JOURNAL OF CHARACTER & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

JOURNAL OF CHARACTER & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
SPRING 2025

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

JOURNAL OF CHARACTER & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

VOLUME 12 | ISSUE 1
SPRING 2025

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY

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REVIEW

Defining Moments and the Formation of Leader Character: The Battlefield, the Boardroom, and Beacons of Hope

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ABSTRACT

Crises are defining moments for leaders that test their competencies, character, and commitment to their roles. These events shape individuals as leaders while providing opportunities to influence the future. If leaders aim to foster greater flourishing–encompassing security, prosperity, well-being, and justice–they must rely on their strength of character to envision and achieve it. Crises underscore that character is the foundation of effective leadership. Competencies and commitment–often the focus of leadership literature

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 325 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.325

and executive education–cannot reach their full potential without character. This article examines the leadership of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy during the Ukraine war. It explores how lessons from the battlefield and government can be applied to other sectors and highlights the importance of character in withstanding crisis. Additionally, this article discusses the use of intentional, directed practice as a tool to help leaders develop character, enabling them to navigate crises and emerge as stronger leaders who inspire hope and generate a better future.

Keywords: Defining Moments, Leadership, Character, Deliberate Practice, Reflection

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Crises are defining tests for leaders, challenging their competencies, character, and commitment to their roles. Such crisis moments force individuals to reflect upon aspects of the self and the environment within which they operate. Crises can shape the way individuals embody leadership by inspiring alterations in mindset and conduct. Furthermore, the insights and wisdom gleaned by reflecting upon challenging moments can generate momentum and new actions that contribute in positive ways to a shared global future.

Leaders who are operating during wartime demonstrate the way that a crisis acts as a crucible in which they must draw upon and hone their strength of character or risk certain failure. Character, often overlooked or misunderstood, is essential to successful and effective leadership. Understanding character through an observable and measurable framework and examining how it is developed offer a way for leaders to develop character with intentionality.

The crisis moments of the battlefield provide valuable lessons in leadership and the development of character. But, these lessons not only are relevant to political or military leaders but also can be translated into the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors. Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy exemplifies a leader navigating a crisis, namely, an unprovoked war with significant human casualties (Spector, 2023; Zachara-Szymańska, 2023). It is a war with an irrational foe that is aimed at destroying Ukrainian identity, and it has forced a reliance on international support for the country's very survival. Throughout the war, Zelenskyy has conducted himself in a calm, composed manner and has demonstrated determination and perseverance when confronting difficult situations. He has inspired and mobilized collective action against Russia at an unprecedented breadth, depth, and pace by rallying Ukraine's citizens and its military, as well as galvanizing most of the international community.

When United States officials offered Zelenskyy the chance to flee advancing Russian troops, his famous response, "I need ammunition, not a ride," became a defining leadership moment (Spector, 2023). The response exemplified his courage and commitment, resonating with both Ukrainians and the international community. Zelenskyy sent an unmistakable message to the world: he refused to bend to fear or to prioritize his own safety. Sidestepping tough challenges and capitulating to fear in difficult times is commonly seen. But while fear creates feelings of isolation, courage and positive emotions—conveyed through social media, video recordings, and speeches—are contagious (Barsade et al., 2018; Seppälä & Cameron, 2022). Zelenskyy's rhetorical skills are considered one of his biggest strengths. Zelenskyy has neither minced his words nor peppered his candor with insult. Rather, his earnest speeches have been transparent, composed, and heartfelt. His carefully chosen words have sought to unify

rather than divide; he achieves this in part by invoking historical events and experiences that resonate with his audiences (e.g., referring to Shakespeare and Churchill in his address to the United Kingdom House of Commons), reminding his audiences they are helping to defend common values such as democracy, respect for human rights, and fundamental freedoms.

Zelenskyy's strong leadership and depth of character was not apparent until it was critically called upon. Before becoming president of Ukraine, Zelenskyy earned a degree in law from the Kyiv National Economic University, following which he created the production company Kvartal 95 and produced films, cartoons, and television shows. He has been a successful actor and political activist. There was very little in Zelenskyy's past to suggest that he would become an admired and heroic wartime president and yet, arguably, he has (Urban & McLeod, 2022). This example suggests that unlikely people can rise to the challenges of crisis leadership when they call upon and draw forth their strength of character.

When fate taps a person on the shoulder, it provides a stimulus for personal growth: the opportunity to respond in a way that is unique unto themselves while also inspiring and galvanizing others. It may be argued that whatever happens in Ukraine, Zelenskyy has had a far-reaching impact on the rest of the world. His example of strong, effective leadership provides a concrete example to other leaders as the world collectively faces numerous other converging crises (e.g., health and climate emergencies, social and economic inequality, declining trust in public institutions, or technological disruption). Leadership that is informed by strength of character has the potential to address present and emergent crises, and to effect change. Imagine, for example, how different the world could be if leaders—in government, business, sports, education, and other areas—would step up the way Zelenskyy has?

