

FROM THE EDITOR

# The Power of Conversations

Dr. Douglas Lindsay, Editor in Chief, JCLD

We have conversations every day. Some are perfunctory and others are much more intentional. What we often fail to realize, is the profound impact a conversation can have. It is often upon reflection, if we allow ourselves that opportunity, where we synthesize and understand the influence of those conversations. In fact, many of us can think back in our lives to critical conversations that we had with a parent, coach, mentor, boss, friend, etc., that had a direct and lasting impact on our lives. All because someone took the time to talk with us.

For leaders, the power of conversations goes well beyond the basic communication of ideas, intent, or expected behavior. It is much deeper than that. It is about things such as making a connection, showing value, allowing transparency, and giving time. What we know about effective leaders is that they take the time to have, and put a priority on conversations.

The interesting thing about conversations is that they differentially impact both parties. If we view this from a leadership perspective, it can have important implications. For example, let's say that a leader is walking down the hallway and passes one of their subordinates. The communication that occurs (and occurs even without words) will have various implications and impact. If the leader walks by and says nothing or fails to even acknowledge the individual, then even with a lack of words, a message is conveyed. If the leader acknowledges the individual, a different message is conveyed. Finally, if the leader stops to engage the individual, even for a brief conversation, that results in a different message. The important thing for leaders, and those learning about leadership, is that in all

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three cases, a message is conveyed to the follower that is directly influenced by the leader.

While the leader cannot always control how the message is perceived, they do have more of an impact than they may realize. When we understand that leadership is about relationships, and conversation is a way to grow and develop those relationships, the influence that can be had is significant. This influence can be magnified as the levels between the employee and the leader increase. In an organization where there are few employees and the leader is seen on a near daily basis, conversations are more frequent and possible. The employee also has access to a wider range of leader interactions and behaviors where they can directly experience the leader and their leadership. However, in

effect. Why this is important to consider is that the even short conversations between leaders and followers can have lasting effects that impact the leader/follower relationship.

### In This Issue

What we hope to do with this issue of the Journal of Character and Leadership Development (JCLD) is to give access to leaders, through conversation, to get a sense of how they think about and approach their leadership and their development. It is hoped that these glimpses into their thought processes will highlight some important factors that will aid in your own personal leadership development.

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All individuals who have even dipped their proverbial toe in the leader development space have come across interviews, biographies, autobiographies, or blogs/podcasts from recognizable leaders. This is of no surprise since if you want to learn about what effective leaders do, you go to those who are effective and talk to them about it. Interviews can be helpful

in that they pose a series of questions to the leader and let them respond. The limitation to such an approach is that it is often restricted in scope by the individual asking the questions. They generally have an agenda based on the purpose of the interview. This is not a bad thing, per se, as access to those individuals are often shaped by who is asking the question or where the individual is from.

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hierarchical organizations (like the military), it is quite common for an employee to rarely see those higher up (even a level or two) in the leadership structure due to factors such as protocol and distance. In these cases, the interactions (or in the case of the current discussion, the conversations) that a leader has with employees further down in the organization can be magnified. What I mean is that if your sample of behavior with a leader is limited to a few short interactions, it is possible for the individual to over sample, in their mind, what the leader is like. Due to what we know about human behavior, this should be of no surprise. If the first interaction or conversation is positive, then that can create an anchor effect in the positive direction toward the leader. If it is negative, you can have the opposite

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opinions and biases. Again, this isn't necessarily a bad thing since it gives a much deeper glimpse into the individual's life than is generally available to most individuals.

Autobiographies can also be useful since they are told by the leader themselves. The limitation of such an approach is that the reader is limited to what the leader wants to share (impression management) that they either think is important or might help sell the book. Again, not a bad thing necessarily but certainly gives glimpses into the leader that has been vetted by some standard by the leader.

Finally, blogs and podcasts tend to be in a much more raw form by the leader, and therefore can lean more toward a current topic or an event that is timely, versus what the listener may want to know or understand about that particular leader. Each of these options have their plusses and minuses and get us a little closer to understanding the story, experiences, and characteristics of the leader of interest.

With this issue of the JCLD, we take a little different approach than those listed above. Our goal was to have a conversation with leaders focused specifically on the leader and their character development, but let the conversation drive the content versus a set of scripted and vetted questions. Some might critique this approach as being risky as the conversation could drift to topics outside of the interest area of the JCLD. While that possibility could occur, what we find is that the richness and direction of the discussion enhances the context of the conversation and leads to insights that aren't often available through other methods. For example, it is not hard to pick up just about any leadership book and find a list of things that we should be doing and not doing based on whatever the author deems as important. Sometimes, the book will even give a little context as to why those are important topics to the author. However, if we were able to discuss such a list through a guided conversation, we can get added

depth and context as to why those items are salient to the individual. This can help those of us who are continually developing as leaders (which should be all of us) a greater richness and material to study. It can also shed some light on the individual's thought process and why they deem certain things as important. The JCLD wants to intentionally be in the space of creating meaningful conversations around leader and character development. Not just within the context of the Journal, but also in the conversations that are spurred because of the Journal. It is directly in this space that the current issue of the JCLD is aimed.

