

NONPROFIT

The Hustle of Leadership

Anthony Hassan, CEO & President, Cohen Veterans Network

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Would you mind giving a brief overview of your journey and how you came to your current position?

Hassan: I was born and raised in the city of Chicago and had humble beginnings. Growing up, I realized that I wanted to get away and do something different. I had a friend who went to Army basic training. When he came back, he told me that he thought I would do well in the Army if I joined. At the time, I needed direction and guidance. After some thought, I took his advice and enlisted in the Army. I was just 17 years old and two days when I entered Army basic training. I went on to serve 11 years as an enlisted soldier working with artillery and infantry units as a radio operator. I learned a lot during my Army years. I learned what it was like to sacrifice. I learned what it was like to lead others. I learned how to lead peers. I learned what it meant to lead by example and to inspire and motivate others when there wasn't much to offer. I also learned that by contributing, by being part of the team, and demonstrating commitment to the mission was one way to inspire those who were my peers.

I was successful as an Army Non-Commissioned Officer, but I knew I wanted more. I knew to serve in a great capacity as a military officer required a college education. So, I pursued my education on nights and weekends. I went to school during my lunch hour, after duty hours, and on weekends. It was difficult, but I think part of my character is to never quit. I have a lot of hustle in me. So, while my friends were having a "good time," I was grinding to achieve my goal of becoming a military officer. After several years, I finally received my Bachelor's Degree. My ticket to pursue a career as a commissioned military officer. .

Dr. Anthony Hassan is the inaugural President and CEO of the Cohen Veterans Network. Dr. Hassan is responsible for leading and executing the strategic, operational, and financial direction of a \$275M network tasked with carrying out the establishment of 25 mental health clinics across the nation. Dr. Hassan is a veteran of both the United States Army (enlisted) and Air Force (officer) with over 30 years of experience in military behavioral health as a social work officer, leader, clinician, and academic. He earned his Bachelor's Degree from the University of Alaska in Anchorage, his Master's from Florida International University, and his Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration from the University of South Florida.

What I learned during my enlisted years from a military social work officer was the quickest way to becoming a commissioned officer would be to receive a commission as a military social worker in the military medical corps. I asked him, “What does that require?” He said I needed a Master’s Degree in social work. So, I separated from the Army after 11 years to get my degree with all the intentions of coming back into the Army. People thought I was crazy and I was making the wrong move. But, I knew all along that I wanted more and could offer more as a military officer. I took the challenge and separated from the Army. I went on to secure my Master’s Degree in social work and quickly applied and within a year I was commissioned in the U.S. Air Force as a military social worker. As an Air Force military social worker, I was afforded many opportunities to grow professionally as a leader and clinician...to hone my clinical skills while serving in various leadership positions alongside excellent leaders and mentors.

During my service as a military social worker, I also had the honor to support service members in faraway deployed locations on two occasions. I served in Saudi Arabia, where I was the only mental health officer on a compound of 5,000 personnel in the middle of the desert supporting Operation SOUTHERN WATCH. I deployed a second time to the border of Iraq & Kuwait in 2004 as a mental health officer on a combat stress control team. These experiences were the most rewarding experiences in my life. I felt for the first time stigma didn’t impede care, and I was able to really help my fellow service members at the right time without barriers to care.

I served in the Air Force as a military social worker for 14 years with my last assignment at the United States Air Force Academy. I was a part of the leader development program for the Air Officer Commanders (AOCs). At the academy, I was in a position to lead successful military officers with amazing careers as a

peer. I helped educate, train, and develop these hand-picked officers to be even better leaders. Along the way, I developed as a leader. I found myself in constant reflection striving to be better. This role at the Academy gave me a greater appreciation for the complexity of leadership, the challenges of peer leadership, and all that is required in the development of oneself. We are never finished developing is what I learned while at the Academy. I retired in 2009 after 25 years of military experience.

