

## SENIOR LEADER PERSPECTIVE

# USAFA: Developing Leaders of Character - Leaders of Airmen

Jay B. Silveria, Lieutenant General, USAF

A year ago I was honored to assume command of my alma mater, the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA). In this unique role I serve as both the commander of a large and diverse military institution, and as the president of a leading undergraduate University. Over the last year I have come to more deeply appreciate this distinctive institution and the various constituents that it serves. I have found that this position presents unique leadership challenges as we develop our students (we call them cadets) in the context of the profession of arms that all of our graduates will enter. It has been an inspiring journey not only intellectually but also personally, as I interact daily with young men and women who have chosen to serve their nation. In reflecting on this year, I would like to share a little bit about our process in developing leaders of character, leaders of Airmen, and leaders for our Nation.

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## Purpose

The mission of the United States Air Force Academy is to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become leaders of character, motivated to lead the United States Air Force in service to our nation. This mission is a critical one and certainly a worthy (and necessary) endeavor, as the news is replete with examples of leader shortcomings and failures across all occupational domains. While many organizations can endure multiple leader failures when outcomes revolve around such factors as profits and market share, the military does not have such a luxury. Since USAFA only provides leaders who will serve as part of the larger Air Force, nothing shy of excellence fulfills the needs of our vision of being the World's Greatest Air Force – Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation. The word “only” is important and should not be overlooked. Unlike other universities, all of our graduates go to a single employer – the United States Air Force. It means that USAFA exists to develop, commission, and provide qualified and lethal officers to the Air Force. With that understanding, our mission is therefore not only to develop leaders of character, but also to develop leaders of Airmen. Our graduates, upon entering the Air Force, will be leaders and their followers will be fellow Airmen. This puts a unique context on what we do. We automatically know what each of our graduates will be doing upon commissioning and the accompanying characteristics they must possess. Our Air Force requires its officers to be lethal warfighters.

However, it is not enough that we develop leaders that have good character to lead our military forces. The battlespace that these leaders will face is dynamic and necessarily complex, and success demands qualified, educated, and agile leaders. The enemies of today are more capable, lethal, and unpredictable than we have experienced in past conflicts. This creates a demand signal that we must be ready for and must

prepare future leaders to embrace. We must provide leaders who can leverage efficient and lethal warfighting capability to the Joint Force. Nothing less than that is needed and nothing less than that is acceptable. USAFA's purpose is clear.

## USAFA

In order to develop these leaders of character and leaders of Airmen, we use an integrated 47-month combination of education, development, and experiential learning. Not only are cadets challenged with an arduous military regimen that helps them appreciate and prepare for service in the profession of arms (i.e., warrior ethos), they also undertake an extensive Bachelor of Science degree program, preparing them to be thought leaders in the career fields that they will enter upon graduation. In addition,

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all cadets participate in athletics to prepare them physically for military service, they develop leadership skills through leading organizations of their peers, and they have the opportunity to participate in airmanship programs. While our process ensures that they have the necessary skills and education for successful military service, the development of leadership and character are not simply process functions. Instead, they are more participatory and occur at the individual level. This creates a challenge for the institution, as individual development takes time and intentionality from both the individual and the institution.

This challenge was best articulated by David Day (2000) when he talks about the distinction between leader development and leadership development. Leader development focuses on human capital and

involves functions that occur at the individual level. This includes individual training on desired skills and abilities that are related to effective leadership. In addition, it helps leaders gain a realistic understanding of themselves and who they are as a leader. Typical skills for leader development include self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation. Leadership

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development, on the other hand, focuses on the relational aspects of effective leadership referred to as social capital. Instead of focusing simply on training effective skills and abilities at the individual level (leader development), leadership development examines the interrelationships between individuals and the social processes that occur. Typical skills for leadership development include social awareness (i.e., empathy), team building, and interpersonal skills. As future leaders, this also includes a thoughtful understanding of such factors as culture, inclusivity, and diversity, as these leaders will be leading diverse organizations that are both joint (interactions with other US military services) and coalition (other countries' militaries). The reason that this distinction is important is that if we are interested in the development of leaders of character we need to be deliberate about challenging our cadets at not only the individual level (who they are), but also in their interactions with one another (how they show up) and the larger organization.

