

The Balance of Leadership in an Army at War
BG Bill Rapp, published in *Army Magazine*, December 2006

Warfare in the 21st Century requires adaptive leaders and highly disciplined and motivated Soldiers. Our world class Army demands world class leadership. Therefore, leading units and the developing our Army’s next generation of leaders lies at the very heart of what we “old guys” do. Although great officers and NCOs have led our Army superbly through five years of continuous war against terror, I offer the following concepts as a means to generate thought and help to coach our junior leaders on what Army leadership in a time of war and change is all about.

Leadership can be viewed as a set of paired attributes built on a firm foundation; some complementary and some which on the surface appear to contradict each other. Success, in my opinion, comes from attaining overall balance in these attributes. Competence and conduct;

Leadership Foundation	Integrity and Vision
Leader Mission Requirements	Leadership Attributes
Set a Positive Personal Example	Competence and Disciplined Conduct
Be an Asset to both Army and Family	Strong Work Ethic and Life Balance
Interact Outside the Immediate Unit	Aggressiveness and Collegiality
Lead Others Within the Unit	Subordinate Development and Team Building
Focus on Issues Facing the Unit	Short Term Initiative and Long Term Proactivity
Take on New Challenges	Can-do Attitude and Composite Risk Management

work ethic and personal balance; aggressiveness and collegiality; initiative and proactivity; leading subordinates and building teams; and finally, can-do attitude and risk management. All are important. Weak areas result in suboptimal personal and unit performance.

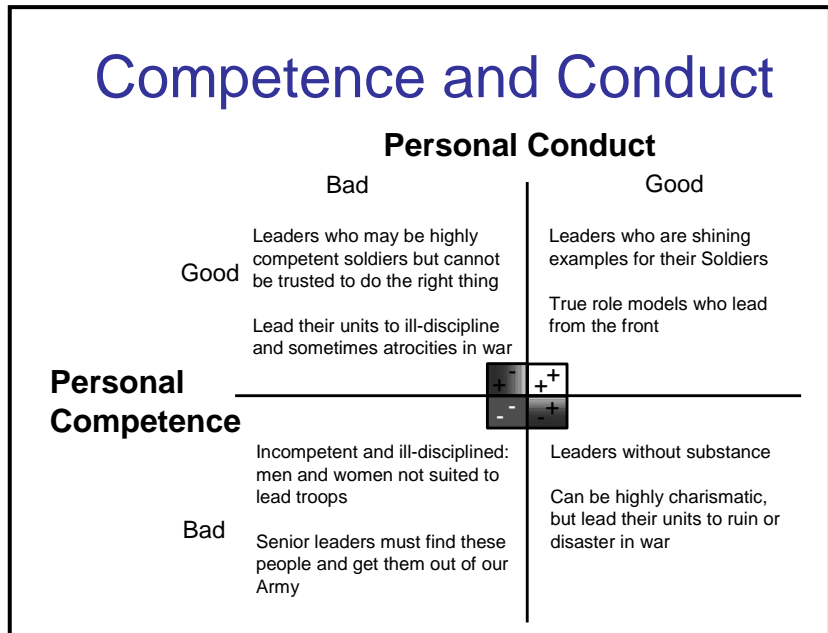
The foundation or baseline for all Army leaders must be **integrity** and **vision**. Integrity is non-negotiable. Telling the truth, choosing the harder right over the easier wrong, and enforcing ethical behavior in units is vital in this long war against an enemy that does not hold to the same standards of conduct. We must not tread the path of expediency and situational ethics and by doing so follow our enemy into the abyss. The other baseline for all Army leaders, regardless of rank, is vision. It provides direction to a unit- a pathway to a desired destination. Units are constantly moving in some direction- forward, backward, or just drifting with the winds. Leaders must provide that vision of excellence so that their units move in constructive directions. Leaders of integrity able to provide a vision for their units, regardless of size, are baseline requirements for success. Quality leadership, as expressed in the following attribute pairs, will enable our Army to continue to be the best force, size for size, the world has ever seen.

Setting the Example

The first pairing discusses the **personal competence** and the **personal conduct** of the leader. Competence is being the most tactically and technically proficient Soldier possible. In an ever-changing world and transforming Army, individual competence requires a commitment to learning. Leaders must have intellectual curiosity and welcome change. Old dogs that can’t learn new tricks will bring their units down in this dynamic combat environment. Personal conduct refers to how well the leader personifies the individual standards and discipline expected

of all Soldiers. Physical, mental, and moral fitness are very important. Leaders must walk the talk or Soldiers might infer that standards are really only guidelines and not important enough to follow.

