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Article Reprint Timeless Leadership Series

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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TIMELESS LEADERSHIP SERIES: ARTICLE REPRINT
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As part of a new series, "Timeless Leadership," *The JAG Reporter* is reprinting articles from past issues on leadership and JAG Corps values. Our first edition comes from *The Reporter*, Volume 29-2 (June 2002), and serves as a reminder to all of the importance acknowledgment plays in the development and maintenance of a ready Total Force. The article was reprinted in its entirety.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF OUR PEOPLE

This article will focus on a subject that can never be emphasized enough: acknowledgment of our people. While several sources have written about this over the years, recent evidence suggests a more comprehensive approach to the subject may be helpful.

Let's first define the scope of the "acknowledgment" we're talking about. Simply put, it runs from initial enlistment through and even beyond retirement. Acknowledgment

is not just about federal decorations, although they are included. Acknowledgment need not only be for a job well done although that is certainly a worthy reason to acknowledge someone. Acknowledgment need not only come from commanders though they are certainly integral to acknowledgment of people. And most importantly, acknowledgment is not something to be pegged to specific timelines or exercised with any rigidity, but rather should be fluid, ongoing, internalized, and a way of life. Notice use of the term "acknowledgment" rather than "recognition,"

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the latter being more commonly used in the military. “Recognition” is a narrow term as it implies a formal process of bestowing tangible evidence of credit on someone for excellent performance. “Recognition” is incorporated into the broader term “acknowledgment” and it is the latter which is the subject of this paper.

These concepts apply to any grouping of people, and even to whole units. The type, source, and reason of this acknowledgment may come in many forms; and that too, should be emphasized.

Acknowledging someone tells him or her that **they are important and that they mean something to you or your office.**

The types of acknowledgment can be oral, a nonverbal act such as the literal “pat on the back” or a “thumbs up” (way to go!), or written, or a combination of any of these. Sometimes a simple spoken “thank you” is appropriate. Oftentimes acknowledgment may take the form of a congratulatory oral announcement to the commander or other group, or taking the person aside, one-on-one and relating how much you appreciate what they do for you and your office. Other forms may include a “Welcome Package” or a letter an office gives to unit or office newcomers to acquaint them with your unit or office services and procedures, “thank you” letters, letters or certificates of appreciation or commendation for a job well done or extra duty served, “office- only” lunches, letters cards or notes for life cycle events of office personnel and their families, state awards or decorations, Air Force decorations, related organizational awards, congratulatory letters or notes upon promotion, receipt of awards or decorations or special or new assignments, and upon leaving the office/retirement ceremonies and celebrations. These are just a few types of acknowledgment, which can expand as far as your creative thinking allows.

Anyone can acknowledge anyone for anything. While acknowledgment to unit personnel most often comes from commanders, or supervisors to the people they supervise, it is not limited to these sources. Commanders and supervisors generate the more formal types of acknowledgment, but acknowledgment should know no rank or position, as the abiding rule is the “Golden Rule.”

Acknowledging someone tells him or her that they are important and that they mean something to you or your office. **EVERYONE**, regardless of rank or position, needs to feel special and wants encouragement. A pat on the back, or a “well done” once in a while is an incentive to sustain excellence. This is acknowledgment. The more creative the type, the more frequently given, depending on the recipient and the circumstance, usually elevates that person’s performance to new heights. Just remember how good you felt when someone you admire said a kind word to you.

A sense of professionalism and pride in one’s own performance, while essential, will sustain a person only so long. Without acknowledgment, by peers or supervisors, that person may eventually lose interest and their performance will suffer a decline, which adversely affects the mission. This should tell you, that **ACKNOWLEDGMENT** is a **READINESS** issue, and should be treated as such.

Please constantly look for ways and occasions to acknowledge your colleagues in your offices. Tell their employers, tell their families, and tell **THEM** how much you appreciate them. When one of your unit members has performed an assignment that has kept the member away from home or civilian employment for a while or has been promoted or placed in a leadership position, a letter to that member’s family or civilian employer to share their pride in this accomplishment or the added benefit to the civilian employer is not only a very nice thing to do, but also will boost the member’s retention in the unit. It’s not only an “if you do this, then look at all the good things that will follow” thing; it’s just the way people who associate with each other should act toward one another. In short, the “Golden Rule.”

