

The Importance Of Integrity

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Webster defines integrity as the “firm adherence to a code of moral values.” The firm adherence that Webster is referring to comes from the internalization of the values espoused by the code to which one adheres. A person will adhere to a set of moral values despite the ambiguity of the situation because that person has legitimately internalized those values and the values have become the prime mechanism for how that person make decisions and views the world. The United States Military Academy is charged with developing leaders of character committed to the values of duty, honor, and country. The 47-month West Point experience is designed to allow cadets to go beyond simple compliance with the formal codes that regulate their daily lives, to more importantly internalize the underlying values that drive those codes. In addition, cadets internalize values derived from moral codes learned prior to their arrival at West Point and then merge them with the enduring values of the professional military ethic. This process is focused on building the integrity of the cadet, an integrity that is vitally important to any leader of character. Integrity is crucial to a leader of character because it is critical to the decision-making processes of any leader, and it gives the leader legitimacy in the eyes of his or her subordinates and facilitates the replication of similar attitudes and, in essence, transformational leadership. Integrity

is essential to the functioning of the leader of character, and this is why West Point drives the development of integrity and a strong moral code into the hearts and minds of every cadet.

In any organization the leader of that organization is usually the prime decision maker and policy shaper. The decisions that leaders must make affect their subordinates’ lives, attitudes, and productivity. Because decision making is a crucial aspect to any organization, there is an individualized decision making calculus that goes into making the best decision possible. Perhaps the greatest variables included in this decision making calculus are the morals and values of the leader. A leader’s morals and values are the foundation upon which all decisions are based. As a leader of character (character being the key word here) an individual must possess a set of morals that allow that individual to make the most ethical and morally grounded decisions possible. A leader’s ability to make tough decisions while still adhering to his or her personal morals is indicative of his or her personal integrity. Our duty as leaders to make decisions grounded in integrity begins at West Point. As the chairperson of the Respect program at West Point, I have learned that it is the unit leader’s responsibility to set a positive command climate (general atmosphere and culture) within the organization. A leader’s decisions, actions,

and failure to act in some circumstances are what set the command climate in their unit.

During my junior year at West Point, I was afforded the opportunity to be a cadet company first sergeant. My primary responsibility was to advise and assist the company commander, enforce his policies, oversee the accountability of personnel and equipment, and ensure the company was properly trained. As a result of these duties I made decisions that impacted all 130 people that were in my cadet company. Early in the semester the company commander and I decided that we would not tolerate the mistreatment or hazing of the “plebes” (freshman at USMA) in our company. While hazing is prohibited at this institution, sometimes the fine line between challenging cadets and mistreatment can become fuzzy during intentionally stressful training events. I made this decision because of my strong belief that you must always treat people with a baseline of respect, despite their rank or relative position. Although this policy was disliked by some, in enforcing it the commander and I noticed that the plebes performed well, and it fostered a strong sense of pride that they were a part of our company. This allowed us to maintain a positive command climate that made us a very successful company, highly ranked in the Corps of Cadets.

Beyond the arena of West Point, as officers and thus the prime decision makers in our units, we will be faced with very dangerous and complex situations in which we will have to make decisions. In the profession of arms, morally grounded decisions save lives and win wars. At

West Point, the honor code and the respect creed are basic foundations upon which we build our moral views, and throughout our cadet career we use these morals in our decision making processes so that as officers we are conditioned to make our decisions consistent with our moral beliefs. The respect creed states, “Cadets will treat others and themselves with dignity and worth and expect the same from those around them.” This creed ensures that cadets will consider others in the actions and decision making on a consistent basis, and this consistent adherence to the code is where integrity is developed. The very language of the respect creed and our adherence to it is a concrete illustration of how integrity is demanded of us as cadets by our institution and is expected of us from our fellow cadets. Anyone can be pronounced a leader but the ability to consistently make moral decisions that adhere to your personal code of ethical beliefs and the professional military ethic is what distinguishes a leader as a leader of character.

One of the principles of leadership that a young leader learns very quickly is that leadership is personal. As a leader you must make decisions for, give orders to, and guide the progression of people. So greatly is leadership entrenched in the people who are being led that a leader’s ability is based on the performance of the people that he or she has led. Because leadership is personal, a good leader must develop a personal relationship with his or her subordinates without trying to become his or her friend. With the personal interaction needed to foster personal relationships comes more opportunity for personal scrutiny of the leaders.

This scrutiny will in part measure whether the leader practices what they preach, in a sense. In the dictation of policy and regulations, a leader's decision making is presumed to be derived from the personal beliefs of the leader. In personal interaction with the leader, a subordinate can judge whether the leader's decisions are actually based on his or her presumed moral values, or if the leader simply dictates policy that sounds good. If a leader possesses integrity, this will be evident in his or her everyday interactions with subordinates. Consequently, if subordinates see the personal integrity of their leader, they will give the leader more legitimacy and respect, thus creating an environment where the subordinates are more likely to willingly follow the leader. This also makes it more likely that the subordinates will internalize the values of the leader, which by definition is transformational leadership.

