

Feedback: A Unique Key to Leadership

Lt Col Henry A. Staley

We've been wringing our hands for the past decade over the decline of personal integrity and the slow slide of "professionalism" down the slope toward "occupationalism." Most of our precommissioning and PME institutions devote blocks of instruction to integrity, leadership, professionalism, officership, and the like. Periodic conferences and symposia bemoan the apparent "lack of professionalism" among the troops. Specific definitions are seldom forthcoming, but the emotionally soggy words *professionalism*, *leadership*, *integrity*, and *officership* make for good press. Merely mouthing the words seems to give some leaders the sense they are actually doing something constructive to mend the tattered fabric of our profession.

Written or spoken words rarely lead to significant *behavioral change* unless those communications are consistently supported with action. Our integrity, our professionalism, and our officership erode a little every time we see the leadership pull a fast one, act inconsistently, or fail to meet that seldom defined ideal. For me, that idea conjures up a definite mental picture. I see an officer who has the strength of character to be humble and the wisdom to be reasonably suspicious of gut reactions. I see someone who sincerely values the opinions of others and considers many alternative paths to the objective. Even when time limits full consideration of all paths, I see an officer who never stops trying to find them. I see an officer who's intellectually stimulated by open debate.

Above all, I see a person who's acutely aware of that almost mythical isolation from reality that slowly and insidiously overtakes a leader as he or she advances in rank. I'm critical of that isolation because it's one of the underlying causes of the perceived decline in integrity, officership, and

professionalism. I formerly blamed staffs for isolating their decision makers, but the more I've studied and reflected on the matter, the more I'm convinced that the staffs are really powerless to correct the problem. They've become their own worst enemy.

I learned long ago never to criticize without offering alternatives for improvement. Therefore, I'll introduce my suggestion by mentioning a grassroots activity that occurs in thousands of situations throughout the Air Force every day. It plays an important role in all human relationships. It's called feedback. But the type of feedback *usually* provided by officers brings multiple injuries to our profession every hour of the day: it's death by a thousand cuts.

Allow me to set the stage upon which this hourly drama unfolds. Psychologists and sociologists tell us that we were drawn to military careers for a variety of complex reasons; three of them are our needs for order, conformity, and authority. (Some would substitute "a father figure" for authority.) Add to these needs a precommissioning regimen that stresses "yessir, yessir, no excuse, sir," and we tend to create a majority of officers who become emotionally frazzled at the mere suggestion of disagreeing with anyone in the authority chain. I won't belabor this truism since you've each witnessed your share of "yes men and women"—careerists, opportunists, and manipulators. You may be one of these types yourself. In fact, we're all members of that overwhelming brotherhood and sisterhood to some extent.

Is there something wrong here? Am I suggesting that we should overcome our basic natures? Should we resist those aspects of USAF training and education that reinforce the "yessir, yessir, three bags full" mentality? Yes! There *is* something wrong here and you can sense it. And, yes, I am suggesting we overcome the traditional approach. But, first, let's return to that hourly drama.

The staff assembles (collectively or individually) and, if fortunate, they are allowed to comment—to give their views on "Issue X." Being bright troops, they intuitively sniff out the atmosphere. "What's the boss really after here?" "Does he/she want to support Issue X?" Most of the staff members will slant their comments so that they agree with the perceived objectives of the decision maker (leader). There may be conventional recognition of opposing viewpoints, but it will most likely be written or spoken in less than emphatic fashion. Thus armed with the supportive wisdom of his or her staff, the decision maker rides off into the sunset toward another calamity, another success, or another nonproductive

Lt Col H. A. Staley, commissioned through OTS in 1962, served as a supply officer, MAJCOM staff officer, AFROTC instructor, and squadron commander in Southeast Asia before coming to the Air Command and Staff College in 1972 as an instructor. In 1976, following the success of his book, *The Tongue and Quill: Communicating to Manage in Tomorrow's Air Force*, he accepted an extended faculty appointment to serve the USAF as its OPR for staff communications. He presently serves as the chief, Staff Communications and Research Division, Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell Air Force Base. Colonel Staley is a resident graduate of SOS, AIS, and ACSC and holds a master's degree in political science from Auburn University.

but expensive rearrangement of the status quo. On the other hand, a truly effective leader (here comes the bottom line) literally squeezes, begs, demands, and cajoles the staff to provide all the reasons Issue X may or may *not* be logical. Equal emphasis is given the position that runs *counter* to the decision maker's personal viewpoint.

A truly effective leader understands the basic character of the corps—the basic need to “yessir, yessir, three bags. . .” ad nauseam. And in understanding it, *overcomes it through personal action*. How many times have you heard these comments front a decision maker:

Now (insert your name here), I know what you wrote on Issue X, but I think you're hedging. Tell me what you *really* think. Tell me which side of the log you'd roll off if the decision were yours. The Air Force is paying you to think and render judgments based on your expertise—it doesn't pay you to flatter me. Now let's have it without the honey.

You haven't heard a conversation like that very often, have you? A truly effective leader has the strength of character to realize that his or her intuitive judgment is usually a poor substitute for the collective wisdom of the staff. And, in those rare cases when intuitive judgment *is* best, listening to the viewpoints of the opposition will neither weaken a sound intuitive decision nor strengthen a poor one.

A truly effective leader's success will hinge in no small part on frequent and meaningful reward for honest feedback. This reward can be as informal as, “Thanks for that candid and provocative viewpoint,” or as formal as specific comments in the OPR.

A truly effective leader realizes that fighting for feedback really *is* a fight—a personal battle. Staff members will resist

it; their eyes will dart from right to left furtively looking for escape hatches and rat holes. After all, this is a new experience. It short-circuits all of their subservience training and career survival wisdom. They will sense ulterior motives on the part of the decision maker. An effective leader must struggle doggedly against these initial reactions. In other words, a true leader must *lead*.

There is obviously no grand design or complex conspiracy aimed at shielding leaders from bad news or contrary viewpoints, but the effect is almost the same. What I'm suggesting is really quite simple. It requires no great intellect, creative genius, or long string of classic leadership traits. It takes only a personal commitment to *demand* and *reward* honest feedback. And, unlike many of the complex leadership/followership issues we read about, the responsibility for effective or ineffective feedback rests squarely on the leader's shoulders.

Some people suggest that our precommissioning and PME systems should approach officership training and education from a more enlightened perspective—that we should, among other things, nurture a more questioning, creative, and assertive approach in our professional programs. Instead of preaching “yessir, yessir, three bags full . . .” we should be teaching “yessir, we can probably do what you ask, but the costs will be . . .” Indeed, until a decision maker actually *decides*, the staff officer should be compelled by his or her professional integrity to render a thorough, no-punches-pulled assessment of every staff issue. Until that time comes (if ever), the key to opening the lock to honest feedback waits in the pocket of every leader. The truly effective leader will reach for it.