Q&A with First Sergeant Thomas Ochoa: Growing into Leadership—Part 2: The Latter Years

By Thomas Ochoa with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/at7thmar

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Thomas Ochoa's perspectives and do not reflect those of the United States Marine Corps or the United States Military. This article has been reviewed by two intelligence professionals with over two decades of experience and has been deemed to have no classified materials.

Introduction

First Sergeant Thomas J. Ochoa is a United States Marine with over twenty years of active-duty experience. He has conducted nine deployments, to four Geographic Combatant Commands, and over ten countries, including combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. First Sergeant Ochoa started off his Marine Corps career as a 0311, Infantry Rifleman with 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, and has held every enlisted leadership billet in a rifle platoon and rifle company, including team leader, squad leader, platoon sergeant, company gunnery sergeant, and company first sergeant. He has conducted two tours of duty at the School of the Infantry-East, being a combat instructor for both Marine Combat Training Battalion and Infantry Training Battalion, where he trained thousands of Marines in the tactics, techniques, and procedures of the infantry. Today, he is the Headquarters Company First Sergeant for Combat Logistics Battalion 7.

First Sergeant Ochoa's two Q&A articles center on leadership. During his journey, he has led in combat and in garrison, with successes and failures along the way. He has seen excellent leadership in his Marine Corps career, as well as occurrences of the lack of leadership. Being an enlisted Marine, his profession requires him to lead down, laterally, and up. Along his leadership journey, he has grown into leadership in an effort to become the leader that he feels his Marines deserve.



Above is the author (right), then a staff sergeant, with his wife, Tave Balman Ochoa, of twenty years. The two are at a staff and officer event in the spring of 2018 with 3d Battalion, 2d Marines.

Over time, as you progressed in rank and position, your views on leadership have changed. In your current position, you view endurance and humility as key to leadership. What do you mean by endurance is critical for leadership?

To be clear, all levels of leadership require a certain amount of decisiveness; however, most senior positions afford you with more time to observe, orient, decide, and act (i.e., the OODA Loop cycle created by retired Colonel John Boyd, United States Air Force). This pause is given to you for a reason: your higher leadership wants you to conduct research, run through scenarios, and properly frame the problem and its solution. Obviously, your leadership does not want you to miss set timelines, but rushing to be first to solve a problem does no good if you are rushing to defeat. I found that there was one issue with this "extra" decision time: the issues were bigger and far-reaching. The problems I encountered at higher levels typically affected a larger population. Due to the years I had spent caring for my Marines, I found myself willing to sacrifice more of my time and energy to ensure that they were taken care of through my preparation.

As a gunnery sergeant (seventh enlisted rank), at one of our senior enlisted leadership schools, I asked a senior sergeant major (ninth enlisted rank) how he continues to give: "How do you still have enough energy to continue to give after twenty-four years of service? I have only been in for fourteen to fifteen years, and I am exhausted. I am trying to continue to give 100 percent, but it's getting hard."

I will never forget his response. "I am glad you are tired," he said. I remember thinking this guy might be a



Newly promoted Staff Sergeant Thomas Ochoa (left) visits one of the best leaders he has known in his twenty-year journey in the Marine Corps, his brother, then Staff Sergeant Michael Ochoa (right). The two were able to connect on a deployment, while in a training area in Okinawa, Japan.

jerk, but then he kept going. He asked if anyone else was tired, and a few brave gunnery sergeants raised their hands. "I am ecstatic that so many of you are tired. I would rather have a tired gunnery sergeant who cares about his Marines enough to work to exhaustion than some well-rested guy or girl who doesn't care about his team. To be a good leader, you have to be willing to give extra; you just have to. I cannot say it enough but thank you. Thank you for caring." He then discussed balance and ways to recharge your battery.

