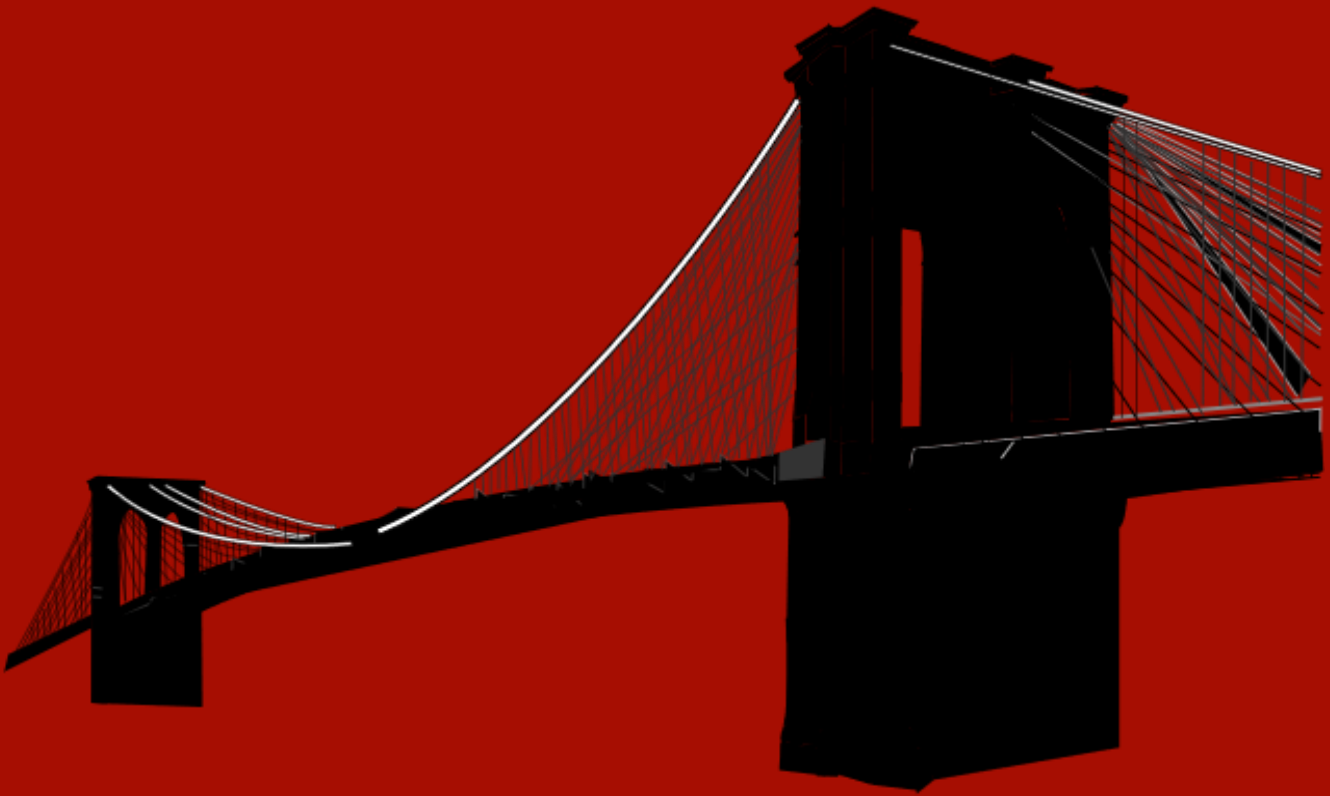


# Good Habits for Leaders



Douglas R. Satterfield, U.S. Army Brigadier General (Retired)

## **COPYRIGHT**

Copyright © 2018 by Douglas R. Satterfield

All rights reserved.

Published in PDF by the author.

[www.theleadermaker.com](http://www.theleadermaker.com)

All the following Good Leader Habits originally appeared in the Senior Executive Leader website which is constructed and maintained by Doug Satterfield.

The Brooklyn Bridge officially opened on May 24, 1883, and the difficulty of construction stands as an example of how great leaders overcome the most complex obstacles.

This PDF book is dedicated to the memory of those who worked on the bridge and to the celebration of their strength, bravery, and resilience. Those are the qualities to which all leaders must aspire.

Cover graphic of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Graphics in document are from various sources.

## Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	v
Good Habit #1: Never Assume Anything .....	1
Good Habit #2: Walk Around and Talk with People .....	2
Good Habit #3: Read Mission-Related Material.....	3
Good Habit #4: Take the Initiative.....	4
Good Habit #5: Make Effective Use of Time.....	5
Good Habit #6: Show the Human Side .....	6
Good Habit #7: Speak Properly .....	7
Good Habits #8: Be Transparent .....	8
Good Habit #9: Learn Continuously .....	9
Good Habit #10: Make No Excuses.....	10
Good Habit #11: Think Out Loud .....	11
Good Habit #12: Make Hard Decisions.....	12
Good Habit #13: Be Conscientious and Timely .....	13
Good Habit #14: Be Honest and Straightforward.....	14
Good Habit #15: Give Credit where it's Due .....	15
Good Habit #16: Walk the Walk.....	16
Good Habit #17: Politely Accept Feedback .....	17
Good Habit #18: Have a Sense of Humor .....	18
Good Habit #19: Adhere to the Golden Rule .....	19
Good Habit #20: Forget Perfection.....	20
Good Habit #21: Be Open to New Ideas.....	21
Good Habit #22: Be a Sounding Board .....	22
Good Habit #23: Treat People Fairly .....	23
Good Habit #24: Ask ' <i>Who Needs to Know</i> ' .....	24
Good Habit #25: Be Generous.....	25
Good Habit #26: Be a Paragon of Standards .....	26
Good Habit #27: Have Patience .....	27
Good Habit #28: Look like a Leader .....	28
Good Habit #29: Smile .....	29
Good Habit #30: Give a Simple Thank-You.....	30

Good Habits #31: Show Your Passion .....	31
Good Habit #32: Ask Good Questions .....	32
Good Habit #33: Be a Teacher .....	33
Good Habit #34: Be Approachable.....	34
Good Habit #35: Prioritize the Important .....	35
Good Habit #36: Be Accountable.....	36
Good Habit #37: Keep it Simple.....	37
Good Habit #38: Get Organized.....	38
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	39
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	39

# INTRODUCTION

*“Good habits formed at youth make all the difference.” - Aristotle*

.....

Leadership is a personal journey. What we make of it determines our ability to influence others and to lead. For there is no place for greatness in the world, it has to be created ... created by leaders.

*It's not the critic who counts ... The credit belongs to the man who actually is in the arena, who strives violently, who errs and comes up short again and again ... who if he wins, knows the triumph of high achievement, but who if he fails, fails while daring greatly.*

*- Theodore Roosevelt*

Leadership is about getting people to do things they would not normally do. Great leadership is about getting people to do this because they want to do it.

This is best achieved when leaders develop and maintain good habits in the performance of their duties. Leaders adopt values that support those good habits, and I intend in this book to highlight a few of those values and habits.

To those who were part of my journey, who provided their wisdom ... thank you.

---

New York, NY: June 14, 2018

## Good Habit #1: Never Assume Anything



Picking good daily habits for leaders is easy because there are so many from which to choose. Today, I've selected the good habit that most leaders regularly violate; making assumptions that turn out not to be true.

People make assumptions in everything we do. Otherwise, nothing would get done. But here the reference is to the important assumptions. Good habits number one is “never assume anything” of significance.

Does this mean we should never trust anyone and anything? Of course not. We should be able to trust, and likewise, we should be able to verify our assumptions. In the military's decision-making processes, we formally list facts and assumptions, so they are out there for criticism and improvement.

An important task of leaders is to turn assumptions into facts as quickly as possible. When that is not achievable, contingencies are built around the unknowns (those pesky assumptions that we cannot verify as fact). This is a good methodology for not having an assumption we were counting on come back later and cause us fail.

An old saying that I repeatedly heard in the military was, “assumptions make an ass out of you and me.” The drill sergeants drew it on the chalkboard for us trainees: ass|u|me. They seared it into our brains ... so to speak.

The point was that when people make assumptions, they are invariably wrong. In war when assumptions are made, and not verified, they are likely to get you killed. Those drill sergeants, with experience in Vietnam, knew what they were talking about because we heard many stories of life and death.

For senior leaders, the best way to get to the truth and eliminate assumptions is to talk with many people about the issue. That is what most of us do. If we were to ask people throughout any organization about their thoughts on a particular issue, we would be amazed at the feedback concerning assumptions.

The leadership lesson for today is never to assume anything; that is, never assume anything of importance without actively verifying its truth.