Purpose

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, this article notes that the battlefield supplies a true and exacting laboratory of leadership and leadership development. Military officials have articulated that little, if anything, prepares leaders for the kind of existentially consequential decisions and trade-offs that they must make on the battlefield, in the midst of chaos, armed conflict, rape, genocidal violence, humanitarian crises, and other atrocities. Leaders, therefore, need to be capable of making quick, well-reasoned, and high-impact decisions in volatile, complex, and ambiguous situations (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2018; Wu et al., 2021).

Second, this article highlights the importance of character to strong, effective leadership and decision-making. Competencies and commitment, often the focus of leadership literature and executive education, cannot reach their full potential without character. This is not a revolutionary or even modern idea; thinkers as far back as Aristotle espoused the value of character development. This article advances a character-based approach to developing leaders. Research in military service, business, education, and consulting shows that a renewed focus on character development elicits positive growth and a dedication to becoming a better leader (Crossan et al., 2024; Sosik et al., 2019).

Third, the article considers how lessons from the battlefield and government translate into other sectors; in particular, it explores the formation of leader character during crisis and applies the lessons found there to employees, leaders, and board members in the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many successful senior executives in government and business have been able to combine hard-won lessons of military leadership principles with real-world business applications.

Raising important questions about leadership theory, leadership research, and leadership development, this article facilitates a deeper understanding of the importance of character in leadership, as well as the ability to recognize its tangible, observable behaviors in leaders, both in the personal and the professional spheres. This article puts forth three reflective practices that leaders can undertake to develop their character as it relates to leadership: (1) personally consider the importance of character and how to exercise strength of character in all areas of life; (2) think deeply about how to end the character deficit crisis currently being witnessed; and (3) reflect on how intentional and deliberate practice facilitated by defining moments can cultivate leaders with strength of character.

Leader Character

Extensive research has reinforced that when it comes to strong, effective leadership, competencies count, commitment to the role of leadership is critical, and character matters (Crossan et al., 2024; Thompson et al., 2008). Competencies reflect what a leader can do (Campion et al., 2011). Examples of competencies include strategic thinking, communication skills, motivating people, and negotiating complex agreements. And while individuals may possess such innate competencies, research has also shown that these (and other) competencies can be developed through interventions such as training, role-play scenarios, assignments, and coaching (Avolio et al., 2009, 2010).

Commitment describes the degree of effort and persistence that a leader applies to create the forward momentum required to make things happen; it is based on the individual's level of aspiration, their degree of engagement with personally or organizationally relevant goals, and the sacrifices they are willing to make to reach a goal (Baker, 2011; Gandz et al., 2010). Consider the example of Zelenskyy. By all accounts, he has not taken a day off from the war—and he knows that he risks his life every day. Former Minister of National Defense Oleksii Reznikov said, "He's in stress mode 24 hours a day, 7 days a week–it's a never-ending marathon" (Balmforth et al., 2024, para. 12).

Character can be described as a habit of being anchored in a set of virtues, values, and personality traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Pike et al., 2021). Virtues are situationally appropriate or worthy behaviors, such as humanity and courage, which are widely considered to be emblematic of effective leadership because they contribute to the well-being of individuals and, ultimately, societies (Newstead & Riggio, 2023; Sosik, 2015). For example, without the virtue of courage as modeled by Zelenskyy, Ukrainians would likely not have felt as strongly about their ability to stand up to Russian invaders and fight back. Zelenskyy made numerous high-risk trips to frontline positions in cities such as Bakhmut, Bucha, Irpin, and Kherson to personally thank soldiers who have been involved in fighting, to present state awards and honorary titles to those individuals who distinguished themselves in battle, and to offer support to residents who witnessed unimaginable atrocities. He lives by the maxim that leaders move toward the sound of gunfire because that is where the action and the danger lays. Doing so can be counterintuitive for a leader but to do otherwise is to shy away from an opportunity to influence and build relational togetherness.

Some virtuous behaviors reflect the activation of personality traits, such as resilience and self-control. For example, studies have shown that building resilience helps mitigate emotional and psychological injury and enables recovery after war-related trauma (Fino et al., 2020; Litz, 2014). Character and personality traits such as the five-factor model of personality (Barrick & Mount, 1991; McCrae & Costa, 1987) are not the same; there are fundamental differences between these two constructs. One crucial difference is that character is anchored in virtuous behaviors and can be strengthened through

deliberate practice, and sometimes through a specific, intense experience. Conversely, personality traits tend to be relatively stable and, importantly, mostly agnostic to virtue (Cawley et al., 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Furthermore, some virtues are expressed as values, such as justice. For example, studies reveal that when leaders demonstrate justice, it helps motivate people within their organization to direct their energies and skills toward addressing common goals and challenges that the organization is facing (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2013; Whitman et al., 2012).

