

What Legal Leaders Can Learn From Marine Corps Principles

By **Edet Nsemo** (February 3, 2026)

Every U.S. Marine celebrates their birthday on Nov. 10. November 2025 marked 250 years since the Continental Congress raised two battalions of Marines to fight the British and secure American independence.

This past November, I reflected on the small-unit leadership principles that are foundational to the U.S. Marine Corps experience — and how those same principles offer a blueprint for addressing leadership gaps that persist in the legal profession.



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In the Marine Corps, failure is not an option. That truth is not bravado; it is discipline. You prepare so relentlessly that when the mission shifts, you and your team move with it — because the mission always shifts.

My mission changed when I exchanged combat utilities for a suit and tie, but the standard did not. The stakes in law are different from those in the military, but the costs of poor leadership are just as real, relative to the mission. After spending the better part of 15 years serving either in the Corps or practicing law, the lesson remains the same.

The Corps taught me how to keep people and the mission aligned under pressure, whereas the legal profession more often shows what happens when those elements diverge.

I have been fortunate to learn from strong lawyers and thoughtful leaders. Having said that, patterns show up across the legal industry and likely at every law firm, even those with the best of intentions. Because I have heard and observed these stories time and time again, I have highlighted here what the legal profession can learn from the Marines.

Gen. Clifton B. Cates said it well — to paraphrase, leadership is hard to measure, but it can be developed. Inherent ability matters, but the rest — initiative, pride, responsibility — can be learned. Leaders can be made. Here is what legal leaders can learn from the Marines.

The Enlisted Lens and the Junior Attorney Parallel

I was not an officer. I was enlisted, which is a different operating environment. Officers lead, plan and fight, but they also carry institutional responsibilities that pull them in many directions. Enlisted Marines live closer to the immediate problem set.

That is the perspective I draw from, and it is the same vantage point junior attorneys occupy: close to the facts, close to the deadlines and close to the work that actually moves a matter forward.

In the military, officers identify mission objectives, while enlisted Marines seize them. Good officers trust small units to solve the problem because that is where the fight is actually fought.

This decentralized decision tree is intentional. It trains units to improvise and solve problems in real time. This ground-level ingenuity is why missions succeed when the plan collapses and the facts on the ground refuse to cooperate.

Small-unit leadership begins in Marine Corps boot camp, where the engine runs at redline from the moment you step onto the yellow footprints — the literal painted outlines where every recruit first stands at attention with heels together and feet at 45 degrees — to the moment you graduate. Falling behind is not an option. Feedback is immediate, public and loud enough to rattle your fillings.

The goal is not humiliation, but alignment. You learn teamwork because shared hardship strips away both individualism and ego. You learn that individual heroics without coordination create risk, and that failure caused by poor preparation, poor communication or poor execution is unacceptable.

Law school is also a crucible, but it shapes a different kind of metal. It sharpens analytical thinking, rewards competitive ranking and emphasizes individual performance. Boot camp, by contrast, teaches you to think like a teammate through clear intent, shared risk and execution under pressure. It is also where the "Six Ps" — prior proper planning prevents poor performance — become second nature, because preparation and coordination are not optional when the lesson is survival.

Because firms often inherit the output of law schools, they can also inherit the gaps: talented associates who may not yet know how to integrate into a moving strategy without context.

Small-unit leadership habits must be built intentionally, because law school focuses on individual advancement rather than collective execution. As a result, it is not hard to fathom that, in many instances, leadership in the profession often remains centered on the individual instead of developing into coordinated team performance.

This is not an apples-to-apples comparison, but the parallels are instructive. Boot camp builds teams. Law school builds individuals. Firms must bridge the gap.

The Leadership Gap in Legal Practice

The legal profession doesn't lack talent. Firms overflow with technical capability. What's missing, too often, is leadership discipline — the small-unit habits that transform talent into consistent execution.

Close the loop and respect everyone's time.

Every lawyer has seen some version of the same loop that extends across the profession. A junior attorney is told on Friday morning, "Research X by Monday."

X is complex, authority is thin and facts are shifting. The junior asks reasonable questions, gets a few answers, grinds all weekend and turns in a thoughtful, sourced memo.

Then: Silence. No acknowledgment.

By Monday afternoon, the junior learns that a client call on Friday night changed the plan. The project is moot — but no one told the junior. The time is gone. The lesson, delivered without a word, is that their time is expendable and communication is optional. This recurring theme in the conversations among juniors across different firms teaches them that next time, they will work with less trust and a little less of themselves to give.

This failure to share mission-critical information between leaders and associates would never fly in the Marine Corps. Marines prioritize two things, in this order: (1) mission accomplishment and (2) troop welfare. These concepts are not at odds when done right.

You make the mission achievable by treating your people's time and attention as the scarce resources they are. You keep them informed. You tell them what success looks like and why. You close the loop when facts change. No one is perfect, but the standard is clear, and the correction comes fast — up, down and sideways.

