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**ALL MANAGERS ARE BASTARDS**  
**Some Thoughts on Leadership**

**INTRODUCTION**

Late in 1973 a group of young men received leadership training at the Officer Cadet School, Portsea. I was one of them, and was 20 years old at the time. Such training has been happening for hundreds of years at officer training establishments around the world. The military is one of the few places where good leadership training is routinely provided for aspiring leaders.

**LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE ADJUTANT**

The adjutant at Portsea conducted much of this training. During one lesson he described policies, work methods and good practice generally, including military law. He suggested that a policy or work standard was like an invisible barbed wire fence that set the acceptable limits of behaviour and the acceptable work standards. He added that we could be sure that soon after such a policy or standard was created, that someone would decide to test it ... edging ever closer to the invisible barbed wire ... just to determine how serious his superiors were.

“That’s fine”, he said. “It’s what we expect. It nearly always happens, even in good units. Your job is to ensure that when they bounce off the invisible barbed wire fence that there is a little blood on their shirts”.

This was his folksy way of saying that leaders are responsible to enforce standards. He went on to ensure us that if we did not do this, standards would gradually slip over time, and so would performance. He was, of course, quite correct.

The adjutant also provided instruction on techniques leaders needed. One lesson concerned itself with the question, “How do you march a soldier or non-commissioned officer into your office, let him know in no uncertain terms that he has fouled up (perhaps unacceptable behaviour or practice), and have him leave your office suitably chastened but with his dignity intact?” We were taught three methods to achieve this aim. Only one is remembered because it is the approach with which I felt comfortable and which I used for the subsequent 42 years. It was the “sandwich approach”, which does not need to be dealt with here. Suffice to say, it works for me.

**LESSONS FROM THE REGIMENTAL SERGEANT MAJOR**

As graduation loomed on the horizon, the Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) conducted a session to groom the potential officers in readiness for some of the issues they would face.

He discussed several issues, including the relationship between non-commissioned officers (supervisors) and their officers.

He also prepared the soon-to-be-graduates for their “baptism of fire” as leaders. One aspect for which he prepared the young leaders was how they could be sure their leadership abilities would be tested by the men very soon after they marched into their first Regiment; usually on the first day.

He explained it thus. “You will be walking somewhere and a soldier, or a small group of soldiers will pass you. One or more of them will fail to salute. You can be very sure that this will happen at least once, and perhaps several times, on the first day or first couple of days.”

The RSM continued, “You have options. You can think to yourself that it is no big deal, and we all know how emotionally tough it is to correct or discipline, on the spot, men who are older and more experienced than you. If you choose this path I can guarantee you that over morning tea these soldiers will explain to their mates that Lefty McConnell is a *weak* bastard”

“On the other hand, if you stop these soldiers immediately, check their behaviour and require an exchange of salutes you can be sure that over morning tea these soldiers will explain to their mates that Lefty McConnell is a *proper* bastard”

The RSM paused to let those words sink in before continuing, “But if you think about it, this is quite liberating. All officers are bastards. QED. So, you get to choose what kind of bastard you want to be. You can be a weak bastard, or you can be a proper bastard. Choose!”

He then suggested we think on this subject whilst we took a short break before marching in to our first Regiments. Before closing the lesson he asked us, “Who do you think the men respect the most; the weak bastards, or the proper bastards?”

### **TIMELESS LESSONS**

These lessons are not only timeless, but also they are universal. They apply everywhere, not only in the military.

The great advantage young officers have always enjoyed is the sure and certain knowledge that every senior officer in the Regiment would back them up on such issues. Sadly, junior leaders in industry and commerce are seldom trained as officer cadets are, and often they do not feel backed up by their bosses. Too many of them become weak bastards. Standards slip. Mining practices become shoddy ... lips and launders in process plants are not cleaned regularly ... machine set-up becomes sloppy ... maintenance checks and routine lubrication are overlooked or performed sloppily ... housekeeping slips ... deadlines are routinely missed ... quality and productivity suffers. Safety becomes a problem. Costs rise, and all this can be a result of poor leadership that fails to enforce standards and good practice.

Every manager, superintendent and supervisor faces the same decision. All bosses are bastards ... now choose what kind of bastard you want to be.