



By [Joe Byerly](#)

As military leaders we should want nothing more than to give our enemies an unfair fight—with the advantage in our favor. And one way in which we do this is through training our forces. I can't think of anyone who has written as extensively on the "why" and "how" of training as Gen. Donn Starry.

In Vietnam, he commanded the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Following the war, he

served as the commander of the Armor School, V Corps in Germany, and eventually Training and Doctrine Command. Under his leadership, the Army developed the AirLand Battle Doctrine in the early 1980s, which set the stage for the next two decades of force development. He retired in 1983 after commanding US Readiness Command.

A little over 40 years ago, in January of 1979 General Donn Starry addressed future battalion and brigade commanders at Fort Leavenworth's Pre Command Course.

In the course of his remarks he provided leaders with insights on leadership that remain relevant today. Below are some excerpts from that speech.

On Careerism

What we're trying to tell you is that, in some way to some extent careerism has kind of overtaken us. Entrepreneurship of the wrong kind has overtaken us. We are more concerned with *my* efficiency report and *my* outfit and *my* this and *my* that than we are in *us*, than we are in the results of the calculus that I've tried to describe for you. You have got to change that. Your leadership has to build synergism in your units so that something like that red line happens instead of the very high level of very low efficiency we have today.

It's got to start with you. You see this term -US ARMY -almost one-half of your life. Take a close look at it -only six letters. What has happened is that, instead of concentrating on the first letters as a word -US -we've fallen into the habit of concentrating on the last two -MY. We do it all levels. Maybe it's a sign of our times. "What's in it for me?" "Do your own thing!" "Individual lifestyles." These are all symptomatic of the problems in the Army and in our society....You must put aside *my* career, *my* efficiency report, for the good of the whole -the team. When you do that, your soldiers will know and follow your example.

Importance of Unit Culture

If you put the soldier in the unit where there is that cohesiveness and the climate of

leadership, many, many of those [discipline] problems will take care of themselves

The Leader vs. Fireman

Now, it isn't going to be easy. There are all kinds of distractors. So many requirements on time -yours and your unit's -that the environment can best be described as downright hostile. You and your unit will be battered from all sides by important things -fund drives, extra duty requirements, inspections, parades, on-duty education, deadlines, schools, crises, crises, crises.

You can command from day-to-day if you choose, stamping out fires as they pop up. You won't be moving toward any goal and you may even survive, but you won't create the type of unit that wins battles.

Incorporating Management into Leadership

You've got to look at the problem of command objectively and systematically. It doesn't mean to replace the art of command with management, but it does mean organizing for the job systematically using some selected management techniques.

The Dark side of Charisma

Charisma is wonderful. If you have it, flaunt it. But for most of us who don't have it, it's impossible to fake it. Most important, charisma is part of the problem. It causes us to focus on leadership as an individual thing, more of the *my* syndrome I talked about earlier. We found that really successful leadership that results in an outstanding organizational performance focuses on the *us*.

The Best Kind of Leadership

Units need organizational leadership, the kind that draws on the strength of the organization itself. It comes from planning ahead; from the confidence of the leaders

themselves and the confidence of soldiers in those leaders; from motivation; and from training, training, training. It doesn't just happen, and if you wait around for it like a knighthood, it won't. It takes hard work and a leadership climate that only you, as the commander, can create.

Not Everyone Should Command

Not all of us are good commanders. We must be willing to weed out those who can't, and do it early in their tour before they screw the troops too badly. It's a command responsibility -it requires a certain ruthlessness. More than that, it requires guts, honesty, integrity, and some empathy on the part of the commander who does the hiring and firing. You can't let your subordinates fear to make mistakes, worse they cannot fear to let their subordinates make mistakes lest they themselves as first parties get fired.

It's a fine line. The only guy I've known well who could do it well was General Abrams. However he said to me many times that the first place he looked when a subordinate didn't do well was at himself. Once he had satisfied himself that his instructions were clear, then he could proceed to act without hesitation to get rid of the marginal performer. It's a good rule.

Want to read more?

Thanks to the [Combat Studies Institute](#) at Fort Leavenworth we can now read (for free!!) Starry's most important speeches, articles, and memorandums in an excellent two-volume series titled [Press On!](#) he wrote about everything from strategy, logistics, leadership, and training to noncommissioned officer development, the role of the command sergeant major in organizations, values, and more.

One thing that stands out is his ability to communicate. In his writings, he's able to concisely describe a problem, develop an operational solution, outline the Army's strategic approach to implementing that solution, and describe the tactical effects. This series is one

of the most important additions to my professional library.

**Update. Many have asked about Don Starry's article To Change an Army. I've provided a link to the [.pdf here](#).

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