

In Extremis Leadership as Liberal Art

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Noted management expert Peter Drucker (2001) describes management (which he believes is synonymous with leadership) as a liberal art. He explores the concept that a liberal arts education allows free thinking and association to produce new solutions to problems. The nation's service academies train officer candidates to lead soldiers in chaotic real-world situations which endanger the lives of both followers and leaders. Colonel Thomas Kolditz, head of the Behavioral Sciences and Leadership Department at West Point, names leadership in dangerous circumstances *in extremis* (2007a, 2007b; 2005), or "at the point of death."

The service academies are in the business of training *in extremis* leaders, and each uses a liberal arts education as the foundation of their educational program. In fact, the Military Academy, Naval Academy and Air Force Academy were named the top three public liberal arts colleges in the nation in *US News and World Report's* 2012 college rankings (2011). This paper examines the position that a liberal arts education is a strong base for developing *in extremis* leaders at the United States' service academies. To do this, it looks at the question: What is the link between the study of the liberal arts and *in extremis* leadership? In order to answer that question, this paper will discuss: the nature of a liberal arts education; the differences between leadership and management; some selected leadership theories; the role of the liberal arts in

in extremis leader development; and then conclude with a discussion of the importance of a liberal arts education to one Naval Academy graduate while *in extremis*.

The Liberal Arts

The liberal arts have historically been studied to form the basis of a meaningful life that contributes to society (Ruscio, 2009). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) states that a liberal education is the foundation that prepares students to effectively function in an environment of "complexity, diversity and change" (2011). The AACU identifies seven subjects traditionally taught as the liberal arts: the trivium, which is grammar, rhetoric, and logic; and the quadrivium, which is geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy. Modern liberal arts subjects include the study of literature, languages, philosophy, history, mathematics, and the sciences. In fact, the liberal arts have found particular expression at Georgetown University in its Doctor of Liberal Studies (DLS) program (Georgetown, 2010). The DLS is an interdisciplinary doctoral program with required foundational courses in philosophy, theology, history, art, literature, and the social sciences.

Discussing the liberal arts and leadership, Maroosis (2009) states that liberal studies allow the leader to take action in a manner that benefits society.

Trained in the virtues as part of this education, a liberally educated leader is steeped in service to others, and able to take independent action in a changeable and uncertain world. Maroosis terms this “practical wisdom” (p. 179). This practical element allows leaders to achieve results by thoughtful consideration, discovering new facts, making heretofore unseen connections, and evaluating courses of action. Liberal studies teach leaders how to learn.

In addition to learning how to learn, a liberally educated leader becomes a lifelong learner, continually refreshing and expanding his or her knowledge base. It is not true today (if it ever was) to say that an education is complete. The process of learning continues throughout a lifetime. This renewal of knowledge allows leaders to draw relevant conclusions from a broad contemporary base of knowledge. Wheatley (2006) discusses the ability to draw knowledge from seeming chaos and to make connections that appear unrelated yet produce effective solutions. Only by practicing learning and thinking can a leader develop this power of discernment for use as a leadership skill.

The nation’s military academies likewise see the benefit of a liberal education, and all use it as the basis for their leadership education. The curriculum of the Military Academy, for example, is designed to broadly educate cadets to anticipate and respond to an uncertain world, while leading soldiers in combat (USMA, 2010). The curriculum consists of 26 core courses that every cadet takes, one course in information technology and a three-course engineering sequence. The core courses include chemistry, physics, economics, computer

science, English (composition and literature), a foreign language, history (including two semesters of military history), international relations, law, leadership, mathematics (including calculus, probability, and statistics), philosophy (included in this course are logic, a survey of ethical theories, and Just War Theory), physical geography, and political science. These topics cover all the modern liberal arts and then some. Taken as a whole, it is evident that even philosophy majors must take (and pass) calculus and engineering, while engineers must meet the same requirements with respect to philosophy and languages. Similarly, the Naval Academy curriculum has core courses in engineering, the natural and social sciences, and the humanities (USNA, 2009), and the Air Force Academy requires 32 core courses in similar areas (USFAFA, 2009). Each of these academies is in the business of training officer candidates to lead troops in violent conflict. It is obvious that they view a liberal education as necessary preparation for *in extremis* leadership.

