

“Message to Garcia”

Still relevant read for leaders

By Lt. Col. Seth G. Hall and Sgt. 1st Class Carl W. Lanier

Written in 1899, Elbert Hubbard’s “Message to Garcia” has become a staple on commandants’ reading lists and used in countless leader professional development exercises across the Army. If you have not read it or have not read it lately, it is worth your time. Briefly, before the Spanish-American War, President William McKinley needed a message delivered to the Cuban insurgent leader, Gen. García, who was operating somewhere in the Cuban mountains. 1st Lt. Andrew Summers Rowan was recommended for the arduous task, which he accomplished, forthwith. Throughout the essay, Hubbard champions the fact that when called upon Rowan accepted and executed the daunting task without asking for details such as ‘where is García’ or ‘how should I get there.’ Hubbard highlights that when given a somewhat ambiguous task, nine out of 10 others will not set themselves to accomplishing the task without asking a multitude of follow-up questions.

Invariably, during a well-intentioned leaders’ professional development session, a facilitator asks, ‘how do we create Soldiers who will carry the “Message to Garcia,” and the group brainstorms this topic. There is nothing inherently wrong with the question; our Army needs Soldiers of every rank who accomplish difficult missions given minimal guidance. Army leadership thought this concept was so important that Training and Doctrine Command dedicated an entire manual, ADP 6.0 Mission Command, to outlining and defining these principles. Rowan’s actions should be lauded and emulated. Of course, when given a task, all of us should

‘promptly concentrate [our] energies; do the thing.’ However, Rowan is not the only one whose actions, or lack of action, played a part in this important mission succeeding. Although at first read he seems like a minor footnote to the story, consider two critical actions taken by President McKinley and how each directly contributed to Rowan’s successful mission.

First, McKinley trusted the recommendation of his staff. “There’s a fellow by the name of Rowan who will find Garcia for you, if anybody can.” This point is not insignificant. That recommendation means McKinley had created a culture where people felt comfortable enough to speak up and offer solutions to complex problems. Furthermore, the culture was such that people felt invested in the organization’s success. The size of the organization and the importance of its mission are irrelevant. If people are not confident that their opinions are trusted and valued, they will not be emotionally invested in the organization’s success and will not contribute to potential solutions. A characteristic of the ‘leads’ competency is building trust. One of the ways McKinley led his organization was by establishing trusting relationships with his team members. All six principals of Mission Command are essential; however, the first principle, build cohesive teams through mutual trust, is the most critical. A leader must trust his or her subordinates. Likewise, subordinates must trust their leader. This mutual trust is earned through actions, well-researched recommendations and sound decisions, are key elements. Leaders constantly and consistently cultivate trust with subordinates; with each good decision trust grows and with each false decision trust diminishes. It is important to note that a leader’s genuine decisions can be incorrect and, if handled correctly, the trust may still grow, provided the error is not immoral, illegal or unethical and the leader immediately takes responsibility and remediates the

incorrect decision. However, the best condition for growing trust between leader and led is for correct decisions to be made. This is as true today as it was in McKinley’s and Rowan’s time.

In 2019, an article titled “Mission Command Critical for a Winning Army,” Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, commander, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine, said that “[exercising Mission Command] is the only way to lead a winning Army.” Townsend goes on to speak about the importance of trust between the leader and the led. This trust is not free; it is not instantly presumed by the rank on an individual’s chest. Instead, trust must be grown; growth through countless human interactions between Soldiers.

Second, McKinley gave Rowan the task and allowed his subordinates’ resourcefulness to meet his intent without the burden of micromanagement. The last mention of McKinley states, ‘McKinley gave Rowan a letter to be delivered to Garcia...’ Again, McKinley demonstrated trust in a subordinate, but this trust went beyond that of accepting a recommendation. This time, he trusted Rowan to accomplish a task critical to the war effort; McKinley deserves a great deal of credit for this decision. Cynics may claim that McKinley’s actions did not display trust in Rowan. Rather, he simply lacked the technology necessary to check in on Rowan’s progress once the mission began. We find this unlikely. Nothing in the text suggests that McKinley desired to monitor Rowan’s progress minute by minute that was only bridled by his inability to do so and blaming technology’s ability to micromanage excuses the micromanaging leader’s toxic actions.

On the contrary, McKinley was exercising Mission Command to the fullest when the stakes were highest. He “provided his subordinate with his intent, the purpose of the operation, the key tasks, the desired end state and resources. Subordinates [Rowan] then exercise disciplined initia-

tive to respond to unanticipated problems.”

Mission Command is doctrinal, and leaders at all levels agree our Army should operate this way, why then don’t Soldiers “believe that we, as an Army, are consistently practicing the principles of Mission Command?” That question goes beyond the scope of the article, but we challenge others to explore and answer it. Perhaps, and this is purely speculative, Soldiers do not believe our Army consistently practices Mission Command because leaders prefer to operate with more autonomy from superiors than they are comfortable giving to subordinates.

In conclusion, when evaluated with a fresh perspective, Message to Garcia continues to inform leaders, extolling time-honored, leadership values with ‘new’ names, like Mission Command. Commanders advantage their units and themselves when they choose to follow McKinley’s example to cultivate a culture of trust and to resist the urge to micromanage. Leaders must capitalize on their most valuable assets, other leaders. If leaders commit to this, they will create a culture that effectively frames problems, understands commander’s intent and takes action to achieve desired end states.

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