A Strategy for Character and Leadership Education

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ABSTRACT

The concept of teaching character and/or leadership is a critical component of human performance and development. Whether in the military, government service, athletic competition, or academics, character and leadership play a pivotal role in producing a quality product. Unfortunately for educators and practitioners, the chief limitation in developing these traits is the inevitable immeasurability of each through normal means. This article establishes a linkage between character and leadership development and the Clausewitzian notion of military genius in order to establish correlation between military genius and character and leadership education. To establish this relationship this article defines the characteristics of military genius, demonstrates how these aspects can be taught and evaluated, and then links these activities to defining moments which allow the one to evaluate character and leadership in practice.

Something is missing from research and discussion regarding character and leadership education—the acceptance that evaluating the efficacy of any given program seeking to develop either attribute is a near impossible task. Determinations of each depend largely on counter-factual scenarios, hypothetical situations, and normative assessments. Unless an evaluator can spend every possible moment with the subject, how can one effectively determine whether or not someone is demonstrating good character? The "right" decision in a given moment could demonstrate character, but could just as easily demonstrate selfish (rational) action. Is character demonstrated when someone is coerced into choosing a certain option, when the choice is between the desired behavior and a punishment? The teacher who witnesses an act of good character in a pupil witnesses the act, which may or may not indicate that the pupil will lead a life of character. Similarly most leadership (especially command style as in hierarchical organizations such as the military) is by definition directional. While one might assert

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that someone has good or bad leadership, how frequently is that determination made by someone wholly unqualified to make the judgment? How can one tell a subordinate that they have demonstrated good leadership? Managerial skills and/or officership can clearly be witnessed from outside or above the leader, but only ones subordinates can accurately tell us if we are, in fact, effective leaders.

The inherent weakness in character and/or leadership education is the near impossibility of actually assessing whether or not the educational or training methods used have produced the desired end state. Observing a system changes the behavior of the system, but if character is doing what is right when no one is looking, acting unselfishly, eschewing self-promotion over unit and team promotion, then we should expect that true character is demonstrated outside observation. Similarly how does one assess leadership when people can be expected to act "leaderly" while under observation? In both cases the educator, manager, coach, etc. is not witnessing character (or leadership) which would be reflected in how the subject behaves in coming decades, but rather how the subject is acting in the moment, on a given day. Neither character nor leadership are an act, but a pattern (Davis, 2003). This is not to claim that those institutions who value each trait should give up, but rather than an alternate means of assessment might be necessary. Rather than attempting to measure specific instances of character or leadership, we should focus instead on developing truly measurable character traits, traits which will be conducive to truly actionable character and leadership under duress. By substituting the Clausewitzian notion of military genius we have a quality that, while largely still normative, possesses attributes more easily and accurately assessed. This article asserts that because the purpose of character and leadership is similar to that of military genius (to make sound decisions under duress), the latter is a useful

predictor for actionable character and leadership, is more reliable in those defining moments which demand solid character and leadership, and are therefore a better focus for training and education.

Introduction

Despite the widely variant folkways and mores of a given time period or generation, a clear streak of consistency runs through scholarly writing on character education. The observation that "character-building, from the standpoint of the institutions involved, requires clear recognition of the necessity of working together toward a single end. They are in no sense competitors or rivals but co-operative agencies" could very well have been written by the United States Air Force's Center for Character and Leadership Development, the publisher of this very journal. In fact those words were written by John Cornett in The Journal of Religion nearly

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a century ago (Cornett, 1931). So too the idea that those in charge of instructing character should "get it," "buy into it," and "live it" (Berkowitz and Biel, 2004). The notion that effective character education actually requires those in positions of authority to demonstrate character is what we would expect of leaders in any field. That effective character and leadership education requires both objective lessons and subjective demonstrations leads Davis to conclude that genuine character education requires allowing the pupils to actually make mistakes, but that few institutions are willing to do so, preferring safety to quality education (Davis, 2003). Davis' assertion that true character and leadership require practice, experience, and failure, with the results often not visible for decades, matches the

premise of this article and also reflects the millennia long historical dialogue on character education. That experience is a more lasting teacher than precept was recognized by Seneca the Young, whom is commonly credited with the notion that "long is the road through precept, short and effective through example." In a like mein, Aristotle's views on habituation argue that habit leads to character, not that character can become a habit. This then leads us back to John Cornett who, in addition to advocating for synergy among otherwise competing interests, further proposed that the trinity of interests in education included purpose, curriculum, and method (Cornett, 1931). Put another way: the purpose represents the desired end state, the curriculum the available means, and the method the ways of using these means towards the desired end. Collectively these ends, ways, and means represent a strategy, and lead one naturally to the realm of the strategist.

