Old Dogs and New Colonels

by

Professor Gene Kamena¹

The adage goes, "you cannot teach old dogs new tricks." Being the owner of an old dog,² I know that old dogs are able to learn new tricks; but it is not easy to teach them something new unless they want to learn. Newly promoted Colonels attending the Air War College (AWC) often take on the learning habits of old dogs; I find this particularly true where the subject of leadership is concerned. I need to make the point here that I have no desire to castigate new Colonels or old dogs, seldom have I met one that I did not like. Colonels, usually newly promoted or about to be promoted, attending AWC are capable of learning new leadership techniques, but they, just like old dogs, must have the desire to want to learn before progress is possible. As a Professor of Leadership³, I expend a lot of time and much of my energy convincing new Colonels that it is in their best interest to expand their leadership skills as they prepare for future demands. Sometimes I make the point, especially to the Colonels with fractious personalities, that old dogs and new Colonels who have stopped learning, are kept around because they had been faithful in the past; more for what they have already accomplished than what they will do today or might do in the future--the point being that old dogs and new Colonels, who do not learn, provide limited value.

At the risk of a challenge from my more research-savvy colleagues, I make the next statement solely based on years of experience and personal observation. Colonels arriving at AWC can be categorized into three leadership groupings. About twenty percent of new Colonels realize that leading as a Colonel is inherently different and they work hard to expand their knowledge. Another twenty percent of new Colonels believe that they know all there is to know about leadership--this group works hard not to learn. The remaining sixty percent of new Colonels intuitively understand that leading as a Colonel differs from the "direct leadership" world from whence they came. This last group takes in information while at the War College, but they are not "all in." Unfortunately, it will take a future leadership event or crisis, an assignment or two after graduation, to convince the officers in this last group to expand and change. Although better late than never, epiphanies may come at a price; pain, loss of efficiency, and wounded reputations. In sum, there are many breeds of dogs and Colonels.
Why do some old dogs and many new Colonels want to cling so tenaciously to the past? I offer a theory, although again not supported by in-depth research, but by experience and personal observations. Kamena’s theory of old dogs and new Colonels goes like this; if you tell old dogs and new Colonels that they are successful (dogs get treats while Colonels are selected to attend the Air War College), that they are the best of breed (dogs get championship ratings and Lieutenant Colonels get promoted), and that there is no need to learn new tricks (dogs are told "good dog," while Colonels are told to stay with what works), neither new Colonel nor old canine will see the need to continue learning.

The real challenge is to convince these new Colonels that post AWC leadership requirements demand more acumen than the sum of their past leadership experiences provide. The majority of AWC students have more than twenty years of experience; in other words, more than twenty years of positive reinforcement (that is a lot of treats). These Colonels are comfortable with who they are; they understand that they were selected for promotion and attendance to AWC based on past deeds and performance. So essentially, they were selected based on old tricks.

Inevitably, new Colonels ask the question "what really changes while leading as a Colonel?" What they really mean is "why do I have to change?" In seminar, the faculty attempts to make several points to answer these valid questions, but tend to highlight that Colonels work in a world of larger and more complex organizations, indirect vice direct leadership, consensus, and strategic communication. In other words, it is not more of the same; the leadership environment changes. Just as we do not want old dogs to forget their old tricks when learning new ones, Colonels should build upon what they already know. Sometimes it is just a matter of doing the right trick at the right time.

From time to time, I have an opportunity to speak one-on-one with a new Colonel about leadership. During these sessions, I sometimes offer an analogy comparing leading as a Colonel to leading a large pack of dogs; people and dogs follow the leaders (pack leader for dogs) who make sound decisions and are capable of providing for the needs of the organization (or the pack). If the student determines my dog analogy to be unconvincing, I then offer the following three ideas in an attempt to answer the questions "what really changes after graduation from AWC and why continuing to learn new leadership tricks is important?"

