

L200 Paper – Leadership Crucible

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"But sir, it's in the TACSOP," I said for the third time in an exasperated voice. Then I rolled my eyes. Big mistake. The entire room full of O/Cs, commanders, and staff fidgeted in their seats. I could feel the tension, but was somehow blind to the warning signs. The Squadron commander glared at me and in a soft but clearly angry voice, he growled, "See me after!" After the brief was complete, I approached the commander, "Sir, I do not..." "Shut up and listen!" he interrupted, "if you disagree with me like that publically again, I'll find another Troop Commander...understood?! That was downright insubordinate! I've had enough of your attitude!" His words were punctuated with finger jabs two knuckles deep into my chest that were felt even deeper. All I could muster was a weak, "Yes sir," as I slunk back into the crowd. Afterward, my peers, who forever immortalized this event as "Zeke's Butt Chewing", approached me in disbelief. "Dude, what were you thinking? He had to ask you the same thing three times! Are you dense?" Clearly, I had been...for a very long time.

As a brand new Troop Commander in a Cavalry Squadron in Germany, my "Butt Chewing" initiated a string of events that reshaped my leadership vision forever. As a brash and tactless junior officer, I was blind to many tenants of effective leadership. It took the real threat of professional failure to initiate an honest and brutal self reflection process. The result was a threefold lesson in how to lead. First, I had a front row seat in how to effectively produce organizational change. Second, I witnessed the awesome power of a well developed and articulated leadership philosophy. Third, I discovered that the impact of a positive and well focused mental model could be far reaching and even decisive. It was not easy, but I would cite the events following my "Butt Chewing" as my crucible leadership experience.

In the fall of 1999, our Squadron had been through a lot. We had just re-deployed from Macedonia where three of our Troopers were captured and later released by Serbia. Our Division commander was asked to retire under questionable circumstances, and morale was generally low. Adding to the confusion and stress was the arrival of a new Squadron commander, who garnished a reputation as a demanding and driven leader. As the new commander asserted himself, he began to revamp nearly every aspect of the organization. The sweeping change caught many off guard and resulted in dissention at many levels. Only those who had previously served with the new commander seemed enthused. "Wait and see," they said, "He will make you a believer too."

As an outspoken extrovert, I soon found myself as one of the voices of opposition to the commander's plan for change. A series of encounters occurred in which my thinly veiled disdain for our new direction was revealed. This

eventually culminated in my "Butt Chewing." This crucible event combined with threat of relief drove me to a level of humility that was necessary for personal change. It was a warning that my previous approach to leadership was a path to destruction. I had a difficult choice to make. I could continue the course, resulting in failure, or I could take a good hard look at myself and change. I chose to change.

Once I removed my self-imposed mental blocks and stayed my own negativity, I realized that the commander's plan was built on the bedrock of a very clear and well developed leadership philosophy. It placed the onus for change squarely in subordinate's laps and it demanded that we "demand leaders in positions of leadership".¹ It was clear that this commander took standards seriously and would hold leaders accountable. Those that exhibited initiative and displayed genuine care for their subordinates were rewarded. Those that were not team players and did not take their profession seriously were marginalized. Every action had a purpose and served as a step toward unit cohesion, combat readiness, and positive change. I watched as initiative and ownership replaced laziness and self servitude. I internalized the importance of sound tactics, doctrine, and well executed staff work. While demanding and ruthless, our commander demonstrated a positive mental model in which anything was possible through team work and aggressive initiative; powerful weapons for positive change. Before long, I was more than a participant, I was a strong proponent. We collectively transformed our previously down trodden Squadron into the most combat ready and cohesive unit I have ever been a part of. My path started with a stinging public rebuke followed by a period of brutal self-reflection. It continued with a professional maturation process guided by the very commander who had humbled me in the first place. As predicted, I had become a true believer.

The first tangible result of this crucible event was that I learned how to effectively produce organizational change. As discussed in the *Tipping Point Leadership* article by Kim and Mauborgne, leaders must clear four critical "hurdles" in affecting organizational change.² The first is the cognitive hurdle in which a leader must first convince subordinates that change is needed and create ownership. Our commander achieved this by offering a superior alternative, and he targeted leaders who could best implement that desired end state. He was able to rely on a professional reputation, forged from years of impeccable service punctuated by combat success during the 1st Gulf War. He parlayed that reputation into

¹ LTC H.R. McMaster, Address to 1/4 Cavalry Squadron, 1st ID, Schweinfurt, Germany, September, 1999.

² Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, *Tipping Point Leadership*, L100 Developing Organizations and Leaders, (Leavenworth, KS: US Army CGSC, 2008), 69-78.

credibility for his new vision. He sought every possible opportunity to engage leaders and Soldiers to sell them on the benefits of change. In time, the logic and simplicity of his arguments convinced even the staunchest opponents. Another hurdle cited by Kim and Mauborgne addresses motivation.³ Our commander was a charismatic leader who could infect others with his own enthusiasm and drive. A grand example is how he cajoled local German politicians to approve usage of occupation maneuver rights not used since Re-Forger exercises in the early 1980s. He also employed the darker side of motivation. He effectively marginalized or removed all opposition over time, and would not tolerate weak leadership.

Thus the Squadron commander successfully cleared multiple hurdles in 4 short months, affecting sustained positive change. His multifaceted approach effectively altered the climate and the culture of our organization in short order. This has assisted me in my experience as an organizational leader in that I learned how to employ both positive and negative aspects of leadership to achieve change. I learned that the need for change must be internalized by all members of an organization, not just shoved down their throats. Although, stern leadership does have a role to play, and may include possible removal of those who do not comply.

The second tangible result of this crucible event was that I recognized the power of a well developed and well articulated leadership philosophy. As previously mentioned, our commander actively sought opportunities to engage Soldiers as he touted his vision and philosophy. In time it became a good natured source of ribbing. "Hey sir, tell us about how you want air and ground to work together again!" was not an uncommon jab at a hail and farewell. The funny part was, in spite of recognizing the joke, he would launch into a succinct diatribe of how he saw air-ground integration working in combat, which impressed even listening spouses due to its simplicity and relevance. The fact is, armed with a well developed and frequently communicated leadership philosophy, our commander was able to recruit the masses to achieve the change he sought. He lived his philosophy by example, motivated others through his articulation of that philosophy, and he allowed it to evolve as a group vision. I internalized these lessons concerning philosophy and have employed them ever since. One can use the process of developing a clear leadership philosophy as a vehicle to hone one's personal vision and refine its relevancy to any specific situation.⁴ Upon taking a new job, I always develop a clear

³ Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, *Tipping Point Leadership*, L100 Developing Organizations and Leaders, (Leavenworth, KS: US Army CGSC, 2008), 69-78.

⁴ Gerald F. Sewell, *Why Write a Leadership Philosophy?*, Reading B, L112, L100 Developing Organizations and Leaders, (Leavenworth, KS: US Army CGSC, 2008), 345.

and concise philosophy for my unit and refine it as time goes on. I deliver this philosophy every chance I get. It provides a focal point for unit success, and directly translates to group ownership of common problems.

The third and final tangible result of this crucible event was that I understood the impact of a positive and well focused mental model; otherwise known as a positive attitude. An excellent example of this can be seen during the Korean War when LTG Ridgeway relieves the Eighth Army G3 for failing to consider attack plans to the north.⁵ This historical example shows that by enforcing standards and demanding the right positive mental models from subordinates, a leader can quickly affect long lasting positive change. Similarly, negative mental models must be marginalized or removed. My crucible event had a similar effect on me, and the unit as a whole. While some may suggest that my public dressing down was an example of toxic leadership, I would argue that it was exactly what was required to get my attention and that of the unit. It served to place everyone on notice that negative attitudes and unproductive mental models would not be tolerated. Those that reformed were welcomed; those that did not were removed. There is also a positive aspect to demanding positive mental models. By demonstrating a genuine enthusiasm for the unit and its people, the commander set the example of what a correct positive mental model could accomplish. The success of that example became quickly apparent and it helped the unit as whole adopt a more positive approach. Thus, the extreme power of a positive mental model stuck with me throughout my career. I found that attacking challenges with vigor and maintaining a positive attitude produced far more successes than failures.

In conclusion, I still have people ask, "Remember that time you made a clown of yourself during the Troop Challenge OPOD?" Yes, I do remember. I remember it as the moment in my career when I stopped treating my profession like a job, and realized that to excel as a leader you must look inward first. I remember it as the day I began to understand how to affect positive organizational change and how to build a team. I remember it as the day I learned the true power of a clear vision and leadership philosophy, and I also learned that a positive mental model can achieve organizational greatness. I must thank my former Squadron commander for his mentorship and example over the years. But in terms of my crucible experience, I should probably thank him most for chewing my ass and threatening to fire me. It has made all the difference.

⁵ Thomas G. Bradbeer, *Setting the Stage: Korea, December 1950*, L205, L200 Leadership Applied, (Leavenworth, KS: US Army CGSC, 2008),, 263.