Strategy and Military Genius

Strategy is an oft referenced and infrequently understood concept. Military strategy, business strategy, national strategy, sports strategy, there are a host of fields which one might consider strategy important to success. Interestingly many of these same fields are those that we would expect have a natural desire for strong character and leadership amongst members. Unfortunately, what often masquerades an organizational strategy is little more than a concoction of buzzwords and immeasurable goals masquerading as

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a defined path towards achieving a desired end state. For the purposes of this article, the term "strategy" adheres to Colin Gray's formulation of a specified means utilized in specific ways that lead to a desired end state. Using this ends, ways, and means construct highlights the fact that Cornett

himself was proposing a strategy for character education using curriculum according to a purposeful method in order to develop sound character in students. By establishing that a strategic approach to teaching character has a clear historical foundation, all that remains is to correlate the characteristics of military genius and their employment in defining moments.

Alongside the dictum that war is a continuation of politics by other means, the notion of fog and friction as timeless aspects of the nature of war is one of Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz' most famous contributions (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). In war, fog represents that which we cannot or do not know. Fog introduces uncertainty, makes effective planning difficult, and ensures that chaos will always be a factor when hostilities commence. Once hostilities do commence friction perpetuates chaos by ensuring the battlefield is dynamic. With every moment that passes friction creates more change, demands more ingenuity. Fog and friction can be considered to have an inverse relationship. As fog recedes through prolonged conflict (after a decade of waging the war on terror, the U.S. had a much better understanding of the character of the war) friction increases, thus chance dominates throughout. According to Clausewitz, in order to overcome the combined effects of fog and friction the sound commander needed to possess military genius, which included the characteristics of courage (physical and moral), intellect (a combination of determination and coup de oil or inward eye), and strength of character (the components of which now compromise what we call leadership (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). By understanding the relationship between military genius and the nature of war we begin to understand why certain leaders and commanders have success where others do not. Thus, when President Ulysses Grant is described as "Outwardly quiet and unpretentious, inwardly confident, Grant's style of command was practical, flexible, and, above all, decisive" we can confirm that not only was the

general a sound military commander, but that, according to Clausewitz, it was military genius that made him so (Waugh, 2009).

> *"If we then ask what sort of mind is likeliest to display the qualities of military genius, experience and observation will both tell us that it is the inquiring rather than the creative mind, the comprehensive rather than the specialized approach, the calm rather than the excitable head to which in war we would choose to entrust the fate of our brothers and children, and the safety and honor of our country." (Clausewitz, trans. 1976)*

Though Clausewitz was certainly writing to and for a military audience, the traits that comprise military genius are by no means limited to military commanders any more than fog and friction are the exclusive domains of warfare. Any agency, collective, business, team, or other competitive organization that operates in uncertain environments, encounters unexpected obstacles, and has another agency working against their own is, in fact, operating with fog and friction. These same organizations then stand to benefit from the characteristics of character and leadership in their members and can (and should) grow those traits through a purposeful program designed to instill military genius. A reason that military officers and non-commissioned officers are marketable in the civilian world and pursued through programs such as Troops to Teachers, is precisely because of the perceived value of the veteran's character and leadership, each the result of purposeful exposure training aimed at developing military genius. For example, the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) directly develops each of the components of military genius in officer candidates through a wide variety of military, academic, and athletic endeavors. Thus, while the Mission Statement of the Air Force Academy *"to educate, train and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the United States Air Force in service to our Nation"* speaks to the need for leadership (officers) and character, the explanation behind this mission statement reads like a modern day appraisal of military genius. "...USAFA forges cadets, through academic, military and athletic training, into resilient (determination), innovative (intellect) airmen who...are able to operate and lead in the most challenging environments (fog and friction)." Sequentially then what the United States Air Force Academy actually does is teach the traits of military genius, with the expectation that those traits can and will lead to leaders of character.