Management and Leadership

Drucker (2001) states that the study and practice of management will give new relevance to the humanities. This paper approaches the issue from the other direction: that the study of humanities will give new strength to the practice of leadership. Drucker describes *management* as the skill of directing work teams to produce useful products. He then describes *leadership* as the ability to control the direction of organizations. His conclusion is that the two skills are functionally the same. In spite of this conclusion, his descriptions align with the definitions of management and leadership that

modern theorists have developed, which consider them separate disciplines. French management theorist Henri Fayol developed the first consolidated theory of management in 1916. He considered the discipline of management to have five “elements,” or functions, those of: planning, organizing, command, coordination, and control (Wren, Bedian, & Breeze, 2002). The purpose of management, he believed, is to make organizations run more efficiently and effectively. Later theorists began to consider leadership as distinct from management (Bennis, 1961; Kotter, 1990; Zaleznik, 1977). These developing theories consolidated around the view that leadership is the process of controlling change in organizations and of providing direction in chaos. Leaders are inherently comfortable in unstable environments, and are unafraid of taking risks, willing to try the unknown or uncertain. This comfort with chaos often puts them at odds with managers, who strive to make operations routine and to make certain the unknown. For operations *in extremis*, chaotic as they are, leaders rather than managers are called for.

Selected Leadership Theories

The nation’s service academies train leaders to operate in circumstances where the stakes are mortal. Kolditz (2007a) describes effective *in extremis* leadership as authentic. He further discusses the context of *in extremis* leadership and states that transactional leadership is almost completely ineffective in mortal circumstances. Before progressing further, this paper will briefly compare transactional leadership with transformational leadership, then discuss authentic leadership in order to better describe *in extremis* leadership.

Transactional and Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978, 2003) describes two fundamental leadership theories: transactional and transforming. Later authors have developed his theory and renamed transforming leadership as transformational (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass, 1990). This paper refers to it as transformational leadership.

Burns (1978) describes *transactional leadership* as the most common form of leadership, where leaders and followers exchange value for value, such as work for pay. Transactional leadership also involves incentive systems to promote performance and punishment systems to correct or prevent undesirable behavior. Bass (1990) states that a transactional leader uses a contingent reward system to encourage superior performance; manages by exception to correct deviation from standards, and intervenes only if standards are not met; and avoids assuming responsibility or making decisions. Kolditz (2007a) states that transactional leadership, with its focus on reward and punishment and the unwillingness of the transactional leader to make decisions or assume responsibility, loses effectiveness in situations where the very survival of the participants is uncertain. Of what use is a future promotion when the future itself is in question?

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, makes appeals to the higher motives in the followers, engaging their whole person (Burns, 1978). A powerful element is a moral appeal to the followers, transforming them into leaders, and possibly into moral agents. Bass (1990) says that a transformational leader: provides a vision and mission, instills a sense of trust in followers; inspires

subordinates, setting high expectations and calling them to a higher purpose; promotes rational and careful problem solving; and treats each follower as an individual, mentoring and developing him or her.

Authentic Leadership

Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009) define *authentic leadership* as a pattern of leader behaviors that are ethical and transparent, accepting followers input and sharing information when making decisions. Authentic leaders have the following characteristics: they have an internal moral compass which regulates their behavior; they objectively analyze information when making decisions; they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and act to maximize outcomes in light of this awareness; and they display their authentic selves to others.

Clearly, then transformational and authentic leadership are similar. Avolio and Gardner (2005) discuss the differences between authentic and transformational leadership. They state that transformational leaders must also be authentic, although the reverse is not necessarily true.

In Extremis Leadership

Kolditz (2007b) defines *in extremis* leadership “as giving purpose, motivation and direction to people when there is imminent physical danger and where followers believe that leader behavior will influence their physical wellbeing or survival” (p. 161). Separately, Kolditz and Brazil (2005) describe the traits of authentic leaders. They state that authentic leaders are self-aware, optimistic, and confident, possessing high moral standards. They conclude that the best description of *in extremis* leaders is authentic.

Liberal Arts and Leader Development

West Point, Annapolis, and the Air Force Academy each use a liberal arts education as the basis for their leader development program for future officers. In fact, in the first half of the 20th century, the West Point diploma explicitly stated the program’s liberal arts basis, saying that a cadet had been “carefully examined on all of the branches of the Arts, Science and of Literature” (Reed, 1911, p. 207). A liberal arts education provides the foundation for living a meaningful life that contributes to society. In addition, it serves as the foundation for developing *in extremis* leaders at these institutions. In what ways do the academies and a liberal education support the development of authentic and *in extremis* leaders?

Education

The liberal arts provide a broad education that helps develop the leader’s moral compass. Drucker (2001) discusses the nature of an educated person. He claims that the education required for leadership is not exclusively the archetypal education in the classics. In order to practice leadership, individuals must be broadly educated and have the ability to apply their knowledge to the world around them. Maroosis (2009) discusses the liberal arts in terms of leadership, describing a liberal arts education as a toolkit to respond to the unexpected in an uncertain world. He differentiates purely academic knowledge from a knowledge that inspires and enables action. The purpose of liberal arts knowledge is to apply it to the world. The leader must join the ability to know with the ability to do.