## Good Habit #2: Walk Around and Talk with People



The best way for senior leaders to learn about what is happening in their organization is to simply walk around and talk to people. That may appear to be uninspiring and lack originality, but it works ... and it works well.

In conversations with the most senior CEOs and military flag officers, one of their most valuable techniques of gathering useful information is to ask a few basic questions and let people talk. Good habits make for great leaders, and this one is key to success.

This habit does two immediate things. First, it allows people to see the senior leader. Being there for people is important for senior leaders. It shows they are human and accessible. This invariably avoids problems associated with miscommunication. Second, the senior leader is in a position to hear issues that concern employees. It gives credibility to the leader and ensures key organizational messages are getting to everyone.

First-rate listening skills compliment this good habit. The senior leader by now should possess the appropriate listening skills. This means having the ability to ask the right questions and listen ... listen for what is said and for what is not said.

To walk around and talk with people, however, is done best with a plan. The first and most obvious plan is to listen and gather information – as already noted. The second is to talk with people about any key issues and messages of the organization and to make certain they understand the finer points. A related part of the plan also gives feedback to the senior leader on how well other leaders are communicating.



## Good Habit #3: Read Mission-Related Material



In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey writes that the most successful people can “sharpen the saw.” What he means is to balance and renew your energy, especially mental renewal. They do this, he notes, through “good reading.”

In the military, it is recommended that all leaders read mission-related material. Going beyond author Covey, reading should not just “renew your energy” but also be relevant to your leadership position.

This is not easy to do. With a busy schedule and a high demand that requires focusing on people, reading is usually the first thing to get sacrificed when looking to gain efficiencies.

However, senior leaders have found that when they do not read, they are left behind intellectually. Reading the material is a forcing function to get a break from the daily routine. Reading, therefore, should be a planned, regular daily habit, and not an occasional act of unimportance.

It is difficult to find very senior leaders who are not well read. Most leaders have a list of books and articles they have found most valuable to them. Some publish their list of favorites. General Raymond Odierno, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, has published his list ([link here](#)).

For someone with the most difficult job in the U.S. Army to find time to read will amaze some folks. Note that all these books in some way are connected to *leadership*.





## Good Habit #4: Take the Initiative



As I progressed through the military ranks, I was always both surprised and amazed those senior officers 2 or 3 ranks above me always seemed to be ahead of my peers and me.

To us, it was like they were intellectually superior and were able to predict the future. It turns out that they were like that because they would consistently *take the initiative* on important matters.

Of course, taking the initiative is hardly a trivial issue. Senior leaders can be repeatedly proactive on critical matters. That sets them apart from everyone else.

Taking the initiative means two things. First, the leader must have the experience and intellect to recognize that their involvement can make a difference. Those decisions they make are the key factors in their success in life and in all they do. Further, those decisions should align with their core values and the organizational mission. This makes it appear that they can foretell the future.

Second, leaders take responsibility for their decisions, the choices they make, and the consequences that follow. This is an unusual trait in a society that frowns upon taking responsibility. People in America are prone to blaming external factors like childhood poverty or racism/sexism/ageism instead of their actions.

Many are willing to take credit for what goes right but not for what goes wrong. A politician I worked for at one time told me that he would “*take credit for everything that goes right and blame you for everything that goes wrong.*”

To have the desire and passion for taking the initiative sets the most successful leaders apart from everyone else. Only the best leaders have the foresight, the ability, and the resourcefulness to carry through on their decisions.



## Good Habit #5: Make Effective Use of Time



Leaders are busy people with too much to accomplish and too little time to get it all done. Using time wisely is a key to successful leadership. One of the most difficult of good habits to obtain and to keep is the focus required to make effective use of time.

Superficially this is easy. Just keep a calendar and have a good assistant who can manage your calendar, wasting no time and with no “white space”

showing. Unfortunately, this mistake is too often the root of *inefficient* use of time and an ineffective leader.

Those in leadership positions recognize that their time is roughly spent in three categories: meeting shareholders, working administrative tasks, and talking to people while visiting various parts of the organization. The time required in each varies yet a productive leader spends about the same amount of time in each.

The executive assistant who manages the calendar will invariably block administrative tasks on the calendar and do a great job. The leader must know that it is the leader’s job to balance the demands of time, not the assistant. A full calendar does not measure effective use of time. Many leaders get trapped into calendar management and overlook the demands of those people outside the office.

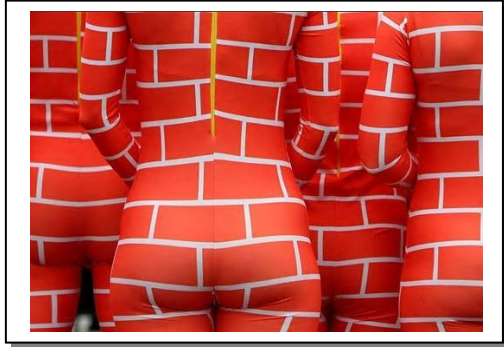
Shareholders are important. They include people on the board of directors, suppliers, government agencies, advocates of the organization, volunteers, customer organizations, etc. This is the area least likely to receive attention but produces significant, long-term payoff for the leader’s organization. The attention required does not seem as immediate as the demands of the office; the importance cannot be overstated.

Another key to good use of time is obtained by eliminating those things that are neither productive nor add value to the leader. The leader should personally study this because it may mean seeing people *less* in the office; something to which they may have become accustomed.

Making changes to the way a leader manages time may upset some people. Thus it will require some expectation management and clear communication to those affected.



## Good Habit #6: Show the Human Side



High School teaching can be a tough job, especially in schools that are in poor neighborhoods with growing crime rates. One young lady from New York City wanted to be a teacher more than anything else in the world but after only six months she quit her job.

“The reason? She was unable to “connect” with her students and she hated the job. Despite being exceptionally smart, this young lady was unable to show the human side of her character and failed at the one thing she wanted most.

Leaders need to be especially adept at connecting with people. This is best accomplished by showing a little about themselves and getting to know people. Politicians are often the best at doing this. They gain votes by developing a personality that fits well with their electorate. President Bill Clinton was one of the most successful. Many people were opposed to everything he did but loved the guy. He established an emotional link ... a connection that made people feel they could trust him.

Here are some of the fundamental traits that leaders possess that are fine-tuned, that makes them capable of showing their human side:

1. Go out of their way to spend the time with people and getting to know them
2. Use conversational language
3. Recognize that it is not all about them
4. Tell stories that relate
5. Provide value
6. Show that they can make mistakes
7. Possess the ability to laugh at one’s self

Of course, this takes time and effort. It also takes practice and is a key component of excellence in the art of communication. President Clinton was the kind of person anyone could go out with to a local restaurant and have a meal together. He was always showing his human side. People loved him as President even when he made poor decisions. This is an important concept. When leaders show their human side to people and later make mistakes, those mistakes are often overlooked.

Leaders who do not have these traits will struggle to be a leader and will never fully develop their potential.



## Good Habit #7: Speak Properly



A small group of friends and I had our first taste of college life after graduating from high school. We were all engineer majors and figured that since we knew nothing about college trigonometry courses, we would take one our first summer.

The teacher was smart and dedicated, but his accent made us struggle to understand some of the concepts. At the end of the third class, I finally got up the nerve to ask him about a certain word because

none of us understood it.

The word was “perpendicular” and critical to passing the course. Of course, to speak properly is an important task of senior leaders to ensure clear communication. Yes, to speak properly means to pronounce words according to conventions of the language.

When leaders work where another language is spoken, they must do their best to understand the needs of the audience. Not surprisingly, there are distracters in the use of any language that if eliminated, would make understanding easier. Distracters are things like cussing, slang, use of acronyms, tone and volume of voice, accents, and inaccurate use of words. Much of this can be controlled with some effort.

The suggestion that cussing, slang, acronyms, etc. are not to be used by a leader does not mean that they are bad or discouraged. A leader, however, must be understood by all people, not a subset or a select group.

Leaders, for example, who get into the habit of using slang will use the slang around those who do not understand it. It is, therefore, a good habit to not use it or use it only selectively. Good speaking habits are not easily developed and leaders must be aware of anything that obstructs their communication skills.



## Good Habits #8: Be Transparent



The demands made on military commanders are awesome; yet little is provided in the way of guidance. Commanders that make rapid, sound decisions are highly valued and promoted quickly to higher levels of responsibility. The problem is that decisions made rapidly often encounter resistance in the application.

Regardless whether the decision is the best or not, how and why the decision was made might not have been answered. Those who carry out decisions need to know more about how and why a decision was made. This is why *transparency* in decision-making is so vital to the leader.