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Courage: Physical and Moral

The first consideration in developing military genius is the requirement for moral and physical courage and, while each are critical components, certain organizations will place a premium on one over the other. For example, many professional sports require a high degree of physical courage, which allows athletes to overcome friction (literal and figurative) during competition. From combatives training such as mixed-martial arts and boxing to contact sports such as football or rugby to extreme sports such as cliff diving, athletics often demand physical courage which allows the athletes to deal with the inherent hazards of their business. Despite the obvious importance of physical courage even the casual observer can recognize that certain sports encourage a culture short on moral courage. Human performance enhancing drugs and the art of flopping (feigning having been fouled by opposing team) are rampant in some sports. Conversely, other organizations such as lawyers and judges each require a high amount of moral courage, and less so

physical. Both aspects however are critical components of military genius because they improve the ability of the individual to react quickly in a dynamic environment, to mitigate fear in challenging circumstances, and to overcome unexpected obstacles (friction).

Clearly physical and moral courage are very different character traits, and an individual can possess (be taught) one, both, or neither. Moral courage leads to reliability and a calmer mind, while physical courage is stimulating and leads to boldness (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). By aiming to instill both in future officers the Academy aims to "the highest kind of courage...a compound of both" (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). Physical courage can be manifested in a variety of ways apart from simulated combat or contact sports. Exercises that emphasize physical courage such as jumping from or crossing large heights, white-water rafting, or even self-protection classes can each be employed by businesses, government agencies, etc. The value from such activities simply requires explaining to participants that, by purposefully engaging in tasks which require physical courage the subject can learn to adapt to uncertain environments. So too with moral courage, which can also be simulated right in offices with simple, effective exercises. Managers, coaches, and employers can present their subordinates with ethical dilemmas, often without the subjects knowledge, and allow them to make choices. The best of these won't necessarily have a "right" answer, but force the person to truly face a moral dilemma. Simply empowering members to speak to leadership about

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Intellect: Determination and the *Coup d'oeil* (Inward Eye)

Like courage, intellect can be broken down into sub-categories, in this case determination and the *coup d'oeil*. At initial glance, the inclusion of determination as a component of intellect might strike some as misplaced. Would determination not fit better under courage or strength of character? In a reasoning all military officers should internalize, Clausewitz postulated that "determination in a single instance is an expression of courage; if it becomes characteristic, a mental habit" (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). As an intellectual quality determination leads to a reduction in self-doubt and helps overcome hesitation when absolute knowledge of a situation is unavailable. Leaders in diverse organizations will continually be presented with situations in which they lack critical information, but must nonetheless act decisively in order to accomplish organization goals in uncertain environments. The intellectual component of determination makes such decisiveness possible. In simplest terms, intellectual determination is the conscious decision to persevere.

From the singular instance and the habitual (mental habit), determination is a quality that can be purposefully developed in members. Many organizations force new recruits to develop perseverance from the moment they join. The military has basic training, athletic teams have "two-a-days," fraternities have challenges. Some businesses place new hires on temporary contracts in order to determine if the new hire has the ability to succeed in a new environment. For each of the above, the determinant for which new members remain and which do not is less a skill problem than a will problem. Recruits don't fail basic training in the early weeks for lack of skills (the purpose of basic training to teach these skills) but because they

lack the will. For Clausewitz, the decision not to quit is intellectual determination.

While the intellectual component of determination allows perseverence despite conditions, the inward eye is that which allows the commander (leader) to maintain battlefield presence and quickly assess situations in light of their own experience and the evolving battlespace (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). Inward eye should be considered the product of self-reflection and personal development, and can potentially yield comfort with uncertainty, helping to overcome fog and friction. The development of the inward eye is a byproduct of time spent in study, specifically study of oneself.

In order to understand anything one must spend time engaged in the task of analyzing said object. From one's children or a profession, to a material object such as a new set of golf clubs or a new car, the more time that a person spends analyzing and employing something, the more one comes to understand that object. The same should be said of understanding oneself. In order to develop an inward eye, an individual needs significant quantities of time spent in efforts to truly understand who they are. Many people do this through religion, club participation, group projects, etc. Occasionally defining moments such as the loss of a loved one or a major life setback can force periods of strong self-analysis. The characteristic of self-awareness (the ability to understand one's mood, emotions, and their effect on others) is often developed through these same avenues (Goleman, 2000). With proper mentoring, members can be taught to recognize when they lack self-awareness, and when they fail at accurate self-analysis. The inward eye is an attribute that can be encouraged by embracing lessons learned from failures, often with the help of mentors. The greater the trust a member has in a potential mentor, the more influence that person will have over their protégé (Melanson, 2009). Thus the inward eye can also be developed through purposeful, lasting mentorship relationships.

