



by C.N. Miller

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The best lessons in life often come from repetition, severe emotional events, and failures. It's why we train to reinforce skills and create situations that are hopefully worse than anything encountered in real life. There is an additional component to these lessons, the maturity to intellectually interrogate the events and extract the critical information that frames the knowledge for future decisions. The best mentors try to pass this information on in an effort to help the next generation avoid learning these same difficult lessons the hard

way. Unfortunately, while well-intentioned, the lack of emotional connection and perspective often fails to resonate and individuals end up repeating the mistakes anyway. These second-hand lessons tend to teach people what to think rather than how to think.

I have had the unique opportunity to work with some of the most experienced and decorated soldiers who have served in our military, including veterans of Operation Eagle Claw, Grenada, Panama, Desert Storm, Mogadishu, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Many of them helped shape how I think by sharing decades of experience in ways that allowed me to grasp the lessons and apply them from my own perspective. I keep a notebook with questions, quotes, and notes on how to think about leadership. I willingly admit I am far from perfect at adhering to these concepts, but I strive to get better by revisiting it regularly to reflect on what I wrote. These are some of the best lessons.

### **Lesson 1: It's All About Perspective**

It's the human predisposition to judge something based on one's perspective. A key concept of targeting operations is considering second and third order effects, or the impact and perception of particular actions. But when is the last time you applied that concept to leadership? When is the last time you asked yourself, "What is the other person's perspective?" When a soldier gets labeled as troublesome, most leaders want to cut them loose and move on because that's the easy course of action (one I am guilty of employing). Or when a leader makes a seemingly rash decision, the easy response is to criticize it as being foolish.

By taking a moment to step back and consider the individual's perspective, you might assess the driving factors. What could be going on in that Soldier's life causing a performance issue, or what pressures is the commander facing to make a specific decision. Taking some time to detach oneself and "red-team" the situation can lead to a better solution, suggestion, or response.

Identifying the root cause of a performance problem can help develop the right type of solution. Leaders can fix most issues with one of the following five concepts:

1. Resupply - Does the Soldier have everything they need to accomplish their task?
2. Retrain - Does the Soldier need more training to be successful?
3. Refit - Are there responsibilities that can be reassigned to someone else to increase focus and build confidence on primary tasks?
4. Reassign - Is there an organizational issue that is impeding a Soldier's performance and would they do better in a different unit?\*
5. Release - This should be the final option and not taken lightly but considered only after exhausting the questions mentioned above.

\* Be careful not to use this tool as a way to dump a problem on someone else. Good leadership means that the issues and reassignment are explained clearly to the Soldier, and an integration plan for the new assignment is thoroughly developed before execution.

## **Lesson 2: You Can (and SHOULD) Learn Something from Everyone**

Everyone has encountered a variety of leadership styles and likely experienced a spectrum ranging from transformational to toxic. Generally, we group leaders in two categories, "good" and "bad," with anecdotes that support the given designation. But how often do we stop and ask ourselves, "What have I learned from my leaders?" A real professional will learn something from everyone, sometimes the lessons might be what not to do, and those can often be just as powerful and impactful as the alternative.

I, too, have experienced a variety of leadership styles, and by far one of the worst leaders in my career taught me two of the most important lessons:

1. Just because you're in charge doesn't mean you're the smartest person in the room or subject matter expert.
2. The quickest way to alienate your subordinates is to treat them as though they don't have a voice.

My initial reaction to these encounters was to discount him as a foolish jerk, put my head down and move on since I only had a few months left in the organization. It took me a little while to remove emotion from the situation and think about what I could learn from those interactions. As a leader, I recognized that I never want my subordinates to feel the way I did. I made notes to ask myself "am I listening to and empowering my subordinates?" and "who is the subject matter expert on the topic?"

### **Lesson 3: Assess Yourself**

Have you read your last OER/NCOER? You, my friend, are the greatest thing since sliced bread, and you actually almost won the last war with your personal actions in theater. Do you believe that? If you do, there's a much bigger conversation that needs to be had. A good leader needs to reflect and ask themselves hard questions like "Where are my deficiencies, and what can I do to improve on them?"

Too often, interpersonal relationships make providing critiques difficult, causing leaders to focus on the positive aspects of performance and ignore specific areas of development. Leaders systematically protect people's egos and choose the path of least resistance by using coded language in evaluations that appear positive unless you know the deciphered meaning. If leaders aren't providing developmental feedback, find a mentor who will or conduct a self-assessment to identify your weaknesses. Don't worry; everyone has them, and it is likely you already know some. Writing them down and creating a plan to work on them is complicated and sometimes even painful, but it's how we get better.

