

Filling Our Lungs with Character and Leadership in Any Context

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A mentor at the Center for Character and Leadership Development once described his goal: “That we so deeply and seamlessly imbed character and leadership into our processes, programs and language that they’re not seen as a series of courses and experience, but instead as just *‘the air we breathe’*.” This desire appeals to many institutions, from corporations to universities to the military, yet we often fall short. The complexities of the environment challenge this developmental pursuit, often polluting the “air we breathe” in a way that has real consequences. The profession of arms in the 21st century is but one context in which this is particularly true.

However, simply acknowledging the complex, non-linear and dynamic environment is not license to abandon the noble pursuit of developing leaders of character, no matter what context we occupy. A major challenge in the continued quest to produce leaders of character is how to prepare leaders to operate and make decisions in circumstances that cannot be predicted. Leaders for today and tomorrow must be on a developmental path that expands their capacity to be adaptive and resilient to these complexities. No matter where they find themselves, they must demand and create the character and leadership “air quality” necessary for the organization or profession to thrive.

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The articles in this issue of JCLI present an interesting collection of contexts in which character and leadership can develop or thrive. Contributions include perspectives in a wide range of developmental contexts – military and civilian, academic and nonacademic, hostile and safe, real and virtual. Yet taken together, all authors seek to identify factors that can “purify” the air we breathe with regard to character and leadership development. What are the leverage points for making character an organic element of the profession? How can we most appropriately understand and use the commodity of power and influence? What are the necessary educational foundations to scaffold leadership development in dangerous environments? How can a culture of ethical and moral leadership exist in an organization that crosses cultural boundaries? Can we develop our actual character and leadership by practicing honorable thoughts and actions in the virtual world? Can an embedded environment of corruption and mistrust be “filtered” and made healthy?

These questions are indeed critical to institutions and professions across the globe, especially in ambiguous and chaotic environments. Again, in the Profession of Arms, we must embrace the ideas and practices that can help us develop and practice character-based leadership as we pursue our noble mission.

In the opening article, Geoff Sutton suggests that the way we educate leaders outside leadership courses may present an opportunity often underappreciated. In particular, Sutton emphasizes the value of liberal arts education in creating leaders who must serve in dangerous (in *extremis*) situations. The elements

of such an education arm the leader with self-awareness, a stronger “moral compass,” ability for discernment, and even experience and courage. The author argues that these capabilities all allow the individual to better integrate and understand the chaos and ambiguity in a life-threatening context.

Amy Moore’s article, “Practice Makes Person,” explores the potential for real-world identity and moral development to be strengthened by practice in the virtual world. Her expertise model extends research insight on the fascinating Proteus Effect (demonstrating a “carryover” effect from an avatar identity to one’s real-world persona), indicating that moral “simulators” can automate virtuous capabilities in the same way that flight simulators can enhance pilot skills. The new schemas can ultimately impact cognitive and affective responses and identity formation. This technological environment presents an array of capabilities (e.g., changing scenarios, coaching/feedback, assessment) that can broaden the depth and reach of most organization’s developmental programs. The promise of building schema using avatars in safe or even simulated *extremis* environments is indeed appealing.

Developing leaders of character is a critical element for the mission success of institutions and organizations well beyond the profession of arms. This issue’s Senior Leader Interview spotlights Mr. Nicolas Lawson, Field Director for *Doctors without Borders*, a global organization bringing medical services to patients in areas of conflict and man-made/natural disasters. Mr. Lawson reminds us that making decisions in high-pressure, ambiguous, and often hostile circumstances is not a condition relevant only to the Profession of Arms. Specifically,

he underscores the importance of fielding ethical leaders with a high tolerance for ambiguity.

The notions of power and leadership are often linked in very nuanced and complicated ways. In the article, “Power, Character and the Junior Officer,” Dan Connelly offers an examination of the use of power and its relationship to character and leadership for a particularly vulnerable population of leaders—the junior military officers. Using French and Raven’s (1959) taxonomy of power, the author first explores the definitions of character and leadership, aligns these definitions with a number of leadership theories, and finally highlights the unique demands and opportunities for power and influence inherent in the junior officer corps. Ultimately, he sees the referent power base as being a particularly salient lever for influencing this community in a transformational way.

As a special feature, this issue of JCLI includes a fascinating collection of short essays about the causes and proposed solutions to corruption in Afghanistan, written by students and faculty at the American University in Afghanistan. Their papers offer a unique and insightful perspective that underscores the impact of ethics and leadership in a fragile environment. The authors identify corrupting issues ranging from ethnic polarization and inadequate economic infrastructures to misaligned incentive systems and cultural habits. Their proposed solutions include physical infrastructures, merit-based systems of reinforcement and democratic and judiciary reforms (no doubt, easier described than implemented). Interestingly, the authors converge on a consistent theme. Overall, they agree that the challenges and opportunities to

combat corruption lie in the ability to (re)establish trust—in institutions, processes and individuals. The introductory article by faculty member Captain Felisa Dyrud (USAF) goes so far as to say that the greatest need in Afghanistan is not physical or financial support, but rather for leaders of character to emerge from the ranks to boldly model integrity to the population. These leaders must be born from, and leverage, challenge, personal choice and positive relationships.

Finally, our student leader’s perspective is provided by Cadet Paul Bryant, the Brigade Chairperson at West Point. His reflection highlights the importance of growth through failure, sharing powerful experiences and lessons from his personal journey at a Service Academy. In the end, Cadet Bryant reminds us of the personal commitment that must be present developing both one’s self and others. The experience of Cadet Bryant demonstrates the value of being immersed in an organization where the “air” is thick with thoughts and discussions about character and leadership.

Each of the articles, the interview, and essays in this issue of JCLI remind us yet again of the unending need for leaders of character in every aspect of society. As we collectively and individually strive to infuse the “air we breathe” with this important topic, we can indeed learn from each other. Across cultures, institutions, professions, domains, levels of danger, and even boundaries of reality, there are ideas that can move us forward. We hope that some of the ideas in this issue will help you breathe easier.