

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

A Force of Character

Chad Hennings, Hennings Management Corp

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

JCLD: Thank you for your time today and willingness to have a conversation about character and leadership. You have agreed to serve on the Editorial Board for the Journal of Character and Leadership Development (JCLD). As busy as you are, why are you interested in being a part of the JCLD?

Hennings: In my life, I've been fortunate enough to achieve some semblance of success. Now, my focus is on pursuing significance. I want to challenge people on what their legacy is that they are leaving – on why they do what they do. Why their identity is important. Why character is important. Why living a life of excellence is important. I've had several unique experiences in life and have come across individuals that, in the eyes of the world were considered a success, but behind the scenes when you peek behind the curtain, they were train wrecks. They do things for the wrong reasons and the legacy that they are ultimately leaving behind is not a positive one. For me, it is about spreading the message as to why character is important. Why solidifying identity is important. And why living a life of excellence is important.

JCLD: I appreciate you bringing up the point about excellence. In your previous work you have written about excellence and creating cultures of excellence. Can you talk a little bit more about what you mean by excellence?

Hennings: I believe that identity is the filter. Character is the process. Living excellence is the journey. What I mean by that is, if you don't have identity, the filter by which you process your thoughts, words, and experiences through in life, the decisions that you make and how you live your life will be made in a vacuum. The decisions you make are reactive, instead of proactive. Character then becomes the process. It's how you tactically execute. Do I want to be an individual of virtue? Do I want to be courageous? Do I want to listen to others? Be a good teammate? Living excellence is a journey and not a destination. It's a constant state of being, a thought process - a mindset.

Chad Hennings is a successful businessman, former Air Force Officer (45 combat missions in the A-10), 1988 USAFA graduate, professional football player who won 3 Super Bowl Titles with the Dallas Cowboys, and one of the most decorated college football players in NCAA history. He is a sought out speaker and author who uses a message of excellence and character to encourage and motivate others to be a Force of Character to develop, grow and serve their communities. He currently runs a commercial real estate company (Rubicon Representation) and consults with major organizations (American Airlines, Bank of America, General Motors, Citigroup, and many others) on building cultures of excellence.

People who strive for excellence are people who have identified who they are, who they choose to be, and that they choose to be the virtuous individual. These are people I refer to as being a “Force of Character.” They are people who live to be their best self every day. They encourage others to do the same. And they encourage the organizations that they are affiliated with to rise to a higher noble purpose or cause.

JCLD: That idea of identity is the filter, character is the process, and living excellence is the framework for the book you wrote called *Forces of Character: Conversations About Building a Life of Impact*. Was that the impetus for writing that book?

Hennings: The reason I wrote the book was to be a conversation starter about character being a choice. How you live your life is a choice. No matter what your past is, we all have a choice or an option as to how we interact with the world

around us. That is why I interviewed the people that I did and had conversations with them, because they come from varied backgrounds. For them, they came to the realization that character is a choice.

JCLD: What did you learn through the journey of writing that book? Did it confirm what you knew or were you able to walk away from that experience a little bit different?

Hennings: It confirmed to me that there are certain universal truths to this life like: always be in a constant state of learning, your past is your past, don't allow past mistakes to define you, what you do does not define who you are, that people matter, etc. Those were solidified through the development of that book. I don't think that we talk about it enough. I don't think schools,

and parents in particular, with so many activities that kids do and as busy as they are, we don't talk about topics like character and virtue enough. A lot of times schools will talk about it in an academic setting, that this is character, but we don't give kids an opportunity to exercise character and leadership with real hands on experience. We don't allow them opportunities to make mistakes. That is why I think athletics is the greatest character and leadership laboratory that there is. That is because there are boundaries set up and they can go out, make mistakes and learn and grow. To see what works and to work through different social constraints. So they can grow as leaders and individuals of character.

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JCLD: I'm glad you brought up the issue of athletics. I'm not sure that everyone understands the value of athletics and the opportunities that it affords to practice leadership and character.

Hennings: That to me is hands on experience. They can start to learn that when they are only 5 or 6 years old playing recreational league sports. They can start to learn the lessons about character and leadership from day one and that is essential.

JCLD: As you know, that idea fits in with the mission here at USAFA to develop leaders of character. We want to make sure that we are doing that in our programs and through our processes. It sounds like you are like minded in the belief that character is something

that can be developed. What were your thoughts about that as you went through the Academy experience? Was that something that was salient to you at the time or was that something that you developed as you were in the Air Force, played Professional Football, and now in Business?

Hennings: I came across it somewhat haphazardly through experience, but while at the Academy it started to become intentional. I began to understand the “Why.” Not just that this is something that you do, but why does it matter? That’s what I took away from the Academy into my other experiences. That “Why” is

The one speech that I remember to this day from when I was a cadet was from a Medal of Honor winner. He talked about his experience in Vietnam. The thing that stuck out for me, and that still resonates with me is, “You can never compromise your integrity, or who you are, because once you give it away it is very difficult to get it back in a leadership position.” You lose that trust.

what I carried away and what has stuck with me. I got to understand the nuances of character and leadership, but I also got to practice hands on in athletics and in the Squadron and Wing.

