

Why Write a Leadership Philosophy*

Gerald F. Sewell

When I took over as a military sub-community executive officer in the early 1990's, I failed to share my leadership philosophy with my community staff; consequently, many did not know what to expect. I became aware later that several civilian members on my staff were afraid of me and did not know if they should approach me. I was clueless as to why. Curious, I queried my Public Affairs Officer and he informed me the previous XO ruled with an iron fist and a very demanding leadership style. The situation was beginning to make sense, and I quickly took the opportunity to gather the staff and share with them my leadership philosophy and style. Later that evening, I took time to gather my thoughts, reflect on the day's discussions, and put my philosophy on paper. I posted it in each agency that was part of the community staff. These actions clarified for my staff what I believed, how I lead, and what kind of support they could expect from me.

I had internalized these beliefs and behaviors from my philosophy over the years and it seemed odd I should have to write them down for others. Would they not eventually figure me out? Why do it? The why became readily apparent to me after this incident. It not only afforded me an opportunity to examine what I believed, but it gave me the opportunity to put the pieces of my philosophy together in a coherent manner on paper to let my staff know about me and how I lead. It provided a visible and ready reference for my subordinates if something I said or did was not clear. It also stood as a reminder of the high standards and expectations I set for my staff and me. My written (and posted) leadership philosophy became a contract to keep me in check and ensure I "walked the talk." Additionally, the reasons for writing a leadership philosophy became clear to me through this illuminating experience. I realized it is for reflection, self-awareness, and self-development as well as to inform those who work for me, as well as my bosses, who I am as a leader and how I will lead.

What should this story mean to you, the reader? As self-aware, adaptive leaders, it is important to reflect on who you are. It is important to know how you developed the tenets, values, beliefs, and behaviors you possess and employ. Self-awareness requires you to study those values, beliefs, and behaviors to understand how and why you react to varying situations and circumstances the way you do. This understanding will allow you to anticipate and adjust your reactions to future situations as well as regulate your response to the variety of attitudes, personalities, and needs of your followers. In his writings on self-awareness, Daniel Goleman, the Harvard psychologist who brought Emotional Intelligence into the mainstream of business and academia, identifies the competency of accurate self-assessment as critical to a leader obtaining self-awareness. Included in this competency is the leader behavior of reflection and learning from experience. In his 1998 book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman discusses the following behaviors of accurate self-assessment:

Accurate Self-Assessment <i>Knowing Ones Inner Resources Abilities and Limits</i>
People with this competence are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of their strengths and weaknesses • Reflective, learning from experience • Open to candid feedback, new perspectives, continuous learning, and self-development • Able to show a sense of humor and perspective about themselves
(Goleman, Daniel, 1998, <i>Working with Emotional Intelligence</i> , p.61. New York, Bantam Books)

* Reproduced by and for the CGSC

The behaviors included in the chart outline the critical actions of self-aware leaders who conduct accurate self-assessment. Self-aware leaders know their strengths and weaknesses, allowing them to exercise humility as well as identify and appreciate strengths of others. They use personal reflection to become cognizant of these strengths and weaknesses by examining their experiences and growing as leaders.

The reflection executed while developing a written leadership philosophy allows you to accomplish this vital self-assessment. By reflecting on your personal values, experiences, training, education, and beliefs about leadership, you can better understand why you lead the way you do and then articulate those beliefs and styles to others. The development of beliefs and values often occurs early in life as the result of not only family influences but the significant lessons of life. These critical experiences influence our character, values, what we believe, and how we respond to and lead others. In their foundational leadership text, *Leadership, Enhancing the Lessons of Experience*, Hughes, Ginnet and Curphy make clear the importance of recording and reflecting on these experiences: “. . .the very process of writing increases the likelihood that leaders will be able to look at an event from a different perspective or feel differently about it. Putting an experience into words can be a step toward taking a more objective look at it.”¹

Further articulating on the importance of continuously reviewing and, if need be, revising ones leadership philosophy based on new and often paradigm changing events, the authors add in regards to journaling: “. . . leaders can (and should) reread earlier entries. Earlier entries provide an interesting and valuable autobiography of a leader’s evolving thinking about leadership and about particular events in his or her life.”² This thought holds true for the leadership philosophy as well. As new roles and events influence the leaders’ life, they create new opportunities for reflection about their leadership philosophy.

