

Rossow on Leadership

By Robert B.D. Hartman

In 1932, Commandant Col. Robert Rossow presented a remarkable series of essays defining his concepts on leadership to cadet officers and non-commissioned officers. At Gen. Gignilliat's urging, *The Vedette* published them over a period three months. Although nearly seven decades have passed, his philosophy is as viable and relevant today as it was when the series was initiated. What Rossow expressed was no less than what the Academy administration expected of its faculty and cadets. It realized the imperfections of man, but insisted that the school community strive to provide leadership in the most positive sense.

Rossow was the personification of the things of which he wrote. In 1898, at the age of 17, he enlisted in the U.S. Cavalry and embarked upon a life-long learning and teaching experience about leadership.

He served for six years in the 14th U.S. Cavalry, rose to the rank of sergeant major and won a battlefield commission to lieutenant during service in the Philippine Insurrection. In 1906, Gignilliat, searching for a tested leader and horseman, hired Rossow, who immediately set out to make the troop the most outstanding equestrian unit outside active U.S. Army Cavalry units. A year later, he was instrumental in creating the Summer Cavalry School.

In 1927, Rossow became commandant of cadets, a position he held until 1937. During the summers of 1931-45, he also served as director of the Woodcraft Camp. After retirement, he was named superintendent of the Indiana State Police. In the two years of his administration, he revitalized a demoralized organization and brought the highest ethical and professional standards to its membership.

His essays, which appeared in *The Vedette* from October 1932 to January 1933, have been edited to make them more contemporary, but Rossow would not mind. His motto was "Do the wise and right thing as you see it, and it will probably be the common sense thing to do."

The Tenants of Leadership

By Col. Robert Rossow

Acumen

This attribute is marked by one's ability to discern and think ahead of subordinates. A leader who can analyze what reactions there will be to contemplated actions or regulations has a decided advantage over the leader who does not possess this quality of analysis. The leader can detect what effect certain actions will have on the morale of the organization. It will assist him in making plans and putting them into execution, without being inflicted by the thought of their wrong reception. It will give him confidence, and gain him the confidence of subordinates.

In practice, it merely amounts to thinking out, in all details, a contemplated plan, and submitting it finally for execution in the most palatable form. A knowledge of simple and practical psychology is essential, to the extent that it will be necessary to recognize human reactions under certain conditions or situations. This attribute of acumen is not altogether an inherent one. It can, more than most attributes, be strengthened by practice.

It requires preliminary thinking and planning. It requires that the leader "estimate the situation" with the thought of human reactions in mind, since they might have a bearing on the situation. The best leaders do this unconsciously. Therefore, before you act, make sure you are about three jumps ahead of your organization.

Common Sense

There is no attribute that a leader might possess which could possibly be more important to him than the attribute of good common sense.

Common sense is the sense that the masses understand and accept. If a leader doesn't have it, he won't go very far. People that are being led must first understand their leaders before they will accept them.

Common sense is mass sense or the sense of the majority. Common sense is the outward work of a balanced intellect. It has no relation to high intelligence. Converted into action, it is merely knowing the right thing to do or say under a given situation.

The wise thing to do is always the common sense thing to do. Most people possess a certain amount of common sense. That is the reason why people, in mass, recognize common sense in a leader. Like any other attribute, it can be strengthened by practice.

Think carefully and logically before you act. Do the right thing as near as you know how. If you find you have made an error, let it be a lesson and don't repeat it.

Courage

Subordinates love and adore a courageous leader. It is the one attribute that, when possessed, seems to vitiate, or make of less importance, the lack of the other necessary attributes of personality.

All soldiers are expected to be brave in the face of danger. Most of them, collectively, are brave. There is strength and inspiration in mass action. Most men have physical courage because they are afraid to display cowardice in the face of danger. It is a mental whip that drives them on in the face of danger. They are brave because they fear the contempt of their fellows. It is their mind, their willpower, and the opinion of their fellows that keeps them from leaving the point of danger.

Moral courage is far more rare than physical courage. It is courage of the heart and of strong convictions and the only whip that drives it into action is the whip of conscience. A display of moral courage rarely gains the plaudits of the magnitude, but has often been known to gain the derision of the crowd. Moral courage means you must be able to say "no" in the face of popular opinion. Moral courage often stands alone, where physical courage rarely does. Yet, together they are an unbeatable combination. No man with a weak spirit can possess great strength of moral courage. Strive to attain it, for having attained it, your strength, power, and influence will be that of many.

