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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**TITLE:** *Marine Corps' Methods of Systematic Recruiting and Involved Leadership: The Competitive Edge for College Coaches*

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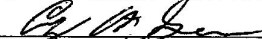
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## Executive Summary

**Title:** *Marine Corps' Methods of Systematic Recruiting and Involved Leadership: The Competitive Edge for College Coaches*

**Author:** Major Barney Blaine, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** The proven methods the Marine Corps utilizes to recruit quality individuals, lead effective teams, and develop junior leaders would systematically increase the effectiveness of collegiate athletic programs.

**Discussion:** In October of 2018, the NCAA Division I Counsel adopted a new rule permitting college athletes to transfer schools and receive an athletic scholarship from the gaining school. The new rule will no doubt increase the volatility of rosters baffling coaching staffs with weak leaders and poor recruiting practices. The proven methods the Marine Corps utilizes to recruit quality individuals, lead effective teams, and develop junior leaders would systematically increase the effectiveness of collegiate athletic programs. Marine Corps recruiting has developed a system that has proven to be extremely effective in gaining the commitment of the same demographic population that college sports teams recruit. High quality recruits, however, must be led, developed, and molded into a team. Leadership and leadership development are not afterthoughts, but top priorities serving to drive decisions, planning and training. Collegiate athletic programs tend to be very good at the fundamentals and tactics of their sport because the coaches have typically lived their entire lives immersed in it, but they could learn from Marine Corps recruiting and leadership practices.

**Conclusion:** To win on the field of play, just as the Marine Corps wins on the field of battle,

coaches should follow the Marine Corps' lead and put into practice compassionate, caring, servant leadership that sets positive examples, incentivizes effort over results, builds vulnerability-based trust, and drives the team to act and think as a cohesive unit.

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## *Preface*

The idea for this research paper was born from my time as the Commanding Officer of Recruiting Station Des Moines requiring me to interact with Midwest college coaches while simultaneously having the opportunity to observe as my daughter and nephew navigated the college sports recruiting process. College coaches often seemed hungry to learn about how the Marine Corps was so successful at recruiting high school and college students, how we lead those individuals to violently execute in battle, and how we develop those young men and women to themselves be leaders. There were many colleges competing for the commitment of my daughter to their college softball program and my nephew to their college football program. Many of those colleges had the opportunity to win them over, but the recruiters and coaches from those programs stumbled through the recruiting process with no systematic framework to get either athlete to say yes. During this time in the Midwest, I was asked on many occasions to speak to groups of college coaches about leadership. Invariably, the conversation with coaches would turn to a sincere interest in many of the leadership methodologies and principles that they could adopt. After many of those conversations, I was asked if I could write this stuff down.

By the way, my daughter, Jessie, committed to continue her education and play softball for Auburn University and my nephew, Brady, committed to continue his education and play football for the University of Missouri. I would like to thank them both for allowing me to be a part of their recruiting process, and thank my wife for being a sounding board for this project.

## **Introduction**

In October of 2018, the NCAA Division I Counsel adopted a new rule permitting college athletes to transfer schools and receive an athletic scholarship from the gaining school. This superseded the previous rule that required athletes to sit out a year without a scholarship, making it extremely difficult to change programs. Nicholas Clark, a recent graduate and former football player at Coastal Carolina University who represents the Division I Student-Athlete Advisory Committee, said the rule change promotes fairness and the well-being of collegiate athletes giving them more flexibility.<sup>1</sup> The concern most have with the new rule is the challenges it poses to a coaching staff. The new rule will no doubt increase the volatility of rosters baffling the coaching staffs that do not have strong recruiting practices and an effective leadership development program, but a look into Marine Corps doctrine can help. The proven methods the Marine Corps utilizes to recruit quality individuals, lead effective teams, and develop junior leaders would systematically increase the effectiveness of collegiate athletic programs.

Every year the Marine Corps recruits 38,000 new Marines.<sup>2</sup> Fifteen percent of those must meet extremely high academic and physical requirements to become Marine Corps officers. The future success of the Marine Corps is based on quality recruiting just as the future success of collegiate athletic programs is based on quality recruiting. College sports recruiting is extremely competitive, and the edge gained from skilled recruiters could make the difference in a program's success. Marine Corps recruiting has developed a system that has proven to be extremely effective in gaining the commitment of the same demographic population that college sports teams recruit and many college recruiters fumble through the process of gaining a

commitment from the prospect they most want; as such, adopting the proven, structured approach used by Marine Corps recruiters could successfully impact their rate of success.

