

Creating, Sharing, and Living A Leadership Philosophy★

The Power of the “Be”

Just as a diamond requires three properties to form—carbon, heat, and pressure—leaders require the interaction of three properties—character, knowledge, and application. The U.S. Army leadership framework of “Be, Know, Do” is the foundation behind one of the most powerful tools a leader can deploy—the leadership philosophy. The Army’s Leadership Framework describes “Be” as character; “Know” as the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities (expertise); and “Do” as applying leadership by influencing, operating, and improving. To “Be” a leader, you must understand and communicate who you are and what you expect, to best influence positive momentum in others.

A leadership philosophy is the key tool for leaders to share their core identity with the people they lead and with whom they work. It is their written “handshake” with the organization—a way for leaders to share with people what is expected of them and what the team members, in turn, can expect from the leader. Leaders have benefited from taking the time to develop and update this tool as part of their leadership journey. The resulting transparency impacts organizational culture. By living and leading with a leadership philosophy, leaders can better inspire others around them and set the conditions for the success of individuals, teams, and the organization.

Allen Wyatt, Plant Manager at National Gypsum, worked with BG LeBoeuf as part of a corporate leadership program in which a core deliverable was creating a leadership philosophy. He reflects that *“the knowledge gained about leadership philosophies was a **life-changing event in my leadership career and development**. It taught me how to lead people and manage change. I used the leadership philosophy to collect my thoughts, define the current situation in my facility, and develop a list of personal leadership values that would benefit the company the most. This philosophy was used to **set my standards and expectations** as a leader. It served as a **foundation** that defined our work culture, held me accountable as a leader, and ultimately helped our facility to earn multiple achievement awards.”*

Importance of a Leadership Philosophy: Perspective from the Generals

Brigadier General (Ret.) Becky Halstead

For me, writing a leadership philosophy was the most important leader development action I took toward becoming a more effective leader. It was the number one leader tool I used throughout my 27-year military career and beyond. I intentionally and deliberately used it to hold myself accountable, and I shared it to allow others to hold me accountable.

I first wrote my philosophy in 1997, when I was selected for battalion command and had just attended the Army’s pre-command course. It was my first introduction to the concept of a leadership philosophy, and those of us attending the course were given a variety of examples to help with shaping our own philosophy. At that time, I had been in the Army for 16 years and had held numerous leadership positions. So, when people ask me how long it took for me to develop my leadership philosophy, I tell them it took nearly 2 decades!

As I sat in my new office, with a blank piece of paper in front of me, I decided to first outline what was most important to me as a leader—personal values, what I demanded of myself and expected of others. I spent the next several hours reflecting over my leadership journey, and I created an acronym to capture my values—STEADFAST (Soldiering, Training, Excellence, Attitude, Discipline, Family-Faith-Friends, Accountability, Selfless Service, Teamwork).

I believe the combination of my deliberate process to write my leader philosophy, and having almost 2 decades of leadership experience, resulted in my creating a leadership tool that served me well for the next decade. I changed it very little during my last 11 years in the Army, and it was my most effective leadership tool. I still live it and lead by it today in my personal and professional life as an inspirational speaker, coach, and corporate guide.

Brigadier General (Ret.) Maureen LeBoeuf, Ed.D.

During my 28-year career in the U.S Army, I served as the Director of Instruction in the Department of Physical Education (DPE) at the United States Military Academy at West Point from 1994-1996 and then spent the following year at the Army War College. During the year away, I applied for, and was selected as, the Director and Head of DPE. This was an historic selection, as I am the first woman to chair a department at West Point, and at the time I was selected, West Point had been building the next generation of military leaders for 195 years. I served as Head of the Department of Physical Education from 1997 until my retirement in 2004.

While I had served in DPE and was known by the staff and faculty, they didn't know me as the head of the department. Additionally, my predecessor had led DPE for 23 years. I knew that the first conversation I had with the department was going to be extremely important. In anticipation, prior to my arrival, I wrote my leadership philosophy. The values I selected were: care, dignity and respect, development, managing change, diversity, pride, maintain a sense of humor, and wellness. The following is an excerpt from my leadership philosophy:

