

The Responsibility of Leadership in Command

Gen John Michael Loh

When we select our commanders, we expect them to create a vision, and motivate and inspire their people toward that vision. We also expect our commanders to face squarely any situations that may undermine unit effectiveness and cohesion. We expect our commanders to be more than the head of a unit; we expect them to be leaders and to be accountable for mission performance. Those who recognize the interdependence of leadership and command are the most effective commanders, can best translate intentions into reality, and sustain momentum. Therefore, we must select for command those who will, with resolve and persistence, meet all the responsibilities—both pleasant and unpleasant—inherent in command.

Command is a sacred trust. We surround the change of command with dignity and ceremony deliberately to dramatize the sacred meaning of military command. A commander is not just the person in the top block of the unit's organizational chart. A new commander becomes a different person than he or she was prior to accepting command.

Commanders are awarded a special trust and confidence to fulfill their units' missions and care for their people with leadership, discipline, justice, fairness, and compassion, in peace and war. Therefore, we must select them with utmost scrutiny and care, and for the right reasons.

Commanders must foster a strong sense of duty and service. They must create a vision, and motivate and instill pride in team performance. When the going gets tough, they must rise above the strife and lead. The essence of command and leadership is to create a climate throughout the unit that inspires all to achieve extraordinary goals and levels of performance at all times and under all conditions, especially in the stress of combat.

So, when a commander violates this special trust and confidence by looking the other way and tolerating breaches of discipline, it is a matter of great concern and demands his or her deep introspection.

When one member of a unit flaunts discipline and directives to the detriment of safety and mission accomplishment, the commander's obligation and loyalty must be to the rest of the members of the unit, those who are loyal, dedicated, and working hard to deliver and support the unit's mission every day. Protecting the few at the expense of the many is

to misplace loyalty and is a serious breach of the responsibility of command. Our people deserve commanders who understand the difference.

Honest mistakes in the execution of our demanding missions, even when they result in injury or loss of equipment, can be, and frequently are, tolerated. We learn from these mistakes and put in place safeguards to prevent recurrence. We must apply common sense and sound judgment here. We train and trust our people to perform in a stressful, difficult, and sometimes hostile environment. We are obliged to provide them the same trust and loyalty that will allow them to make split-second decisions and carry out their missions with a feeling of security and confidence even when honest, explainable mistakes occur. When honest mistakes occur, we must stand by our commanders and their people.

But a crime is different from a mistake. The distinction lies in the culpability of careless or negligent acts or the degree of premeditation and willful disregard for directives, regulations, and sound judgment.

A good leader realizes the difference between mistakes and crimes and, in the case of the latter, displays the moral courage to protect the loyal many at the expense of the disloyal few. Our people deserve such leadership from all our commanders, all the time.

What follows are a few of my time-honored principles of solid leadership. As they apply to those in command positions, they are not only relevant, they yearn for reinforcement today.

- Commanders must be role models, leading by example as well as by authority and influence.
- Commanders must be open and accessible, but not “one of the gang.”
- Commanders must promote a positive vision and culture within the unit, and not look the other way to avoid having to face a difficult problem.
- Commanders must distinguish between mistakes and crimes, and deal with them differently.
- Commanders must apply discipline fairly and consistently across the board without regard for friendship, rank, or other discriminators.
- Commanders must avoid favoritism, nepotism, and cronyism in all their forms.
- Commanders must understand trust and loyalty to the entire unit, and not misplace them.
- And finally, commanders must understand when to administer discipline and compassion, and not get the two mixed up.

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Fortunately, in our Air Force we are enriched with a plentiful supply of commanders at all levels who understand these principles, and are applying them conscientiously and scrupulously at home and when deployed around the world. They are real leaders in every sense of the word, and their people hold them in high esteem, would follow them anywhere, and risk their lives for them. I see these commanders

every day throughout Air Combat Command and our Air Force. We must never let the actions of a few overshadow our commanders' leadership, accountability, and devotion to duty. Our commanders understand their responsibilities. They are accountable. They deserve our trust and support, and they have both in full measure.