The backbone of both the Marine Corps and collegiate athletic programs is the organizations' recruiting force and leaders. Recruiting, leading, and developing a company of Marines capable of fighting in sustained combat operations through the Helmand River Valley can be compared to recruiting, leading, and training a collegiate sports team capable of battling through a long, grueling season. Both require the same authentic compassion, untiring selflessness, unwavering personal and organizational accountability, and intimate understanding of craft. The coaching community in the United States is intrigued by how the Marine Corps' leaders build units with such legendary esprit de corps and get the sheer best out of each individual warrior; unfortunately, coaches are typically misinformed as to how the Marine Corps accomplishes this.

The Marine Corps' success is built along three distinct lines of effort: recruiting top performers; developing their leadership skills; and building lethal, cohesive, winning units. Marine Corps officer recruiting, like the recruiting of collegiate athletes is extremely competitive and requires the recruiter to build an unbreakable bond with the most sought-after prospects. The tactics, techniques, and procedures used by Officer Selection Officers are extremely effective and would revolutionize collegiate athlete recruiting. Marine Corps senior leadership must develop young officers into skilled, effective leaders before putting the lives of the nation's youth in their hands. Leadership is not an afterthought, but a top priority serving to drive decisions, planning, and training. Likewise, high level collegiate athletic programs must use the first few years of an athlete's collegiate career to instill good leadership skills necessary for college junior and senior athletes to lead their teams to success. Finally, young leaders must be

taught to build lethal, cohesive units that maintain a high level of esprit de corps to be effective on the battlefield just as collegiate coaches must build team spirit and pride to have success in competition.

## **Recruiting**

College athletic programs have little structure to their recruiting process. They comb the nation's high schools and club programs for top athletes spending countless hours and enormous amounts of money on the recruiting trail, but then fumble in their efforts to gain a commitment from the athletes they worked so hard to find. Two highly recruited high school athletes, one male and one female, report similar ineffective recruiting practices by dozens of athletic programs.<sup>3</sup> Both athletes are ecstatic about the schools they eventually committed to, but there is no doubt that a more skilled recruiter from a different school could have changed the outcome.<sup>4</sup> Both athletes report most recruiters doing a tremendous job *building rapport* with the athletes in an effort to build trust and demonstrate an exceptional ability to communicate the *features and benefits* of their program.<sup>5</sup> This is an integral part of any sales process, but no program sat down with the athletes to have a meaningful conversation to reveal what the athlete's priority needs and motivators are. Most college recruiters eventually figure these things out but in a slow, disjointed manner instead of *exploring* in a structured conversation early in the recruiting process that would allow everyone interacting with the athlete to demonstrate how their program or school can support the athlete's priority needs. College recruiters typically do what is referred to as *dump-trucking*. The recruiter attempts to tell the prospect everything there is to know or show the prospect everything there is to see, leaving the athlete feeling overwhelmed and often confused. A structured conversation similar to the one used by Marine Corps recruiters would make them exponentially more effective and ultimately net the programs more of the top athletes

they want. The Marine Corps uses an extremely effective process that starts by building rapport with the prospect through *purposeful listening*. Then it transitions to engaging in a *meaningful conversation* where the recruiter explores the *needs and motivators* so they can be effectively supported with personalized *features and benefits*. The structured conversation ensures that both parties overcome misunderstandings and objections. The dialogue ends with the most aggressive *yes* that the recruiter can achieve, but ensures that there is a plan to continue with persistent follow up and consistent service after the sale. Meaning, the conversation continues to progress until the recruiter feels he cannot gain any more ground in this conversation, leaving the recruit excited and looking forward to the next interaction.

Most college sports recruiters do an adequate job of *building rapport*. The Marine Corps guidebook for recruiters defines *building rapport* as developing a relationship through interpersonal skills to facilitate trust and an honest exchange of information.<sup>6</sup> It asserts that rapport building happens immediately and is ongoing in all interactions.<sup>7</sup> Its purpose is to make the prospect comfortable, build the early stages of trust, and prepare the prospect to engage in a meaningful conversation. Will Shepard, a writer for *COHESION*, an organization that advises Fortune 500 companies in recruitment, asserts that the candidate sees all contact with representatives of the company as an insight into its culture. A lack of rapport building reflects negatively on the company's culture.<sup>8</sup> A recruiter should learn and address mutual interests by simply asking a lot of open questions to find those interests and spend time discussing them. The 12<sup>th</sup> Marine Corps Recruiting District Sales Book states, "If the only thing you have found in common is the reason for the conversation, keep asking questions."<sup>9</sup> After the recruiter has established rapport, then and only then can there be a conversation that will reveal a prospect's

*priority needs and motivators.*<sup>10</sup> This is where college recruiters start to flounder and Marine Corps recruiters thrive.

