

LEADERSHIP

# Leading With and for Character: The Implications of Character Education Practices for Military Leadership

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Schools, businesses, and governmental and non-governmental organizations have been increasingly concerned with developing individuals in their charge in ways that promote positive, holistic, and meaningful change in all facets of their lives, including character strengths. Character development is a relational and context-specific phenomenon; it is also a phenomenon that builds on philosophical principles of right and wrong. That is, character involves mutually beneficial relations between a person and the specific requirements for “doing the right thing” at a specific time and in a specific place (Callina & Lerner, 2017). As such, researchers and practitioners must leverage the diverse relationships in the lives of individuals to ensure the development of character.

One key relationship involves the exchanges between the leader in an organization and the teams and/or subordinates he or she might lead. This relationship is critical because the character attributes of a leader might be reflected in the character attributes of subordinates and the quality of an organization might be shaped by the character strengths and character-supportive practices of the leader (Crandall, 2007). Therefore, it is important to focus on both the character of the leaders themselves and the knowledge and pedagogical/leadership competencies and proclivities of these leaders, because both may impact the character development of the members of the organization or group and the nature of the organization or group itself.

Character development strategies to develop leaders and organizations of character can be improved by reviewing best practices for character education, and by applying these practices to institutions such as schools, corporations, and the military. The military, in particular, emphasizes character as critical to the alignment of performance and professional values (Crandall, 2007). Although the military emphasizes the importance of positive character in its branch doctrines, and supports character development strategies, such as mentoring, instruction, and developmental and leadership opportunities (Woodruff, 2007), it could

benefit from the successes of contemporary knowledge of effective character education. This article outlines the importance of character education and, in particular, of educating and developing leaders of character. As well, we present examples of, and suggestions for, the military as it further integrates character into its overall strategy for mission success and the enhancement of the profession of arms.

### Character Education

Ultimately, character education is about educating for character. In other words, it is leveraging education

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to foster the development of character in students, and other stakeholders, in the educational context. This statement begs the question of what is character?

### *What Is Character?*

Character is a concept that is used and explicitly defined in quite varied ways. The concept actually originates with the Greek term for the imprint or “mark” on a coin, but eventually came to mean that which marks the nature of something. Hence, it is possible to talk about a person’s character as the attributes of an individual that define the nature of the specific, unique person. Character can be good, bad or neutral, and so one version of character refers to one’s nature (personality). However, character is also often used to mean the positive side of one’s character; as in, “she’s a true person of character.” In this case, people typically mean a specific aspect of one’s character, that is one’s moral character.

Shields (2011) defined four aspects of character: moral, performance, intellectual, and civic. Following previous scholars (Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Nucci, 2017; Turiel, 1983), moral character refers to that part of one’s character that impacts the welfare and rights of others (or, for some, self and others) and is universal. Lickona and Davidson highlight further the relational aspect of moral character, as it often is about how people treat and relate to others. Aspects of moral character include compassion for others, integrity, and honesty. Performance character, again following Lickona and Davidson, is about that part of character that has to do with excellence. It is about the characteristics that impact how well people do whatever they attempt to do. These characteristics include grit, perseverance, fortitude, and an ethic of craftsmanship, for example. Intellectual character (e.g., Baehr, 2013) is about the aspects of character that have to do with the pursuit of truth and knowledge. This type of character includes such constructs as intellectual courage and open-mindedness. Civic character includes those virtues

that support effective participation in the public sphere (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). Civic character includes tolerance and a sense of social responsibility. It is important to note that there is some overlap between these four categories of character, at least to the extent that there are moral and performance aspects of both civic and intellectual character, whereas moral and performance character tend to be separate and complementary with each other.

It is beyond the scope of this article to differentiate the nature of leadership in regard to character development in each of these four domains. Instead, we will focus on strategies of leadership that more generically pertain to character broadly defined. However, our bias will be toward the moral end of the character spectrum. When the second author worked at the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA), there was a repeated discussion that the cadets at USAFA may someday have command and/or control of weapons of mass destruction. The discussion was further elaborated to avow that the nation cannot afford to have officers with such power who did not also have a moral compass. Character development for leaders is a matter of life and death, particularly when one is dealing with the profession of arms.

A remaining issue is the unity and stability of character strengths. We argue that the nature and development of character is complex and dynamic, and that it resides within the mutually-influential relations (or coactions) between an individual and the system in which the individual exists (i.e., a web of social relationships, existence within diverse overlapping social systems, etc.). Lerner (2018) offers a relational developmental systems framework that explicates the person-within-system dynamic of character development and Berkowitz (2014) suggests a “quantum” nature of character both as relatively stable within person and simultaneously part of a relational developmental system.

