



Quick-Look Report: USMC.2017.0005

**Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture
Research Project: Empathy in Leadership**

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Publication Date: 1 June 2020

Distribution: UNLIMITED

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About the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project

What is MCOCR?

The MCOCR Project is a small, exploratory, qualitative research effort intended to gather Marine perspectives on a range of issues related to Marine Corps culture. The project resulted in 150 semi-structured interviews and 32 semi-structured focus groups with 267 unique participants (nine Marines participated in both an interview and a focus group). All participants were volunteers, and the project was conducted under a protocol approved by the Marine Corps Human Research Protection Program. The project was conducted under Marine Corps University's academic freedom policy.

How should the information in this report be used?

Because of the non-representative sample, data and analysis from MCOCR are intended to inform discussions in conjunction with other information sources. They should not be used to make broad claims about Marines or Marine Corps programs and policies.

Were Marine statements fact-checked?

No. The intent of the project was to gather Marine perspectives without regard to whether the perspectives were based on full knowledge of current Marine Corps policies and programs. In some cases, it was important to capture misperceptions, as they have implications for internal Marine Corps messaging.

What are the project's limitations?

1. The MCOCR sample was not designed to be representative of the Marine Corps population in terms of sex, race/ethnicity, MOS, or other characteristics. Therefore, the data cannot be used in statistical analysis designed to make claims about all Marines. Sample demographics are included in the March 2018 report from the project, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/AD1079774>.
2. The project did not include reservists or recently retired/separated Marines due to Marine Corps interpretation of DoD guidance on information collections at the time the research was designed.
3. We did not actively seek volunteers above E-8s and O-5s; therefore, the senior voice is not strong in the sample.

Who funded and sponsored the project?

The project falls within the normal scope of work of CAOCL's Translational Research Group (TRG), and the majority of the project was funded out of CAOCL's existing budget. Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) requested that the research be done, but the research design, conduct, and analysis were controlled by TRG. M&RA provided assistance with logistics, travel for research team members who were not part of CAOCL, and funding to accelerate transcription of audio recordings.

When and where were data gathered?

Between August and October 2017, the research team gathered data at the following locations: Pentagon, MCB Quantico, MCB Camp Lejeune, MCAS Cherry Point, MCB Camp Pendleton, MCAGCC 29 Palms, MCAS Yuma, and MCB Camp Butler (Okinawa).

What are the qualifications and characteristics of the research team?

The principal investigator is a cultural anthropologist with more than 20 years of experience working with and doing research on national security organizations, including 10 years leading research teams on projects focused on the Marine Corps. The composition of the MCOCR research team has changed between 2017 and 2020, but team members have possessed graduate-level educational backgrounds in the following disciplines: cultural anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, international relations, education, communication, and evaluation science. Data gathering teams included male and female researchers. To the maximum extent possible, participants were allowed to choose the sex of the researcher with whom they interacted. All team members thus far have been Caucasian. The data gathering team included two members with Marine backgrounds. One was a recently retired field-grade Marine officer, and the other was an active duty company-grade Marine officer. The research team also consulted with other social scientists and Marines during design and analysis.

MCOCR Quick-Look Report: Empathy in Leadership

Executive Summary

Using data from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project, this report discusses a leadership insight from Marines: empathy is a strength and a powerful leadership tool. Some Marines talked about empathy directly, while others shared stories that illustrated empathy in leadership. Drawing from these experiences and perspectives, this report addresses the following:

- 1) Some Marines think empathy should be an organizational value, perhaps even finding its own place in the leadership acronym JJDIDTIEBUCKLE.
- 2) Marines are aware that empathy is often considered “soft” and seems at odds with the hard-charging Marine image, but some insist that empathy is actually courageous.
- 3) Empathy is often associated with women, which can be a double-edged sword for female Marines. Some Marines recognize female empathy as an asset to the Corps, while others see it as a weakness.
- 4) Empathy is something that can be learned by anyone if they are open and willing.
- 5) Marines recognize that behind a unified Marine identity, individual differences make Marines diverse. Empathy is a great tool for incorporating diversity into the force.