At graduation, that same sergeant major told me that he was glad I had asked that question and that the situation I had been working through is why endurance is a leadership trait. It takes endurance to keep giving it your all year after year. And while I may have found myself with more time to make decisions, I really had found myself with more time to give. To endure hardship, while striving to serve those in your unit, is to lead.



Staff Sergeant Ochoa floating down the Fjords in Norway during Operation Cold Response 2016. The author believes that the extreme cold can teach someone much about themselves.

Why is humility needed for leadership? Can one reach one's true leadership potential without humility?

The absolute worst leaders I have had at any level all lacked humility. It is simply impossible to grow without humility. I believe that the opposite of humility is ego. While displaying humility, true humility, can lead to your growth, ego only saps your potential. You might say things like, "That's good enough, and I'm good enough." These statements show laziness, ego, and a lack of humility, and is a disservice for those who one leads. It can be hard to look in the mirror and say, "That wasn't good enough; I can do better."

Since the day that my good friend Daniel Olsen died in Iraq on April 2, 2007, I have striven to get better in all aspects of my life. I highly doubt that there is anything more humbling than that first defeat and loss of a friend. For the last twenty years, I have been trying to make sure that I am not just good at my profession. I want to be great, and any leader worth their salt should not be satisfied with just being good; they, too, should want to be great.

A prior commander had spent a good amount of time teaching me about Jim Collins and his book *Good to Great*. While I won't go into too much about it, the overall premise is that most people and businesses never achieve greatness because they settle for being good. There are a million reasons to settle for good enough, here are a few:

- *You're tired.* The reality is that you must fight for yourself and your team: ENDURE.
- *You're not sure where to go or what to do.* The more that you learn and train, the faster that you will be able to act. Never stop learning and training: BE DECISIVE
- *You have nothing left to learn.* Ego will sap your growth and potential, kill it. Don't settle for being good—be great: HAVE HUMILITY

In the end, none of these excuses are helpful, as only

great Marines and great leaders can truly increase the odds of victory on the battlefield.

As a platoon sergeant, company gunnery sergeant, and company first sergeant, you are paired with an officer to be their enlisted advisor. While the officer outranks you, they rarely (if ever) have more experience than you. What advice can you provide on leading up the chain of command?

The first and most important piece of advice that I can give was also discussed earlier: a great leader must have humility. Readers may hear this piece of advice and think, "Yes, officers need to show humility. They lack the experience that their enlisted counterpart has." While it is correct that an officer must display humility, it is especially important that Staff Noncommissioned Officers (SNCOs) (i.e., sixth to ninth grade of enlisted Marines) do so as well. We, SNCOs, are not perfect; each of us has gaps in our knowledge or experiences. Showing humility is step one.

I am aware that not all officers hit the mark; I understand this reality, but most are incredibly knowledgeable, eager, and more than willing to teach any ready Marine. I have found that when I express a desire to learn from my officer, they are also more likely to learn from me, and together we grow stronger. It takes time and patience to build this mutual trust. Everyone is hesitant to take advice from someone they've just met. After you build this mutually respectful relationship, your officer will be more likely to listen to your advice, if you have the experience and knowledge to offer it in the first place. Thus, building a relationship based on shared respect is step two.

It is also easier to build this relationship with lower-level officers. Don't forget, your officer continues to get formally educated as they pick up rank, something the enlisted often fall behind in comparatively, as the enlisted education is mostly to make them subject matter experts in their military occupational specialty. As a staff sergeant, your lieutenant has at a minimum a bachelor's degree, as is required for all officers. As a gunnery sergeant or first



Shown above are the Marines of Lima Company, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines executing a mechanized assault with the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR), Australian Defense Forces in the summer of 2022.



Shown above are two generations of 1st Platoon, India Company, 3d Battalion, 2d Marines. Far left is First Lieutenant Godwin next to the author; on the far right is First Lieutenant Kirby (two of the best officers that the author was lucky enough to serve with as the platoon sergeant for 1st Platoon).

sergeant, your captain or major may have a master's degree. If you want to lead up, you'll have to speak their language to relate to them. Getting smart enough, often through self-education, to have advice to give is step three.

