

3 Leadership Lessons Observer, Coach, Trainers Understand That You Should, Too



By Joshua Trimble

Leadership traits are taught and leaders evolve in some of the most unsuspected places. Consider that U.S. Army training centers are built and designed to put units through rigorous and realistic training to evaluate their preparedness for fighting our nation's wars. Most people would understandably assume training centers are more about preparing units than leaders. The Observer, Coach, Trainers (OCTs) are an integral part of these training

centers and often evolve as some of the best leaders – learning and teaching leadership traits to those they observe.

Serving as an OCT at a training center is not without its own unique challenges. The OCT is often trapped between wanting to unnecessarily help the rotational training unit avoid disaster and watching them fail. The training units predictably expect the OCTs to be experts, and OCTs want to help lead the unit to learn through their own experiences of mistakes and successes. For the OCT, knowing when to say something to the unit or a Soldier, as well as what to say, is an art developed from self-observed and practiced experiences that translate to effective leadership traits. It is a practice of understanding the appropriate situations to lead in a more passive role to develop individuals, teams, and units and knowing when to take an active leadership role when it is most necessary to coach and train. OCTs are leaders on the battlefield, and they understand the following traits that can apply in any type of organization.

The leading question is a leader's question

You can tell a Soldier what they should do or you can lead a Soldier to *think* about what they should do. The latter lends itself to discovery learning and lets the owner achieve more than simply working through a checklist of things told to do. Easier said than done, the ability to ask the leading question is directly related to your understanding of the situation and having a comprehensive understanding of what needs to happen. Engaged commanders (leaders) with experience and an awareness of the abilities of their Soldiers will perform this effortlessly. Sometimes, the easiest leading question for a commander to ask their Soldiers is, “why?” That simple question can lead someone to think and learn about the solutions that create ownership in their own abilities to meet the mission.

Leaders in all organizations should strive to ask leading questions. Someone that does not understand his or her organization will not be able to capitalize on this leadership trait. A manager can handle and report on tasks, but a leader can lead organizations through tasks

and onto achievements. And, in doing so, that leader is creating a learning organization capable of creating other emerging leaders within its ranks that will take the organization to new successes. That is the great ability of a leading question and one that leaders are adept at using.

We are all here to learn

Everyone at the training center is there to learn. The training unit learns, the opposition forces learn, and the OCTs learn. Many assume that an OCT, in the position to coach and train, is the expert with most of the answers. While others assume the sole focus on learning at a training center is on the training unit. Both assumptions are not completely true. OCTs will lead learning through collaborative after-action reviews where input is received from the entire group – creating learning points for everyone involved, including the OCT. The leaders of the formation are learning through the comments from the Soldiers participating and the Soldiers are learning from the comments of their leaders. Leaders are observing their formations as they go through the exercise and learning their strengths and weaknesses, while the Soldiers are learning about decision making and tactics, techniques, and procedures from their first and second-line leaders. The dynamic and free playing opposition forces create learning for the formations through experiences that a unit cannot achieve in a simulator, and the opposition forces are learning by reacting to the decisions of the likewise dynamic and free playing training unit. The OCTs learn new techniques from each unit that performs tasks just slightly different from other units while the training units learn from the input of the OCT to their mission rehearsals and battle actions. Everyone learns at a training center, and leaders understand this.

The same can be said for leaders of every type of organization. We all can learn from each other as long as we are willing to listen. The principal can learn from the teacher, the coach can learn from the athlete and the parent from the child. The moment the people in your organization stop learning – the moment the leader stops learning – the organization stops improving. There is no improvement without learning. Leaders understand the importance

of learning at all levels, set the example, and encourage the discovery.

Winners sometimes lose

Winning matters and good leaders will guide their units to experience success. However, winning is not easy and nearly all units will work through some frustrating losses at a training center. That is not to say you cannot win at a training center, but you will definitely experience struggles designed to make your unit better. OCTs understand that their responsibility is to help the unit train and create a winning environment that creates success in the rotational units' tasks and mission sets. OCTs and leaders comprehend that in order to do this, the unit will most certainly fail at some point. A good OCT recognizes how to let the unit fail just enough to learn from the mistake and not let the failure become the focal point that distracts the unit from learning how to be successful. Instead, they are able to provide a learned path to success. By experiencing that failure and asking leading questions of what they might have done differently, the unit can achieve success and master their tasks.

Leaders of all types of organizations appreciate that the group can gain from failure, and they grasp the difference in a "no-fail" task and one that the organization can learn the most from through successful failure. It is wonderful to build upon success,, but there is a great deal of learning from failure. Effective leaders accept that failure can be a catalyst to success and they will lead an organization through failure.

OCTs have the benefit of observing a lot of great leadership and learning from those that are still improving. It is through these observations and chances to coach and train that the OCTs understand some of the finer leadership lessons that can make units and organizations of all types successful. They ask leading questions, they are always learning, and they realize that losing can enable learning. Leaders everywhere can benefit from using these traits.

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LTC Joshua Trimble is an active-duty U.S. Army Signal Officer and has served in a variety of leadership and staff positions in the Signal Corps to include over nine years as an S6\G6\J6. A graduate of the National War College, LTC Trimble has an MS in National Security Strategy and an MA in Management and Leadership. LTC Trimble served as the task force signal senior mentor (OCT) at the Joint Readiness Training Center in 2018-2019.

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