Transparency provides everyone with the understanding to carry out the mission. Transparency also adds to the leader's credibility. Keeping processes open and available to anyone in the organization means that a healthy work climate is more likely to occur. Workers will be more apt to perform work tasks to standard and be happier.

Transparency is a form of communication and, of course, communication is the key to great leadership. Making decisions without input, belonging to secretive associations, and purposeful hiding and confusing the inputs needed for a decision, will lead to problems in execution. Accountability, for example, will be lost in the clutter of the fog of business.

There is always a place for secrets, especially in military operations against the enemy. How and why decisions are made should be explained to the fullest possible level to those who carry out those decisions. Having a boss who keeps information "close-hold" and is unwilling to share the thinking that goes into why things are done, will eventually lead to people abandoning the organization's mission.



## Good Habit #9: Learn Continuously



My grandmother – affectionately called *big mama* – told me many times that “*if you ain’t learning, you ain’t livin’*.” She valued all types of education and was the first relative of mine to insist I go to college.

She implicitly knew that continuous learning is one of the many good habits a person needs to be the best they can be. The best leaders also know that by learning they advance themselves, especially about things that most interest them.

The world is undergoing a constant change; the workplace, our homes, travel ... all are in a continuous state of transformation. We can either learn to adapt to it or fall behind. Who hasn’t known the intellectually lazy person who is unwilling to make themselves better? Who hasn’t known the opposite type person, someone who drove themselves to be better? The difference in each of these persons is that one is motivated to continuous learning, the other to stagnation. The former is “living”; the other is ... not living up to who they could be and certainly not succeed.

For the most part, the world does not encourage us to learn more. Often we are told to “slow down” and not show too much ambition or motivation; else we will be shunned or given extra work. Standing out in the crowd will get us recognized as a “do-gooder” or “teacher’s pet.” Overcoming these obstacles is never easy, but if we have the inner drive to push ourselves, we can succeed. Procrastination is both dangerous and enticing. It also results in a creeping intellectual rot.

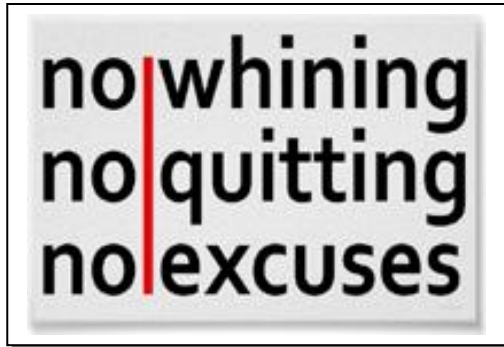
As I travel through the many airports of the world, I observe what people do to pass the time. The most obvious pattern is that many people are working on something – reading a book, writing, etc. Many others are just playing games or sleeping. I talk with people in the airport – anyone who will say hello. Those working on something are usually engaging, smart, and likable. Those who play games are not interested in talking much about anything. Is there a difference here? I think yes.

Everyone needs to keep continuous learning in their mental rucksack. This topic is not new, original, or rare. So it is not surprising that many see the benefits to keeping up on the newest developments in our areas of interests. Continuous learning makes for a more engaged leader; one who is more intellectually creative and savvy about the world around them. This is the type of person we want to follow.





## Good Habit #10: Make No Excuses



In the U.S. Army, we are fond of saying the “*maximum effective range of an excuse is zero meters.*” This is a play on words that harks to the effective killing range of a weapon system. I learned this the hard way when, on my first day as a platoon leader, several of my unit’s armored vehicles would not start. Good military leaders will tell you that one of their best pieces of advice is never to give an excuse for failure.

We’re told to “*suck it up, learn from the failure, and move on.*” Contrary to this advice, when questioned by my company commander who was my immediate boss, I gave the excuse that this particular day was only my first day on the job – and it was my first day. After a considerable ass-chewing I learned a valuable lesson; if we’d been in combat, many people would have died because I neglected to check the vehicles.

*“And oftentimes excusing of a fault, Doth make the fault the worse by the excuse.” – William Shakespeare*

The only value in giving such a poor excuse was that I never again made that mistake. For a new and very junior officer, the lesson was of considerable value, but I should have never made it in the first place. I was a reader of military literature, schooled at the best Infantry course in the world, and an avid player of sports; all who acknowledge the value of never making an excuse. It is human nature to push off responsibility, and in a moment of weakness, I had failed both my commander and my men.

Whether you are a leader or not, ‘*make no excuses*’ is a habit that should never be forgotten. It is not a new concept but is put to frequent use. As I was returning home from Texas earlier this week, I experienced a rude flight attendant. Without hesitation, the head flight attendant apologized and then went on to excuse the bad performance by telling me that the attendant had trouble at home (inappropriate information). The excuse, of course, didn’t change the behavior.

*Make no excuse* is always the better choice when confronted with failure. No one ever excused himself to success.



## Good Habit #11: Think Out Loud



As leaders, we often find it difficult to communicate what tasks need to get done and do so with as few mistakes as possible. Surprised? Of course not. Leaders normally give good orders but fail to communicate plainly their intent and also fail to put it into the proper context so that an employee can carry it out. One good habit to overcome this problem is for the leader to *think out loud*.

Leaders need their folks to do more than follow orders; even in the military, we need more. When all people do is follow orders, it's no longer important for them to understand what the leader is trying to accomplish. Since we operate in a changing and complex world, just simply giving an order and hoping all works out, is not going to produce success.

A better technique that should become a habit is that leader should think out loud to convey crucial information in the context of the work environment. By doing so, the leader is giving information that can be used to decrease uncertainty. This means the leader will make themselves susceptible to failure but at the same time, they will build resilience in the workforce.

*“Leaders must learn to “think out loud,” being transparent in their thought process as decisions and trade-offs are made, as well as showing vulnerability when they aren’t sure what to do.” – Brad Smith, Intuit President and CEO*

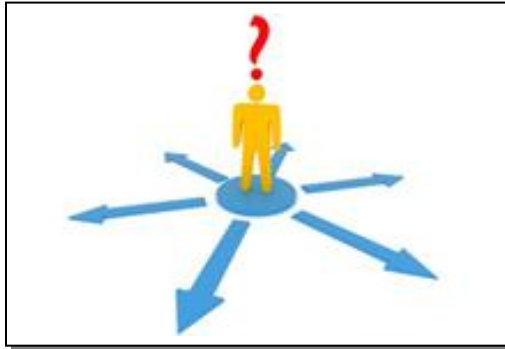
The habit of thinking out loud has the additional benefit in that it teaches what core principles are most important to the organization and why. To achieve excellence – rather than trying to avoid mistakes – it is worthwhile that we encourage people to say what they think, what they believe, were skeptical about, worried about, and hoped for the future. The fact that we don’t normally do this is a problem throughout most organizations and what Brad Smith was saying in the above quote.

*Thinking out loud* is the choice that leaders make to strive for reducing mistakes and achieving success ... and this is not what we are taught as leaders but should make as one of our good habits.





## Good Habit #12: Make Hard Decisions



One of the first commanders that I worked for shortly after my commission to Second Lieutenant was a great guy and family man. He was the kind of person you could have a beer with and enjoy watching the football game on television. However, as a leader he had one major flaw; he could not *make hard decisions* that require moral courage. The problems this caused were incalculable.

Leaders exist at many levels in an organization and they report upward in what we call in the military a “chain of command.” People tell us about how important good daily habits are for a successful and appreciated leader but none will tell us how to separate the good from the great leaders ... those that can make really hard decisions. Only the best can make difficult choices and do so with courage, compassion, and at the same time take care of their workers.

My commander made decisions and some of them required exceptional analytical skill and a clear understanding of our headquarters’ directives. He could do this well. The problem was that if a tough decision was required, one that involved putting forth moral courage, he could not make a decision. Things would hang unsaid and undone for the unit. It was like a pause button had been hit and everything was on hold.

The soldiers considered him weak. Leaders in my unit were also frustrated by the indecisiveness on select issues. Nearly everyone has had this experience. We find leaders who cannot make decisions when they have something at risk and they fail because they fear losing their careers. This fear is difficult to overcome and some leaders cannot make the leap.

I was fortunate that my commander was eventually transferred to a staff position and we received a new commander; a captain who we all appreciated for his ability to be decisive and could *make hard decisions* regardless of the circumstances. All our junior leaders learned a valuable lesson that no decision sometimes means that a de facto decision has been made; one that they may not want.

The inability to make hard decisions that require moral courage is not only found at the junior leader level but can be found anywhere, including high ranking leaders. Later in my military career, I had a Flag Officer as my commander who could not make hard decisions, and a soldier died indirectly as a result. Such is the disheartening results when leaders fail to be decisive. People will suffer when there is indecision, the very thing those leaders are often trying to avoid.



