

# MILITARY

# ADDING VALUE

SEAC Ramón Colón-López, CMSgt, USAF

Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

**Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay**

**Lindsay:** You have talked previously about being the sensor, synchronizer, and integrator for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Mark Milley. Can you talk a little about what that means and a little bit about how you support the force?

**Colón-López:** All of it derives from speaking truth to power. We hear that often. People use it all the time and it is almost a bumper sticker anymore. But the way I view it is there are a lot of people within Staffs who are concerned about not wanting to ruin the boss's day. In my position, as the Senior Enlisted Advisor, I am not concerned with that. I am concerned about not ruining his career because he doesn't know something critical. In my role, I don't sugar coat anything. I just tell it like it is, the bottom-line up-front (BLUF). This is what he needs to be cognizant about. Does it require his action or does it not?

That takes a lot of courage to do because sometimes the reaction is not something that is going to be pleasant. One of the things that I have gotten in the habit of doing, is that while everyone at the Pentagon is concerned with looking at the strategic picture, I translate that picture to the lower echelons, to the trenches. I get input from the force to see if it is something that is going to number one, resonate with them. Number two, something they need, and number three, that it is something that they are going to buy into. If they are not, I ask the reasons why? I tend to make the problem harder to better understand it. By the time it gets to the principal, in this case the Chairman or the Secretary of Defense, it is a bottom-line up-front kind of message, and includes an explanation of why. It is by the numbers and includes any questions. That's what being a sensor, synchronizer, and integrator means.

**Lindsay:** How did you grow into that position of being able to be the bottom-line up-front message giver and truth teller?

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**Chief Master Sergeant Ramón "CZ" Colón-López** is the Senior Enlisted Advisor (SEAC) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff where he is the Principal Military Advisor to the Chairman on all matters involving joint and combined total force integration, utilization, health of the force, and joint development for enlisted personnel. In this capacity, he is the most senior enlisted service member, by position, in the United States Armed Forces. SEAC Colón-López has held assignments in numerous commands and has deployed in support of Operations SOUTHERN WATCH, NORTHERN WATCH, ENDURING FREEDOM, IRAQI FREEDOM, NEW DAWN, RESOLUTE SUPPORT, INHERENT RESOLVE, and others in classified locations. <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/2040114/senior-enlisted-advisor-to-the-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-ramon-cz-c/>

**Colón-López:** I would say it is all about habits. It started out early on when I was a young E-4 accessing and being selected for Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). I had a heavy Spanish accent and as an E-5 Combat Search and Rescue Team Leader, I was expected to brief the commanding general on the personnel recovery plan of every exercise and mission. So, I had to grow confident in how to shape the message. I also had to be cognizant that the general only had about three to five minutes to digest the information that I needed to tell him. It was life or death information and I needed him to know exactly what I was saying. So, I got into the habit of summarizing the message with the key points. Very seldom do I ever go in and talk to the Principal off the cuff. I don't like to bounce around and have to say, I don't have that information, or I'll have to get it to you later. I have the habit of shaping the information and being patient enough to stay silent until I have my ducks in a row. But, that doesn't mean that I am going to sacrifice expediency of the message. If it something that needs to be said now because the end goal is going to expire in the next 20 minutes, then you have to go ahead and pull the trigger. It is finding the balance, context, purpose, and value to the intended audience.

**Lindsay:** I think what you are talking about gets shaped a bit by the communities (career fields) that we grow up in. Generally, I think operators tend to understand that point pretty clearly because they grow up understanding life or death consequences. Whereas in other communities, that skill may not be as developed because there is often more time to debate or discuss issues, problems, and concerns.

**Colón-López:** On that note, I always took it on my part to train those folks. I always took the time to invite them to meetings, share my notes, and let them understand how I shaped the message. When I was a Command Chief, I went as far as to write leadership papers that encapsulated many of those ideas.

**Lindsay:** I imagine that part of that process is developing trust with the Principal that you are able to do that.

**Colón-López:** Yes, it really comes down to making sure that you add value, and not time. To never pass up the opportunity to shut up, when needed. For example, sometimes, because they have the boss in front of them, people will often take the opportunity to bring up trivial issues, because that may be the only opportunity they will have to see them that week. Fortunately, I have access to the Chairman all of the time, and the Secretary of Defense often. If I need to push something to him, I tell him that there is something on my mind and I generally use a 5 x 8 card that summarizes the

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issue that I give him so we can discuss later. Again, it is about delivering the information and making sure that he has everything that he needs to know. It also involves coordinating with the Staff. Being the sensor, synchronizer, and integrator applies to all officers on the Staff because, in a sense, I am their Senior Enlisted Advisor as well. I need to help set them up for success.