A liberal education exposes students to ethical theories, philosophy, literature, and history. By developing a knowledge of these subjects, a leader gains historical perspective and the ability to see different aspects of moral issues. By strengthening these skills, leaders develop their personal values and create their own moral compass. A leader *in extremis* is often faced with time pressures and incomplete information. He may not have the time for a considered analysis or the luxury of introspection. A leader making these choices, with imperfect knowledge and the door of opportunity closing, is much better able to do so without at the same time having to consider his basic values. With value-driven leadership, the authentic leader is better able to make moral judgments in the murky moral low ground of combat.

Discernment

A liberal arts education additionally provides the ability to make an objective analysis. By developing a facility with analysis and design, a leader develops the ability to bring objectivity to a chaotic situation. The ability to think logically and systematically about problems is well developed by the design process. Another essential component of this education is the ability to appreciate and understand different cultures and viewpoints. This understanding allows the leader to work in divergent cultures and with a variety of people. The ability to appreciate and value different cultures allows a leader to step outside himself and bring his analytical skills to bear even when he is far from home.

Experience

In addition to a broad liberal education, leaders must have a base of experience which helps to develop their skills, while at the same time increasing their self-awareness and authenticity. Experience is necessary to develop these qualities. Maroosis (2009) describes liberal arts as knowledge applied to the world. With this application will come inevitable failure. If a leader does not step out and rub up against the world, academic knowledge remains just that: academic. By stepping up and solving problems with his eclectic storehouse of knowledge, a leader begins to build up a store of experiences, giving him not only knowledge but experience. The service academies provide the opportunity to gain experience by allowing leaders to solve practical leadership problems, refining their techniques and decision making skills. Sometimes leaders will fail. By failing in one attempt, and rising to begin again, the leader learns that failure is not for all time. Neither does it mean that he is a failure, only that he has failed at a specific task. The knowledge gained by both success and failure in a variety of leadership situations develops an awareness of his strengths and weaknesses. This self-awareness allows him to bring his authentic self to any situation. He begins to realize that it is possible to successfully act without all the information he might want. This gives him a tolerance for uncertainty and a willingness to make decisions and take action when necessary, accepting that he has made the best choice possible.

Courage

In extremis leaders must have one final characteristic born of experience: that of courage. Kolditz (2007b;

2005) describes the process of developing authentic leader qualities by participating in dangerous activities. These qualities include not only authentic leadership, but also the ability to demonstrate these leadership qualities while managing fear. One way the United States Military Academy develops this skill is by requiring male cadets to take a class in boxing, and female cadets to take a combatatives class. Kolditz offers additional examples of activities that may help develop *in extremis* leadership, such as sport parachuting, mountain climbing, or other extreme sports. These activities can all help to develop *in extremis* leadership skills.

Stockdale in Vietnam

Vice Admiral James Stockdale, a Naval Academy graduate, naval aviator, and former prisoner of war who was awarded the Medal of Honor, described his time spent as a prisoner in the Vietnam war (Stockdale, 1978). He states that his education in the classics, history, philosophy, and political theory were the portions of his education that were of the most benefit in that potentially lethal situation. His liberal arts education developed and clarified his values, which strengthened his integrity and authenticity. He describes interrogation procedures that would allow his captors to exploit weaknesses in the prisoners. The captors would extract a small concession from a prisoner, for example, a piece of information. Later, they would use that small failure to create a larger break in the prisoner's psyche. This process, if left unchecked, could lead to the prisoner losing his self-image and self-respect. Stockdale discusses integrity, along with the concurrent ability to acknowledge a mistake and recognize that one mistake does not make you a traitor. As the senior

officer in confinement, Stockdale established a policy of forgiveness for prisoners who broke or made errors under duress. He credits his liberal arts education for giving him the integrity to remain whole even under duress, the authenticity to admit failure, and the grace to forgive and ask for forgiveness. In his view, an education in the liberal arts is crucial *in extremis*.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the relationship between a liberal education and *in extremis* leadership. Kolditz (2007a) says that leadership without authentic grounding fails *in extremis* when conventional rewards and punishments are meaningless. Only authentic leadership skills will withstand the stresses of mortal situations. The study of the liberal arts is one way leaders can develop their own moral compass and analytical skills, both of which are key to authentic leadership. The Military Academy, Naval Academy, and Air Force Academy all use a liberal arts education as a base for developing *in extremis* leaders. Further, they provide future officers with opportunities to apply leadership lessons, which develop leader self-awareness and the authenticity that comes from knowledge of self. These qualities, combined with their liberal education provide leaders with the attributes essential for *in extremis* leadership.

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