

FEATURE ARTICLES

The Importance of Examining Our Perspective: Fostering Development & Enhancing Effectiveness

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To what degree should leaders trust their perceptions of themselves? To what degree should leaders trust their perceptions of other people—their supervisors, peers, and subordinates? How confident should leaders be in how well their perspective accurately and thoroughly diagnoses a given situation or context? Leader effectiveness and leader development rely on this critical topic—perspective. Our willingness to examine our own perspectives strongly influences our ability to maximize development, achieve goals, enrich connection with others, and make more informed decisions.

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Perspective is simply a particular way of looking at something or someone. The Latin root meaning is to *look through or perceive*. Perspective transformation refers to the process by which a new experience is assimilated to or informed by past experiences; a personal paradigm for understanding ourselves and our relationships (Mezirow, 1978). Other words used to represent perspective include attitude, approach, outlook, frame of mind, viewpoint and point of view. The term perspective is often used to infer the ability to see the situation or problem in a more accurate or reasonable way.

Why does thinking about our individual perspective matter? First, our perspective is a key component influencing our thoughts, attitude, commitment and ultimately, our actions. Inaccurate perceptions of others can inhibit effective task delegation. Leaders might give tasks to followers who are not prepared for them or withhold tasks from followers who are. Inaccurate or incomplete perceptions of others can cause leaders to retain and promote the wrong people which might cause worthy candidates to leave their direct supervision. This type of mismanagement frustrates followers who will likely recognize their leader's biases and corresponding favoritism. Leaders who misperceive their own leadership abilities create problems as well. Overly confident leaders may not listen adequately to others' ideas, neglect important forms of developmental feedback, make bad decisions, and generally frustrate others with their inflated self-views. Leaders lacking confidence might be too willing to listen to others, miss opportunities for success, and fail to exhibit the type of presence vital for effective leadership.

Second, our willingness to be curious and to open-heartedly seek to understand other's perspectives broadens our aperture of understanding in any context.

As philosopher Marcus Aurelius said, "Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth." Building critical examination and refraining from holding tightly the things we know fosters the practice of being a lifelong learner and allows us to hold more informed positions. This concept has evolved into an entire category of psycho-social competency called *perspective taking*, defined as the ability to understand how a situation appears to someone else and the effect on them cognitively and emotionally (Johnson, 1975).

Perceptions and Warrior Ethos

While a strong argument can be made for the power of perspective as an influential component of being an officer of character, how does it relate to having warrior ethos? Warrior ethos is one of the four attributes of officership defined in the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) Officer Development System (ODS). Possessing warrior ethos requires the maturation of core proficiencies founded on *intellectual development* inherent in the Profession of Arms, and the *values development* prescribed by the Air Force Core Values (USAFA, 2020). As outlined in the USAFA Warrior Ethos white paper, the ability to understand both the profession of arms and nature of war are predicated on the ability to see multiple perspectives. As is true for developing competence for any skill, perspective-taking requires intentional practice, reflection and continued repetition.

USAFA is a unique environment within the Air Force with four years solely dedicated to an officer candidate's development. It is the place where these future officers establish habits relating to critical thinking processes, risk-taking, and willingness to push themselves beyond their comfort zone. In doing so, they build a growth-mindset, commit to being lifelong learners and set the foundation continually for excellence in all they do.

Demonstrating excellence requires honing mental and professional skills as well overall effectiveness (USAFA, 2020). With this in mind, consider the following questions:

- If one is unwilling to work on these proficiencies at USAFA, how can we reasonably expect that will change in training or operational environments when the risk is greater?
- If we are unwilling to challenge our perspective now, will it get easier in the future or just become more ingrained?
- If we don't have the moral courage to be vulnerable and have an uncomfortable conversation now, is it reasonable to assume that will change in the future?
- Are the rewards of pursuing proficiency in this area worth the risk?
- Do they warrant our time, effort and consideration?

Recent research centering on cadet commitment indicates intentional reflection on the perspectives we hold is worth further exploration, especially in the context of USAFA.

The mission of USAFA is to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the United States Air and Space Forces in service to our nation. The Academy's framework for developing leaders of character is predicated on cadets owning their attitude, effort, commitment and overall role in their development as Leaders of Character (CCLD, 2011). Based on the authors' combined experiences as a cadet, a graduate assistant coach, Air Officer Commanding (AOC), and a faculty member, we feel it is unrealistic to assume all cadets are committed to this endeavor. This is explicitly true when cadets are disenrolled for multiple honor violations or committing a crime.