Also, during that time, I received my doctorate—again grinding on nights and weekends to achieve this goal. Not because I needed doctorate, but because I wanted one. I wanted it because I thought it was something that I should accomplish in my life. It was a goal that I set for myself. By having the doctorate degree, so many more doors opened.

After retirement, I then went on to the University of Southern California (USC) which was my first civilian job. In that job, I helped develop the country’s largest military social work program and established a research center focused on military mental health. This was very important at the time, and remains important today. The impact on the military member’s mental health after war and the impact it has on their families can be devastating.

My work at USC was rewarding and the catalyst to my current job as the CEO of the Cohen Veterans Network. Mr. Steve Cohen, who I now work for, was looking for someone to execute on his vision of providing accessible mental health care to veterans and military families. He pledged \$275 million to this mission. Steve A. Cohen is a man dedicated to ensuring that military men and women who need mental health care can get help, as well as their families, at no cost. In 2015, I joined Steve to build his network of military family clinics. Today, we are an organization of 14 operating clinics, growing to 25 clinics total by 2020.

We have 45 staff members here at the headquarters and over 200 staff members that operate our clinics across the country. In just three and a half years, we have been able to accomplish a lot. It has been the greatest success of my life. To build this network of mental health clinics from the ground up has been amazing with so much more to do. It is quite a challenge, but I come to work every day inspired, motivated, and committed to leading this charge. I am grateful for all of the experiences that brought me to this point and for all the people that mentored, guided, and believed in me.

Lindsay: Thank you for sharing a bit about your journey. You mentioned that you come to work inspired and motivated. What do you find most rewarding in your current position?

Hassan: Our collective efforts are saving lives, saving families, and saving futures. I know that may sound cliché, but it is true. The 12,000 people that we have seen so far in our network may not have received mental health care or may not have received it when they needed it. This is important. Access to mental health care in America is hard to find. Quality mental health care is hard to find. We are providing access to high quality, culturally competent care. It matters. This is amazing and to be able to lead this effort is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

From a leader's perspective, when do you have the chance in your life to build, operate, and innovate all at the same time? Of course, this comes with huge challenges and a lot of complexity. But, this is what we are doing. We are building a network of clinics, and as we are building them, we are operating them, all the while looking to innovate. It so dynamic and it's amazing what we have been able to accomplish in such a short period of time.

Lindsay: With having to build, operate, and innovate all at the same time, what are some of the things that you are looking for in the leaders in the organization?

Hassan: We are very thoughtful on all leader selection, or for any member of our team. We always select for someone who can complement the team with a skill set or competency that we don't have. Those closest to me are people who have competencies or talents that I don't have. For example, we might look for someone who is very creative or someone who is process oriented. We look for someone who is aware of social media and marketing. I'm always looking for competencies that are complementary to the leader and the team as a whole. But it's not just about their competency. The individual also must have hustle. I need all team members to grind with me on the work. I need passion for the work. I need integrity and transparency and someone who is not afraid of it. At the same time, I need teammates who can also be compassionate for others. I can't have someone berating others. In addition, teammates must deliver excellence in all they do. I am asking a lot of people and it generally takes us a long time to find the right person for our team and in order to do that we have to sacrifice time, to find the right person to come join us.

If you aren't hustling on our team, especially within the senior leadership group, you are going to stand out and you are not going to last long. When you are building, operating, and innovating at the same time, you have to have hustle. I have learned over time that hustle and passion are core to being successful. This is especially critical in a startup that is evolving into an organization. It takes special people.

Lindsay: That idea of hustle is an interesting one. When I think about hustle, there is certainly the aspect of being willing and able to do the grinding of the work that you mention. Being in the leadership development side of things, I also think that hustle also involves knowing where your weaknesses are and being willing to better yourself and better your best. Can you talk a little bit about that with respect to development over time and how you work to create that within your organization?

