

FEATURE ARTICLES

My Calling

Joe Sanders, Colorado Uplift & Colonel (Retired), USAF

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Do you mind sharing a bit about your journey and how you ended up where you are today?

Sanders: I think it really starts with a calling and having a desire or a sense to answer that call. For me, much of what I have heard and seen in my life, and how I would characterize my call stems from what I saw in my dad. Specifically, seeing him serve our country in the Air Force. As a kid, I remember growing up and going to the machine shops and hanging out with him. I would see a comradery and esprit de corps as I was there. I would see the pride that he had every day when he would put on his uniform. In fact, I remember helping to iron that uniform and shine his boots. It was really a cool thing for me. Seeing that, being around that, and spending time on the flight line, I thought, this is what I want to do with my life. That was an initial call to serve my country in a way that my dad was doing it.

It made a lot of sense to go into the Air Force and serve my country like my dad did, but there was something else that my dad did when he retired from the Air Force that took a little longer for me to comprehend. He had an opportunity to go and serve in a lot of different positions of employment. He had several college degrees and a tremendous amount of experience at the time. He could have been a college president. He could have gone to work at Boeing on the technical side of things. Or he could have joined any number of large organizations. But, he decided that he was going to move back to Louisiana and give back to his people. In doing that, he was looking to pastor a church. He also started providing counseling, therapy, and training for group homes with teens in foster care. One particular conversation I remember is when he was looking at different churches. He had a huge church that offered him a position and he had another church that also offered him a position. The second church was very small, met in an old fish market with maybe 20 people in the congregation when we visited. He said, I believe I am being called to be at this small church. By the way, it was in one of the most impoverished areas in Alexandria,

Joseph Sanders, Ph.D., is a retired Air Force Colonel and served as the first Permanent Professor and Director at CCLD. He has also served as the commanding officer for training, support, and combat units. He has authored and published several articles and book chapters on topics ranging from transformational and servant leadership to organizational spirituality and moral development. He is currently the CEO for Colorado Uplift, creating a new generation of urban leaders through long-term, life-changing relationships, and serves as an adjunct professor at the University of Colorado at Denver.

Louisiana. I asked him, “Dad, what are you thinking?” He said, that the smaller church is where he felt he was being called to. At the time, that did not make sense to me. When I think about him serving his country in the military, that calling made sense. But when he decided to pastor this small church and work in foster care group homes, it didn’t make sense because I was thinking about things like the money and the prestige.

The “why” of your identity is what allows you to actually see what you need to be doing and how you need to be doing it.

He spent all this time and had all these college degrees, why wouldn’t he put those to work and take advantage of some of the opportunities? He said to me, that he felt he was being called to this small church and to impact the surrounding community. It is a good news story because the church has expanded and the community has been transformed by his presence there. I’ve seen the lives of people changed because my dad is there. There is no doubt that he was called to be there.

Where it started making sense to me was about 20 years later, right as I was getting ready to get out of the military, there was a push and a pull. For the pull, I remembered the time that I spent with my dad down in Louisiana when I was home visiting from the Air Force Academy. I remember sitting in one of the group homes, where he was doing some counselling with some teenagers in the foster care system. I was sitting in a room with this group of kids from ages 13 to 16, we are talking about possibilities in life and I was trying to give them an encouraging message. I was talking to them about what they can do with their lives. What became painfully obvious to me was that these kids couldn’t see past the four street corners that they lived

in. They had no schema of any possibilities beyond that. I remember that hit me pretty powerfully. My heart just sunk because I went back to the Academy and the cadets were talking about what immersion program they were going to be in, what Master’s program they were going to be a part of, and what jet they were going to fly. Granted, they were a few years older, but the trajectory is so different in terms of what they saw as possible in their lives.

For me, there was a real dissonance. I felt that being at the Academy, while immensely rewarding, I just felt there was a need out there that I felt called to do something about. I got to the point where I realized that I couldn’t fulfil my

greater purpose in life, my calling, doing what I was currently doing. I just couldn’t. I needed to avail myself to communities, like where those kids came from, to make a difference. It is so hard to describe, but it was clear to me. The interesting thing about it was I had no idea what it looked like. What I did know, was that I now understood my dad’s calling. Just like I had a lot of things, opportunities lined up that I could do, and they made sense from a pragmatic perspective, there was no way I could do them and fulfill my purpose.