### *What Is Character Education?*

It is important to summarize the fundamental principles of effective character education before we delve into the place of leadership in character education and specifically leadership within a military context. One of the Federal Commission on School Safety's key recommendations is to focus on prevention, that is, to prevent threats to safety in schools, such as violence, through the implementation of evidence-based, effective character education (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2018). Given the history in the U.S. of violence within colleges and universities (e.g., shootings and mass murders at University of Texas-Austin and Virginia Tech, as well as crimes involving sexual assault or rape on campuses across the nation), a focus on character education is relevant to higher education as well. To implement this recommendation about character education the Commission pointed to the use of the PRIMED model of effective character

3. Intrinsic Motivation/Internalization: implementation strategies should lead to the internalization of targeted values/virtues and to the growth of intrinsic motivation for key values/virtues.
4. Modeling: leaders, at all levels including classroom teachers, must model the character they want to see in others.
5. Empowerment: the basic human need for autonomy, voice and empowerment (Deci & Ryan, 1985) must be strategically and intentionally met, that is, power and voice must be shared and respected.
6. Developmental Pedagogy: the long-term and indelible formation of character must be the goal, rather than short-term compliance. There should be a developmental perspective.

*The goal of what happens in officer formation (or any leadership formation, for that matter) is the long-term development of character, for when it matters most, that is, when a person is functioning in a leadership role.*

education (Berkowitz, Bier, & McCauley, 2017). PRIMED identifies six fundamental evidence-based principles of effective character education:

1. Prioritization: fostering the development of character must be a (if not *the*) authentic institutional priority.
2. Relationships: the development of healthy relationships among all stakeholders must be strategically and intentionally targeted.

When the second author was at USAFA, the outcome goals of character development were often articulated in the form "Cadets who..." This statement should be expanded to include officers in the operational Air Force, as well as cadets.

This revision is vital because the goal of what happens in officer formation (or any leadership formation, for that matter) is the long-term development of character, for when it matters most, that is, when a person is functioning in a leadership role.

In short, character education is pedagogy that effectively fosters the long-term development of internalized character by making it an authentic organizational priority, modeling it, nurturing the relationships upon which it depends, and empowering others to be co-authors and co-owners of the journey.

When this effort is made in a way that produces people who have moral, performance, civic and intellectual character, it is effective character education.

### ***Making the Case: Why Pursue Character Education?***

This question can be answered both conceptually and empirically. On a conceptual level, it can be argued that no society can sustain itself if it does not nurture the development of character in each subsequent generation. Character education, at the broadest level, then, is an eternal human obligation and necessity. Doing it effectively means understanding the what and how of character development. This development can be understood from each of the four aspects of character. For example, for economic prosperity, at the least institutions and their leaders need to nurture intellectual and performance character for creativity and a work ethic. For societal health and progress, moral and civic character, etc., must be nurtured.

On an empirical level, there is now an impressive body of research showing the broad impact of quality, evidence-based character education (and its related fields, such as social-emotional learning and virtue education) on a wide range of desirable outcomes, including the development of character/virtues/values (e.g., Berkowitz & Bier, 2007), academic success (Benninga, et al., 2003; Durlak et al., 2011), positive contributions to and engagement with community institutions (Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015). Although there is relatively little longitudinal research, the longitudinal research that does exist substantiates the long-term impact of character education (Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteyn 2012; Taylor et al., 2017), even when the character education was only delivered at the elementary school level; Seattle Social Development Project; Hawkins et al., 1992). In other words, character education has broad positive developmental, behavioral, and academic impacts and, when studied longitudinally,

these outcomes tend to be maintained, even into early adulthood.

### **Leading for Character**

Leadership is a highly studied and discussed phenomenon, across many sectors such as the military, business, and education. This focus exists because of the influence and importance of leadership within organizations. The leader of an organization has disproportionately more influence on the organization, and hence its members than any other aspect of the organization. We can then posit that the leader of an organization concerned with the development of character of its members, needs to look closely at the role of leadership in character formation (Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz, Pelster, & Johnston, 2012). Developmental research specifically on the role of leadership in character development is relatively sparse (e.g., Callina, et al., 2017), but what research exists supports this contention (e.g., Marshall, Caldwell, & Foster, 2011).

Recent research (Navarro, Johnston, Frugo, & McCauley, 2016) has identified a set of attributes of school leaders who are effective at leading schools for character development. The attributes cluster under the label “The Connected Leader,” and they include vulnerability (operationalized as humility, authenticity and openness), transformational leadership (Bass, 1996; with features such as charisma, creative challenge, and ethical role modeling), and a professional growth orientation (operationalized as human capital learning capacity building, empowerment, and a focus on creation of a positive adult culture). An additional framework of value in exploring leadership for character development is servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1991; van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015), because of its focus on the development of those people one is leading, including ethics and social justice. Along this line of research, Bier and Berkowitz (2017) identified eight virtues of the servant leader: foresight/future-mindedness,

noble purpose, courage/authenticity, interpersonal acceptance (which includes care and forgiveness), stewardship for the greater good, empowerment (and a focus on the development of others), gratitude, and humility.

