



In his famous book, *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli asks the question, “Whether it be better be loved than feared or feared than loved?”

By: [Thomas E. Meyer](#)

“Regard your soldiers as your children and they will follow you into the deepest valleys. Look on them as your own beloved sons and they will stand by you even unto death.” -Sun Tzu; *The Art of War*

A military leader’s first encounter with leadership is rarely through the military lens. Often, our early encounters with leaders - parents, teachers, coaches, church leaders, etc. - are the most influential to developing the men and women of character who will later lead our nation’s Armed Forces. Perhaps the family bonds of service in combat inspired Sun Tzu’s emphasis on parental love in leading an Army. No one thinks it is crazy to consider love an integral part of leading a child, spouse, student, or athlete - but when we discuss military leadership it is rarely part of the conversation. Rather than ignore the leadership examples set, for many of us, by those who positively influenced us as children - let us embrace the example set by these monumental personalities who shaped us along the way.

Masculinity, toughness, machoism (which is not a male specific problem) are so embedded in our identity within the Armed Forces we often miss or overlook the most critical and

foundational aspect of leadership - love. Try standing in front of a formation of combat arms soldiers and telling them the basic function of leadership is to love those you lead. When I first did this, I purposefully paused to observe the faces of my soldiers. An onlooker could almost see the questioning doubt as if it were the perspiration that results from the scorching heat of Fort Campbell, KY in July. The problem is, we have the wrong understanding of what it means to love our soldiers; to love those we lead. But, when you relate this idea to two words in two different languages it isn't so crazy and it certainly isn't weak.

The first is Latin; *passio*. From this word we get "passion," but the direct translation is "to suffer." To lead is to have passion for those you lead; a willingness to suffer emotional, mental, and physical pains for the purpose of growing and bettering those you are charged to lead. Whether it is burning the midnight oil to ensure some training event or combat patrol is properly planned and resourced, not eating because by the time your platoon made it through the chow line there is no food remaining, or turning around at the end of the 12 mile release road march to walk back and motivate those straggling behind, dedicate yourself to the passion - suffering - that is leadership. The examples of this are magnified when applied in combat. COL (Ret.) B.P. McCoy defined this in his book, [\*The Passion of Command\*](#) as:

A commander must genuinely love his men and win their affections in return [...]. Here lies the moral imperative of leadership. The leader is entrusted with the lives of his men and accepts unlimited liability for their welfare. The task of bearing such a burden requires more than passive preparation from organizational schooling and mandatory training. Such a task demands passion. Here I speak of passion in the Medieval Latin sense of the word: to suffer for love. **The passion of a commander is equal parts love, zeal, and a quite wrath: love for the men, zeal for the lifelong study of the profession of arms and the behavior of men in battle, and quiet wrath to make the nightmares of our enemies come true.**

Passion for the men, the profession, and the mission is absolutely necessary to leadership. If passion is one side of the love coin, turn to Greek for the second aspect of the love required to lead.

Ἀγάπη or Ἀγαπάω (*Agapē* or *Agapaō*) is one of four Greek words used to describe the multiple facets of "love." *Agapē* is the most noble of the four; it is a love of sacrifice and

passion for serving others. Agapē is the word, in original Greek, for love used in one of the more oft quoted Bible verses amongst the Armed Forces: “greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for a friend,” John 15:13. P.J. Neal, in his post for [The Strategy Bridge](#) (“Leadership: A Bedrock of Trust”) mentions a form of this love – compassion – as one of the four key elements of trust. He states, “Compassion comes from a belief that individuals care for each other and will work to protect each other, as well as protect those they care for.” Love, passion, passio, agape, compassion – whatever word we use, our soldiers will never care what we know until they know we care.

How do we demonstrate leadership with love? We lead intentionally, selflessly, authentically, and with accountability.

### **1. Love Intentionally**

Leaders demonstrate priority through intentionality. As a child, my father had a couple key phrases he said so often they were met with a preemptive repeating of the phrase – “I know Dad, ‘you are responsible for your own actions’” – and a rolling of the eyes. If caring for, being proud of, and passionate about your soldiers is a priority then it needs to be demonstrated through actions and words. Leaders need to treat every interaction as a touchpoint – whether with an individual in passing or a unit formation. A leader’s message needs to be so consistent it becomes synonymous with the leader him/herself.

