

‘The Man in the Arena’

How Famous Quote Applies to Army Leadership

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“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

— Theodore Roosevelt¹

President Theodore Roosevelt is renowned for many motivational quotes. The quote above, known as “The Man in the Arena,” continues to resonate in relation to command climates within the Army. This quote can be applied to all levels of the Army and can positively impact the overall efficiency of the organization in many ways. First, when a leader is not in a “grassroots” leadership position, it is easy to get focused on too broad a picture and experience a “can’t see the trees for the forest” effect. Second, complementary to the first point, it is often difficult to recognize that leaders are “men in the arena” in their own right. Last, the ability to recognize that we are all in our own arena can further the development of Soldiers that “makes” the Army the organization it is. In a sense, having the ability to apply “The Man in the Arena” to subordinates, superiors, and to the Army as a whole can not only make or break a career but also the direction of the Army in general.

A common friction point between leaders and their subordinates is the perception of the leaders’ viewpoint noted in the quote, where the leader is the observer viewing the man in the arena: the subordinate. Subordinates are at risk of feeling as though their hard work — the “great enthusiasms, the great devotions” — are under-appreciated or insufficient based on critiques from leaders, specifically those further removed from training. The more distance up the chain of command a leader is, the further removed he/she inevitably is from the training. When leaders observe training for example, it is their duty to point out areas of improvement.² However, when “higher-ups” have the opportunity to observe training, they may be too far removed from the direct implementation of training to understand the reasoning behind certain training standard operating procedures. They then, as per their duties and responsibilities, provide feedback from their perspective. Their scope of mission, of course, comes from their superiors, and will be applied to the training they observe. Unless enough effective communication is made a priority, there may be too much separation between lower-level efficiency of training and large-scale mission scope for individuals operating in either group to see eye to eye. The Roosevelt quote is a fantastic reminder to all leaders to not fall in the trap of “not being able to see the trees for the forest.” The issue with having too broad of perspective can cause subordinates to lose respect for leaders who may be perceived as being overly critical, which in turn puts unit morale at risk. Roosevelt reminds us to see the “man in the arena” — or the Soldiers — putting in the effort to contribute their best to the Army. After all, it is he who Roosevelt gives the credit to. Roosevelt’s words challenge us to see the hard work put in versus the insignificant stumbles or faults along the way. If subordinates feel their time or efforts are not being appreciated, they may become demoralized and unmotivated. It is leaders’ responsibility to give recognition to the hard work and dedication of subordinates, while also guiding them to refine training to accomplish the mission at hand more effectively.

On the opposite end, there are the perceived actions of the leader from the subordinates’ point of view. Often, subordinates may not understand why leaders do what they do because they lack the broader perspective of higher-ups’ mission or intent. Subordinates may view the actions of the leaders as illogical, and they may also feel as though leaders require unnecessary tasks. This can lead to leaders feeling as though their efforts, successes, or failures are for nothing. However, they too are attempting to fight their own fight. Leaders often “strive valiantly” to complete the mission or fulfill their leaders’ intent.³ It is a long-time Army tendency to request that

subordinates act without asking questions. This leads to misguided impressions of leaders' actions and requests, and subordinates may be prone to feeling as though a leader is wasting their time or not doing things efficiently. This is due to a lack of effective communication either from the subordinate, who may have a better idea of how to accomplish a task, or from the leader, who may not have effectively explained why something needs to be done a certain way. The development of overly critical subordinates who fail to see leaders also as "men in the arena" can negatively impact unit morale and the overall efficiency of the organization. Subordinates may become discouraged by perceiving themselves as overly criticized and under-appreciated, so too can leaders. This has the same demoralizing effect on leaders as it does on subordinates; we are all human at the end of the day.

The ability to recognize that we are all in our own arenas can enhance Soldier development at all levels if an environment of effective communication and understanding can be fostered between leaders and subordinates. It is critical to apply the concept behind "The Man in the Arena" within the Army to increase motivation and buy-in to the organization. One of the most critical ways this can impact the Army is when considering the longevity of a Soldier and his/her desire to pursue a full career to retirement within the Army. Many Soldiers decide not to complete the full 20 years due to a lack of fulfillment. This often comes from poor communication, a sense of hyper-focus on faults, and insufficient recognition of one's commitment during their time of service. Roosevelt's quote can have immediate implications for both those who consider ending their time in service prior to retirement and everyone working with those considering separation. If Soldiers apply themselves with an understanding that they can directly impact the direction of the Army because they feel appreciated and their hard work is recognized, the organization as a whole could see an increase in both the efficiency and longevity of Soldiers. This could allow for more advanced military training of Soldiers due to Soldiers staying in longer and receiving greater professional development. There will always be individuals who decide before they join that they intend to serve a full 20-plus years; these individuals also stand to benefit from being professionally and morally mindful of Roosevelt's quote. Not only will they eventually be responsible for fostering a positive command climate, but they will also be responsible for the foundation of countless professional careers, both military and civilian. With that said, it is every Soldier's duty to take individual responsibility in the type of environment he or she helps create and to ensure it is a professional, respectful, and disciplined one.

Whether an individual plans to make a career of the Army or use it as a stepping stone, the professional applications of the quote can contribute to the individual's success as well as the success of an entire institution. Those who have served in the Army are often sought-after in the civilian world in part due to the concept that all Soldiers are leaders and professionals and are disciplined enough to act accordingly. "The Man in the Arena" forces one to look above and below within the chain of command to obtain a broader perspective on where to place focus. Not on small faults, but in true dedicated effort and relentless commitment. Be not overly critical of blunders and stumbles, but caution all "observers" on being critical of someone who is wholeheartedly applying themselves in the arena. This concept, when applied on a broad scale, could have drastic impacts on the entire command climate of a unit, organization, or institution.

Quotes live on long after those who spoke them are gone if they carry both a meaningful and applicable impression on those who hear them. "The Man in the Arena" is undoubtedly one such quote as it was delivered as part of a speech from Teddy Roosevelt more than 100 years ago on his travels through Europe. The speech, "Citizenship in a Republic," was delivered in Paris in 1910, and while Roosevelt did not intend for it to be applied to the Army, it is both relevant and applicable to innumerable life situations. His words of wisdom resonate to this day if only one can find a means to apply his cautions and guidance. One significant take-away from the whole concept is to not allow the perspectives and opinions of others, in regards to your efforts, to impact your ability and willingness to "strive valiantly" and to "spend (yourself) a worthy cause."⁴

Regardless of looking up or down the chain of command within the Army, one must make an effort to communicate thoroughly in order to be mindful of how criticisms are received, as well as ensure credit is given where credit is due for the values upon which our Army is built. This applies to the Soldier or leader in the "observer" role viewing the other as the "man in the arena", as all people are subject to fall prey to perceiving themselves being observed by a critic as Roosevelt cautions against. A significant take-away from this quote lies within the realm of individual responsibility to not let your perception of others' opinions impact your own motivation, determination, and buy-in to the organization. This caution only serves to strengthen the foundation of the Army and its core values. At

the end of the day, each one of us sees himself/herself as “The Man in the Arena” striving with enthusiasm and devotion.

Notes

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, “Citizenship in a Republic” (speech, Paris, 23 April 1910).

² Army Doctrine Publication 7-0, *Training* (July 2019).

³ Roosevelt, “Citizenship in a Republic.”

⁴ Ibid.

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Soldiers from 198th Infantry Brigade maneuver as an infantry rifle squad on 21 August 2020 on Fort Benning, GA.
(Photo by Patrick A. Albright)