

## FEATURE ARTICLES

# The Importance of Human Capital Development

Brook Leonard, Chief of Staff, USSPACECOM, Brig Gen, USAF

**Interviewed By:** Douglas Lindsay

**Lindsay:** I appreciate you taking time today to talk with me about leadership and character. You have an extensive background leading different size organizations and teams. I understand that you did a lot of work with leader development, specifically coaching and mentoring, when you were the 56th Fighter Wing Commander at Luke AFB. Could you talk a little bit about what you did and what you got out of that?

**Leonard:** I'll rewind a little bit to get to our why and then talk about how we pursued our why. It really goes back to what I think is the real third offset, and that is human development and decision-making. I feel like that is our biggest resource and untapped in many ways. It is hard to measure and it is hard to do, but the return on investment curve is very steep. So, just a little bit, adds a ton. That is my perspective. That was our starting point. I wanted to invest in that piece with our leadership teams. We needed to put our money where our mouth was but how were we going to do that? I felt the biggest thing that we do as leaders is make decisions every day. So, the overall objective was to be better at making daily great decisions. To make those decisions, I created a decision gym. The decision gym was really a process of gathering decision tools, equipping people, and then giving them opportunities to execute those decisions. A sandbox if you will.

Then, there was the critical feedback piece of...how did you do? That feedback piece breaks down into mentoring and coaching, about understanding what you did and encouragement to get back in the fight. We brought in a lot of folks, materials, and dedicated resources toward it. I really just tried to feed everybody with information and

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opportunities. One tool and opportunity was to be intentional, for example, instead of just telling someone that I wanted them to be in charge of something like the unit's annual holiday party, I could be more intentional by aligning the opportunities and areas for growth. So, it was about being more intentional and more personal. It was, hey Doug, I noticed you are struggling with delegation, so I am going to have you do the holiday party and I am going to give you three folks that are extremely capable in delegating that you can learn from. I really want you to practice delegating and trusting these individuals to create the holiday party. After that, we are going to sit down and see how it went. That is how you take an everyday event, and turn it into an actual developmental opportunity where you have a specific mission, where I have told you what I have seen, I have given you feedback, given you a task and then armed you with the resources to execute and succeed or fail and learn. And then after the event, I give you feedback and close the loop with you. Then once you got feedback we provided a battle buddy to discuss it with. Everybody had a battle buddy that knew you and could go through your feedback with you pull out what was pertinent and get you back on track. That was the gym, the methodology of training decision makers so they could make decisions that had real impact and risk, what we called below the water decisions because to win in combat or competition you must be able to make decisions that matter about things that matter.

To get to below the water line decisions you had to start above the water line and progress into situations that mattered more and more. So how do you progress from leading the holiday party to leading the airshow to leading in combat? A big part of that progression was the coaching and feedback. It was arming them with tools but also incorporating the reflection piece. We are not taught a lot about coaching formally in the military, so I wanted to demonstrate how to do

that and also get smarter on it myself. So, I started two levels down with my squadron commanders, not with my Group Commanders. I felt it was good to go two levels down for a couple of reasons. One, because they weren't my direct reports. So, it was a little more of a relaxed environment because they were separated from me in reporting. I didn't want equipping to be mixed up with assessing. The other piece of it was I felt that spreading those tools down to them would help percolate it across the Wing faster. I broke them into two groups of four at a time and we did four sessions with each group over eight weeks, basically one week with one and the next with the other group. I asked them to come to the meeting with one thing they were trying at home and one thing that they were trying at work, but wasn't working. We would meet and go around the table, they would record the conversation, and then had two weeks between meetings to reflect on what we talked about, put it into practice, and then get results one way or another, reflect on that, and then talk about it.

I struggled to describe what we were actually setting out to do, but eventually called it moaching because I thought there were two key elements. One was the coaching element where I was listened and asked questions. Through coaching, I was trying to help them find the answer in themselves. When we talk coaching, and I know you are familiar with this, it is all about you asking questions. You dig and allow the person to walk through the issue. But there was a mentoring part too. The mentoring part is essentially, I have walked this path, I don't know if this will help you, but here is a suggestion of what I have learned in a similar situation. And by the way, I want you to go out and try it and then come back to me and tell me how it went, if you are comfortable doing that. That is why I called it moaching because I thought both of those elements were important, but not equally, more of an

80/20. 80% of the session coaching, listening, and question asking and 20% of it was hey, here is a thought that I had.

There were some other pieces and parts of it as well. For example, not only did they record the session, but then I asked them right after the session to give me feedback on what they valued from the discussion and how they felt it would be useful. It was feedback to me to see if I was meeting them where they needed to be met. It helped me, as the coach get these reflections. Then, they were to go over that transcript a week later and do the “homework” I gave them to do.

