

# ALWAYS CARRY DRY SOCKS: SIX LESSONS FOR CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS I LEARNED IN THE MARINE CORPS

by

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## Introduction

It is with some amusement that I reflect back on the first day of my new job, November 23, 1977. Sometime around 2:00 a.m. I found myself standing straight as a two-by-four in a pair of yellow footprints painted on the pavement. Several Marine sergeants were whirling around our newly arrived platoon like tornadoes, roaring orders and hurling invectives.

It's humorous now after nearly 30 years, but at the time—as anyone who's been there and done that can attest—it wasn't funny.

The Corps set me on a path of believing that I could achieve anything I put my mind to. Eventually, I ended up serving seven years on active duty, all stateside and mostly in peacetime. I will always remain deeply gratified to be part of that “band of brothers”—a term of fraternity among Marines long before the superb special aired on HBO by the same name.

Many of the leadership and survival lessons I learned in the Marines proved applicable to civilian life. This was never more true than during my years as a school superintendent in independent schools. Such schools face similar challenges as charter schools, including having to compete for enrollment and teachers.

Like the process of becoming a Marine, I learned that becoming an effective school leader is learned in the crucible of daily management. School leadership is a job that often requires more than 60 hours a week, day and night. You are both a servant and a boss—a paradoxical role that is sometimes difficult. You're never off. You can't go to a restaurant, church or the fitness center without a parent, teacher or student who wants

to take “just a couple of minutes” to voice their problems or concerns. And you have multiple constituents, including children, parents, teachers, support staff, coaches, churches, the community, board members and donors. They all have expectations that not only differ from one another within and between groups, but each also expects that their position on any given matter should prevail. I figured out pretty early that it is impossible to make *any* decision—no matter how trivial—that satisfies all the school's constituents.

After 12 years, I laid aside administrative leadership of schools. I sometimes joke with some of my friends that I'm a “recovering superintendent,” having not run a school since the summer of 2002. This almost always evokes a knowing laugh among those who have actually done the job. The serious reality is that it's a demanding job that requires tough-minded leadership.

These days, I'm about the business of taking what I've learned and using it to help charter schools improve by providing research, writing, technical assistance and leadership training.

One of my favorite aphorisms is that “nothing ever rises above its leadership.” This is just as true of charter schools as it is of the Marine Corps. In fact, I don't think it's an overstatement to say that the success of the entire charter school sector depends in a very large part on the effectiveness of its school leaders.

The purpose of this paper is to share a few leadership lessons I learned in the Marines to inspire and encourage charter school leaders to “Be all you can be.” (That's Army, but what a great tagline!).

## Lesson One: Always Carry Dry Socks

A typical publication about leadership lessons one learns in the Marine Corps—several good ones exist—usually begins with mission, teamwork, Corps values, and the like.

This is not a typical publication.

Instead, I begin with the admonition to always carry dry socks. It was one of the first lessons I learned in the Marine Corps—the hard way.

The sky threatened rain as we started the morning on our first field training exercises. Around noon chow (i.e., lunchtime), it began to sprinkle. By mid-afternoon the downpour had become relentless.

Of course, you wouldn't expect a little precipitation to stop Marines. We slogged around the remainder of the afternoon, including scaling a hillside known to us by its slang (unprintable) name. While not linguistically or logically correct, it would nevertheless be accurate to say that because of all the mud and water, we fell *up* the hill.

By the time evening chow rolled around, we were wet and tired. With only a few minutes to inhale our C-rations and prepare for evening live-fire exercises, we were told to change socks. Most of the recruits dug through their packs and did so. As you've probably guessed, I forgot mine.

Your feet are funny things. If they are dry and warm, the rest of your body (except for your head) can withstand being wet and cold. On the other hand (no pun intended), if your socks are wet for several hours on end, your feet get cold and begin to hurt like the dickens. The discomfort you feel in the rest of your body seems multiplied many times over.

Thus, the learning curve for young Marines to remember to pack dry socks is a short one.

So how does carrying dry socks relate to school leadership? Leading a school—if you're to be effective over the long haul—requires the same kind of self-preservation. That is, you must intentionally create strategies to ensure that your physical, emotional and spiritual needs won't be ignored because of the demands of your job.

For example, during several years of leading schools, I stopped working out. "No time," I told myself as I sat at my desk and plodded through sheaves of paperwork. I also allowed myself to miss too many evening meals with my wife and daughters. "No time," I told my wife. "I'll eat later." When my daughters wanted to play or go somewhere, I too often said, "No time. Daddy has to work."

