

DEVELOPING LEADERS OF CHARACTER
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Leadership Development at all Levels

Steve Trainor, The Google School for Leaders

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Could you talk a little bit about your journey and how you got to your current position at The Google School for Leaders?

Trainor: One way to share the story is to talk about a turning point or transition that was a significant part of my journey. I spent 30 years in the military, but there was a critical point in my career where my focus and direction changed dramatically, which ultimately led me to my current role. My early background was as a helicopter pilot in the Navy where I had a fairly typical operational background. The turning point for me was mid-career, where for the first time I realized that I really had to think about what I was doing and what was most important for me. For most of us in the military, we don't have to think a lot about what we are doing in a larger context of our career and development because our career paths and professions have been pretty well defined. But this was one of those times where I really took some time and reflected on it.

In this case, I needed to decide between two very desirable and different futures. I was fortunate enough to be selected for operational helicopter command, and I was presented with the opportunity to change career paths and go into a leader development role as the first Permanent Professor of Leadership at the Naval Academy.

Steve Trainor is responsible for building a world-class leadership faculty and scaling opportunities for leader development in The Google School for Leaders. He has over 30 years of Active Duty military service as a Navy pilot, executive human resources manager and as the U.S. Naval Academy's Director of Leadership Education and Development, and first Permanent Military Professor of Leadership. An ICF-certified executive coach with extensive leadership and organizational consulting experience, Trainor graduated from the Naval Academy and received his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Maryland, College Park a Masters of Arts in International Affairs from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and a Masters of Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, PA.

That was deeply personal for me because flying was something that I had done for 15 years and operational command is something I'd aspired to. However, there was something inside of me that helped me decide that my real purpose was waiting on this other pathway. A big lesson for me through that experience was not only saying what I was going to do, but deciding what I was not going to do, what path I was choosing to leave behind. The choice between two valuable things is one of the most difficult things we must do in our lives. The reflection on why something is more important than another is the core of personal leadership.

Deep down inside there was always something that was drawn to growth, learning, and development. So, I pursued the path to the Naval Academy where I worked in leader development ultimately becoming a Department Chair and Division Director for Leadership Education and Development.

Leaving behind my career in Naval Aviation, which was so much a part of me and framed my thinking about leadership in order to pursue something of an unknown path, but where I felt my purpose lay has ultimately led me to my current role. Since retiring from the military, I have worked in leader development for business executives. I do that internally at Google now as a leadership coach and a facilitator of executive development programs. However, it was that moment in time, as a mid-career officer professional, where I had to decide what was most important to me and what I needed to leave behind.

Lindsay: That's a great point because people often talk about a decision point, but not the point you highlight about what they are going to leave behind. That is a critical point because it is not just about pivoting to something new and doing more. What you are talking

about is a bit of a different mental model and perhaps a change in your identity and how you see yourself.

Trainor: That is very true. Each service has its own career management or talent professional and I remember having a conversation with them. They said, "Okay Trainor, only one good deal per career. You have to choose." The challenge was that they were both things that were of great value to me. Being a pilot and operational leadership is something that I had been striving for the first half of my career. Yet, there was this other thing inside of me, drawing me to this other path of leader development. Added to the challenge was that I didn't know what the future career potential would be because it was something pretty new in the Navy at the time. But, I do remember something that a mentor shared with me. He said there are lots of opportunities for leadership roles in the military, and you move in and out of those over time. However, one way to frame this differently is that I could have an impact on the system of leader development, thereby impacting generations of leaders instead of a moment in time or discreet place. We need both of those things, but they are different mindsets.

Lindsay: They are both important, but for vastly different reasons. Both involve investments in people, but the way you do that and the touchpoints are different. You can impact the system itself which can, in turn, impact the entire enterprise, but it may not have the publicity or visibility behind it that a formal leadership role would have.

Trainor: That is correct. For me, it was a growth opportunity because it helped me and challenged me from a learning standpoint. Challenged me to think differently about not only leadership, but how I could be in that place. Going back to graduate school as a

parent of three young kids in the middle of your life was both a learning challenge and a personal stretch opportunity for me to grow in different ways.

Lindsay: Based on your background, you also had some context to apply that which you were learning from your operational experiences.

Trainor: Yes, having that balance of the operational experience in conjunction with the developmental and theoretical mindset of the academic program is very powerful. But, you don't need to go back to get a PhD to do that. You see many military leaders, and business leaders as well, who are deep students of the profession of leadership. I have been so impressed with the leaders in the business world that I have encountered after retiring from the military who are students of

are standards to how we think about what a leader is and means.

Trainor: It may not be to the level of a medical profession where there is licensure, but it still has expectations and duties. It is a higher calling and there are obligations and responsibilities that we haven't called out enough or articulated enough. But, maybe it is time to.

