

NCO JOURNAL

‘Sergeant’ means ‘servant’: How NCOs typify the servant leader

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It is seen in the sergeant who helps the private move into his barracks. It’s seen when that same sergeant corrects that private on how to conduct Army business. It’s seen when first sergeants take the time to know each of the Soldiers in their companies. It’s seen when sergeants major spend their Thanksgiving serving troops in the mess hall.

Though not always recognized as such, servant leadership — putting the needs of others first and helping people develop and perform as highly as possible — is ingrained in Army culture and within the NCO Corps. In fact, the very word *sergeant* comes from the French word for servant. It’s the type of leadership that all NCOs should aspire to if they want to lead in today’s Army, said Command Sgt. Maj. Rory Malloy, commandant of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas.



Sgt. Andre Lobban of “Palehorse” Troop, 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, carries a “casualty” through a simulated minefield during a spur ride Nov. 28, 2012, at Rose Barracks, Germany. (Photo by Spc. Joshua Edwards)

“This type of leadership is getting to the heart of our values and what it means to lead,” Malloy said. “Leaders who live this style of leadership, they don’t have to worry about whether or not other leaders within their organization will do what they ask. Because when they ask, most of their Soldiers will give them their heart ... because they have that respect for them.”

Servant leadership is the underlying theme of the Army Values, and it’s just good business, said Lt. Gen. Daniel Allyn, commanding general of the XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, N.C.

“If you look at our Army Values, the center of that is selfless service,” Allyn said. “The idea of servant leadership is you put others before yourself. That, to me, is an inherent quality of leadership, and our Warrior Ethos also speaks to it in ‘I’ll never leave a fallen comrade.’ That

implies that we're going to do all we can to ensure that we're always looking after the needs of our Soldiers."

Doing what people need

Servant leadership isn't about being weak and giving in to what everyone wants. It's about identifying what people need, said Jim Hunter, an author who has researched, written about and taught servant leadership during the past 35 years. He has also written two books on the subject, and has lectured to many military and civilian leaders.

"Slaves do what people want; servants do what people need," Hunter said. "And there's a tremendous amount of difference between those two. Servant leaders meet the needs of their people. They identify and meet their legitimate needs."

Since servant leadership is about meeting people's needs, leaders must hold people accountable for reaching high standards, Hunter said.

"If you don't hold people to excellence, you're a thief and a liar," Hunter said. "You're stealing every time you take a paycheck, because the taxpayer or the people paying your check are paying you to hold people accountable."

Doing what's right, even when it's hard, is what NCOs are called to do on a daily basis, Hunter said.

"Oftentimes, people think that being a servant is about being wimpy; it's anything but that," Hunter said. "The great servant leaders I know are pit bulls; they hug hard and they spank hard. They are relentless about doing the right thing for their people. Doing the right thing means you're someone who is approachable, who listens, who appreciates people and gives respect. But when it's time to hold people accountable, they spank hard."

Combating toxic leaders



Sgt. Travis Webb, right, helps Spc. Steven Andreini cross the Tarnak River in the Panjwayi district of Afghanistan on April 10, 2012. The Soldiers, both of "Chaos" Company, 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, and their Afghan National Army counterparts, participated in a two-day clearing mission of the Komandek Ghar area. (Photo by Sgt. Kimberly Hackbarth)

By creating a culture founded on servant leadership, NCOs can both stop toxic leadership and help those exhibiting poor leadership to grow, Malloy said.

“[Servant leaders] create that command climate that fosters that right behavior,” Malloy said. “When you do that, it eliminates that toxic leader or that leader who just doesn’t fit into that mold. No longer are you outcome-based focused; instead they focus on *how* they get to the desired result or outcome.”

Soldiers, whether they realize it or not, want servant leaders, Malloy said. They want their NCOs to treat them with dignity and respect.

“We will gravitate toward that type of leader because he or she is executing the mission and treating people in a way we would want to be treated,” Malloy said. “Those who are abusive in nature or who are toxic leaders who compromise their integrity or values — even though at the moment it may benefit the individual — in the back of their minds, they will tend to steer away from that.”

Made, not born

People don’t have inherent personality traits that make them better leaders, Hunter said. They learn and grow into being better leaders.

“Character is learned behavior, and so is leadership,” Hunter said. “Leadership is a learned or acquired ability available to 95 percent of the population.”

Great servant leaders accomplish the mission, take care of their people and balance the two, Hunter said.

“The key to great leadership is who can do both,” Hunter said. “Who knows how to accomplish tasks while they build relationships for the future? Who can do the hugging and the spanking? Who can find the sweet spot between those two? That is a skill; that is a learned or acquired ability. It’s not something you’re born with. I’ve never met a 2-year-old servant leader. It’s all about your character, your willingness to do those things.”

At the lowest level

Servant leadership is most often displayed in the junior platoon sergeant or squad leader who takes care of his or her Soldiers’ needs, Malloy said.

“It’s really critical at the lowest level for the noncommissioned officer, especially our sergeants,” Malloy said. “They have to be out front, able to bark orders and able to yell. But they don’t have to do it in an abusive way. They can still maintain standards and accomplish the mission.

“Sometimes you do have to yell to get a point across, but it can’t be abusive,” he said. “Early on, these young sergeants need to learn that they are here to serve and to be that teacher, that trainer, to learn and grow in their own leadership abilities. That way, when they do achieve higher ranks in the Army in positions of responsibility, they do so not for personal gain, but because it helps the overall mission.”

Still, being a servant leader isn't about letting the privates run the show, Malloy said.

"For a young NCO, it's about digging into our Army Values and the way we treat people," Malloy said. "We're not talking about being huggy-feely, or treating people like they're little kitty cats. You have to demonstrate tough love, but you can do that without being abusive."

Implementing servant leadership

Most people don't disagree with the principles of servant leadership, which include practicing integrity, honesty and loyalty. But oftentimes, most leaders struggle with implementation, Hunter said.

"The only way you ever get this stuff into your game is you have to practice these things," Hunter said. "That's the disconnect for most people."

To implement servant leadership, NCOs need to focus on their Soldiers' needs, Malloy said.

"The hardest thing about the implementation piece is just doing it, understanding it and then daily reflecting back and trying to live it," Malloy said. "The easiest thing is to say it. The hardest thing is living it."

And the better NCOs are at being servant leaders, the better they uphold the NCO Creed, Allyn said.

"There are a number of tenants in the NCO Creed that speak to serving others and placing the needs of my Soldiers before my own," Allyn said. "Those are all inherently embedded within this concept of servant leadership." ♦

Characteristics of a Servant-Leader

Servant leaders can be recognized by the following character traits:

- **Patience** shows self-control.
- **Kindness** gives attention, appreciation and encouragement.
- **Humility** means being authentic without pretense.
- **Respectfulness** treats others as important people.
- **Selflessness** meets the needs of others.
- **Forgiveness** gives up resentment when wronged.
- **Honesty** is free from deception.
- **Commitment** means sticking to your choices.
- **Service** sets aside your own wants and needs to seek the greatest good for others.

Source: The Servant: A Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership, by James C. Hunter