## Good Habit #13: Be Conscientious and Timely



I've been very fortunate during my lifetime to have had many people around me that gave good advice and lucky for me I paid attention and followed their guidance ... sometimes. Imagine if you will for just a moment an Army Drill Sergeant screaming in your face, "Private, you don't do your job, you're late, and now your ass is on extra duty in the mess kitchen for a month." Being conscientious and timely are good habits to possess.

Some would call this social event with the Drill Sergeant a "motivating experience." To me, it meant more than that but you have to be there to appreciate the up-close personal interaction to understand fully. I had a good excuse for being late and not doing my job that day; but excuses didn't rate very high on the defense scale so I kept my mouth shut (something that can be very rewarding in situations like this).

*"Conscientiousness and timeliness are invaluable habits and character traits. As I tell my law clerks, I want my work done right and I want it on time. No matter what you do, do it right and do it on time." – Justice Clarence Thomas*

More often than not the advice was given to me was helpful in both my academic endeavors and in my military career. Occasionally someone would publish a list of army rules that made things better for the Infantryman's survival chances. For example, "*Don't ever be the first, don't ever be the last, and don't ever volunteer to do anything.*" While this was intended to be humorous it did contain an element of truth (see [link](#) for full list); like volunteering to be the point man on a patrol can be unusually hazardous to your health.

Being *conscientious* (doing a good job without others telling you to do it) and *timely* (being where you're supposed to be when you're supposed to be there) would appear to be self-evident for leaders. Strike that assumption from your mind because leaders are just as likely to fail at their jobs and be late to work as the next person (or army Private). For those that do possess these good habits, expect good things to come their way.

I paid attention to the Drill Sergeant screaming at me. Most people don't need that extra social discourse to understand the importance of conscientiousness and timeliness. It should be a habit for life. Now that I'm retired from the military, I sometimes drive my wife crazy with these habits, which she then counsels me that it's time to slow down.



## Good Habit #14: Be Honest and Straightforward



My maternal grandmother was fond of giving her grandchildren sage advice. One particular time when a group of us were playing with fireworks and had set the grass on fire, she said to us “*okay, spit it out, who started this, and whoever did it can expect a butt-whooping!*” She put fear into us but what she wanted was for us to be honest and straightforward about what had happened.

She was trying to teach us the value of being a good person because this trait is what her generation had learned as the only way to improve their lot in life. She was a product of the Great Depression where a single penny meant much more to her than a hundred dollars means to me today. There is an old photo of 11 of her grandchildren standing beside her. We had all been given a valuable lesson in honesty that day and the expression on our faces tells all.

There are some ways for us to be honest and straightforward. Like my grandmother told us, “*it’s better to be truthful now than truthful after a whoopin’ for doing something wrong*” ... seems like we could never hide anything from her. Here is some additional advice of hers that supports being honest and straightforward:

- Always tell the truth (even if it hurts)
- If you can’t say something good, then don’t say anything
- Don’t make promises you can’t keep
- Obey the Golden Rule and treat others like you would have them treat you

My grandmother would not like today’s politicians. Their trustworthiness and honesty are very low in the opinion of most Americans. The same is true in Europe and I would expect a similar opinion in any democracy. She would say that they just aren’t being honest and straightforward; they shade the truth, talk in circles, and frequently talk bad about others.

With the presidential elections in the United States, there will be many opportunities to test the words of the candidates. Those that are plain spoken and do so without a prepared speech are the ones most likely to advance. Perhaps this is why the outspoken Donald Trump led the pack of Republicans when so many predicted his campaign would implode.

The best way of being held in high regard is by being honest and straightforward. “*Why can’t politicians follow the advice of our grandmother?*,” asked my cousin from north Louisiana. Of course, I had no answer.



## Good Habit #15: Give Credit where it's Due



One hundred and one years ago French General Joseph Joffre gave the order to attack the advancing German armies that were pushing allied troops westward in a series of defeats early in World War I.

Failure would mean the death of thousands, the collapse of military forces resisting the Germans, and the fall of France. The allied governments were *giving credit where it's due* when they formally recognized Joffre for his leadership.

There are many habits leaders take on to ensure the success of their mission. It may seem obvious that leaders who give credit where it's due are valuable team players. Doing so also provides motivation and validation of those who are doing the real work. Giving credit is an underappreciated leader habit, but when leaders don't give credit, there is reduced innovation, a stifling of collaboration, and limited growth.

The best leaders will take the blame for failures and give credit to others when things succeed. It makes for loyal and dedicated followers. Too many times, I've seen senior leaders take credit for things they had no hand in doing. People aren't stupid and are quick to recognize this type of leader for who they are. Whether a narcissist leader or just one is just plain dumb there is no excuse for not giving credit to others.

Without knowing whether the British forces would join them and without knowing how his army would perform on such a complex maneuver, Joffre nevertheless gambled everything to stop the German armies. Joffre was responsible for the French forces and for the strategy that was successful.

General Joffre gave credit to the bravery of the French and British soldier that made the difference between victory and defeat. He knew the importance of giving credit where it's due.



## Good Habit #16: Walk the Walk



As a newly commissioned Second Lieutenant of Infantry, I was assigned to a platoon that had been without an officer for over a year. Promises had been made to them and broken repeatedly. To say they were a little disillusioned over how unit officers treated them was an understatement.

My senior Non-Commissioned Officer, “noncom” in Army slang, told me on my first day that his best advice was simply to *Walk the Walk*.

This 20th Century American saying is probably based on various adages that epitomize the belief that “talk is cheap,” “deliver on your promises,” “actions speak louder than words,” and “practice what you preach.” The contempt military folks have for a leader who talks but rarely follows up with an effective action is shared throughout the work world too.

*“Fear not, my lord, we will not stand to prate; Talkers are no good doers: be assured. We come to use our hands and not our tongues.” – Shakespeare’s Richard III, 1594*

*Walk the walk* is almost always said in concert with *talk the talk*. My noncom was telling me something important when he said: *“Most of the officers around here say they will support our platoon but only a few of them can talk the talk and walk the walk.”* They simply wanted me to deliver on my promises to lead them well in combat; as I had said I would do. Backing up what I gave my word to do with action was what anyone wants.

The low popularity of political leaders here in the United States is largely the result of making promises they rarely deliver on and to make it worse they continue to gloat about what they can do. Leaders walk the walk; they don’t talk the talk. Leaders would do themselves and their followers a favor if they spent more time doing things rather than simply talking about it.



## Good Habit #17: Politely Accept Feedback



All leaders will tell you they *politely accept feedback* on their performance and encourage people to share their opinions on their leadership capability. In practice, however, that is rarely true and official systems have been developed to ensure feedback is given on a minimum regular schedule.

True leaders are tenacious about getting quality feedback and do so in a variety of ways.

*“We all need people who will give us feedback. That’s how we improve.” – Bill Gates*

As an example, the U.S. military has a 360-degree feedback system. But the main effort must be made by the leader to accept feedback as something helpful. I’ve written about how to get good feedback (see link [here](#)) and the key is having multi-dimensional sources usually in the form of peers, subordinates, and superiors and also getting feedback at regular intervals. This applies to all leaders regardless of position. However, a good leader goes beyond this minimum to reach all stakeholders and perhaps even some uninterested observers.

Without senior leaders who are committed to ensuring they get quality feedback, any system will inevitably fail to work as designed. Leaders must also recognize that feedback is often biased as overly praiseworthy and in most cases, I would propose, much of it is not valuable. Feedback must be accepted both politely and viewed with skepticism. This is why large organizational leaders work hard to have quality feedback systems in place; a very difficult and resource-intensive task.

*“Regular feedback is one of the hardest things to drive through an organization.” – Kenneth Chenault*

Leaders are often criticized, many times appropriately, for being out of touch. A good feedback system, established by the leader, goes a long way to overcome this criticism. Leaders must do themselves a favor and accept feedback politely, with skepticism, and use that information to make themselves a better leader.





## Good Habit #18: Have a Sense of Humor



An essential skill for leaders is a *sense of humor*. Humor is universal; it keeps everyone at ease, boosts engagement, and allows a leader to be more approachable and more effective. Comedians are like artists who use human psychology as a way to move people to laugh and be happier in the moment. Leaders can learn a lot from comedians to get things done.

*“A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done.” – Dwight D. Eisenhower*

While the benefit is undeniable, it surprises the number of leaders who avoid humor. Some leaders want to be portrayed as serious and consider humor amateurish. Humor, however, when used in just the right setting and at just the right time can be professional. It takes a keen sense of perceptiveness and just a bit of wit to use it properly. Some leaders fear it because they know it is easier to fail with humor than succeed.

