

LEAD WITH CHARACTER

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No matter what walk of life a cadet comes from, we are all here to develop ourselves as officers, be it in the United States or countries around the world. Every day we take part in experiences designed to prepare us to be leaders of the Armed Forces. In order to accomplish this daunting task of being officers, for four years we engage in physical training, military discipline, and academic scholarship. The Officer Development System and United States Air Force Academy Outcomes outline the qualities and attributes we seek to instill in each officer candidate. To realize these high aspirations, however, it is not sufficient to merely go through the motions or simply function as a widget in the USAFA machine. To fully realize our potential, we all must acquire the proper mindset.

Although many of the efforts I describe in this article are generated from my own experiences at USAFA, I challenge each reader, to include all members of our military, to analyze his or her own life and participation as a military professional. Through daily interactions we see plenty of examples of people who follow the rules and those who don't. That distinction is easy. What is harder to distinguish are those people who follow the rules by the letter of the law and those people

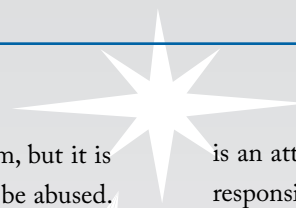
who go beyond the motions to lead in the spirit of what those rules ultimately stand for and are trying to create. Throughout all of my interactions, I've come to the conclusion that it takes character to develop oneself as a leader. But what does it look like to have character as a requisite to becoming an exceptional leader?

In and out of the military, it's the people with the high positions whom most people call leaders. If this is the case, it would only take putting in the time, academic excellence, or a few more years of practical experience to attain the rank of "leader." I'd like us to consider that "leader" means more than a position; it means going beyond what we thought was ordinarily possible given our current circumstance. To do so takes something more than technical training, knowing the answers, or even shiny shoes. Whether we are managing or leading, without character, we are not living up to our full potential, and our organization will suffer for it.

Character means many things to many people. Here at USAFA, the actions of someone with character includes holding people accountable for their actions, admitting mistakes, and giving proper credit for work done by other people. Character is

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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easy to spot in the Academic classroom, but it is also the place where it can most often be abused. The number one complaint from cadets is that they do not get treated like adults. When a teacher fails to hold a cadet responsible for his or her own actions, it breeds feelings of cynicism. It tells the student that the teacher doesn't believe that he or she can hold themselves to the high standards originally outlined. These type of actions such as excusing late work or accepting justifications for behavior doesn't benefit either party and leads to the decline in character. We often talk about the Honor Code here at the Academy, and Character is often cited as the difference between following the Honor Code and living by the Honor Oath. By following the Honor Code, you don't lie steal, cheat, or tolerate other cadets who do so, but by living the Honor Oath you pledge to live honorably. The biggest difference is that by living honorably throughout the day you stop looking for ways you could avoid violating the letter of the code and start taking actions in the spirit of living honorably and doing the right things. This is just one example where we as cadets can see our actions being swayed by our mindset. If we apply a mindset that is fixed to the constraints of our surroundings then we will never be able to fully utilize our leadership skills. However, if we employ a growth mindset, one in which we are willing to fully embrace the possibility of the situation, than we can enhance our experience and our ability to make a difference. This difference

is an attitude that reflects a willingness to accept responsibility for any outcome that occurs in the situation. This includes not only your own personal actions, but the actions of your group and actions that may be out of your control. Character is more than a fixed way of thinking. Sometimes as Henry Ward Beecher once said, we need to "Hold [ourselves] responsible for a higher standard than anybody else expects of [us]." By holding ourselves responsible, we set an example that not only our subordinates will follow, but our peers and our leaders as well.

A cadet's time on the USAFA property can span up to 5½ years, and there are hundreds of decisions that we make as cadets every week. Entering my final semester here at the Academy, I find myself reflecting on what I have observed in myself and in my fellow cadets over the last four years. With few exceptions, cadets go through their daily lives living for graduation. Without a significant shift in mindset, graduation will only mean the end of marching, the end of classes, and no more DI¹. It will mean getting paid more and leaving all of the turmoil behind. Countdowns to graduation for every class are mandatory knowledge for the doolies to know on a daily basis. Staff tower announcements about who has less time here are more frequent than most of us would like to admit. Of course good grades are essential if cadets are looking to obtain a graduate degree, but the "2.0 and go" chant of the classes of old

¹ DI is dormitory inspection. Each night, all cadets must be accounted for by being in their rooms or in an authorized location.

still lingers here on the hill². Also big on a cadet's priority list is staying out of trouble so as to be able to take advantage of free weekends. Taking a breath of relief when we pass the physical fitness test is also high on the priority list. As a general observation, for the most part, cadets live their lives the same way for four years and tick off the time until they leave the Academy.

Walking back from lunch the other day, reflecting on the general way cadets function, I wondered, "Is that it?" "Is this all we're living for?" With all of our opportunities to make an impact here at the Academy, is the whole purpose of our being here to merely survive the trials and figuratively limp to graduation?