However, the literature remains sparse at this writing, and more research is needed to better understand the nature of leadership for character development. Nevertheless, from the extant educational literature, several attributes have been identified as important: an orientation of service to those being led, a focus on the positive moral development of those being led in particular, and a specific set of personal characteristics of the leader, including humility, authenticity, openness, challenge, empowerment, and charisma.

PRIMED can be used to frame these ideas about leading for character development. For character development to be an authentic Priority in any organization, leaders must hold it as a (ideally *the*) priority of the organization. Then they must act accordingly; that is, to maximize the emphasis on character development, such as through the allocation of resources. In addition, leaders must embody the character they want to see in others. In other words, leaders must Model it. Central to being this kind of leader is the authentic valuing of Relationships. Note that the Navarro and colleagues' (2016) model is called the Connected Leader, focusing on interpersonal relationships, which most contemporary leadership models do. Also central to many of the models identified is the Empowerment of those being led. This focus is part of Servant Leadership and the professional growth orientation to leadership in the Connected Leader. Finally, the core of both Servant Leadership and the Connected Leader is an authentic valuing of the development of those being led, which is the purpose of a Developmental Pedagogy.

### **Character, Leadership and the Military**

Framed by an interest in fusing positive leadership

and leading for character, we examine an organization that has set the authentic Priority of educating for character merged with a mission to develop strong and effective leaders: the military. The various branches of the military emphasize developing the character of their personnel to ensure that there is group and organizational trust, support, and general alignment of performance and professional military ethics among units to best "complete the mission." For example, the various service academies explicitly list that they wish to "develop leaders of character" (e.g., U.S. Military Academy, 2015), that "character is the defining element of success for a leader in combat" (Chadwick, 2017), and that they must create "an environment where cadets and faculty alike 'Own, Engage, and Practice' the habits...in line with an identity of a leader of character" (U.S. Air Force Academy, 2018).

For the reasons presented earlier, the military focuses particularly on educating its leadership for character because of the special connection leadership has to influencing the organization both vertically and horizontally, and the heightened priority of moral character when dealing with issues of lethality and security. The various branches and their academies converge on the idea that character is developed through relationship-building and mentoring (formal and informal), direct instruction, developmental experiences, and leadership opportunities across military, physical, and intellectual domains. For example, each of the four major academies has some sort of character and leadership assessment or programming, and the branches have integrated centers that support alignment of professional values and character development through training, education, and operations (e.g., the Center for the Army Professional Ethic).

The United States Military Academy (USMA) has the West Point Leadership Development Strategy (WPLDS) to "educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets...[and] to develop not only creative and

adaptive leaders, but also leaders of character who will make the moral-ethical decisions based on their internalization of the Army Values” (U.S. Military Academy, 2018). By aligning leadership, character, and professional values through the WPLDS, USMA not only shows a Priority of character education, but also the goal of Intrinsic Motivation, and an orientation toward a Developmental Pedagogy. Alignment of professional values with aspects of leadership provides a connection between character and professional success. Therefore, this integration should eventually be internalized as character becomes more apparent in a service member’s context (including shared norms defining the identity of an exemplary service member as character rich) and reinforced in his or her own behavior. Emphasis on education, training, exposure to role models of character, and development provides a framework for creating a systematic progression of character programming that provides flexibility for individual needs and strengths, and results in the general ability to lead with professional ethics and character.

This developmental pedagogy is emphasized in the WPLDS efforts (echoed in many ways by the other service academies), as well as the Character Development Strategy at USMA, whereby USMA coordinates military, academic, and mentorship opportunities that theoretically promote character and leadership in developmentally appropriate, yet challenging, ways. Such experiences include summer military detail, leadership and character coursework, and coach-athlete relationships through mandatory sport participation. These opportunities allow for Relationships, Modeling, and Empowerment, as well as the relational core of Connected Leaders and Servant Leadership, to come to the fore, at least to the degree that these role models embody the advocated character and leadership attributes and authentically are committed to the development of character and leadership by those being coached, mentored, etc.

By building relationships with other cadets and active military that serve as instructors and other professional guides at USMA, cadets are given the chance to model character and exemplary leadership, and to engage with humility in the process. In addition, cadets are empowered to be leaders of character in ways that are unique to a cadet’s experience and specific situational demands. Such relational and autonomous aspects of the character and leadership development system at USMA also lend themselves to further Intrinsic Motivation and internalization of character. Internalization is most likely to occur when cadets develop a healthy emotional bond to both the group and the leaders of the group, and the group and leaders embody the character being espoused and targeted.