Diligence

The leader who does not personally pursue his many missions with careful attention and effort will soon discover that his influence is dwindling.

Negligence and carelessness are faults that are undesirable traits in any person, even in those persons who occupy a low station of responsibility in life. These faults are magnified in their degree of undesirability as their possessor attains rank and responsibility. A lifetime of earnest and diligent effort can be vitiated, or entirely wiped out, by a temporary reversion to negligence or carelessness.

Such slips on the part of aspiring leaders are blows at their dependability, and superiors are prone to measure worth in character and ability by the weakest traits displayed rather than the strongest. For as the strength of a chain is always measured by its weakest link, so the strength of leadership is measured by the weak spots in an aspiring leader's character.

Earnestness

No person, in a position of leadership, will ever impress those under him if he approaches the responsibilities of leadership in a half-hearted, lukewarm manner. Followers unerringly sense a lack of interest, or an artificial interest, on the part of their leaders.

Earnestness of purpose on the part of a leader is quickly noted, and copied, by subordinates. If your organization observes genuine earnestness in you, it will repay you with earnest efforts.

Enthusiasm

This is the strongest ingredient necessary for achievement in leadership. It takes work to accomplish any worthwhile task, and work, as such, is never popular in any group of followers. It is the leader who can inspire his subordinates to their greatest efforts who will succeed.

An organization that is imbued with a burning enthusiasm is one that possesses esprit de corps. No organization has ever attained success unless the membership, down to its very lowest member, has been imbued with this intangible feeling of esprit.

Literally translated into English, esprit de corps means "spirit of brotherhood"—one for all, all for one—and everybody for the organization. A leader must strive to inoculate the organization with esprit. Work enthusiastically to the end that everyone will not only feel but know that his organization is best.

Faith

Without faith there can be no success. Faith is confidence in self and confidence in those you are leading. Lack of faith in self brings indecision and groping and uncertainty; lack of faith in your subordinates begets a lack of faith in them for you. A lack of faith in the cause you espouse to brings one thing—failure.

Examine every great cause in the world's history, from its initial inception to its final and successful culmination. All succeeded because their leaders held on through rebuffs, discouragements, and temporary failures to their inspired and great faiths. The great faith of leaders can sway the multitude.

Honor

Honor, as regarded by men of character, is not merely a code of conduct. It is, in reality, the outward expression of the inner man. It is the rock upon which character is built. It is the quality in a leader that keeps his course of action true, regardless of the buffeting of criticism and the erosive effects of intolerable opposition. It is his real strength.

No genuinely honorable leader can be turned from the right course of action, even though that course may be the unpopular one. Honor always lays the true course of the ship of leadership and, like the needle of a compass, though it might be interfered with and deflected locally, it will always point the way if those interferences and deflections are recognized and understood. A leader is, in effect, the captain of a ship. His honor is his compass.

Knighthood had its foundation in honor and courage. The word of honor of a true gentlemen, the world over, is stronger than any bond. It is the quality in a man that separates him from the average run of humanity, from the cheap and the common. Real honor cannot exist in the heart of a person who is not honest in every angle of human relationship. It cannot grow or live in the mire of lying, thieving, cheating, or deceiving.

It is an attribute that has no roots in the heart or in the mind. It is the gold in the dross of human character. Money cannot buy it, nor can poverty destroy it. It is the ultimate attribute of the complex human character.

Judgment

Good judgment is kindred to common sense. A leader who can weigh carefully the various ways that are open to him in the accomplishment of a task and choose the right way must be credited with good judgment. The more infallible he is in choosing the right way, the sounder is his judgment.

The ability to judge correctly on any given issue, or problem, is one of the strongest virtues that a leader can possess. It is merely the ability to distinguish the right way from the wrong way.

Good judgment can be present or absent in every act that is committed by an individual. If an aspiring leader can conduct his personal affairs with good judgment at all times, he can be assured that he is in good training for the greater problems of leadership.

