

Bet You Never Heard of this Leadership Trait

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Abstract

This is a commentary on educating leaders within the constraints of a highly technical curriculum. The U.S. Naval Academy's mission is to produce leaders for the nation. Many things compete for the time and attention of Midshipmen (the Academy's students). Greater attention must be paid to interpersonal communications skills in the formal and informal curriculum.

Trait Approach

There are few things in the study of leadership as polarizing as the trait approach. Widely viewed as anachronistic at best and counterproductive at worst, trait theory is commonly associated with the axiom that "great leaders are born that way." Those who rightly view leadership as a process reject the trait approach because they believe it suggests that a few are preordained and the rest of us will never fully get it. I consider this view an oversimplification and an injustice. Leadership is largely about maximizing inherent talents and then combining those talents with experience and education. By applying this combination of inherent traits and developed abilities in accordance with a foundation of values, we all have the opportunity to fulfill our potential as effective leaders. Some may have to work at it a little harder than others, but we can all get there on our own timeline.

Student Criticism

While I was on a recent speaking engagement in Hawaii a young sailor, just returned from Iraq, shared with me her principal criticism of the graduates of my own institution—the United States Naval Academy. Of course I was prepared to take all of it with a grain of salt, for whenever anyone paints with such a broad brush as to say "all Academy grads do this" or "all Academy grads think that way" then I am instinctively skeptical. To my relief, her criticisms were not pejorative. Rather, she offered observations that were fair and intended to get me thinking about our process. She acknowledged that the technical preparation of Academy grads was beyond reproach, their professionalism was unquestioned,

and their potential for higher command unrivaled. She felt the human touch was, unfortunately, lacking. She felt graduates of the Academy seemed to care about their subordinates a little less, were more awkward in social situations, and lacked the essential skills of socialization with varied groups.

Need for Social Skills Development

This young sailor was making an observation I had heard echoed many times before, that somehow the preparation we provide aspiring officers was incomplete. Perhaps the very rigor, demands on their time, expectation of detached professionalism and technical competence produced the perverse effect of making our graduates socially inept. Was this a consequence of the educational philosophy of the institution? Due primarily to the realities facing all Naval Academy graduates, particularly in a time of war, the technical and practical course of study must continue. Only the most zealous proponent of the Great Works Curriculum would suggest swinging the pendulum in the other direction and embracing the classical liberal arts education. Besides, the Naval Academy's next door neighbor, St. John's College, has that local market cornered. What then should be added to the existing Academy curriculum to address the concern of this young sailor and others who feel similarly?

Savior Faire

Selfishly, or perhaps self-deprecatorily, I believe the task falls to my own field of study and department, Leadership and Ethics. The fundamental issue at stake involves personal effectiveness and that is the ostensible starting point of leadership development. Among the attributes graduates of the U.S. Naval Academy require to fulfill their leadership potential is the seemingly unlikely trait of *savoir faire*. Now I must admit I am neither a Francophone nor necessarily a Francophile, however, the term does capture something the simple English term "tact" does not. Most people consider tact through its antonyms, the qualities of being blunt or rude. Tact is the absence of blunt and rude behavior. *Savior faire* is so much more. *Savoir faire* is polish, it is graceful behavior, it is the ability to do or say just the right thing in virtually any setting—from counseling an underachieving, grieving, or misguided subordinate to mingling socially with diplomats, contractors, or janitors.

Clearly there is no short-cut to the development of savior faire. It has long been considered the product of a proper upbringing and that upbringing surely includes a humanistic education. But given the realities of the technical curriculum of the U.S. Naval Academy and the myriad demands on the time of its students, how do we achieve development of this trait? At risk of sounding like a hopeless reactionary, I submit we must bow to tradition in this regard. The classical, yet moribund, discipline of rhetoric should be our guide. The art of persuasion through the concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos provides the pedagogy. The Academy must assemble people of firm moral competence to serve as models of

human interaction (ethos). Those charged with development, both faculty and staff, must maintain the narrative of graceful and gracious behavior (pathos) in and out of class. Finally, the actual technique of effective interpersonal communication must be introduced and reinforced (logos) also in and out of class.

To the inevitable detractors who will claim we certainly do not need a finishing school to build Navy and Marine Corps officers, I would simply offer my agreement. The point in developing the trait of *savoir faire* is less about gentility than it is good old-fashioned leadership effectiveness. The young sailors and Marines who will be led by Naval Academy graduates deserve the best. Being the best leader includes deft handling of human beings. The tried and tested trait of tact is insufficient, as is our apparent ability to inculcate it. By aiming higher at the unlikely quality of *savior faire*, we correct the real and perceived limitations of our product.

Author Biography

Joe Thomas is a retired Marine whose research interests include experiential leadership development in austere and demanding environments.