Although the framework for developing leaders of character at USMA theoretically *should* work does not mean that it *does* work. Such conclusions require rigorous empirical, developmental evidence. Of course, it is relatively easy to implement a program. However, it is much more difficult to assess a program’s actual effectiveness. Nevertheless, despite the methodological challenges involved in effective program evaluation (e.g., Card, 2017), the difficulty of a challenge does not eliminate the necessity of acting to address the challenge or the need to undertake assessments and evaluations that will show a commitment to demonstrating excellence in programming and a commitment to being accountable for resources.

In this regard, WPLDS not only created a framework by which USMA develops effective leaders of character, but it also tracks the evolution of the institution-wide commitment to infuse cadet life with character. This tracking was led by their most recent former superintendent, LTG Robert Caslen (retired). LTG Caslen “sensed a disconnect” (Matthews, Ryan, & Lerner. Manuscript submitted for publication) between the mission of USMA and the Army, and what was actually implemented to develop leaders of character. He ordered that there be a systematic

integration of character into all levels of cadet training, resulting in the comprehensive WPLDS strategy outlined above, and he required tracking and iterative processes to improve character development at USMA (Matthews, Ryan, & Lerner. Manuscript submitted for publication).

*Given what is still emerging to fuse character and leadership in the military, it may be useful to provide some recommendations for continuing the process of creating and sustaining effective character leadership programs.*

In addition to this ongoing effort, USMA has partnered with Tufts University to address the effectiveness of developing character through their programming by way of an innovative study, *Project Arete* (Callina et al., 2017; 2018). Launched in 2015, Project Arete is a longitudinal, five-year cohort sequential, mixed-method investigation of the development of character virtues among USMA cadets. The goal of the project is to assess the bases, features, and implications of the development of character attributes specifically relevant for thriving at USMA and in the larger US Army. For instance, the project has examined the factor structure of a set of 15 character attributes of specific relevance to the West Point context. Bravery, Empathy, Gratitude, Grit, Hardiness, Honesty, Integrity, Intellectual Humility, Intentional Self-Regulation (ISR), Leadership, Optimism, Purpose, Relational Humility, Social Intelligence, and Teamwork. Using data derived from self-report surveys of about 1,500 cadets from all four class years, an exploratory factor analysis identified a 4-factor structure of character across these attributes: Relational, Commitment, Honor, and Machiavellian. A confirmatory factor analysis provided evidence

for the validity and measurement equivalence of the factors (Callina, et al., 2018).

In sum, through institutional support, routine institutional assessment, and further collaborations between researchers and the military, USMA leaders can identify features of character development and, as well, effective strategies for developing character and leadership that are the most useful for individual-individual and individual-context relations.

#### **Future Directions: Leading with Character**

Given what is still emerging to fuse character and leadership in the military, it may be useful to provide some recommendations for continuing the process of creating and sustaining effective character leadership programs. We offer a few suggestions that can be generalized to most large organizations (i.e., non-military as well), based on the PRIMED model and concepts of Connected and Servant Leadership:

1. Emphasize that character must be prioritized, and leaders of the military must act in accordance with that priority. The current leadership and overarching organization must have buy-in and set an explicit stance (much like USMA and WPLDS) to connect professional success with character and leadership strategy.
2. Implement evidencebased practices of character development and education, with clearly articulated outcomes and goals and a developmental, context-appropriate logic model to achieve such goals, and avoid wasting time on high saliency, low impact strategies (Berkowitz, Bier & McCauley, 2017).



3. Leaders must model character—talk the talk *and* walk the walk. If leaders articulate and model positive character, their behavior can enhance the character and competencies of the staff (i.e., leaders can manifest a professional growth orientation for the staff; Navarro et al., 2016).
4. Character is relational, and relationships are key. Leaders must not only have rectitude in and of themselves, but they must also show respect and humility in their relationships with others. They must establish positive relations with others and part of that is empowerment. It also aligns with a servant leadership orientation.
5. If leaders of character are to serve the nation, they need to create a network of like-minded and -behaving members of the military who take duty, honor, and courage seriously, with character being the glue that holds those concepts together.

At the beginning of this article we noted the interest with all governmental and non-governmental organizations in enhancing character development among all individuals in their charge. We believe these recommendations can provide a successful way forward in creating a context wherein such development will occur. Moreover, we believe such development is critical for the continued welfare of the military and our nation. Therefore, it is more than important that theoretically sound and methodologically rigorous character education is enacted and evaluated. It is imperative.

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