When you look at your call in life, the “why” of it is a deeper level of your identity. While it may not be the whole of your identity, it is a level that most people don’t talk about. Most people talk about the “what” of their identity or the “how” of their identity. The “why” of your identity is what allows you to actually see what you need to be doing and how you need to be doing it. I felt like there was a calling when I was in the Air Force serving my nation. As I got clearer on my “why,” I just couldn’t do that and continue on in the Air Force. My point is that I lived out a purpose in the Air Force and it was very rewarding for that time in my life. But as I started to uncover and get clear on my

broader purpose in life, those things felt like stepping stones to this broader thing that I am now engaged in. When I made the decision, I knew nothing about Colorado Uplift where I now work. I went to my wife and said that I was being called to leave the Air Force. She said, "...to do what?" I told her I did not know, but I felt that underserved youth and at-risk youth was the population that I was being called to work with, combined with my passion for work in leadership and character development. That is all I knew. That is all I could articulate. So, I stepped out of the Air Force, did a few things like corporate leadership development and teaching at UCCS, and standing up an LLC. Then, I started getting intentional about a non-profit organization, Touchstone Leadership Academy. At that time, I had no idea of what I would be doing, I just knew the "why." I knew that I was being called to invest in at-risk youth to try to make a difference in their lives so that they can lead.

Lindsay: So they could see beyond their four street corners and a larger possibility?

Sanders: That's right. The other piece to that is helping them see that and equipping them. We talk in social science about social learning and how important that is. That really comes to bear so much now. The ideas of vicarious learning and modeling and how important that is. So, not just giving them an inspirational speech, but giving them sense of confidence that they can actually do what they see. Because sometimes people come in, like when I was in that living room, and say, "let me give you an inspirational message about something," and "You can do it." But, how did I equip them? So, let me give you the tools. Let me put something in front of you that will shape your behavior. To model the way for you and help you get there. That's the thing that I didn't feel I had the space to do when I was still in the

Air Force. So, to free up time to make space and avail myself to that and to stand in that gap of possibility... to help with access to possibility for these kids. That is what I have been about.

Lindsay: I'm assuming that your calling is what led you to Colorado Uplift. Can you share a little bit about what that organization is about and your role?

Sanders: I would, but want to share a little context first. One of the lessons that I learned by retiring and stepping out is that faith is real. I'm not just talking from a religious perspective, for a leader to grow, they have to get uncomfortable and you have to be willing to step out on faith, whatever it is.

If you ask me what are the three domains that I would advocate a leader adding capacity in or expanding, the first is faith. Faith is a belief in something. Faith is a clarity on your purpose. Getting clear on that. You can clarify that when you can live into your purpose with a belief and efficacy that not just helps you but others around you. The other piece is faith in something beyond you. When I think about faith, it is a belief in something outside of me. If I just believe in me, I think it falls apart. The second is hope. A hope in a better tomorrow. A hope in the people around you. A hope in a sense of greater humanity. That is important. And the third is love. A focus in on people. Those are the areas that are important to develop as leaders. All the other things that we talk about like skills and personality, I understand that and they are important. But, if you have a leader that expands their ability and capacity to demonstrate faith, to expand their ability and capacity to hope and to inspire hope, and expand their ability and capacity to love, I say you have a leader. A leader that is going to make a difference. I can tell you that at the ground level, when you are sitting across the table

from a kid who doesn't know where their next meal is going to come from, and you have to encourage him/her that there is a possibility beyond the four street corners, I guarantee you that having some faith, a bit of hope, and a bit of love, is going to make all of the difference. You can't come to that kid as a leader without a sense of faith, hope, and love. If you try, you are going to be limited. For me to carry out what I need to do. To be the kind of leader that I need to be, to really impact the lives that I want to impact, it is vital.

The pressure that comes from a privileged background, can also cause people to have blind spots. Because they can compensate with other things. I can substitute a fulfillment on my purpose because I am doing something that I like or something that pays the bills. I am doing something that keeps the lights on and I can get by. I am not fulfilling my purpose, but I can compensate. I think that often happens on that side of the equation. On the other side though, when you look at some of the communities that we work in, the idea of trust is important. You aren't going to get there if all they see are the cars and the things that you have. You have to be able to engage with them in a way where they see what you are offering. I want all kids to have a sense of hope. A hope in humanity. A hope in their community. A hope in their nation. A hope in the world. That is fundamental. But I also want them to have a sense of faith that they can actually make the difference that they desire to make.

Lindsay: Whatever that difference may be.

Sanders: Yes, whatever that difference may be. To have a trust and a belief that they can realize it. Then, I want them to have the love and compassion and know that they are supported in that. From a developmental perspective, what we have done at Colorado Uplift is to narrow that down and we have focused on a

development model that we have adopted from the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). Our mission at Colorado Uplift is to build long-term, life-changing relationships. Our vision is that we will be able to create a new generation of leaders for the future. These leaders will not only be able to go out and survive in their communities – but thrive in their communities and make a difference – the recursive relationship between a good citizen and a good society. We build up good citizens with the hope that they can build good societies. But we are also going to touch the societies so they can build good citizens. Our declaration is that we want to be the premier organization for transforming lives and communities. The essential nature of relationships and development is in our mission statement. In the context of relationships is where development occurs. Training and education can occur outside of relationships but development cannot occur or is severely limited. Inside that relationship, what we strive to do is provide structures for challenge, whatever that challenge may be. The other circle inside of that is structures for support and then we have structures for accountability. We use those to help develop their capacities, which I mentioned earlier. We define capacities as their confidence, competence, and their commitment. With faith, hope, and love as a leader, you develop that. The model that we apply to develop them is that model in the context of relationships.