Hassan: I think because we are a new organization, we are just starting to strategically work leader development into our organization. That said, we have already supported team members with continuing education especially in their occupational competency. We are also poised on hiring a group to provide us with some leader development where we work through a process that will help us grow as individual leaders as well as a team. Our senior leaders, in addition to myself, are also reminding our team that growth is constant and that development is a process. For example, I have a habit of getting up early and reading various articles generated by the industry. When I find one that I think would be relevant to a particular department or all of CVN, I send the article along with a little summary of how it is relevant. What I am trying to demonstrate is that I am always engaged not just in leader development, but also in the industry trends. I'm constantly trying to model that reading is important and it is vital to stay on top of your profession. As the CEO, I don't know everything, but it is critical that I know enough about the lines of business so that I know where they intersect and how they are related.

You remember the Hogan & Kaiser¹ model that highlights the point of who we are as people is how we lead others. I constantly remind the team that leader development starts with them. That they must understand who they are and what they bring to the team and organization. That they shouldn't be afraid to find a weakness or growth area and work to improve it. I also reflect back to lessons I learned while at the Academy about topics like transformational leadership and Kouzes & Posner's five practices of exemplary

leadership², and why individual leader personality and behavior is important. At CVN, leader development is not yet a formal program, but eventually will be...but more important than a formal program is the day-to-day of how we do business, our organizational culture – how we do thing around here.

Lindsay: That approach can be very powerful by embedding it into the organizational culture of “that is how we do things around here.” Often, I think people struggle because they think about leadership

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development as an event, a specific program, or a course that you go to. It is something that the organization is having me do or something that is being done to me. This limits the individual accountability in the developmental process. Since people aren't static, they are constantly being impacted and developed (positively or negatively) by things going on around them.

Hassan: I'm glad you brought that up. I am a strong believer that education, workshops, and conferences are the least impactful developmental opportunities. They are certainly useful, but there also has to be a connection to what is going on every day in one's organization. The educational experiences need to be integrated. Organizational leaders need to give their team members room to grow though things like

¹ Hogan, R., & Kaiser, R. B. (2005). What we know about leadership. *Review of General Psychology*, 9(2), 169-180.

² Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2006). *The Leadership Challenge (Vol. 3)*. John Wiley & Sons.

progressive job responsibilities. They may not know everything about the new task, but I guarantee you if you give them chance to grow and excel, they will. We have had a unique opportunity to bring people in and watch them progressively grow in jobs that stretched them. Today, they are phenomenal leaders within our organization. You never know what a person's capacity is until you give them the chance. We have done that here at CVN and I am very proud of that. When someone has hustle, is intelligent and has a passion for what they are doing, their potential is endless. It is our job as leaders to cultivate this talent.

Lindsay: Again, you brought up the idea of hustle. Oftentimes we tend to focus on certain competencies when we talk about leadership or leader development. Are they extraverted or conscientious or some other trait. However, hustle is unique from that. If you see a young leader that has hustle, what are you seeing from them? What does that look like?

Hassan: I have to first give credit to a friend of mine who shared the term hustle with me in the context of an individual's propensity for success. I would say someone who has hustle is tenacious, is future focused, mission-oriented, resilient, hopeful, and positive. Someone who is always striving for excellence. A person with hustle wants more...is hungry...is willing to sacrifice, who is never comfortable – restless.

As a personal example, people describe me as restless and never comfortable with the status quo. They say that I am always looking at new ideas, adventures, or opportunities. Someone with hustle isn't afraid to challenge or afraid to take on a new challenge. If they fail, they learn from their mistake. They are undeterred.

Lindsay: I think that is important talk about because that doesn't really show up in the literature on leadership, but is so critical to success. To me, it goes back to a word you mentioned earlier of grinding. It's

doing the work and the investment in yourself and in others. Sometimes that is those long nights, like what you mentioned you did in earning your degrees. It is the constant working to be better, to serve better, to show up better at work every single day.