While there is considerable scientific research on humor, sadly it doesn't tell us how to use it effectively. Research does show that employees admire and feel more motivated by leaders who use humor effectively but have less respect for those who try to be funny and fail. It is not surprising then that some leaders avoid it. But business research tells us that humor can stimulate creativity and teamwork as well as increasing analytic accuracy and productivity.

Good leaders know when and how to use humor; they do so to relate, motivate, and communicate their vision and ideas. While leadership has many complex pieces that a good leader knows, using humor can make it easier and more effective. And it's never too late to start learning how to use humor.



## Good Habit #19: Adhere to the Golden Rule



The habit of treating all people like *you* would like to be treated is an adage that goes back before recorded history. It is the basis for all religions and successful customer service in any business enterprise. Good habits for leaders also means taking the Golden Rule further and treating people like *they* would like to be treated.

*“I have something that I call my Golden Rule. It goes something like this: ‘Do unto others twenty-*

*five percent better than you expect them to do unto you.’ ... The twenty-five percent is for error.” – Linus Pauling*

Most of us know of the ethical rule best explained in the Bible in Matthew 7:12 where it is written ... “*do to others what you would have them do to you...*” Sadly, however, the fact is that most leaders regularly don’t follow the Golden Rule; we don’t live it, most of us don’t believe in it, and we don’t trust its practical effects on others or us.

The best leaders know that the Golden Rule and all its implications do not originate in the law of humans but the knowledge that all people are important. It is based on what makes people tick and it must be practiced without self-interest. Good leaders recognize the needs of others and adapt to them accordingly.

Treating others like they would like to be treated is infectious. Those individuals are more likely to pass along the good attitude and graciousness that they have received. They are more satisfied with all aspects of their lives and are thus more creative, helpful, and hard working.

The best leaders know to use the Golden Rule and know to go beyond it. This simple adage is easily learned and easily practiced. When employed by a real leader, nothing but good can come from it.





## Good Habit #20: Forget Perfection



Having worked with military and civilian engineers nearly all my life, I can attest to the fact that perfection is one of their most important goals. Getting any calculation wrong can mean the difference in project failure or success ... and that means a lot.

Once I finished my first year in a combat zone with military engineers, this seemed no longer to apply. Their new mantra: forget perfection.

When in combat a soldier no longer has the luxury of time to get things exactly right. Time is an enemy and the more time that can be saved through proven shortcuts, the better. We never had the time to get things just like we wanted. Once I was given the mission to build housing, office space, and communication nodes for 5,000 soldiers. I was given six weeks to get it all done. That same day, our bulldozers were leveling the ground while the commander and I drew up plans on the hood of his [Humvee](#).

The running joke in Iraq for U.S. Army engineers was “*how would you like your project done? Fast ... Good ... or Cheap ... pick two*” and “*here [in Iraq] you can only pick one and maybe you won’t get that.*” A good example is when we put a tactical float bridge across one of the Iraqi rivers while under mortar fire from a group of insurgents. We didn’t prepare the bridge like the manual says but we got it done and done fast.

Too many people have a psychological hang-up on getting things to perfection. When you live in an environment where that’s not possible, like in combat, you learn to adapt or you go crazy. I had to send several engineers home early because they couldn’t grasp the fact that we operated at a much higher pace and didn’t do things exactly by the book. Once I had a 20 ton [D7 fully armored bulldozer](#) operator ask for a mine-clearance team to clear out anti-personnel mines. We laughed and told him to drive over mines.

Perfection is unachievable. By teaching people to let go of that ideal, they can get on with their lives. Like the D7 dozer operator who was halted by a few mines, he was able to continue with his job and we were able to build housing for several thousand troops in less than six weeks. For those who demand perfection, they rarely get things done.

Procrastination is a common trait of a perfectionist. Holding onto perfection, and not [watching your six](#), will get you killed.

Forget perfection. Get the job done safely. Live your life without perfection and everyone will be better off for it.



## Good Habit #21: Be Open to New Ideas



One of the concerns about being a military engineer is that our education and experiences can intellectually trap us. There are great engineers who've escaped and produced amazing works. They did this by developing a daily habit of being open to new ideas.

We all have marveled at those who designed and built the Panama Canal, the Brooklyn Bridge, or the Great Pyramids of Egypt. These things and many more were not built on the foundation of the past

but on developing new and creative ideas, techniques, and procedures. Being open to new ideas increases a leader's chances of success by:

- Sometimes reaffirming their position
- Encouraging creativity and new ways of doing things
- Empowering the workforce and increasing satisfaction in what they do
- Helping motivate people to achieve excellence

The biggest engineering challenge of U.S. and Coalition forces in the Iraq War was how to place 60,000 new military and the supporting civilian personnel into a desert environment. Troops would begin to flow into the country starting in 90 days from the commander's order and continue until complete four months later. Most folks know this as the "surge" that eventually decimated the Iraqi insurgency.

The engineering preparation, however, is largely an unknown but was a crucial phase of the operation that was also successful. Engineers didn't succeed because they used pre-designed structures or off-the-shelf plans. It was done through being open to new ideas on how to house, feed, protect, and care for a large number of people in a shortened window of time.

Being open to new ideas requires new personal strategies for doing things. It means:

- Being open to mistakes and increased risk of failure
- Lessening of direct control to allow others to do things and make decisions
- Understanding and practicing change
- Listening more and avoiding quick decisions
- Being increasingly honest and admitting you are not all-knowing



## Good Habit #22: Be a Sounding Board



I remember that day well; one of my junior soldiers came to me to ask questions about how he should deal with a problem. With my mindset of not telling people *how* to do their job but rather just giving tasks, I failed this young man because I failed to consider his suggested ideas. He just wanted me to be a sounding board for him – he trusted my judgment to test his ideas for the probability of success or failure.

Good leadership means being a sounding board for others to push new and creative ideas without risk. That translates into leaders developing the appropriate social skill sets to listen, provide constructive feedback, and do so without putting people at risk of being insulted, disrespected, or turned-off by that leader's behavior.

The problem of my failure was that it didn't take long for word to get out that I was not someone soldiers could bounce their ideas off. It took time to rebuild that trust and confidence lost by a single incident. The old Dutch saying that "*trust arrives on foot but leaves on horseback,*" is very appropriate to this situation.

Research into how leaders operate on a day-to-day basis shows that one of the most important aspects of working with others is directly related to how they listen. More than anything else it means listening without judgment and it also involves judiciously giving responses that put those seeking advice or input at ease; dampening any fear what they say will somehow be used against them.

When a leader acts as a good sounding board, the benefits extend beyond those seeking comment. Team performance improves, people get along better with others, there is a greater focus on the mission, and overall willingness to risk new, creative ideas. It is also vital that junior leaders be able to seek seniors who are willing to act as their sounding board.



## Good Habit #23: Treat People Fairly



Today I want to deal with one of the more crucial daily habits that a leader must employ; treat people fairly.

Being fair means working with people in a just and consistent manner. It is not always easy when people come with different needs and skills but it is incumbent that the leader makes a concerted effort to do so. Regardless of our rank, each soldier must adhere to the military's uniform codes of morality

and justice. No one regardless of leadership position or political connections is exempt from any military rule or regulation. This is the basis of fairness.

A leader who jumps to conclusions without having all the facts and follows up by making destructive decisions, is harmful and a danger to all. One of my friends from the U.S. Infantry Basic Course was accused of cheating on an exam because someone "turned him in." After an investigation, the facts show that the accuser was jealous of my friend who had consistently embarrassed the accuser by being the top scorer in the military's physical fitness tests.

A good leader checks all the facts and hears everyone out before passing judgment. Often difficult since leaders work in an environment where facts are not always complete, but it remains crucial that any decision is based on as many facts and logic as reasonable at the time. One will be known as a fair leader. That is what helps establish credibility with the workforce.

When people are treated fairly and, more importantly, when they feel they are being treated fairly, they reward that leader with loyalty, respect, and dedication. Such is the epitome of leadership in the modern age. A leader who shows fairness in the daily execution of their duties is more likely to be not just successful but given high praise and respect by those around that leader.



## Good Habit #24: Ask ‘Who Needs to Know’



As the Staff Sergeant walked in the new Afghanistan combat operations center in the heart of the Division headquarters, he saw plastered everywhere the printed words, ‘*Who needs to know?*’ He was new to combat and so he asked the closest person working on the security staff what it meant. The sergeant was to discover a good habit that helps ensure effective communication is asking about *who needs to know*.

We can take a lesson from the U.S. military.

Effective communication is difficult under ideal circumstances and yet our soldiers must be proficient in passing accurate and relevant information in a fast-changing and physically dangerous environment. How can they do it? How can soldiers ensure that crucial information is disseminated to the right people at the right time?