The matrix shown here is one way to view the pairing of competence and conduct for the leader. The upper right box is where all leaders should strive to be. As with all of these leadership attribute matrices, most of us find ourselves from time to time flirting in either the upper left or bottom right corners and have to tighten up the bootlaces and get back into the game. In this pairing, a leader with a high degree of competence but poor personal conduct will likely lead his unit to acts of ill-discipline or even



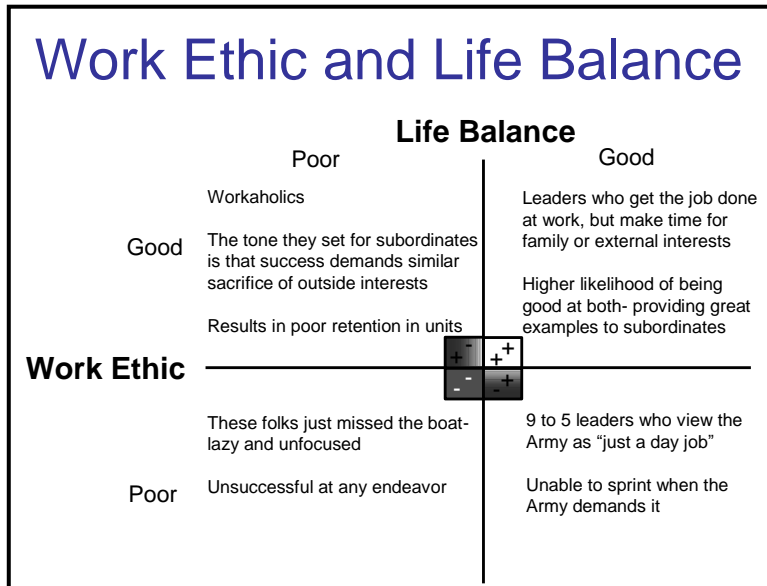
atrocities in war. Conversely, the “parade ground” leader who looks the part but is incompetent will lead his unit to disaster. Finally, no Soldier should ever have to serve for a leader who is personally incompetent and ill disciplined. However, those leaders who are both highly competent and hold high personal standards of conduct set the stage for unit success.

Work and Family

The second pairing of leader attributes refers to the important balance between the demands of the Army and the needs of family, friends, and other interests. For simplicity, I label these attributes **work ethic** and **life balance**. In combat, the scales will tilt massively toward the Army and unit as leaders seek only the personal time necessary to keep them functioning well and thinking clearly. However, in garrison, the sustained health of a unit and the Army depends on leaders who can find the right balance between work and personal interests. The Army is changing and a higher percentage of young Soldiers and leaders are married. I firmly believe that a Soldier can be a top-notch leader and be a great family man or woman. There should not be a choice to make and if we force our young leaders into such a predicament, many of the really good ones will choose family and leave the service.

A leader consistently working until 2100 hrs in the office in garrison should not impress his superiors with any other conclusions that he is over tasked, inefficient, or insufficiently balanced in his life. We should judge our subordinate leaders by the quality and timeliness of their work, not by the hours spent doing it. However, make the time at work count. I dislike smoking not only because of the health risks, but because cigarette breaks interfere with productivity and momentum during the work hours. Quality work, not quantity of hours, is what enables a good leader to have personal and family time without sacrificing the readiness of the unit. All leaders

need to have outside interests that allow them to recharge their batteries and be ready for the call. Army life is a marathon with interspersed sprints and hills- pace is vital for success.