JCLD: Did the Academy give you the space to come to that on your own or is there something that we can do to help cadets with that process?

Hennings: That’s a good question. During my time at the Academy, I felt like I didn’t get enough opportunities to sit down and listen to and engage with leaders in regards to their real world experience. What mistakes they made, how they were able to correct them, how they grew from that. How they dealt with

real world situations. For me, I wish we had more of that. That’s why I wrote the *Forces of Character* book. I wanted people to read the stories of Roger Staubach, Troy Aikman, Jason Garret, Justice Clarence Thomas, among others. How ironically all the former Dallas Cowboy players, myself included, when we were little we stole something. It was something like a pack of gum or a pocketknife and we were caught and subsequently disciplined. We all came to the realization and we really understood there is a right and a wrong (I can hear all those jokes now from fans who dislike the Cowboys). This was also the motivation behind our Class of ’88 gift to the Academy – to endow the Profession of

Arms Speakers Series. We wanted to make sure the Academy could continue to bring individuals back to talk to the cadets about their Academy experience, what it meant to them, and why it is important. And also share their real world experience – their challenges of leadership and life. So instead of just having cadets go to a mandatory session where

they are going to get a lecture about a topic, where it feels like just another class, you can put in front of them someone who has actually been through those life’s experiences. It resonates with the cadets. It is a point of connectivity and it means more.

JCLD: With that in mind, how would you encourage a cadet to take a pause, while they are at the Academy, to do exactly what you are suggesting?

Hennings: It’s certainly not something that you can force upon someone. Sometimes you have to go through an experience in life to get to the point where you can own it. Where the light bulb moment happens. The one speech that I remember to this day from when

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What I think is needed, and I’m not sure it is feasible, is a mentorship program. Being able to have communication between former alumni, who are willing to be mentors that can communicate on a regular basis with a cadet. They can talk about life. It could be a recent graduate or someone who is senior in their career field. If we can pair these cadets with mentors, that is where I think we can have the messages reinforced versus just hearing about it in an academic setting. It is with someone who has been there and done that – someone who has credibility and experience. I think that would really resonate with cadets. I know I would have appreciated the ability to talk with someone. I felt like I was shooting from the hip and blind sometimes when I got on active duty. I would wonder “What is coming at me next?” I had no idea.

JCLD: The nice part about what you just said is that it not only helps the cadets to start to get a sense of the “why,” but it also helps the graduate community stay connected in a meaningful way and contribute back to the institution.

Hennings: Exactly. When the graduate community has that connection, it’s natural to want to be more a part of what is going on and contribute in many ways. They are a part of the team. As an example of its effectiveness, Jerry Jones did this with the former Dallas

Cowboys players. For most teams, when individuals are no longer playing, they are just gone. Jerry set up a Legends Committee that allowed us to come back to do different functions and to engage with players, businesses, other organizations, sign autographs, and attend the games. As a result, we still feel connected and a part of the team. Otherwise, if we didn’t have that we would just be another former player. This is something (the mentoring at USAFA) that would be awesome. The benefit is that it works both ways (for cadets and for alumni). I know I would get as much out of it as the cadet would.

I was fortunate to be able to achieve several things but my “why” really became solidified when I became a parent. I saw my children struggle. I saw my son go through a medical issue and when I couldn’t fix it based on my own efforts and abilities, that’s when I realized that there has to be something more that holds us together as humans.

JCLD: I agree. It gives the alumni who came through USAFA, where it had a significant impact on them, the opportunity to pay that back and stay connected to the university. Whereas a traditional university may have many graduates stay in the local area, by design, all USAFA graduates leave either immediately after graduation or soon thereafter.

If I could go back a little earlier in our conversation, you said earlier that you were able to find your “why.” How has that changed over the years as you have gone through your different phases of your life (military, professional athlete, businessman)? Has your “why” changed?

Hennings: My “why” has become more refined. I was fortunate to be able to achieve several things

but my “why” really became solidified when I became a parent. I saw my children struggle. I saw my son go through a medical issue and when I couldn’t fix it based on my own efforts and abilities, that’s when I realized that there has to be something more that holds us together as humans. It can’t just be about the accomplishments. That’s not what truly defined me. I want to be remembered as an individual of faith, an individual of character, and someone who it wasn’t all about accomplishing things and acquiring material possessions. Having had those experiences and having met so many different people and to see how they have lived their lives, I have been able to refine my “why” to what it is today.

JCLD: Thank you for sharing that. While the accomplishments can provide a platform to give an opportunity to talk about things of significance, they certainly don’t define who we are. Can you talk a little bit about some of the things that you do in the community and how you work to make your “why” happen?

If I can impact one individual, who wants to be that force of character, that’s significant. Because that person can then go out and impact someone else. Then that person can go out and impact someone else. Then you are impacting your community, your culture, and your society.