## Core Values

It is important to mention that all of this occurs within a particular organizational context. Since USAFA develops officers – leaders of character and leaders of Airmen – for the US Air Force and our nation, there must be alignment between our Academy and the greater Air Force. Otherwise, we risk developing officers with inadequate skills to accomplish our mission. One way that we ensure alignment is with a common set of Core Values. These Core Values not only indicate what is important to the Air Force, they also serve as an orienting function by letting those in the organization know the standards to which they will be held accountable. They also send an explicit message to those outside of the organization on what we value as a military service. These Core Values, first established by USAFA in 1994 and later adopted by the Air Force in 1995, are *Integrity First*, *Service Before Self*, and *Excellence in all We Do*.

*Integrity First* means that all individuals will act with a soundness of character. We will be honest, truthful, and authentic in what we do and in our interactions with others, both inside and outside of the military. The significance of such a value is that it provides a common starting point of trust and respect in our interactions. When we consider that when accomplishing our mission (the delivery of lethal force) our lives could be on the line, we should expect no less.

*Service Before Self* indicates that military service can require sacrifice. We serve something larger than ourselves and we do this freely. In fact, the Commissioning Oath that every officer commits to includes the words, "...that I take this obligation

freely...” This means that there may be times where we need to suspend our own personal desires in order to answer the call to which we committed. There is a powerful point of connection when you understand that others that are serving by your side are willing to sacrifice for the greater good. When we look back in our military history, this sacrifice and commitment to something larger than ourselves has resulted in significant outcomes and results in the freedoms we enjoy today.

*Excellence in all We Do* is not just a mantra, it is how we approach our profession. It becomes the standard by which we can expect others to perform. It implies that we are always willing to better our best. As it fits the developmental approach at USAFA, this means that we are constantly challenging our cadets to be the best that they can be instead of being complacent with prior or current success. This is a point at which innovation can be leveraged, but more on that later.

These core values create a strategic direction for our members. Whether it is a military member leading a training program or a civilian academic professor in the classroom, we all understand what is expected of us and what we can expect from those around us. This becomes a powerful centering function for our personnel. However, while the Core Values provide a foundation for how we act and interact with one another, they alone do not ensure that our cadets actually develop along the trajectories that we want them to. We must also add intentional aspects to our developmental paradigm (leader development AND leadership development). We do this through our Leader of Character Framework.

### Leader of Character

While there are numerous definitions of leadership and countless explanations of what good leaders do, there is

less understanding of what a leader of character entails. Therefore, several years ago we codified what we refer to as the Leader of Character Framework. A leader of character is someone who:

- *Lives Honorably* by consistently practicing the virtues embodied in the Air Force Core Values.
- *Lifts Others* to their best possible selves.
- *Elevates Performance* toward a common and noble purpose.

From this definition of a leader of character, you can see multiple linkages between the mission of USAFA, the vision of the US Air Force, and the Core Values. This alignment ensures that we are working toward purposeful development. We enable this through a three step process. First, we teach cadets to *Own* their development. This means that we show them that their ability to develop is dependent on them being a participant in the experience. They must own their part of the process. Their part includes understanding their attitude and effort, their duty, their commitments, and owning their role in the developmental process. The next step is for them to *Engage* in purposeful experiences. This is done through a collaboration of

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the individual and the organization. The institution can provide developmental experiences, but if the individual is not willing to engage in the development, then the opportunity is of little value. The final step is to *Practice* habits of thoughts and actions. Based on earlier work by James Rest (1979; 1999), we implement his 4 step model related to ethical and moral concerns. This process includes the steps of Awareness, Reasoning, Deciding, and Acting. Cadets can utilize

this approach through intentional experiences, programs, and courses provided by the organization. From a developmental process, the challenge for most cadets comes between the Deciding and Acting steps. It is one challenge to decide what needs to be done, and another to take action. We call this the Decision-Action Gap, and we work with cadets to move past this gap toward intentional development.