**Lindsay:** That is an interesting point, because leaders, at all levels, don't always understand that point about communication. Not everyone prepares the same amount when going in to see the Principal.

**Colón-López:** Absolutely. The other part that goes along with that is priorities. Do you really need to bring that up right now with everything that is going on? Some things can be put on ice, where other things need to be put directly in the frying pan.

**Lindsay:** Continuing with that idea of sensor, synchronizer, and integrator, how have you been able to do that with the restrictions of travel due to COVID? Your travel schedule must have been quite busy prior

to COVID, but how do you ensure you are doing that when you can't go everywhere you want to like you did previously? How do you ensure you are getting the information that you need to feed up to the Chairman?

**Colón-López:** Traveling was going to be a heavy load, but I was already thinking about how to limit travel because there are a lot of tasks that I need to follow up with at the Pentagon with key decision makers. If I am on the road, doing what the Service Senior Enlisted leaders are doing and duplicating their effort, then I'm not really of value. But, there are certain things that require my presence, the enlisted voice, at the Pentagon where I need to be at those meetings. I hate using the term thinking outside the box. Instead, I like thinking panoramically. What else is out there? What haven't we looked at yet that can be beneficial to our cause? I started thinking that if I am the sensor, synchronizer, and integrator, how am I going to get after that?

I started by employing the talents of our Public Affairs team. We brainstormed on how to get the best information and once the Chairman and the Secretary of Defense had their guidance about how we were going to operate under COVID, I then used social media like Zoom and other mechanisms to be able to reach out to the force and still get their feedback. Even though we didn't have the chance to travel, we made a conscious effort to make sure that we had face to face time with the troops. In smaller groups, of course, but have sensing sessions to find out what was affecting them. When it came to policy creation from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the advice of the Chairman, my charge was to go out and get the ideas of the Staff and pitch them to our people in the field and get their feedback. Also, to identify any pitfalls we were missing. We would hear from the field, "That was nice, but this is really what is affecting us." What was really being said was "While that is good, this is something that you need to pay attention to." While some of those issues hot at the moment, they the potential to rear their ugly head a month or two, becoming the insurgent inside the wire.

Since we didn't know how long this was going to go, we needed to have plans on ice so that we would be able to execute later. That is exactly what we did. We ended up putting many things in the queue. Then, when the issue surfaced, it was almost immediately implemented. That helped get the trust and confidence of the troops in their senior leaders.

**Lindsay:** That accessibility is important. As that sensor, you are only as good as the connections and relationships that you have. People need to feel like they can bring those issues up. At the senior level it is difficult. If you just rely on the information that floats up to you, you are not always going to get the fidelity of information that you need to make sure the boss has all of the information that he needs. So, you need to build those relationships and those trust circles so that you know you are getting the information that you need.

**Colón-López:** Exactly. To also include the proper amount of emotional intelligence and staying close to your foundation and roots. Anyone who has known me for years knows that I haven't changed. This is me since I was an Airman and an NCO. They know what to expect. You develop a reputation for being honest and up front with people. You are a person of your word. Whatever you say you will do, you will follow through on. If you can't do it, then you will say exactly why you can't do it. All off those things play a factor in how open people are willing to be toward you.

The other thing is humility, and the willingness to be honest, opens a lot of doors. I was just at Walter Reed earlier this morning and I was having a conversation with some of our patients. At the beginning, they were a little guarded because there was a figure head coming in. Then, we started talking about some issues that were pretty close and personal to why they were there, and the demeanor changed quickly. Within five minutes, they started talking quite a bit, because they knew they weren't just getting the normal party line. I was there to listen. The whole purpose when you interact

with people is to make sure that you provide something in return. Because your service as a Senior Enlisted Advisor is to do just that. Fix things. Fix people. And, make sure to provide the right information of how we can fix processes. Being a PJ, I fixed things as I cut my teeth through the years, so this isn't really a departure from that.