Hennings: Of course. I started a non-profit men’s ministry called Wingmen. We encourage men to be husbands, fathers, and friends of purpose and to be engaged in the community from a faith based, servant leaders perspective. I have also written 3 books and I do a lot of public speaking. I talk to audiences on character and leadership. I mentor young professionals through my Commercial Real Estate Company that I

helped found (Rubicon Representation). I work with other non-profits in my community. I also have the opportunity from time to time to speak at military bases. For example, in a few weeks I will be going to Dyess Air Force Base and spend a whole day there talking to all levels of the organization. That evening, I will have the opportunity to speak at their Air Force Ball along with members from the local community. I will talk to them about the things that we have just been talking about. The “why.” Why do you do what you do? To hopefully inspire them to go out and continue to serve, to be that servant leader. I see a need and I try to fill the need. It’s been a lot of fun.

JCLD: When you go out and give these speeches and talk to people, what do you take away from those opportunities? What does it mean for you personally to be able to give back in that way?

Hennings: What it means to me is that, hopefully, I am making a difference. I want to make a difference in people’s lives. Life always comes down to the smallest

common denominator: the individual. If I can impact one individual, who wants to be that force of character, that’s significant. Because that person can then go out and impact someone else. Then that person can go out and impact someone else. Then you are impacting your community, your

culture, and your society. Not to get off on a tangent, but if you look around, we are in a crisis of identity. I’ve read a lot of Jonathan Haidt’s books. I’ve read *The Righteous Mind*, *The Happiness Hypothesis* and I’m currently reading *The Coddling of the American Mind*. In his first two books, he refers to a study by pioneer sociologist Emil Durkheim. Durkheim studied communities in Western Europe in the late 19th century. What he found was that where communities

don't have the same moral foundation and the same social constraints, there is a decrease in happiness and an increase in suicide. It broke my heart when I read just yesterday an article where it's not just teenagers or millennials where suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death, but it's at the point now where young kids, ages 8-11 years old, suicide is on the rise. I think a lot of it is because we don't emphasize those things that bring us together in community. It has become so divisive. It is all about identity politics from a variety of competing interests. Where our culture is almost bordering on anarchy. I'm sorry to go off on a tangent, but I'm passionate about this. I don't want to see our communities fail. It's become about the "me" and not about the "we." That is what I talk to and share with people. There were studies done over a 100 years ago that looked at this and these are the consequences. Look around. There are reasons why if we go down this path, it's not going to end well. And that's not just my opinion.

JCLD: I appreciate you sharing that. I agree that whenever we take our focus off of others and put it on ourselves, we get very predictable results as communities and as a larger society. You highlighted something that I thought was really interesting. It sounds like you are a pretty avid reader.

Hennings: Absolutely. What I have found is that what I am drawn to are historical works, predominately biographies - individuals in the military, politics, and theology. I also enjoy reading books on social psychology. I love reading about why people think the way they do and what makes them tick.

JCLD: Have you always been a big reader or is that something that has developed over time?

Hennings: It has been more over time. When I separated from the Air Force and started playing for the Dallas Cowboys, that's when I started to read more.

JCLD: As you know, one of the things that the Academy tries to instill in cadets is the idea of lifelong learning. That we can always continue to learn. One of the things that I have found in my experience is those that are thought leaders, those that are leaders in their field, and those that have had real success are readers. They are always on that path to continue to develop and refine themselves and their thought processes. Is that something that you have found as well?

Hennings: Yes. Leaders are readers. It truly is a lifelong process. I couldn't agree with you more.

JCLD: On a little bit of a different note, we talked about character and a bit on excellence, and one of the other things that we focus on here at USAFA is being a leader. When you think about leadership and being a leader, what comes to mind? In your experience and in your reflection back on the leaders that you have come into contact with, what do good leaders do?

Hennings: Good leaders are constant learners and they know their craft. They set the example. It's do as I do, not just do as I say. They also have the intangible quality of those under them knowing that they truly care for them and have their best interests at heart. I may have gotten "chewed out" by a leader, but I knew that they always had my best interest in mind. I knew that I needed it and they held me accountable. Leaders are also always looking to find their replacement. Who can I mentor to step up to the plate and replicate good leadership?

JCLD: Thanks for sharing those points. Along those lines, the Academy has defined a leader of character. A leader of character *Lives Honorably, Lifts Others, and Elevates Performance*. You talked about character, excellence, pursuing significance, mentoring others, bringing in thought leaders to interact with junior leaders (Speaker Series), and more. It's interesting that you have covered

those three ideas over the course of our conversation. Does that framework of a leader of character resonate with you?

Hennings: Very much so. If you do those things, good things can happen. I agree wholeheartedly.

JCLD: If you had the opportunity to give advice to the class of 2019, around the ideas of character and leadership, what might be some things that you would want to pass on to them?

Hennings: When you graduate from the Academy, now your real world experience begins. Be in a constant state of learning. As a leader, it's not about you. It's about the people that serve under your command and about those that you serve. Give of yourself.

JCLD: That's great advice. Thank you very much for your time.

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