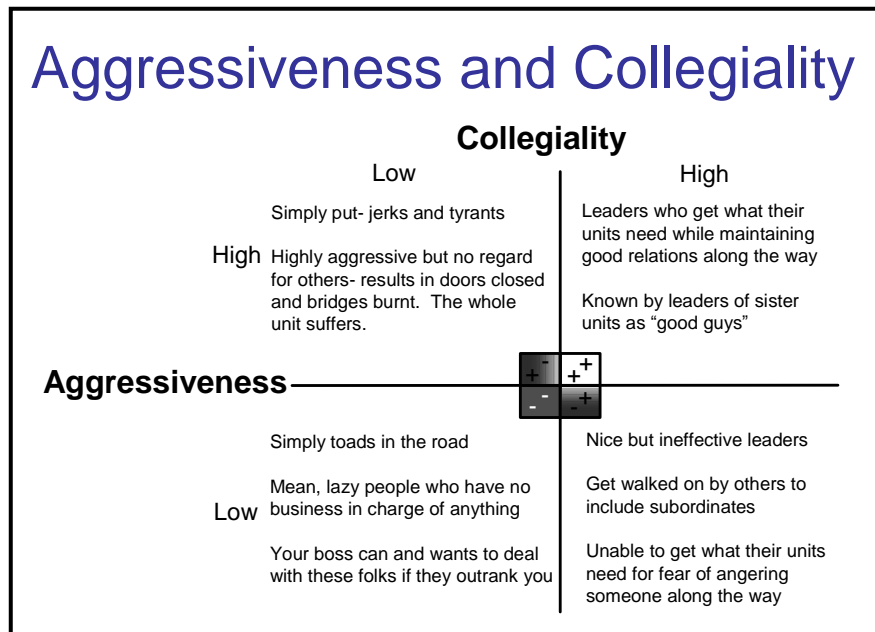


The top right of this matrix showing work ethic and balance holds the leaders who are hard working and dedicated, yet are still able to make the time necessary to be successful as spouses, parents, little league coaches and the like. Those leaders favoring their outside interests over the Army will become "9 to 5" leaders who see the Army like a job at a bank, when we all know it demands much more than that. Those favoring work to the exclusion of balance are workaholics who may drive out of the Army their best and brightest subordinates simply

due to their personal example. Those who do poorly at both tend to be unsuccessful in any endeavor.

Dealing with Those Outside the Immediate Unit

The next attribute pairing may have already raised some eyebrows: **aggressiveness** and **collegiality**. These two attributes have to do with how a leader advocates to external audiences for his unit. We always want our young leaders to be aggressive, to be a bulldog on task and not be satisfied with the first "no" when they know what their unit needs. These officers are diligent and persistent advocates for their Soldiers and doggedly pursue the needed equipment, resources, and time. However, at the same time, we need leaders to be good colleagues. In a word, we need leaders to be nice as the default behavior. By being aggressive and threatening, nearly anyone can get what he or she really needs...once. To be able to consistently advocate for subordinates and be able to go back through that gauntlet multiple times



requires a degree of collegiality. There are most certainly times in dealing with people when “nice” just is not what the doctor ordered, and a good leader knows when to shift modes, but 90% of the time, a collegial approach to a problem will result in more effective cooperation. 21st Century leaders must be aggressive and collegial. They must be able to insist and assist with equal energy. The Army is a team effort, be a good teammate.

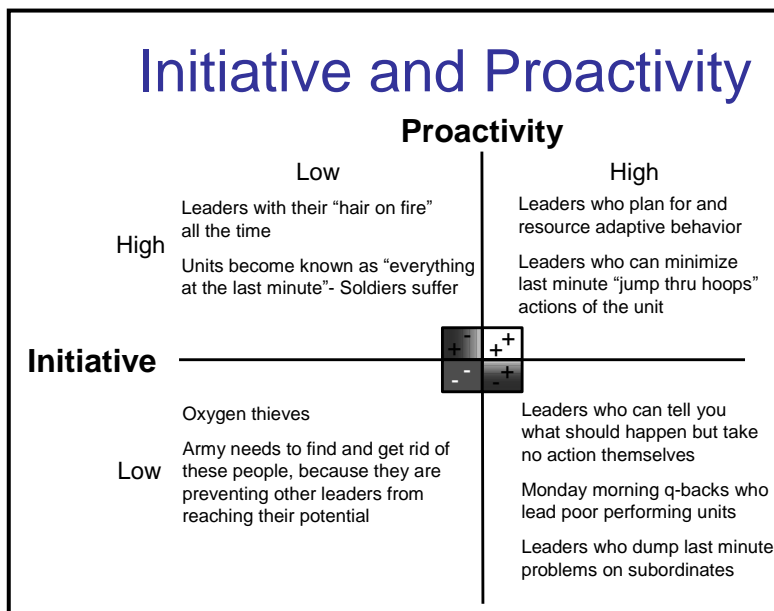
In matrix form, one can see that the leaders who are nice but unaggressive (bottom right) get walked on by peers and subordinates. Those who are aggressive but not collegial are seen as jerks and doors will be closed to both them and their units. Lazy, mean people are toads in the road and most senior leaders have no problem squashing these kinds of bureaucrats. Coach our young leaders to be aggressive and good colleagues and our units will be all the better for it.

