

JCLI Review: Inspired Leadership

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U.S. Air Force Academy class of 2011

“Caution: Without genuine concern, this is all worthless.” –Col Bryan P. McCoy, USMC

I used to think that it would take a lifetime to figure out how my life would turn out. I thought that I would wake up one morning, several years into the future, and my routine, my job, my family would all magically fall into place. As long as I was still alive, life would keep happening to me and I would naturally figure it out. I wondered, on that course, how much of my life would I have spent without really living? Establishing a deliberate purpose or a passion is the first step in pursuing inspiration.

The second step begins with exploration: traveling, discussions, keeping an open mind – gaining experience wherever opportunity presents. Without really knowing it, I have been searching for inspiration by seizing every opportunity that has been presented to me to learn something

new or to gain fresh experience. I have gone on international trips to immerse myself in new cultures, listened to my friends talk about their interests and projects, and attended every intriguing invitational, conference, seminar or lecture that has been available to me. It’s admittedly not always fun to step outside of your comfort zone in order to speak to someone unknown or to give up free time to attend an unfamiliar event, but the conversations and perspectives that often spawn from those events are what catapults you on your way to discovering your passions. A word, a quote, a topic-- or even an audience member’s question-- could spark an idea. Someone could one day be a die-hard fanatic about something he or she doesn’t even know exists yet. Engaging in conversations with other people

Megan Hoskins is a recent graduate of the US Air Force Academy and, since graduation, has returned to Texas to train to be an Intelligence officer. Her mother and brother are the most important people in her life and she attributes all of her drive and successes in life to their love and support. Megan believes in the importance of empowering others to turn motivation into action and the impact a group of dedicated individuals can have on the world. She also recently discovered the power that finding your passion has in staying positive and motivated and she hopes to inspire others to identify their own passions. In her spare time, she’s committed to her work with the Africa Redefined Foundation, as well as seeking other ways to assist and get involved in the community around her. In general, she firmly believes in having character and integrity in everything you do and hopes to change the world and inspire others to reach their potential to do the same.

presents the potential to be exposed to new ideas, perspectives, and experiences that are essential to gaining access and understanding to your deeply held passion. Pinpointing your passion is the key to unlocking inspiration in life and, furthermore, feeling a sense of purpose and direction. That's the third step.

Once the inspiration is set free, life gets a lot brighter. I found my passion by hosting a leadership event at the Air Force Academy for college students. The curriculum for the seminar had not been set and someone suggested teaching the attendees about ontological leadership. The material, which I had never seen or heard before, enraptured me and the positive feedback about the invitation from the students inspired me to commit to learning more about the material and spreading it to as many other people as possible. I wanted to host another seminar for more college students, one for high school students, even to try to bring the material to Africa. The idea evolved further to creating other ways of making the material accessible to anyone and everyone who would listen. I wanted to educate people, to help them grow and mature as leaders, and to empower everyone to achieve their goals. I was inspired to change the world.

This inspiration penetrated all elements of my life, mind, body, and spirit. It can be incorporated into education, career, and family. Being inspired is a total body experience. It gets you out of bed in the morning, puts bounce in your step, and spreads to others like an epidemic. Having passion in my life made me feel like a better person and opened my mind to helping others. Going to class, attending mandatory events, even interacting with my

peers took on a new context for me because I was interacting with my life from an inspired place. I wasn't just drifting, but I was taking control of my future and actively shaping it to be what I envisioned it being. My conversations changed, my attitude transformed, and my perspective became more flexible. And all of this was visible to others as they inquired about my newfound positivity and energy. Speaking from an inspired place, I was able to excite them to find their passion, their inspiration. Some even shared my interests and wanted to collaborate.

Whether it is sparked by a conversation with a passionate person or through an inspiring event, the urge to get involved spreads, like the video "The First Follower, people often see something cool going on, they get excited and want to be a part of it. Watching this excitement unfold, either as a bystander or the instigator is even more inspiring and automatically places you in the position to be a leader. Furthermore, this sense of rejuvenation from incorporating passion and inspiration into your routine makes the mundane or tedious parts of life have new meaning. Whether that renewed sense of purpose serves as motivation to do well in all aspects of life or simply puts a smile on your face. It matters because you've found your passion, being involved in something bigger than you frequently serves as a positive and powerful motivation in your daily life.