Like any leader who wants to be successful in what they do really, they must daily ask themselves, ‘who needs to know?’ If there is an attack on an outpost in the northern territories, should the leader let those in the south know about it? This is the crux of the issue of good communication; getting it right makes all the difference to the battle and how the combat force is perceived by the lowest of soldiers in its ranks.

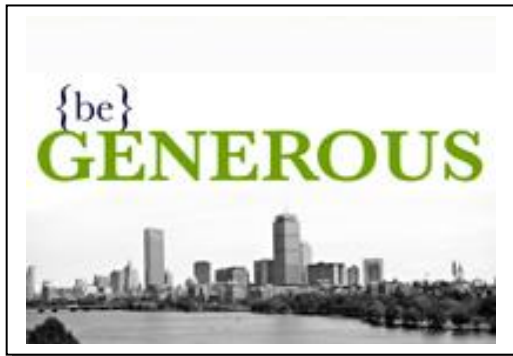
When information is in the hands of the right people, it generates confidence in leaders and their ability to make good, timely decisions. Otherwise, we will witness a drop in morale and esprit de corps. I’ve personally seen it happen to military units that performed well in peacetime but were frozen in combat. They couldn’t prioritize their information, nor let their soldiers know what was important and what wasn’t.

Leaders who are real professionals know that they must be asking, ‘Who needs to know?’ The question provides the lubricant to the operation of a military unit or to any organization that plans to grow and succeed. Those who put this in their proverbial rucksack will never regret it.

Oh, the staff sergeant got his answer. The previous Division took unnecessary casualties when they didn’t get accurate or timely information to their soldiers. The new division commander didn’t want to repeat that mistake and it paid off in saved lives, destruction of more enemy personnel and assets, and higher morale in his unit.



## Good Habit #25: Be Generous



I was an enlisted man for seven years in the U.S. Army before receiving my officer commission. One of my proudest moments was when I was promoted to the rank of Sergeant (E-5 pay grade). More commonly known as Buck Sergeant, I was fortunate to have plenty of mentors who gave me the basics on how to do well. One Vietnam Veteran told me that the best thing I could do would be *be generous* to others.

I thought to myself, *“Now wait a minute. How can that be true in an Army based on killing the enemy? Aren’t sergeants taught to be strong, mean, and nasty?”* What that combat veteran taught us was that our time, charity, energy, and resources, should be shared without reservation with everyone in the unit. By doing so we were giving everything to our troops and anytime they needed us, we would be there.

Too many leaders these days are not generous at all; especially with their time or credit for success. Leaders understand that their job is to provide resources and what they know to help others succeed. If only more shared their time, especially as mentors, teachers, and coaches, then organizations would see more success.

I also learned from that combat vet that giving my soldiers credit for successful operations in peace and war was a way to gain their respect and admiration. One Corporal told me later that all his Sergeants did was “hog the credit” whenever things went right and “blamed us” whenever it went wrong. That sounds like some of the politicians I’ve known over the years.

Leaders who are generous are those who can inspire and motivate. We’ve all known these leaders while we are growing up. They’re willing to give their time, knowledge, and credit to others. And, they are admired by us for what they do for us and others. That Vietnam Vet was right after all. I’m glad I followed his advice and when after nearly 40 years in the U.S. Army people ask what my secret was ... I tell them it’s no secret at all; it’s just that I was generous with others.





## Good Habit #26: Be a Paragon of Standards



There's an old saying in the U.S. Army that goes something like this ... *"If you pass a problem by, you just set a new standard ... a lower standard."* As a military leader when a problem (or issue, or concern) is overlooked, the troops will notice and see that leadership expectations are not as high as they once were.

Achieving excellence in any organization – whether it be a church, a business, the military, or even the family – means those very people are the ones who will make it achieve success or make it fail. Motivation will take their organization beyond the minimum required and that means engaged leaders at every level.

It takes considerable due-diligence to achieve this habit. Every day, every minute, the leader must be on the lookout for the opportunity to communicate standards and motivate everyone to live up to the promise of excellence. It follows that without giving the authority to achieve excellence means nothing will happen above the minimum.

The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill of 2010 shows us what a 'culture of the minimum' will do. Interestingly, there is now a movie starring Kurt Russell about the explosion and it's quite good. If you see BP Oil commercials today, you will hear the narrator talk about how any of their employees, regardless of position, have the authority to shut down any operation they believe to be unsafe.

It shows how serious BP Oil is has taken the hard-earned lessons from the mistakes made by the company. For a summary of those mistakes, see a good article at [slate.com](http://slate.com) (link [here](#)) and Wikipedia.com (link [here](#)).

Great leaders are never satisfied with either the status quo or unnecessary risk-taking. Missions like ultra-deepwater drilling, military Special Forces defending local citizens, and skyscraper firefighting require professional men and women who have been highly trained and who have a level of dedication not typically seen elsewhere.

Without leaders being the paragon of standards – every day without hesitation – excellence like this cannot be realized.



## Good Habit #27: Have Patience



Leaders are trained to be and experienced in being proactive; aggressively pursuing missions, tasks, and goals is expected and good. Inaction is shunned. Great leadership means patience and knowing when to employ the precise timing of rare, aggressive action.

*“Patience is not an absence of action; rather it is timing. It waits on the right time to act.” – Fulton J. Sheen, American Catholic Bishop*

What leaders do in their roles does require time; sometimes lots of time. No wonder so many people say that being a good leader is so difficult. It means balancing action with patience ... or so they think. “Action” and “patience” are not mutually exclusive concepts for leaders. The best leaders know that patience means giving the time for their guidance, policies, decisions, etc. to take effect.

I’m reminded of what I was told by a famous four-star general at my education as a new general, *“Making decisions is easy but only great generals have the patience for the right moment in which it is most productive to act.”*

All of us recently promoted after being a Colonel for years had been force-fed the idea that action-action-action is the winning methodology to get things done and done right. At the Flag officer level, however, that is not the case.

Senior leaders must have patience and only through practiced guarded action will they be truly successful. I’m reminded of the history of U.S. Army General Dwight Eisenhower who, as the Supreme Allied Commander, exercised restraint and patience to ready his invasion forces that went ashore on June 6th, 1944. Surprise caught German Nazi generals as D-Day began the day mainland Europe was to be liberated.

Leaders who fail to practice patience will see their leadership diminished. Too many are apt to make decisions that junior leaders should make (sending the message that the senior leader does not trust those less senior), making decisions without all the information available (unnecessarily risky), or before circumstances change. Waiting for the right moment is the better tactic.





## Good Habit #28: Look like a Leader



Success comes in many forms and is the result of good habits practiced daily. Leaders give credit where it's due, accept feedback, are generous, and treat others fairly. But leaders should also *look like a leader* and that is not so easy.

*“People buy into the leader before they buy into the vision.” – John C. Maxwell, Author, Speaker, and Pastor*

First impressions do make a difference and although it doesn't matter that much how we look physically (beautify or ugly, tall or short, etc.), how we dress, our mannerisms, our “image,” does matter and does so more than most people would think. Some studies have shown that our *gravitas* and our *appearance* can make a great difference in how we are treated; even more so than our credibility.

Our *appearance* is one of the keys to success in business and many self-help books are dedicated to showing people how to make improvements. In my opinion, the most important aspect of appearance is hygiene and it is no surprise that many authors have written about the effect of staying fit, walking and sitting properly, cleanliness (like proper shaving), wearing the appropriate clothing, and our hairstyle.

We find that it is our *gravitas* that is what truly matters most in looking like a leader. Sometimes referred to as “executive presence” in the business world, those that act the part are those most likely rewarded and successful. Gravitas is directly related to how we speak and act; it is a signal to others that you are worthy of being heard and followed. Decisiveness, confidence, moral courage, and authenticity all express an individual's gravitas.

Leaders can develop and improve their image and their actions that will set them apart from others; yet draw respect and admiration. With a proper appearance and the right gravitas, leaders can expect “doors to open” for them. While each leader is different and their environment changes as they move through their lives, we can expect those that most look like a leader are those with the best appearance and gravitas.



## Good Habit #29: Smile



Someone once said that a smile is the language of kindness and that is certainly true. Leaders of all stripes, to be successful, smile to be both approachable and motivational. This is achieved easily for those willing to take the simple step of smiling. Recent interpretations of ancient writings tell us that a smile is what leaders have used since time immemorial to pull people together for a great cause.

