

## Transparency and Stability: The Twin Beacons of Leading Highly Effective Organizations



by Ben Showman

### **The Leader's Responsibility**

The Army has a [clear definition of leadership](#). It is carefully and intentionally crafted for Army leaders to flexibly accomplish missions while simultaneously improving their organizations.

However, well-defined as it may be, it's very easy to drift away from.

Even gifted Army leaders can lose sight of their responsibility to positively influence their unit under the pressures of a high operational tempo and competing priorities. Leaders can combat this natural tendency to drift with an emphasis on transparency and stability across their organization.

### **Transparency**

*"Leaders make [their] challenges transparent to their subordinates whenever possible."*

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*Leaders are responsible to create conditions that enable subordinates to focus and accomplish critical tasks.” ADP 6-22*

Lack of transparency promotes assumptions and fosters distrust. I saw this unfold firsthand as a member of a military instructor team tasked with writing a paper arguing for or against a set of topics irrelevant to our teaching mission. As this task was unrelated to our primary duties and the [‘why’](#) was not forthcoming, assumptions and rumors flourished. The prevailing gossip surmised that a student’s complaint had led our leadership to scrutinize our capabilities as instructors.

Rather than communicating a purpose and providing motivation for task accomplishment, a dearth of communication produced a sense of destabilizing secrecy. Coupled with alleged mistrust in our instructional competence, this approach created resentment not only towards the task but also towards those who assigned it. As professionals, we did what we were told and begrudgingly wrote our papers; we didn’t want to find out what would happen if we refused. While blind obedience may be appropriate in constrained or dangerous situations, in this case it was an unnecessary substitute for internalized motivation. Our unwilling obligation could have transformed into willing participation through purposeful transparency.

When David Marquet took command of the USS Santa Fe in January 1999, he became the unenviable [commander of the worst performing submarine in its fleet](#) with a recent history of [poor accomplishment and worse morale](#). Having taken command on short notice, Marquet recognized that he didn’t know his ship well and the unit’s dysfunctional culture required the commander to issue strong directives to accomplish anything aboard.

Realizing that the unit lacked ownership at all levels, Marquet gathered his subordinate leaders and clearly explained the problem. With input from his team, Marquet [gave control](#) to the crew. He ceased giving orders, replacing these with intent – his purpose and goals – for various activities. Rather than asking permission to do their jobs, Santa Fe submariners began notifying the captain of their intent. Instead of “Request permission to submerge” it was “Captain, I intend to submerge the ship” followed by a “Very well” from the commander if the action was appropriate.

Task ownership on the Santa Fe no longer rested with the commander of the vessel. It rested with those executing the tasks. Under Marquet’s command, Santa Fe achieved the [“highest retention and operational standings in the Navy.”](#) Transparency about the original problem enabled his team to not only enact a solution but also to achieve greatness.

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### Stability

*[“Instability causes a breakdown of trust within a unit, but stable leaders can improve unit confidence and poise under pressure.”](#) MSG Danny R. Lampkin*

Organizational stability allows focus on what’s essential rather than requiring responses to continuous change. [“Emotional self-control, balance, and stability enable leaders to make sound, ethical decisions.”](#) Regardless of the words in a command philosophy, PowerPoint slide, or speech to the formation, leaders demonstrate their priorities in how they authorize their units to use time, spend money and incentivize outcomes or behaviors.

[“The Army requires leaders who provide direction and subordinates who can execute without the need for continuous guidance,”](#) not managers who inundate subordinates with a [distracting stream of ‘supervision’](#) or skilled but aloof experts who [own the entire mission while minimally involving subordinates](#). Everchanging schedules and unpredictable tasks reflect inconsistent or - maybe worse - poorly developed priorities.

Army teams need answers to questions like “What are we doing here?” and “What do I need to focus on?” These answers offer direction. In 1864, Ulysses S. Grant was in his command post when a subordinate commander entered in a panic. Grant’s Army of the Potomac had been hard-pressed in the [Rapidan Wilderness](#) by Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. The officer excitedly lamented predictions of Lee’s imminent incapacitating maneuvers against federal forces.

Grant lost it. “Oh, I am heartily tired of hearing about what Lee is going to do. Some of you always seem to think he is suddenly going to turn a double somersault, and land in our rear and on both of our flanks at the same time. Go back to your command and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do.” This prioritized focus on mounting superior capabilities instead of reacting to dynamic enemy movements enabled Grant to force Lee further south toward Richmond, a significant turning point in the dismal fate of Lee’s army.

### Own It

I arrived at work one morning midway through my company command to find a screenshot from David Marquet’s [summary video](#) on leadership taped to my office door. After watching Marquet’s short retelling of his Santa Fe experiences and his exhortation for leaders to give control while communicating intent, I realized I had a problem.

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Someone in my company wanted to tell me I was failing in this area and felt compelled to do it anonymously. They wanted transparency about our unit's challenges and stability in how we did business, but they didn't want to confront me. They didn't see me as the approachable listener I thought I was.

While I didn't 'turn the ship around' the way Marquet did with the Santa Fe, I began to develop and communicate intent with input from other leaders in my organization. I slowly began to loosen my death grip on control and let my subordinate leaders lead to their capabilities rather than how I thought they should.

Several months later, during a live-fire training exercise - the crescendo of our push toward mission readiness, I stood aside while a highly-competent lieutenant briefed the training plan to our company leaders. It was his moment to shine, not mine. I had a setback later when I pulled aside a squad leader, berating him for running his team through the scenario much differently than I had envisioned. I was saved by my First Sergeant, who discretely asked "Sir, would his plan have accomplished the mission?" Humbled, I retracted my requirement for the squad leader to execute my plan, emphasizing his competence to execute the task his way.

This trust and freedom to work are what competent subordinates need from their leadership. If you as a leader have done your job to develop and communicate intent, they probably don't need more guidance, just transparency and stability so that they can accomplish the mission.

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