
MASTERING THE ART OF LEADERSHIP: LORD NELSON

♦ A B S T R A C T ♦

Successful military leadership synthesizes into two concept: leading by example, and competence. In our history, the names of Lord Cochrane and Arturo Prat would stand out. In Europe Lord Nelson originated the isolation of Napoleon and the consolidation of the British Empire for one hundred years. Nelson's leadership style is not outdated; on the contrary, it is the desired behavior of any military leader.

Keywords: Leaderships, example, competence, moral, forces.

DOMINANDO EL ARTE DEL LIDERAZGO: LORD NELSON

♦ R E S U M E N ♦

El éxito del liderazgo militar se resume en dos conceptos, liderar con el ejemplo y ser competente. En nuestra historia destacarían los nombres de Thomas Cochrane y Arturo Prat. En Europa el almirante Nelson, dio origen al aislamiento de Napoleón y la consolidación del Imperio Británico por los siguientes cien años. El estilo de liderazgo de Nelson no está pasado de moda, al contrario, es el comportamiento que se espera de cualquier líder militar.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo, ejemplo, competente, moral, fuerzas.



FRIEDRICH VON DER WETH PETTINELLI

Capitán de corbeta IM

Diplomado en Humanidades (U. San Sebastián)

(federicovonderweth@gmail.com)

Viña del Mar, Chile.

In 1803, Great Britain was at risk of being invaded by France. However, one naval leader denied Napoleon's intentions. Horatio Nelson produced the isolation of France during the Napoleonic Wars by his inspirational leadership and superior military competence in the conduction of Britain's Sea Power. The design of successful plans to neutralize France's navy during critical naval battles, such as the Nile and Trafalgar, together with his ability to enhance moral forces during combat, set conditions for Britain's sea domain for the next hundred years. His leadership style is not an element of the past but is fully applicable to the actual maneuver doctrine and modern warfare.

Naval operations commanded by Nelson highlight his military competence and the exploitation of fundamentals of maneuver warfare. In 1798, Napoleon conquered Egypt, minimizing the influence of the

British Empire in that region. However, exploiting surprise during night conditions, Nelson found the French fleet in the bay of Abukir, destroying 13 capital warships, leaving the enemy army isolated in Egypt.¹ Seven years later, the British Mediterranean fleet, in command of Nelson, confronted the Franco-Spanish forces at the Battle of Trafalgar. Napoleon managed to gather a fleet of more than 40 ships of the line with a total of 2,862 cannons; the British fleet was outnumbered, having only 27.² Instead of presenting a line of battle, Nelson maneuvered with two divisions, sailed his fleet directly at the enemy's flank, splitting the Franco-Spanish fleet in three. Once divided, Nelson exploited one of his force's critical capabilities: faster and accurate firepower.³ Because chaos is a natural component in war,⁴ mission command is one of the best tools to minimize its effect over friendly forces. According to Roberts, before Trafalgar, Nelson gave simple but



Batalla de Trafalgar.
(Fuente: Wikimedia Commons)

1. Andrew Roberts, *Leadership in War: Essential Lessons from Those Who Made History* (New York: Viking, 2019).
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Clausewitz, Carl von, Michael Howard, and Peter Paret. *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

clear guidance to his subordinates: "No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy."⁵ Following Nelson's course of action, the enemy lost 22 ships, while the British lost none.⁶ At this point, it is important to remember that any military force's final objective is always victory. The skilled use of tactics and resources is crucial to achieving that goal. Through the actions led by Nelson, employing basics such as surprise, initiative, and correct use of the friendly center of gravity, the Royal Navy achieved sea control of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. For Napoleon, the consequences meant limiting logistics lines of communication over continental Europe and denying any possibility of invading Britain. However, Admiral Nelson dominated the theoretical-scientific component of naval warfare. Since war is a human activity, moral forces can produce more relevant effects than physical ones.⁷

The ability of Lord Nelson to lead by example and from the front line inspired his crews, contributing to enhanced moral forces in combat. According to Roberts, he "was loved by ordinary seamen in the fleet and could inspire others, sometimes simply by his mere presence at an action."⁸ Leadership in combat requires suffering together with the troops to generate esprit de corps and cohesion. By 1805, Admiral Nelson had already lost an eye and an arm in past combats.⁹ During Trafalgar, Nelson conducted his forces from the deck of HMS Victory, guiding one of the penetrating columns, being able to make decisive decisions at the right moment. Leading from the front line became his death by an enemy's musket bullet.¹⁰ Britain lost a great leader but achieved maritime domain for the next 100 years, consolidating it as one of the most relevant empires in human history. In combat, leaders must stay in the zone of action, ideally on the front line, producing

the necessary inspiration so that the troops can achieve victory in an environment full of dangers and uncertainty. Nelson's example of leadership worked as an enhancer of moral forces but also allowed him to make decisions at decisive moments by understanding the situational panorama. His military genius, combined with his ability to inspire his forces in combat, is the essential manner to master the art of leadership.

In today's time, Nelson's leadership is applicable to a maneuverist force. Competence is one of the fundamental virtues of maneuver warfare, applying military skill and judgments, submitting the enemy to one's own will.¹¹ For the above, commanders must position themselves where they can best understand the situation and make decisions, which translates into areas where the action occurs, usually at the front.¹² The trust of



Retrato del Vicealmirante Nelson.
(Fuente: Wikimedia Commons)

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5. Ibid, 71.

6. Ibid, 76.

7. U.S. Marine Corps, MCDP- 1 Warfighting (Washington,2018).

8. Roberts, Leadership in War: Essential Lessons from Those Who Made History, 55.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. U.S. Marine Corps, MCDP- 1 Warfighting

12. Ibid.

subordinates in their commanders is vital to maintain unit cohesion. Consequently, commanders must demonstrate a willingness to submit to danger, creating the necessary synergy to achieve objectives in the most demanding human endeavor: war.¹³ All of the characteristics described are what the Marine Corps demand of its leaders. Thus, according to the arguments, Admiral Nelson's way of leadership is a clear example to remember what it takes to be a proficient conductor of men in combat. Competence is needed. However, the leader's challenge is to inspire, which cannot be done by words but with the example of actions, even risking life.

Lord Nelson was the man who kept the heart of the British Empire safe from invasion by mastering the art of military leadership. Examples of his military capabilities are

his tactical conduct during decisive naval battles, exploiting maneuvering principles such as surprise, audacity, and initiative. Employing their critical capabilities against Franco-Spanish forces, he demonstrated a clear understanding of applying strengths over enemy weaknesses. His leadership style enhanced moral forces in demand of Britain's objectives, a skill reserved only for a few military leaders. The consequences of his military leading style set conditions for Napoleon's defeat and consolidated Great Britain as the leading maritime power for over a hundred years. Finally, the example of Lord Nelson, compared with the present Warfighting doctrine, reminds the reader that effective leadership does not change over time, and his success depends on a combination of military ability and the skill to influence the minds and hearts of the subordinates positively.



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