At the end of the day, you must be humble, remain patient, get smart, and, as long as you have consistently demonstrated competence, your officer may follow your lead. Try to remember, though, just because they listen to your advice doesn't mean that they must take it, as you *do not* always have the right answer. Additionally, the burden falls on the officer for their decisions. Regardless of what our advice as SNCOs is, if the plan fails, the negative consequences are on the officer's shoulders.

You've stated that you will never forget some of the lessons that your officers have taught you. Additionally, you've stated that one of the most beneficial experiences that you've had leadership-wise was being negatively counseled by a brand-new lieutenant. Can you elaborate on any of these experiences?

As an enlisted Marine, your time in service, your multiple deployments, your Special Duty Assignments, and your experience *do not* mean that you have nothing left to learn. Thinking that you have nothing to learn from any Marine, let alone any officer, is foolish and detrimental to your growth. It is vital that you remember that one of the primary roles of a commissioned officer is to teach, and I have learned so much from my officers.

My first platoon commander in 2007 knew that I was upset over Daniel's death (which was recent at the time) and gave me some advice that I will never forget. Once I had vented about the loss of my friend, he began to talk about control. He told me that I didn't control Daniel, nor did I control the enemy. He said, "The one thing you do control in life is your thoughts, your actions, and how you choose to react to the events in your life." It wasn't immediate, but this new lieutenant taught me how to begin to control my emotions, which has served me well over the years. Later, I would learn that the concept he shared was an aspect of stoicism. While I did not know it at the time, my lieutenant had taught me philosophy. He never elaborated on where he had learned the concepts, but he kept stopping by to teach me philosophy throughout the deployment; he simply wanted me to heal.

My first platoon commander when I was a platoon sergeant in 2014, was a little socially awkward. He was also very smart, physically fit, and a good human being. I had checked in after teaching at School of the Infantry, had been meritoriously promoted to staff sergeant (sixth enlisted grade), graduated from the Infantry Unit Leaders Course, and had been to combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. I imagine that it was a little intimidating for a new lieutenant.

Unfortunately, after a few months into our deployment, I began to repeatedly fall short.

I was forgetting some timelines and missing some minor details. My lieutenant, who had been in service for less than two years, asked me to grab my notepad and sit down. He then showcased how some of my errors were hurting the platoon. I wouldn't have corrected these issues as quickly had he not called me out. I made the corrections, and we became good partners. Two years later, at his going-away, I pulled out the paper notes that I had written during the counseling. I said, "I know this must have been hard for you, but it helped the platoon, and it made me better. Thank you, Sir." I still have access to his input and reflect on his counsel to this day.

What do you believe the optimal relationship is between an enlisted Marine and their officer? Is the relationship different at the different levels of leadership?

The relationship between enlisted Marines and officers is dynamic and changing. For anyone who is enlisted, it is important to remember that the officer is your superior, regardless of your rank. If this fact upsets you, learn some humility, earn a commission, or get out of the military.

As a junior enlisted Marine, the relationship is simple. Your officer gives you commands, and you follow them. Along with the SNCO, they are also responsible for teaching, coaching, and mentoring you. As long as the command team holds up their end of the bargain by teaching and training, the junior enlisted tasks are simple: listen, learn, show up on time, and have the gear that you need to compete and win.

As a non-commissioned officer (NCO) (i.e., the fourth or fifth grade of enlistment), you start to become the middle ground. You will be the primary trainer of the junior Marines at the direction of your officer and senior enlisted. This is a great position to be in, as you take your first steps up the chain of command. As an NCO, you still have a lot to learn. Look to your senior enlisted officer and your commissioned officer for guidance and education. As the officer, remember that you work through your NCOs. Lean on your SNCO to help teach and train them. Your platoon will only be as good as your NCOs.