Yet from a more psychological and behavioral level, cadets have limited available time which forces them to make calculated decisions about how they use their resources, specifically their time. While becoming an officer of character is USAFA's stated mission, it is an intangible that cannot be objectively measured and isn't quantified in cadet overall performance average the way military performance, athletic performance, or academic performance is measured. While most cadets see the benefit of their development as leaders of character, the absence of an objective evaluation tool and associated incentives create an environment where commitment to the mission often fails to be the top priority. Commitment is an instrumental measure for understanding human behavior, a key component of learning organizations, and thus has been one of the most frequently studied organizational constructs. Research findings consistently associate commitment with valuable organizational outcomes including motivation, organizational citizenship behaviors, job performance, job satisfaction, and turnover reduction.

Approach

The *Leader of Character* (CCLD, 2011) framework is so fundamental to the mission of USAFA that we designed the research to better understand these questions: How committed are cadets to their development and to USAFA? What is the range of cadet commitment and what are the factors associated with this variation? The methodology used for this study was an explanatory sequential two-phase design, starting with a quantitative phase to acquire and analyze useful data via survey, followed by qualitative research through semi-structured interviews to explain the quantitative data including typical (or atypical) results, significant results, outlier results, and surprising or confusing results (Creswell & Plano, 2018). Phase one involved a survey with 230 participants. While analysis of that

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics: Cadet Commitment to Their Development as Leaders of Character

Commitment to Developing as Leader of Character	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	Std. Deviation
Average Commitment Score	230	1.25	5.00	4.01	0.735

cadet sampling showed a high average commitment level of 4.01 on a 5-point Likert scale, the range of cadet commitment is significant as seen in Table 1.

Phase two consisted of 34 cadet interviews to gain a deeper understanding of cadet commitment as well as how and why certain factors are associated with it. The interview questions were open-ended to allow cadets to highlight which factors they considered significant in how committed cadets are to their development as leaders of character, as well as to the Academy as an institution. All factors provided were coded inductively and something unexpected emerged—over half of the comments about factors affecting cadet commitment were on the topic of perspective. They fell into four interrelated subcategories of personal perspective that can provide insight for reflection and application for the developing leader.

Seeing the Big Picture

Many cadets conveyed how situational interactions increased their awareness and commitment to their development by providing a better understanding of the necessity and significance of USAF operational success and/or by helping them realize how important their development is and its role in operational effectiveness success. A freshman said, “A briefing or meeting that hits you, when your AOC or AMT using it in my life or

future job makes me focus and pay attention;¹ (when) it is applied it helps make me focus.” A sophomore stated it more explicitly, “One of the opportunities that has pushed me most to the mission are interactions with other people. My AOC would bring people in to talk to us and at the airfield officers have been doing coffee hours with those who have more experience than you that really foster development. You can lecture all you want, but it is the experiences that motivate cadets to develop as leaders of character.” Another senior highlighted other situations also fostering this connection, “The Institute for Future Conflict is great². Incorporate it. CCLD panels are great,³ when we bring in the operational (application) and what is going on in real world. That is key.”

While situations present opportunities to make these connections, individuals also play an important role in making this connection. A cadet noted the ability to see the significance of these situations and how their individual actions now affect the future requires maturity, a maturity that many cadets do not have. This maturity is fostered by having goals and

1 Air Officer Commanding (AOC) is a commander of cadets at USAFA and Academy Military Trainer (AMT) are Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) responsible for educating, training and inspiring cadets at USAFA.

2 The Institute for Future Conflict is a research and education entity at USAFA for cadets to examine the changing character and technologies of armed conflict.

3 The Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD) is one of the mission elements at USAFA.

the grit to persevere to reach those goals. As one cadet put it, “The end results are worth the pain. Those who realize that are more committed, those who don’t take opportunities and don’t get that idea of end benefit are less committed.” Two seniors conveyed the importance of having clarity in their future job in the Air Force with one of them saying, “I wasn’t sure if there was a job or career for me. Recently I’ve gotten excited about the Space Force. Something that interested me and seeing something I could see myself doing in the future.” The other said, “My motivation has evolved from a whim, to a real career being able to pursue it and develop the right way and with the right people. The Academy gives you plenty of opportunities to do that.” As conveyed by that senior, seeing the big picture and future application enhances our ability to see our current opportunities.

