

Case Study Applications: Generational Variations and Trait Leadership

Leadership Examined

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On June 6, 1944, Richard Winters was a First Lieutenant in the United States Army and in charge of Easy Company. Winters jumped out of the airplane he was being transported in when the airplane was shot down. The day would be later be infamously remembered as “*D Day*”. When Winters landed, he had lost his weapon, had lost of the plane he was being transported in, and had lost a lot of the men he was supposed to go into battle with.

Winters gathered several other soldier paratroopers, which included members that were not part of his initial platoon, and continued their mission. Winters calmly gathered the group of men and the group of men gladly followed Winters. The whereabouts of Winter’s leader was unknown and thus, the situation thrust Winters into the position of commanding officer of Easy Company.

Winters was able to put together a group of soldiers even though some of the soldiers belonged to platoons that weren’t his initially. Winters kept the soldiers focused on the mission at hand, and helped them to work cohesively. Winters’ leadership during that day allowed for Winters and his men to complete an attack on foreign land. Winters led about thirteen men into battle that had never worked together as a team before, on land they were not familiar with, and they were able to successfully defeat a group of soldiers that almost quadrupled the size of their platoon. The feat was so grand that the attack was later replicated in a teaching environment at West Point Academy to incoming cadets as a textbook version of how to attack a stationary target/group and win.

Winters not only proved to be a great soldier, he proved to be an outstanding leader. Winters’ actions not only won the attack, but ensured that Winters and his men came together,

stayed together, and lived through the ordeal of having to face a group of soldiers that almost quadrupled in size compared to their small group.

The *Principles of Marine Corps Leadership* enlists some leadership traits that are essential in leaders. While the traits listed in the article are not the only indicator of leadership success, they are definitely a factor indicative of success in great leaders.

While Winters was initially a leader of a particular platoon, circumstances forced him to create a team of soldiers made up from different platoons at a moment's notice. The situation Winters was thrust into gave Winters the opportunity to shine as a leader. During that fateful day, Winters showed he had the following leadership traits mentioned in the *Principles of Marine Corps Leadership*: Initiative, Decisiveness, Dependability, and Courage.

Winters showed that he had the courage to take the lead in a uncertain and dangerous situation. Winters could have stood down and waited for somebody else to take charge. However, he knew he had the skills and ability to lead and he did not need someone to order him to take action. Winters decisiveness allowed for him to take charge quickly, and to make decisions that kept his men safe in a very dangerous situation. Winters' initiative to lead showed he was meant for that task, and showed his men immediately that Winters' dependability was what they needed in that moment in time. Winters leadership abilities, coupled with his military tactical knowledge was a perfect combination for success of the mission.

A 1989 study on leadership attributes completed and published by John W. Gardner mentioned that some leadership attributes "*appear to make a leader successful in any situation.*" Some of the traits included in the study were: eagerness to accept responsibility, skill in dealing with people, courage and resolution, decisiveness, and assertiveness (Fleenor, 2011, p. 831). All of the above mentioned leadership traits were displayed by Winters during the day he decided to

take command of thirteen men and successfully complete an attack on a group of fifty German soldiers. The situation Winters was faced with was uncertain and dangerous. Winters had no problem accepting responsibility and took charge of the situation. Winters was a natural in dealing with people since he was able to cohesively put together a group of men that had never trained together and were able to successfully work together in one of the most dangerous situations possible. Winters showed courage, decisiveness, and assertiveness while assembling his team. However, he was never overbearing.

Generational values have a large impact on an individual's daily life, and they also impact their leadership style. Winters was born in 1918, which places him close to the Silent Generation. Winters was twenty six years old in 1944, when the incident occurred. Winters was part of the Greatest Generation, which Tom Brokaw said he believed was "*the greatest generation any society has ever produced*" in his book titled *The Greatest Generation*.

Winters showed he was a leader that people respected and he did not need a rank or title to lead men into battle. Winters' courage, decisiveness, assertiveness, initiative and dependability, coupled with his great people skills and tactical knowledge allowed for him to successfully lead his men into battle and conquer a group of soldiers that almost quadrupled the size of the group of men he led into battle.

### Appendix

The 1940's was a very turbulent time for the United States. The country was fighting in World War II. United States Army troops were involved in the war and they were tested as they fought their way through Europe. Richard Winters was one of the soldiers enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War II. Winters was a part of Company E, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 506 PIR. The company Winters belonged to was also known as "*Easy Company*." Winters rose through the ranks while being a part of Easy Company. Winters started as a platoon leader, promoted to first lieutenant, and eventually promoted to acting company executive officer.

At the beginning of Winter's journey in the United States Army, he was under the command of First Lieutenant Herbert Sobel. While Winters served under the command of Sobel, he was able to experience first hand Sobel's unique leadership style. Sobel's leadership style was utilitarian. Sobel was a positional leader and focused heavily on the power of his rank. Winters disagreed with Sobel's leadership, but kept his opinion of Sobel's leadership to himself.

Winters' leadership style was completely different from Sobel's. Winters focused on moral standards and justice. Winters was a leader that cared for his people. He focused on loyalty and faith. Winters was focused on the mission at hand, which was to win the war, but he was ultimately focused on the well being of the soldiers he led. Winters' leadership gave way for the opportunity for Winters to lead his troops as a First Lieutenant when Sobel was transferred. Winters was well respected for his leadership skills. Winters leadership abilities proved to be extremely successful to not only gain the respect of his soldiers, but to gain the respect of the U.S. Army. Winters and his troops were able to successfully defeat a platoon of about fifty troops with a group of thirteen soldiers. Winters' attack was later taught at West

Point military academy as a great example of how to conduct an assault on a fixed position with a small number of soldiers.

The primary source for this case study will be the TV series *Band of Brothers*, with supplemental materials from related online articles. The advantage of this incident as a case study is that it includes multiple layers for analysis of leadership as well as opportunities to review leadership strengths and weaknesses. The disadvantage is that the incidents occurred decades ago and a lot of detailed information regarding the incidents might have been lost over time.

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