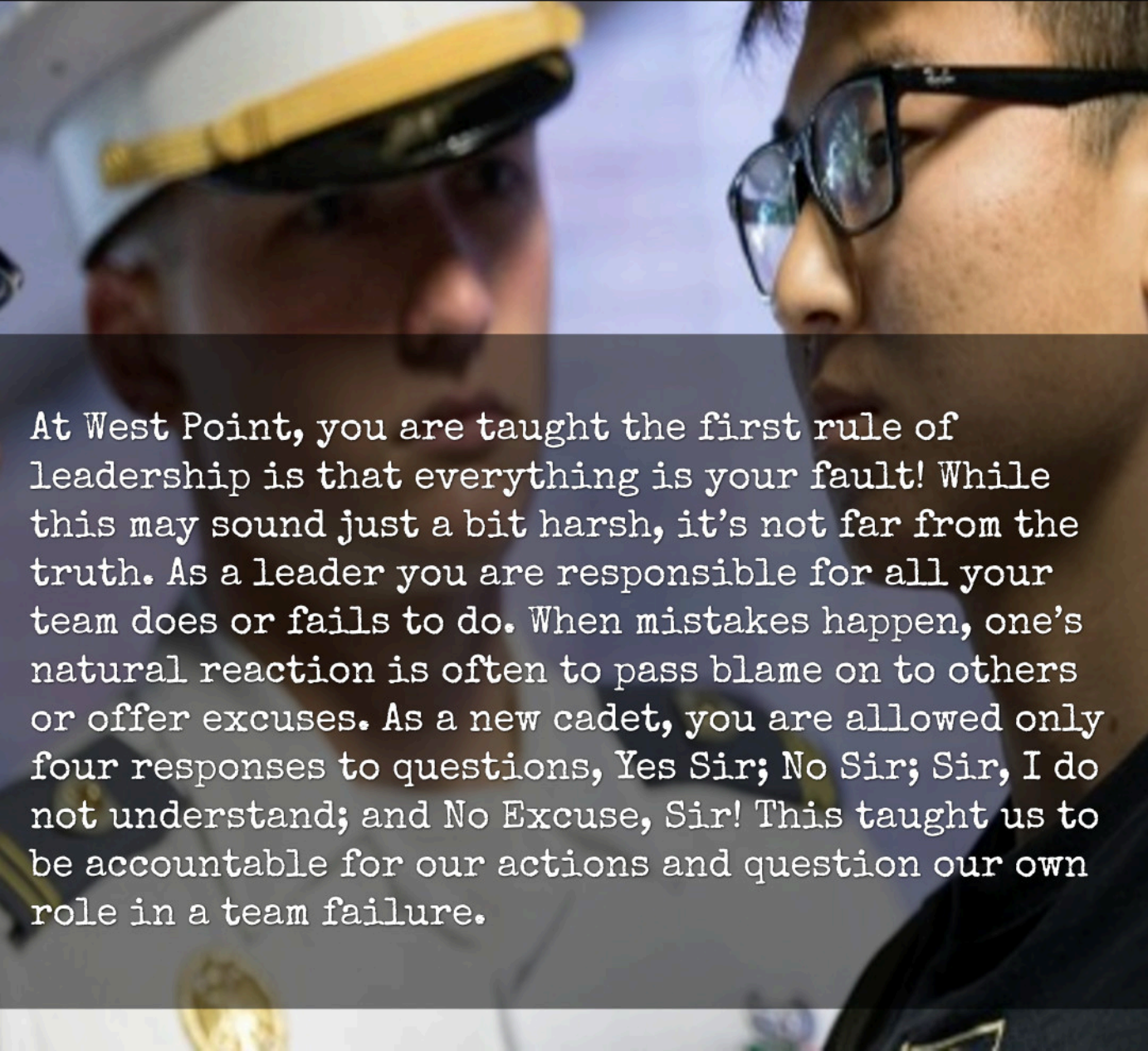




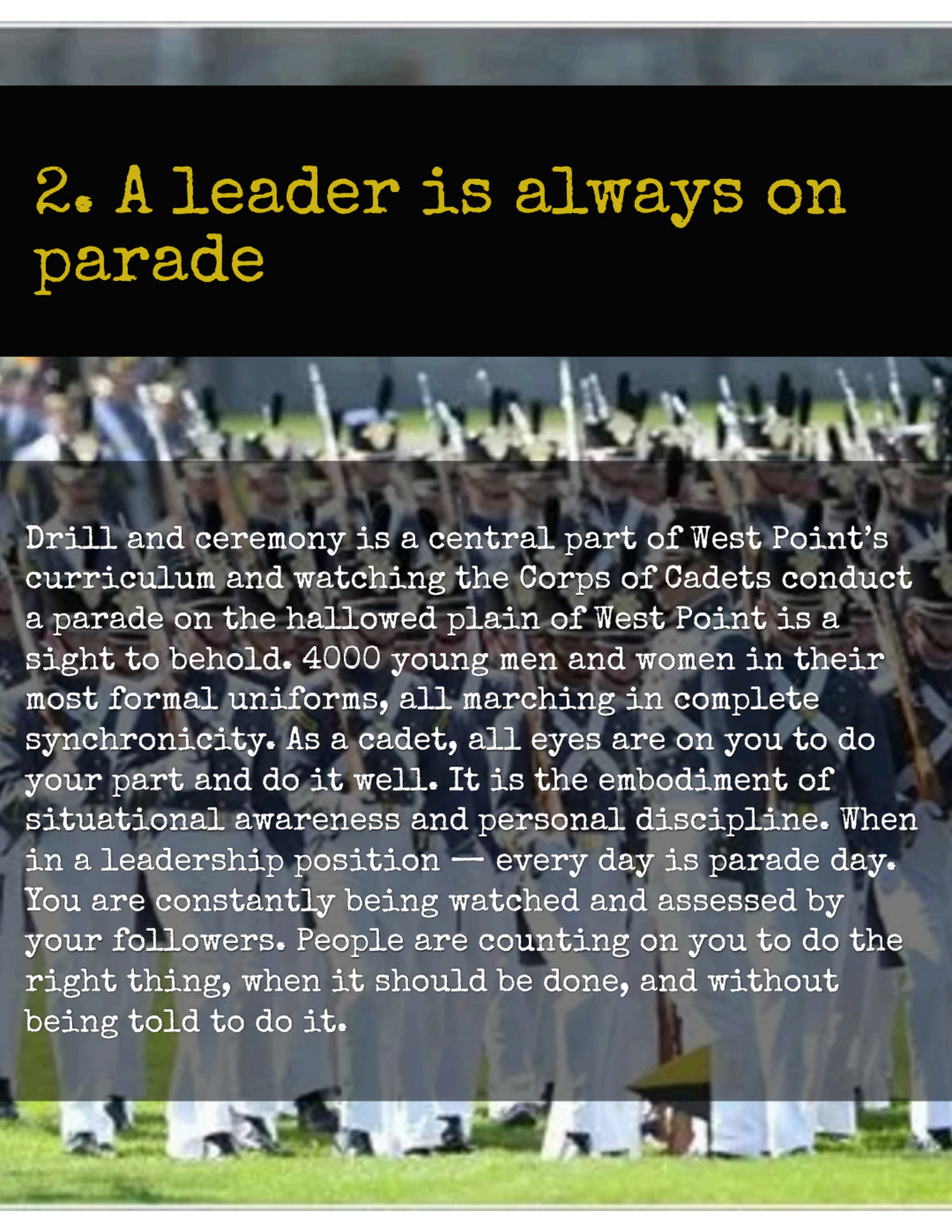
10 Leadership
Lessons
I Learned at
WEST POINT