To the discerning leader with good judgment, the right way is usually clearly labeled. Except in rare instances, the right way is invariably the way that, if adopted, will serve the best interests of the greatest number of people.

Justice

One of the first traits that subordinates become conscious of in their leader is a sense of fairness. Subordinates will, as a matter of fact, overlook many shortcomings in their leader if, above everything else, he will deal out justice impartially and fairly. Conversely, if a leader commits even one unfair act, it is an unquestioned fact that his status as a leader will be irreparably ruined.

There is no finer sobriquet that a leader can earn than that of being a "square shooter." With such a reputation as a keystone to his character and personality structure, he can develop to a degree of greatness which will be limited only by his energy and ability.

In justice as in judgment, the paramount requisite in the leader is the ability to recognize, infallibly, right from wrong. Even friendship, if it stands in the way of justice, should be sacrificed if it comes to an issue between the two virtues. Friendship that can only be retained by an act of injustice is selfish friendship and is not worth retaining.

The leader who is absolutely fair under all possible circumstances need not worry about the popularity of his decision on any given issue. The majority of people will recognize justice. Absolute justice is born of moral courage—and moral courage, in the final analysis, is recognized by all mankind.

No leader, if his followers are composed of intelligent persons, will retain their confidence if he gains the reputation of being unjust. Justice is the most cherished heritage of a free and independent people. It is the very framework upon which enlightened civilization is built.

It is not necessary to be unduly harsh to mete out justice, nor is it essential to be absurdly lenient. If justice has been fairly executed even the recipient of a penalty will recognize and admit it. If it hasn't been, even a disinterested public will rise in verbal revolt. To be usually just, is not enough. It is necessary to be always just.

Allow nothing to interfere with your sense of justice, for it is the very keystone of the structure of leadership. If you are just, you are strong in moral courage. If you are unjust, you are weak in character.

The just man is always self-confident. The unjust man isn't sure of himself, and even his best friends will lose confidence in him in the end. It takes courage to be just.

Loyalty

To attain success in leadership, it is necessary to be not only loyal to yourself but loyal to both your superiors and your subordinates. For, if you are true to yourself, it is unlikely that you will be untrue to others.

Disloyalty is the most cankerous, destroying disease that can attack an organization. It blights and kills all that is good, leaving only the bleached bones of a lamentable failure. Loyalty will attract loyalty; disloyalty will attract disloyalty.

Morale

Successful leadership is always dependent on the morale of the group that is being led. If morale is good, it is easily led; if it is bad, or has none at

all, it is impossible to lead. In a group without morale the achievement of a definite purpose can only be accomplished by driving and not by leading.

What is morale? It is a collective mental attitude or condition of mind. Inevitably, good leadership produces good morale, and poor leadership produces poor morale. Morale is born of leadership.

The two forces, leadership and morale, are so closely related and interwoven that it is impossible to separate one from the other. Morale is an unbridled force. Leadership is a directive force. Morale is like the electric current that is guided by the conductor—leadership—to the incandescent light. Without electric current the conductor would be a useless cable. Without the cable, electrical current would be dissipated into thin air.

The state of morale of an organization is always influenced by environment, by individual and group thought, by contentment and harmony, by the innumerable conditions that make for a happy and cheerful existence, and, if those conditions are bad, complaint and unhappiness.

Leaders must work toward the end that conditions will be good and that happiness and contentment will prevail in your organization. Do not content yourself with grumbling about a condition. Think and plan on work to correct it. Your only interest is the welfare of your group. Let any personal ambition or pride in achievement that you may have be a mere by-product of success.

Build into your organization wholesome interest, cheerful enthusiasm, a burning spirit, and unquenchable pride, and your leadership problems will disappear as the mists of the valley evaporate before the onslaught of the warm rays of the morning sun.

Remember always that real leadership implies the giving of service. Poor leadership is the receiving of service. Remember, too, that there is no short cut to real leadership except along the road of service to humanity.

Self-Control

A temporary lack of mental balance probably causes more outbursts of violent temper and loss of self-control than any other trait of disposition. A person so affected is “off the track,” as it were, during the period of his

temper tantrum. He is not efficient in thought or action. He cannot make a calm and sound decision.

