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By Joe Byerly

As military professionals, one of the most critical components of our personal growth is the time and energy we spend on self-development. Whether it is through reading, reflection, or deliberately placing ourselves in experiences that force us out of our comfort zones, we must be relentless in this endeavor. The men and women we lead need us to be the most

competent and confident versions of ourselves.

So how can we improve our leadership abilities? By looking to the past. History is a landscape full of commanders who led soldiers through extreme conditions and faced great fear and uncertainty yet accomplished amazing feats. Their leadership made the difference, and we can improve ourselves by studying their successes as well as their failures.

Some might argue that we get enough leadership training and development from our everyday experiences in the military. They believe these experiences provide enough of the raw materials to build ourselves into better leaders. This can be evidenced by a claim that Lt. Col. Drew Steadman [recently made on his blog at TheMilitaryLeader.com](#), arguing that we've taken leadership out of leader development. I believe this is why many military professionals rarely pick up a book. I've met several officers through the years who read only during professional military education courses. They've been platoon leaders, squad leaders or company commanders; what more do they need?

I see three problems with viewing our narrow experiences as enough to maximize our leadership potential.

Time

In the grand scheme of things, we do not have a lot of time to perfect our leadership abilities. For most of us, positions of leadership come quickly and then are gone in a blinding flash. We're leading platoons—bam! We're an assistant S-3. We're leading companies—bam! We're preparing slides for the next day's brief on a brigade staff—bam! Let's face it: For officers, command is the exception, not the norm.

Now let's examine our time in actual leadership positions. We spend the first couple of months figuring stuff out. Then, we get in a groove and an event or person happens—a lost weapon, a death, new boss, troubled subordinate—that consumes us. We shake it off and get

back in our groove, and then we finally feel like we've got this leadership thing down. Time's up; now, we must begin prepping for the next person to take over our organization. We start looking toward the handover to make sure it goes smoothly. We say goodbye to our squad, platoon or command. It's over; back to staff.

It is for this reason we need to arrive prepared, ready to hit the ground running when we are in charge, and make the most of our time leading others. One way to do this is to think about the type of leader we want to be ahead of time. Nothing helps drive introspection better than studying past leaders.

Additionally, we can come loaded with vicarious experiences that will greatly improve our decision-making abilities. British Field Marshal Sir William Slim can help us think through the value of calm and cool-headed leadership when we are up against insurmountable problems. Gen. George S. Patton Jr. can teach how aggression on the battlefield affects enemy decision-making. Finally, Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant can prepare us to effectively exercise Mission Command when one of our subordinates is a Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman and the other is a Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren.

Whatever investment we make ahead of time in self-development will ensure that we arrive better prepared to lead our formations. Additionally, the interplay of the leadership experiences of others mixed with our own will help us quickly develop into the leaders our organizations need.

Great and Horrible Bosses

We learn a lot from and are largely influenced by the leaders we encounter in the military. Most of the bosses I've worked for have been good, and I consider myself fortunate to have served under them. But in 12 years, I can give the title of "great" only to a limited few. The same goes for horrible bosses; I've had only a small number along the way.

Just like we need a harsh winter to appreciate a wonderful summer, we need both great and horrible leaders in our lives to help mold us into the best version of ourselves. We don't run into too many of these in our careers. This is the second reason we must turn to military leaders from the past to help shape our leadership identity.

Great leaders such as British Vice Adm. Horatio Nelson can inspire us to truly achieve Mission Command in our organizations. Gen. George Washington teaches about the importance of self-study and the character required to lead in the face of friction and uncertainty. Sir Winston Churchill's early career was rife with failure; he teaches that failure does not have to define us but can develop us. And Maj. Gen. Fox Conner, who was a role model to then-Maj. Dwight D. Eisenhower, highlights the importance of mentorship.

While I've learned a great deal from the leaders listed above, I've also learned much from the horrible bosses of history as well as rising stars who fell from grace. Maj. Gen. Charles Lee, who was permanently dismissed from the Continental Army, is a great example of what happens when we fail to follow others and let our personal flaws go unchecked as we are given more responsibility. The careers of Gens. George McClellan and Douglas MacArthur should help us reflect on ego so we may keep ours from clouding professional judgment. British Gen. Sir Redvers Buller, from the Boer War, exemplifies what happens when we fail to develop our intuition through self-study.

Combat Experience

Finally, war is a phenomenon that breaks down the best systems, the best plans and the best armies with a vengeance. As Carl von Clausewitz noted in *On War*, this is overcome only with exceptional leadership. Because most of the professionals serving today have limited experience in combat, we must study the actions of those who led under those conditions to better prepare ourselves for the type of leadership required to overcome the horrors, uncertainties and moral dilemmas presented in war.

There are several books that when paired with the study of individual leaders can help us think through leadership in combat. Karl Marlantes' *What It Is Like to Go to War* can aid in preparing for the moral struggles we will face from prolonged combat. We can learn about the effects war has on an organization's discipline in Jim Frederick's [*Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death*](#). Peter Hart's [*Voices from the Front: An Oral History of the Great War*](#) brings the day-to-day realities of large-scale warfare into clear focus. Finally, we can learn to avoid many of the failures of past leaders by reading Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch's [*Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*](#).

When we study the leaders who came before us, we begin to reflect on the leadership traits we want to develop in ourselves. We become better prepared to respond when the need arises, and we more clearly understand what is required of us to win in battle.

The choice is ours. We can either be shaped and influenced by our narrow experiences, or we can allow leaders from over 5,000 years of combat to mold us into the great leaders our subordinates deserve.

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