Strength of Character

For Clausewitz the component strength of character was that which grants the leader the ability "not to be unbalanced by the most powerful emotions" (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). According to Clausewitz, of the variety of men (now women) who could be formed from the development of strength of character, the best was a person who was "imperturbable." (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). The imperturbable leaders were those best able to "summon the titanic strength it takes to clear away the enormous burdens that obstruct activity in war (friction)" (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). Strength of character then does not just allude to a character trait

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that subordinates desire to see in their leaders, but an existential quality that directly combats the friction of war. If Clausewitz is to be believed, without the strength of character, which develops imperturbable men, commanders would be unable to overcome the burdens, hazards, and difficulties of combat. Though the ideal archetype, these imperturbable men can still be overcome by blind passion if unable to retain their self-control during combat. The hazards of being ruled by emotions are further exacerbated by fog and friction, and for this reason strength of character must be developed in leaders, and future commanders must be taught to rely on their experience and wisdom rather than the passions that inflame the people during war.

Tied to the strength of character aspect of military genius are staunchness and endurance, representing both a physical and mental component, although to Clausewitz the former represented emotional fortitude and the latter intellectual. (Clausewitz, trans. 1976). Staunchness is said to represent the ability to recoil from a single (initial) blow. When

knocked down, can the leader/commander recover? More importantly, how can we know in advance if an individual will have the ability to recover?

Defining Moments - When Character and Leadership are Displayed

If we accept that military genius gives the officer the ability to overcome fog and friction, and that the service academies in general, and the Air Force Academy specifically, have been purposefully designed to teach the Clausewitzian components of military genius, the follow-up question becomes: how does one test military genius? Together, character traits such as courage, intellect, and strength of character should give the officer the ability to act appropriately when confronted with the fog and friction of combat. Rather than hoping such is the case, the Academy graduate would be better served were they able to test for themselves that they had in fact learned and internalized these concepts. Having been taught the traits, how can cadets be placed in situations that allow them to employ these skills before the mission or lives are at stake? Can the Academy create for cadets a defining moment; does the Academy already do so?

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According to Joseph Badaracco (1997), defining moments are those that reveal, test, and shape each individual. Often those moments can occur without the individual even recognizing that they took place, and frequently require strong self-analysis or insight to recognize what was actually learned in that moment. Because a defining moment is as unique as the individual experiencing the moment, purposefully creating individualized moments can be

difficult, and the focus therefore should be on helping cadets recognize when these moments occur, or when they will be likely to occur.

One way to help the cadet recognize these defining moments is by understanding the relationship between the individual and the moment, which is often presented by a challenge or decision brought about by circumstances. In his book *Decision Points*, former President George W. Bush (2010) identifies a personal defining moment on the very first page, the moment when he decided that, based on an inability to recall the last day he went without a drink, to give up alcohol altogether. The decision to set an example for his daughters came to define the rest of President Bush's life. For General Chuck Horner, Commander of Central Air Forces during Operation Desert Storm, a defining moment came as a junior officer when his F-100 engine flamed out. In the midst of a near-death experience General Horner had the presence of mind to recollect a table-talk discussion on the ability of the afterburner to reignite engines (Horner, 1999). In that moment, the military genius component of the inward eye saved General Horner and his aircraft, and remained a formative lesson on how close to the edge pilots operate every time they do their mission.