This inspiration is an entry point for leadership. It is the breath that sustains the energy required for good leadership. Without inspiration, leadership can border on management, as you are not necessarily motivated to look for new or innovative ways of executing tasks or working with subordinates, but

merely going through the motions and maintaining the status quo. Through inspiration, leaders of character readily emerge as it is easier to be positive, to be genuine in your actions and expressions, and to exude optimism towards those with whom you interact. Inspired leadership, though not absolutely necessary to be a good leader, produces more creative, driven, and committed people, both in the leaders themselves and in those with whom that leader works.

The final step towards inspired leadership is probably the most challenging – turning inspired ideas into tangible products. Whether it’s a project, a trip, a modification to a policy or the start of a world-changing organization, the inspiration is useless if nothing is done with it. People are inspired *to do something*, so inspired leaders should seek to make waves. Leadership can be defined in so many different ways, one of which being creating a future that would not otherwise exist, which requires action. This is not to say that uninspired people or those who have not discovered what they are truly passionate about cannot be good leaders.

The ability to turn this innovation into action requires a certain amount of empowerment, whether it’s inherent or imparted by another. The ability to see endless possibilities is significant in leadership, as it is difficult to empower others when you, yourself, are not empowered. As a leader, it is important not to limit yourself or others with psychological constraints we often subconsciously place on ourselves every day that keep us from chasing our dreams: “Everyone would laugh at me.” “Nobody would take me seriously.” “I could never do something like that.” These constraints hinder

our capacity to dream, our visions of the future, and our visions of ourselves, our possibilities, and our potential to impact the world. Sometime, these limitations can be inadvertently transferred to others. We all have our own list of constraints that are holding us back from something and most of the time these constraints are all self-imposed. You are truly the only barrier to your future. So, don’t limit yourself. Allow the world to be at your disposal. Don’t think outside the box – think without one.

The great leaders of the past did not limit themselves – they saw possibilities and envisioned their involvement within those possibilities. These leaders were inspired, saw a place for change, and let their passion drive them to impact the world. They got involved in their communities and didn’t let anyone derail them from their goals. For everyone, a “community” can be interpreted differently, but it’s important to be cognizant of whatever happens to be your interpretation of the word. For some, “community” is the office and co-workers. For others, it’s the neighborhood, the district, the city, state, nation, or the globe. It doesn’t matter what your interpretation of your community is; it only matters that you get involved in it. Help someone in your community, talk to those around you, and identify with those whom you share your life, however indirectly. Whatever part of your community you relate best to or are passionate about, get involved.

The energy that accumulates from living passionately seems to almost feed off of pessimism and negative feelings, consuming the negative and regurgitating it as positive optimism and excitement. The steps to finding that passion are not always easy or comfortable, but, once discovered, inspiration can

change your life and you should use it to change someone else's.

As a cadet at the Air Force Academy, the concept of 'cynicism' is our kryptonite. It's easy for our opportunities and successes to get mired by our cynicism. I found myself in a situation that made me incredibly pessimistic, for the first time, about being a cadet and all I wanted to do was complain and be negative because that was the easy way to handle my anger. It consumed me and impacted my ability to interact with others. Fortunately, I had a group of friends who are true visionaries. Every conversation with them was inspiring and forward-thinking, about changing the world in some way or another. I left their company consistently feeling upbeat – not just less negative, but actually so excited and motivated that I sometimes found myself clapping. Yes, clapping. I realized that those emotions, that energy, did not have to be an occasional experience for me, but could be felt all the time, every day. I sat down and made a list of all the projects and ideas that my friends and I had talked about. The mere conversations had transformed me so I wondered what the actual actions would produce. It changed my world as every day I woke up taking steps towards bringing those ideas to fruition. There just was not time to dwell over what had happened to me, to even remember it. Without me realizing it, these cadets' passion and commitment led me to where I am today. Providing in me the inspiration to develop my own leadership skills and make a difference.

Everyone has the potential to be a leader. For many, that potential is laying dormant within

them, untapped and, in some cases, unknown to the individual. It is the responsibility of leaders to activate those individuals, to get them involved, and to believe in them, just as my friends identified it in me. Their potential is not just for the future, but for the present – to be leaders right now. They just need someone to believe in them, call them a leader, and watch them run with their newfound empowerment. Just as excellence knows no race, gender, or creed, everyone has the capability to lead from an inspired place and touch the lives of others.