Once the Marine recruiter has adequately built rapport with a prospect, he will transition to business. The recruiter will ensure that they are in a place without distractions and one that the prospect is comfortable having a personal conversation. It is important to emphasize that this conversation is about the prospect and not about the recruiter or the recruiter's organization. The recruiter will give the prospect the agenda for the conversation, explain the value of the conversation to the prospect, and ensure that the prospect is comfortable moving forward with the interview. This step is very important to ensure that the prospect understands and is ready to engage in this personal conversation. For a college recruiter it could sound like this: "Johnny, I would like to ask you some questions about what you are looking for in a college, a football program, and in life. This will help us determine if the University of Winslot football program is the right fit for you and if you are the right fit for the program. How does that sound?" The recruiter can now begin asking questions to *explore the needs and motivators* that drive the prospect.

*Exploring* a prospect's needs and motivators is the key to this recruiting process and the most challenging. A *need* is the desire to achieve or change something.<sup>11</sup> *Motivators* are forces that can create a need and can be identified as circumstances, feelings, and goals.<sup>12</sup> Goals can be identified as assets, accomplishments, or appearance.<sup>13</sup> Exploring needs is how the recruiter learns what it is that drives action in a prospect.<sup>14</sup> It is important, however, to consider that the prospect has a young, developing mind and may not really know what it is that he or she wants in life, in a school, in a program, or in a career. Young prospects will absolutely have a hard time verbalizing needs and motivators. As such, it is imperative that the recruiter *listens to*

*understand*. Marine Corps recruiting defines hearing as mechanical and listening as mental.<sup>15</sup> Exploring is the most challenging part of the conversation as the recruiter must be innately in tune with the prospect. While exploring, the recruiter listens to understand, listens for the expression of facts and feelings that can motivate the prospect, listens to further build trust and closely observes the prospect's body language to find signs of impactful matters. Marine recruiters ask *open* questions to gather information, for example: "How do you feel about that?" or "Why is that important to you?"<sup>16</sup> Recruiters then ask closed questions to confirm an understanding.<sup>17</sup> Closed questions usually elicit a yes or no answer or a measurable fact. The transition from open to closed questions will identify things that motivate a prospect. Once *motivators* are identified, further exchange of open and closed questions will identify the *needs* behind the *motivators*. Continued exchange should reveal *priority needs* that drive action.

Figure (1)<sup>18</sup>

For example: One of a football player's *motivators* may be the goal of playing in the National Football League. Further discussion may reveal that the *need* derived from the motivator is financial security. The *priority need* is his desire to better the quality of life for his family. This priority need is rooted in the poverty that the prospect grew up in. Most recruiters will never have this conversation with the athlete and merely assume that showing the poverty-stricken athlete the nice dorm rooms, quality gear, and nice locker rooms will get the job done. The

college recruiter will overlook the fact that every school that the prospect visits can and will show him the same thing; contrarily, the recruiter that identifies the prospect's priority need and communicates that need to the entire football program staff can support that need in every interaction with the recruit. This is done by demonstrating how the *features and benefits* of becoming a Marine or in this case of becoming a U of W football player will enable the prospect to address his specific *needs and motivators*.

*Enabling* with *features and benefits* to specifically address the needs of a prospect is powerful as it demonstrates how the prospect can get to a desired change.<sup>19</sup> A *feature* is an identifiable characteristic of an organization or a product, and a *benefit* is the specific value of a *feature*.<sup>20</sup> Effective exploring by the recruiter armed the head coach of the hypothetical U of W football program with key insight into the mind of his prospect. The coach knows that instead of talking with the prospect about interesting facts like planned additions to the locker-room, he should *enable* with the *features and benefits* of the U of W football program that will address the prospect's motivator of getting to the NFL with *features* such as historical program success of current NFL players, connections the program has with NFL scouts, and specific skills that the U of W football program can teach the applicant to better prepare him for an NFL career. *Features* must be tied to a *benefit*.<sup>21</sup> The coach or recruiter can tie provided *features* with the *benefits* to the prospect family's future quality of life. Marine recruiters will ensure that they address all identified needs before attempting to gain a commitment from the prospect.

The final part of the conversation is to *gain a commitment*. It should be done when the recruiter feels that all priority needs have been effectively enabled or supported with *features and benefits*.<sup>22</sup> For a college recruiter, that may not happen until the end of a four-day visit. The recruiter should summarize the *benefits* found during the conversation and ask for a

commitment.<sup>23</sup> The recruiter should seek the most aggressive yes possible. For Marine recruiters the commitment may be merely to meet with the prospect's key influencers, typically the prospect's parents. The most aggressive yes could be a full commitment or a plan to meet and talk on another day.