Seeing Opportunities Rather Than Just Challenges

The first part of this perspective is simply the willingness to see past the hindrances in order to see the opportunities USAFA provides and the role the cadets have in seizing them. A sophomore put it this way, “A factor that promotes your development is all of the resources and tons of paths you can take. You would expect we are all cookie cutter, but actually there are so many unique experiences here, you have to take the initiative yourself to determine how you want to get better in developing. For instance, I am a club CIC and I routinely set plans and manage all of the facilities.⁴ I am the only cadet doing that. It is something that develops me. I had to seek that out on my own.” Certain situational examples can help us diagnose how much we focus on the challenges versus the opportunities.

Cadets discussed different situations and how cadets respond to those situations. One common situational example was having poor leadership. Here

⁴ Cadet in Charge (CIC) is the cadet who is the head responsibility of a specific group or club.

are two different freshman responses to this situation, “Permanent party makes cadets cynical,⁵ they play a big negative factor in cadet’s commitment to their own development,” while the other freshman said, “Everything I’ve seen is helping me to develop.” The difference in these perspectives is how they frame the situation; one on what is being done to them (low locus of control), and the other from how they respond (high locus of control). This reinforces another freshman’s comment, “You can respond in one of two ways (to poor leadership)—If this leader can get away with it (being a poor leader) and I give up; others see it and say I won’t be like that and it motivates them.” As a sophomore put it, “I have an active role in it (my development).” Another example provided was how probation (a punishment when a cadet violates a standard) affects cadet commitment. One senior said, “Discipline issues can go either way; if someone has disciplinary issues at any point, I think they can really check out, freshman especially; they get into trouble and think ‘this isn’t following me around’ since they are going to a new squadron in a year, I can afford to have this mentality; I’ve also seen it as a sophomore where they do a total 180, they are a lot more involved in their squadron, more committed to their development.”

What causes the range of responses? We observed two relevant factors in cadet responses: ownership and grit. One senior highlighted the importance of ownership, “That kind of person in general always blames someone (else) and doesn’t seek out opportunities to grow themselves, whereas if you have the mentality maybe I don’t know everything that is going on, maybe there is some interest they have in doing this to me, and I am going to focus on what I can do to develop myself as a person, those people I find grow and try to develop themselves.” There is also an element of grit required. One sophomore came to

⁵ Permanent Party are the military members in charge of cadets.

USAFA to be a doctor, but organic chemistry was too difficult, and she said, “I realized I wasn’t going to get a med school slot and it hindered my desire to learn, grow, and develop myself. I was in this really low state. I guess I was thinking I don’t want to be here, I don’t want to be in the Air Force anymore. USAFA itself hasn’t stopped me from wanting to develop myself.” Over time she was able to see that challenge as an opportunity to embrace other opportunities. Having a growth mindset and persistent willingness to develop requires perseverance and grit. How often do we let the challenges outside of our control influence us rather than focusing the opportunities within our control? Seizing these opportunities seems to be interrelated to a growth mindset.

Embracing a Growth Mindset

Maintaining a growth mindset in a competitive environment like USAFA is challenging. This mindset requires practice at taking risks by going outside of one’s comfort zone. A senior articulated this process well, “As a freshman you don’t want to get called out and are just trying to survive. Some experiences encouraged me to take more chances and not worry about failing in a leadership role. I have a growth mindset now. I’m more willing to take risks outside of my comfort zone—sophomore year, water survival was hard, I passed with a bad grade, but (it was) the 1st time when I was really personally challenged. Basic Cadet Training (BCT) was a team challenge. Being forced to take on an individual challenge and (when I) made it through it was worth it. Airfield has taught me that also... growth mindset.” A sophomore put it this way, “It is a weeding out process. All (cadets) are told they are the best of the best; but not all rise to the occasion. Once tiers are established here many don’t work to that challenge, many end up with a set mindset. It is (based on) personal motivation.”

