

FEATURE ARTICLES

Enhancing the USAFA Leader of Character Framework: What Does it Mean to Live Honorably, Lift Others and Elevate Performance?

Scott Heyler, United States Air Force Academy

Michele Johnson, United States Air Force Academy

When we arrived at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) in 2006 as Air Officer Commanding (AOC) Master's Program students, we were excited for the opportunity to learn about how we could effectively mentor cadets to become the leaders of tomorrow's Air Force. We took classes on group and individual counseling skills, as well as different theories of leadership. The number one strategic goal of USAFA at that time was to "focus on character and leadership development." In our program, however, we did not explicitly discuss how to develop leaders of character. Because of the transient nature of military organizations and the lack of a unifying approach to character and leader development at USAFA at the time, we faced a significant challenge in deciding, individually and collectively, how to approach the work of developing leaders of character. Each USAFA Mission Element (e.g., Dean of Faculty, Department of Athletics, Cadet Wing et al.) worked hard to accomplish this goal, but without a unifying framework, the task was challenging. Developing leaders of character was a noble goal, but it was difficult to find anyone or any document that could explain what the Academy actually meant by the term "leader of

Dr. Scott Heyler is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Management at the United States Air Force Academy. He graduated from USAFA in 1994 with a bachelor's degree in Management. He served in the Air Force for over 26 years prior to his retirement in 2020. Dr. Heyler held leadership positions at the squadron, group, wing, major command and air staff levels, and in the joint environment while on active duty. He served in positions in the United States as well as in Germany and Afghanistan. He was the Air Officer Commanding for Cadet Squadron 29 at USAFA from 2007-2009. He received his PhD in Management from Auburn University in 2014. His research interests lie in ethical decision making and organizational leadership. He has published articles in *The Leadership Quarterly* and several other management journals. He teaches in the areas of organizational leadership, power and influence, and business ethics.

character.” It was one of those ideas where “we know it when we see it”, but there was not a true definition on which to focus.

In 2011, a group of USAFA scholars created the document, *Developing Leaders of Character: A Conceptual Framework* (Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD), 2011). This paper was grounded in academic research and helped to define a *leader of character*. A leader of character is defined as someone who *Lives Honorably* by consistently practicing the virtues embodied in the Air Force Core Values, *Lifts Others* to their best possible selves, and *Elevates Performance* toward a common and noble purpose. This document gave USAFA a much clearer picture of what it was trying to develop and allowed personnel to focus their efforts accordingly.

Unfortunately, this framework was not widely embraced outside of the Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD), and it languished, unutilized, until a few years ago. In the spring of 2019, the USAFA Superintendent Lt. Gen. Richard M. Clark decided to adopt the *Leader of Character Framework* as the foundational model, upon which all character and leader development programs at the Academy, are based. With this command-level direction and support, USAFA was able to make progress in implementing this framework to assist all personnel in their efforts to develop leaders of character. Based on direction

through the USAFA Strategic Plan (USAFA, 2021), Mission Elements across the institution began making strides to “institutionally embrace the Air Force Core Values and Leader of Character Framework.”

In 2022, to cement this alignment, the Officer Development System (2013)¹ was rewritten as the USAFA Manual 36-3526, *Developing Leaders of Character at USAFA*. This document incorporates the original framework and vignettes from USAFA personnel to help cadets and permanent party see themselves in the model. It gives a clearer idea of what characteristics and values define a leader of character, and encourages alignment and integration across USAFA Mission Elements and the headquarters. USAFA personnel are currently working to codify the different assessment mechanisms that exist to help measure progress in developing leaders of character. They are also identifying shortcomings and benchmarking effective assessment tools from other organizations with the ultimate goal of establishing an integrated and effective assessment program for character and leader development at USAFA.

While the Leader of Character Framework helps us understand what a leader of character is and how one is developed at USAFA, it does not give much detail about

¹ USAFA Pamphlet 36-3527, Officer Development System (2013), originally published in 2004, offered leadership development guidance based on three critical objectives embodied in our Oath of Office – identify, commitment, and competence.

Dr. Michele E. Johnson is an Assistant Professor for Officer Development Integration in the US Air Force Academy's (USAFA) Center for Character and Leadership Development. In this role, Dr. Johnson partners with faculty and staff to integrate character and leadership education and training across the 47-month cadet course of instruction. Dr. Johnson also teaches leadership core classes to junior and senior cadets. In addition, during her 25-year active duty career, Colonel (Retired) Johnson commanded squadrons at USAFA and Basic Military Training (BMT), and earned her master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Colorado. Prior to her current position, Dr. Johnson served on the faculty at Air University in the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies and was Dean of Students at the Air Command and Staff College. Her extensive experience encompasses pre-commission education at USAFA, enlisted accession education at BMT, and officer professional military education at Air University.

the subcomponents. As a result, we were left wanting to know more. Specifically, what does it mean to live honorably, lift others, and elevate performance in our day-to-day roles? We needed a better understanding of each of these components – a call to action and a way to bring them to life across USAFA.

A new team of USAFA scholars took up this task. What follows in the next three articles are propositions about what it means to live honorably, lift others, and elevate performance. With a systems approach, we look at each of the components and give a better understanding of how cadets, faculty, and staff can live out each of the components of the Leader of Character Framework. The aim is to help cadets, faculty, coaches, and staff members bring these components to life in cadet squadrons, in classrooms, and on the athletic fields. A few of the common themes across the papers include accountability, community, and culture. The writing teams are from a range of disciplines and academic departments, so you will see different perspectives in the ways the three framework components can be operationalized. One of the strengths of the Leader of Character Framework is that there are numerous ways to approach developing leaders of character. These three papers highlight complementary perspectives as all members work together to accomplish the USAFA mission.

Organizations are complex systems and their leaders need to understand that decisions made in one area can have impact across the organization. One cannot live honorably in a vacuum—living honorably happens in the context of interactions with others. It is also critical that the environment created by leaders encourages honorable living. Lifting others is not just about leaders interacting with subordinates; leaders need to be mindful of others, help motivate and guide them to work toward their best possible selves, and encourage a culture where people are encouraged to look out for one another. Finally, elevating performance is not only about working harder and making the most

productive individual contributions, although that is critical. More importantly, it is about creating an environment where individuals can thrive and thereby elevate the performance of the organization as a whole. This starts with an adaptable and flexible leadership approach while also establishing an ethical culture. Under the auspices of an ethical culture, one can then apply different leadership and management constructs to ensure performance is maximized.

Our hope is that the following three articles provide some tools and techniques that will assist in your efforts to apply the *Leader of Character Framework* in your day-to-day roles at USAFA, regardless of your position. The Air Force and Space Force need leaders of character to ensure future success. It is our job to ensure they are developed effectively.

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