Leaders in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors have demonstrated that strength of character elevates leadership and thus increases the likelihood of success in addressing the evolving demands and challenges that await leaders. For example, the temperance Zelenskyy showed in his communication with Ukrainians and the world is very effective. In a February 26, 2022 video posted online, Zelenskyy revealed that he was still in Kyiv and said, "I am here. We are not putting down arms. We will be defending our country, because our weapon is truth, and our truth is that this is our land, our country, our children, and we will defend all of this. That is it. That's all I wanted to tell you. Glory to Ukraine" (CNN, 2022, paras. 5–6). The leadership that emerged under Zelenskyy during the early days of the war—calm yet passionately resolved—was critically important: the positive relational energy that Zelenskyy created led people to believe they mattered, and that they were needed to win the war and help build a better, stronger Ukraine for future generations.

Many people, including scholars, philosophers, and generals, have written extensively about war and the role of strategy, tactics, leadership, and strength of character. For example, Sun Tzu was a legendary military strategist in ancient China. He is traditionally credited as the author of *The Art of War*—a book that is generally accepted as a masterpiece on strategy and tactics, and that has been frequently referred to by generals and scholars. Sun Tzu (2021) says five dangers await the general: (1) if they fight recklessly and imprudently, they will surely perish; (2) if they fear death, they will be imprisoned; (3) when they are angry and on fire, it is easy to provoke them; (4) when they are arrogant, they are easy to offend; and (5) a general who loves people too much is easily alarmed and disturbed. Each of these five behaviors is a character-related failing and, correspondingly, harmful to soldiers and their nations.

A Model of Character

Many people erroneously believe character is a subjective construct that resides in the eye of the beholder, as well as being something innate. However, contemporary models or frameworks of character focus on specific behaviors that embody character-based leadership (Brooks et al., 2019; Kiersch & Gullekson, 2021; Lamb et al., 2021; Ruch et al., 2014; Wang & Hackett, 2016, 2020). Crossan and colleagues developed and validated the leader character framework shown in Figure 1 (Crossan et al., 2017, 2024). The framework is based on both qualitative and quantitative research involving over 5,000 leaders from the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors in North America, Asia, Europe, and South America. The language embedded in the framework is based on prior empirical research as well as input and data gathered from leaders within various sectors and industries (and meeting the 10 review criteria to content, measurement, and development; see Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The framework highlights 11 distinct dimensions of character considered relevant to strong, effective leadership and 62 behaviors (or character elements) that are illustrative of the dimensions. The behavioral description of each character dimension is shown in Table 1. Each of the character elements has an impact on the strength of the corresponding character dimension; hence, the easier it is for a person to activate a particular behavior, the stronger the associated dimension will be

(Wang & Hackett, 2020; Wright, 2015). And while virtuous or positive behaviors—inherent in the definition of character—are all favorable, there is considerable anecdotal and empirical evidence of variance in the extent to which leaders evaluate and actually display such behaviors (Monzani et al., 2021; Seijts et al., 2019).

In leadership development, temperance tends to be the weakest dimension of character in leaders operating in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors. Consider again the example of Zelenskyy. How does he, or any leader in a wartime situation, maintain such a calm demeanor—given the horrific reports—the countless missile and mortar

Figure 1
Framework of Leader Character, Adapted from Crossan et al. (2017).

Table 1

Definitions of the Dimensions for Leader Character.

