



Essay Nine:

**"We're Surrounded,
That Simplifies the
Problem." Being an
Effective Leader**



NPS Photo/Neal Herbert

I was probably one of the worst second lieutenants in the history of the United States Marine Corps.⁹⁷ Though painful to admit, it was sadly true, as many colonels pointed out at the time. To this day, I marvel at some of the stupid decisions I made. Fortunately, I was a fairly quick study and improved dramatically, eventually grasping the lesson that successful leadership is essentially about two things which are equally important: 1) accomplishing the mission, and 2) taking care of your people. I have maintained this leadership philosophy through many years in wildlife biology, and it has served me well. If you work hard to consistently fulfill these two tenets, you will eventually earn the respect and trust of your co-workers, regardless of what position you occupy in the chain-of-command. To accomplish the mission, the leader of a particular group or project needs to define the problem or task for their coworkers, answer questions and consider

⁹⁷The quote in the essay title has been attributed to Lewis "Chesley" Puller, the most decorated Marine in history.

ideas, refine a plan based on this input, and then supervise the successful completion of the project. Everyone at every level should work at becoming a better leader by participating in the planning of their daily activities, being prepared to accomplish their assigned tasks, focusing and paying attention to detail during these activities and, as necessary, being creative to solve problems. Also, everyone needs to take responsibility for their actions. We all make mistakes—acknowledge them and learn from them. In addition, try to live your life with honor (do what's right), courage (do what's right even when it's hard), and integrity (be true to yourself and others). It's not easy, and I've failed to live up to these ideals many a time, but it's important to strive to attain them.

Successful leadership comes through ideas, planning, supervision, and hard work. The rarest commodity in wildlife biology is an original idea. Wildlife management is often about solving problems, and ideas to reach solutions come from being curious and thoughtful about the world around you. Planning involves setting realistic objectives and timeframes, and preparing for the inevitable contingencies. Detailed planning is essential because, as the Cheshire Cat explained to Alice in Wonderland, any road will get you there if you don't know where you're going.⁹⁸ In other words, if you don't define clear objectives and a precise process to attain them, you'll fail to advance toward the desired outcome. Supervision involves choosing good people, training them, providing guidance on what you expect, and then letting them use their abilities and inge-

nity to get the job done, all the while monitoring their progress to ensure successful completion.

To take care of their people, leaders need to make sure their coworkers have the proper training and equipment for the task, as well as a strong commitment to safety. When conducting the daily activities, everyone needs to focus on their tasks, be alert to their surroundings and changing conditions, and pay attention to detail. Everyone needs to be prepared to implement contingency actions if things do not go as planned. If anyone observes an unsafe situation, either rectify it or distance yourself and your coworkers from it and then bring it to the attention of your supervisor. If a situation doesn't feel right, back away and assess why. Trust your instincts. Also, if others are exhibiting unsafe behavior, let them know about it and correct it. Don't remain quiet and watch someone get hurt.

Some accidents will happen despite every precaution. The goal is to keep them minor and rare. If someone is injured, make sure they receive treatment and are taken care of. If you are injured, let people know as soon as possible. No one should be punished or ridiculed for reporting an injury, no matter how minor it may appear initially. Also, you should encourage the reporting of close calls or near-misses that highlight a safety concern that needs to be corrected and shared with others to prevent future injuries. Safety needs to be a creed and a culture in your group. People have to believe in it and live it to be successful. For example, the United States military has a creed, never leave anyone behind; that is not always possible or true in reality, but essential nevertheless because everyone believes their buddies will do everything in their power to live

⁹⁸Carroll, L. 1865. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Macmillan, London, England.

up to it. There is no doubt about this commitment; it is absolute and, therefore, reassuring. Obviously, the day-to-day risks taken by wildlife biologists should be far less than our brothers and sisters facing combat in defense of our country and ideals. However, a similar creed is still applicable—everyone should come home safe to their families and friends each day.

Last but not least, I appropriated the following bits of advice and ideas regarding leadership from a wide variety of wise people, ranging from my father, Bert White, to the author of the book *Don Quixote*, Miguel de Cervantes, to the former Chief of the Yellowstone Center for Resources, John Varley, to famous football coach, Vince Lombardi, to the extremely successful businessman, Bill Gates, to the legendary Marine, Chesty Puller.

- **Try to be Great.** Set high standards, work hard, and make a difference. Also, be passionate—remember why you got into wildlife conservation.

- **Act Like You've Been There Before.** You have to be confident and believe in yourself and your co-workers. Don't let fear or those pesky, naysaying "voices" in your head keep you from acting and succeeding.

- **Don't Fight Windmills.** Focus on the important things you can change, not the things you can't. Also, if you try one approach to solving a problem and it doesn't work, repetition likely won't help. Think, listen to the ideas of others, and come up with an alternate solution.

- **Don't Be a Sensitivity Kitty.** Expect criticism; when people stop criticizing you, they've given up on you. If you need to impart criticism, do it soon after the mistake is made and the events are fresh in everyone's mind.

- **Don't Be a Talk Show Host.** If it's not helpful, don't say it or spend time on it. Also, listen to people instead of thinking about what you're going to say next. Keep an open mind, and compare and contrast alternative actions before making a decision.

- **Just Do It.** Once the boss makes a decision, you don't have to like it but you do have to implement it unless it's unethical, unlawful, or unsafe. Work is not a democracy. Likewise, you don't have to like your co-workers, but you do have to learn to work effectively with them and take care of them.

- **Don't be a Hero.** Don't try to do it all yourself. Surround yourself with smart, talented, hard-working people and learn to delegate. Believe it or not, some other people are better at certain things than you are.

- **Success Breeds Success.** Have pride in your accomplishments, and encourage and reward others for excellence. Put people in a position to succeed, and use their strengths and talents to boost productivity and confidence.

- **Take Things in Stride.** Sometimes, despite your best planning and efforts, everything goes to hell for whatever reason; and you can either sit down and cry

or work your way out of it. Life's not fair—so get over it and deal with the problem(s). As we said in the Marine Corps when things went from bad to worse, "ain't nothin' but a thing."

• ***Play to Win.*** People are paying you to accomplish great things, not just to show up for work. Help yourself by learning to take calculated risks, when appropriate, and negotiate effectively; whether the issue is time, power, money, or some other matter.

• ***You Can't Have Too Much Fun.*** Stop taking yourself so seriously and enjoy your job. Relax and have fun with your colleagues—which is much easier if you're working hard, solving problems, and winning.

These teachings have been very helpful to me throughout my wildlife career, and I hope they will be helpful to you during your journey. And remember, no one will help you if you don't first help yourself by putting forth maximum effort.



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