Have a plan, an intentional vision of how you are going to demonstrate genuine care. Daily conversations with your soldiers as they pass by – “how is your wife, Jessica, doing?” – show you genuinely care about them as an individual. The simple act of investing time in the monotony and struggles of an individual’s life produces immense return on investment in the form of human capital. No matter what the method, ensure it is intentional and demonstrates the message and vision you intend to cast.

### **2. Love Selflessly - Servant Leadership.**

While the method may vary, it needs to be service oriented. Leadership, like love, is not about you. You are a servant for those you lead. Many articles, doctoral theses, and books – to include the #1 bestselling book of all time – were written on this topic. Easily defined, servant leadership is an inverse pyramid where the needs of the led outweigh the needs and privileges of the leader. Leadership is not about what is convenient, what is easy, what is comfortable, or what you think you’ve earned at your time in service and rank – leadership is not about you. Love your soldiers by serving their needs and the needs of your unit above your own.

### **3. Love authentically and congruently.**

In the intentionality section above we discuss actions and words - congruency between the two magnifies the outcome while a lack thereof has immensely negative effects. A congruent leadership model is a positively demonstrated and perceived relationship between what the leader or organization espouse as their beliefs (word) and how they take action daily (deed). Authenticity is as simple as - be who you are. The men and women of your organization will, consciously or subconsciously, build a perception of who you are based on how you talk, what you say, what you do, and what you fail to do.

If you do not genuinely care about those you lead, it will show. Talking about love - transformational leadership - while living out transactional leadership will exponentially harm credibility. Conversely, don't undervalue the importance of what you have to say as a leader. Your actions are not always seen by all and are rarely perceived the same by all. Use opportunities to speak to the whole, as well as those to speak to individuals, to explain the "why," reaffirm shared values, discuss vision, and receive feedback. Tools such as command climate surveys and Multi-Source Assessment 360 evaluations are also great opportunities to garner feedback and identify the gaps between your beliefs and the perceptions of those you lead. Loving those you lead and the organization you are a part of is important, but it is all for naught if it lacks genuine authenticity and congruency.

### **4. Love through discipline/ accountability.**

The final, and perhaps most counter-cultural, aspects of love's role in leadership is discipline and accountability. Loving those you lead is not soft or passive; it is an aggressive pursuit of the unlimited potential within your organization and every individual you lead. Common phrases such as "it is called leadership, not likership" and "you need to lead your soldiers, not be their friends," are absolutely valid - to a point. Too often they become an excuse for being a jerk or for not investing the emotional energy and intelligence in caring about them as individual people with potential and value. Referring back to the Sun Tzu quote at the beginning, loving those you lead is like regarding your soldiers as your children - parental love. Being a parent is immensely charged with love and passion. With that love comes the responsibility to invest in your children to ensure they discover their potential. Part of this responsibility is disciplining them when they are wrong, correcting their course, and maintaining accountability. Leading with love requires the leader to hold their soldiers accountable while remaining accountable to their soldiers.

Leadership requires a passion. It requires a deep passion for what you do, who you lead, and a vision of what they can achieve. If you don't wake up with excitement for what you do and who you lead, do yourself and your soldiers a favor and meditate, ruminate, pray, or invest thought into why you don't and if you should be doing something else. Leadership requires a willingness to sacrifice and a measure of suffering for those you lead. Regarding your soldiers as your children is not to say treat them like children; it means love and sacrifice for them as if they were your own beloved sons. Agapē and passio - love - are the foundation of leadership.

*Thomas Meyer is an infantry officer in the United States Army. He manages a leader development initiative named Hay in the Barn LDR. Follow @HayInTheBarnLDR on Twitter (<https://www.twitter.com/hayinthebarnldr>) and Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/hayinthebarnldr>). The views of this post are his and do not represent the United States Army or the Department of Defense.*

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