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By Daniel Sukman

“James”

“Please come in, James. I am surprised to see you this afternoon. It’s unusual for officers to use my open-door policy. In fact, it’s unusual for anyone to use it.”

“Thank you, sir.” I replied. However, it didn’t surprise me that nobody had ever approached Colonel Stark to have a conversation. For the past six months, after he had assumed command of the brigade, Colonel Stark instilled fear among his subordinates. It wasn’t his physical presence. In fact, Colonel Stark was a bit on the diminutive side, standing only about 5 foot 6 inches and weighing perhaps 140 pounds soaking wet. What kept people away from Colonel Stark was how he treated his fellow human beings.

“So, what is it that you want?” Colonel Stark said, as he sat behind his desk, his eyes still looking at his computer.”

“Sir, I wanted to talk about our command styles. Our leadership styles anyway.”

The colonel hit send on his email and finally made eye contact with me.

“Is there something that you want to change? I could loan you some books on various forms of leadership. Kotter, Sinek, Pressfield....take a look at the bookshelf in the corner and take your pick. The books are useful, but ultimately you need to figure out what works for you.”

Colonel Stark's comment threw me off. I came to his office to address his leadership style, and already the conversation moved in a different direction. I began to tremble a bit but was able to muster a couple of words.

"Sir, I've been in your brigade since you assumed command. I work well with your staff, and with the other company commanders in the brigade. We love our unit and performed well on the last deployment"

"Yeah, we're pretty good" Colonel Stark loved to interrupt, and would always agree with what he took as praise. "Is that why you came here? To tell me how great we are? I don't need your affirmation if that is what this is about."

"No sir," I replied. "It's just that a number of us are having some issues with your command style. It's been a bit abrasive, and to be honest strait up demeaning. You have been abusive to your staff and to your subordinate commanders. It's wearing us down." I took a deep breath and exhaled, hardly believing I spoke those words to him.

Colonel Stark sat back in his chair to reflect on my comments. After 30 seconds that seemed like 30 minutes he spoke up. "Well I appreciate your honesty. But can you be more specific?"

Earlier in the week as I prepared for this session, I wrote down a litany of events where Colonel Stark demeaned his junior officers. "I can sir. Just yesterday for example, you screamed at Captain Rickman. You called him worthless and a poor excuse for a soldier. This was in front of his company, in front of his NCOs and soldiers. He's going to have a hard time recovering from that."

"Any other examples?"

"Yes sir. Last month you told Major Lombardini she was fired. I assume it was out of anger because she is still coming to work and using the same office. She is the most respected field grade officer in the brigade, and you crushed her."

"Really, I barely remember it. To tell you the truth I have not even thought about it since. She's got a strong personality and I assume she got over it."

I was stunned. Rumor had it that Major Lombardini had a small breakdown leading to an extended leave before she came back to work. Two people at the center of an argument. One had a meltdown, and the other doesn't think twice about it. I thought about this, and it scared me. How someone could be a central figure in someone's life, and the other would not even care about her existence. I thought about some of my past relationships, friends,

girlfriends, family. What if I was important to them and only considered them as periphery characters in my life?

“Do you know how many soldiers we have in this brigade?” Colonel Stark asked. But before I could answer, he did so for me.

“About four thousand soldiers. I can’t develop personal relationships with everyone. My photo is on the wall of every unit, and when I go to Walmart soldiers approach me and initiate a 15-minute conversation. Most, if not all the time I have no idea who they are. I only know that sooner or later they are deploying to combat, and their life is in my hands.”

Colonel Stark continued. “Look James, I could put on a mask of command and treat other people nicely. I could compliment them on their products, on their work ethic, and on their accomplishments. It’s an easy thing to do. But it’s not me. It’s not how I command. I get that people see me as toxic, but in our profession it’s not the leadership style that matters, it’s the results. I care about accomplishing our mission, winning in combat, and bringing everyone home from our deployments. The latter isn’t always possible, but damn it I will do everything within my power to achieve it. I understand what I can control and what I can’t. What I can’t control is how people feel about the way I interact with them. What I can control is their preparation for combat. If that means I’m toxic, so be it.”

This is when the realization hit me. Up until this point of my career, I assumed that toxic leaders were oblivious to their ways. It had never occurred to me that someone would make the deliberate choice to be toxic. Even more disturbing was realizing that choosing to be toxic serves some people rather well. I began to question everything I believed about leadership. How many other commanders and senior officers made this choice? How many tried to treat others well, and to be respectful, only to realize that could be a path to failure? I was speechless.

After a moment of awkward silence, Colonel Stark continued to speak. “Do you know what’s worse than being a toxic leader James?”

“I have no idea sir. I tend to think nothing.”

“Well you’re wrong. Soldiers, marines, officers, NCOs, they can’t stand a toxic leader, but they hate a phony leader even worse. Most people are a good judge of personality. They can peg you for who you are. Some can do it within ten seconds of meeting you, others will gradually come to their conclusion. But eventually they figure it out. And if you are pretending to be somebody you’re not it’s a recipe for disaster.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Colonel Stark wasn't done.

"Back in high school, you ever read *Catcher in the Rye*?" he asked.

"I did sir"

"Holden Caulfield, for all his faults was on to something. Nobody likes a phony. Nobody likes hypocrisy. You may not like how I lead; you might call it toxic but pretending to be something I'm not is a thousand times worse."

For a moment I thought about the book. I thought about the essay I wrote in the tenth grade, the one filled with passive voice that Colonel Stark would crumple up and throw back at me for the poor grammar and illogical conclusions. Finally, I responded, "You don't have to be a phony sir. Just hold your tongue or bite your lip next time you think about tearing someone down."

"No James, I won't do it. It's not who I am. It's not how I got to where I am. I'm 43 years old and I don't take leadership advice from soldiers in their 20s. Don't get me wrong, I think I can learn something from anyone. Everybody knows something I don't, and I willingly admit I can learn from the commanding general at division headquarters to the private sweeping the floor. But that learning won't change how I lead. So, if you're here to persuade me to change my ways...my successful ways after a couple decades of wearing this uniform...well then you're wasting your time. And you're wasting my time too."

He was right. In the army, attaining the rank of colonel and commanding a brigade is penultimate success, slightly below attaining the rank of general. Even more, based on the brigade's tactical performance, Colonel Stark was well on his way to becoming a flag officer. The more I thought about it, the less his chances at promotion bothered me. What bothered me was the inconsistency. I had known terrific leaders who respected their subordinates, who treated them well. Those leaders climbed the higher echelon ranks just as Colonel Stark is. If any type of leader can command a brigade, or promote to general, then does leadership style really matter? What difference does it make to the individual if results are all that matter?

"Do you have anything else you want to bitch about?" Colonel Stark asked.

"No sir." I replied. "I'm good." I saluted crisply, executed an about face and walked out of his office back to my company.

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