The accumulated effects of a largely sedentary role eventually presented their bill in the form of undesirable health. My failure to keep dry socks in the way of family time (including vacations) left my wife and daughters feeling stressed and distant from me. My failure to engage in leisure reading or hobbies turned me into a dull, one-dimensional person.

These failures did not make me a better school leader. They made me tired, overweight, unhappy, impatient and largely dissatisfied with my work. They certainly did not make me a better husband or father—a dereliction of duties (to use the Marine term)—of my primary leadership responsibilities.

Finally, when the pain became great enough, I decided to make some life changes.

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I began by shedding 70 pounds. I threw away my hypertension pills. I now workout several times a week. I spend more time with my wife and daughters, even though the elder attends a college hours away from home. I read a couple of books every month just for pleasure. My wife says I'm a lot more fun to be around, too. I'm definitely a happier person.

Given the quality-of-life differences, I sometimes now wonder why I didn't always carry dry socks. You won't catch me without them again.

## Lesson Two: Remember the Six "P's"

One evening after a long hot day of war games in the middle of the Southwestern desert, we received orders to pack up our gear and move the entire unit. We were all past the point of being tired, but such demands are common and necessary because training is nothing more than rehearsing for combat. And as everyone knows, combat is unpredictable, so rehearsing for it has to contain elements of unpredictability.

So we began the mount-out process. First, we packed our personal gear and loaded it on to trucks. Then everyone worked as a team to disassemble the large tents that served as shelters, work areas, chow halls, first aid stations and so on. This was a big job, but a few hundred Marines working together made short work of it. All the tents were also loaded onto trucks and driven through the cool desert night to the new encampment area where the process was reversed.

The hours dragged on after we arrived at the new area. As we finally neared completion of the set-up, the ridiculous occurred.

Our commanding officer (CO) showed up and determined that the camp was set-up at the wrong coordinates. He ordered us to tear it all down again and move it a few hundred meters to the east. What followed was a disorganized free-for-all as the Marines begrudgingly moved the camp.

At one point, I stood back to survey the process. A good friend of mine walked up and even in the dark he was able to make out the look of frustration on my face. He cracked a joke; it found its mark and we both laughed. We then proceeded to talk about how messed up the entire night had been. We knew that the six "P's," as they are called by Marines, had been ignored: *Prior proper planning prevents poor performance*. (A seventh purely adjectival "P" may be inserted at one's discretion before the word "poor" to emphasize the point in some extreme instances!)

What we realized, but were not in a position to influence because of our place in the chain of command, was that someone's failure to properly plan and communicate resulted in a long night and a bunch of tired, de-motivated Marines.

A school leader is the organizational equivalent of a commanding officer (though it is generally more effective as a civilian to lead through collaborating than commanding). As such, every school reflects the leader's strengths and weaknesses.

Effective leaders live by the six "P's" because prior proper planning really does prevent poor performance.

And here's a secret weapon for schools in the planning arsenal: Ninety percent of everything that occurs during any given school year will happen all over again the next year.

Think about it. Every year, the

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following things are definitely going to happen, whether they are properly planned for:

- Interviewing and hiring
- Ordering curriculum
- Sports events
- Testing
- Board meetings
- Reporting (required state and local reports, grade cards, etc.)
- Budgeting
- Scheduling (daily classes, etc.)
- Hosting ceremonies (graduation, holiday productions, etc.)

It is precisely because these things are cyclical that the school leader has an advantage over the Marine CO. The school leader knows approximately when these things will occur and he or she can influence the performance of the school by giving appropriate time to the discipline of planning.

Here's an added tip for those looking to improve their ability to plan, execute and evaluate. The single best seminar I ever attended on planning wasn't in the Corps. It was a one-day Franklin Covey seminar.

Although I thought I was a good planner prior to the seminar, a fellow school leader (also a military colleague) said the event had been "life-changing" for him and that if I would attend but didn't agree, he would personally refund my seminar fee. How could I pass that up?

After the seminar, I had to concur with my friend's opinion. *It was life-changing.* The first thing I did was to go back to the school and register my four principal colleagues for the next seminar.

Although I'm not in a position to make you the same guarantee, I am willing to say this in print: The

course was one of the best one-day investments I've ever made in my entire career.

One final thought on planning. I mentioned previously that 90 percent of what occurs during the school year is cyclical. What about the other 10 percent?

It is good to give some brainstorming and discussion time to contingency plans for things that are not cyclical. For example, what are you going to do if:

- a chemical pipeline near the school explodes, spewing toxins into the air?
- a female teacher comes into your office and complains that a male teacher just groped her in the hallway?
- a parent calls to complain that her teenage son has bruises because other boys on the baseball team subjected him to an initiation rite on the bus returning from winning an important game?
- the county inspector arrives to shutdown a rural school that gets its water from a well that the inspector says is unsanitary?
- a kindergarten child gets left behind on a field trip?
- a tornado warning occurs?

