

Four Cornerstones of Inspirational Leadership

- By Col Ajai Lal

I decided to structure this article on the theme of '4 Cornerstones of Inspirational Leadership' which is primarily based on my personal experience of Leadership.

I have had 3 distinct career transitions. The first was in the military where I served in the Armoured Corps on tanks for 25 years, participated in many challenging and life-threatening operations. To name a few:

- As part of IPKF – Indian Peacekeeping Force when the Indian Army was deployed in Sri Lanka. We had to deal with the LTTE, a rebel group fighting for an independent state. This experience battle tested my leadership in volatile situations and in dealing with setbacks.
- Then as a Senior Military Observer where I led the Indian Army Contingent for 2 consecutive UN Missions in Cambodia. There we were engaged in conflict resolution and negotiations with the Khmer Rouge a communist group charged with genocide for having slaughtered 25% of its population in 3 short years.
- Thereafter, I commanded my Tank Regiment to be prepared to lead them into battle. This was the acid test of Inspirational Leadership. All was going great and I was at the pinnacle of my career
- Until one day, 11th Dec '97, in a river crossing operation close to the border forefront, I met with an accident on my tank and suffered a serious injury on my right leg. It was a dark and devastating moment in my life. That day in December, led me to take one of the toughest decisions in my life...My farewell to arms.

I transitioned from the 'War Room' to the 'Board Room', from a career in the military to a career in the Corporate with NIIT a global talent development corporation, where I served for the next 15 years leading domestic and international businesses. I largely applied Military leadership principles, principles of war and warfare strategies to the market place to gain market share. I grew in the Corporate and was the Chief Business Officer leading the International Business of NIIT spanning 40 Countries.

And now, from the last decade I am in the third phase of my career and have been following my passion to coach, train, equip and empower leaders to optimize their potential and be the truest and fullest expression of themselves as a leader. I have also delivered a TEDx talk, authored a book on Fear and have been an International Radio host where I hosted the 'Leadershift' program broadcasting across 150 countries. That's a snap shot of my journey.

I will attempt my best to distill this experience and learning of over 4 decades into what I choose to call the "4 Cornerstones of Inspirational Leadership".

Passion: People: Performance: Legacy

First Cornerstone: Passion

If I take an analogy from the military regarding Passion... There is one unique difference between the corporate and combat space. Combat leaders in the military, lead troops into battle without any extraneous motivation, no material incentives or performance bonuses or stock options whatsoever. They lead by sheer unadulterated inspirational leadership and by developing and leveraging the passion and spirit of a soldier.



I invite you to walk in the boots of a soldier, just for few minutes, and sense the underlying passion and spirit of a soldier:

- What springs him to his feet when he is at the point of death and sends him in that one last charge to capture the objective?
- From where comes the dogged resolve when soldiers stand steadfast against the enemy rather than give away one inch of territory?
- What generates that indomitable spirit that inspires soldiers to even make the supreme sacrifice and lay down their lives for the sake of the mission?

This passion and spirit, I believe springs from the imprinting and tattooing of 3 undying and timeless tenets on the hearts and minds of all soldiers. These very tenets are the foundation and bedrock on which military laurels are won and accomplished. These are best described as **MVP : Mission – Values – Pride.**

I have experienced and strongly believe that these three tenets are not only applicable to the military but ‘translate powerfully’ into both individual, leaders and organisations. Let’s take a brief look at each of these.

First - Mission is Why we exist? – What’s the purpose of our very existence?

In the military, on commissioning as officers, the famous Chetwode Motto has been immortalized and carved in stone and ingrained right from the onset of our military career. It is the credo of the Indian Army and the first sentence reads:

- The safety, honor and welfare of your country comes first, always and every time. Everything else follows.

The Mission is critical in the Military. Not only in the military, as individuals, leaders and organizations too, it is critical to have striking clarity of our Mission and then be willing to stay in the fight despite the obstacles, risks, resistance and opposition. We need to be both relentlessly stubborn and agile – stubborn to stick to the Mission and not quitting but agile during the process. If there is nothing that can make you quit, there is nothing that can make you fail.

The key question to ask yourself. How strong and clear is Your Mission? How strong is your Why?

Feel the zeal of your Mission in your bones and in your spirit – live it, breathe it and imbibe the will and faith to hold on to it on the ‘inside’ and it will manifest on the ‘outside’.

Second – Values: Values are what is important to us.