So why did I have them bring a personal problem and a work problem, and why were they to be problems that they were working on that they hadn’t been able to solve? First, I didn’t want a flippancy, help me solve world hunger type of discussion. I wanted it to be a real issue for them, something that they had worked at but weren’t successful at. I wanted a work one and a personal one because I wanted to illustrate to them that you are one person. The flaws that you have in one aspect of your life are the ones that you have in another aspect. Sometimes they come out in different ways and maybe you can recognize how to fix the one at work and you can use that strategy in your personal life, and vice versa. It also helped provide two perspectives on maybe the same core issue. Two different perspectives, helped us really get to a core understanding of the leadership issue that they were struggling with, and help them through that. Also, sometimes, it is easier to change yourself in one area and you can gather courage and can try it in the other environment with a little previous success, experience, or preparation.

I could go on and on about the benefits of the details and the intentionality of what we set up, but that was the original format that we then modified as we went. For

example, I started off with four folks, and went down to three because four was just too many to get into any in-depth questioning on two different issues and get around the table in an hour and a half. Another thing we learned was that it was good to have other people in the room because they learned from each other. They saw that each other had the same sort of struggles. It may not be exactly be the same issue, but just that they were struggling too. And sometimes they had a great suggestion or question, so I started encouraging them to talk, to moach too. It built this incredible teamwork across the commanders and an incredible amount of empathy in that it was okay to have issues, share them, and work through things together.

Overall, squadron command is the first level of true command. The Air Force, at the time, wasn’t really equipping people very well. I think they are doing a better job now, but still have work to do. That is why the moaching part was really important. I got some great help and advice from some outside agencies that are really good at this. I spent a lot of time working on the format because I felt that was very important. Even how I questioned. I would start of the discussion and the person who would go first is the person I thought would go the deepest. If the conversation started out deep and open, the rest of them would also be deep and open. If it started out really shallow and at the surface level, the rest of them tended in that direction and I would really have to work to drive them deep. The success of the overall session, in many ways, was contingent upon the first person that went.

I also spent a lot of time arranging the groups where I thought I had someone who would go real deep every time so I didn’t have to guess and could just start with them. I didn’t let them know that initially the methodologies at play, but I let them know that at the end and shared with them all of the background,

philosophy, framework, and design to equip them to go out and do this with their folks. I would do the sessions with them, and then the next eight week session, they would go and do the same thing within their squadrons. The group commanders were doing the same thing with the flight commanders. It was every other echelon throughout the Wing. We got to where squadron commanders were moaching below the flight commander level. Group commanders were moaching the flight commander level and I was moaching the squadron commander level. On the enlisted side, we had a little bit of that, but not as much as I wanted to. It was powerful...we talked about potty training your kids, dealing with in-laws, and how to lead diverse teams. I had people break down and cry in my office that I never would have expected. I had people learn and make huge personal changes and accordingly make huge difference in the people around them and our mission.

Overall, you never really know exactly the impact you are having. People often tell you the good stuff and not always the bad stuff. So while I got a lot of good feedback, I was hungry for what we could do better in this area. I spent a lot of time and energy on human development, a lot of money, resources, and focus was on leadership and decision-making. One of the questions I most remember, a squadron commander asked me at one of the leadership offsites, and it was "what is your measure of effectiveness with all of this time you are spending on leadership?" I thought it was a great question. I had been struggling with this because I think investment in human capital is important but often hard to quantify. Where was my return on investment? I told them, it was that one day, when you have led your family well, and you had led well in the Air Force, and you are successful as a mom or dad, husband or wife, and you can look back and say that part of that was because the time we spent

on it at Luke, then I will feel we were successful...so stay in touch and write me back in five years. As for immediate success, it was a mixed bag. In some ways, I thought I was pushing it a lot, and when I left, some of it stopped. So a question you need to ask as you do a change like this is, are you forcing this change on the organization at a rate it can handle it or are you forcing it on the organization at a rate it can't and therefore it snaps back? And to that end what is the best way to do it? I felt like, at the time, it was the best methodology at Luke because in the end, it was tactically helpful and strategically sustainable. In reality based on the amount of time it took, it probably would have taken another year or so to get to that strategically sustainable place and show the exponential growth in tactical gains. Through this process an accelerant is external support and to get that you often need to show those outright, immediate gains, but that isn't necessarily the right and long view you must have with human development.