Because the skill of managing the structure of a conversation to explore and enable is so challenging, Marine Corps Recruiting developed a tool referred to as *benefit tags* designed to help the individual recruiter maintain control and minimize wasted time, energy, and effort.<sup>24</sup> The tags depict a combination of features and benefits that capture both historical and proven traits the Marine Corps can deliver in an enlistment.<sup>25</sup> This tool could easily be modified to assist college sports recruiters as well. There are eleven tags that a recruiter asks a prospect to look through. The recruiter asks the prospect to pick the three that would be the most important to his or her future. The tags are Technical Skills (fundamentals of a sport), Professional Development, Leadership Skills, Courage and Self Confidence, Self-Reliance and Self-Discipline, Physical Fitness, Challenge, Travel and Adventure, Pride of Belonging, Financial Security, and Educational Opportunities.

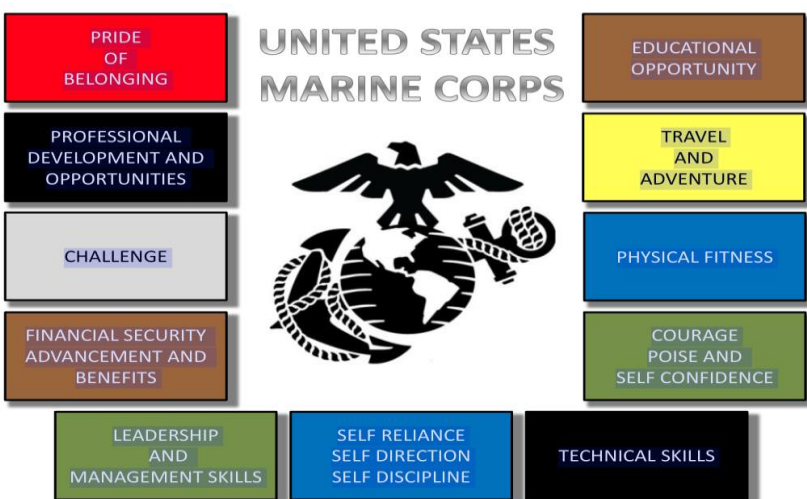


Figure (2)<sup>26</sup>

Those three selected tags are a powerful way for a recruiter to start working through *open* and *closed* questions to find the *needs* and *motivators* of a prospect.

A fastpitch softball player, heavily recruited to play college softball by multiple power five programs, committed to the program that most effectively met her individual priority needs with features and benefits.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, the program that she committed to fumbled through the recruiting process with little structure, but happened to support her priority needs without knowing it.<sup>28</sup> None of the college softball programs had a quality recruiting conversation with her. A Marine recruiter would have quickly learned her priority needs with the use of *benefit tags*. The softball player was later presented tags by a skilled recruiter, she chose *Pride of Belonging*, *Challenge*, and *Physical Fitness* providing the recruiter an easy route to her priority needs.<sup>29</sup> The *Pride of Belonging* tag would have revealed that the softball player's family moves often; she will have attended three high schools in three different states before she graduates. Further questioning would present to the recruiter a priority need of playing softball for a school she could be proud to call her own, one deeply rooted in tradition and history. The *Challenge* tag would have exposed her need for the sense of immense personal satisfaction that comes from achieving success through hard work and dedication. The *Physical Fitness* tag would have unveiled that it is important for her to join a program that would further develop speed, strength, and agility; her final priority need is to play in a culture that values diet and exercise to maximize performance on the field of play. Three other top softball programs had the opportunity to get her to yes but only one supported her priority needs with *features and benefits*.

While on a visit to the athlete's chosen school, she talked with a waitress who was a graduate student there and, even though the student was from the other side of the country, she

relentlessly reinforced in the mind of the softball player that there was no other place that had the same school spirit and pride.<sup>30</sup> She gave details of how that pride and spirit was rooted in historical customs. The graduate student's conviction in her sense of belonging that she felt for her school was so strong that she touched the soul of the athlete's priority need to *belong* to a storied university. The softball player later had the opportunity to interact with the coach, who unlike other coaches, did not tell the athlete that things would be easier for her if she came to the coach's school but instead explained how hard she would be expected to work and that with hard work the athlete would be afforded opportunities.<sup>31</sup> The final incident that demonstrated a support of her needs occurred in the weight room, albeit by chance. As a result of a rained-out game, the players were forced to work out with the strength and conditioning coach. The prospect had the opportunity to watch the college team go through a very well-designed work out and do it on an expected day off demonstrating that the coaching staff truly values physical fitness. The other programs all had better stadiums, nicer locker rooms, and more advanced training facilities, but unfortunately for them their facilities were the sole focus when she visited their school.<sup>32</sup> Only the softball player's school of choice, albeit accidentally, established that the school could *enable* her priority needs. The inadvertent enabling of needs made it easy for the coach to gain a commitment from the softball player.