A person who is afflicted with a temper, but controls it on all but rare—and righteous—occasions, is better fitted for leadership than the person who, due to colorlessness of personality or a vapid disposition, is incapable of losing his temper. A controlled temper makes for power; an uncontrolled temper dissipates power.

Simplicity

Pomposity and egotistic exhibitions of self-importance have probably ruined more would-be leaders than any other single shortcoming of leadership. Pomposity and self-importance are out-croppings of an inner ego. Mankind, in general, has an analytical eye and a keen sense of humor. Pomposity and an attitude of self-importance are obvious to the eye, and people love to laugh—even though they are compelled, through force of circumstance, to laugh inwardly and discreetly.

Any aspiring leader who puts on unmerited “airs” has sacrificed the major part of his effectiveness as a leader. He will be either laughed at, or cursed for a pompous ass, and either act will assign him to the mythical graveyard of near-leaders, whose numbers are legion.

Read the biographies of such outstanding leaders as Lincoln, Grant, or Lee to assure yourself that simplicity was one of their outstanding traits of character. Mankind understood them and accepted them as genuine. Mankind, in the mass, will reject a complex egoist!

Tact

One of the most essential attributes to successful leadership is tact. With tact, an aspiring leader will go far. Without it, he will soon come upon a stone wall.

It is the quality in man that is marked by his ability to get along with other men, inferiors or superiors. The possession of it means smooth functioning; the lack of it always brings friction and resistance.

Do not confuse tact with the idea of merely offering no resistance to the known demands of your subordinates when they are not in the best interest of the organization. That is not tact, that is weak leadership.

The only time there can be any possible excuse to deviate from the use of tact is upon the rare occasion when one's authority is challenged directly.

Truthfulness

An out and out liar will, in due time, hang himself. Generally, a liar will even arrive at the point where leadership is offered him.

There are degrees of truthfulness, strange as that may seem. A person can, in describing an event or action, use the exact words appropriate to the description, yet by shadings of word, inflections, and innuendos, give an entirely misleading and untruthful account.

There are people living in this world who consider themselves keen and smart because of their adroitness in evading the truth. There are others who have an alibi for every shortcoming with which they might be charged. The alibi artists are always liars, even though it is often difficult to prove them as such. All of them justify their conduct by invoking the belief that their wanderings from the truth are motivated by the law of self-preservation or their desire to protect a friend. Truth will always win out.

Abraham Lincoln's famous remark, "You can fool some of the people all of the time; you can fool all of the people some of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all of the time," applies particularly to liars, for they, very often, think that they are fooling themselves.

There is no possibility of great leadership without nobility of character, and a man who does not tell the truth at all times cannot aspire to nobility of character. Even if a man was so clever and adroit as to never be discovered in the little lies that he might tell, the final result would still be the same. In his heart of hearts, every man knows himself. It is this knowledge of himself that is the very essence of the ingredients with which character is built. For as a man knows himself, so he is.

An aspiring leader might possess all of the attributes of leadership in the very highest degree and still be an utter failure if he were addicted to telling untruths or half-truths. There is just one way to be truthful. A lie is always a lie; the complete truth is always the truth. A man may justify an untruth or a half-truth, but the damage to the character and conscience cannot be justified.

Remember, always, that even as everybody hates a liar, conversely, everybody will love and admire a man who always speaks the truth.



Admiral Hugh Rodman headed the Summer School from 1926 through 1939. He viewed his four-star rank with considerable informality when dealing with boys. He and Col. Rossow, who headed the Summer Cavalry School, were unparalleled raconteurs and were in great demand for Saturday night stories at Woodcraft Council Fires. *Click photo to enlarge.*



Rossow and his guidon bearers in 1929. Rossow (center) with some of the Academy's greatest leaders. His star-studded line-up included a future superintendent, W.E. Gregory; Academy Executive Officer A.R. Elliott, Band Director W.J. O'Callaghan and his assistant E.T. Payson, BHT head C.A. Whitney, and Rossow's successor as Commandant, C.F. McKinney. *Click photo to enlarge.*



A young Rossow poses for a formal photograph in dress blues and cape. *Click photo to enlarge.*



In his monograph on "Leadership," Rossow did not address manliness, but his every move was designed to portray that attribute to the Corps of Cadets. He was impeccable in his dress and composure, believing that it essential that he and his staff set the proper example.