

The 8 Lessons of Leadership I Learned Brewing Coffee - A Tribute to BG Sean P. Mulholland



By Alex Licea

I originally wrote this over two years ago. It's about the leadership lessons I learned brewing the morning coffee while working as the enlisted aid for then BG Sean P. Mulholland, who was the commander of Special Operations Command-South (SOCSOUTH).

This blog post now has even more of a special meaning for me. While these lessons still play an important part in my life and my military career, this article now serves as a tribute.

This is because our military community lost a great brother-in-arms on August 8, 2018 when BG (Ret.) Sean P. Mullholland died at the age of 58. Sean Mulholland was not only a great

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military officer, he was a great man who cared about his people.

It would only be fitting on National Coffee Day to share the lessons I learned as a tribute to a man who liked his coffee with absolutely no cream or sugar.

Let me take you back to October 1, 2013.

The government had shutdown for the first time in nearly 20 years.

Our command group's support staff was bare and overwhelmed since our secretary had been furloughed, and our military reservists could not get new orders due to the lack of funding. It was an unanticipated setback.

By that afternoon, the unit command sergeant major asked our first sergeant to seek "*volunteers*" to help run the front office, answer phones, e-mails, and scheduling appointments among other office tasks.

At the suggestion of my former supervisor and the commander's current executive officer, he recommended me to the administrative position. I was a U.S. Army Sergeant First Class, a senior noncommissioned officer, at the time and served as the Public Affairs chief in charge of PAO operations across Central and South America.

In my mind, I felt 'overqualified' to be a glorified office assistant. I had a bachelor's degree in Communications, working on a Masters in International Relations, and served as the military affairs consultant for an international documentary that was seen all over the world among other accomplishments. It was safe to say I was not thrilled with my new role.

Like a true GenXer/Millennial, I took to social media to vent my frustrations and posted this on my Facebook timeline.

**“Thanks to the government shutdown, I will now be working in the front office.
If you need me, I will be by the coffee pot”**

The CSM told me to be in the office at 5:30 a.m. and starting brewing the coffee by 6.

Ready for duty the next morning, I cleaned the coffee pot, placed the filter and added the coffee grounds. When the CSM arrived 15 minutes later, he poured himself a cup, took a sip and quickly turned to me and said *“El café esta flojo”* which translates to **the coffee is weak**. He told me to throw it out and make a new batch and place a full cup on the commanding general’s desk.

At this point, it was safe to say that my post-Army career did not involve me working as a barista.

I made a fresh pot and left a mug on the general’s desk. Later on that morning, the general came up to me and asked how I liked working in the front office. I simply told him *“it’s a learning experience Sir.”*

Then he said something that left an impact on me *“Anything you do can be a learning experience.”* He then smiled at me and made his way to go see his officer in charge of operations.

In the weeks that followed, I learned eight aspects of leadership while working for the commander and of course brewing the morning coffee. *Here they are:*

Mornings are valuable. The morning hours were his time to be effective and plan his day. With meetings most of the day, office calls or preparing to hit the road, those couple of hours in the morning needed to be free of interruptions.

The importance of servant leadership. The concept of servant leadership is an approach

described by the leader putting the needs of his people before his or her own. The servant-leader values contributions from others and encourages teamwork.

Making a difference in and out of uniform. The commander embraced working with local communities outside the installation. He even established a military assistance program to help mentor underprivileged and low-income teenagers in a JROTC program at a local high school as a way to teach them the value of citizenship and service.

Trust. He believed in people. Whether the person was a senior officer or a low-ranking troop, the man believed everyone's intentions were good. The belief of trusting people was key to his leadership style because he wanted to build meaningful relationships with the people he served.

Humility. I never met a more humble general officer than the man I poured coffee for every morning during those two months. I know that may sound funny, but as a former enlisted Soldier himself, the commander always gave credit to his troops. He didn't seek special treatment and took care of his people who he called "his peeps."

Dealing with stress. With leadership comes stress. It's part of the job. Managing stress can be difficult and everyone handles it different. Two things I observed from the commander is that he would take stress breaks. He would either walk around the headquarters building or take a moment to watch the news. It taught me the value of taking a step back.

It's lonely at the top. Sometimes in order to be successful, you have to give yourself up to loneliness. Yes, the commander was surrounded by people all day. He was either in meetings or consistently traveling. But, at the end of the day, it was just him alone in his office.

Bonus lesson. More than anything else, the biggest lesson I learned during this experience

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is never underestimate any job no matter how mundane you think it may be. My initial attitude toward the job was a bit arrogant, but this job made me realize that none of us are that important.

Doing something outside of your discipline can sometimes be rewarding. For me, doing something as simple as brewing a pot of coffee and working as a commander's aide became a life-changing experience.

For that, I say thank you for everything Sean Mulholland! RIP

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