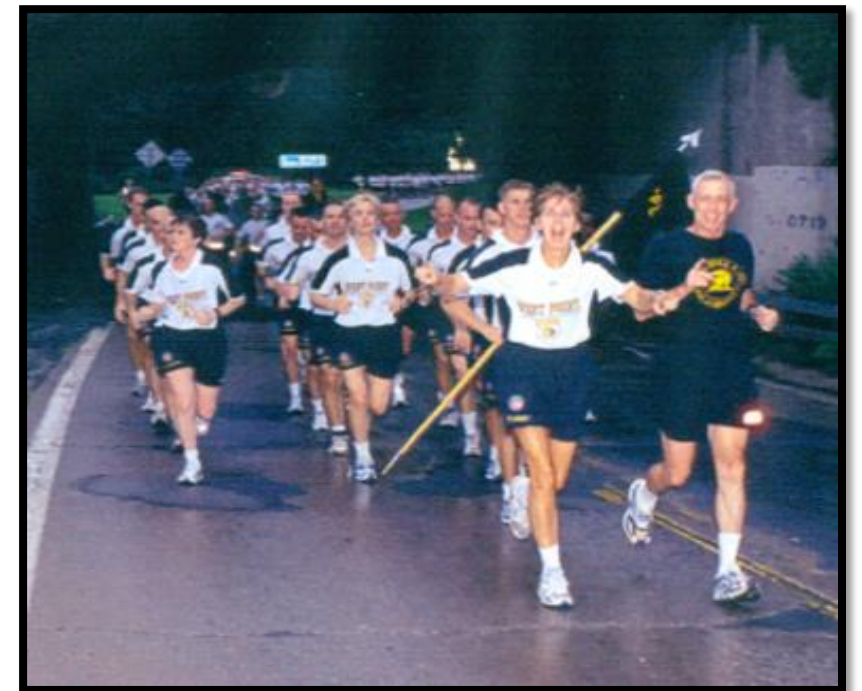
Diversity – we are all different, it is that difference that makes us unique and strong

- We have a wonderfully diverse faculty in DPE; each individual brings their own unique talent, skills and ideas. Everyone is expected and encouraged to contribute. There are no rookies in DPE, first year faculty members yes, but no rookies.
- I value your opinion; I will listen and take suggestions into consideration when making a decision. However, once I make a decision, the debate is over.

Leadership Philosophies in Action

Many are familiar with the group stages of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (source: Tuckman). This is a somewhat normal sequence of events when organizations are formed or transformed, when new people join the team, or new leaders move into leadership positions. The leader philosophy is a hugely effective tool for reducing the learning curve, minimizing surprises, and quickly bringing the team together in a cohesive manner.

As Head of DPE, BG LeBoeuf would share her leadership philosophy with the department at the start of each academic year. Additionally, if a new member arrived in the department after the start of the academic year, they would have an office call, and she would review her leadership philosophy. This way, she knew that everyone in the department heard about her leadership philosophy from her. A new team member means you have a new team; sharing leadership philosophies also helps the individual and team move from forming to performing.



As Head of the Department of Physical Education at West Point, BG LeBoeuf demonstrated the value of wellness, a part of her leadership philosophy, as she led the Department and cadets on a run.

BG Halstead refers to her leader philosophy as her “life philosophy,” because it is how she leads her life every day. Leading is not something you turn on and off between work and home. Her leadership philosophy became the very first document and conversation with every new team she led. As new members joined her team, she shared her leader philosophy with them, as well. It was her personal and professional handshake with every member of her team. By creating the acronym “STEADFAST” to capture the essence of her leader philosophy and defining what each of those individual values meant to her, she discovered that people easily embraced and remembered what she shared.

By [BG \(Ret.\) Becky Halstead](#) & [BG \(Ret.\) Maureen LeBoeuf, Ed.D.](#)

A leadership philosophy is also one way in which you hold yourself accountable; by sharing it with others, you allow others to hold you accountable, as well. Sharing your leadership philosophy can help create a work environment where your team members know they can approach you, respectfully challenge, and further discuss issues. For example, while serving in Iraq, BG Halstead gave her staff specific guidance for providing high-level detail and data on the status of all vehicles that had been modified with additional armor (including Iraqi partner forces). Her senior plans officer requested to see her and explained the significant resources required to complete this task (and what work would not be completed as a result). BG Halstead then reassessed the requirement and drew the conclusion that other than “nice to know”, she really did not need all that data and details; this is a great example of living her leadership philosophy.

Your leadership philosophy is also an effective tool for bridging relationships with people outside of your organization/team. BG Halstead was a logistician in the Army and her organizations provided support (supplies, ammunition, food, water, maintenance of vehicles and weapons, medical, etc.) to other organizations. To be more effective and efficient in their performance, they needed to develop relationships with those organizations. She used her leader philosophy to foster those relationships. For example, while serving in Iraq from 2005 to 2006, BG Halstead was responsible for 20,000 military men and women and 5,000 civilian contractors. It was impossible to personally introduce herself to each and every person on her team. So, she used her leader philosophy to connect and bridge that gap.

You can also use your leadership philosophy to influence other leaders to invest time and energy into writing theirs, too. It is a way in which you can “lead up” to your boss. By sharing your own leadership philosophy with them, you can encourage them to do the same.

Corporate leaders also find incredible value in writing and sharing their own leadership philosophies. Here are a few notable ways that a philosophy has had a positive impact on the leaders, their teams, and their organizations.