Lindsay: One of the things that makes me think about is a big part of being part of a profession, like the military or the medical field, is service back to the larger community of the profession. If you think about that with respect to the field of leadership, it is interesting to think about what service back to the larger leadership community would be?

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leadership as well as practitioners. I believe there is a profession of leadership. Leaders see themselves as having these responsibilities to the larger system of life and society.

Lindsay: I agree and Barbara Kellerman has spoken on that idea as well. Not just the system of leadership, but also how we need to start thinking about it. I think there is power in framing leadership beyond the position or event, but something that we aspire to, that we opt into, that we continue to learn and there

Trainor: I definitely agree. And this gets to the notion of character, your work is always going to be in service of something. The challenge is, what is that something? Do you know it? Because, if you don't know it, you will still be in service of something. You might not like it or you may not be aware of what you are in service to.

Unfortunately, I think that is where a lot of organizations find themselves caught in a position where leaders are in a bind of their duties. A lot of companies today are making declarations that there is a new business compact out there. It sounds good and maybe a crisis like we are facing now causes people to see the need for a higher level of responsibility that cuts across the confines of an organizational structure.

Lindsay: That makes sense, because we know that development doesn't always occur when you are in a

comfortable environment. Sometimes those external forcing functions can get us to a point where we think about that more. It challenges us to look at things in new ways, much like you mentioned earlier where you were forced to look at things in new ways at the midpoint of your career. Any regrets, by the way, about the choice that you made?

Trainor: Never had a regret. There was uncertainty at different times, but I think that uncertainty and complexity are things that are evident in the system at times more than others. Uncertainty and complexity have always been a part of the human system and condition. I feel like that was part of changing a pathway. You have to work on that but I never regretted it. One of the things that I value most about it is the learning journey for myself. We don't spend a lot of time thinking about our career and our future and how we actively engage in it. Likewise, we don't spend a lot of time in reflection and looking back to see how we were shaped and how we were changed over time. So, we keep this mental model of being a fully formed human being adult like that is it. That is who I am. But, being able to look back and see the change that has taken place. Having a big transition that I had, made it more manifest, but all of us are experiencing these changes across our lives but we aren't necessarily seeing it for what it is worth. By not seeing that, it is harder for us to see how we might be different in the future.

Lindsay: We also aren't really good at giving people that opportunity and time for reflection. In addition, when we actually do take the time to reflect, it is typically because something bad happened and we are going to take a pause. But, what you are talking about is looking at reflection from the positive aspect and looking back on decisions that were made that were good and how that helped to shape where we are at.

Trainor: I can see that in my own experience. All of the change and growth that has happened. Some of it was a result of pain and stress. But, being able to take those experiences for what they were and look back and see what is different now, that in itself is part of human growth. We have the capacity to keep growing but unfortunately, we often get stuck for a lot of reasons. The coaching work that I do has helped me understand that in myself and in other leaders. There are many things that can hold us in place, our careers, our communities, even our identities. While those things help ground us, we also need the ability to change so we can achieve our highest potential.

Lindsay: That point about coaching is an important one. I don't think everyone realizes the power of coaching and what that can bring to the developmental dynamic. Thinking about that as a developmental tool, especially at the executive level, it is so important for people to have that opportunity to talk through and process those experiences in an intentional way.

Trainor: It is. What has been surprising to me as I work in this space, is how powerful coaching is. Even for senior leaders who have vast expertise and experiences, there are many reasons why even they aren't seeing or doing things that can help them be more effective. Some of it is structural, cultural, and individual, that prevents them from seeing what is possible or what other alternatives there are. Having someone for a leader to reflect with...to share with...to test and challenge with, like a coach, is a benefit that we are realizing more today. However, I feel strongly that we are engaging coaching way too late and too little for the system effects that we want to have. It's almost, in many cases, that coaching is seen as an intervention and applied way too late. I feel this is particularly the case in the military and there's a real need to create more of a cultural demand

for coaching early on in the career of leaders, we just don't do it. Admittedly, there are bandwidth issues and it is a huge cost, but there are ways to bring a coaching culture into an organization earlier and I think that is desperately needed.

Lindsay: The data supports that as well. If we look at leader failure, rates can be pretty high especially in certain domains. Others have argued, that the cost associated with doing interventions like coaching may seem programmatically like a big ticket, but if you think about the impact and cost of a mid or senior leader who fails, that isn't inconsequential either. Coaching is certainly important at the senior levels, but the data shows it is effective at mid and lower levels as well.

Trainor: Exactly. The work environment is such that the junior and mid-level leaders are making decisions and are faced with cases and situations that ripple throughout the organization that have strategic implications. Empowering them to be able to think about, reflect on, and get feedback in ways that are powerful, strengthens the bottom line of whatever organization it is. The case can be made that it is well worth the investment.