MCOCR Quick-Look Report: Empathy in Leadership

Introduction

Marines know leadership, and the data from the Marine Corps Organizational Research (MCOCR) Project¹ prove just that. Leadership was perhaps the most ubiquitous topic of discussion during MCOCR interviews and focus groups². Marines easily articulated what they look for and value in a good leader, sharing informed perspectives and personal stories. Many Marines spoke of an influential leader who positively impacted their career, sometimes even inspiring them to stay in the Corps after a bout with bad leadership. Some also provided insight into their own leadership journeys, detailing how they learned to lead, experiencing trial and error along the way. Needless to say, when talking about good leaders and the qualities they possess, Marines brought up many of the characteristics that are promoted in Marine organizational literature and culture and represented in the leadership acronym JJDIDTIEBUCKLE: justice, judgement, dependability, initiative, decisiveness, tact, integrity, endurance, bearing, unselfishness, courage, knowledge, loyalty, and enthusiasm.

But an unexpected characteristic came up in discussions of good leadership: empathy. Some Marine talked about empathy without ever using the word. These Marines told stories of leaders who displayed the ability to put themselves in someone else's shoes, or, conversely leaders who lacked this ability. Several Marines, on the other hand, directly and emphatically brought up the word "empathy" and discussed why it is so important for a leader. This report discusses empathy as a leadership trait that is highly valued – if not always explicitly talked about – in the Marine Corps. In addition to Marines' direct appeals to empathy, I provide stories of empathetic leadership and Marines who learned that empathy is a strength and not a weakness. Although the Marine Corps is often thought of as a place of knife-handed leadership, the MCOCR data show this "softer" leadership characteristic is valued. This unexpected insight is not only a testament to the revelatory power of exploratory qualitative research, but also just one example of how Marines themselves can provide innovative solutions to Marine Corps issues.

¹ Please see "About the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project" coversheet at the beginning of this report for more information on the project. For a more in-depth summary of the project and its genesis, see: Fosher, Kerry, Rebecca Lane, Erika Tarzi, Kristin Post, Gauldin, Eric, Edwards, Jennifer, and McLean, Jeremy. (2020) Translational Research in a Military Organization: The Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, published online 22 February 2020: volume and issue forthcoming. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/napa.12130>.

² See the following MCOCR reports for more on various aspects of leadership: (1) Lane, Rebecca, Erika Tarzi, Kristin Post, Eric Gauldin. 2018. Marines' Perspectives on Various Aspects of Marine Corps Organizational Culture. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1079774.pdf>; (2) Lane, Rebecca. 2019. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Implicit and Explicit Perceptions of Fairness. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1079415.pdf>; (3) Tarzi, Erika and Rebecca Lane. 2019. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Pregnancy Loss. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1085324.pdf>; (4) Lane, Rebecca and Kristin Post. 2020. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Rethinking Mentorship. Report will be available on the Defense Technical Information Center public portal: <https://discover.dtic.mil/>; (5) Tarzi, Erika. 2020. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Trust in the Marine Corps – the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Report will be available on the Defense Technical Information Center public portal: <https://discover.dtic.mil/>.

JJDIDTIEBUCKLE: “I would take out one of those Es and add empathy”

JJDIDTIEBUCKLE is tried, true, and memorable. The acronym frequently passed through the lips of MCOCR Marines when asked about good leadership. The Marine Corps leadership traits it stands for are all qualities that, to varying degrees, Marines in this project appeared to value and uphold. However, some of the Marines with whom we spoke felt it was missing something from the acronym, namely empathy. In an interview, this Major A^{3,4} said of JJDIDTIEBUCKLE:

I would take out one of those Es and add empathy. Empathy is a thing that allows you to see things from other people's perspectives. It's not a touchy-feely thing where we have to give a shit about people's feelings and hug them and make sure they don't ever get hurt.

Similarly, Major B⁵ said that although JJDIDTIEBUCKLE “is really good,” empathy and humility are not included in the acronym, nor are they discussed in the Marine Corps publications at any length.

JJDIDTIEBUCKLE is really good, but we don't ever talk about empathy, humility in anything. I think empathy is used one time in *Leading Marines ...* and maybe *Sustaining the Transformation*, but it's not a core value, it's not a leadership trait, it's not a leadership principle. ... Humility and empathy are huge if you want to re-trust the generational gap and have people be part of that team, and we don't teach it.

Why, as Major B says, isn't empathy ever talked about? It might have something to do with Major A feeling the need to clarify that empathy is “not a touchy-feely thing where we have to give a shit about people's feelings.” That is, empathy often associated with weakness.