**Lindsay:** I really like the points about being humble, genuine and authentic. You aren't different from what you were 20 years ago in terms of who you are and how you care for people. The role, may have changed but the approach hasn't. People can tell when you are authentic. If you are asking them how they are doing, but don't really mean it. You sometime see people get into trouble when they try to lead from someplace that isn't consistent with their values or isn't consistent with who they are.

**Colón-López:** Some people like to put on a show in front of an audience, but that isn't really who they are at their core. Whether I am in flip-flops and shorts or my Mess Dress, you get the same thing. People have gotten to know that from me. The other thing is that I know my time is limited. I am a carton of milk within the Joint Staff and my expiration date is going to come soon. I only have so much time to feed that machine to be able to provide the best advice, to make the best decisions, and implement lasting processes and fixes to issues in the short time I have in this position.

**Lindsay:** I like that example of a carton of milk because it highlights the element of urgency. We all have a relatively short amount of time to affect that change and what we want to do. With that in mind, how has your thinking evolved about how view your position, now that you have been in it for a year?

**Colón-López:** The Senior Enlisted positions haven't really changed that much in that we are advising the Principal and are taking care of the force. But, in this position specifically, Gen Milley asked me to break the

mold of the Senior Enlisted Advisor (SEAC). I am only the fourth one and the first Airman to hold the position. He wanted something different. He wanted something that is going to be able to create lasting effects for the benefit of the force. When I started looking at the things that could help create or better shape how the position operates, the one thing that I always kept in mind was that I couldn't cross streams with my Service Senior Enlisted counterparts. I shouldn't be doing things that the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force is doing. The same goes for the Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, and now the Space Force. Things like manning, training and equipping, I do not do that. However, there are certain policies that effect the manning, training, or things like pay, which I am involved in. If you look at the pay scales from E-1 to E-9, it doesn't say Soldier, Sailor, Airmen, Marine, or Coast Guardsman. So, I am part of that decision-making process. High level decorations, like medals of honor, regardless of whether they are officer or enlisted, I am also a part of that process that looks at the packages when the Services submit them to be able to provide the Chairman the best advice on whether that decoration should go as presented or not.

Something else is brain health. It affects the military writ large. It doesn't just affect the Army or the Navy. It affects all of us. I am part of the Committees and Executive Councils to be able to advocate for the enlisted force. But, there is a fine line between advocating and then advocating with the Services input. Because that inclusion is really the key thing that I do as the Senior Enlisted Advisor for the Chairman. The services provide their issues and the Chairman compiles the information and reports up. That is how I operate as well and how I do my business. Often, in a lot of these meetings, I am the only enlisted representative. The Senior Enlisted Representatives are not there. I take their collective input and present it as ours and not just mine.

**Lindsay:** That fits into the idea you mentioned before of providing value and representing the entire force. Being able to understand the different services and their perspectives.

**Colón-López:** Yes. I have an advantage with that having been in JSOC from a young Airman. As a matter of fact, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Bass was a young Airman with me in that same unit. So, we have a long history together. We were exposed to joint operations before joint was cool. Before all of the deployments that we have seen. We learned to operate with the other Services. Half of my time in JSOC was with the Navy, so I am pretty savvy when it comes to Navy jargon, procedures and the way that they think. The same with the Army because we spent quite a bit of time training, operations, and in exercises together. My education in the joint environment came early on. I believe that is a big part of why I am sitting here right now because of those important experiences.

**Lindsay:** That is important because it helps to shape the vision of the different roles that we have. For example, if you grow up only in an Airman pipeline, then the tendency is to view everything from an Airman lens and as an airpower issue. It is very easy to get myopic in our perspective. Because of that early experience that you had in the joint environment, it shaped your mental model of what an operation is and who is involved. Not everybody has the opportunity to get that.

**Colón-López:** That is true, but it is incumbent upon us to get those experiences to move forward. To take people who don't have that chance and teach them. To say, "Hey, this is what I have learned about being joint. It is not about becoming, it is about understanding. And, this is how you can be the best Airman that you can be in that joint environment." People get confused sometimes when they don't have enough exposure to the issues. Then, they end up going to the far left or the far right. So, we try to get them closer to the center, where they need to be with that understanding and what it really means to be joint. Also, timing is of the essence. I wouldn't spend time teaching a Senior Airman about the joint environment. I would wait until they are a Technical Sergeant when they are seasoned in their

skill, in their Airmanship, in their NCO duties. Then, let us teach you about this other side where you can potentially serve as Senior Enlisted Leader or on the Joint Staff. It is all about timing. We need to make sure that all of the services have ample time to create the best soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, coastguardsmen, and now, our space force personnel. We need to give them the opportunity to cut their own teeth in their specialty before we start making them purple.