Every situation above occurred in schools while I was head, along with other such 10 percent situations. It helps to have given advance planning to such things. Eventually, things do occur; you just can't predict when.

Your contingency plans will change as the circumstances necessitate, but it's better to anticipate and think through a likely course of action when things are running

smoothly. You can figure out the rest as the situation unfolds.

The six “P’s” are your friend. No sense in waiting until the building is burning down to find the exits.

### Lesson Three: Check the Milk Cartons

I’d like to introduce you to my dad, Master Sergeant Gary R. Carpenter, USMC (Retired).

At 70, he’d admit that he’s not quite the lean, green, fighting machine he was in his earlier days as an infantry leader. But I guarantee you’d still want him on your side in a dark alley conflict. I’ve learned more than one leadership lesson from him over the years, including the lesson of checking the milk cartons.

Years ago, his unit was war gaming in Norway. He tells the story of how their Norwegian hosts were kind enough to supply them with morning chow.

Every morning, a Norwegian Army supply truck would roll up to where dad’s unit was encamped and deliver cartons of food. It was delicious, especially the freshly baked loaves of bread. Compared to the usual Marine fare of C-rations or powdered eggs, it was a feast.

But when one of the Marines reached for his half pint of milk, he shook it and noticed that instead of a light splashing sound, the contents in the little cardboard carton made only a dense sloshing. Not wanting the putrid smell of sour, curdled milk to permeate the air, he threw it out and promptly spread the word to others to do the same. Everyone’s carton made the same sound. Instead of milk, they washed breakfast down with canteen water and field coffee.

Early the following morning, the

Norwegian chow truck rumbled in again. The Marines were happy to have some great chow but someone noticed again that the milk cartons were in the same shape. This time they didn’t even distribute them to the troops. They discarded all of them unopened.

Next day, same thing.

Several more days went by with the fresh food and sour milk deliveries. Finally one morning, one Marine decided to inspect the contents of one of these pints. On the outside, the carton looked ordinary, except of course, everything was written in Norwegian. When he opened it however, he was astounded to see, not sour milk, but what my dad describes as the thickest, sweetest blueberry preserves you’ve ever tasted! And they had been throwing the stuff away by the gallons.

Ugh.

As a blueberry lover myself, I still share his sense of lament when I think about all those perfectly good discarded cartons of wonderful preserves. My dad and I laugh, too, when we think about his Norwegian hosts coming behind them to pick up the trash. They had to have been thinking, “What’s wrong with American Marines?”

At a summer school leadership conference cocktail hour, I once asked the wife of a prominent headmaster friend what she attributed her husband’s success to. He had managed to build a good relationship with a sometimes flighty board and had raised millions of dollars for the school. Student performance was high, and within a few years, enrollment was through the roof. Without hesitating, she said, “He takes the long view of things.”

I’ve pondered that simple state-

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ment many times.

I think what she was saying was that her husband wasn't reactionary. Instead of letting the challenges of each day control him, he maintained his vision by keeping problems in the broader perspective of his goals.

In the language of the milk carton lesson, while others were jumping to conclusions on the basis of limited information, my friend didn't go along with the crowd. Through self-discipline, he developed the ability to see what nearly everyone around him missed: the potential to build an exemplary school—an achievement as sweet as blueberry preserves.

### Lesson Four: Pace Your Force March

One of my former COs was a physical fitness machine. During our weekly physical training sessions (affectionately known as PT), he would often go beyond the distance. I think he, a man in his early forties, enjoyed seeing the younger twenty-something Marines panting to keep up.

Occasionally, the CO liked to lead the entire squadron in a force march. In this instance, force refers to a military force, however, it was compulsory, so to the out-of-shape Marines, it was considered a *forced* march. I was in decent shape at the time, so I regarded force marches as a chance to get out of the office for a nice 12 to 25 mile walk.

To appreciate the lesson of the force march, it is necessary to understand how it occurs. In essence, the entire unit is divided into two single-file columns. Each column walks down the opposite side of the road. When there are several hundred Marines on a march, the columns can be quite long. The required distance

between you and the Marine in front of you is about three feet. The sergeants and staff sergeants will often march between the columns to prod the stragglers to catch up.

On one particular force march, I was only two or three men behind the CO. This was the first time I had ever been near the front. I noticed that the overall march seemed substantially easier than the previous marches where I had been in the middle or further back in the column. I wanted to figure out why.