Dealing With Problems

The next pairing refers to how our leader looks at problems and comes up with solutions. **Initiative** and **proactivity** are vital to success in adaptive warfare. While they sound similar, I define initiative as the ability to recognize a problem exists and, without lots of oversight, take steps to mitigate the problem or achieve success in a given situation. It is about shooting at 50 meter targets without having to be told “the target is up.” It is the ability to start and follow through energetically with a plan or task. Step up, take charge, and make it happen.

Proactivity talks to the need for leaders to think about and act to resolve long range “300 meter” problems before they become 50 meter targets. It is about developing the skill to look at a plan or situation and do “what if” drills and emplace mitigation measures to deal with problems that might likely arise. Units benefit tremendously from leaders with the ability to anticipate difficulties and take proactive measures. Thirty minutes spent coordinating a range today is often equal to eight hours spent the day before the range trying to pull it out at the last minute.

As seen in this matrix, without having both initiative and proactivity, a leader’s unit suffers badly. When the unit is led without initiative, everything is dumped on subordinates or left to fail through neglect. When a unit is led without proactivity, it seems like everyone’s hair is on fire and all tasks are done at the last minute. Both situations are extremely demoralizing for Soldiers and make for a unit unprepared for the rigors of combat- where failure to act or to be prepared may lead to death. However, a unit with leaders both proactive and full of initiative can successfully adapt and innovate on the battlefield.

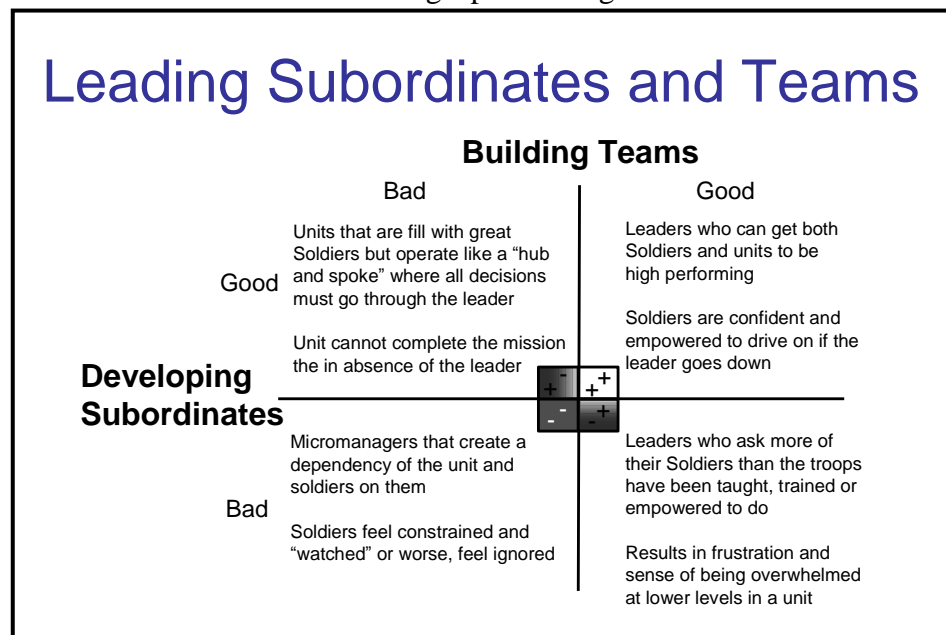


Leading and Developing Others

There are different skills needed to be able to effectively **lead individuals** and effectively **build and lead teams**, both are vital. Good leaders must be attuned to the individual needs of their subordinates and know how to challenge them to be better than they thought they could be. Counseling, coaching, empowering, and providing opportunities to develop leadership...those are the basics of how we develop our Soldiers to be the very best they can be. Doing this well takes a fair amount of moral courage on the part of a leader. The easiest way to kill initiative in a subordinate is to hammer him when his initiative produces bad results. Good leaders underwrite their subordinate's honest mistakes and coach them toward further development. Building highly effective teams requires some different leadership skill sets. The focus is on teamwork, group initiative, confidence in each other, and a sense of purpose. The acid test of good team building is how the unit performs in the absence of the leader or when the leader goes down in combat.

As with the other attribute pairings, it is possible to be good at one while neglecting the other. This matrix shows the four combinations. There are high performing units with well-trained Soldiers that fall apart when the central leader is gone.

This leader created a "hub and spoke" dynamic within the unit and made the subordinates dependent on him for direction and motivation. A unit like this falls apart if the leader goes down. However, a leader can focus too heavily on team building without developing individuals and result in a unit that asks more of its Soldiers than they are able to give. This results in frustration and poor team performance. Developing subordinates well and building high quality teams are necessary for consistent success in battle.