**Lindsay:** That idea about timing is important when we think about development. If they don't have that technical expertise or proficiency in an area, they don't know who they are yet with respect to their functional

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specialty. More broadly, as a Service, are we are starting to come around to the understanding of the value of that jointness? We talk a lot about it, but it doesn't always translate to how people think about how their career should be.

**Colón-López:** It just so happens that Gen Goldfein and Chief Wright made it a point to develop the force. To be ready for joint warfighting. When you ask the Senior Enlisted Advisors of the Services, they will tell you that the Air Force had an edge on the rest of the Services with respect to joint development and teaching them how to do that. It was pretty evident when you looked at the Combatant Commands about two years ago, as you had five Airmen in Combatant Command leadership positions. That is pretty amazing. The Air Force used to have zero as it was pretty Army heavy. So, the scales tipped to a point where people really started

valuing what joint meant and started having Airmen that competed for those positions being able to show the hiring authority that they understood and were ready to operate in the joint environment. I think that our Service has done pretty well in helping people understand that dynamic.

**Lindsay:** And also placing value culturally on that experience. Your example is a great one that represents that in that you can talk the languages across the different Services. So, when one Service comes to you, you have a perspective of where and why they are bringing up that issue.

**Colón-López:** Absolutely. We owe it to our people because there won't be a single engagement that we take on that will be unilaterally by a single Service.

**Lindsay:** As an example, if you look at what we have done in Afghanistan in the last 15 to 20 years that is apparent.

**Colón-López:** Even in the early stages, the Army had a beef with the Navy being there in a landlocked country and wondering what they were doing with ground operations. But, after a year or so, that kind of died down as they recognized all that needed to be done. They started valuing the company of each other.

**Lindsay:** People were able to show their competence. To get in there and show that they knew what they were doing. That also gets back to your point about timing. With that in mind, how well do you think we are doing in getting people ready for those leadership positions? We certainly invest a lot in our professional military education to prepare people.

**Colón-López:** I believe, at least on the enlisted side, that we are doing a good job. But, something that we can do better is increasing the depth of Senior Enlisted Leaders understanding. What I mean by that is often, Senior Enlisted Leaders in the Air Force get comfortable doing things that a First Sergeant should be doing. That

doesn't really add value if they are doing the same thing. Some don't even have SIPR net accounts. How can you operate as a Senior Enlisted Advisor if you don't have access to certain information? Are you getting the same information that your boss is getting so that you can advise them? Remember, you are an advisor to the boss. Some people get too comfortable just doing the routine things and unfortunately, some get carried along by their boss because of loyalties. That can sometimes lead to people being unprepared in senior positions. Unfortunately, those people will fail because they can't hide behind what the First Sergeant used to do. They now are expected to perform with internationals and with other services, and if you are shallow, you will be seen as shallow right from the beginning. There is no way you can hide that.

Something that we need to do is start identifying people early on, like at the Master Sergeant level, and put them in the joint machine so that they can gain that understanding. Remember, the sweet spot I mentioned is around the Technical and Master Sergeant levels. Giving them the education and the exposure to it by having them work, deploy and do certain things. Then, when they become Senior Enlisted Leaders, we can potentially plug them into the Joint Staffs and Directorates to give them more experience. In addition, they can be more competitive when comes to the Combatant Command Senior Enlisted Leader positions. Keystone is a great course, but it comes too late in a Chief's career. You are talking 25 years of service on average. We are creating a course right now called Gateway and that is targeted at the E-6 and E-7 levels that have high potential and are nominated by the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force to the Joint Staff for an in-residence course. We are creating that so that we can start bridging the gap that we currently have, not just for the Air Force, but for the rest of the Services. I think if we do that and start giving people the right experiences, we are going to have a deeper bench, not just in volume, but in understanding. Unfortunately, we didn't do that

years and years ago and sometimes we struggle finding the right person to fill those joint billets.