Commanders and Supervisors: Do you know when the last federal decoration was received by each of the people you command or supervise? If you don't, you should.

Authority to award a decoration and "how to do it" are no longer barriers. The only two possible remaining reasons preventing this are: (1) "I just don't have the time" and (2) "the proposed recipient doesn't deserve it."

"No time." No one disputes that "people are our most important resource" and that "we have to take care of our people." We've all heard that often enough. But what does it really mean? It doesn't just mean we have to get them ready for deployment or other crises and prepare their families for their time away. It also means that as part of the everyday military environment we must acknowledge people every chance we can. This is not instituting a new program, but rather adopting a way of life. Federal decorations are just a part of it.

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If you say you don't have the time, you're saying you have too many "other things" to do in connection with your military life such as briefings, meetings, conferences, training, etc. If people really are our most valuable resources and everyone needs ongoing acknowledgment to nourish the incentive to sustain and improve the quality of their performance, should those of you who have "no time" to acknowledge them, reassess your priorities? Let some of those "other things" that can wait, wait until you process that decoration package or acknowledge your people in some way. The point is you **MUST** make time to acknowledge your people as part of your everyday military life. "I have no time" is not an acceptable excuse. Acknowledgment has, for too long, in too many sectors, been thought of as an "extra" that you do

if and when you have time. Your office is likely among the busiest in the unit. There's always something to do; and often you try to cram 10 hours of work into an eight-hour duty day that is already shortened by meetings, conferences, and classes. Nevertheless, you **MUST** make the time to express "thank you" or "good job."

"They're not deserving." If you as a supervisor or commander don't think one of your office or unit members deserves a federal decoration, consider whether that evaluation is more a reflection of your own leadership skills than of any deficiency of the considered recipient. If your people are not performing well enough to merit favorable consideration for a federal decoration every three years, you're either not motivating them enough to improve the quality of their performance to warrant that decoration or you've got the wrong person in that position. In either case, you should do something about it. If you are properly leading the right people in your unit or office, it is almost axiomatic that they should be favorably considered for a decoration every three years. If you recommend someone for promotion for their future potential, you have done them a disservice if during the time between promotions they have not received (a) federal decoration(s). So, awards and decorations, in addition to being a Readiness issue, is also a **LEADERSHIP** issue.

Remember supervisors, your commanders usually cannot know about the day-to-day performance of your people. You do. You have to take charge and let the commander know by preparing these packages.

It is a tenet of good leadership that the more deserved credit and expressions of gratitude that are given to those you command and supervise, the more favorably it reflects on your abilities as a leader.

Please don't wait three years to say "thank you" or "well done" or otherwise acknowledge your people. If you regularly do it, everybody wins, and you'll just feel better for saying or doing something nice for someone else.

Finally, from time to time when a person leaves a position or retires, that person wants to avoid any kind of fanfare on that occasion. With all good intentions, that person wants to avoid imposing a “burden” on others to say “goodbye” or show their appreciation and affection for all the good the person has done for them, the unit and the mission. As well motivated as that seems to be, it is a wrong, and even a somewhat selfish attitude for two reasons.

First, at the culmination of an assignment or career, those people with whom the person has associated have a basic human need to express their gratitude and appreciation. Far from being a “burden,” people need the catharsis of saying “good-bye” and “thank you” in a manner, they, and not the person leaving, see fit. It is a “life-cycle” event as much for them as for the person leaving, and they need to celebrate it. Call it “emotional cleansing.” Don’t deprive them of it.

Second, expressions of appreciation on these occasions send a powerful morale message to the rest of the unit. Everyone inevitably leaves the unit or organization at some time in the future. When people see how the current person leaving is treated, it will hearten them to know that years of dedicated service may someday merit such a celebration for them and their families. So, if you come to the time when you leave your assignment or retire, let those who will honor you and your contributions do so, as they deem appropriate. You’ll just have to sit there and “take” all those nice things they will say about you. Take comfort though, there are worse things you could endure.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, take the time to do something nice for someone else every chance you can, and when your time comes, let people do something nice for you!

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