A focus on decision making isn't the only thing that helps decision making...adding other things that grow the character of your folks is an accelerant as well. So another thing that we did was instead of having the standard wingman day, we worked on resiliency, which is often best done by focusing on someone else. For example, someone is having trouble dealing with a loss, and when they started helping someone else with a loss, it helped them in their own loss. As an example, we closed down Luke for a day, we put on our orange Luke Thunderbolt shirts, and the order of the day was to go out and serve the community. That was our wingman day...to go out and serve others. I felt that day made us more resilient. It is interesting because we weren't flying or producing students, but it absolutely bubbled up and yielded a huge return. It was really critical that we went out and served and it wasn't your typical sit in a room and talk about resiliency. We are going to go out, help the homeless, clean up, and do some really

interesting things. The feedback I got was really good. It was a huge investment on something different and it is a necessary part of a larger context of what we were trying to do in building human capital.

**Lindsay:** You hit on a lot of important things there. Training can happen over a set period of time, depending on what we are training to, but development occurs over time. Development doesn't often occur when we are comfortable, but when there is a reason for that development to occur. What I liked about your examples were that they showed commitment from the top level and it had many second and third order effects as well on things like trust, psychological safety, and commitment to the organization. I think it shows that it can occur at all levels of the organization. You also mentioned your own personal development. As a senior leader working on your development, that sends a powerful message. That you learned a lot through that process and are still working on your own development as a leader.

**Leonard:** Absolutely. It is the, if you stop growing, you die kind of philosophy. It is really about suspending judgement your whole life and listening and learning... and putting what you learn into action, and trying again. I think the higher in rank that you go, because of some of the protocol afforded to you, and this came out to me at my time at North Carolina in their leadership school, when your strengths get overplayed is usually when you fail as a leader. One of the ways that I buffer myself against that is if you can put yourself in the room and actually suspend judgment, listen, and ask questions and just sit there. Instead of, "I have been in that position before and I know the solution." As a matter of fact, doing that as a coach, made me better in the Wing standup. Instead of saying, "No, on Tuesday you are going to do this," I instead asked, "Why do you think that?" It really helped.

The key about development, and you hit it on the head, is that it can be uncomfortable. It is the gym analogy. We go to the gym not to get a little bit hotter, but to sweat, and if my muscles are sore, that means I had a good workout. But we don't approach our development in leadership that way, at least not naturally. We go to the gym, work out and break down our muscles and then we will have a protein shake and recover. But we don't have the same thing on leadership development... we don't have an organization or methodology to do that to break down and build up our leadership. That is what I think is critical. It is that developmental process that you have to put in place as a leader to build other leaders. You have to give people the tools and you have to give them an opportunity where it counts. You can start off with the holiday party, but you are going to have to get to a "do we land on Normandy or not type of situation?" You have to get them from where they are to that level, and you do that by first getting them to the level that they should be. For them to be a flight commander, they have to make decisions at the flight commander level. So, whatever responsibility the organization wants them to have, they need to be able to go at that speed and make decisions at that level to beat the enemy. But they are typically nowhere near that point, especially when they first take that position, you have to get them up to that point. In the NFL you don't start the season with the Super Bowl. You practice a ton and play a bunch of games and finally you get yourself up to that fighting category, and then you go win it.

We don't often do that systematically or over the time horizons required within the Air Force to equip people to make those decisions to where we can really trust them to make them and know that they are going to be great. We sort of give them the opportunity, a little episodic training and let them go. And then we are often episodic with intentional feedback. The feedback

piece is important to be able to learn and grow...the protein shake of development. So with human capital development, you have to create the process to do all of that. It is incredibly important to equip, test with intention, assess, digest, repeat. Then, on the character and teamwork side, we don't spend time in each other's lives. The coaching and mentoring process was all of those things. Let's just talk. What are your hopes and dreams? Where are you? The higher up in rank we go, the less we talk to each other and ask about each other. This is the delta that I think we need to get better at. It's that gym process and about being uncomfortable. If you go and work out and get sore, but you don't recover, that is bad too. If you don't know how to do a bench press and you hurt yourself, that is also bad. It is those nodes of arming and educating, running out into the arena, getting dirty and beat up, recovering, and then cycling back again.

**Lindsay:** I like that example because it talks about intentionality in the process. Being intentional about what you are doing and why you are doing it. That coaching process and development is important. I know that when I coach others, I also learn a lot about myself. Along those lines, if you could go back, and Brigadier General Leonard could sit down with Cadet Leonard, what advice do you think you would give yourself?

**Leonard:** I would say, take advantage of the opportunities. As an example, the Academy from what I had seen had never gotten the squadron commanders together and tried to fill up their tanks before they assumed command. However, our senior year, they started doing that. Do you remember that?