1. Don't point the finger, point the thumb



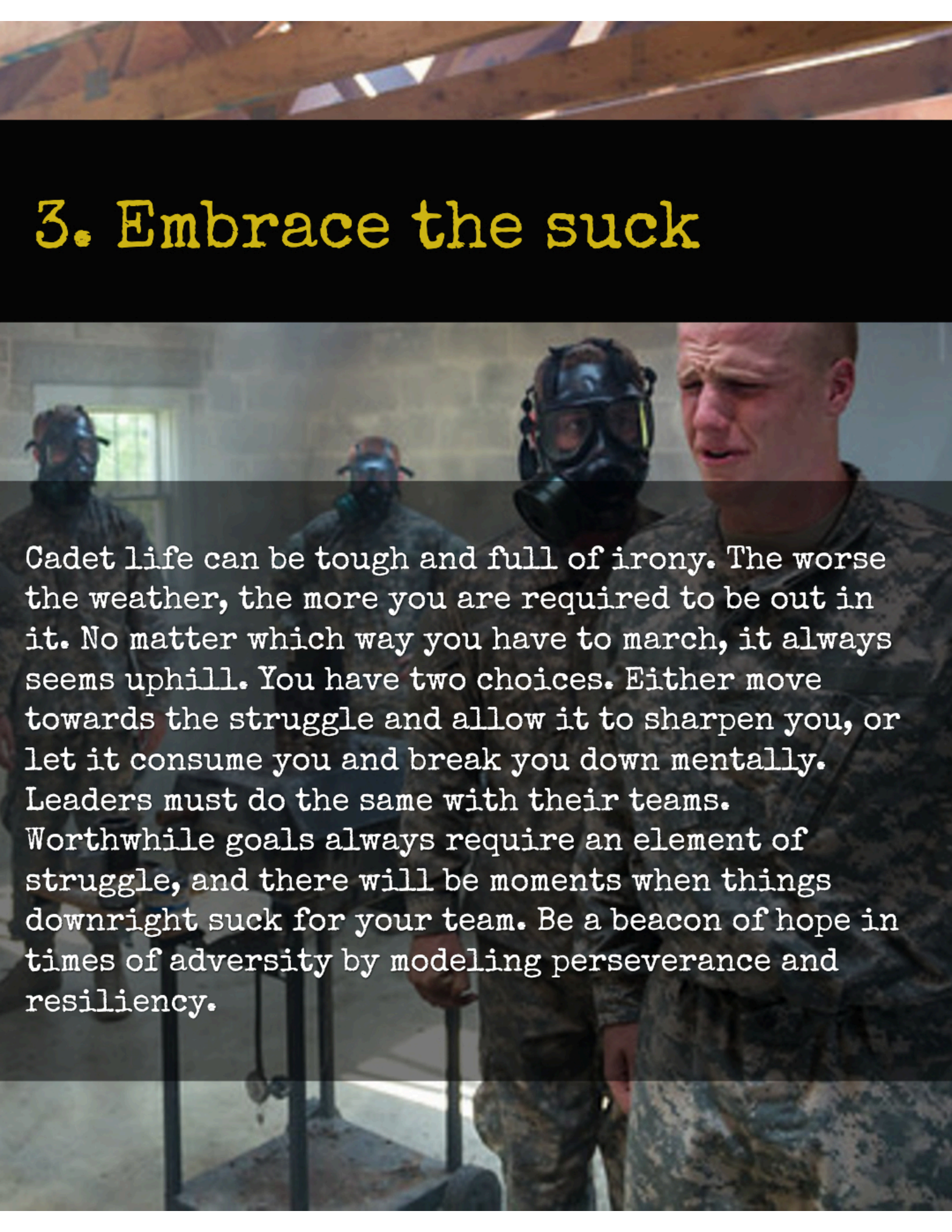
At West Point, you are taught the first rule of leadership is that everything is your fault! While this may sound just a bit harsh, it's not far from the truth. As a leader you are responsible for all your team does or fails to do. When mistakes happen, one's natural reaction is often to pass blame on to others or offer excuses. As a new cadet, you are allowed only four responses to questions, Yes Sir; No Sir; Sir, I do not understand; and No Excuse, Sir! This taught us to be accountable for our actions and question our own role in a team failure.