The spectrum of cadet’s mindsets related to growth and development is wide. One senior put it this way, “Very big range. Not freshman year, but after that it’s all about what you pursue. People who take opportunities, who take any opportunity versus the ‘2.0 and go’ mentality, to graduate with minimum effort. Many are in the middle who sometimes pursue some opportunities but are not as driven. It is possible to slide by with minimal effort.” If it is possible to get by with little effort, then why do some cadets push hard to grow? The simple answer is they see the benefit of pushing themselves to excellence or as a senior put it, “You have to pursue the mission to get anything out of it.”

Focusing on the Collective Team Rather Than Solely Self-Interest

This is arguably the most important perspective to continually self-assess. People come to USAFA for a wide range of reasons, most of which are individually-focused: free education, prestige, to play division one sports, or often to set yourself up later in life. A sophomore outlined the range of cadet focus from the individual to the team, “Definitely a variety. Lots of people are here because they can be, and it benefits them on a less inspirational level. Wide range. Good opportunities.” Taking every opportunity to develop must be interwoven with a commitment to the Air Force Core Values including *Service Before Self*. During BCT, the focus is on building a team, by increasing stress, thus requiring cooperation and teamwork. USAFA defines a leader of character in three ways, two of which are collective-based: *lifting* people to their best possible selves; and *elevating performance* toward a common and noble purpose (CCLD, 2011).

Motivational factors promoting commitment to the collective fall under two main categories: (a) desire

to develop others and make USAFA better; and (b) a sense of service and responsibility to the Air Force and our country. One statement accentuating the former theme, “I’m committed to team/unit success. I came here with that, but service before self has been reinforced more now trying to help others reach their potential.” One statement emphasizing the latter theme, “It doesn’t always feel like it now, but we are the military and serving the greatest nation on earth. The people of our country and my teammates deserve my very best.” Another statement ties these two themes together, “We talked about developing yourself here, but it isn’t just about yourself... they focus so much on the team. If you focus on the team, you will also develop as an individual. That is a key part.” This collective focus ties back into the core mission of USAFA as a cadet articulated, “All in all, it’s producing someone of character who can lead others, that is the main goal and I take that personally. I want someone who is leading me to have integrity and be brought up under stressful circumstances, so they know how to handle things.”

This analysis was focused on cadet responses related to their commitment to their development as leaders of character. However, the same trends were true when examining cadet commitment to USAFA, with 26 of 34 factors coded under perspective. The same four categories existed, but in a slightly different order of prevalence: Seeing the big picture; focus on the collective team; focus on the opportunity versus challenge and having a growth mindset. The 34 cadets interviewed were a stratified random sampling representative of the demographics of the cadet population with an even mix of class year and gender and a representative sampling of race/ethnicity. It is apparent from the analysis of these cadet interviews—perspective is a significant factor in cadet personal development and overall success.

Applications for Enhancing Leadership Effectiveness

Inaccurate or incomplete perceptions can impede individual development and competency. A leader’s inability to critically analyze the perspectives they hold as well as the underlying assumptions and biases frustrate followers, impact culture and hinder group effectiveness. Yet, leaders cannot simply stop perceiving the world in distorted or unhelpful ways. The mind is designed for efficiency which dictates processes for making intuitive judgments about self and others (Kahneman, 2011). These judgments are often roughly accurate, but they can be mildly or substantially misguided as well. Furthermore, many of these processes are deeply entrenched and require intentional development of habitual practice in reflection and intervention. Leaders do not suspend perceptual errors because they have been made aware of them. Nevertheless, understanding these perceptual errors and biases can reduce misperceptions, increase opportunity for connection and enhance effectiveness. Here are a few key points of application for all developing leaders:

- **Be Willing to Consistently Question Your Beliefs and Perspectives.** Individuals are frequently overconfident in their intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. They believe too strongly in the accuracy of their judgments about themselves, others and situational contexts (Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013). While effectiveness is predicated on some degree of assertiveness and confidence, it must be balanced with genuine humility. We must ask questions. What am I missing? What are my biases preventing me from seeing? Whose voice isn’t being heard or represented? Am I genuinely open to considering insights that challenge my existing

belief? This is not advocating for paralysis by analysis, but rather thoughtful consideration for effective deliberation and decision making.