Lindsay: I agree. Thank you for sharing a bit about your journey and how you got to where you are today. Can you explain a little about what you do at The Google School for Leaders?

Trainor: The basic work that I do is in the facilitation of executive learning and coaching with senior leaders at Google. As Head of Faculty Development, I am responsible for the development of the larger community of facilitators who work with leaders at Google. This work is part of the learning and development center of expertise called People Development. Just as in

the military, business organizations today have global impact. The responsibility that these leaders have is not just for their company, but also for the impact of that company. That impact can be immense.

The thing that I feel is most important in executive development is growth and maturity - be it for leaders in the military or virtually any other industry. In earlier times, leader development was focused on what you would hear called horizontal development. It was building skills, capabilities and competencies to help a leader be more effective in a role or function. Usually that would support a specific role at a particular level in a company. That approach to leader development has dominated for the last few decades. While skills development will always be important for leaders, we are also focused on vertical development. What we are talking about with vertical development is not just moving up in the organization functionally. It is the developmental maturity of leaders. This is something that is needed in every organization today. Leaders need to both expand the range of competency and skills, while also increasing the capacity to handle things like complexity and leading in ambiguous and uncertain times. If you think of a leader as a container of capabilities, it is really about expanding the size of the container so that a leader has a greater depth and breadth of effectiveness. It is not merely adding new skills or behaviors. It is about being able to see more broadly. To be able to think further into the future. To be able to even look at oneself objectively and learn. Ultimately, developmental maturity offers leaders a different way of thinking and seeing. That is what many companies focus on today, increasing the capacity of leaders to hold today's more complex operating context.

One challenge leaders face is to be laser focused on certain things at the expense of other things that they

ought to be able to see and understand. There's a need or demand for more agile perspectives and mindset shifts around what a leader actually does in an organization. Which leads itself into what kind of skills and behaviors a leader needs to have. So, they are interrelated, but they are not the same thing. We are doing much more vertical development today than we have before.

Lindsay: That's an interesting point about capacity. What we sometimes see with emerging leaders is when they look at a more senior leader, they tend to pay attention to particular skills and behaviors. The problem is that they may not know how to develop those particular skills or may not feel like they can emulate the skills of that leader, for whatever reason. However, by focusing on increasing leader capacity, it is something that can be developed by all leaders.

Trainer: Exactly. Challenges are part of the growing experience. It sometimes means that you need to stop doing things the way you did them in order to hold something differently. For example, it may mean you need to stop relating to your direct reports the way you have been in order to look differently at the organization. As Ronald Heifetz talks about, it is having an adaptive mindset to the world. In doing so, you are actually freeing up mind share for yourself to focus on the highest, best use of your abilities and allowing the folks who work with, for and around you to do the things that they can uniquely do as well. That works well in any kind of structure. Whether it is a flat organization or one that is hierarchical, leaders can adapt that mindset that they need to expand their capacity to hold these bigger ideas and challenges to see across the organization. Who

would have imagined in January that we would be doing things the way we are today? Organizations and leaders are adapting, but coming out of this is the real challenge in many respects. How will this change organizations? Industries are being disrupted. Leaders who can't hold this bigger space are going to have a hard time coping with this longer term and newer environment.

Lindsay: One of the things that is becoming evident for many in light of current events, and leadership practitioners have known this for a while, is that it is important to understand leadership capacity at all levels because we are seeing the workforce dispersed and working in new ways. In many respects, junior leaders are being put into leadership situations and experiencing challenges that historically have been seen at the more senior levels. This is having the impact of causing

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organizations to look down into the organizations and consider what we can do developmentally at all levels.

Trainer: We always need capabilities and competencies to do the job, but the jobs are changing all the time. So,

we need the capacity to think about what else we could do and what else can we think about. We often save that kind of work for an offsite where we set aside time for strategic planning or visioning. Perspective taking and reflection were ancillary activities that we did outside of work. However, that thinking also needs to be inward in our daily lives. Perspective, awareness and reflection needs to occur up, down, and across the organization. General (ret) Charles Krulak (USMC) talked about this many years ago with his notion of the strategic corporal having an outsized impact on outcomes. Today, across all organizations leaders at lower levels make decisions with strategic implications and consequences. That has been made manifest across all of our organizations now. Whether you see it in tech, retail, or the military, leaders must shift how they think and how they see their role and the value they bring to the organization.

Lindsay: With that in mind and trying to get people to think about capacity, when you are coaching and doing your developmental work, how do you break through to a leader about that? They obviously wouldn't be in a leadership position in an organization as successful as yours without some prior success. How do you break through to them about that broad thought of capacity and the need to keep learning?