West Point has intimately familiarized me with the concept of being a leader of character. Throughout my cadet career I have had to lead other cadets who were very close to me in age and military experience yet differed from me in ideology and leadership style. Because of the parallels in our experience, many of my subordinate cadets have questioned my decisions and policies as a leader. However, I have found that remaining consistent in my core values and ethical beliefs have given me solid ground to justify and legitimize my decisions to critical subordinates. During my junior year at West Point, I witnessed another junior quizzing a plebe on his "daily knowledge" (a series of pieces of information that freshmen are required to know

at all times), the plebe did not appear to know a portion and the junior berated him, calling him an "idiot and an imbecile." I approached the junior and I told him that that type of behavior would not be tolerated, and I assigned him a minor punishment as a result of the incident. The junior who I had confronted and a few others did not like this decision and approached me about it. However, I justified my decision by stating that while we have to demand excellence from our subordinates, we must also treat them with dignity and worth. I expressed that I believed that my classmate had not upheld this ideal and the punishment I gave him was intended to reinforce it. When I justified my decision, many people understood and agreed with my actions. As a leader I based my decision making in the values of the cadet respect creed. I honestly wanted all cadets to be treated with dignity and worth, and, because my fellow cadets shared common ideals, they understood my decision.

The Role of Failure In Developing Leaders of Character

When an individual chooses to attend West Point, that person is choosing to rise to a series of challenges that will span their 47 months on the banks of the Hudson. A prospective cadet can expect to face physical, mental, and emotional challenges while at West Point. Every cadet will not initially succeed when faced with some of the specific challenges that West Point presents, and this is expected. West Point is tasked with developing leaders of character, and failure provides a great opportunity for development.

When a cadet fails at the academy, the focus is placed on the reasons for the failure and the plan of correction and not simply the fact that a failure has occurred. West Point is often characterized as the world's premier "leadership laboratory" where cadets act as the scientists experimenting and learning different leadership lessons daily.

Cadets are challenged daily by the rigors of the academic and physical requirements that must be met and the military standards that must be internalized and upheld. However, many of the greatest challenges and subsequent failures that cadets face are those posed as a result of the ethical and moral lessons that we learn daily. The design of the West Point leader development system requires each cadet to work with other cadets and lead them on many different levels. In working with each other cadets are required to understand and respect the beliefs, opinions, and perspectives of others. While this is theoretically a simple task, there are both cadets and professionals everywhere who struggle with truly grasping this concept and implementing it in their personal and professional lives. West Point is unique in that it requires all cadets to respect themselves and others at all times, yet it understands that cadets may fail at this task, and in this failure is an opportunity for cadets to learn invaluable lessons.

One of the key focuses of the respect program at West Point is to educate cadets and raise awareness of issues we may face as leaders. One of the most dynamic educational opportunities that the program provides is the respect mentorship

program. This opportunity generally presents itself in the failure of a cadet to uphold the respect creed. A cadet is enrolled in the respect mentorship program when the cadet's chain of command recognizes a consistent character flaw in the cadet in regard to his or her ability to respect him- or herself or others. Once enrolled in the program, a cadet is paired with a respect mentor and tasked to complete a series of requirements under the guidance of that mentor. These requirements are directed by the phases of the program, which include admission, regret, reflection, and commitment to changed thought and behavior. During the program a cadet focuses on why he or she committed the offense, exhibits a genuine remorse, and illustrates a true desire for change. The respect mentorship program provides cadets with a powerful opportunity to overcome moral failure and become a better and more competent leader.

Failure is a vital concept in every cadet's experience at West Point. While failure is not tolerated as the result of a lack of effort, commitment, or proper preparation at the academy, it is tolerated as a learning point by which cadets can develop into better leaders. Failure provides the opportunity for unparalleled growth and learning through lessons that will stay with cadets for the rest of their careers and perhaps their lives. Many cadets who have excelled all of their lives at all of their endeavors never experience a true failure until they reach West Point; and when they experience it and understand how to learn from it, they develop an invaluable lifetime skill. Failure is such a vital asset to the West Point learning

model that cadets tend to understand the failure of their peers and are generally understanding in providing help to assist their fellow cadets in need.

During my plebe year at West Point, I was enrolled in a mandatory Survival Swimming course required of each cadet for graduation. The course was particularly difficult for me because growing up in the inner city I had never learned how to swim. After taking the course for a few weeks, I simply did not grasp the skills that were being taught and I failed several of the skills tests that were given. By midterm grading I had earned a D in the course; this was shocking to me because I had never struggled with school before, and here I was with a D on my grade list. I learned here that I would, for the first time, have to get additional instruction (the common phrase for tutoring at West Point) for a class. I went in three extra times a week to learn how to swim, and by finals I was going just fine and I raised my D to a B-. It was through this failure that I learned a lesson in perseverance and effort; two concepts I have had to apply again countless times during my West Point career. Learning how to learn from our failures as cadets is often the first step in learning how to succeed as officers.