The balance of this issue is a series of such conversations with leaders representing different domains. I highlight different domains as it is instructive to examine approaches to successful leadership from individuals who lead in different capacities. While the research on leadership tells us that things like communication, self-awareness, and conscientiousness are important factors related to effective leadership regardless of domain, we also know that the context in which leadership is enacted is critical to understand. For that reason, leaders from the domains of the military, business, academics, sports, consulting, and nonprofit have been included. While it is impossible to survey every different domain, it is hoped that the reader of the JCLD will be able to examine both the similarities and differences in the included approaches and how they could be relevant to your own development.

The first domain that we examine is the military. The five conversations in this section give a broad range of senior leader perspectives on leadership and character. The first conversation is with the President of The University of Texas at El Paso and former Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson. She shares thoughts from her time as the Secretary of the Air Force, the impact that USAFA had on her, examples of effective teamwork, what she sees as some of the future leadership challenges, and why she chose to go back to academia as

a university president. It is a rare opportunity to learn about leadership from one of our nation's top leaders.

The second conversation is with the Dean of The Bush School of Government & Public Service and former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General (Retired) Mark Welsh. He reflects on his time at USAFA, several critical things that he learned about leadership along the way, reflections on his time as Chief of Staff, and why he chose to move into a different domain – academia. This conversation tells a story of how you can be successful, but also truly enjoy the journey.

The next conversation is with the current Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, CMSgt Kaleth O. Wright. This conversation took place before and after the National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS) that occurs every year at USAFA. Chief Wright shares his thoughts on NCLS, reflects on his journey in the Air Force, the strength and value of the enlisted force, and his thoughts about leadership. This conversation reflects the power of knowing ourselves, developing trust, and how critical it is to never stop developing as a leader.

The fourth conversation is with the Air University Commander and President, Lieutenant General Anthony Cotton. Through the conversation, he shares about his journey, lessons learned along the way, improvements that are being made regarding professional military education and his perspectives on leadership. He does this by sharing his thoughts regarding four key elements of leadership that he has experienced throughout his career: competence, commitment, composure, and compassion.

The last military conversation is with former Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel and Services, Lieutenant General (Retired) Gina Grosso. In this conversation, she shares about her journey in the Air Force, how the Air Force prepares people, some of the changes initiated with respect

to Air Force personnel, and where we are headed. It is a great conversation at the organizational level of leadership in terms of how we prepare, promote, and take care of our personnel.

The next domain is that of professional sports and features a conversation with National Football League (NFL) Hall of Fame Quarterback Kurt Warner. Through the conversation, Mr. Warner shares about his journey to and in the NFL, the importance of leadership, the power of faith, and his legacy. He also shares about giving back through a foundation that he started, First Things First. It is a great discussion about the journey, how not everything in life is fair, and doing your best.

The domain of academics is examined next. The first conversation is with Dr. Barbara Kellerman, who is the James MacGregor Burns Lecturer in Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School. In this insightful conversation she shares about the field of leadership, where our weaknesses are, how we might fix them, and how we need to keep improving. She shares her thoughts about looking at leadership as a system instead of an individual focused construct. Through understanding the leader as part of a larger system, this allows for a deeper understanding of what leadership is, and what it is not.

The next academic conversation features Dr. David Day, who is a Professor of Psychology, Director of the Kravis Leadership Institute, and the S.L. Eggert Professor of Leadership at Claremont McKenna College. Dr. Day shares his thoughts about leader and leadership development, the state of the leadership field, how leaders develop, and identity. Through this conversation, he talks about how we should be looking at leadership capacity and why some people stand in their own way of developing as a leader.

We next jump to the domain of business where there is a conversation with Mr. Howard Behar who is the



Former President of Starbucks North America and Starbucks International. In this conversation, hosted by Dr. Josh Armstrong of Gonzaga University, Mr. Behar talks about the culture of Starbucks, the role of character, his leadership philosophy, and advice for new leaders. This conversation gives a glimpse of what it is like to set the culture in an organization.

The next conversation is with Dr. David Altman who is the Chief Operating Officer at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). Dr. Altman shares how his journey led him from the field of public health into leadership development. He discusses how he leverages both fields to make a difference and the power of interdisciplinary approaches to leadership development. Through discussing what CCL is and isn't, he shares the vision of CCL in not being a traditional consulting company, but an organization whose mission is to benefit society worldwide.

The final conversation in this issue gives a nonprofit perspective from Dr. Anthony Hassan who is the CEO and President of the Cohen Veteran's Network. He talks about his journey and how that journey helped shaped him into the leader that he is today. He uses the construct of "hustle" to talk about what successful leaders and teams do. Through sharing about the growth of his organization, he talks about leadership, development, and what future leaders need to be thinking about.

We wrap up the issue with two book reviews highlighting several works directly related to leader development. The books are *Leaders: Myth and Reality* and *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*. The reviewers (Douglas Kennedy and David Houston, respectively) describe the essence of the books and how they relate to leaders and leadership development.

### Looking Ahead

The next issue of the JCLD will focus on the theme of the upcoming National Character and Leadership Symposium and Air Force Academy's Outcome of "Valuing Human Conditions, Cultures, and Societies." If you have any ideas or thoughts regarding a potential article for that issue or an interview that you would like to see in the JCLD related to that theme, please let me know. Also, if you have any feedback on how we are doing or how we can continue to examine leadership and character development, please feel free to reach out at [jclld@usafa.edu](mailto:jclld@usafa.edu).