Whether in the military or the civilian sector, a student or a CEO, many aspects of leadership are the same across the board. Though the following advice came from an Air Force Lieutenant Colonel about my time spent at the United States Air Force Academy, it is universally applicable, regardless of scale or institution: *"If you're not tired by the time you leave here, you did something wrong."* The same words can be said of anyone in any capacity. The point is the same: to seize every opportunity and make the most of every opportunity to grow. As part of finding your passion and purpose in life, seeking new opportunities and expanding your comfort zone whenever possible are critical. In the words of retired Vice Admiral Dirk J. Debbink, *"What the hell, let's go see what the world's like."* Get out there and take risks, make mistakes, and see what failure feels like. Those experiences are invaluable and serve to help you grow and become more audacious in your actions. Would you rather be led by someone who shies away from the unknown or by an individual who confidently stares uncertainty head-on and searches for new challenges? Beyond that, getting involved in the world and aspiring to enrich your life will change your living. Either way, life will

happen to you, but you can choose to happen to your life. You only get one shot at living, so why not make the most of it? And, while you're at it, why not make a positive change in the world?

Seek the opportunities that enrich and enable you to make the change you want to see, if for no other reason than to gain perspective because, as a leader, those perspectives can save you from great struggle and conflict. Having the ability to recognize when it's necessary to see a situation from another's viewpoint, to see their context, is a critical component of leadership in any realm. It is also important to realize that everyone comes from different backgrounds, upbringings, and beliefs and to remember that those experiences have shaped who we all are and influences how we react to situations. The ability to remember and recognize that is also a very difficult skill to acquire and then even more difficulty to employ. Obura Tongoi, founder of Africa Redefined, said, "Before you try to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, don't forget to take yours off."

So, with passion, inspiration, and perspective on your side, how do you then engage others to take an active interest in their futures? Or just in their current state of being? Give them something to be proud of and believe in them and call them a leader. If your people are inspired and motivated, following your lead, they'll want to be in the *"right place, at the right time, in the right uniform, with the right attitude,"* as Brigadier General Richard Clark frequently tells the Air Force Academy Cadet Wing. If people are proud of what they're doing and are committed to the mission, getting them to do what you want them to should follow easily.

Above all, nobody is going to listen to someone they do not find to be credible. This credibility is gained in many ways, through your own personal commitment, accountability, and respect for the rules and expectations you set out for your own people. Many service members include an additional key quality of leadership: never ask your troops to do something you're not willing to do yourself. This element of character in leadership can be applied universally, but is critical to remember. Just as USNA Men's Soccer Coach, Dave Brandt, said, "Leadership is in attitude and action rather than title and position." Leadership doesn't get easier or more convenient as years roll on or as one is promoted, you can not expect people to follow you just because you order them. Maintaining a solid character throughout is important, not only for your personal integrity, but also for that credibility.

Character in leadership is challenging, especially depending on how you define success as a leader. Regardless, you cannot divorce choices with character. Character is about choices, not competencies, as our abilities do not make us who we are; our choices do. Someone can be an effective leader without having character, as can be said of Adolf Hitler. But to be a leader of character, with integrity in choices and in action, is truly an accomplishment. As a leader, you are responsible for your actions and the actions of those around you, regardless of the circumstances. Leading with character and inspiration is contagious, making the responsibility for others' actions less of a burden, as others see and want to emulate that manner of leadership. The option of cutting corners and barking orders is always available, but it is those who lead with character

and inspiration, and go the extra mile are often presented with more opportunity to make positive change.

I have quoted several people who have had an impact on my life, and I feel I have been smart enough to listen to when they spoke about leadership. Now, it is my turn to leave some of my own thoughts. The bottom line for inspired leadership is to find your passion, get involved, be committed, seek knowledge constantly and then pay it forward. Remember that gratitude is the cheapest currency and to use it often, because many people appreciate being acknowledged for their efforts. Always challenge others to look at the world in a different way, from a new perspective.

Finally, remember the “Three P’s” of success in inspired leadership: Post-It’s, People, and Possibilities. Be someone people can rely on and who they want on their team. For me, that means making lists of things to do on post-it notes to stay in integrity with my commitments. Surround yourself with good people who will keep you motivated, accountable, and on your toes. If you can find people who have similar motivations, not necessarily like-minded, but who are driven and committed like you, keep them around. Through them, expose yourself to new ideas and interests. Finally, see endless possibilities. Be empowered to change the world and do not let anyone or anything stand in your way. See yourself as a leader and inspire others to do the same of themselves. Do it all with passion and commitment. Be an inspired leader.