2. A leader is always on parade



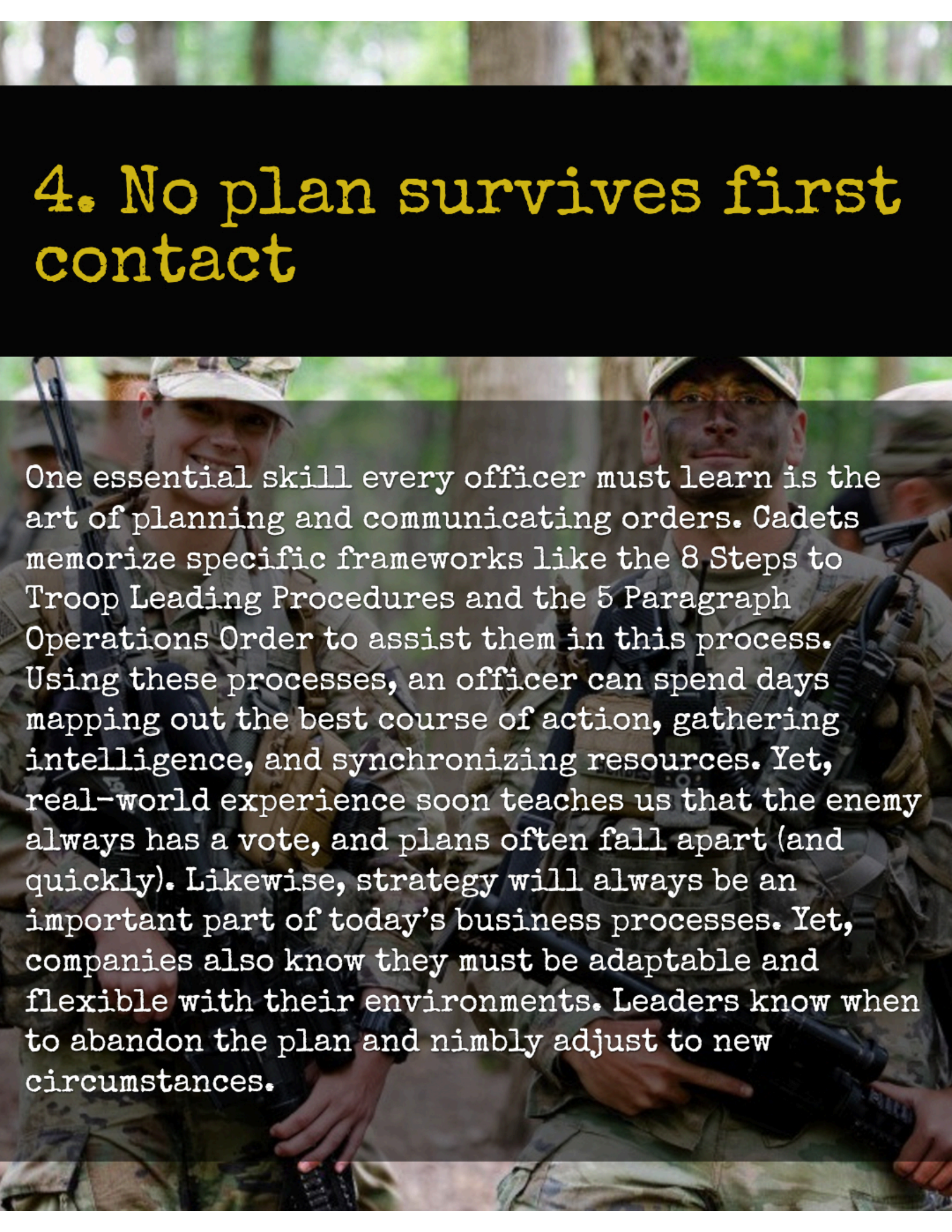
Drill and ceremony is a central part of West Point's curriculum and watching the Corps of Cadets conduct a parade on the hallowed plain of West Point is a sight to behold. 4000 young men and women in their most formal uniforms, all marching in complete synchronicity. As a cadet, all eyes are on you to do your part and do it well. It is the embodiment of situational awareness and personal discipline. When in a leadership position — every day is parade day. You are constantly being watched and assessed by your followers. People are counting on you to do the right thing, when it should be done, and without being told to do it.

3. Embrace the suck

A photograph of a soldier in camouflage uniform, looking distressed and crying. In the background, several other soldiers are visible, wearing gas masks and standing in a line. The scene appears to be outdoors, possibly during a training exercise or deployment.