Marine Corps recruiters are extraordinarily talented at gaining the commitment of the same demographic population that college athletic programs fight to acquire, and many college recruiters fumble through the process of gaining a commitment from top prospects because they don't have a structured approach. They do an adequate job of gaining rapport with prospects but do not transition well to engaging with an applicant to find his needs and motivators leaving the college recruiters unable to demonstrate the features and benefits of their programs that would be

most impactful to the prospect. Instead, they tend to spend limited available time with the prospect not really knowing what he or she is looking for in a school and athletic program; worse, no one ever helps the prospect figure out what it is that he or she wants in a program. A set of benefit tags, as demonstrated with the story of the softball player, could be specifically designed to represent the features and benefits of the individual college program and used by the college recruiter or a head coach that is intimately involved the recruiting process.

Marine Recruiters must *maintain the commitment* of their prospects for up to two years after initial contact and up to a year after contracting before shipping to recruit training. *Maintaining Commitment* is challenging as the life circumstances of a teenager change so often. Marine recruiters keep weekly contact with every prospect and train with all prospects as a group at least once a month. Constant contact is the key to maintaining the commitment of the prospect. Marine recruiters use social media outlets and group chats to build a connection and sense of obligation to the group. NCAA recruiting rules limit contact with prospects making constant communication difficult for college sports recruiters, but maximizing contact within the rules is an absolute must to maintain the prospect's commitment.

Quality recruiting is what college athletic programs rely on to be manned with great athletes, but leadership is what develops talented athletes into winning teams. Many coaches fall short as leaders because, unlike Marine Officers, they have not been formally taught to lead and merely rely on their experiences. When a collegiate coach is fired, the public announcement often relates to a lack of confidence in the leadership capability of the coach not coaching ability. The firing of the former University of Missouri softball coach, Erhen Earleywine, is a perfect example. Coach Earleywine had a winning softball program but started losing as reports of physical and verbal abuse began to surface.<sup>33</sup> The Missouri athletic director said, in an

interview, that he had a chance to observe Coach Earleywine's leadership of the program and his decision to fire him was based upon a culmination of leadership concerns.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, one of the greatest basketball coaches of all time, Mike Krzyzewski, better known as "Coach K," attributes his time learning to lead at West Point as his foundation for his success.<sup>35</sup> West Point, like Marine Corps University, formally teaches leadership. College coaches cannot go to West Point or Marine Corps University to learn leadership, but they can look from the outside in and study what Marine Corps officers are being taught and apply those same principles.

### **Leadership**

To be successful on the battlefield, the Marine Corps must develop leaders capable of getting the most out of their men and their peers. College athletic programs must do the same to develop winning teams. The Marine Corps Warfighting Publication, *Leading Marines*, asserts that "Our leadership style is a unique blend of service ethos and time-tested concepts that support Marine leaders in peace and war."<sup>36</sup> The basics of leadership are taught to young officers in entry level training; career officers are further educated in the art of leadership at Marine Corps University. The top twenty percent of captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels are pulled from the operating forces every four to six years to spend a year studying at Marine Corps University. Leadership is intertwined into every aspect of the curriculum at every level. In addition, the Commandant of the Marine Corps' required reading list is grounded in books on leadership for young officers to read and discuss while not in an educational environment. Marine Corps University, through reading, lecture, and discussion, educates leaders on many aspects of leadership: students study (1) the positive impact of truly caring for their warriors and knowing as much as possible about them, (2) what it means to be a servant leader, (3) the necessity of constantly being a positive example, (4) the impact of accountability, (5) the type of trust that is

built in great teams, (6) the positive effects of incentivizing effort and hard work over perfect results, and (7) the building of high performing, cohesive teams.

When Marine Corps leaders are preparing to take command, their peers often remind them that, “They don’t care what you know until they know you care.” Dr. Brian Gearity, at the University of Tennessee, highlighted a similar concept in a research project comparing good and bad coaches. Research showed that good coaches build supporting and caring personal relationships with athletes.<sup>37</sup> Understanding the impact of being a caring leader is important, but the caring must be genuine and more than that inherent of leadership positions.