If we were to assess most leaders that made an impact in history, I believe they had the capacity to live out or demonstrate faith. It may not have been a religious faith. It could have been a faith in country or honor, but not just themselves, because faith is a belief beyond yourself. Hope in a better tomorrow, a different tomorrow, or a different circumstance. And having the passion and compassion for people, a love for them. I think those are capacities that need to be developed. So, the leader has to show up with a certain capacity

to engage in the relationship. It is not that the leader is perfect every day, or that they are 100% hopeful every day, but they have the capacity for hope. They can see beyond the present to something more. As an example, we had a hope that one day, a crazy idea that we had about starting this journal, of what it would look like one day. Can you imagine if the conversation would have stopped the moment someone told us it is not going to happen? The Journal of Character and Leadership Development (JCLD)¹ wouldn't exist and we wouldn't be sitting here today.

So that is what I am talking about when I say hope. It isn't that everything you say is Pollyanna, but it does mean that you are able to not have your actions, your words, and yourself defined by solely by your circumstances. You want to talk about identity? Talk about a person that can actually understand how their identity is not defined by the circumstance of the moment, but it is actually vested in a calling and a belief that they have for tomorrow. Their identity is actually shaped by a purpose they are here to fulfill on. Having that capacity as a leader is critical. For example, I can give you a course on emotional intelligence, but if you don't have the capacity to love, where is it going to go? I can come in and help you shape your vision statement, but if you don't have the capacity to hope, what is that going to do? I can come in and talk to you about a strategic plan for the future, but if you don't have the capacity to have faith, what is it going to do? So, the capacity piece is the piece that I think that has been missing in

the literature. I'm not sure if capacity is the right term or maybe it should be domains. Either way, they are foundational.

Lindsay: I like the framing of it as a capacity because then it becomes developmental. Something that can be increased. On the flip side then, it is also something that can be decreased. We all have examples where we have seen someone who was doing great at a job, and then something happened and it seems like they lost something about who they are. They show up at work different than they used to.

Sanders: Something that you just said is critical. It ties back to identity. I love how you just said that. They lost something about who they are. There may be a certain image that we want to have, but image is not identity.

These are identity capacities because it is part of who you are. To expand hope, faith, and love like we are talking about, is helping you fulfill who you are. It is helping you to fulfill your purpose.

I think that identity is everything. Everybody innately has this desire or need to fulfill on a purpose. I believe that the more in touch we are with that, the more pure our identity is.

That is the essence of what we are saying. These are identity capacities because it is part of who you are. To expand hope, faith, and love like we are talking about, is helping you fulfill who you are. It is helping you to fulfill your purpose. You can't give me a purpose that someone has in their life for the good of society where having more faith, hope, and love would get in the way or wouldn't be required. Also to your point, when you

¹ Douglas Lindsay & Joseph Sanders started what is presently called the Journal of Character and Leadership Development (JCLD) in 2011 while faculty members at the United States Air Force Academy. For more information about the JCLD, please refer to: <https://www.afacademyfoundation.org/s/1885/rd19/interior.aspx?sid=1885&gid=2&pgid=585&cid=1542&ccid=1542&crd=0&calpgid=61&calcid=1151>

lose the capacity to do that you are losing something of yourself. Skills can be perishable, but what we want to have are capacities that we don't allow to perish. For example, I can't run as fast as I used to. That skill has perished as I have gotten older. The danger in losing capacity, however, is the implication that it has on our identity.

Lindsay: In understanding those as capacities to lead, how does character fit into those ideas of capacities?

Sanders: I think they actually source a person's character. If you want a person to be compassionate, it is sourced by love. If you are asking a person to take on a sense of responsibility, faith or hope can inform that. As you think about these, it is sourced by these at a character level. Also, I remind you that these three things are actually considered virtues in and of themselves. You can actually look at love, faith and love as virtues. In fact, I think you could go to Christopher Peterson & Martin Seligman's book *Character Strength and Virtues*, you will find equivalents for those exact words. At a minimum, they source it. If you give me a character trait that you want in a leader, I think one of those three capacities would be synonymous with it or if those three were circles, it would fit in one of the character traits as a subcomponent of it.

Lindsay: As you know, at the Air Force Academy, we are working with young leaders that we want to embrace a leadership identity. With that in mind, and what you have just talked about, what advice would you have for them?

