



FROM BOOT CAMP TO COMMAND: TRANSLATING MILITARY LEADERSHIP TO THE MODERN WORKPLACE

There's a premium for post-military leadership across business and government organizations nationwide. Military leaders represent some of the best-trained, experienced and mission-driven professionals in the civilian workforce. In this issue of the Authentic Leadership Series, I talk with Eddie Maldonado, Administrative Services Manager for the VA Roseberg Healthcare System, retired U.S. Air Force Chief Master Sergeant and two-time recipient of the Senior Noncommissioned Officer of the Year award to discuss the leadership approaches that have made him successful during his career.

Q: With over three decades of service with distinction to our nation, how would you describe the evolution of your leadership journey?

Eddie: How does one summarize 30 years of service? For me it has to begin with basic training and the instant exposure we all have to the military's autocratic leadership approach. Imagine the responsibility of taking young people who come from all walks of life and shaping them to conform to a single standard. As you know, the military follows a hierarchy that's intended to promote this autocratic style in order to execute war. I was fortunate to start out in the service as a medic. My job was to sustain life. My skills spanned the breadth of medical to physician assistant. I worked in emergency rooms and intensive care units, and in seven years I was in charge of my own clinic. I believe that in addition to my expertise, it was my ability to multitask under demanding and traumatic circumstances that made me an ideal candidate.

As my military career continued, I supervised more personnel. During my last assignment,

I served at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where I was directly responsible for all medical support. I was in charge of coordinating the support and flow of patients, and was a key advisor to any medical planning. This included football events that sometimes had more than 100,000 spectators in the area at one time. If there were a terror attack, I would be the one to execute

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the plan by managing the flow of patients and assessing our capabilities. This required a large scope of preparedness and practice. It involved providing consistent leadership and mentoring for a team of more than 85 personnel. The Air Force gave me the spark and I turned it into a leadership fire.

Q: How would you characterize your leadership style?

Eddie: Eventually everyone hones their own unique approach, but the closest one to

mine is situational leadership. Where I differ is that rather than grouping people, I focus on treating each employee as an individual. When you group people, it can diminish the value of individual contributions and morale, and lead to counter productivity. I believe that the paradigm for solving a problem or achieving a mission must be determined by knowing the capabilities of the individual in the context of the current situation. This approach has made me effective as a leader. Regardless of the rank or position I've held professionally, I've been successful at exercising influencing authority rather than having to consistently rely on direct authority to lead and motivate my team. It's a learned approach that requires patience and humility.

Q: What are some of the conscious decisions you've made that define your leadership style and how you interact with your teams?

Eddie: Firstly, I don't pretend to be better than anyone because of my role, title or position in relation to an organization or to a person. I approach each day as a day that the team can go forward together. I don't address the team with

actions or words that say, “I want to do this.” It’s always, “We do this.” I make sure that my team knows that I’m just as fallible as they are. We’re all human and we all make mistakes. It’s also my goal to communicate well and be transparent. With this level of honesty and accountability, they are better able to understand expectations as well as lend trust during times when I am unable to share certain information due to institutional sensitivities or other reasons. In those instances, there is an understanding that I’m not holding information close as a power play. Leadership transparency isn’t about sharing everything—it’s about accountability. Transparency creates a trusting relationship and strengthens your ability to lead a team from point A to point B. As with any relationship, people are going to test the waters. Accountability on both sides will create the right boundaries and help the team and underlying relationships flourish for the betterment of the organization.

Q: What should leaders prioritize in order for teams to succeed?

Eddie: Many times, leaders must put the team and organization before their own professional interests. If you want success, then you have to sacrifice something to move the team forward. Humans naturally want to put a feather in their own hat and go on to the next step when the leadership model should be—*only when the team succeeds do I succeed*. You also have to have balance. Some leaders make the mistake of going overboard and sacrificing everything for the team. If they sacrifice everything and take matters to this extreme, it will create barriers to team success in the long run. My advice is, don’t do it—there’s a balance to be afforded. Your role as a leader is to focus on the people and to provide the inspiration that comes from good leadership. When you inspire your people, you will garner more productivity. I can attest that leaders who learn and practice the soft skills will build and retain teams that are more committed to the organization. The net effect from a business perspective, of course, is that it will increase the bottom line.

