



By Zachary Mierva

The cabin was very quiet. A few passengers made phone calls or sent text messages to loved ones. Some were saying their prayers. Others would say they were making peace with the situation. If they were going to die, they said, there was nothing they could do about it, and so they tried to accept it.

Some later told me that they were glad I didn't give them too many details. That would have made them even more frightened.

It wasn't until about 90 seconds before we hit the water that I spoke to the passengers.

I wanted to be very direct. I didn't want to sound agitated or alarmed. I wanted to sound professional.

"This is the captain. Brace for impact!"

[-Cpt Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger](#)

On the morning of January 15, 2009, CPT Sully Sullenberger remained calm on the surface while his mind rapidly worked through the necessary calculations to safely land the plane after he lost the use of both engines. Beyond being an exceptional pilot, his example on the intercom that morning provides us with some leadership insight worth further examination. The composure he exhibited in the face of uncertainty is the same required of leaders in our Army.

According to ADRP 6-22 *Army Leadership*, the Army expects leaders to display a confident presence by “projecting self-confidence and certainty in the unit’s ability to succeed in whatever it does; able to demonstrate composure and outward calm through steady control over emotion.” As is with most doctrine, we can simplify this down to a few words: Be the Duck.

As a duck swims, it appears almost docile. It effortlessly glides across the water: calm, cool, collected. Ducks look like they have their stuff together. You can look at a swimming duck and think, “That duck knows what he’s doing.” However, the unseen action beneath the surface is utter chaos. The duck’s feet churn, fighting for every inch to maintain forward progress, creating a storm beneath the water.

So how does being a duck relate to leadership? A duck-like leader’s calm under pressure is contagious and subordinates begin to emulate the leader’s actions. Conversely, if a leader is in panic, [the organization tends to follow](#). The simple portrayal of outward calm can immediately change a bad situation into one [with the potential for success](#).

I’ve witnessed the power of this principle first hand. The first time I was in contact during combat, I was a duck. Unfortunately, I was an upside down duck with my feet kicking in the air. The panic caused by the event threatened to overtake me, however it was my platoon sergeant’s voice on the net that counteracted the moment. His calm, measured response forced me to do the same. He was deliberate in his instruction, and after hearing his voice over the net, I was able to focus and execute.

We all should aspire to be the duck. By portraying the composure necessary, your organization will begin to follow. Nevertheless, that’s not to say that your feet are kicking below the surface. Whether in contact, giving a briefing, or in daily interactions with your subordinates, maintaining your duckness will have an immeasurable impact on your organization. Every moment of a patrol or even during a PowerPoint briefing, your feet should be churning. We should look for the next covered and concealed position, prepare for the next question, or think ahead to the next slide, all while giving the outward appearance of self-confidence and calm.

In addition to the comforting effect that duck-like leaders create, the ability to remove the chaos helps reduce the emotional aspect of a situation. By removing the emotionality, you can work towards lowering the propensity of making an irrational decision during the heat of the moment. There's no shame in taking a long, slow breath while you collect your thoughts to provide clear and direct guidance to your organization. Too often leaders make passionate, and frequently regrettable, decisions that negatively affect the morale and ability of a group to function.

While there are countless factors that influence an organization, the critical moments of conflict are those that define leaders best and shape future success. CPT Sullenberger was the duck that fateful morning when he landed the plane on the Hudson. My platoon sergeant was the duck when our platoon came into contact with the enemy. A leader who acts like a duck, one who remains calm and unemotional in times of crisis, will directly influence the success of an organization.

Be the Duck.

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