### Innovation

While this framework is grounded in theory and informed by practice, one of the things that we must constantly monitor is the operational context in which our future leaders must thrive. Not only must we equip our leaders to be successful in the situations they face upon graduation, we must also attend to trends and forecast an uncertain future. I view my leadership approach as Superintendent through a prism of firsthand experience gained in leading Airmen on the 21st century battlefield. As I have experienced throughout my career, modern warfare is complex, lethal, fast paced, and rapidly changing, and will require leaders who not only lead Airmen, but who can also lead in joint and coalition environments. Future

things to ensure we are outpacing rivals in an uncertain future. To that end, one of my strategic priorities as the USAFA Superintendent is innovation.

Innovation in large, regimented, and traditional organizations can be challenging, and change of any kind can be difficult. When considering that USAFA is a military organization as well as a University, we face a daunting situation. Questioning assumptions, processes, and policies can often be seen as threatening as they challenge the status quo. However, we cannot let that stop us from being the agile organization that we need to be and the Air Force requires us to be. In order to do this, I will tirelessly focus on innovation for the duration of my tenure as Superintendent. A couple of ways that I am leading this charge involves USAFA's Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD) and the Journal of Character and Leadership Development (JCLD).

We have had a Center focused on character (and leadership more recently) for several decades. While our efforts have been in place for some time, we have been through several organizational iterations of this concept. In order to maximize CCLD's impact and relevance to the institution, I have taken steps to realign and clarify the mission of the Center in such a way that it will serve both an integration and an innovation facilitation function for the entire organization. For example, one of the common struggles of large

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leaders will need to have a warrior mindset (understand their profession) and lead in austere situations. This means we must provide them both the skills and education to successfully lead today, and the tools necessary for making sense of the future. In order to do this, we must be able to analyze and assess our current processes and be able to incorporate new ways of doing

organizations is that many people are doing great work (often very innovative work), but not everyone is aware of that work. That can often result in duplication of effort and a less than optimal use of resources. It can also stifle innovation by limiting it to pockets within the organization. CCLD's mission is now to interface with all organizations in the institution in order

to leverage best practices and highlight innovative practices, thereby acting as a force multiplier for the organization.

A second step has to do with an intentional focus on scholarship. USAFA has a proud tradition of scholarship and research. However, we haven't always been as effective at socializing that work outside of the organization. For example, most people don't realize that USAFA has 21 research centers and institutes and is rated as the #1 Undergraduate Research University. Hundreds of publications and presentations are produced every year by USAFA faculty and staff. This past academic year alone, our staff and faculty were multiple patents, published books in addition to numerous scholarly publications. The quantity AND quality of the scholarship at USAFA is truly outstanding. To facilitate the distribution of some of this work, we have reintroduced (starting with this edition) the Journal of Character and Leadership Development. Through the JCLD, its Editor in Chief, and a world class Editorial Board, we will facilitate communication to other organizations (academic, military, businesses, etc.) about all of the significant work that is being done (facilitate distribution of innovative practices) as well as partner with other thought leaders with respect to character and leadership development. We will also use it as a means to ask challenging questions about what we are doing and what others are doing to develop leaders.

## Conclusion

While we have a unique mission here at USAFA, it is not one that can be successfully done in isolation. In fact, in order to continue to be relevant moving forward, we must partner with other thought leaders to ask challenging questions, innovate, and further understand the relationship between character and

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leadership. Through such collaboration we can ensure that we are developing leaders of character, with lethal capability, for an uncertain future. I would like to invite you into that partnership and help us continue to develop the kinds of leaders of character, leaders of Airmen, and leaders of our Air Force that our nation deserves.

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