Dimension	Definition of dimension
Judgment	Makes sound decisions in a timely manner based on relevant information and critical analysis of facts. Appreciates the broader context when reaching decisions. Shows flexibility when confronted with new information or situations. Has an implicit sense of the best way to proceed. Sees into the heart of challenging issues. Reasons effectively in uncertain or ambiguous situations.
Courage	Does the right thing even though it may be unpopular, actively discouraged, or result in a negative personal outcome. Shows an unrelenting determination, confidence, and perseverance in confronting difficult situations. Rebounds quickly from setbacks.
Drive	Strives for excellence. Has a strong desire to succeed. Tackles problems with a sense of urgency. Approaches challenges with energy and passion.
Collaboration	Values and actively supports development and maintenance of positive relationships among people. Encourages open dialogue and does not react defensively when challenged. Is able to connect with others at a fundamental level, in a way that fosters the productive sharing of ideas. Recognizes that what happens to someone, somewhere, can affect all.
Integrity	Holds oneself to a high moral standard and behaves consistently with ethical standards, even in difficult situations. Is seen by others as behaving in a way that is consistent with personal values. Behaves consistently with organizational policies and practices.
Temperance	Conducts oneself in a calm, composed manner. Maintains the ability to think clearly and to respond reasonably in tense situations. Completes work and solves problems in a thoughtful, careful manner. Resists excesses and stays grounded.
Accountability	Willingly accepts responsibility for decisions and actions. Is willing to step up and take ownership of challenging issues. Reliably delivers on expectations. Can be counted on in tough situations.
Justice	Strives to ensure that individuals are treated fairly and that consequences are commensurate with contributions. Remains objective and keeps personal biases to a minimum when making decisions. Provides others with the opportunity to voice their opinions on processes and procedures. Provides timely, specific, and candid explanations for decisions. Seeks to redress wrongdoings inside and outside the organization.
Humility	Lets accomplishments speak for themselves. Acknowledges limitations. Understands the importance of thoughtful examination of one's own opinions and ideas. Embraces opportunities for personal growth and development. Does not consider oneself to be more important or special than others. Is respectful of others. Understands and appreciates others' strengths and contributions.

(*Continued*)

Table 1
Definitions of the Dimensions for Leader Character.

Dimension	Definition of dimension
Humanity	Demonstrates genuine concern and care for others. Appreciates and identifies with others' values, feelings, and beliefs. Has a capacity to forgive and not hold grudges. Understands that people are fallible and offers opportunities for individuals to learn from their mistakes.
Transcendence	Draws inspiration from excellence or appreciation of beauty in such areas as sports, music, arts, and design. Sees possibility where others do not. Has an expansive view of things both in terms of taking into account the long term and broad factors. Demonstrates a sense of purpose in life.

attacks, the hundreds of billions of dollars of damage to infrastructure, the witnessing of death and injury, the use of rape as a weapon of war, the attacks on hospitals and healthcare facilities, and the stories about family separations and children being kidnapped—and not have his judgment be compromised by anger or rage? The dimensions of character offer several possibilities. Perhaps he maintains his composure because he is committed to being accountable to his people, and he knows they need a leader whose role is to guide them through such atrocities. Perhaps his transcendence allows him to remain future-oriented and optimistic that Ukraine will prevail. Perhaps his calm is inspired by a deep sense of interconnectedness with the very people he is leading, who have yet to give up on the dream of victory. Regardless of which dimensions of character he is drawing upon, they equilibrize the anger to ensure that his judgment is balanced and uncompromised.

Understanding the networked nature of character is critical to comprehending how character functions—for better or for worse. The dimensions and their concomitant elements shown in Figure 1 independently and interactively influence individual behavior, hence team and organizational outcomes. For example, when engaged in coaching or developing others, being candid when providing feedback can take courage; however, it is only when courage is coupled with empathy or compassion that feedback can be truly heard and accepted, and meaningful and lasting behavioral change can occur. Conversely, failing to activate the right dimensional balance can create a behavioral gap that, due to the lack of a necessary element, generates a negative outcome including but not limited to resentment, lack of trust, and anger (Seijts & Milani, 2024). Such imbalance may explain deficiencies in judgment by leaders who demonstrate behaviors associated with, for example, drive, yet do so in a way that reveals little humanity and justice.

To illustrate, a 2021 survey among Ukrainian military leaders revealed that they rated the dimension of judgment as the most important of the 11 dimensions of leader character—more important even than courage (Monzani & Rozhdestvenskyy, 2021). The surveyed leaders may have recognized that an excess of courage—perhaps recklessness—may compromise judgment.

Research has provided compelling evidence that character is essential to performance and sustains excellence at the individual, team, and organizational levels (Crossan et al., 2024; Neubert et al., 2022; Newstead & Riggio, 2023; Sosik et al., 2012, 2019). The crucial and far-reaching consequences of character beyond military leadership are summed up by a Canadian executive and director in the private and public sectors: "I believe leader character is the bedrock of an organization.

I believe over the long-term character becomes the destiny of the organization. Character helps to build and sustain a business over long periods of time" (as cited in Seijts et al., 2019, p. 245).

Judgment

In a complex and complicated world, with increasing economic, financial, social, geopolitical, natural, and technological volatility, there will likely be frequent shocks to the environment in which organizations operate. Therefore, leaders often deal with what scholars Rittel and Webber (1974) coined *wicked problems*—problems that require both deep insight into the heart of challenging issues and critical thinking about them. Wicked problems are situations that demand sound judgment, the central component of character.