As an SNCO, you need to accept that you will likely never be the patrol leader ever again on a mission. This fact is hard for many enlisted Marines, as the Corps emphasizes for the small unit leader to have decisive action at the point of friction. However, you now have the incredibly difficult and important task of guiding and mentoring what could be a future general, and this officer will never forget their first interactions with their SNCOs. The platoon will succeed or fail based on how well you train your NCOs and mentor the officer. *Do not* fail in this task, as your officer will only grow in influence as they progress in rank and position.

The officer must exercise balance. The officer will work with their SNCO, while still leading and holding them accountable. Do not be intimidated by their experience; learn from it, as a strong command team can change the outcome in battle.

Lastly, for every officer, never forget that you chose to commission. We expect you to look, speak, and act differently, and to be professional at all times. I imagine it can be exhausting to be "above reproach." This is why endurance is critical for a leader. You are not enlisted and should never emulate us in public. From private to first sergeant, I have studied and trained to not only be professional like you but also to beat you as well. If you lower your example, you will lower us all.

One of your most critical roles as the senior enlisted advisor is maintaining the culture and discipline of the unit. Any advice on how to maintain the standards of the organization?



Shown above is the casualty evacuation team during a company life-fire assault through the Australian "bush" during the 2022 summer Marine Rotational Force-Darwin deployment. These Marines were a part of Lima Company, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines.

A senior enlisted advisor alone cannot maintain culture or discipline in a unit; it absolutely requires a group effort. The first and most important person whom you need to be in sync with is the commanding officer. Plan a meeting and take some time to discuss your vision for the unit's future. After the vision is defined, identify the linchpin that will make it a reality. This concept was taught to me by the first commanding officer I had as a first sergeant, Captain Jack Morgan. Together, we identified the vision for Lima Company, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, and spent the next year making it a reality. I have yet to be in a unit where the linchpin that holds the company together isn't the NCOs, in particular, the sergeants. If you can get the sergeants on board, everything will fall into place.

Getting the team to care about culture and discipline requires both enthusiasm and persuasion. I find that units whose leadership relies solely on an authoritative approach to enforcing discipline end up fostering only obedience instead. An obedient Marine is likely to fail when their leadership is not near, whereas a disciplined Marine will survive and thrive on their own.

Culture may be hard to build and maintain, but it is the only way to keep a unit successful long after your departure. Building and sustaining your unit's culture will also require buy-in from the staff and junior leaders, as—again—you cannot accomplish the desired outcome on your own. However, I have joined units that lacked a strong culture, resulting in a decline in personal discipline. It may be hard to get it started on your own, but it's worth it in the end. Sometimes it just takes one person to get the ball rolling and show others the benefits of a strong culture and personal discipline. Lead by your example and never forget that it only takes one spark to start a fire.

You have led down, laterally, and up over your time in your Marine Corps career. You

state that leading your peers (laterally) is the most difficult. What advice can you give to leading your peers?

Empathy, relatability, and displayed competence will get you far with your peers. If you can truly show empathy for their situation, then they typically respond in kind. If you are relatable, then it is easier for others to understand your goals. Lastly, absolutely zero people will willingly follow you if you are not good or great at whatever it is that you do.

Leading laterally is also a callback to an earlier answer that I gave about leading by example. Others will want to get on board and follow you if you are emulating the qualities often sought after by the team. I often seek out peers who are faster, stronger, and smarter as a way of seeking to improve myself. In this way, I am being led by my peers.

Lastly, you must be persuasive. This trait is a hard-fought one that requires a lot of practice and training. It is not enough to say smart words; you also must check your tone and inflection and pay careful attention to your body language. In a related piece of advice, do a little reading into interpersonal communication and body language. The more of these skills that you learn, the easier time you have communicating and getting your peers to follow your direction. I cannot tell you how many times I have been talking to someone about an important issue when their body language told me they were not interested. I would then break contact, re-evaluate, and re-engage at a later date, and maybe next time I would bring their favorite soda.