**Lindsay:** I do, I was the Squadron Commander for CS-15.

**Leonard:** They got us all together at a hotel off base. That was the first time that they had done that. It wasn't that event specifically, but the idea that they were going to invest in you as a person, not just as a student. It was this focus on leadership that was very individually focused. I remember one of the things that we did was write down on index cards for each other, "You are at your best when..." I still have those.

**Lindsay:** So do I.

**Leonard:** It made a huge difference. We spent time away from the Academy, it felt special, it was individual, and it was about leadership. That was later in our time at the Academy. I felt like we could have done that earlier and much more intensely. If I could speak to my earlier self, I would say, go seek that out because it was going on, just hard to find. I knew it was going to make a difference the second I did it. It was just getting plugged into these seemingly peripheral opportunities.

There are many more things out there like that now, but the key is how do you get plugged into that? That was the other thing about moaching, it was in my office, it was just a few people, but it wasn't a syllabus or a module that the Air Force issued. It was something different. It was individual. I would tell myself to seek that out and to individually start the journey. That got me going a little bit and then later I went to the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS) at Maxwell Air Force Base. That reinvigorated it for me. To seek out personal growth in my profession, as an officer who is responsible for leading. Whatever your AFSC is, it comes back to what the Air Force really needs out of you—to be a great leader. Personally invest in that development. Go find it, immerse yourself in it and make it part of your life. There have been some really great power pellets during my career, and the more you can find the better. That is what I would

suggest to me as my younger self. To the organization, I would say provide those opportunities more overtly, and intentionally and especially at the daily unit level.

There are more pieces and they wrap into some of the other things we tried. In pilot training, I can show you my grade book. Is he good at formation flying? Is he good at instrument flying? Is he good at this or that? I take a PT test, and you know exactly what I can do and how long it takes. If you would ask, what are my leadership strengths? What are my tendencies and biases? You can't tell me that. Hopefully, I know them. It is important for me to know that, but institutionally we don't provide people the tools to know themselves. Don't get me wrong, it is hard. But, there are tons of things out there, low hanging fruit that can be done. For example, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a very simple assessment. There are others out there, and I saw them put into amazing use at the U.S. Army War College. The instructor took information based on numerous assessments, unbeknownst to us, and seated us based on that. He took the extraverts, as we were sitting in a u-shape, and put them on either side of him. He put the introverts at 10 and 2 o'clock right in his line of sight...all to balance the discussion where everyone contributed, but not too much. Then, he mixed things up. We were doing a creative thinking assignment where we had to come up with the latest gadget and how we would advertise it. He intentionally organized those groups for certain results. We went off and did the project and had to work with each other in groups. When we came back, he said, I am going to tell you what happened in each group before you brief me. Group A met for about a half an hour of the three hours allotted, and came to a decision. They think it is the greatest thing ever and thought that they had too much time to do it. Group B, couldn't come to a conclusion. They had about a thousand examples, and still don't know what is best and Group C, they fought the whole time.

He was spot on in each case. The reason was, because he used the results from our assessments and chose groups based on that. He made one of super decisive people, one of creatives, and the last one he mixed it up in a way he knew would create chaos. That was the lesson. The whole creative advertising thing wasn't the lesson. The lesson was how we need to pay attention to our personalities. Coincidentally, on our name placards, which had been there for about a month, he had written our Myers-Briggs scores inside of them and as he went through how he used them he had us flip them open and see physically how powerful knowing yourself and each other is. A brilliant demonstration of how important that is.

There are other examples, but I say that because I think we need to give people the tools to understand themselves and organizationally, we need to understand each other and that will help us with development and our return on investment. It is really important. Knowing that, understanding that, and measuring that goes back to human capital development and where I think it is important to spend resources at all levels. It is really important that we begin at the earliest levels and keep it up across a career.

**Lindsay:** Exactly, if we don't catch people early on about what they think and how they think, we are missing a huge opportunity and the potential return on investment.

**Leonard:** That was the biggest thing that I was trying to do as the Wing Commander in doing all of that human capital development. Yes we wanted to be better right now, but we really wanted to create habits early on, and be better exponentially and across our great service. As a matter of fact, I still have habits as a pilot that started when I was a Lieutenant at Luke AFB. I still do some of those things. It is even better

if we can get them while they are at the Academy, their mind is even more wide open. The earliest time is the best time to put them on that vector. The opposite is also true. If you are not putting that in their time at the Academy, it is a lost opportunity and other things start to compete for your time and attention, and it becomes hard to turn that around when they are a Lieutenant, or even later.

**Lindsay:** Development will occur anyway, even if we don't support them in that. One way we can build on, the other, we may have to recover from. It is that intentionality that is important.

**Leonard:** Agreed. Thanks for what you are doing and if I can support in any way, please let me know.

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