**Lindsay:** I think we do a little better job of that on the educational side. People seem to understand the value of it educationally, but not always practically and experientially. That goes back to the point you said about creating value. It is not just about executing. One of the things that I have noticed, is that in large organizations, it is easy to kind of float along and rely on the organization to tell me what I need to do. Or expect someone else to develop me. The successful leaders that I have seen have been those that have taken the onus upon themselves to develop either through research, study, or experientially. They worked intentionally on themselves and did not just leave it up to anyone else to do for them. They were active in their development versus passive.

**Colón-López:** Agreed. When it comes to the assignment topic, there is only one assignment that I pleaded for in my career and that was to the Joint Special Operations Command. I believed that if I got that one assignment, I would build enough credibility to where I would be placed in the right place at the right time with the best problem set suited for my abilities to be able to get after it. That has been the theme of my career. I have never requested any assignment. Wherever I need to be, so be it. Going to the Pararescue school is a perfect example. It was recommended to me by a Chief Master Sergeant. He said that I had a lot of potential, but I needed to get out of JSOC since I was already a Master Sergeant and I needed to broaden my horizons. You haven't done any training or been out of AFSOC for a while. We need to send you to AETC. I didn't know whether to hug him or curse him at the time. I trusted him so I said that I'll go ahead and do this. To be honest, I learned quite a bit and that was good for my development. Then, JSOC brought me right back in after I got that developmental experience. Just when I thought I was safe to stay in JSOC, I was approached about being a Command Chief. I thought

I was going to be a PJ Chief for the rest of my 30 years and then retire. But, someone saw potential and I had built up some credibility. They said that they thought I should do that because it would be good with my leadership style. I got selected as the Command Chief for the 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, Florida. Shortly after that, I was told that I was going to be the Command Chief at the 18th Wing in Kadena, Japan. I said, okay, that will be my first time working for a fighter pilot, so that will be interesting. Then, when I was sitting in that assignment, someone said that I have too much CENTCOM experience, so they were never going to send me back there again. They said that they needed to send me to Korea. So, I interviewed for Korea and in the process of interviewing the same person that said that I didn't need to go back to CENTCOM because I had too much experience, flipped the tables on me and said that they needed to send me to AFCENT in Qatar. I said whatever, wherever you think I need to go, I will go.

Then, when sitting in AFCENT, I was waiting to see what would happen. They told me that the timing just wasn't working, so they were going to put me in in the Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs Office. I thought, what the heck is a knuckle-dragging PJ going to do at Manpower and Reserve Affairs? I don't know anything about that. I got thrown in there for a few months and the next thing you know I was selected by a Marine to be the Command Senior Enlisted Leader at U.S. Africa Command. The point being, I never bid for an assignment because of personal gain. I always wanted the challenge. To go to the worst possible scenario so that I had an opportunity to do something good or fix something. I figured if I had that, then my purpose was going to be defined, I was going to be fulfilled, happy with what I was doing as long as I was empowered by my boss. That was always my first conversation I had with my commanding officer, by the way. What was the dynamic going to look like, how are we going to operate, and what do you expect from me? Those three questions...always. Then, we marched that

route the rest of the assignment. If you start bidding too much for positions and assignments, you start sounding self-serving which goes against the whole building credibility piece. So, I advise young people that wherever you are, make yourself useful and develop yourself. That credibility that you build there will put you in the best place to be put in the position where your talents will be best utilized. If you do that for the rest of your career, you will have no regrets.

**Lindsay:** That goes back to what you mentioned before about providing value and excelling where you are at. My guess is that if you weren't successful early on, I doubt people would have come knocking on the door advising where you need to be or go. If you are too focused on the future, then you will lose sight of the impact that you can make in the moment and build that credibility.

**Colón-López:** You touched a bit upon self-teaching, being proactive, and on educating yourself on the things that are important. I did that quite a bit. I was always reading a lot. I didn't get my Bachelor's degree until I was the AFRICOM Senior Enlisted Leader because the reason I joined the service was to get away from college. So, what I did was study tactics. I studied Clausewitz and many other war-like publications to be able to better understand how my bosses thought about issues. I am always asking them, "What are the top two books that you have read that shaped your thinking?" I then go and read those two books to help my understanding. My education was based on the moment, the fight that we were fighting, and what I needed to provide that boss. When I finally decided to get after my education, I picked my degree based on something that was going to be relevant to my place at the time. That was leadership and management. I always kept everything related to what my purpose in life was, which is to be an Airman, a Senior Enlisted leader.