In essence it is completely acceptable to regard failure as a key facet to developing leaders of character here at the United States Military Academy. We take pride in the rigorous academics, stellar athletics, and superb military training that harness all the abilities that each cadet possesses in order to push them to their

very limits. Once this is achieved and the cadets have made it through they have certainly failed in one facet or another. However, the sheer fact that they have made it to the end proves that they have risen to the challenge and are a leader of character. Overcoming failure and learning to be a failure-tolerant leader helps the cadets that come from this fine institution to fare well as leaders in today's Army. They understand the challenges that face them and rise to meet them head on because they believe that anything is possible and that even if they fail, given the definition above, getting up and trying again is necessary and possible.

Expectations of Cadets at West Point

The United States Military Academy has transformed me into a leader of character. I have made my fair share of mistakes, but I have turned those experiences into positive ways to grow as a leader. It is a place of learning, of celebration, of defeat, and, most importantly, of self- and professional growth. Here at West Point, we are expected to make mistakes. No cadet is expected to be perfect; and when we make mistakes, there are systems in place to minimize the effect of that mistake. This is the beauty of the academy, as it affords us an opportunity to experiment with different styles of leadership. While we are expected to make mistakes, we are also expected to learn from them. There is a distinct difference between making a mistake once, and continuing to make the same mistake over and over. Repeat offences are where the academy draws the line, and that is where the hammer crashes in terms of

enforcement and disciplinary action.

If USMA asks one thing of its cadets, it is how to review and correct mistakes. In other words, what needs to be done to prevent a personal mistake or mistake made by another member of the unit from being made again? A positive learning environment allows the cadet, in this case, to make the mistake in a controlled environment and then take steps after the mistake is made to improve and not make the same mistake again. Part of this process involves maintaining an environment that allows mistakes to be made without punishing those responsible too heavily. The USMA does a good job at this. During summer training, cadets are given the opportunity to lead younger cadets in a very realistic experience. Problems, fears, and excitement are all among the emotions, as cadets are put through a number of leadership crucibles. However, chief among the experience is that no lives are lost if a cadet makes the wrong decision during a patrol, and no soldiers are ill-prepared for combat if cadet companies fail to develop effective training schedules. Having a learning driven environment allows for constant assessment of leadership techniques, and a tweaking of those techniques along the way.

In addition to the firsthand leadership experience we receive as cadets, we receive an immense amount of leadership training and professional development courses. This two-headed approach to leadership enables cadets to learn via firsthand leading and observation of leading, as well as to absorb the lessons and experiences of officers who impart their knowledge to cadets through

the leadership development program.

Honor at USMA is everything. We have a firmly established honor code: "A Cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do." And we enforce that honor code with a sophisticated and entrenched honor system that involves education, discipline, and mentorship. Cadets are first exposed to the honor code during basic training, where they receive a number of classes on the honor code and its meaning to the corps. Throughout a cadets' career, knowledge of the honor code increases, culminating in "cow" (junior) and "firstie" (senior) years where the meaning and significance of the honor code is expected to have been fully understood. To this extent, punishment for offenses relating to the honor code increase in severity with every year a cadet is at the academy. Not all plebes have yet internalized the honor code. We recognize that honor and integrity must be developed. Plebes are often given a chance for remediation when found in violation of the honor code, resulting in less severe punishments than cadets who have spent more time "under the code." For plebes who violate the honor code and are found, it is not uncommon to see semester turn backs and enrollment in the honor mentorship program, whereas with cows and firsties who violate the honor code, separation from the academy is not uncommon.

One of the many bright sides of USMA is our firmly established honor system. Consisting of a comprehensive education and enforcement system, to include a powerful committee dedicated

to furthering and improving implementation of the honor system, honor at the academy is in full swing. Therefore, when cadets violate the honor code, they are held strictly accountable. Cadets are expected to adhere to the honor code. Cadets have very high expectations of each other, and hold each other to a very high standard. Included in this standard is the honor code, which exemplifies the ideals of duty, honor, country, the founding principles of West Point and the driving forces behind the developmental process here. Policing of the corps is not unexpected, however, as cadets are simply trying to improve their institution.

All in all, the honor code is a big part of the cadet development system, and is something that cadets take when they leave the academy. Of all the life skills one can have, chief among those is the honor code, which defines the respect one has for others and the world around them. Mistakes are always made; however, it is how these mistakes are made, and what effort is made after making them to improve that truly determines ones character. With these principles in mind, the idea of our professional development system is fully understood.