



Views and hyperlinks expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of The Judge Advocate General, the Department of the Air Force, or any other department or agency of the United States Government. The inclusion of external links and references does not imply any endorsement by the author(s), The Judge Advocate General, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense or any other department or agency of the U.S. Government. They are meant to provide an additional perspective or as a supplementary resource. The Department of the Air Force or any other department or agency of the United States Government does not exercise any responsibility or oversight of the content at the destination.



Article Reprint Timeless Leadership Series

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF GOOD LEADERSHIP

The Reporter, (Volume 36, Number 4)

Timeless Leadership Series: Article Reprint
By Major General (Ret.) John D. Altenburg, Jr.

In this *Timeless Leadership Series*, we look back to a *Keystone Leadership Summit* speech given by Major General (Ret.) John D. Altenburg, Jr. on the fundamentals of good leadership and successful organizations.

Change

Change needs to come from the bottom up. The more things are top driven, the more likely they will be micromanaged. As a leader, you need to make sure you have right systems in place to create organizational success. To use a football metaphor, much of leadership at the base level amounts to blocking and tackling—remembering to do the basics and stay with the fundamentals. This is more important in a time of change than any other, because the basics and fundamentals of good leadership never change.

The Three Qualities of Successful Organizations

We need to give people the tools to exercise leadership. In an organization that has many big egos, that means recognizing that leadership is not about being the smartest lawyer in the

room. Too many staff judge advocates go into a leadership position assuming that. But to be a leader, and not just a great lawyer, an SJA has to build a team, and create an organization that is responsive to command and produces world-class legal products. You have to lose the ego. The single most important quality of a good leader is humility because if you are humble, you realize you cannot do it alone. You can't make it happen by yourself no matter how smart you are, or how many 20-hour days you put in. It takes a team. The key three members of that team are the staff judge advocate, the deputy staff judge advocate, and the legal office superintendent. These three individuals must stay together even though their constituents have different perspectives, different needs, and different wants. If you are going to build a team, you must have a central core that understands where the organization is headed. These leaders

Modified Illustration: © Deemerwha studio/stock.adobe.com

must share the vision of where the organization needs to go, then empower people to make it happen. How do you measure success in an organization in a JAG office? Start by looking for three qualities: Is the organization responsive? Is it effective? And is it efficient?

The single most important quality of a good leader is **humility** because if you are humble, you realize you cannot do it alone.

Responsiveness

In terms of responsiveness, how long does it take to get a legal assistance appointment? How long does it take to turn around advice? I know how long it takes to turn around advice to the installation commander—a nanosecond—but how long does it take to respond to a sub-organization that needs an opinion? Does your organization find legal ways to accomplish command goals? Is everyone ready to deploy? Are you ready to help others mobilize? When you prefer charges for trial, are you going to take months to get there, or will you work to minimize the impact on combat readiness? Are your metrics meaningful? How long from the time that the JAG office becomes aware of the offense or the command becomes aware of the offense until it's resolved, either with a lower disposition, a dismissal or a court-martial? I know all kinds of people who are real proud of their processing times, but mere processing time is meaningless if it's about figuring out how to count it to look good in our own statistics.

Effectiveness

Secondly, is your organization effective? What's the quality of your products? What's the quality of the advocacy? That's not just trial work, but persuading commanders to do the right thing. Is the office of the staff judge advocate integrated into the command, or is it a stand-alone organization? Do you sit in an office building and wait for the problem to crawl into your inbox? How often are you surprised? If you are surprised by events, then maybe it's a measure of how effective you are as an organization, and an illustration that you are not

integrated into the command. In the AOR, we like to tell commanders all the legal issues don't begin with the letter "L." You need a lawyer in there to be reading the message traffic to figure out whether there's a legal issue or not.

Efficiency

Third, in terms of efficiency, how often does your organization have to reinvent the wheel? Are people managing their own schedules, or are the schedules managing them? How's the morale? Do you have time for sports and social events, or is everybody working 18 hours a day? That has to do with efficiency. The way you get there is by having systems in place at the base level. You need a newcomer's orientation program so that incoming officers and noncommissioned officers understand what the organization does and how the various functional components relate to one another. In a large office, each division chief should brief the new officer. If you are an office with five attorneys, the orientation for the new officer or the new noncommissioned officer may be a matter of hours, but if you are at a large installation, the orientation may need to be several days. If you build this system right, and involve your entire office, you will empower your people and make them feel like they are really in charge of something. Then when there's an Article 6 visit, the organization remains calm and you can take care of the visitor. The SJA doesn't have to do everything, because he or she has set the right attitude.