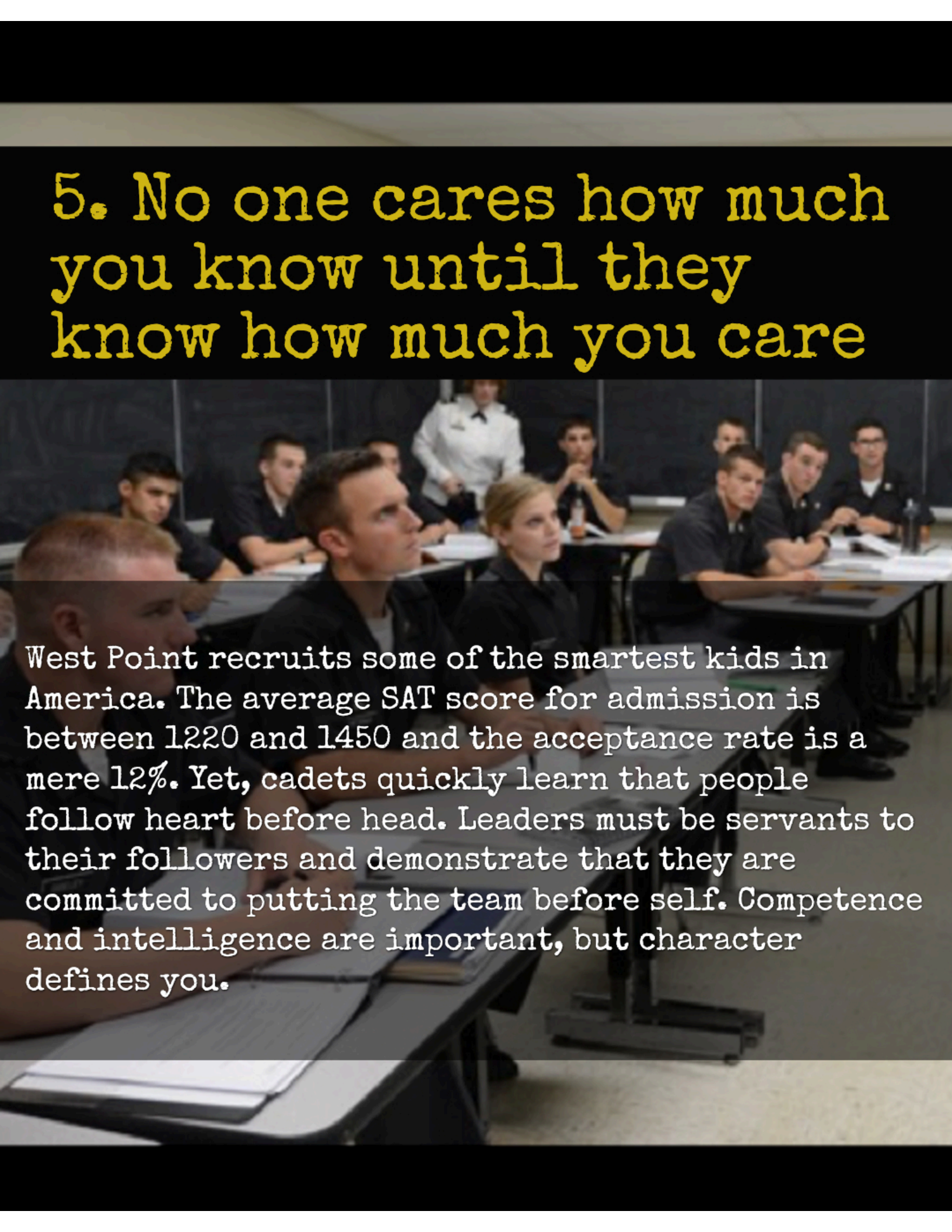
Cadet life can be tough and full of irony. The worse the weather, the more you are required to be out in it. No matter which way you have to march, it always seems uphill. You have two choices. Either move towards the struggle and allow it to sharpen you, or let it consume you and break you down mentally. Leaders must do the same with their teams. Worthwhile goals always require an element of struggle, and there will be moments when things downright suck for your team. Be a beacon of hope in times of adversity by modeling perseverance and resiliency.

4. No plan survives first contact



One essential skill every officer must learn is the art of planning and communicating orders. Cadets memorize specific frameworks like the 8 Steps to Troop Leading Procedures and the 5 Paragraph Operations Order to assist them in this process. Using these processes, an officer can spend days mapping out the best course of action, gathering intelligence, and synchronizing resources. Yet, real-world experience soon teaches us that the enemy always has a vote, and plans often fall apart (and quickly). Likewise, strategy will always be an important part of today's business processes. Yet, companies also know they must be adaptable and flexible with their environments. Leaders know when to abandon the plan and nimbly adjust to new circumstances.

5. No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care

A photograph of West Point cadets in a classroom. They are seated at long tables, looking towards the front of the room. A female instructor in a white uniform stands at the front. The cadets are wearing dark blue uniforms. The text is overlaid on the image.

West Point recruits some of the smartest kids in America. The average SAT score for admission is between 1220 and 1450 and the acceptance rate is a mere 12%. Yet, cadets quickly learn that people follow heart before head. Leaders must be servants to their followers and demonstrate that they are committed to putting the team before self. Competence and intelligence are important, but character defines you.

