

Values-Based Leadership Isn't for Wimps

What Every Organization Can Learn From Marine Corps Ethics Training

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The U.S. Marine Corps training has long been held in high regard among the military services.

During a recent visit to the Marine Recruit Depot at Parris Island, S.C., we learned that the foundation of that training is a pragmatic leadership program. In 100-degree temperatures, we saw firsthand that there's nothing soft about the Marine's values-based training, and we learned how elements of this approach could help every organization achieve its goals.

We were part of a group of 18 business leaders from Atlanta who

traveled to this remote coastal location to participate in an ethics training seminar organized by the Center for Ethics and Corporate Responsibility at Georgia State University. We witnessed how the foundational values of "honor, courage and commitment" are integrated into nearly every aspect of basic training — from formal classroom settings to carefully scripted briefings during breaks in rigorous physical exercises in the field. One of the members of our group, Howard Winkler of the Southern Company, described it as "one message being heard from many voices."

Based on our experience and encounters with the officers and recruits at Parris Island, we've compiled a list of four battlefield-tested disciplines for values-based leadership:

1. Making connections

Employees want to be a part of something bigger than themselves. The

Marines instill this feeling in recruits in large part by using their history to connect new members with veterans, who have a long legacy of proud, honorable service to the nation and to fellow Marines. In fact, values-based leadership is what the Marines have been practicing since the birth of the Corps in 1775.

So ask yourself: What are the founding principles and values of your organization? What do they mean to current employees? How have they changed? In what ways can you create shared meaning and pride in your organization.

2. Instilling integrity

Lists of "corporate values," which are often smartly framed and hung in company hallways, aren't worth anything without gen-



Field drills at the Marine Recruit Depot in Parris Island, S.C.



photos courtesy of j.r. hipple

uine support from the CEO and the other executive officers. In fact, we have seen multiple instances where new values-based management programs were not fully supported by the CEO. When this is the case, trying to implement the program can have significant negative effects on employee morale and productivity due to an unfulfilled expectation of change.

The original Commandant's order

in 1996 to create the Marine's Values-Based Program came from General Charles C. Krulak. This order codified the core values of "honor, courage and commitment" and spelled out the management processes for integrating the values throughout the corps. The original process is broken down into three steps:

• **Initial entry training** — This is where Marines are formally instruct-

ed on the core values as soon as they enter the organization.

• **Reinforcement education** — During advanced training courses, leaders reiterate and discuss values.

• **Sustainment education** — There is a directive that leaders demonstrate the core values of honor, commitment and courage daily.

The most effective values-based management programs in the private



sector also have a process of training, education and reinforcement. The key, however, is to have a CEO — like the Commandant — who is the standard bearer for your organization's values. This begins with the integrity of senior leadership, who must model the behavior expected of others, and requires an enterprise-wide process of education and reinforcement.

3. Remembering and reliving your values

Dr. Walter Fluker, renowned ethicist and author, says that being a storyteller is one of the principal roles that leaders need to play to advance values-based management. He advises executives to remember, retell and relive stories about the organization's character and values. Doing so will create a shared consciousness with employees.

The Marine Corps name for this is "tie-in," a reference to tying in words and thoughts with actions. The most poignant moment at Parris Island came when our group huddled within earshot as a drill sergeant spoke to recruits seated in the dense South Carolina woods.

During a break from a grueling training exercise, the sergeant described a story about the heroism of a fellow Marine who was killed in action and awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously. The recruits responded to questions about the case by relating the actions on the field to the core values.

What stories do you need to remember, retell and relive within your organization?

4. Increasing effectiveness

The military was the first to develop the idea of a "force multiplier," which refers to an attribute that significantly increases the effectiveness of a group. The U.S. Marines' values-based leadership program is designed to set in

motion a multiplier effect when maintaining the direction of troops in the field, which is accomplished through shared goals and behaviors — and life-saving teamwork.

The success of the troops can be boiled down to their understanding that one plus one equals much more than two and, at the same time, that the

"Professionalism and professional appearance is pretty important because it gives you the first impression, the benefit of the doubt. If you look the part, then you get the opportunity to show whether you're competent or not."

John Meyer, CEO of Axiom, on how his early career in the Air Force prepared him to lead a company.

Source: *Harvard Business Review*

chain is only as strong as the weakest link. Mix that with heavy doses of believing in a cause larger than yourself, and you can create some really driven people.

Examples of companies where values-based leadership is a force multiplier can be found on *Fortune* magazine's annual list of Best Places to Work. The companies selected for the list excel in building trust in leadership that expands, or multiplies, trust between co-workers and departments. This creates a more supportive and productive work environment and produces exceptional business results. The publicly held companies on the list outperform their peer companies 4:1 during good economic conditions, and a recent survey shows those same companies have been outperforming their peers 10:1 during the recent recession.

Mitchell Communications Group (MCG), a mid-sized PR firm in

Fayetteville, Ark., recently formalized its values-based leadership process in light of its nearly 200 percent growth during the past two years.

After a participative company-wide process to shape a list of shared values, management asked employees to become "keepers of the seal" for the MCG brand — which is a commitment to uphold the shared values in all they say and do. This commitment, plus MCG's leadership training and employee recognition programs, put words and thoughts into action, similar to the process that the Marines used.

An annual Gallup poll asks Americans to rank their confidence in various institutions. In 2010, the military received the highest marks from the public — with an approval rating of 76 percent. In contrast, 19 percent of Americans expressed confidence in big business, and 11 percent felt confident in Congress. The Marine Corps earns this confidence through its commitment to the country and to fellow Marines — a promise that it keeps due to a tangible, management-oriented process. Other organizations can replicate this process by setting goals, establishing systems, and driving behavior and performance through values-based leadership. ■



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