Ongoing Leadership Development

Maintain an active leadership development program. Having a leader development session a minimum of every two weeks enables you to do all kinds of things with your organization where you are sharing your values, and you are sharing what you think is important. The leader development session can be a visiting IMA who is with you for two weeks who happens to be the first Assistant U.S. Attorney in a given district or it could be a state court criminal court judge from Brooklyn. Furthermore, this program gives the staff judge advocate an automatic platform to make a brief introduction as to how this relates to everything else the office is doing. And just in case something terrible is going on in terms of morale, you have an automatic forum to meet everybody and it's no big deal. I can remember being part of an organization

where the boss says there's a meeting this afternoon, all hands on deck at 1600. Everybody starts the rumor mill. Everybody starts talking and stops working. You can address those kinds of issues at a regular meeting for leader development once you have the system set up.

Everyone knows that Sir Edmund Hillary was the first person to scale Mount Everest, along with Tenzing Norgay, his Sherpa guide. But not nearly as many people know about Colonel John Hunt. Colonel John Hunt was a British officer in charge of the Everest expedition in 1953. I didn't know anything about John Hunt until I saw his obituary in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* many years ago. I saw a great example of what we mean by leaders, and the importance of the mission and the organization coming ahead of the individual. Colonel Hunt, when interviewed, said that he would have loved to be the first man at the top of Everest. In fact, as part of a smaller expedition from the main expedition, he got within 400 feet of the summit. As Colonel Hunt reflected on who he was going to send the next day, he sublimated his own ego, his own desire to be the first human being in history to be on the highest mountain in the world. He put that all aside because he thought it was more important for the team that it be Hillary and Norgay, that they were really the two best situated to make it to the top. How many leaders in our lifetime in the military have we met who would make the same decision?

Anybody Can Coach Michael Jordan

Once I had a young judge advocate in the First Armor Division who was a superb action officer and crackerjack trial counsel—good at everything that came her way. One day I was sitting at my desk in Augsburg, Germany, basking in the glory of my leadership, thinking about how wonderful it was that this officer had me for a staff judge advocate because I held her to such high standards. And as I sat there, I thought to myself—what would she be like if she was working for that other SJA in a similarly sized organization as mine? Then it hit me. She'd be every bit as good. She was a star. She had great natural ability and a wonderful work ethic. Who couldn't lead somebody like that? It occurred to me that I wasn't really having that much of an effect on this

officer's development, and then it struck me who you really do need to develop.

Anybody can coach Michael Jordan. Anybody can take care of really talented people. The challenge to leaders is how many people in the middle of the pack can we move through leadership to greater success. How do you lead the people that make you say to yourself—who in the world was the recruiter? How did this person get in my Air Force? A really good leader is like a talent scout, and figures out what people can do to contribute to the organization. That may mean that you narrow and neck down the scope of their responsibilities to where they're not responsible for much, but they can at least make a contribution in that one area. That's the ultimate challenge of leadership: taking a person who slipped through the cracks, and then guiding them to make some kind of meaningful contribution to the organization.

Anybody can take care of really talented people. The challenge to leaders is how many people in the middle of the pack can we move through leadership to greater success.

Establishing a Baseline of Competence

Leaders need to establish what I call a baseline of competence. When your people have achieved that baseline, you can send them off with the wing commander and know that if they get asked a hard question, they'll give the answer you would give, or they'll have enough presence of mind to call you and find out what the answer is. In other words, it all comes down to issue identification. The key component of someone being ready to deploy is when they have the common sense and judgment to spot the issue, realize it's an issue, then address the issue or ask for help to address the issue. That's the baseline of competence, and that's what we work toward in orientation.

Addressing Ethical Standards

When I got to 18th Airborne Corps, we had a legal assistance officer who devised a scheme by checking the roster of clients who signed up for the separation agreement and divorce briefings. This young, single officer decided this file was a good target list to get phone numbers and call these women who, obviously, were in a bad relationship, then hit on them. The investigation went all the way up the chain, they found him guilty, and it came back to me to handle the officer evaluation report counseling session. We were talking about what his report was going to look like, when it struck me—maybe this guy was asleep in law school when they talked about ethics, or wasn't paying attention in our basic course, and maybe somehow thought this was okay. I don't really believe that, but it made me realize we need to have a failsafe in place.

**We all know the difference between
real leaders and those who
masquerade as good leaders,
but really aren't because they really
don't care about people.**

This starts by addressing ethical standards with every newcomer. The big standard for me is confidentiality. I made it a component of everything I ever did in every office that the standard is not attorney client privilege. The standard is absolute confidentiality of everything that happens in our organization—a much higher bar. If you do that, you know you are going to meet the ethical standards. This was reinforced back at Fort Bragg when I was a captain and heard a Soldier talk about being in line at the PX lunchroom and listening to a JAG captain—not violating attorney-client privilege—but running his mouth about everything that happened that morning, and how unprofessional it seemed. People may not understand the attorney-client privilege, but will see behavior like that and think, “I don't want to go to that JAG office.” Respecting confidentiality is an important component of what we do in orienting our people, because it's our business.