Hassan: Absolutely. It is living the mission. Some people may argue that people like me who have been described as restless, might be too determined and not focused on the operating side of the business. But, I would argue that there is just as much hustle in operating as there is in building and innovating. Operators need to be relentless on identifying key performance indicators, using artificial intelligence to gain insights, laser-focused on quality assurance, etc. There is hustle needed everywhere. Those same traits continue into your life outside of work as well. I don't want to give anyone the impression that someone who hustles is consumed with their job and doesn't find enjoyment or quality of life elsewhere. Hustle is an approach to life, not just work. Remember, what got you here – won't get you there...without hustle!

Lindsay: I agree. The hustle idea isn't just applicable to work. Fundamentally, you aren't someone different at work than you are at home. The desire to do better isn't just at work, it's about how you choose to live your life. It goes back to your comment about who you are is how you lead. Thinking about that a little more, I would say that leaders who hustle will often find themselves in a very unique career path. For example, if you look back at your career path, you wouldn't necessarily predict where you are today. But it is the hustle that you displayed that probably makes you perfectly suited for the position that you have today.

Hassan: I appreciate you saying that. I reflect on that all the time. How did I end up here? Yes, I'm hustling all the time. I am always looking to improve, be better, and to challenge myself. I could not have predicted I would be where I am today. When I first met Mr.

Cohen, he described me as someone who is passionate, which I think is synonymous with hustle. If you are hustling it is because you are passionate about what you are doing and you are committed to it. While not every single person in the organization can be described as one who hustles, the leaders in our organization and those who are responsible for business lines do hustle and they have to hustle across their line of business.

Lindsay: With that in mind, and looking back over your career, what advice would you have for young leaders?

Hassan: I would say that relationships matter. Be nice to people. Transparency is also important. Subordinates need to know what you are thinking, what your values are, and what is important to you. People need to know your roadmap. You will need to determine the level of transparency in terms of what you share, and that is developed over time. Leaders also need to listen. I personally pay attention to listening more. As I mentioned earlier, leadership is a developmental process and this is one area that I am working on. Even before I go into meetings, I remind myself to listen more and to ask more questions. It is amazing what you will hear and what people will share if they are given the opportunity.

I try to model shared decision making and I try to make sure everyone in the room has a voice. That is important and leaders need to be open to new ideas, but the ultimate decision rests with the leader. Once a decision is made, we need to move on it.

I would also say that all leaders need to be humble. There is no place for arrogance. What we see from the leadership literature and in real life is that the leaders who fail are those who do not manage their discretion

well. When a leader grows through the organization, they are given a lot of discretion. They are given a lot of decision making power. What we see often with leaders is their inability to manage discretion. So, leaders need to be careful with the power and authority given to them and they need to use it wisely.

What I learned in the last few years is that it is important to have performance management standards and then manage to the performance. What are you measuring and what tools do you have in place to measure your outcomes? What outcomes are important because what is measured is what people will pay attention to. Moreover, managing the performance, having your leaders, managers, and the team manage performance. Making sure people know who is responsible for what. Understanding that people

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will be held accountable. What is the pace that you are expecting around these deliverables? Do you have the right people in the right places to get the job done? It is so important for people to understand what they own and what they are going to be held accountable for at the end of the day. There should be no ambiguity.

Lindsay: That is great advice. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Hassan: I did want to add a couple of thoughts regarding leadership at the strategic or organizational level. One of the things that I have learned because of the partnerships and franchise relationships that we have established, is this notion of meta-leadership. I am having to work with other CEOs in our network and

constantly ponder the importance of peer leadership. I think this is a whole different aspect of leadership that more should be discussed and written about.

Another area is the importance of Board relationships. I never had to worry about a Board in the military. A few important things to ask are: How do you manage your Board? How do you get to know your Board members? How do you respond to their inquiries? At what tempo do you communicate with your Board?

And, one last thing that I'd like to share is that you always need to have multiple capabilities. You can't have one single point of failure. In other words, you need to have a backup or an exit strategy for all of your business strategies.

I hope that I have offered you something that will be useful to the Journal.

Lindsay: Absolutely. Thank you for your service and your time.