Reframing Empathy

2nd Lieutenant C⁶ illustrated how empathy is often construed as a weakness, joking about how some might perceive “empathy training,” if there ever were such a thing in the Marine Corps, to be setting the Corps up for failure.

You can't simply put it, “Oh, empathy training,” because Marine Corps can look at that and be like, “Oh my God, we're gonna lose. We're gonna lose to the frickin' British cheerleading team.” I don't know [*laughter*] whatever you want to think of. We're going to lose because we're talking about empathy but ... I think it's just as courageous to stand up in those moments than it is to frickin' go out there and put your life on the line because sometimes you are putting your life on the line doing that.

She suggests a redefining of courage to include standing up for someone, which in her estimation requires empathy, demonstrating what a loosening of the association between empathy and softness would look like. Likewise, Captain D⁷ talks about the connection between compassion and

³ The letters after rank are meant to avoid confusion between participants and do not in any way relate to the name of participants, which is information that we did not collect.

⁴ Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

⁵ Participant #203, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

⁶ Participant #125, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

⁷ Participant #600, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

vulnerability and how this can often be seen as a weakness, but which, in his opinion, is actually a strength that allows him to guide Marines through “real life issues.”

People have opinions about compassion because it's the attributed to, I guess, vulnerability and weakness. But vulnerability is not a weakness. I don't believe that. Us as officers are trained to be the example, the stoic rock that whenever someone is in trouble, that they can turn to us. ... We're supposed to be the beacon of light. Yeah, we are, but we're also human. I never led Marines into battle. I don't know what that's like. But I've led Marines through difficult times in their lives when they attempted suicide, their family members have died, their own coworker just committed suicide, or someone just overdosed, her baby just died. Those are real life issues that I've dealt with my Marines.

Like 2nd Lieutenant C, Captain D offers an alternate reading of compassion. Though he has “never led Marines in battle,” Captain D portrays himself as a good leader because he has guided his Marines through traumatic life events, implicating compassion as a powerful leadership tool.

From the above quotes, it is clear that the Marines value empathy, yet see it as something that does not quite align with the “hardcore” Marine image. Empathy might be a taboo subject for some in the Marine Corps, but that does not mean it is lacking. In fact, one might argue that it is enacted in the Marine Corps ethos of “getting to know your Marines” and “taking care of your own.” This came through clearly during an all-male focus group. Early on in the focus group, 1st Sergeant E addresses the moderator's question of what makes a Marine not fit in with other Marines by bringing up the idea of the alpha male. He says, “Manliness, I think is what's expected, and if you don't bring that alpha male mentality to the pack, then you could easily be, you know, expedited [sic] or whatever, or kicked out of the pack, if you will, or not accepted within the pack.” But later in the focus group, after the moderator asks him about a previous statement where he suggested that alpha males don't have room for sensitivity, he clarifies that the alpha male mentality does not exclude the act of caring:

You know, we all go through our own issues. So, if you have a problem, well I'll easily take a step back and make sure you're taken care of. 'Cause at the same time that I'm talking to you about your problem, or engaging with that Marine, personally, inside, I'm working through my own problem that I might be going through. And, now we're spit-balling ideas back and forth. And truthfully that two-way conversation is helping both of us out.

The caring Marine that 1st Sergeant E talks about is sometimes eclipsed by the image of the hard-charging Marine. Though caring is inherently gender neutral, it is often associated with females. Although the 1st sergeant is able to hold a conceptualization of the “alpha male” that includes caring, the gendered baggage that things like “caring” and “empathy” carry is tricky for some to reconcile with the image of the hard-charging Marine.

Empathy and Gender

Empathy is a characteristic that anyone can possess, yet it is often associated with women. In the Marine Corps, this association can be a double-edged sword. Master Sergeant F made a distinction about how empathetic men are perceived versus empathetic women, insisting that women in the Marine Corps cannot afford to be as empathetic as men because they need to make

up for the fact that they are already seen as “soft.” In his experience, men get more empathetic after they join the Marine Corps and women get less empathetic. After describing how he and his wife (also a Marine) took an online test for empathy and he scored higher than his wife, he said:

I think males start down here, like, “I don't give a damn,” right? And then as we go up, you know, through the ranks and through the years, we get more empathetic. Females are the opposite. They have to be tough, they have to be rigid, they can't care and then it never changes... This shouldn't be like this, but in society usually like the males have no empathy and the females are way more empathetic. [F]emales in the Marine Corps do not have room for empathy. They don't have time for it. They could understand, alright? They can align with you. They can even try to understand what it is that you're going through, but they didn't have that luxury. No one was empathetic for them. No one gave a crap if the daycare opened 6:00 and PT [physical training] was at 6:00. *[imitating an unempathetic Marine]* “You figure it the hell out. ... Suck it up, figure it out or get a nanny or you get somebody drop off the kid for you or something, but it's not the Marine Corps' fault. The Marine Corps didn't issue you a kid, alright?” So I think female Marines are way less empathetic than males, and if they are empathetic – which is okay to be empathetic, right? – then it's seen as a weakness. So there's like this double standard that falls in there.

Master Sergeant F ended this quote by pointing out that the pairing of “female” with “empathy” can easily be seen as a weakness.

However, empathy, even when seen as a feminine characteristic, was not considered a weakness by all. Some leaders recognize the value of empathy and sometimes call upon female Marines, who they believed to possess more empathy than men, to expand their own leadership repertoire. Major G talks about how her leader, “one of the better leaders [she] worked for,” wanted her to teach him about empathy.

[H]e was really upfront, he said, “You know what?” He's like, “I don't really work with a lot of women.” He's like, “I struggle with empathy.” He's like, “Maybe you can help me balance that.” Like he saw the value that I guess maybe my gender brought. I don't know, but apparently I am supposed to have a whole bunch of empathy that would solve it, but that's what he saw when he looked at me, you know, and he was really- I appreciate his honesty about it. He's trying, you know. You just don't get that, you don't even get the impression that people are trying with that at all.

Although the major appears to question her leader's assumption that she is adept at empathy, she ultimately appreciates the effort put forth by the leader, as she does not “get the impression that people are trying with that at all.”

Empathy through Experience

The MCOCR data shows that some Marines are indeed trying to embrace empathy. Lieutenant Colonel H talks about how, before she gave birth herself, she lacked perspective and empathy when it came to the treatment of pregnant Marines, but after she became a mother, she was alarmed at how she had treated pregnant and post-partum Marines and sought to make amends.

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[U]p until the time that I became a mother as a lieutenant colonel with sixteen years of service, I had no idea what the challenges were for pregnant service women and also for new mothers. And I'm ashamed to admit that I was part of the problem because I completely accepted the Marine Corps' cultural norm on face value and did what I thought was appropriate as a supervisor, which was to hold my females accountable the same way I'd hold men accountable. And so, no, I was not inclined to give any sort of accommodation. I wanted the doctor's note for everything. I was awful, I was absolutely awful. And after I became a mother where I could find them, I sent emails to the women who I had been a supervisor of and I apologized to them because it was— I was perpetuating a system that is not very accommodating. ... But I did, because that's what was expected. And in fact, my bosses, men, expected me to do that, and I didn't see anything wrong with it.

In insisting that, before she was able to empathize with pregnant Marines and mothers, she was “perpetuating a system that was not very accommodating,” Lieutenant Colonel H is pointing out an organizational bias that favors the male body.⁸ She also demonstrates how individuals can change and become more empathetic. While men of course cannot bear children, many male Marines in this study demonstrated a willingness to understand the experience of female Marines so that their own perspectives might be better informed. For instance, several male Marines expressed wanting to participate in mixed gender focus groups expressly because they wanted to hear about the Marine experience from a female perspective.

In the 2nd Lieutenant J's story below, the gunnery sergeant displays empathy in encouraging an Officer Candidate School candidate through using a bit of knowledge about the candidate's past. Instead of yelling at the candidate because she consistently could not keep up, the gunnery sergeant took a different approach.

[W]e had one candidate who was struggling, just struggling physically, academically, leadership wise. It kind of made some people in our squad who don't know about the games of ... boot camp and things like that, like they try to mess with you, and then they try to see who turns on each other. ... And so there are people turning on her, and we were out for a particular run, and this gunnery sergeant— this girl was falling back, this was like [the] third run this week and she's falling back, falling back, falling back. And instead of just laying into her like all the other gunnery sergeants and our officers were doing, this gunnery sergeant turned around, slowed down the whole squad, turned around and started looping, like loop back and got her and had her lead and like kept getting her. Every time she'd fall back, she'd make all of us run with her and make all of us get her to go. ... It was the first time I'd ever heard a sergeant instructor say anything positive to anyone and was like, “Come on, you played basketball in college. This is all mental. You can do this,” and like started motivating her. To me, that was really awesome because it could be so easy.⁹

⁸ See the following MCOCR reports for more on this bias: (1) Lane, Rebecca. 2019. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Implicit and Explicit Perceptions of Fairness. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1079415.pdf>; (2) Tarzi, Erika and Rebecca Lane. 2019. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Pregnancy Loss. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1085324.pdf>.