Q: You mentioned the value of leadership soft skills. What are they and do you think they’re valued differently in military versus civilian workplaces?

Eddie: Although soft skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation and others are critical regardless of your vocation, in the military,

there’s not much emphasis on cultivating these skills in an open and formalized way. The military is a nonprofit organization. Our job is to protect and serve in times of war and peace. In times of war and protection, soft skills take a back seat to planning, logistics, security and safety measures. However, the opposite is true during peace-time and humanitarian missions. Because of these other types of missions, senior leaders are learning and transitioning to using more soft skills in the military. My belief is that these resources need to be readily available. Soft skills should be taught to leaders while they’re young—not just to senior leaders—so that the younger generations can find their leadership vectors. These skills bring critical value to both military and civilian settings across all levels of leadership and throughout all stages of the professional life cycle.

Q: Military leaders are frequently deployed across the nation and globe with rotating duties. That means that change is constant. What leadership advice do you have for managing change and new teams?

Eddie: In the military, you’re always changing stations and coming into a new team. It’s something I’ve had to do 11 times in my career. I considered my career to be a permanent change of station, but no matter how many new leadership roles I had, I stayed open to learning something new. Leadership is a lifelong endeavor and we’re always improving. One critical approach that I learned was to be observant. Right away I would bring the group together and I wouldn’t make the conversation about me or about my experience. *It was about them and my job was to observe and serve*. For example, in my current position with the Veterans Health Administration, when I arrived, I didn’t initially tell the team about my background or talk about myself. Instead, I asked them what they thought of themselves. They performed an informal, but personal, self-assessment. I learned about their experiences and I also asked them what they thought were the three biggest issues for the clinic we were managing and what they thought we could do to make it more successful. I tried to see the organization through their experiences by asking for honest input. If trust and accountability are established, I find that people are more than willing and eager to provide input when leaders ask. I also learned that people

value two universal things: (1) honesty from leadership and (2) accountability. In the brief meeting shared above, I learned that my team members wanted honesty from me and they wanted me to hold them accountable. From an improvement perspective, they also asked if we could improve different processes for better efficiencies. Our relationship shifted to one that was participative. There was a huge

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morale issue, but after the initial meeting, we built momentum and capitalized on it. Leaders have to communicate consistently and simply, but they also have to model the behavior they seek from their teams in order to create trust and collaboration.

This is not to say that this style will ensure smooth leadership sailing. There will be troubled waters from time to time. In fact, I recall that when I first started my assignment at the Air Force Academy, they were half-staffed. While the team was adjusting to my leadership style some of the initial reactions were, “I don’t want to do this.” I began by focusing my attention on the team’s history and their individual motivations. It was evident that because they were only 50-percent manned that they were being asked to do a lot more with fewer resources. So I looked for opportunities to provide them the resources they needed to be productive. *Basically, I listened*. Listening is difficult to master, but it’s a powerful leadership skill. The fact that they were able to voice their concerns and give me constructive feedback—and the fact that I actively listened and tried to act on their concerns—inspired them. There was a gap between leadership and the team that needed to be bridged. We were able to build trust as they adapted to my leadership and I adjusted to what their needs were. We figured it out together and the relationship changed. Instead of me having to ask them to do things, they were proactive and kept asking, “How can I help?” As the team became more cohesive, they adopted

similar leadership behaviors and they mentored the new guys so that they could also be effective.

Q: At what point in your career did you realize the importance of mentorship and how did it help you succeed?