Don't Misuse The “E” Word

At the same time, you cannot toss around the “E” word. It's so easy to label a myriad of bad conduct as unethical. For example, the defense counsel talks to the trial counsel at 7 o'clock in the morning and says, “I know we're in trial today and I was supposed to make all of my motions, but I woke up at 5 o'clock and I realized I've got to make this Fourth Amendment motion.” The trial counsel responds, “That's unethical. You knew a week ago you were going to make that.” But who knows? Laziness, sloppiness, and mediocrity are all kinds of negative traits that we don't want to see in lawyers, but don't always equate with an ethical violation. In our organization, you weren't allowed to say unethical. If you thought another attorney had been unethical, you had to go to your division chief. If you and your division chief agreed that someone was unethical, then you had to go to the deputy. If all three of you agreed that it was, in fact, unethical conduct, then they'd come to me and if we agreed, then we would do the right thing if it needed to be reported. That is another important part of orientation and establishing the fundamentals.

Remember to Give Positive Feedback

When I was a staff judge advocate in Germany, I was hard on people, especially when they first started trying cases. They had to do it my way for six months before they could develop their own system. One day I was driving one of my subordinates who lived in the same village home. He'd been prosecuting for six or seven months. We were stopped at a traffic light and he asked how he was doing. I said, “You're doing great”. He said—“Really?” I then told him why I thought he was doing well. Of course, I'd been hypercritical for the first four months. That was on a Thursday. He had a trial on Friday. Afterwards, the judge came up to me and said, “What in the world did you do to your trial counsel, he was like a different person in court. He had all this new confidence. He's always been okay, but he was like a different person.” That's when I realized—shame on me. Shame on me for not realizing you got to stroke people. You've got to tell them when they are performing well. I had failed to do that, absolutely, and it was burned in my brain. That was in 1979. That guy ended up being a MAJCOM staff judge advocate and he retired as a colonel. Had I not been lucky

enough to say something nice to him, he might have been gone in four years.

True Moral Courage

I've been in a couple wars, and was enlisted in Vietnam with the 9th Infantry Division, so I know something about physical courage, but there is also moral courage. We lawyers especially embrace the moral courage trait and know that it's important because we've got to make sure the command does what's right. I will tell you nothing in my life required the moral courage that it took many times to sit across a table and tell an officer or a non-commissioned officer why they were getting the performance report they were getting. We pay lip service to moral courage, and then have inflated reports and we take the path of least resistance. How my Army could have to change this performance rating system every seven or eight years because senior raters let it get out of control, and yet still stand on a box and talk about moral courage, is beyond me. That's moral courage. We shouldn't paint it any other way. Many of us don't do that very well.

Look behind the words and clichés we use when we talk about quality leadership.

Drill Down To Real Leadership

Drill down and look behind the words and clichés we use when we talk about quality leadership. The person who people say is a micromanager may actually be holding people accountable and making sure things get done right. The SJA who prides himself as power-down delegator may be a lazy boss who doesn't want to follow up on anything, and has no clue what his people are doing. One of the last things I will tell you is that you cannot fake this stuff. We all know the difference between real leaders and those who masquerade as good leaders, but really aren't because they really don't care about people. Your Airmen and noncommissioned officers know who the phonies are, and can spot those who are only interested in self, not team.

Edited by: Major Allison K.W. Johnson (Editor-in-Chief)

Layout by: Thomasa Huffstutler

It's All About The Team

There's nothing like wearing the uniform. It's the best job there is. Remember that the single most important quality in a leader is humility, focusing on building a team, rather than being the smartest lawyer in the room. It's all about the team. Have the right systems in place to train your people and developing them as leaders so you affect change from the bottom up. Being the right kind of leader and building the right organization is what makes you capable, and makes the Air Force capable of addressing any change that comes along, whether it's tomorrow, next year or ten years from now.

The previous remarks, which have been edited for this publication, were made by Major General (Ret.) John D. Altenburg, Jr. at the Keystone Leadership Summit on 26 October 2009.

About the Author

(2009 Biography from *The Reporter*, Volume 36, Number 4)

Major General John D. Altenburg

Major General John D. Altenburg served for 28 years as a judge advocate in the Army. From 1997 to 2001, he was The Assistant Judge Advocate General of the Army, helping transform the practice of law in the Army by insisting that lawyers acquire soldier skills and immerse themselves in their clients' business to become more effective advocates. Presently, he serves as president of the Judge Advocates Association, a national professional legal organization dedicated to judge advocates and practitioners of military and veterans' law.

Glossary

- **AOR:** area of responsibility
- **IMA:** Individual Mobilization Augmentee
- **JAG:** judge advocate general
- **MAJCOM:** major command
- **SJA:** Staff Judge Advocate