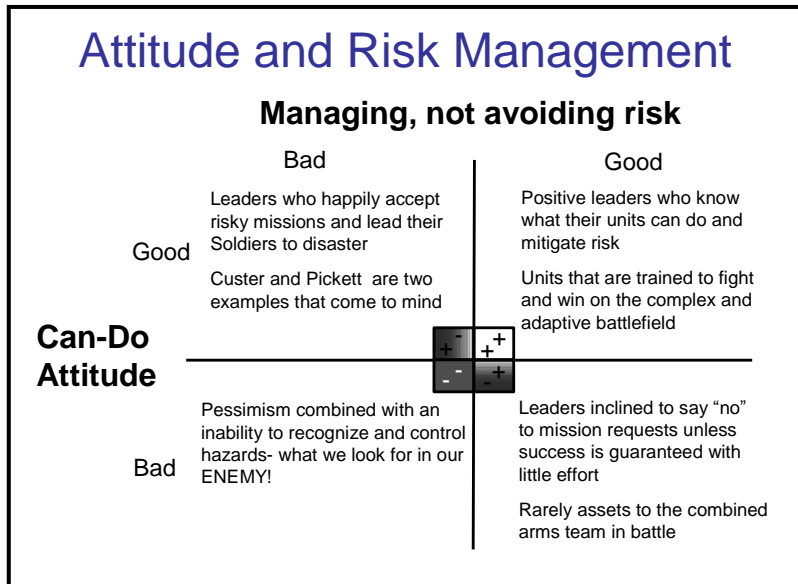


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Taking on Challenges

The final attributes necessary for today's Army leaders is a balance between a positive, "**can-do**" attitude and the ability to recognize and **mitigate risk**. The battlefield is fluid and dynamic. The only guarantee is that in almost every case, the unit will not have exactly the right personnel, exactly the right equipment, or exactly the right resources for the given task. The key to success, then, depends on attitude and prudent improvisation. Our Army needs leaders who view a given situation with an eye to the opportunities, not just the challenges. We prize leaders who think "yes" first and then work to resolve the challenges over those who instinctively think "no" and then must be prodded into action. Engineers say "Essayons!" (Let us try!). Infantrymen say

“Follow Me!” Both portray the spirit of optimism and can-do attitude our Army needs. However, successful leaders also must not risk being another Custer and gleefully charge their cavalry headlong into disaster. Recognizing and mitigating risk are vital to success. The French proved that “élan” (martial spirit) and direct attacks could rarely overcome well-sited machine guns in World War I. Attitude must be seasoned with prudence. Bravado often gets men killed. Combat confidence is what we seek in our Soldiers. It is about teaching leaders to actively manage risk, not avoid it all together. Our business is inherently risky and therefore we must train our leaders to account for risks and take steps to minimize their impact on operations.



In the final matrix of attributes, we can see that the upper right, where leaders have positive, can-do attitudes and good ability to manage risks, results in units able to take on the changing battlefield situations and win. These units are valuable assets to the combined arms team. Dare and do! At the other extreme, pessimism and extreme risk acceptance or avoidance is what we look for in our enemy! Optimism without a healthy regard for possible risk leads to disaster. Pessimism and risk avoidance leads a unit to be

merely oxygen thieves on the battlefield. The war needs them to step up, but they will rarely do so unless a situation is completely on their terms. Our Army in this long war does not have the luxury to wait for such ideal conditions and must then rely on other units to pull the load.

In summary, success in the long war against terrorism and Islamic extremism demands that Army leaders be adaptive, professional, ethical, and able to build winning teams. Integrity and vision are baseline requirements for all leaders. We must be grounded in the Army Values and live the Warrior Ethos. We must also provide direction and meaning for our subordinates so that they understand the pathways and goals of the unit. I firmly believe that leaders get the job done and prepare their units for success in combat when they:

- Are competent and demonstrate outstanding personal conduct
- Work hard but retain a sense of life balance
- Are aggressive and at the same time collegial
- Demonstrative both initiative and proactivity
- Develop subordinates and build winning teams
- Have a can-do attitude and manage, not avoid, risk

Soldiers who came into service during the Cold War will not be the ones who end up winning the “Long War,” but we from that era must train and develop the young leaders and Soldiers who

will win that war. Army leaders are entrusted with the men and women who are the treasure of the nation and we must always work hard to live up to that privileged trust.