## Lesson 4: Learn and Assess Your Team



Everyone on your team has known and unknown capabilities. Sure, the guy with the pathfinder badge should be able to set up a landing zone. However, some things aren't so outwardly obvious. Who on your team grew up on a farm and can get almost any engine running? Who volunteers for [Habitat for Humanity](#) and understands construction standards and codes? Those traits can be invaluable in the special operations career field, and they can help allocate talent in the right places, but you're never going to find that information on someone's record brief. Ask yourself, "What things don't I know about my people?" and develop engagements and training that tease out those capabilities. Knowing their motivations and interests will make your people feel valued, and people who feel valued in their organization work hard to see it succeed. Invest in people; they pay incredible dividends.

## Lesson 5: Don't Fear Delegation

The deluge of requirements on commanders and Soldiers today is almost incomprehensible. Dr. Leonard Wong at the Army War College wrote a paper called [“Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession,”](#) (which you should read if you haven’t) that talks about the disproportionate amount of training requirements to available time. That said, how many times have you kicked back in the team room to chat or watch YouTube videos? No one dares ask the commander if he needs help with anything because he could either assign something you don’t want to do or, in haste, give unclear instructions making for a frustrating task.

Learning to delegate, giving clear, concise instructions of what’s required, and accepting that the tasked Soldier may execute it in a different way than you had envisioned is extremely difficult. Ask yourself the question, “What can I delegate, and how do I give clear, concise instructions on what I need?” Remember that delegation serves an important function. You are developing subordinates’ capabilities and preparing them for the next level. I often got frustrated when a commander would ask me to draft my award or OER; after all, that’s their job, why don’t they do it? In time, I realized that I wasn’t frustrated that they delegated the task to me (well, maybe a little) but didn’t use it as a development tool. They would take my draft, edit it, and submit it as their work. They never took the time to explain how I could have drafted it better, how to format certain things, or better focus the information.

Delegation comes with an implicit agreement that the commander takes the time to critique the work and provide constructive feedback to develop subordinates. If a product comes back and doesn’t meet the intent, the leader needs to ask first if they gave clear instructions and then examine why the product didn’t meet the expectation. The fault can fall on either or both parties, and as opposed to being upset, leaders need to take a moment to assess the situation. Finally, a critical imperative of delegation is an exact deadline. Holding subordinates to flimsy deadlines like “next week” is a recipe for disaster and frustration. Tell them what you want, how you would like to see it, and a defined date when you want

the product due; it will save a lot of aggravation for both parties.

## **Lesson 6: Read, Read, Read...and Take Time to Think About It**

In an era of streaming media and every sort of distraction available at our fingertips, taking the time to read can be difficult. There's the old cliché that "the book was better than the movie," and the simple reason is because the book has greater detail. It gives a rich perspective and fills in all the little gaps that you can't necessarily extract from videos or other media. Over the past year, I have made a conscious (and arduous) effort to stop watching and start reading. I cheat a little by consuming audiobooks while driving or doing other hobbies, but I have learned the importance of taking time to read. I also intentionally read on topics with perspectives counter to my own. I find these different viewpoints often make me think about my leadership questions and influence my ability to answer them. So, ask yourself, "What am I reading?" it can be books, articles, journals, or websites, but consuming intellectually rigorous information is pivotal to self-development.

However, reading requires a second element, in the form of a question posed by a mentor with more than 40 years of military and government experience, "Did you take time to think about it?" His point was in our fast-paced world we often don't take the time to properly digest information and do critical analysis. It took a while to fully grasp the concept; while reading on a long flight I sat and pondered the concepts and the importance of ruminating on the information registered. I realized that taking a little time to interrogate the information gave me a greater understanding and even inspired me to read more.

## **Closing Thoughts**

In hindsight I wish I would have learned lessons on how to think about leadership when I was younger. Leaders have a variety of individual strengths, and their leadership style should seek to capitalize on what works best for them. Developing a list of questions can shape how an individual thinks about leadership and act as a signpost to stay on track in

difficult times. It represents personal values and creates a construct for continuous self-evaluation. These are mine:

1. What is the other person's perspective?
2. What have I learned from my leaders? (good and bad)
3. Where are my deficiencies, and what can I do to improve on them?
4. What things don't I know about my people?
5. What can I delegate, and how do I give clear, concise instructions on what I need?
6. What am I reading, and am I taking time to think about it?

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