- **Develop a Growth Mindset.** Leaders should give themselves and others the opportunity to change. A growth mindset can enhance interpersonal effectiveness in fundamental ways. In teaching leadership, we have occasionally heard a false belief that leadership is a fixed skill – one either has it or they don't. One interesting response to this belief is to ask whether the person making this statement is going to believe that leadership is “fixed” when followers request mentoring for their own leadership development. Is the student going to feign a disingenuous belief in a follower's potential? Is the student going to tell such followers that their leadership development is hopeless? These questions should highlight the importance of a leader's authentic support for follower development. To do this, leaders need to believe that change is possible. This process works for self-improvement as well. Believing that one can improve makes leaders more willing to listen to feedback and put more effort into their own leadership and personal development (Dweck, 2006). USAFA's stated mission is to develop leaders of character, but in reality, this exists on two levels. In order to effectively develop leaders of character it takes the humility and willingness to continually develop as leaders of character. Staff and faculty must consistently set the example as lifelong learners seeking to get better daily.
- **Focus in on What is Within Your Control and Take Ownership of It.** Analysis from the cadet interviews for this study emphasized one

fundamental point. The ability to focus your effort on things within your control is directly tied to overall effectiveness. When evaluating a problem be a thumb pointer, not a finger pointer. First ask yourself how can what leadership intervention can I take improve the outcome? When looking at things you are unable to change, change the way you look at them. How can I reframe my thoughts to maintain a positive attitude, stay engaged and influence outcomes?

- **Build a Culture That Celebrates Diversity and Sees Feedback as a Gift.** Even though individuals cannot altogether discontinue their distorted processing of information, they can learn to temper it. There is evidence that people can adjust their snap judgments when they are motivated and cognitively able to do so (Lieberman, Gaunt, Gilbert, & Trope, 2002). For example, all people are susceptible to viewing others in the context of a group-level stereotype, but evidence suggests that individuals can inhibit the application of a stereotype by putting in effort to consider others as individuals (Devine, 1989). The importance of putting in effort to understand others dovetails with the notion of focusing on behavior when evaluating and providing feedback to others. Placing the focus on behavior essentially forces a leader to consider whether the other person truly exhibits behavior in line with the leader's perceptions. We can broaden this sentiment by encouraging leaders to question their beliefs about self and others by asking – what is the evidence? Taking time to focus on whether the evidence matches the belief should allow leaders some opportunity to correct misguided perceptions. This is predicated upon having a network of individuals with a

diverse backgrounds and perspectives, combined with building a culture with trust, open communication and critical feedback.

It is easy for leaders to say that they want followers to tell them the truth. It is much tougher for leaders to actually listen to critical feedback. Leaders might intend to be receptive to criticism, but this intention can become derailed by defensiveness that occurs in response to criticism, particularly criticism from followers who often have less experience and less formal authority. Leaders must practice the art of encouraging constructive criticism so they can get used to responding effectively to it. When leaders encourage and embrace feedback, they build a culture of honesty and transparency. This culture allows for the presentation of wide range of potential solutions, not just the ones that are likely to be endorsed by the leader. Additionally, it fosters the critical analysis necessary for effective decision-making.

Conclusion

When leaders recognize that their perceptions of self, others, and contexts are fallible; it's humbling. This realization provides the opportunity to be intentional and gain a more thorough understanding of ourselves, others, and our environment. Our development and effectiveness as leaders are predicated upon our willingness to continue expanding and evolving our understanding and application of many leadership principles. Leadership principles are not obvious statements that people simply employ. Leadership principles are a dynamic system of skills with competing priorities requiring a great deal of intentional practice. Thus, leadership principles should not function as obvious statements about what good leaders do, where students, who generally view themselves as good leaders, assume they do all these things. On the

contrary, leadership principles are in a sense questions that should provoke personal reflection about how the student can improve her or his skill level and manage these leadership principles when other principles also compete for the leader's time. Perspective-transformation is a mental and professional skill needed for warrior ethos proficiency and the continued pursuit for *Excellence in All We Do*.

Self-examination of our perspectives and how they influence our attitude, effort and actions is not only worthwhile but necessary. How well do I see beyond my personal needs to what is needed for team success? How well am I able to see the opportunities I have despite the existing challenges? How willing am I to take risks and embrace a growth-mindset? How well do I balance focusing on the immediate task and also seeing the big picture? Recognizing the limitations and gaps in our current perspectives should provide aspiring leaders the motivation to reexamine them critically. Admitting one's leadership shortcomings is hard, but it provides opportunity to expand interpersonal skills and enhance our development. Those who wish to improve their leadership effectiveness should regularly reexamine their perspectives with an open mind and critical eye.

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