Eddie: I've always been aware of various mentorship programs, but it wasn't until my 12th year in the service before I realized their true value. At the time, I had a situation where I had to contend with a rebellious individual on my team. My goal was to fix the clinic, but in terms of the process for managing people, I was out of my league at the time. I wanted to tell the individual to just shut up and color (*laughing*). But, as a leader, I needed to effectively self-manage my own responses and find a better tactic. I went to my boss and asked for help. He turned out to be a great mentor because he allowed me to observe him during an interview and see how he worked with people. I learned a lot. Later, I reached out to the individual and put my cards on the table. I asked him to give me some advice to move the issue forward. He said, "All you had to do is just ask me." It turned out, it was the reporting relationship that was difficult for him because he had a tremendous amount of experience and I outranked him. He was pushing back out of frustration. Now he's a good friend of mine and I've been learning ever since.

From this mentorship experience, I was able to overcome a hurdle by observing and learning. Today, I pay it forward by providing mentorship and coaching opportunities to others. Leaders should understand that they have a lot of experience to share and information is power. It's very empowering to help your people succeed. Sharing the information locked up in your cerebral vault gives them a chance to ask questions, grow their confidence and capabilities as well as apply learning to evolving workplace challenges and situations. A mentor is the one to emulate the right skillsets and to give employees an understanding of how to develop those skills. It becomes a two-way discourse. You, in turn, have the chance to learn from them and that relationship starts to flourish as you both grow.

Q: What leadership books have helped you most during your career?

Eddie: My most pivotal book is Stephen Covey's, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." At the point in my career when I first read the book, I was having some challenges and my mentor suggested that I read it. I also attended the seminar. The most important thing that I learned was that it's hard to manage the things around you if you haven't managed yourself. It helped me grow as a leader and understand what I can and can't control, and what I can influence. Another book that I highly recommend is, "The Situational Leader" by Paul Hersey. "The One Minute Manager" by Kenneth Blanchard and "Who Moved My Cheese?" by Spencer Johnson both also helped me to manage change, which is ever-present.



Eddie Maldonado
Featured Guest

Eddie Maldonado serves as the Administrative Services Manager for three community-based outpatient clinics in the VA Roseberg Healthcare System. He is accountable for the administrative management of fund control points, which are budgeted for several million dollars. Additionally, he develops mechanisms to continuously improve performance in the efficiency, utilization, productivity and effectiveness of programs. His leadership style promotes an environment conducive to cooperation and integration of clinical and administrative roles leading to high productivity, customer and staff satisfaction, and developing strong communication channels within programs and across internal and external customers and product lines. Eddie is also a retired Chief Master Sergeant for the U.S. Air Force, a grade reserved for the top one percent of the enlisted force. In his last duty assignment, he was the U.S. Air Force Academy's Aerospace Medical Service Manager. In this role, Eddie provided direct oversight for on-the-job and readiness training programs; partnered with the Chief Nurse Executive to develop strong OIC/NCOIC and Flight Chief/Flight Commander leadership teams; advised the Command Surgeon, Command Chief Medical Enlisted Force, and the Aerospace Medical Service Career Field Manager on issues impacting education, training, development, appropriate utilization and deployment sourcing of all medical technicians; and coordinated medical coverage for all installation events to include cadet activities and NCAA sporting events. He also served as the Air Force Aeromedical Evacuation Technician Consultant. During his 30-year career, he also participated in contingency operations in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan.



Michelle Maldonado
Series Creator

Michelle Maldonado is a former corporate attorney with more than 17 years of leadership experience in strategic planning, operations and partnership development across the e-learning, technology and online media industries. She currently serves as Associate Vice President of Corporate and Strategic Relationships for American Public University (APU) and is the creator and editor of The Authentic Leadership Series. Michelle is passionate about talent development, coaching and the mentoring of professionals to support organizational success and sustainability. Utilizing an authentic and consultative approach, Michelle collaborates with industry organizations to form education alliances that support overall talent and institutional growth strategies. She also represents APU in conferences and other venues on the topic of leadership authenticity and its convergence with emotional intelligence, mindfulness and other "conscious leadership" practices that inspire culture transformation. Michelle's work has been featured in Chief Learning Officer, Human Capital Insights, Leadership Excellence, and Training magazines.

To learn more about how American Public University's programs and services may help you with your talent development and retention strategies, please visit: www.StudyAtAPU.com/Solutions or contact Michelle at mmaldonado@apus.edu.



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