Colonels lead, mentor and develop other leaders: Just as the pack leader trains other members of the dog pack to one day be the leader, Colonels train Lieutenant Colonels to be Colonels. Mentoring is a big part of what Colonels do. Mentoring is not leading subordinate organizations, it is allowing subordinate commanders to lead, make mistakes, learn, and grow. Colonels provide top cover, give advice when needed, and encourage subordinates. Mentoring
requires finesse and skill; remember no one likes an intrusive boss. As a Colonel, your job is to establish an environment that fosters success.

Colonels are also required to make difficult decisions. As a senior leader you now decide which Lieutenant Colonel is worthy of advancement within the organization. This is a leadership decision, it is not a personality contest; therefore, Colonels must separate personal feelings from actual talent and future potential. Each service has their own way of selecting future leaders, but suffice to say, make sure your vote counts. As a brigade commander for three battalion commanders, I was able to select (influence) only one of the three battalion commanders to be a future brigade commander. This is tough business, especially when you have to look people in the eye and explain to them why they were not rated as the top Lieutenant Colonel. But then, being the pack leader is not always easy.

Colonels set priorities and provide resources: In the same way as pack leaders provide food for their pack, Colonels ensure their organizations have the resources required to get the job done. One thing that changes as a Colonel is that you can no longer merely ask for more resources, be it money, people or time. You now must establish priorities, balance shortfalls of resources and decide what will and will not get accomplished--where to take risk. Colonels realize resources are scarce (and will become even more so in the near future); therefore, asking for more is done only as a last resort. Senior leaders get paid to garner the most efficiency from their organizations, to cross-level resources and, when necessary, to take risk. Good Colonels avoid the "do more with less" trap; they do the most with what they have, and when appropriate they ensure their boss understands what will and will not get done--they get "buy in." Again, being the pack leader in any organization is not easy.

Colonels build and foster relationships: A good pack leader ensures harmony within the pack. In the same vein, senior leaders build and foster relationships within the organizations they lead. But now, to a much larger degree than as a Lieutenant Colonel, they also build bridges outside their organization. Peer relationships matter more to Colonels, because, Colonels need other Colonels to get things done. Rank between Colonels is meaningless; therefore reputation, trust, and the ability to build consensus matter more to Colonels than the rank on one's collar. This is also true when working with other governmental agencies, allies, and non-governmental organizations. While Lieutenant Colonels can succeed by focusing their energy internally to their organizations, Colonels cannot afford to do so. The successful pack leader is adept at building and managing relationships.

In closing "mentoring" sessions with new Colonels, I convey the following thoughts respective to the leadership group to which they belong:

- To the twenty percent of new Colonels who "get it," I say keep learning; the study of leadership is a lifelong process.
• To the sixty percent of Colonels who delay the inevitable, I tell them that they can avoid lost time, wasted energy and personal pain if they work now to open their leadership aperture. They will eventually have to change and adapt to succeed, so why allow future circumstances or an unpleasant event to force the change--get on with it. I emphasize, do it for yourself and for the people that you will lead.

• To the twenty percent of Colonels who refuse to change, I inform them that they will be great Lieutenant Colonels masquerading as senior leaders. This usually does not go over well, but even old dogs and new Colonels need to hear the truth.

Finally, employing my canine analogy one last time, I remind old dogs who refuse to learn new tricks that there is always a challenger, one who continues to learn and grow. One day the pack will choose a new leader over them, because it is in the pack’s best interests to do so. But do not fret; we love our old dogs, even the ones who will not learn. We give them bones and ensure that they are cared for, but sadly, their pack leading days are numbered.

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1 Dr. Kathleen Mahoney-Norris and Colonel (USAF), Mike Downs and Colonel Al Hunt provided valuable editorial recommendations.
2 My dog’s name is Draco, but sadly, he is getting on in years. He is still eager to learn and I value his instincts, friendship and loyalty.
3 Professor Gene Kamena serves as the course director for the Joint Strategic Leadership at AWC. He is a retired Army Colonel with more than 30 years of commissioned service in the Infantry. He has taught leadership to new Colonels for more than five years.