Judgment is central because it facilitates the direction of all other dimensions of character toward a balanced expression; it prevents an individual from falling into behavioral extremes (Eikeland, 2006; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). Leadership is always context-dependent, and as such, wise leaders—those who exercise good judgment—understand, for instance, when it is appropriate to encourage collaboration and when it is appropriate to be more directive; when to demonstrate humility, and when to be assertive.

A 2008 Canadian military example illustrates an ethical dilemma, including a set of conflicting principles, that required sound judgment. Captain Robert Semrau of the Canadian Armed Forces was convicted of a war crime for killing an injured Taliban insurgent after a heavy firefight in Afghanistan. The Taliban fighter had been shot by a U.S. Apache helicopter. A veteran Afghan army officer told a court-martial that the fighter was so badly injured he was "98 percent dead…there was no possibility for him to stay alive that day. He could die in 5 minutes, 10 minutes, or a half hour.…His legs were cut off, his belly torn off. The intestines were coming out. From the middle down, everything was gone. He was hardly breathing. His body was not moving" (Graveland, 2010, paras. 3–8).

Neither Afghan government forces nor Canadian officials offered medical care to the injured fighter because it was determined that no medical intervention would prevent his death. Compounding the decision-making process was the fact that calling in a medical evacuation helicopter would place the crew and aircraft in danger since the area was still very much a battlefield. Semrau told a colleague that "he couldn't live with himself if he left an injured human being—and that no one should suffer like that" (Chase, 2010, para. 12). He then performed a mercy killing by aiming his C-8 rifle at the fighter's chest and pulling the trigger.

Semrau was eventually acquitted on charges of second-degree murder and attempted murder. However, he was found guilty of disgraceful conduct, demoted, and released from the military. The judge spoke to Semrau's position as a leader, saying, "How can we expect our soldiers to follow the rules of war if their officers do not? Shooting a wounded, unarmed insurgent is so fundamentally contrary to our values, doctrine and training that it is shockingly unacceptable behavior" (CBC News, 2010, paras. 7–9).

By all accounts Semrau did what he thought was right and humane, and he was prepared to deal with the consequences. However, there is no legal defense for mercy killing in the armed forces, regardless of the circumstances—even though many soldiers describe mercy killing as the "highest tradition" of military service (Friscolanti & Geddes, 2010, para. 9). The case sparked a fierce debate about the ethics of mercy killing in war zones. Professional codes and regulations cannot guarantee proper conduct in the most complex or complicated situations military leaders may face, and therefore, it is essential for these leaders to exercise sound judgment and be willing to take accountability for any consequences.

The need for sound judgment arises in other spheres as well. Many businesses operate to a large degree in grey areas. In such cases, the right decision is not clear cut, and all the rules in the world are no match for judgment or practical wisdom. Spaces of ambiguity or moral opaqueness require leaders who demonstrate strength of character—regardless of whether they operate in business, the medical field, politics, the military, sports, or elsewhere (Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Nguyen & Crossan, 2021).

Some corporations pursue social policy agendas that governments cannot or will not pursue. Consider, for example, banks in the United States such as Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, and Goldman Sachs, who started to cover the travel costs of employees seeking access to abortion after the Supreme Court of the United States, struck down the federal constitutional right to the procedure (Benoit, 2022). The banks recognized their employees as crucial stakeholders in their organizations; their interests were therefore of importance. Business organizations must consider all stakeholders, not solely the shareholder, when developing their strategies and managing aspects of their organizations (Freeman et al., 2010; Shin et al., 2022).

The challenge for any organization is that each stakeholder will declare different and often opposing interests and views about what is of value to them. When the interests of stakeholders are not aligned, leaders are required to make difficult trade-offs, often in highly charged situations. Such trade-offs or choices require two things: (1) a skillful examination of the situation to grasp the essence of the challenge and (2) logical reasoning based on relevant information and critical analysis of facts to determine the requisite action.

Situations in which leaders must navigate opposing interests illustrate the observation that Tichy and Bennis (2007) made in *Judgment: How Winning Leaders Make Great Calls*. They noted that a leader's most important role in any organization is to make good judgments: well-informed, wise decisions that produce desired outcomes. To achieve the vision of creating a sustainable, thriving world, leaders need strength of character if they are to have the judgment necessary to balance legitimate, urgent, and competing stakeholder interests.

Judgment provides critical thinking; however, without the insight that arises from the other dimensions of character, it may be misdirected. For example, without humility, judgment can become arrogant, particularly if leaders tend to privilege the intellectual over dimensions such as humanity and collaboration. Furthermore, without temperance, leaders may be overwhelmed by the situation, trying to take the whole world on their shoulders resulting in burnout, and compromising judgment.