The rank worn on the collar of a Marine will always hold a level of respect from those junior because of the customs and courtesies every Marine holds sacred just as a coach holds a level of respect as a result of his title, yet genuine caring requires hard work. To successfully lead in battle or on the playing field, the Marines and athletes must know that everything their leader does is first for the betterment of the organization, second for the welfare of the individual, and always in the best interest of the leader last. When referring to the relationship between the leader and the led Marine Corps Warfighting Publication, *Leadership*, proclaims that, “It is about the inseparable relationship between the leader and the led, and is as much about the individual Marine—the bedrock upon which our Corps is built—as it is about any leader. There is less a line between the leader and the led than a bond.”<sup>38</sup> To build that type of bond, the coach must get players to buy-in to mentorship, leadership, teaching, and guidance. The led have to know the leader truly cares about their success. A Marine leader strives to know everything he can about his men because to truly demonstrate that he cares about them, he must know about them. Dr. Ben Baran, author and professor of management at Cleveland State University asserts that, “Being a technical expert can help you be an influential leader or

manager—people like to follow people who know their stuff. But if you want to motivate people for the longer term, if you want people to follow you because they truly want to do so, you need to dig deeper. People need to know that you’re looking out for them and that you care about them.”<sup>39</sup> Infantry platoon commanders are required early in their career to carry a “Platoon Commander’s Notebook” to record what they learn about the young Marines they lead. At the basic level, the notebook will contain the names, occupations, and type of relationships the young Marines have with their mom, dad, siblings, friends, and wife or girlfriend. It will also remind the leader of the young Marines’ hobbies, goals, and fears. It will contain anything that might help the leader understand his men. Coaches, like the infantry platoon commander, should know everything they can about their people; they should strive to know their people so well that they can sense uncharacteristic behaviors derived from stress in their personal life, in the locker room, or on the field. This provides an opportunity for the coach to demonstrate how much he or she cares ultimately resulting in the athlete freely accepting the coach’s leadership, mentorship, and guidance.

Marines are servant leaders. They are taught to work harder and longer than their junior Marines unlike many coaches observed in Dr. Gearity’s research. He identified poor coaches as those who did not put in the time that the players were expected to put in. They missed film sessions and workouts and came to practice unprepared to run the practice.<sup>40</sup> Simon Sinek’s book *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don’t* was titled after a conversation Sinek had with a Marine Corps General Officer.<sup>41</sup> The book was named for servant leaders. Sinek stated that when he asked the general officer what makes the Marines so amazing, he said that *leaders eat last*.<sup>42</sup> At every Marine Corps chow hall anywhere in the world, you will see the Marines lined up in rank order. The most senior person is always at the back of the line

so that the most junior person eats first. No order ever has to be given and it is not in any rule book.<sup>43</sup> Rank order happens as a result of the way Marines view the responsibility of leadership. Sinek states, “Most people think leadership is about rank and power, the Marine Corps views leadership as the responsibility for other human beings.”<sup>44</sup> In most college athletic programs the freshmen eat last while on the road, put out all team gear for practice, and pick up team gear after practice along with a multitude of other mindless tasks, unintentionally teaching the athletes that leadership is about being served instead of serving. Leaders eating in reverse rank order and shouldering or supervising daily mundane requirements may seem insignificant; however, it lays a foundation of servant leadership early in an athlete’s career so that when they are seniors servitude is deeply seeded in their culture. Servant leaders are poised to inspire, and these seniors get it because they were once on the receiving end and understand how powerful it can be.

Coming to the aid of a struggling ball player or a struggling Marine requires the leader to sacrifice his or her most valuable asset, time. Sinek also asserts, “The best leaders come to the aid of their people whose performance is down. They do not come down harder on them.”<sup>45</sup> The servitude inherent in sacrificing time to better another individual demonstrates that the leader truly cares and aids in building an individual bond laying the foundation to inspire and motivate. In every barracks in the Marine Corps there is a talented young twenty-one-year-old machine gun team leader teaching a brand-new eighteen-year-old Marine how to better employ his weapon system, and a forty-year-old battalion executive officer volunteering to stand duty for a young twenty-three-year-old lieutenant so the lieutenant can go home to take care of his pregnant wife. Colonel Jason Morris, a Marine leader as experienced at leading men in combat as anyone in the Corps, reminds young leaders in his commander’s guidance that, “You can pretend to care but you can’t pretend to be there.”<sup>46</sup> For a baseball coach this is finding time to help a struggling

freshman hitter with their swing and coaching a more skilled and experienced senior player to do the same. It may mean that when the football team is eating breakfast at 0600, the strength and conditioning coach is there ensuring that a freshman outside linebacker who needs to shed a few pounds is making the right choices with his diet and he is being taught what to eat and what not to eat. The head coach is ensuring that a senior leader is spending some extra time in the weight room with that freshman. These selfless sacrifices demonstrate the most powerful leadership tool, caring, and are an integral part of building the framework to inspire and motivate young Marines and young athletes alike. Part of the selfless sacrifice made by good leaders is having the intestinal fortitude to always set a positive example.