In talking to my dad and several other Marines, I got my answer. They explained that the people in the front of the column don't have to work as hard when the CO quickens his pace because they are right behind him. But the farther back one is in the column, a sort of domino effect occurs. A quickening of two or three steps at the front of the column can leave the poor guys in the back having to run to keep up. If the CO fails to maintain a steady pace, the guys at the rear of the column can spend the entire time alternating between standing still and sprinting.

Years later, while running a school, I regularly observed winded looks on some of my colleagues' faces. As I began asking folks what was going on, I realized that my work pace had been unsteady—alternating somewhere between fast and faster. It dawned on me that my team was having trouble keeping up with me because I hadn't established an even pace.

The effective school leader appreciates that people working for him or her have different work styles. The best pace accommodates others whenever possible. Remember to keep it steady so people can keep up, especially for those near the bottom of the flowchart.

## Lesson Five: Prize Respect Over Rank

I reported to a lieutenant once who was a good guy, but left much to be desired as a Marine officer. I still recall how on one occasion he directed me to report to the office on my afternoon off. As I hurried over, I thought to myself that something important must be going down. Perhaps an urgent situation in the classified message traffic or something.

When I arrived, he handed me some handwritten notes and asked me to type a résumé for him. His time in the Marine Corps would soon be up and he was actively searching for a new job.

Technically, I could have declined his request on two grounds. First, it wasn't an order, and second, personal servitude in the Corps is a no-no. What irritated me the most was his general inconsiderateness. I had better things to do with my afternoon off than taking care of his personal matters.

I did what he asked out of deference to his rank. But what the lieutenant failed to understand is that such deference is a matter of formality and that true respect has to be earned.

One of the best leadership books I ever read on respect is entitled, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It*, by James Kouzes and Barry Posner (1999). It's an excellent source for understanding the dynamics of how you build credibility—another word for real respect. For example, the authors say that you earn credibility by following the maxim DWYSYWD—Do What You Say You Will Do.

One of their key points is this: People may be required to defer to your “rank” as head of school, but you cannot demand credibility. It is given to you when others deem that you have earned it and it is removed when others deem you have lost it.

Most critically, once you've lost it with a group of people, such as your faculty colleagues or your board, it can seldom be regained.

Thus, it is imperative that you retain your credibility. Without it, you have nothing left with which to lead people.

## Lesson Six: Lead Through Core Values

Few professional achievements have ever given me as much satisfaction as the day I was meritoriously promoted to sergeant. I achieved this in part by adding value to myself by enrolling in evening college courses and by mastering the requirements of my job as an intelligence analyst. And while at the time I recognized that the Marine Corps placed a high value on self-improvement and education, improving my abilities has always been one of my core values. The Corps rewarded me for it because of the value it gains from high-performing Marines.

As the above illustrates, adding value to yourself is reciprocal. When you do so, you add value to your organization. Your school—or a future employer—will recognize that value and reward you for it because it adds value to them.

As core values go, self-improvement combined with integrity are a winning combo.

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## Concluding Thoughts

The Marine Corps provided me with magnificent opportunities for responsibility and leadership. I doubt that I would be where I am today without the foundation laid in my life by many excellent NCOs and officers. Though I left the Corps almost 20 years ago, a few remain close friends to this day.

Many of the leadership lessons I learned in the Marines helped me with school leadership. I have also been influenced by many useful books on the subject, some of which I've listed in the references below.

There was another important lesson I learned in my first couple of years as a school superintendent:

Civilian teachers aren't Marines and they dislike being treated as such.

Don't misunderstand. I never barked commands at my teaching colleagues. But the Corps is a highly structured organization with the emphasis always on the chain of command in preparation for combat.

Those of higher rank are forbidden from fraternizing with those of lower rank. But in a school setting, it is actually desirable to create a certain level of fraternity or—even better—community among all the school's colleagues. Rank works against this.

Yet it is helpful to appreciate that even in leading schools there is a certain loneliness at the top. You must be somewhat guarded because everything you say and do is felt to some

degree by your teaching colleagues. Complaining to them about your frustrations is absolutely off-limits. Instead, make friends with other school leaders who represent "safe" relationships with whom you can vent your frustrations and anxious moments.

Finally, like the Marines, you've chosen a challenging role for which not everyone is cut out. Take it up with zeal because there are few roles in society more important than that of seeing that children receive a good education. When you lead well, you help children and colleagues build success in their own lives. What could be better?

*Semper Fidelis*—  
Brian L. Carpenter

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## References & Suggested Reading

*It's my personal practice to regularly read books on leadership. Those listed below are among my all-time favorites. I highly commend them to you.*

Collins, J. C. (2001). *Good to great: why some companies make the leap--and others don't* (1st ed.). New York, NY: HarperBusiness.

Covey, S. R. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people: Restoring the character ethic*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

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