Recognizing that judgment is essential to leadership raises at least three questions that are worth exploring through research. First, what are the antecedents of the dimensions of character that support judgment? Second, how can judgment—and the dimensions that support it—be cultivated in individuals who operate in stressful conditions? Third, how can organizations create a character-infused culture that facilitates proper decision-making processes and outcomes? In a world of converging crises, it is not merely an understatement to say that the world craves better leadership, but a misstatement. The assertion embedded in this article is that the world needs leaders who exhibit strength of character in general and good judgment in particular.

The Case for Character

The case for the importance of character has three parts. First, it is key to outline the meaning of character in a clear and compelling manner. Character reflects who people are, rather than their skills or talent. It influences

judgment and the choices people make in any given situation. No level of competence or commitment will work to potential without character. Strength of character, therefore, is essential to leadership.

This article discusses an example of an empirically based framework for leader character that provides a consistent language—a character lexicon—through which individuals can understand, examine, and discuss character in both their personal and professional lives. The framework allows individuals to understand and discuss what character is and how it can be observed and measured, and it outlines how the dimensions of character work in concert to inform judgment and support decision-making. We used Zelenskyy as a central example to illustrate some of the dimensions of character. We did so because he provides a vivid, real-world illustration of leadership in crisis. Studies have shown that the outcomes that result from strength of character yield vital benefits to individuals, teams, and organizations. Character leadership enriches the experience of the personal and the professional, thus justifying the attention the construct deserves in the leadership discourse, as well as the need to return to a conscious and concerted effort to develop character as a habitual practice.

Second, as many scholars have pointed out, individuals—including leaders—need to recognize that they can and, indeed, are already developing their character, for better or for worse, whether they are conscious of it or not (Hannah & Avolio, 2011; Newstead et al., 2018; Wright, 2015). Defining moments like war, health crises, or organizational events help shape character (Lindsay et al., 2020; Newstead et al., 2021). However, leaders do not necessarily need defining moments or dramatic opportunities to live up to challenges, to learn, or to demonstrate character. Both defining moments *and* everyday occurrences offer opportunities for learning, and such learning only occurs if leaders take the time to reflect. Making time and space for reflection can be challenging, given the fast-paced personal and professional spheres that leaders are typically immersed in.

Third, individuals and the organizations they lead need to recognize that character must be present if they are to achieve long-term success. Many, if not most leaders are operating in environments that are in a state of constant uncertainty, disruption, and flux. Strength of character generates the agility and the creativity to address challenges, the fortitude and resilience to bear hardships, and the ability to remain curious and open. And yet, for decades, the issue of character has been largely absent from many organizations. For example, a survey involving a national sample of board directors from public, private, and not-for-profit sector organizations reported that directors felt that leader character is often only brought up during or after a crisis (Seijts et al., 2019). Typically, character is not a central part of board discussions at any other time. Boards can become complacent until a significant event happens, at which time character finally gets the attention it deserves (Bhardwaj & Seijts, 2021; Grant & McGhee, 2014). Senior leaders and boards need to pay close attention to indications of character during good times as well as bad.

Furthermore, leaders set the tone for organizational members and, as such, should model the character they want to see in others throughout the organization. Studies have shown that virtuous behavior begets virtuous behavior (Jung et al., 2020; Kelemen et al., 2020). In addition, leaders who are devoted to creating a character-infused workplace should make a commitment to actively coach and mentor organizational members so they can develop their character (and competencies) to benefit their professional and personal lives. This understanding was captured by James Mattis, the retired United States Marine Corps four-star general who served as the 26th United States Secretary of Defense. He internalized the mantra: listen, learn, help, and lead. He believed that as a leader, you listen first. But as he explains in his book *Call Sign*

Chaos: Learning to Lead, "... but don't just listen to rebut, listen so that you can learn what the issues really are. Then you help them with their issues, and in so doing you lead."

Character and Reflective Practices

Ukrainian soldiers have retained high morale, but they have also battled physical and mental fatigue. This is in part because they are fighting the enemy in constant deficit, notably lacking advanced weapons systems. Military and political leaders have grappled with how soldiers can be inspired to continue to fight and defend Ukraine in exhausting circumstances. Furthermore, the life of every Ukrainian was deeply affected by the war. Societal leaders will have to come to terms with the damage inflicted on them in order to make the substantive shift of returning to a peacetime leadership approach equipped to rebuild and regenerate the country.