One of the most challenging requirements of a leader is being disciplined enough to set a positive example at all times, yet it is imperative to do so. There are two great Marine Corps adages that fit nicely in this discussion: The first is, "Never ask your men to do anything that you are unwilling to do." The other is, "Marines will do what you tell them to do, what you allow them to do but most significantly, what they see you do." One of the best examples of positive example setting can be seen in a video sent out to every Marine by the Marine Corps' top general, General Robert Neller. The video depicts the 65-year-old general running the Marine Corps' annual Combat Fitness Test (CFT) inspiring his Marine Corps, young and old, to put forth maximum individual effort when running theirs. No Marine expects their commandant to maximize the point values on the CFT or even beat their score, but the Marines do expect their commandant to do the things he is asking them to do and the commandant does. Body composition standards are the same for Marines if you are an eighteen-year-old rifleman or a forty-five-year-old battalion commander. The battalion commander can effectively mentor and counsel a young officer about poor dietary habits only because the battalion commander holds

himself to the expected standard. No athlete expects their coach to be stronger, faster, or fitter than they are, but if the coach does not live what he or she teaches, the coach will never be able to have complete buy-in by the athlete therefore rendering the coach ineffective. Compassionate leadership based on servitude requires personal and organizational accountability.

Accountability must be 360 degrees and established through the leader's actions. The book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, written by Patrick Lencioni, is studied extensively at Marine Corps Command and Staff College. Lencioni addresses accountability of the "we" or 360-degree accountability by proclaiming, "Once we achieve clarity and buy-in, it is then that we have to hold each other accountable for what we sign up to do, for high standards of performance and behavior."<sup>47</sup> A culture of 360 degree accountability will drive excellence. Lencioni stresses when a team avoids accountability it encourages mediocracy and puts an undue burden on the team leader as the sole source of discipline. He stresses that a team holding one another accountable ensures that poor performers feel pressure to improve, identifies problems quickly by questioning one another's approach, and avoids excessive bureaucracy around performance management and corrective action.<sup>48</sup> Marine Corps commanding officers understand that they are accountable for everything their warriors do or fail to do. This top-down accountability fuels team accountability. Another Marine Corps adage is, "The warriors win fights but only the leader loses fights." If the fight is lost, the commanding officer will place blame on himself for his inability to properly train the unit, or for the tactical decisions made in battle. If the fight is won, all credit is given to the warriors. Marine Corps commanding officers will never say I or me when referring to the efforts of the unit unless taking accountability for the unit's shortfalls. A coach should never be heard saying "my team" or "my quarterback"; instead the coach should say "our team" and "our quarterback". The team did not lose the game; the coach failed to

prepare the team for the game. If this personal accountability is demonstrated by the coach and followed up with aggressive effort to improve individually and as a unit, accountability will reverberate throughout the team. A unit culture of accountability primes an organization to thrive in the most important aspect of team dynamics, trust.

Vulnerability-based trust is the foundation upon which every great team is built. Coach K's experience as a military officer comes out strong when he states, "In leadership, there are no words more important than trust. In any organization, trust must be developed among every member of the team if success is going to be achieved."<sup>49</sup> If there is no trust, no team will fully maximize its potential. People will not exchange opinions freely, and the combined knowledge of the team will not develop.<sup>50</sup> Vulnerability-based trust stands in contrast to a more standard definition, one that centers around the ability to foresee a person's behavior based on past experience. For example, a baseball coach might "trust" that the team's leadoff hitter will get on base more than half of his at bats in a given game because he has done so throughout the season. Vulnerability-based trust is deeper and extremely difficult to achieve, but also extremely powerful. Lencioni states:

The root cause of absence of trust lies with team members being unable to show their weaknesses; to be vulnerable and open with one another. The absence of trust is a huge waste of time and energy as team members invest their time and energy in defensive behaviors, and are reluctant to ask for help from – or assist – each other. Teams can overcome this dysfunction by sharing experiences, following through in multiple ways, demonstrating credibility, and developing strong insight into the unique characteristics of team members.<sup>51</sup>

Just as accountability has to start with leaders, so does trust; a commander or coach must demonstrate that he or she is comfortable exposing personal weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, and mistakes.<sup>52</sup> Vulnerability-based trust requires shared experiences over time, multiple instances of follow-through and credibility, and an in-depth understanding of

the unique attributes of team members. However, a leader can take a focused approach and dramatically accelerate the process.<sup>53</sup> It is imperative that the unit leader or coach risks losing face in front of the team or unit, so that subordinates will take the same risk themselves and most imperative, the leader must create an environment that does not punish vulnerability. Even well-intentioned teams can dampen trust by chastising one another for admissions of weakness or failure.<sup>54</sup> Vulnerability-based trust lays the foundation for a culture that incentivizes effort over results cultivating an organization that executes violently to achieve a common goal.

