



***Updated Article – Expert Advice Column PM BOULEVARD,  
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## **Leadership Is ...Banishing the Palace Guard!**

**by Jo Lee Loveland Link**

This is a story about a quiet, unassuming, and unsung hero: U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. William K. (Kurt) James (Ret.), former Director of the Defense Mapping Agency (DMA, which later became National Imagery Mapping Agency (NIMA)). If he were to read this story, Maj. Gen. James would most likely disclaim being a hero. However, he accomplished a major feat that deserves recognition and, even more, contributed a model for today's leaders. General James led the 9,000-person agency through a successful enterprise transformation that resulted in profound culture change, increased openness and candor in communications, heightened productivity, increased efficiencies, and expanded technological resilience (while other federal agencies were running to catch up).

Clearly, what makes for great leadership is a major unsolved challenge. Leadership literature continues to explode with new and old ideas for the simple reason that no one has found the "silver bullet" for leadership success.

Yet in a relative desert of leadership excellence, speaking to his mid-managers gathered to hear him, General James identified perhaps the most important lesson for great leaders today. Recognizing he was announcing no "silver bullet," the General said, "The real hope we have of turning this agency around is direct communication between you -- and your people -- and me, the one charged to lead us forward."

"Many leaders," said General James, "surround themselves with a 'Palace Guard' who protect the leader from intrusion, negativity, and requests. The cost is that

these leaders never know what's really going on! What I have found," he continued, "is that the only way I can lead effectively is with smart ideas from the people I am leading. And I need to get your ideas direct – no filters."

"So, here's my secret to successful leadership: Banish the Palace Guard!"

**"The real hope we have of turning this agency around is direct communication between you -- and your people -- and me, the one charged to lead us forward."**

"If you find anyone on my staff trying to block your direct access to me, you find a way to let me know, and that person will be gone off my staff by tomorrow. There is nothing more important for a leader to have than contact with the people he is leading."

The wisdom of General James' approach has been confirmed in research by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Ernest L. Arbuckle Professor of Strategy, Innovation, and Leadership for Change at Harvard Business School. Kanter's groundbreaking research identified the three most *powerless* roles in organizations: administrative staff (due to lack of resources), first-level supervisors (due to lack of authority), and Chief Executive

Officers – due to lack of sound information!

Kanter's findings show managers and staff universally tend to censor, sugarcoat, alter, or withhold key information from their senior leaders, for a variety of reasons. Information blocks may be motivated by good intentions -- e.g. to spare the senior leader from information overload, and to "save" him or her for the "important things." However, the effects are almost always adverse -- like a broken speedometer that registers a faulty speed. At best, the driver underestimates the speed, and gets ticket and at worst, causes a crash. When the "driver" of an organization lacks critical information, crises of disastrous proportions can arise.

In a February 2015 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Kanter asks, "Can CEOs be smart enough, visionary enough, and flexible enough to disrupt their own business model before someone else does?... The continuing challenge for CEOs is strategic and cultural: rethinking assumptions about where value will be generated and then leading transformation. At the heart of this is **changing the culture to value openness to learning, collaboration in development and execution, and a true partnership orientation**" (highlights are author's).

Recent news shows that blocked communications becomes a kind of "information shield," and a primary cultural problem for intelligence agencies, as well as for corporate officers. Without true "situational awareness" from the folks doing

the work, or at the front, leaders will likely make poor decisions.

Many Knowledge Management initiatives fail because true Information-Sharing (especially targeting top leadership) is culturally resisted. Yet only when senior leaders have the information they need can they make truly wise decisions.

So, what are lessons for today's leaders in General James banishing his Palace Guards? How can leaders create open communications that strengthen the organization? Again, drawing on the General's initiatives, here are some clues:

- *Find out from the people what the real issues are:* An agency-wide survey was conducted at DMA found overall low employee morale, with specific glaring gaps in leadership.
- *Make a long-term plan and publicize the plan, right from the start:* General James created a five-year plan of action to create strong leaders, from top to bottom of the agency. In a succession of Town Halls, he spoke publicly and candidly about current problems and future vision.
- *Create goals, cultural principles, and enterprise learning to back them up:* The agency launched a series of enterprise-wide weeklong Leadership Development Seminars and unit retreats that all mid-managers were required to attend.
- *"Waterfall" transformational leadership throughout the organization:* Every single leader was required to learn, and every single leader was required to teach, new skills in open communication and a climate of "no punishment" for spotlighting problems.
- *Establish structured open forums for dialogue between every level of leadership and the rest of the organization:* Beginning in the Leadership Seminars and continuing in various formats, senior leadership was required to provide to their people honest disclosure of agency plans and changes and engage openly in question-and-answer sessions with employees.
- *Create channels for ongoing two-way communication and feedback:* The new culture of open communication was reinforced by ongoing structures designed to "bubble up" issues that arose over time and provide answers to people about their key concerns. New internal Social Media is creating new tools for this.
- *Make sure that accountability is a two-way street:* Opening up candid two-way communication works, only if people understand and accept expectations of mature behavior by all. Complaints must accompany genuine recommendations for improvement. Recommendations for

improvement must become readiness by employees to help create change -- at every level.

tend to provide just those kinds of information that he or she really wants and needs to receive.

- *Find a way for the most senior leader to be accessed by his or her people:* This one is the major stumbling block for many leaders -- who often fear that opening the floodgates will create overwhelming and disruptive messages from their people. Actually, the reverse is true. If the above steps are followed, people are respectful of their leader and

Given widespread disappointments with many current leadership styles, this scenario could seem "pie in the sky" -- except it really happened. Within a short number of years, the agency's leadership program was judged so valuable it continued under the two subsequent Generals who led DMA after General James's retirement, paving the way to a smooth changing of administrations when DMA transformed to NIMA.

U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. William K. James was director of the Defense Mapping Agency between June 1990 and June 1993. Under his leadership, DMA – a heritage organization of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency – went from producing products to meet the requirements of the Cold War to a concept of a Global Geospatial Information System (GGIS) directly accessible to combat commanders of the Rapid Deployment Forces. The GGIS was a major paradigm shift in warfare with the delivery of geographic information to fast-moving military forces.

Commissioned into the U.S. Air Force through the Reserve Officers Training Corps program, Gen. James received his pilot wings in July 1959. During his military career he totaled almost 6,500 flying hours and 180 combat missions in Vietnam. He retired July 1, 1993. (*NGA Bio*)

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