The Ukraine war is a dramatic example of how events shape individuals, for better or for worse. However, the war also provides an opportunity for people to reflect not only on how they want to live but also on who they want to be, whether as a leader or a citizen. If leaders want to develop their strength of character, they will need to engage in a consistent, deliberate, and directed practice of reflection (Bryan & Babelay, 2009; Kiersch & Gullekson, 2021). Reflective practice is both separate from and integral to the daily tasks and responsibilities that require constant attention—personal and professional, large and small. Rather than rushing unheeding from one undertaking to another, leaders must be aware of who they are becoming while they are busy doing. They must ask themselves: Have I become more patient or less patient? More compassionate or less compassionate? More humble or less humble?

The French philosopher Weil stated, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity" (as cited in Pétrement, 1976, p. 486). In order to develop strength of character, individuals need to do the following: be generous to themselves by taking time to reflect and time to invest in their own development; actively take ownership of their personal growth and development; reflect on defining moments and identify the concrete lessons embedded in them; recognize epiphanies and weave their insights into the goals they set for themselves to further grow and develop; and carefully select their role models and never forget that their own behaviors, words, and emotions impact others around them. Individuals should never deny themselves—or others—the profound learning that may be embedded in the myriad experiences they encounter throughout the course of their personal lives (Seijts & Milani, 2024).

For example, Duckworth (2016) proposed that deliberate or directed practice—not just practice alone—can make the difference in whether someone continues to develop character in a positive way. She describes a four-part cycle that individuals can adopt: the setting of a precise goal; a 100% focus on attaining that goal without any distractions; getting information-rich feedback on what is being done correctly and incorrectly; and reflecting on that feedback and adjusting as needed. The practices associated with this cycle, and hence the development of behaviors associated with character, are extremely intentional. Intentionality also applies to the way that organizational leaders can facilitate the development of character in others.

Issuing the Challenge

It is commonly believed that there is very little one person can do against the enormous array of the world's challenges. However, effective leaders inspire others to think positively and build confidence in their talents, abilities, and character for collective action (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 2023). An example of a leader expressing hope, optimism, and a deep belief in the human capacity for change is former United States senator Robert F. Kennedy. He delivered an address known as the "Ripple of Hope" speech to students at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, on June 6, 1966. Kennedy discussed myriad topics such as

individual liberty, apartheid, and the need for justice at a time when the civil rights movement was ongoing. The speech was, in effect, a call to action, addressing the issue of helplessness in a highly volatile world. His brother, Edward Kennedy, resurfaced this speech and quoted large parts of it during the eulogy he delivered following Kennedy's assassination in June 1968:

> [Many hold] the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills. Yet many of the world's great movements, of thought and action, have flowed from the work of a single man. A young monk began the Protestant reformation; a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth; a young woman reclaimed the territory of France; and it was the 32-year-old Thomas Jefferson who [pro]claimed that "all men are created equal."
>
> These [people] moved the world, and so can we all. Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation. Each time [someone] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. (Kennedy, 1966, p. 25:03)

Robert F. Kennedy was a leader of character and an inspiration for many to elevate their own character in service of building better communities. He challenged complacency in society and sought to bridge the great divides in life—between races, the poor and the affluent, the young and the old. Committed to the principles of freedom and social justice, he carried a message of hope and an unflagging conviction that courage would bring change. His central belief in the civic and moral responsibility of each individual and the community to take action against injustice, poverty, and prejudice underlined his public life.

Hope and strength of character are essential to overcoming challenges. Individuals, and leaders in particular, cannot allow pessimism or despair to become entrenched, or to subscribe to the belief that the converging crises are too large for individual choices and actions to matter. When Zelenskyy took office in 2019, he said in his inauguration speech, "I really do not want my pictures in your offices, for the president is not an icon, an idol, or a portrait. Hang your kids' photos instead and look at them each time you are making a decision" (Zelenskyy, 2019, para. 24). His words reveal a deep sense of transcendence—a sense of future orientation, a sense of inspiration to create a better, and stronger country for future generations. Zelenskyy reminded listeners that success can only be achieved cumulatively. It is through large and small character-related behaviors and actions that individuals and leaders can work together to improve communities.

Conclusion: Character as the Main Substance of Our Life

This article focuses on the role of character in achieving success through sustained excellence and well-being—individually, organizationally, and as a society. Crises underscore that strength of character is the foundation of strong, effective leadership. Stockbroker and author Haskins (1940) wrote, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us" (p. 131). Past and future circumstances are not as important as character, no matter the setbacks or the challenges. This article presents a framework of character and utilizes Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a central example who demonstrates dimensions of character to withstand a major crisis: Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Leaders in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors must often make quick, well-reasoned, and high impact decisions in today's complex and challenging global environment—they must exercise good judgment, the central component of character. The argument advanced in this paper is that leaders in all sectors can learn from military leaders such as Zelenskyy when it comes to character-related behaviors deployed in volatile, complex, and ambiguous situations.