But often, you see people who are looking for that easy button, that silver bullet. They are thinking that having a Master's Degree is going to give them an advantage. But they have to think, a Master's in what? How is that going to benefit the service? Or they think they need to go to as many schools as possible. Okay, but what have you done with that education? The true end of education is not knowledge, but action. What are you going to do with that education? Are you teaching others? Are you able to translate that into whatever your bosses' mission or vision is? Are you able to use that education to make better decisions and what have those decisions been? I

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sometimes get people who look at me and ask, what made you successful? You made it to the Combatant Command. I ask them, what are you passionate about? I did the things that I was passionate about and those are the things that set me apart from others at certain points in my career. What is unique to you that we need to start working on to set you up for success? It's not just "get a degree" or "go to that school"...everyone does that. It's about that edge. How do we get you that edge based on your own passion, drive and motivation?

**Lindsay:** When I hear you talk about that edge, it makes me think about alignment. You are suggesting that if I am working toward something that I am passionate about, invest in where I am at, work hard to be good at what I am doing, that creates that edge and will surpass those who are just holding the position while they are trying to get the next one. People will see that alignment and see the authenticity in that.

**Colón-López:** Exactly. I have always believed that only the mediocre feel that they are at always at their best. I never felt like I was doing good enough. I always saw room for improvement. I was always critical of myself and was reassessing what I needed to do better the next time I tackled any opportunity. I eventually created a habit to where I was always open minded. I wanted to listen. I wanted to learn from the views of others. That turned me into a very inclusive and transparent person. Eventually, the kind of person that can trust people enough to delegate the things that someone else should be doing. So, I do the things that only I can do based on my position.

**Lindsay:** Along that idea of development and wanting to learn, one of the things that I noticed is that you have a professional reading list. To go back to your point about books that have impact, I think that helps give some insight on books that have influenced you and your thinking.

**Colón-López:** That is another example of not just doing things to check a block or put it on your report, you are doing it because you want to get something out of it. I never wasted time with books that didn't peak my interest. Something that you will notice about the books on that reading list are they are not the ones that are the popular best sellers right now. Often, you will see that people will follow the fad of the day because it was a national best seller or for some other reason. On my list, some of those books are 20 plus years old. They are books that I go back and read all the time. So, if I am going to put together a reading list, I want to make it worthy of the readers and to explain why I chose those books. That is why I put a quick synopsis on each of them to explain why I chose each book. Hopefully, people can find value in that. I am about to come out with a second list soon, but I think I am going to do two separate ones. There are a lot of lists out there that talk about leadership and history, but I also want to focus a bit on the human domain. There is a lot going on now regarding resiliency, but I want to know things like what

can they read to increase their threshold for misery. What I mean by that is how can they thrive when everyone else is quitting and falling apart? What are some of those books that can help people think deeper about the way that they are and their biases? How can they be more inclusive? That is what I am looking for and that is why I only chose five books to begin with. With COVID, it seems like everyone is reading more, so I might accelerate those lists. But, I will not push out a half-baked product. I want to make sure they are the right books for the right time and for the right audience.

**Lindsay:** That goes back to your point about not just reading for knowledge, but for understanding and application. We need to understand that human domain better. Many people are very good at the technical side of things, but tend to put relatively less effort into the human side.

**Colón-López:** Agreed. I have seen both sides of the spectrum on that before. For example, we were running this Senior NCO board at the Numbered Air Force (NAF) level. We had a senior NCO who came in strong. He said he was a student of John Maxwell and his Laws of Leadership and stated that he had studied them and lived them every day. By the way, at that time, everyone had John Maxwell on their EPR. It was the flavor of the month. So, when he finishes his rant about how well he fits with Maxwell's theory of leadership, I asked him, "Okay Sergeant, tell us five of the laws of leadership." He couldn't do it. My point is that if think that you are the only person putting that on your EPR, then you are not only lying to yourself, you are lying to others and overselling your capability. The reason I read Clausewitz was because I heard a lot people like General McCrystal and Admiral McRaven talk about the art and science of war. I didn't really understand it and was told it was from Clausewitz's *On War*. So, I read the book, and as a matter of fact, I have it right here. This is not something that the average person is going to pick. It is slow and it is a hard pill to swallow. But, I wanted to understand it so I go back often and try to better understand it. I want to know

what people are using and how they get that context into their conversation. I will challenge folks with the question of what does art and science mean to you just like I did that young man about Maxwell. If you are going to read something and be vocal about it, then let's test it and see if the intent was met to better enrich your development, your thought process, and ultimately your actions.

