

Reflections: Developing Leaders of Character

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The following article was developed from an interview conducted on July 6th 2010 between Chief Master Sergeant Salzman, Command Chief Master Sergeant of the United States Air Force Academy (USAF), and Angela Mound, Scholarship Associate in USAFA's Center for Character and Leadership Development.

Embracing leadership is one of the biggest issues we have here at the Academy because, quite frankly, teaching about leadership is a daunting task. This is especially challenging given the changing nature of war to one that is so asymmetrical, unconventional, and covert. As the profession of arms changes to reflect the nature of the battle, we must also change how we educate and train the future leaders in that profession.

Our challenge is to give all our cadets, before they graduate, real hands-on, training leadership experiences. We need to provide our cadets as many opportunities as possible to lead now, to make mistakes here at the Academy, to learn from those mistakes, and more importantly, to learn how to change direction when necessary.

When I sit down and I talk with cadets who are in leadership positions, I ask them, "Tell me about

your experience. Was it different from what you expected?" The one thing they consistently tell me is that they like having the responsibility. They like being leaders. They especially like being asked for their input and opinion. And each one says to me, "This is what I've wanted to do since I came here -- to be a leader."

Of course, they also tell me about their mistakes. In fact, one of the challenges we face here at the Academy is that often people are too afraid to make a mistake. What I try to explain is that it's not the mistake that's the biggest issue. It's what do you do once the mistake has been made. Experience is everything, as long as you learn and improve from it.

We push our cadets. The Academy expects a great deal from these young men and women, and we expect them to balance a lot. But, despite that,

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they are still hungry to lead. They like it when they get to lead, and they truly appreciate when they get feedback on their leadership. Unfortunately, because they have to balance so much, this feedback sometimes gets lost.

Despite their tendency to examine all the different aspects of a problem they face, I keep telling these young men and women that there is no “big book” that you can open up to find out how to lead in this or that situation. In our training and development programs, it is important that we demonstrate -often by having the cadets hear from or talk to current officers and enlisted- that they will be expected to lead and make decisions right out of the Academy. This can be especially daunting considering they will in many cases be asked to lead older, more experienced, technically competent, and educated enlisted men and women, often with complex life issues in a high-stakes environment. This expectation can be particularly eye-opening when the message comes from recent grads who are fresh from the battlefield or their

professional area. But the ability to perform well and honorably does not happen without practice.

So, when some of the cadets say, “Chief, I feel like I don’t get the opportunity to practice leadership enough here,” that resonates with me. We need to continually challenge them to assume the role of leader – to succeed and possibly fail – in this environment, where, quite frankly, nobody dies if they make a mistake.

In developing these cadets, we need to strike a balance between academic preparation (which is critically important), and their having the opportunities to apply and practice the tenants of character that are so important in leadership. Again, the cadets tell me like to be given the chance to step into the leadership role, where their abilities and character are challenged. When they are given that chance, it is critically important that they get feedback on all aspects of their performance. If we do that, they will be better prepared to demonstrate leadership and character, no matter what the future battlefield may look like.