

The Military Veteran's Transition to a Leadership Culture in which Obedience is a Bad Word

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Obedience is part of military culture, both as a legal obligation and as an instilled reflexive practice deemed essential to survival in combat. Circumstances might require following orders that go against natural instincts.

Military training also encourages initiative and independent thought, and, when appropriate, expressing concerns about decisions or a state of affairs. But it also involves understanding that when a decision has been made you must do everything you can to implement it and influence others to act in the same way.

Contrary to what many without military experience may assume, the military teaches leaders not to rely on obedience, and training does not equate the wielding of authority with leadership. All of the branches define leadership essentially as influencing others by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission. They teach that leadership always must be adapted to the circumstances.

The need to adapt is certainly true for veterans who take on leadership responsibilities in civil organizations. They need to keep in mind that public service organizations usually do not share the military's culture of formal authority. **Veterans can be surprised by how much depends on voluntary cooperation rather than adherence to a chain of command.** The word "obedience" is not uttered except derisively.

Military leadership training gives developmental experience of this adaptive nature. It involves being assigned responsibilities for peers and supervising their performance. Peers likely will not respond well to an authoritarian approach. Success depends on building mutually supportive relationships. Those who were unable to gain the trust of their peers may not have support when they most need it and it cannot be compelled.

In organizations in which appeals to authority are unlikely to be welcomed, leaders with military experience must be attuned to all the principles they were taught for effective leadership, especially the importance of integrity, communicating a compelling mission, and setting an example of

commitment to that mission. **Failure to be vigilant about important differences in organizational climate can have unfortunate consequences for both a transitioning leader and the organization.** Individuals may speak out, ignore direction, or even act contrary to it. Harmful stereotypes about the military may be reinforced, causing other members of the organization to discount the leader's ability as tied too much to a hierarchical and authoritarian culture. This can cause long-term damage to the leader's standing within the organization and even impede openness to veteran hiring or collaboration.

Successful military leaders usually recall rarely having to wield the formal authority with which they were entrusted. They developed relationships within their units based on trust and respect and a unified commitment to mission accomplishment. Though the paths to developing these relationships and commitments may look different, the successful result looks very much the same.

Click [here](#) for Szypszak's recent discussion of **Learning from Military Leadership**, published in *PA Times*.