*“The real man smiles in trouble, gathers strength from distress, and grows brave by reflection.” – [Thomas Paine](#), American political philosopher, activist, and revolutionary*

A smile is universal and it is associated with truthfulness, intelligence, and caring; all enduring leadership traits. For some of us, smiling is a chore. Even so, knowing that a smile is linked to success, every effort should be made to smile when possible (except in circumstances where it would be inappropriate). Experience helps us determine when and how to smile, and yes, there are different types of smiles.

[U.S. General George S. Patton](#) was known as a strict disciplinarian and intolerant of slackers who were unwilling to fight. He was, in the vernacular of the times, a hard ass and was referred to as “old blood and guts.” His philosophy of leading from the front and his ability to inspire troops with vulgarity-ridden speeches is part of his enduring legacy (see the text of his June 5, 1944 speech to the troops before the Normandy Invasion, [link here](#)). But it was his practiced smile, perfectly timed, that earned him the endearment of the men under his command.

Even the toughest leader among us has to develop that persona that anyone can approach them and say what they think, without a filter, without holding anything back. This is the embodiment of a real leader; one who can push to accomplish the mission without hesitation and, to do that, a smile will occasionally make it easier to take for those who are doing the hardest tasks.

General Patton was preparing his men psychologically for the invasion that would eventually destroy the Nazi military machine. In Patton’s speech in June ’44, at one point toward the end of his now famous speech, he paused and smiled and said:

*“I don’t want to get any messages saying, ‘I am holding my position.’ We are not holding a Goddamned thing. Let the Germans do that! We are advancing constantly and we are not interested in holding onto anything, except the enemy’s balls! We are going to twist his balls and kick the living shit out of him all of the time...We are going to go through him like crap through a goose...”*

Motivation at its best and done with a quick smile and a serious tone. This is a real leader.

## Good Habit #30: Give a Simple Thank-You



I remember it like it occurred yesterday. My maternal grandmother was a kind yet tough individualist who spoke her mind plainly and often. One day after I was baptized as a young boy in church she said, “*Douglas, you’re a good kid, thank you.*” It should be no surprise that the best leaders are those who make a habit out of recognizing others for what they do.

Was I flabbergasted? You bet I was. Did I ever forget it? Nope. People – all of us regardless of position, age, or experience – appreciate and remember a suitable pat on the back now and then. A retired 4-star general once told me that what he liked most about his long career were the soldiers that thanked him along the way. His medals were just pieces of ribbon.

*“Take time to be kind and to say ‘thank you.’” – Zig Ziglar, American author, salesman, and motivational speaker*

A pat on the back is not merely a figure of speech; it’s about a powerful connection with others. A leader should, therefore, make a regular habit out of it; best to make it a daily activity. Too often while we go about our busy workday, we may forget that those around us can always use a simple acknowledgment with a verbal thank-you, a thumbs-up gesture, a simple smile, or a “job well done” comment.

A thank-you should be given freely and without strings attached, reservation, or regret. Leaders should also exercise great care that it is appropriate for the action that elicits acknowledgment. On the one hand, if a colleague, worker, boss, friend, or family member does something well and has exceeded expectations, then a thank-you is the right thing.

On the other hand, random thank-you’s, those not connected to anything of importance, will hurt one’s credibility and believability. It is disingenuous to thank someone for no reason and it cheapens others who have been thanked. Some call this an inflation of the thank-you and it is, of course, not a good thing.

Real leaders, those who are genuine, are those who use the thank-you daily. They clearly understand the lesson from long ago, a remark by Alexander the Great who said that it is the work and effort of others that creates excellence, not our powers.



## Good Habits #31: Show Your Passion



One day many years ago I was visiting Fort Dix, New Jersey; a small U.S. Army base where mostly Reservists and Guardsmen train. It's located east of Philadelphia across the Delaware River.

The base commander was a senior Colonel and a rising star in the military. He was eager to tell me that his primary job was to be a “*cheerleader for the base*” and his passion for the job was irrefutable. This was one of his many good habits.

That chance meeting stuck with me for a long time. Passion is contagious. Where ever I went on Fort Dix I was met with personal warmth that was a bit unusual; typically I'm met with a [stiff upper lip](#) feeling on army bases. Militaries have a history and being warm is not one of their common traits and is often looked down upon as being weak (I'm judgmental here, of course).

*“Great ambition is the passion of a great character.” – Napoléon Bonaparte, French military leader and emperor*

Showing your passion means that others will see you as interested, engaged, and caring. Passion can be quick and relatively easy to start but very difficult to maintain. That is why those who consistently show it have achieved greatness; as they show those key traits. Some say that leadership is a journey – and it certainly is – but this conveys the idea that passion does not play a key role; a mistake that should be dismissed.

We should be always aware that passion is ultimately an emotion and being such it can cloud our judgment and actions. Mental resilience and mental strength, achieved through experience and education, can keep it in check. For we use passion as we would use any tool to make us better leaders and better people.

My trip to that small base in central New Jersey provided me with a life-long lesson that I never forget during my time in military service. I applied that concept of being a cheerleader (having passion for my job), and it worked.



## Good Habit #32: Ask Good Questions



Here at <http://www.theLeaderMaker.com>, I like to encourage habits that make leaders effective. In that context, I've found whenever a leader asks good questions, good things happen. Indeed, this is a significant fact that cannot be overlooked by those who fill the role of leader. There is, however, some confusion I will clear up. Two key points.

First, there are many types of questions. Some are designed to encourage sage thinking. Others are to show we care, demonstrate respect, and produce courteous behavior. And some are asked but are just orders or requests to be carried out. These are not what I'm writing about today.

Second, the ability to ask good, pertinent questions is a fundamental talent of good leadership. It should be exercised daily and with care. Such questions, asked skillfully, can do two things to enhance communications. They can elicit information that is useful to fill in gaps in knowledge and data; usually to improve a leader's decision making. And good questions can help verify existing information, ensuring confidence that what we know is accurate or, at least, what is generally known and unknown at the time.

*"Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers."* – [Voltaire](#), French Enlightenment philosopher

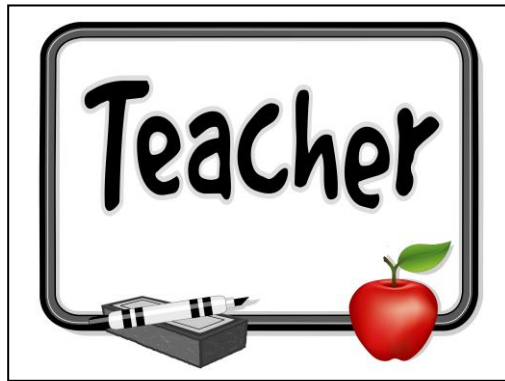
A comment is to set straight a common misconception. Like me, you've been told that there is no such thing as a stupid question. Wrong. Stupid questions do happen and can be misinterpreted, mislead, irritate, waste time and resources, and also tarnish one's credibility. When a leader isn't focused, it can come out in the form of a bad question for all to hear and to wonder if that person is intellectually up to the task.

Thinking through a question before it is asked is a good start. It should be asked so that it is least likely to be misunderstood. Repetition is also helpful. Asking the same question to many people will provide a variety of answers that can be synthesized for a common understanding, test consistency, and reliability. I would also recommend not interrupting someone answering your question.

Ask good questions daily. Review and analyze your question and ask yourself how it could be asked in a better way. Remember that the very best leaders among us are those who are asking good questions.



## Good Habit #33: Be a Teacher



Practical, day-to-day leadership is something that must be practiced and that is why I began this series on *good habits* several years ago. At the time, I wrote some good advice and my first was to [never assume anything](#). It was also the time that I wanted to write that one of the best pieces of advice I could give any leader and that was always to be a teacher.

Teach them never to make assumptions, never to make excuses, always to be honest and straightforward, and they will always be great

leaders. Being a leader is difficult. One must do all those things required of any employee, soldier, or guardian of our profession but one must also teach.

Once I was asked what I thought was the most important thing to teach young people. I told my friend, who had asked the question, that good leadership means teaching people to care about others. Bill Gallagher, a friend of mine for more than four decades and best man at my wedding, argued with me on this point. He said that it is impossible to teach people about how to have good “character.”

We can teach technical solutions to problems, and we can teach certain skills but what we cannot teach, Bill fought me on, was good character. Good character, he claimed, was the purview of parents and religion. I disagree. Not only do I disagree but I believe that it is crucial for the development of good leaders to do exactly that; teach character.

It is of morally necessity to daily teach those things that make people better and at being a good person. A good person can be trusted to do things with less oversight and generally with less guidance. This is a win for leaders who must devote so much of their time dealing with crises after crisis.





## Good Habit #34: Be Approachable



Effective leaders make a habit out of those things that work and that sustain them in times when things are tough. Leaders, therefore, must use their skills at persuasion to enforce standards of excellence. The only way to do this is to be approachable where people are not afraid to come to you and voice their concerns, issues, and opinions.