Sanders: Definitely understand those capacities. At a more pragmatic level, I would say for that person to get to know and understand themselves. Get to know as much as they can about themselves. Then, when they get to a point where they have a better understanding

of themselves, to get over themselves. What I mean by that is – get to the point where I understand things about me, but at the end of the day it's not about me, it is about the team winning. I understand my strengths and abilities, but it is about more than that. I think the sooner we can help folks understand themselves that is important. Self-awareness is critical but it can't be an end in and of itself. I think you also have to do that with a greater end in mind. You have to do that within the context of what you are called to do in meeting the needs of those around you. Look internally, and then look beyond yourself where you can actually make a difference. Find ways to get over yourself and find ways to impact others and the environment. In the context of leadership, we have to be willing to get over ourselves. We have to be willing to put at risk our feelings and emotions for the sake of others and our purpose. We don't dismiss our feelings and emotions because they are real, but we can't allow them to constrain and dictate how we interact with others. How we interact with others has to be a function of what they need and what our purpose is and less of a function of how I feel about somebody upsetting me at a meeting. It's not fair to the people we are leading. When you are leading, it is so much more about others and your purpose than it is about you. In order to support our leaders, giving them a foundation where they have an expanded capacity of faith, and expanded capacity to hope and expanded capacity of love, helps to support them. So, when I have that bad day, a capacity of hope can help me smile a bit more. When I have that bad day, focusing on how much I love my kids can help me smile a bit more. So, it all ties together. If you have those capacities, it can actually help you in those moments where you need to be demonstrating to others that you really care about them.

I would also remind them that you can still make an impression, but not have impact. You can have success,

but not have significance. I think that incorporating this framing in what we provide for our leaders is important. Part of that is actually equipping them. How do we help leaders get over themselves? That is where some skills do come in. Having them learn how to truly listen to others. What does it look like to engage in a conversation? Not just communication skills, but what does it look like to engage in a conversation where you are eliciting something out of the person sitting across from you? Where you are giving something but you pulling something out of that person.

How often do we engage intentionally in conversations? That is a big part of leadership. How to converse. Not speak, but to converse where we are connecting? That equipping is critical. We also talk about modeling which is important. Reinforcing it and highlighting it.

Lindsay: Along with that is the ideas of holding people accountable and discipline are important. I think those points are often left out of the leadership literature. What you are suggesting is that if you hold people accountable out of a capacity of hope, love, and faith, it comes across appropriately.

Sanders: What I would suggest is that it is even more directly tied back to the relationships that we talked about earlier with respect to challenge, support, and accountability. What I think that happens sometimes if you try to hold people accountable, outside of the context of relationship, it doesn't work. Or, you try to hold people accountable without the support or a clarity of challenge. If I am challenging someone and I have a relationship with them, and provide support for the challenge, but I am not holding them accountable, then development doesn't occur. As a leader, if I know that my responsibility is to build their capacities, then I have to be able to hold them accountable. What that

gets to is back to the idea of getting over yourself. One of the things that I have to tell people on occasion is that, I care more about you and your development more than I care about what you think about me. Not that the relationship wasn't important, because I still want to have the relationship, but you liking me is not the same thing as having a relationship. My kids liking me in the moment is not the same thing as us having a relationship. For example, they may not like me in the moment when I am holding them accountable.

I'm not just talking about it, I am in it. Doing something about it. I am in the cause. The leader needs to be present in the cause. How do you help a leader do that?

In my career, I've had situations where I have had to administer an Article 15, or dismiss someone from a position, or write someone up, but I feel it is always important to leave someone whole and complete. If I really care about you, the accountability must be there along with the challenge and support. Without that accountability, you can't grow. Any time I have ever had to administer discipline, that was fundamental to my thinking. I have to be willing to do that for you. In order to do that, we have to get over ourselves. I have to get over what you might think about me for your sake. Being there for someone means that I am willing to challenge, support, and hold them accountable fueled by my capacity to have faith, hope and love. While those conversations are not comfortable, I think we are called to do that.

Lindsay: It's about being present, right? Not just physically there, which is important, but being present in the moment for them.

Sanders: Yes. If I see that there is a need in community for at-risk kids, I am there in the cause. I'm not just talking about it, I am in it. Doing something about it. I am in the cause. The leader needs to be present in the cause. How do you help a leader do that? What do I need to stay in that cause? By having a greater capacity to love, I can be there. The greater hope and faith that I have for you in the community, the more I am going to stay there. If I don't have that capacity, I am less likely to stay. It is a journey of humility. It takes something to daily get over yourself for the sake of others. You are not getting over yourself for the sake of getting over yourself. It is for the sake of others to fulfill your purpose or calling. So, you have to be willing to be uncomfortable and still continue to show up. To keep coming back. To say, I am here for you. I am going to set aside everything because I am here for you. You gotta be willing to be there. Being willing to be there in that relationship and in that moment.