Some defining moments might even force an individual to act against his or her own personal convictions for the greater good. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta gives just such an example when discussing the public release of memos on advanced interrogation (Panetta, 2014). Despite his personal ambivalence towards enhanced interrogations, he nonetheless recommended to President Obama that internal memos discussing the techniques not be released to the public. Though overruled by the President, Secretary Panetta, when confronted with the choice between his personal views and his professional responsibilities,

chose the latter. Similarly, in his own memoir Secretary Robert Gates details the resignation of General Stanley McChrystal from command in Afghanistan, the cautionary tale representing defining moments for both Gates and McChrystal. In Secretary Gates' retelling, he advised McChrystal that the only thing preventing Secretary Gates himself from firing the general was safety of the tens of thousands of men and women he commanded in Afghanistan (Gates, 2014). For McChrystal, the defining moment occurred when tolerating the presence of reporters in an informal capacity, which eventually led to the infamous *Rolling Stone* article and McChrystal's relief of command. These defining moments deserve consideration. It is not as though McChrystal went from a leader of character to one without, but rather that, at a critical point in time, a singular mistake led to a loss of faith in his judgment, with direct ramifications for ongoing combat operations. This lesson is important for any organization developing strength of character. A singular (potentially even a multitude) of mistakes does not mean that one lacks character, any more than a single righteous act demonstrates good character- a pattern of either are necessary to actually determine the quality of someone's character.

Executing the Strategy

We have defined the desired end state of our strategic approach to character and leadership education as providing an individual the tools necessary to act as a leader of character. Can we employ military genius to actually reach our desired end state? This question returns us to the original difficulty presented in the opening paragraph: how to assess traits that are most critical when no one is watching? Leadership under monitoring changes the leadership style. Similarly, character assessments made under evaluation do not reflect behavior when no one is observing. Moreover, as Michael Davis (2003) points out, one cannot count

that the behavior we teach is the behavior that is learned. Unfortunately, educational methods on both character and leadership can be so contrived as to detract from the purpose. In jurisdictions such as Maryland and Washington, D.C., high school graduation requires students accomplish

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a certain number of hours of community service, while others permit local school boards to require volunteer time, ostensibly to teach students character. Though people might satisfy such compulsory requirements (in any organization), and do so well, the conduct does not necessarily illustrate internalization of the desired traits. When compulsory (whether through written requirements or though organizational norms / unwritten rules) volunteerism occurs an individual might demonstrate appropriate conduct, but in reality is experiencing a deprivation of liberty, in extremis a lack of character from their own leadership (Davis, 2003). Forced labor masquerading as character training risks teaching cynicism.

What end-state based character or leadership truly desires is the decisive action (or leadership) in a period of conflict, what might be termed a defining moment, and which might not happen until many years later in life. The success of previous education, training, and mentoring is determined by the ability of the student, team member, or employee to function with integrity in crisis, whether actual or manufactured. In the latter case, defining moments can be created and simulated in training environments, but even the former can occur organically through the application of military genius. Many of the experiences that can grow the traits of military genius have the potential to be their own

defining moments. Most notably, with proper mentoring failing at something can increase the inward eye and serve as a catalyst for future growth.

One of the best examples of this purposeful creation of defining moments occurs for students majoring in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership (DFBL). In the DFBL capstone course, cadets engage in field exercises with the Academy Unmanned Aerial Systems Center that place cadets in simulations rife with fog and friction and challenge them to make decisions under duress. With limited understanding of the scenario, DFBL cadets work with other cadets operating a simulated Air Operations Center and with still more cadets flying the RQ-11 Raven unmanned aerial vehicle to make determinations about proportionality, risk management, mission accomplishment, and a host of other ethical dilemmas common to the warfighter, but highly uncommon to the cadet. Given the opportunity to challenge themselves and test their leadership and decision-making capacity, these cadets have responded with vigor, creating increasingly challenging scenarios for each other (Scott and DeAngelis, 2015). By following this example the Academy can aim to create defining moments

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for all cadets. Writing on wartime leadership Anthony Codevilla noted that "nothing so convinces others that they ought to follow you than your confidence in your own actions" (Codevilla, 2009). Through experiences that create defining moments, cadets become better leaders simply because they learn to trust their own ability.

Allowing subordinates to fail when doing so does not lead to mission or organizational failure can be one of the hardest aspects of leadership. Subordinates will likely need to see this behavior in order to model it. That being said, in too many cases, subordinates in many career fields are not afforded the opportunity to fail, but are coerced into doing the right thing. Especially at institutions such as the service academies, while coercion might lead to solid performance, it can never lead to effectiveness in creating leaders who will be expected to execute missions around the world within months of graduating. Ultimately character and leadership are exceedingly difficult to measure, given the mere observation of a subject alters the behavior of the system. However, by purposefully developing courage, self-reflection, and perseverance in members organizations can be secure in the knowledge that members have at least been given a toolset that can enable sound character and better leadership later in life.

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