Trainor: Most of the leaders that I have interacted with have at least some sense that they need more from a developmental standpoint. So, I'd say that humility is a key activator of greater leadership capacity. Part of that is because there is a constant tension that exists between the normal churn of an organization and what a leader is doing. Self-aware leaders have an idea of what they want more of and maybe less of where they feel the tension. Regardless, if you talk to any leader in any organization, within a matter of a few minutes you will likely hear a sense of what tensions they are feeling.

I would argue that exists for leaders at all levels of the organization. There is this felt sense of needing to do more or do something different. It is a matter of helping them make sense of the tension that they are feeling and from that, helping them to see what that is. Then, to help them make sense of ways that they might be able to release or reorient some of that. So, it is a matter of finding those pain points for leaders. Those points of tension can be learning and development opportunities. Many people just try to power through and manage it and in some organizations, it is frowned upon to expose any of those pains or tensions. However, it takes a toll on us. I'm encouraged by all of the work that is emerging in neuroscience and showing the way that a lot of these tensions leaders experience can be understood through what is occurring within our own systems. We are learning both how that is actually having a toll on us and how that impacts our ability to be as effective as we could.

Lindsay: What you highlight is the need for coaching. Being able to sit someone down and walk them through that. Just because leaders aren't talking about it doesn't mean that they don't have tension or that it isn't impacting them. Leadership has a cost on the individual.

Trainor: It does. Particularly in the military, we spend a tremendous amount of time training which in part is what makes it so amazing. It enables us to come together in teams, to practice, challenge and test one another. At the same time, I think we need to think about the training and care of the whole person in that space. For example, it is readily apparent when someone physically breaks down on a march. We can actually see the result of that but not the other levels of us as people - the emotional, mental, and spiritual side of things. We have to consider all of these elements of person and their

development and care if we want to be at the top of our game. We do it to a certain extent in the military, but we don't do it for all of those levels. We don't consider all of those things fully. We have kind of touched the top and bottom of that with the physical and spiritual sides because they are socially and culturally there but the emotional and mental side, we haven't spent as much time. I think we are starting to understand how important they are after all we have learned over the last couple of decades of conflict for our armed forces. That holds true in the business world as well. You can only be "on" so much. I think in this remote and virtual world we are in right now is magnifying these challenges because there is no escape from the work. It can go 24/7 depending on your circumstances. Some people are busier than they ever have been and some people are less busy, but all of those things are taking a toll on people emotionally and mentally.

Lindsay: It seems to me that, at least in your organization, the fact that they have a school for leaders and that they are thinking about the development of their leaders, is a recognition of that and the value in developing leaders. It seems like it is valued in your organization.

Trainor: Yes, it is. It really is amazing. I think there are models of this focus in other organizations like General Electric with its Crotonville Leadership Institute and other companies that have a long history of focusing on leaders and leadership. What is important, I think, is to look at the focus of organizations in a time of crisis, like right now. Is the focus still on helping and supporting leaders to grow in this time of challenge? In many respects, it is a defining point for an organization and it will be a cultural marker of an organization that makes it through this time. How we survived together and what leaders did. How we all hung together and what

was the message? What did we focus on and how did we solve the problems? Those are all things that can be a narrative of leadership.

I feel like what we are doing and what other companies can be doing right now in terms of investing in leadership and helping leaders to grow in this challenge is probably one of the most important things a company can do for future growth and success. Organizations must be able to deal in the present moment and take care of the things that are most dangerous and emergent to us in the immediate moment, but we also have to think about the uncertainty of the future as well. Again, it is one of those things - those tensions that leaders need to be able to hold at the same time. I recall a research report that talked about how we don't really multitask, we cycle between tasks. This idea of holding both of those things means that you aren't doing both of those things at the same time but you have the capacity to hold both of those things. Essentially, the ability to be in the current moment and the future and the tension between both. There are all of these kinds of tensions. Leader must be able to hold them both, but that doesn't mean they are occupying the mind at the same moment in time, but a leader can do both of those things.

Lindsay: Any parting advice that you would be willing to share?

Trainor: No one imagined that we would be doing this - living in a pandemic and an economic crisis. I think for me, it just brings home the idea that leaders and those who work with leaders have to be sensitive to the surrounding environment, they should spend as much time as possible thinking about the context and how leaders are experiencing it, so we can best support their development. This important prep work will help leaders be more prepared when that moment of

challenge comes. I think it has a direct relationship to the building of character as well. If you go back to the ancient Greeks, they said that you have to practice this and work at it in whatever way possible so that when you are faced with this new challenge or unforeseen set of circumstances, you are ready for it. I think that is really the connection point for me between leadership and character. In other words, leaders are expected to step into this place of responsibility and immense challenge and be ready to act. How are you preparing yourself and the leaders around you for the choice or decision that you never expected having to make? That's where we need to be focused next.

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