As leaders, we typically are confident in our self-assessments—who we are and how we lead. However, we often find ourselves in situations reacting in a manner we did not expect (contrary to who we think we are). Why is that? It is because our self-reflection is superficial at best and we lack true self-awareness. As a result, we find ourselves asking, “Did I do that?” or “Did I say that?” FM 6-22 echoes the need for leaders to examine themselves and their experiences to see what they really believe and who they really are. “Self-aware leaders analyze themselves and ask hard questions about experiences, events and their actions. They should examine their own behavior seriously. Competent and confident leaders make sense of their experience and use it to learn more about themselves.”³

In keeping with the military’s practice of conducting after action reviews after military exercises, leaders should also conduct personal after action reviews to capture the lessons learned from their experiences. The Army’s leadership manual identifies some of the hard questions leaders must ask themselves when reflecting and examining their experiences and their responses. The answers to these questions can provide valuable insight into your leadership philosophy.

1. What happened?
2. How did I react and why?
3. How did others react and why?
4. What did I learn about myself based on what I did and how I felt?
5. How will I apply what I learned?⁴

Putting an experience into words is a necessary step toward taking a more objective look at one’s actions. Writing it down makes it visible and somewhat tangible. Writing out the philosophy causes you to actively reflect and consider each of the tenets and elements of your philosophy. Stepping back and taking the third party view will help you see potential gaps in the leadership skills you may need versus

what you believe you have. This makes it easier for you to see the areas in your professional and personal life that need more development as well as to reflect on the origins of a particular belief. You may think you know all of these things about yourself but it is important to write them down for your own personal growth and development. A leader must never believe they are beyond personal growth. The Army promotes life-long learning in the third core domain of its leader development model, which is self-development. Personal growth and self-development are synonymous, and are both products of life-long learning.

The ability to read and review your leadership philosophy is of particular interest to those affected the most by your decisions. At the direct level, leaders find it relatively easy to have daily contact with their followers. It is easy to get to know them and just as easy for them to get to know their leader. They become intimately aware of who you are, what you believe, and how you lead. Unfortunately, the further we move up the leadership ladder, the further removed from direct contact with Soldiers we become. A written and posted philosophy lets those Soldiers you do not see everyday know who you are. Knowing how you think and lead is the first step in their ‘wanting’ to follow you versus being “required” to follow you. The written philosophy makes who you are as a leader and person clear to them.

What are the components of a leadership philosophy? Although leaders at all levels recognize the importance of having a leadership philosophy and writing it down, there is no doctrinal reference for the requirement. However, most experts in the field of leadership agree that the leadership philosophy should include; “What you believe in, what you value, your priorities, and your expectations of yourself and others.”⁵

FM 6-22 defines leadership as “*the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.*”⁶ Living your leadership philosophy before your Soldiers builds trust and makes it easier to influence and provide the purpose, direction, and motivation of that definition. It is an important tool in motivating and inspiring your followers. Kerry Patterson and his co-authors in their fascinating book, *Influencers*, observed how powerfully individual behavior is shaped by observing leaders. They chronicle a study by Dr. Albert Bandura in which the subjects observe the behavior of another person and almost immediately imitate that behavior.⁷ Both subordinate leaders and Soldiers get to know their leaders better by way of their leadership philosophy; seeing him or her live up to that philosophy provides incentive and motivation to follow eagerly the leaders’ vision and course.

The exercise of writing your philosophy is both clarifying and eye opening. It provides the opportunity for you to step back and look at yourself from the third person point of view. It allows you to understand, refine, and often redefine yourself and, just as importantly, allows you to articulate clearly to others who you are and how you lead.

¹ Hughes, R., Ginnett, R., Curphy, G., (2006). *Leadership, Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* (5th ed.), p.435. New York: McGraw-Hill.

² Ibid.

³ FM 6-22, para 8-46.

⁴ Ibid., para 8-48

⁵ *Leadership Philosophy*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 2, 2008, from <http://www.academyleadership.com/leadershipphilosophy.asp>

⁶ FM6-22, para 1-6.

⁷ Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Maxfield, D, McMillan, R., Switzler, A. (2008). p. 18. *Influencer – The Power to Change Anything* (New York: McGraw Hill).