One of my commanders once told me never to bring him bad news. I was a junior officer and thought to myself at the time that perhaps I had done something wrong; in the future, I didn't bring him any news at all. Also, I didn't feel the need to help him make the unit better. Later as I looked back my time there, I considered it near failure. This is what an approachable leader does *not* do.

A team environment where folks are fearful to speak up and ask questions (even “dumb” questions) is one that is destined for failure. Authentic leaders make it known they welcome criticism and challenges to their way of doing business and are genuinely open to other viewpoints regardless of perceived value.

Leaders know that only through those around them can missions or tasks be completed. By ensuring they are approachable, leaders create an atmosphere where thoughts, ideas, and discussions can flow throughout their team and organization. This is done first by making it known that excessive criticism is unacceptable. It is also done by taking steps to reward those with the courage to step up and make their thoughts known.

Approachable does not mean the need to be liked or popular. It also means not being a pushover. This leads to weak leadership. Approachable means that folks can be assured they will be heard and given fair consideration. Some simple tools help; smile, don't react negatively, thank them, avoid overreacting (either positive or negative), and be consistent in any reaction.

An approachable leader will see the morale of their team and organization increase when seen as an authentic person who cares enough about members to treat them with respect and consideration. Cooperation will improve within, and a more positive attitude will prevail.



## Good Habit #35: Prioritize the Important



*“Everything’s a priority!”* yelled the commander of the U.S. Navy frigate. The story was from my uncle who sailed on an Anti-Submarine Warfare ship during the last months of World War II and so the story goes – as he told us children – the events that led to the sinking of his ship and rescue at sea.

It is the most successful leaders who practice good habits; in particular the habit of prioritizing important things. As the family’s small children

heard the story of the sinking, we were captivated by the men who fought in the “big war” where evil threatens to destroy us. My uncle was a first-rate storyteller. From his telling, the morale was poor, the food okay, and the duty monotonous.

Being a Gunner’s Mate 2nd Class had its advantages with the other sailors but not so much with the ship’s Captain. The frigate’s anti-ship guns were in need of repair and the work was not getting done as quickly as my uncle would have liked it. My uncle was meticulous about the mechanics of “his guns” and the ammunition that feeds them. Problems arose early after departure from a port in England late that January 1945.

After getting nowhere with the junior officers on board, my uncle went to the ship’s Captain to explain problems with the guns and what needed to be done to make repairs and necessary maintenance on them that had been ignored. As I remember the story, the Captain yelled so that everyone on the bridge could hear that the guns were a priority but that everything else was also a priority.

As we all know today (but not as a child hearing the storytelling) that when everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. That is how it went with the anti-ship guns. They never received the required parts to get them all fully mission capable. When the convoy returning from Europe was attacked by submarines, the guns failed to engage at least one of them on the surface.

Shortly after a torpedo entered the ship’s stern, it sank within minutes. Loss of life was tragic and quick. Fortunate for my family, a sailor pulled my uncle from one of the gun turrets, and they were rescued shortly after. He was told that the lives of the men in uniform was a priority but so was the ability of a ship to protect itself. The ship’s Captain had failed and many of the sailors aboard paid the ultimate sacrifice.

A leader who practices good prioritization of important tasks and duties can be assured that when the time comes, all will be in proper order. When my uncle died, many years after the war, there was nothing that was not done for his arrangements. The “kids,” all of us, always admired him for his service and for being our uncle.



## Good Habit #36: Be Accountable



U.S. President Harry S Truman had a sign on his desk that was there to show he accepted responsibility for the way the country was run. The sign read, “*The buck stops here.*” Good habits by leaders start at [accepting responsibility](#) for their actions and the best leaders do this daily.

Leaders don’t try to shift the blame onto others because they are accountable for what happens and for what doesn’t happen regarding their behavior.

Many leaders will resist this idea because, as the logic goes, they follow orders or are fearful of being unfairly blamed for things not their fault. That idea went out at the [Nuremberg Nazi Trials](#) after World War II.

*“The ancient Romans had a tradition: Whenever one of their engineers constructed an arch, as the capstone was hoisted into place, the engineer assumed accountability for his work in the most profound way possible: He stood under the arch.” – Michael Armstrong*

Like the Ancient Roman engineer, *the buck stops here* is more than just words on an office sign. It’s a philosophy of leadership with a material meaning that no one else is answerable for any failure that occurs. If the arch fell, it would matter little if he could have blamed someone else for its collapse.

While serving as a U.S. Artillery Captain during World War I, Truman captured the respect and admiration of his men because they knew he would not shift the blame on them for the unit’s failures. He earned their trust by backing them up. Truman didn’t just learn accountability during the war, but it was reinforced upon him that it works.

Great leaders understand the concept of accountability and what it means to those who worked for them. I’ve been fortunate to have worked for those, like Truman, who are accountable. The freedom it gave me knowing that my boss would have my back was a relief.



## Good Habit #37: Keep it Simple



One of the first things that I learned from my military instructors on how to be a leader was to keep things simple. That's not exactly what they said; it was *keep it simple, stupid* which is usually said in its acronym form KISS; oddly enough, originally a design application of the U.S. Navy in 1960.

The KISS principle is widespread and a basic rule that good leaders follow daily. The concept was popular in the military during the 1970s and is still today, in particular under combat conditions. Military planners figured out that when things are complicated or require a network of things to work harmoniously; they will often fail when under stress.

It has often said that a simple plan today, poorly executed, is better than a complex plan tomorrow, well executed. Humans, being who we are, are prone to mistakes, biases, and selectivity in what we do. When things are kept simple, those things are less likely to enter our behavior.

The KISS principle has many variations, like “keep it short and simple,” but the idea remains the same; humans are error-prone, and when things are kept simple the result is typically a better product. I'm reminded of the 1999 NASA Mars Climate Orbiter than burned up in the Martian atmosphere because engineers had failed to convert units from English to metric.

Of course, funding, designing, building, launching, and the monitoring of a spacecraft is highly complex. A NASA review board quickly discovered the problem; caused by different agencies using different systems of measurement ... and nobody checked. To make a bad situation worse for NASA, the Mars Polar Lander, launched 23 days later, also disappeared.

The lesson is very clear; don't put complexity into things that can be made simpler; fewer mistakes will be made that way.



## Good Habit #38: Get Organized



As a new Second Lieutenant, I was originally a slob; my clothes were everywhere, my refrigerator had expired food in it, and my desk at work was disorganized. One day I had a grizzled, old sergeant comes into my office to give me a piece of constructive advice. *Get organized*, he said, *and while you're at it, look organized too.*

I had always admired folks with neat desks but I had been too busy and had too much work to keep a clean desk. I knew about the quote, *"a messy desk is a sign of a cluttered mind."* Was that me? I asked myself one day. I finally had to admit that yes, I was a mess and needed help. My roommate suggested I invite Sergeant Jacob McCann (a legend in administrative efficiency) to my office for some advice.

Everyone recognizes the advantages of being organized; increased productivity, less stress, reduced clutter, etc. The old administrative sergeant's advice was spot on. He told me that there are five things I could do right away to get organized and look like I was organized.

1) Make a "to do" list, 2) prioritize my daily tasks, 3) always work on the list, 4) stay focused, and 5) clean and organize your work desk.

While this was helpful – actually very helpful and it also helped make me more confident – the more important impact was on how others saw me. In the past, most of my soldiers, peers, and commander saw me as unprepared and inefficient. That changed when I began to clean and organize my desk.

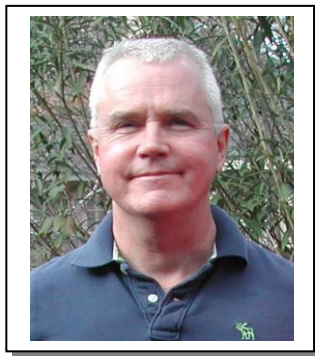
There was a lesson in this for me. Being prepared is something I had always prided myself on and getting organized helped immensely. Also, by looking organized, it drove how others saw me and saw me in a positive light. There was no downside to being organized except it required constant effort. Get organized is a leadership skill that is invaluable.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Special thanks to all the dedicated readers who have made this "Good Habits for Leaders" a success. Also, thanks to my wife Nancy who has also given her time and patience to allow me to work.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



My name is Doug Satterfield, and I live with my wife Nancy in the state of New Jersey. My experience in Senior Executive Leadership has been fascinating, and I intend to share some of the lessons and characteristics of those who have gone before me.

As I travel about, people ask me to discuss leadership and those many conversations have helped develop deeper friendships. These books capture both those discussions and new leadership discoveries.