Values are principles and standards of behavior. Values become our default system. They influence us in decision making, our behaviors under stress and in analyzing and solving challenges, particularly in the face of adversity.

In the Indian Army we have core values that are timeless. These are – Integrity, Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Honor, Courage, Selfless Service. These are not mere fancy words or artefacts hanging on walls or just spoken values, but these values are infused in action, blood, sweat and spirit of every soldier.

An important question I would like you to reflect upon. What are Your values? What are the values of your organization? What is important to you?

And Finally Pride – Pride is what inspires us, what energizes hearts and mobilizes minds. What moves us to victory first in the heart and the 16 inches between the Mind and the Heart. It is not pride that borders on arrogance but pride that espouses respect and honour.

In the military, pride in the Regimental badge, pride in the battle honors and glorious traditions of the Regiment and pride in the Mission – is a key battle winning and defining factor.

A question you may wish to consider. How strong is your Pride for your organization? How strong is your pride in who you are and in what you stand for? In your self-esteem and in your self-image? We can never outperform our self-image.

To sum up Passion - as leaders and organizations:

- If your MISSION is **inspiring** and clear
- If your VALUES are **infused** in your whole being
- If your PRIDE is **ingrained** in everything you do

You Will be invincible.... And nothing can ever stop you!

Second Cornerstone: People

The one word I would focus on for People is: **Caring.**

Caring is about People. People don’t care how much you know, till they know how much you care! Caring is dealing with people with empathy, compassion, kindness and creating an atmosphere of safety, protection, belonging and comfort. Generating a feeling that people are cared for, their perspectives matter, they are valued and they are not just a statistical head count but a heart count. Make people feel seen, make people feel heard, engage with people to find out their hurts, their heart and their hopes.

Let me touch upon another key aspect in Caring.

Trust: Building and Establishing Trust with your people & team. What really is Trust? Simply put – trust means confidence – confidence born out of the Character and Competence of a leader. Focusing on Radical Truth – Radical Transparency – Radical Open mindedness are essential.

To share an Extreme example for Caring from the Military - Soldiers are often asked the question: What made you risk your life for your comrade? The answer given is always simple – Because we know that they would have done exactly the same for us. This sacrificial spirit and sense of values sustains a Mission.

That is the essence of care, trust and bonding that needs to be generated amongst people within an organization.

Remember the one word for People – **Caring.**

Leaders first touch the people’s heart and then seek their hand. That takes us to the next cornerstone - Performance.

Third Cornerstone - Performance

The one word I would focus for Performance is **Daring.**

A few key principles ‘related to Performance’ drawn from my experience in the military. I will request you to draw the relevant analogy.

- **Selection and Maintenance of Aim:** Having striking clarity of what you want to achieve, your Aim, Mission, Vision, goals, objectives. Define the end state

and ensure your strategies are directed towards achieving it.

- **Offensive Action-** You cannot gain ground by defensive measures.
- **Concentration of Force and Economy of Effort:** Concentration of superior force and focus at the point of decision.
- **Flexibility:** No plan survives first contact with the enemy. Capability and agility to respond to changing and fluid situations.
- **Simplicity:** Prepare clear, uncomplicated and concise strategy and plans to ensure their understanding.

Daring is about accomplishing missions and achieving goals. When people feel cared for, what I spoke earlier – they are then inspired to embrace challenges, take on stretch goals – bold, audacious goals - take risks, exploration and discovery, without the ‘fear of failure’, but with an attitude of ‘relaxed efficiency’.

They focus on the wildly important goals, they act on lead measures and create a culture of ownership, accountability and responsibility across the organization.

Fourth Cornerstone - Legacy

‘There is no success without a successor.’ Legacy lives in people not things.

Someday people will summarize your life in one sentence. Pick that sentence now. So ‘know’ the legacy you want to leave and ‘live’ your legacy.

The legacy which I decided to lead and live with were these 4 words ‘**People First – Mission Always**’ and this held me in good stead through the over forty years of leadership in the Military and Corporate.

With the interplay of these 4 corner stones of **Passion (MVP) – People (Caring) – Performance (Daring) – Legacy...** there is energy and inspiration and that is when the potential of people is unleashed and Missions, Visions and goals accomplished.

*Leaders dream more than what others think as practical
Expect more than what others think as possible
And Care for people more than what others think as wise.*

That is when people and teams develop the faith and their ability to see the invisible, believe the incredible and that empowers them to achieve the impossible. 🏆