6. No combat-ready unit ever passed inspection

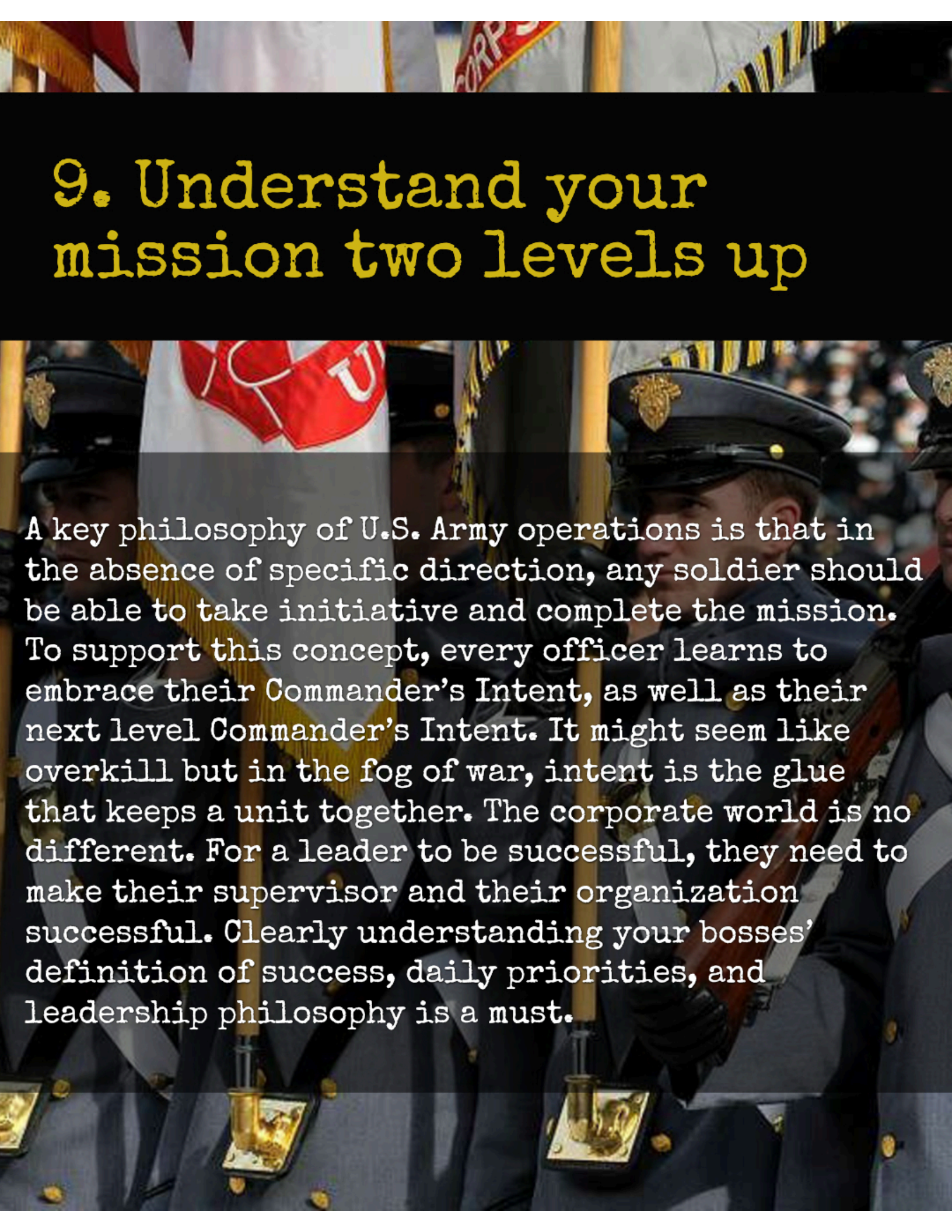
West Point cadets endure lots of inspections. From daily uniform checks to white glove room inspections called SAMI (Saturday Morning Inspection), by default every cadet becomes a master shoe shiner and sink scrubber. If at any time you failed to meet Academy standards, you could get written up and ultimately end up walking hours on the area as punishment. No matter how “squared away” you were, most cadets end up walking at least a few hours over their four years as you are constantly juggling many priorities and eventually balls are dropped. Thus, cadets get very good at prioritizing what is most important. With only so many hours in a day, sometimes studying for the big exam or writing that important paper meant you would likely be written up for an untidy room or uniform. The same goes for leaders today. It’s important to get the big stuff right — always. You might take a few bruises along the way, but in the long run, your ability to stay focused on what’s most important will pay off.

