



Gen. Eisenhower visits the 101st Airborne before D-Day

Are Your Leaders Ready to Take Charge?

When General Eisenhower launched the Allied invasion of France¹ on D-Day, June 6th 1944, he had high confidence in his subordinates to accomplish their mission. The United States was totally unprepared for World War II when America entered the war in December 1941, but

by June 1944 millions of soldiers had been trained and were ready to liberate Europe from Nazi tyranny. Some of the soldiers that Eisenhower commanded had already been battle tested in the campaigns in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. Even those who had not yet seen combat were also ready because they had participated in extensive training programs that replicated combat conditions as they prepared for the invasion in England.

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Not only were the soldiers well trained, but so were their leaders. The officers and sergeants who led them had all been through army leadership schools and were promoted based on their potential and performance. All the senior officers had graduated from the Army Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth. Junior officers, most of whom were awarded their commissions after graduating from officer candidate schools, also completed leadership courses for their specialized branch of service like infantry, artillery, or engineers. Sergeants also were trained as leaders by completing military specialty training, and some had even graduated from rigorous airborne and ranger training courses too. They also gained valuable experience as they were promoted through the ranks. All were prepared to do their job and also ready to step-up to the next level if their unit leaders were killed or wounded in combat. Strong leadership and training were two very important keys to the ultimate success of the Allied victory in Europe in May of 1945. So when Eisenhower visited the 101st Airborne Division on the eve of the Normandy invasion, he knew that the soldiers were ready and so were their leaders. As the Supreme Commander, he had made sure that they were prepared for one of the largest and most complex military operations in history.

Leadership is just as important today as it was during World War II. This holds true for any organization whether it’s a military unit or a commercial enterprise. Leaders must be trained to do their jobs as leaders and be prepared to step-up when the time comes. In the United States today, approximately 76 million baby boomers will begin to retire in 2011. In many companies, these are the key leaders and managers. The critical question facing many CEOs now: “Are your junior leaders ready to take charge?” Unfortunately in most cases they are not. This is a pending crisis of leadership.

“The invasion of France, code named “Operation Overlord” was one of the most complex military operations in history. “Nothing like it has ever been seen before or would again.” - Stephen Ambrose, Historian and author of *Band of Brothers* which was made into an HBO mini-series by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg.

All too often, people are promoted because they have strong technical skills, but they may not have leadership skills. For example, when a vacancy opens up on the IT team, a lead programmer may be promoted to team leader. Although this person may be the best programmer on the team, he or she likely has not had any leadership training or experience. Sometimes they will succeed, but often they will not. Their failure then becomes a problem not only for the individual, but also for their team and the company too. There is a better way to fill important leadership positions.

The best way to fill critical vacancies is to be proactive and prepare leaders in advance of the need. Generally this begins with an assessment of likely candidates of not only performance, but also potential. Once potential leaders have been identified, then the task is to provide them with learning and development opportunities. Learning opportunities may involve formal education, or more likely a focused course on leadership. A short seminar will not magically turn people into leaders overnight, but it is a place to start. Leadership education should be coupled with practical application or “action learning” opportunities. These opportunities can be temporary assignments as project leader, acting team leader, or a short term rotational assignment to another part of the company. Development opportunities, coupled with the training, are the best way to prepare leaders. It is through practical application that learning is reinforced and how real development occurs.

Good leadership training programs also focus on fundamental leadership principles rather than management techniques. Fundamental principles transcend time and circumstances. They represent the core elements of leadership that have universal application regardless of the industry. When leaders understand principles, they can be more confident about how to proceed in a wide range of situations that they will encounter in the real world.

Given the current workforce demographics, senior leaders should be preparing the next generation to take charge now. Even in the economic downturn, now is the best time to groom the next generation of leaders. When boomers retire and critical leadership positions must be filled, it is too late to begin the process. Start today to identify your potential leaders and get them into a development track. Only then, will they be ready to take charge when the time comes for them to step-up into a critical position. Be like “Ike.” Make sure your people are ready.

Colonel Leonard Kloeber, Jr. is the author of ***Victory Principles: Leadership Lessons from D-Day*** where he uses the WWII story of the D-Day invasion to illustrate universal leadership principles that can be applied to any leadership endeavor. He has extensive “hands-on” experience as a leader in both business and the military and with large and small organizations alike. Most recently he was a senior level human resources executive with a multinational company, but has also worked for start-up and small privately held organizations. He lives in Prior Lake, MN. For more information contact him at staffride@gmail.com or visit his website: www.victoryprinciples.com. © 2010 Leonard Kloeber. All rights reserved.

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Unfortunately in most cases they are not.”*

Many leading companies are now preparing junior leaders to step-up as more senior leaders are getting ready to retire. A robust succession plan is an organizational imperative for sustained success, and these CEOs understand this. Since the military has been widely recognized for its leader development programs, some corporations are using similar techniques to train their leaders. One example is called the “Staff Ride,” where leaders study history to learn valuable lessons from the past. Business leaders can benefit from studying historical examples because leadership principles are fundamental even though technology and circumstances have changed. Dealing with basic challenges of leadership such as decision making, setting a vision, allocating resources, and overcoming obstacles are but a few of the fundamental challenges facing leaders that transcend time and place. Understanding how leaders have dealt with these same challenges in the past, even in very distinctly different circumstances, provides insights on how to deal with similar issues. When faced with future challenges, they can fall back on the fundamental principles of leadership even though the circumstances may be quite different. Find out more about the Staff Ride concept: www.staffride.com