I'm reminded of a Firstie (senior) who trained us during recognition³ back when I was a doolie (freshman). We were at the peak of our exhaustion, pushing ourselves further than we ever imagined possible and were fumbling every knowledge question thrown at us. Now this particular cadet wasn't the most-liked cadet in our squadron. She was one of those cadets who got in your face when you screwed up and made sure that you were following every rule in the book. More than once during the year we would complain about how we hated her style of training and how she was one of the only ones who called us out. True to her style, she was right there at recognition correcting us as she had done all year. After

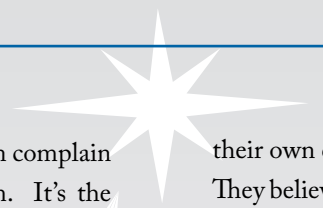
many grueling knowledge questions, she finally asked a question we were all ready to get right: "How many days until I graduate?" Knowing the answer, we all responded that "Ma'am the answer is 74 days." Satisfied with the answer she followed the question up with "What does the number 1173 stand for?" Hearing our class days left, we promptly responded with "Ma'am the answer is the number of days until the class of 2010 graduates." Immediately we knew we had given the right answer, but it wasn't the answer she was looking for. We expected her to raise her voice and start chewing us out, but instead she calmly but forcefully said, "Wrong. It's the number of days you have left here to make a difference." That moment of inspiration has stuck with me for the last three years.

What made her different? What separates those few cadets who have the strategic vision to make a difference on the lives of their subordinates so strong that, three years later, they remember every word that was said? I assert the difference is a mindset.

This difference in mindset can be seen across the Cadet Wing on a daily basis. You can separate cadets into two different categories: the lions and the lambs. The lions are the cadets who go to Cadet Professional Military Education with an open mind, looking for every opportunity, and the lambs are those who hang out in Mitchell

² "on the hill" refers to being on the Academy campus.

³ Recognition is the final intense training period before freshmen are recognized as being upperclassmen.



Hall until the very last minute and then complain every minute they're in the classroom. It's the lions who teach basic training with an undying hunger to impact lives and the lambs who wonder why permanent party⁴ has put all of these constraints on their lives and actions. It's the lions who understand that their time is better spent on the development of their followers rather than the lambs who can be found hiding out in their rooms watching movies and surfing the internet. It's the difference between the lions going to required briefings and doing the things that are required rather than the lambs pretending that they're too busy to be bothered by such things. Interestingly, it is the lions who are most humble while the lambs arrogantly think there is nothing new to be learned.

So what makes the difference between the lions and the lambs? Why, when we all receive briefings on character and leadership, do some seem to display the learned knowledge and others don't? It turns out that it's not the situation that we're put into, but the fundamental mindset that we personally take that makes all of the difference. By altering our mindset we find that it's our own attitudes that limit or enhance our experiences.

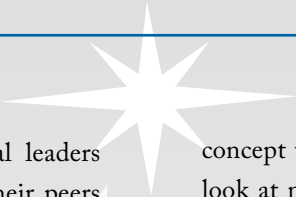
Our mindset is by far the most impactful part of our being that affects our potential impact. By analyzing the mindsets a little more we see that the lambs believe that everything they do is out of

their own control and a function of circumstance. They believe that there's a war between permanent party and that we are two sides battling for power over the actions of the Cadet Wing. The lambs think that they can't do anything about their own futures, and that the policies in place dictate their lives. The lions on the other hand see that they are the authors of their future and they are the ones who create opportunities for themselves to succeed. They understand that they have a say in most things that go on, and that there is a partnership between themselves and the permanent party; both are working towards the same goal. The lions not only help set the policy, but know that if there's something in place that doesn't make sense, they work with their leaders to change the policy. They take the view on life that they do make a difference.

So then, if we have the same situation, yet two completely different experiences, I am left to the conclusion that the one thing we have the most control over, how we see ourselves, others, and the situation, is the only thing that limits us. It's not permanent party, rules, policy or standards that constrict our performance, but rather we do so by not being able to see what is possible in each and every situation.

The people I respect and want to most emulate are those who take the view that they control their experience and who have the mindset

⁴ Permanent party refers to the officers and staff at the Academy as opposed to the cadets.



that what they do matters. The real leaders are those who hold themselves and their peers to the standards, even when it isn't the popular thing. It's not that we don't all "know" this to be true, but what makes the difference between knowing and action is having this mindset of taking advantage of each and every situation to develop oneself as a leader. I have come to the conclusion that character isn't simply trait that you have or don't have; rather it is something we have complete control over: our mindset.

That's what I mean when I say it takes character to develop true leadership. Without character we will never take advantage of the opportunities required to fulfill our true potential. This is an easy concept to understand, but a very difficult

concept to implement in our daily lives. I must look at myself authentically and ask myself if I have the courage to be a lion under the most challenging of circumstances and when those around me are being lambs. Here at the Air Force Academy, there is no shortage of opportunities to make a difference and be the difference in our peers' lives. I challenge each of you the next time you are faced with an decision, no matter how small it may be, to take a step back and ask yourself, "Who am I going to be and what do I stand for? What mindset will I hold? Am I going to be a lion or a lamb? What's it going to be?" It is a good thing that we have the opportunity to be difference and make a difference in the lives of our peers and the institution. I hope that the outcome of our decisions always includes the choice to be a lion.