7. Trust but verify

In their second year at the Academy, every cadet is assigned a first year cadet (called a plebe) as a direct report. For many, this is their first opportunity to lead someone on a daily basis. You are responsible for your plebe's performance and quickly learn to conduct periodic inspections to ensure discipline and proper accountability. While subordinates in today's organizations don't want leaders hovering over their shoulders and inspecting their every move, they do expect you to check-in with them often and acknowledge their hard work. Train your team, trust they will deliver, and then verify standards have been met. The act of verification is important because it validates your leadership priorities and helps to clarify expectations for the team.

8. Leaders don't always have the answers, but they ask great questions

As a first year cadet in particular, success is often clouded with mystery. There is so much to learn and so little time to learn it all. Then, just when you think you have figured it all out, you are challenged with new tasks that make you feel like a novice again. To survive this intense period of learning, you must accept your vulnerabilities and lean into others for support (we used the saying “Cooperate and Graduate” as a reminder). Leaders today must do the same. No one expects you to have all the answers in this fast changing and complex world we live in. Instead, leaders should practice an impassioned curiosity and have the courage to say “I don’t know” when appropriate. The irony being, in admitting our vulnerability we often find the answers and/or develop the very competence we are seeking.

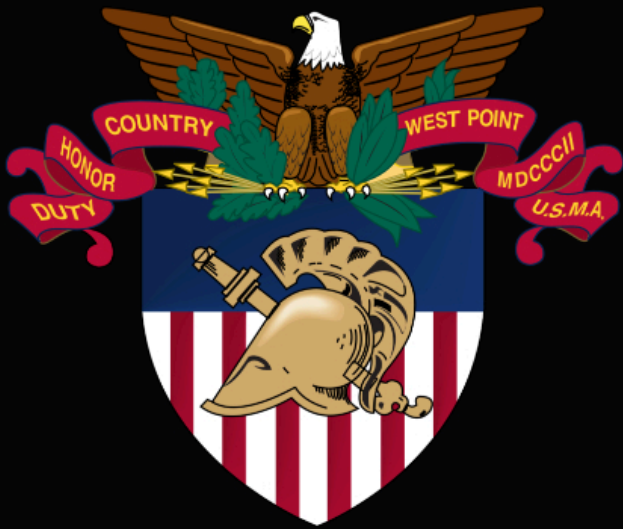
The background of the slide features a photograph of U.S. Army soldiers in dress uniform. They are wearing blue uniforms with gold buttons and epaulettes, and black hats with gold crests. They are marching in formation, carrying flags. One flag visible has a red and white design with a large 'U'. The text is overlaid on a dark, semi-transparent rectangular area.

9. Understand your mission two levels up

A key philosophy of U.S. Army operations is that in the absence of specific direction, any soldier should be able to take initiative and complete the mission. To support this concept, every officer learns to embrace their Commander's Intent, as well as their next level Commander's Intent. It might seem like overkill but in the fog of war, intent is the glue that keeps a unit together. The corporate world is no different. For a leader to be successful, they need to make their supervisor and their organization successful. Clearly understanding your bosses' definition of success, daily priorities, and leadership philosophy is a must.

10. Mission first, people always

This popular Army slogan represents much of what a cadet does on a daily basis until it philosophically permeates every bone in their body over time. From simply checking on your subordinates feet while on a long road march, to never leaving a soldier behind on the battlefield, cadets practice balancing mission execution with taking care of their people's needs. Leaders in the corporate world should also embrace this philosophy. Talent is the single greatest differentiator in the marketplace today and every organization's greatest asset is its people. Successful business leaders understand how to manage the stresses of short-term stakeholder expectations while continuously being mindful of employee needs and concerns.



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Hi, I'm David Spungin, a USMA '97 grad and Founder of The Leader Growth Group. For the past decade, I've helped technology and engineering companies develop more emotionally intelligent servant leaders so they stay relevant, profitable, competitive, and sustainable in a changing world.

I've trained or coached 5000+ leaders, to include in 14 Fortune 500 companies. Much of what I share with my clients today, I learned as a cadet. It remains my foundation, and my passion is helping more leaders scale their impact through these time-tested principles.

Interested in how my programs can help advance your company's leadership? Connect with me for a free 30-minute discovery call to assess your leader development needs and potential solutions.



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