Jen Vasin, Senior Vice President of Human Resources at Insight, says *“the exercise of writing (and living by) my leadership philosophy has helped me to grow as a leader. Most notably, it is a document that **holds me personally accountable** for the type of leader I proclaim to be. The philosophy has been helpful to people I interview for my direct team at Insight so they can decide if I’m the type of leader they’re interested in working for. Once people come onboard, the philosophy allows them to call me directly when/if I misstep, and they can **support me in getting back on track**. And, last, but actually most important, the philosophy allows me to make difficult decisions about how to spend my time; when I am in doubt about which of two activities to work on, **I look no further than the leadership philosophy for direction and guidance.**”*

Mallory Trusty, Vice President of OP Experience at OrthoPediatrics, said that writing her leadership philosophy *“allowed me to **reflect on my values and strengths as a leader**, and **be more intentional about communicating those beliefs** to my team. I have shared my Leadership Philosophy with all my colleagues, supervisors, and direct reports – specifically inviting them to hold me accountable to the behaviors I believe in, and aspire to, as a leader. As a result, I have had more open conversations about leadership, and my performance – and shared this experience with others throughout OrthoPediatrics.”*

How to Create a Leadership Philosophy

The leadership philosophy is a tool that works well for leaders in business and industry. While the end result of the written philosophy may not look complex, it does take time to develop. It requires self-reflection to determine what really are your values - what is truly important to you, how you live, and how you lead. While this can take some time, don’t let overthinking it get in the way of getting your first draft completed.



“Battle buddies” BG Halstead (left) and BG LeBoeuf (right) keep one another committed to their individual leader philosophy and behaviors.

Tyler Kunkel, Lead Product Trainer at US Ophthalmics says that *“writing your leadership philosophy is challenging for most people to complete. It’s almost like describing the most incredible adventure where you visualize it perfectly, however, you can’t decide where to begin despite your excitement. Upon putting pen to paper, we see our people at US Ophthalmics **lead with greater confidence** in their purpose, and I can personally attest to just that. Since writing mine over 4 years ago, I have **led with greater clarity ensuring my vision, actions, and behaviors align to my purpose.**”*

Your leadership philosophy does not need to be too long -- two pages at the most. There is no singular format, so write it in a way that reflects how you lead or aspire to lead. The most important part is getting started! Below is high-level approach for preparing a leadership philosophy:

1. Select your personal leadership values. The narrowing down of values can be daunting. However, as a leader, you cannot be everything to everyone. A way to narrow down the list is to put the words in the following categories: *most important, important, not important*. Narrow down to your top five to ten. The values you ultimately select should reflect who you really are (or who you aspire to be). They must be your authentic self.
2. Define each value. Remember, this is *your* definition, not Webster’s.
3. Write how you will *live* the values you selected and what you expect of your team or organization.
4. Once your leadership philosophy is written, allow some trusted advisors to review it. It is important to ask for feedback around this all-important document. You want to ensure the values you selected are authentic, the document is easy to understand, and there are no typos.
5. Once your leadership philosophy has been completed, share it with your team.
6. The most important part of the leadership philosophy is that you must live it!
7. Review your leadership philosophy at least annually, as both you and your organization will change over time. Your leadership philosophy will evolve as you do.

In both BG LeBoeuf’s and BG Halstead’s books, [Developing Your Philosophy of Living & Leading](#) and [24/7: The First Person You Must Lead Is You](#), respectively, they guide leaders through how to turn values into what will become their individual leadership philosophy. The Generals expound on how they developed and live their own philosophies; they also give examples of other leaders’ philosophies as guidance and inspiration.

Closing Thoughts: “Be” the Standard

Leadership is about leading by example and being the standard. One of the best ways to do so is to invest your time and efforts into writing your leadership philosophy. Your leadership philosophy is your “handshake” and commitment with, and to, others. By sharing it with those who work with you, you are also communicating the importance and priority you place on the leadership philosophy. This action also influences those on your team to follow suit and do the same for their team. Hands down, it will become one of your most powerful leader tools.

Write (or refresh) your leadership philosophy, share it, and most importantly, live it!

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ABOUT THE EXPERTS

[Brigadier General \(Retired\) Becky Halstead](#) is the first woman graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point to be promoted to General Officer and the first woman in U.S. history to command in combat at the strategic level. She has over 30 years of experience leading large organizations in dynamic and challenging environments. Becky is a faculty member with Thayer Leadership at West Point and the author of [“24/7: The First Person You Must Lead is You.”](#)

[Brigadier General \(Retired\) Maureen LeBoeuf, Ed.D.](#) was the first woman department head at the U.S. Military Academy. She has 28 years of leadership experience both in the Army and as the Former Executive Director of the Feagin Leadership Program at Duke Sports Medicine. Maureen currently serves as a faculty member with Thayer Leadership at West Point. She is also the author of [“Developing Your Philosophy of Living & Leading: One Moment at a Time.”](#)