⁹ Participant #125, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

While some Marines, like the Lieutenant Colonel H, learned empathy through their own personal experience, others learned it through witnessing their leaders, like the gunnery sergeant in 2nd Lieutenant J's story being empathetic. In both stories, empathy was extended to individuals who do not quite fit into the Marine norm.

Empathy and Diversity

Empathy is great for facilitating diversity inclusion. However, as the following two Marines illustrate, this is not necessarily about perspective taking for the sake of political correctness, something that seemed to rub a lot of Marines the wrong way. Instead, it is for the sake of accepting the undeniable reality that people are different, be those differences gender, generation, or anything else. Captain K talks about how seeing everyone as the same is an illusion that is unproductive.

I know that I've been through things that are very specific to being female. And then I know that my friends have gone through things that are very similar, and that we have struggled differently, solely based on gender. And I think that, as a culture, or as a Marine Corps, there is this perception that, if we look at everyone like they're equal, then they'll just be equal, which is just false. It's not true. It's a terrible way to look at the problem. And I think it lacks the empathy ... we were talking about earlier to address the issues and solve them.¹⁰

Captain K relates the problem back to empathy and a lack of understanding for the ways that people are different. Although a unified Marine identity is a powerful motivator and plays an important role in fostering cohesion, there are also differences among Marines that are not changed by simply ignoring them.

This acceptance of difference can be a huge asset to leadership. Captain L used the word "compassionate" to describe his ideal Marine officer and talked about how an empathetic attitude in leadership is conducive to being able to more effectively lead your Marines and bridging divides between generations,¹¹ stating, "I think an empathetic leader and someone who is compassionate, empathetic can be able to relate to an individual. That's my opinion on how a Marine officer should be." He suggested that understanding where millennials are coming from makes it easier to lead them.

That's why I think Marines are more comfortable that way. We were leading a millennial generation. Instant gratification. Things need to happen now, now, now so to better understand that. Either pick up a book and read, get on social media, understand how they think work and operate, and you can be able to lead them better. Talk to them too.¹²

¹⁰ Participant #058, Captain, Focus Group, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

¹¹ For more on MCOCR data concerning generational divides in the Marine Corps, see: (1) Gauldin, Eric. 2020. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Elements and Antidotes for Disillusionment. Report will be available on the Defense Technical Information Center public portal: <https://discover.dtic.mil/>; (2) Tashev, Blago. 2020. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Generational Differences in the Marine Corps – Exploring Issues and Frictions Between Older and Younger Marines. Report will be available on the Defense Technical Information Center public portal: <https://discover.dtic.mil/>.

¹² Participant #600, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 17.

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This was an alternative perspective to the Marines who saw the millennials as deficient (as opposed to just different) and the gulf between them and older generations as insurmountable.

Conclusion

The Marines who participated in the MCOCR project expressed a desire to be part of the solution. Across TRG's projects and in our experience working with Marines, when it comes to leadership issues, targeting toxic leadership is a frequent topic of discussion, while bolstering good leadership sometimes plays second fiddle. Yet, the Marines highlighted in this report see the value in fostering the positive characteristic of empathy. Several Marines suggested that empathy can even be made into an organizational value, perhaps even finding a place in JJDIDTIEBUCKLE. Some address the fact that empathy is not always seen as "strong," but they offer a reframing of the concept to show how empathy is a strength to any leader. Marines shared personal stories of how they learned empathy and employ it in their careers. For many, it is not about political correctness, but instead facing the fact that, behind their shared identity, Marines possess qualities – such as gender, race, socio-economic background and age – that make them different. These differences are not going away, so instead of getting upset that different people have different needs, the Marines in this report suggest that empathy can be used to understand those different needs and experiences and to lead in a way that works *with* instead of against the diversity of the Corps.