One of the most fatal coaching mistakes is unintentionally developing a culture of athletes that are hesitant in execution because they are focused more on not making a mistake than on being successful. Marine Infantry Officers learn from studying post-WWI German military doctrine to train warriors to execute violently and without hesitation. Dr. Gearity found that losing coaches very often inhibit the desired results by fueling a culture that does not allow for mistakes. This quote from an athlete in Dr. Gearity's research illustrates this coaching failure well:

You know what...to this day my biggest regret about my playing was that I became afraid to fail. I worked out so much and so hard all the time...I liked working out but (not) the competition part ...I just worried so much about not failing...I was trying not to mess up because I knew if I messed up, I was coming out.... So, I was playing not to make mistakes and it just wore me (out). That's why when I got done playing in college I was ready to be done.<sup>55</sup>

German leadership developed and emphasized an offensive mindset and decentralized operations to the lowest level. They stressed violent exploitation and speed in execution as they knew that such a small force did not have time for slow and centralized leadership.<sup>56</sup> German officers were taught how to think, not what to think and they were incentivized to have a bias for action. In the German Army culture an officer rarely reprimanded a subordinate for showing initiative.<sup>57</sup> The term *Selbständigkeit*, authority to change an order, was vital to the culture that fuelled German

success at the onset of World War II. This culture facilitated offensive attacks that out cycled their adversaries' slow and cumbersome centralized decision-making cycle. College softball coaches can often be heard screaming from the dugout identifying where they want a player to throw or who should catch a fly ball. While this may seem trivial, it is a sign of an overly centralized leadership style that inhibits violent execution. A great leader will own the results of their team or unit and merely demand maximum effort from the members of the team. A commander makes every effort to free his warriors of thinking about the results of a fight so that the warrior can violently execute what has been instilled in training. If the point man conducting room clearing hesitates because he is thinking too much about the fundamentals of marksmanship, he and his comrades could be killed just like a basketball player will never make the great cut to the basket that scores the game winning shot if the player is overly concerned about running the play exactly as it was drawn up. Marine leaders often say that a 75 percent plan executed violently will defeat a 100 percent plan executed tentatively and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Violent execution is imperative to success but it must be violent execution as a cohesive unit or team.

A great leader on the battlefield or the field of play must be a servant to those they lead, continually setting a positive example, holding themselves and the team accountable, building vulnerability-based trust within the organization, and incentivizing maximum effort and hard work while simultaneously taking responsibility for organizational success; however, it is all in an effort to cultivate a cohesive unit that wins in combat or on a ballfield. It is important, however, for a coach or unit leader to recognize the pattern of growth each team will go through to get there. Colonel William McCollough, the Director of Command and Staff College at Marine Corps University, broke this pattern down into five parts while mentoring an infantry

officer break out group. He asserts that a level one unit will merely do as it is told because of fear. A level two unit does as it is asked as a result of liking the leader. A level three unit acts on its own without input due to respect of the leadership. A level four unit thinks and acts on its own because of deeply rooted trust in the leadership. Finally, a level five unit can think and act as a single entity because the organization understands and no longer requires guidance from unit leaders.<sup>58</sup> Coaches must invest exorbitant dedication to get to a level four or level five functioning team but the best teams all do.

### **Conclusion**

Recruiting and building lethal, cohesive winning units that fight our nation's wars and win our nation's battles is what the Marine Corps does. College coaches and college recruiters looking for a guide to success should follow Marine Corps recruiting practices and leadership development practices to develop an athletic program with high quality athletes who think and act as a cohesive team. Recruiting top athletes is extremely competitive among opposing athletic programs. The football player and softball player likely would have committed to play at different programs than what they chose if any of the programs competing for them had used the Marine Corps recruiting model of exploring the athlete's priority needs and demonstrating how their program could support those needs. Coaches that are willing to follow the Marine Corps' lead and put into practice compassionate, caring, servant leadership that sets positive examples, incentivizes effort over results, builds vulnerability-based trust throughout the team and drives the team to act and think as a cohesive unit will win on the field of play, just as the Marine Corps wins on the field of battle.

## Notes

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