Shown above is the best group of 8999s (First Sergeants and Sergeant Major) that the author has ever served with in his twenty-year career; specifically, those of 3d Battalion 7th Marines, from 2023 to 2025. From left to right, First Sergeant Ochoa, First Sergeant Sortino, First Sergeant Prutch, Sergeant Major Cuellar, First Sergeant Goard, First Sergeant Alavardo, and First Sergeant Ruelas.

Any final thoughts on leadership?

In the Marine Corps, gunnery sergeants (seventh enlisted grade) must make a decision prior to promoting to the eighth enlisted grade. They must decide if they will stay with their military occupation and become a true subject matter expert by becoming a master sergeant. Or they must decide to become a first sergeant, a subject matter expert in leadership, whose

primary responsibility is advising the commander on non-technical issues, such as customs, discipline, morale, culture, and administrative issues.

One of the most senior Marines in my service recently asked why my colleagues and I had decided to go the first sergeant route in our careers. We were also asked to look into what paths the younger SNCOs wanted to go and why. When I asked my junior SNCOs, it became apparent that a few of my Marines did not find becoming a first sergeant, and later a sergeant major, appealing or even rewarding. Perhaps I had not been displaying the rewarding nature of being a senior enlisted leader. I had a similar discussion years ago with three young, hard-hitting sergeants about becoming an SNCO (i.e., sixth grade of enlistment and higher). Their answer was also, "No, thank you. It looks terrible." So, in an effort to practice what I preach, below are the reasons that I chose first sergeant and the joys that I found in it along the way. My hope is that other SNCOs, regardless of rank or level, do the same for their Marines. It only takes one spark.

My original military occupational specialty was 0311, Infantry Rifleman. I was assigned to a traditional line company where my SNCO leadership ended with a first sergeant. It seemed natural to follow the same career path. It was during my second deployment, when I saw my company first sergeant evacuate the wounded Marines—myself included, that I knew that I wanted to be a first sergeant.

Nothing is more important to an enlisted leader than bringing everyone home.



The staff non-commissioned officers and commissioned officers in the author's first company as a newly promoted first sergeant. This was the end of First Sergeant Ochoa's Marine Rotational Force-Darwin deployment (summer 2022). This candid photo shows the Marines with whom First Sergeant Ochoa had achieved his dream as a young corporal, becoming a first sergeant in the 7th Marine Regiment.

Almost every first sergeant whom I had worked with was physically fit, intelligent, motivated, well-spoken, and showed care through action. So, as a corporal, I stood in front of my platoon in 29 Palms (Marine Corps base in California) and told them that I would come back to 29 Palms one day to be a first sergeant in 7th Marines. They laughed, but I met several other first sergeants and sergeant majors over time who helped me pursue my dream. In October 2022, I achieved it. I even got to take an infantry company on deployment twice from 7th Marines. Having achieved my seemingly impossible goal, each additional day that I get to be a first sergeant is now a gift.

I get to make an impact on Marines every day. Every time that I run a meritorious board, I get to see young, hard-charging Marines fighting for a promotion. Win or lose, they learn, and I get to have long conversations with both. Every award I help a young officer with goes to a deserving Marine. Being a first sergeant, I also get to mentor and advise officers. Young officers become old generals, and I hope that, for my officers, I did justice to our Corps.

One of my favorite Marines to sacrifice my time for is the one who receives non-judicial punishment. I have mentored countless Marines who have made mistakes. I find it incredibly rewarding to help someone learn and grow, and in many cases, these individuals need it the most. To the Marines who end up facing separation, I get to spend time with them as well. Regardless of why they are separated, I chose first sergeant because I care about people, so I get to help them too.

Take leadership seriously for no other reason than to help other people. I have found that helping others is all that matters in this life, and if you really want to make a difference to a massive group of people, by the sheer nature of your job, become a first sergeant.