**Lindsay:** Exactly. How has that changed you as a leader? How has that had an impact on you and your character? That is something that we haven't talked a lot about yet, but that alignment between who I am and what I stand for and my behaviors and actions. We see a lot of places today, due to the media's help, about those who are not in alignment between their thoughts and actions.

**Colón-López:** To that point, one of the things that I have written about in the past is to know the difference between character and reputation. Character is who you are and what is inside you. Reputation is how others see you. They are often connected based on how you act. If I needed to put money on one of them, it would always be character, because the other will play out from there. But, many people are more concerned about reputation. That is when they take the shallow approach to things like overselling themselves like the Sergeant I just mentioned. Just be proud of your limitations and your strengths because they will both help you to be better at some point. Limitations bring humility. Strengths bring credibility. If you combine the two, you will be a strong, powerful leader.

**Lindsay:** You will be aligned and develop trust and people will want to follow you. What we know about development is that it rarely occurs when we are comfortable. Being able to identify those weaknesses isn't always comfortable, but to your point, understanding those puts us in a position to grow. Some people see those weaknesses and think others can't see them so they ignore them or try to cover them up. Instead, you are suggesting to recognize them, work on

them, and use that to get after it. That helps to align what training you might need or what educational program you should pursue. Not because it will make me look better, but instead that it will help me to be better and to lead better.

**Colón-López:** Everyone who assumes a position of responsibility has certain expectations that come along with it. Along with those expectations, if they don't know you, people will make assumptions about what they can expect from you. If you don't deliver, then you are going to lose them from the beginning and diminish that credibility. That happens quite often when people are on panels. They get asked a tough question and they can't answer it and they just dance around the subject. They instantly lose the credibility. They had the perfect opportunity to be prepared, but they just couldn't deliver. They took the lazy approach by not preparing and as a result, failed their people. I try to teach people to not put themselves in that situation.

**Lindsay:** With that in mind, if SEAC Colón-López could go back to Airman Colón-López and give some advice regarding leadership and preparation, what would you say?

**Colón-López:** Something that I always tell our young troops is to learn to listen attentively. Sometime people hear things, but they aren't really listening. I know that may sound like a cliché, but let me explain. Often, when you are listening, especially when you are new, you can get overwhelmed about all the things that you need to do. You don't pay attention to the key things that must take place before any action is taken.

If I needed to go back to my young self, I would first say to pay more attention to comprehending the English language and enriching my vocabulary. Number two, I would say to learn to listen better. I wasn't bad, but my understanding wasn't there. I would spend more time talking to my peers about the things I didn't understand instead of just going along.

**Lindsay:** To be a more active participant in that process?

**Colón-López:** Yes, because the fix to that didn't come until I was assigned to JSOC where I was putting more attention into messaging, both receiving and transmitting to make sure that I was respecting people's time and the needs of the person that the message was intended for.

**Lindsay:** That's good advice. Any parting thoughts that you would like to pass on?

**Colón-López:** The point I want to get across is that there is no magic formula to what we do or the success of any one person. But there is something to be said about character, about humility, and how you treat others. That is really what leadership is all about. If you can demonstrate that you are able and comfortable to do that with the courage to make the tough calls and to be able to properly advise those around you up and down the chain, then I think you are going to find a good place to thrive within the Department of Defense. Don't think that checking blocks is going to be your savior, because it never is. We can smell that a mile away. And always line yourself up with people that you admire. Don't become them, but learn their strengths and weaknesses so that you build this compilation of excellence within you and be able to move forward and be a role model for others.

At the end of the day, the true role of any leader is to create that talent bench that is going to take the place on that shelf of the expired carton of milk. Spend the time to create those leaders now. Those leaders are now sitting at the E-5 and E-6 level, those leaders are cadets and young lieutenants right now. You need to invest early in people. Those young NCOs and officers that are out in the field right now, grow them right and you will see what happens 10-15 years from now.