How might legal leaders implement this lesson in practice?

Returning to the example above, instead of saying "research X by Monday" when assigning a complex task to a junior associate, leaders might say something like:

We're moving to dismiss on lack of personal jurisdiction. I need a survey of Seventh Circuit cases on consent-by-registration for foreign corporations. Key facts: A, B, C. If D turns out to be true, stop and ping me. Deliverable is a one-page executive brief by Monday morning. We'll discuss Monday evening.

And, if the plan changes at some point, instead of silently pivoting without telling the associate, the partner in charge should promptly email the associate with something like: "Update: Friday client call changed our path. Stop work on X. Save notes and bill time. Monday we'll reassess scope. Thanks for the push."

These strategies are not heroics. They are habits. They cost minutes and save hours. They respect the mission and the people asked to carry it.

Assign the right mentors.

Many firms claim to train and mentor. But the term "mentorship" sometimes gets used loosely, with little attention to whether the mentor can actually advance someone's practice. Pairing an attorney with someone who shares certain traits, but not their work, docket or deadlines, misses the point.

Representation matters, but mentorship works only when it is mission-proximate and delivered by someone who is not boxed in by the soloist mindset that dominates the profession.

In the Marine Corps, mentorship is inseparable from the chain of command. The corporal calling fire team movements is the one correcting you. The legal profession is no different. The real mentor is the attorney who reads your drafts, ties your assignment to the strategy and explains how the case fits together.

Shared traits help, but they cannot substitute for instruction. When a mentee gets that instruction, they accelerate. Without it, they may drift — competent on paper, unanchored in practice.

The legal profession ignores this at its peril. Law is demanding, talent does not develop on its own, and even the most capable attorneys can lose their bearings without effective leadership. Growth happens when leaders commit to developing their people and keep them grounded in the mission, rather than leaving them to navigate the practice alone.

Make the mission and standard clear to everyone.

Real clarity means everyone knows the mission and the standard. Leadership in the Corps is taught and expected at every level. This creates a standard where corrections move both horizontally and vertically. Central to the standard is ensuring that everyone knows not just the "what," but also the "why."

Any Marine will tell you — and my experience confirms — that a lance corporal could point out a better way, and if it made the mission more likely to succeed, we changed course. Egos bent to the directive: mission first, troop welfare second. In other words, how one person felt about the method mattered less than accomplishing the mission.

The legal profession can benefit from the same clarity by committing to a disciplined standard: Articulate what the mission is, explain why it matters, communicate when it changes, read what you requested, return feedback and adjust the system when you miss. This creates a culture where every team member is a stakeholder in the "why."

When seniors share the strategic intent in addition to the tactical task, juniors will develop into attorneys capable of engaging with the level of depth that exceptional work requires.

Developing your people and providing quality legal work are not mutually exclusive goals. They are codependent. Embracing both by integrating the standard into the culture positions your firm — and its people — for sustained excellence.

None of that requires a drill instructor. It requires a standard.

Employ tact as a force multiplier.

One word that belongs in every firm's leadership vocabulary is "tact." For Marines, tact is about more than saying or doing the right thing at the right time; rather, it is a disciplined habit of courtesy that colors every senior-junior peer interaction. Marines are taught to expect clear, constructive criticism, delivered in a manner that sharpens performance rather than dulls motivation. It is a failure in leadership when criticism drains a subordinate's drive instead of building competence.

Tact is the difference between willing, enthusiastic follow-through and hollow, mechanical compliance. The former builds loyalty; the latter breeds attrition. The principle is simple: Consistently treating peers, seniors and subordinates with respect is a sign of maturity. And in a law firm, as in the Corps, maturity is what sustains a culture worth serving in.

In practice, tact sounds like this: "I followed the initial direction and didn't escalate the revised provision quickly enough. That's on me. I've corrected the product and will flag all material revisions before advancing the draft." Tact does not soften truth; it delivers it in a way that preserves trust and keeps the team moving.

What is true top-down is also true bottom-up and horizontally. Juniors owe tact to seniors. Seniors owe tact to juniors. Peers owe tact to one another.

Respect is not a perk. It is a force multiplier.

The Standard I Carry

We can do better. Small-unit habits scale: Clear intent. Tight feedback loops. Real mentorship tied to the work. A disciplined and steadfast respect for time.

I no longer wear the uniform, but I still carry the standard. Failure is not an option — not because perfection is expected, but because we refuse to tolerate the waste of our people's trust and effort. The remedy is not more hours. It is better leadership: Set clear intent, communicate changes, respect time and develop your people. Do this consistently, and you will feel the difference in your team before your client ever notices on the invoice.

The enlisted Marine in me, shaped by a 250-year tradition of disciplined, small-unit leadership, believes this because I have lived it. The lawyer in me knows the profession will be better for it.

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