Strength of character can be cultivated. People have the potential to constantly learn, modify, adapt, and experiment as they make their way in life, and the development of character is no exception. This article discusses defining moments, or leadership crucibles, as catalysts that may alter a leader's self-perception and worldview. Such moments can undoubtedly induce a personal transformation and thereby build competencies or strengthen dimensions of character. However, for this growth to happen, leaders need to engage in reflection and intentional, directed practice.

Leaders in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors always have the chance to do the right thing. It has been said many times that leadership is a journey—and many leaders encounter defining moments and go through personal transformations as they mature, enabling them to navigate crises and emerge as stronger leaders who inspire hope and generate a better future. And yet, the development of character has often been an afterthought. It feels, at times, that character is treated as though it is a residue, rather than a main substance of success. Character is a vital part of leadership—and indeed good citizenship—and should never be left to chance.

A successful leadership journey is about taking responsibility for personal transformation and engaging in introspection and renewal. This advice taps into the behaviors associated with character dimensions of accountability (takes ownership and responsible), humility (reflective and continuous learner), drive (demonstrates initiative and strives for excellence), and transcendence (creative, purposive, and future-oriented) (see Figure 1 and Table 1). This article identifies at least four lessons for any leader. First, to understand the need for introspection in the learning-to-lead process and set aside time each day, week, or month to reflect on areas for growth. Second, to appreciate the importance of coaching, mentoring, and feedback for personal growth as a leader. Such appreciation will require a level of humility because sometimes developmental feedback can be challenging to hear. Third, to take ownership of the leadership journey and actively manage one's career. For example, individuals need to develop both self and situational awareness to identify what competencies and dimensions of character will be needed to develop in order to be successful in the next role. Fourth, to develop a deep appreciation that one's ability to learn and grow, and to recognize the myriad ways in which individuals need to do that, is the biggest enabler of leadership development.

Committing to personal growth and development is a deliberate choice; it is not a consequence or side effect of working hard or being busy. You have to work at it intentionally and consistently because the only person who is truly capable of creating positive, lasting, sustainable growth in your personal and professional life is you.

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REVIEW

Navigating the Toleration Clause: The Complex Role of Reporting Policies in Collegiate Honor Codes

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ABSTRACT

In our Fall 2024 *JCLD* article, *The Evolution of Collegiate Honor Codes*, we traced the history of honor codes into their current form—promoting character development. Despite their wide support, several features have continually drawn criticism, including mandatory reporting policies. Due to a range of perceived risks and benefits, many institutions have struggled with the decision to include or exclude such policies in their honor codes. They require strong organizational commitment and constant re-investment. Without this, the risk of creating an environment of avoidance rather than accountability is significant. In this article, we examine the history of toleration clauses and their complex role within collegiate honor codes.

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 329 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.329

Collegiate honor codes have proven themselves as a productive approach to reduce cheating and promote ethical conduct. They empower students to own the culture of integrity at their institutions. Yet, several aspects continue to spark controversy—primarily unproctored exams, single sanctions, and peer reporting policies. Of all the responsibilities associated with honor codes, students consistently find peer reporting to be the most difficult (Cheung, 2014; Fiske, 1975; May & Loyd, 1993; McCabe et al., 1999; Staats, 1975; Trevino & Victor, 1992). At the same time, peer accountability is a critical skill expected of our future leaders (Wendt, 2024).

To emphasize the importance of peer accountability, some honor codes include toleration alongside prohibitions against lying, stealing, cheating, and plagiarizing. Often referred to as a toleration or non-toleration clause, it is typically included as part of a school's honor oath (Fass, 1986). The toleration clause sets an expectation that students are responsible not only for their own behavior but also for that of their peers as well (Zoll, 1996). Historically, the presence of this clause categorizes an institution as one of the stricter and more traditional honor code schools (McCabe & Pavela, 2000; McCabe et al., 2012; Nuss, 1996).

Multiple Interpretations

When it comes to peer accountability, Dr. Donald McCabe, commonly known as the father of Academic Integrity, identified two separate expectations placed on students: non-toleration and reportage (Cole & McCabe, 1996). Non-toleration was defined as the obligation for students to take some action, while still allowing them to determine the most appropriate response based on the circumstances. Meanwhile, reportage was defined as a separate obligation to officially report misconduct. It is our perspective that, over time, these two distinct expectations have often been lumped together as one thing since the schools with non-toleration language in their honor oath also frequently make "failure to report" a violation.

However, the existence of a toleration clause does not automatically imply that a school has a mandatory reporting policy. Similarly, not all mandatory reporting policies are emphasized with a toleration clause. The language used to promote peer accountability in collegiate honor codes ranges from clear guidance that "failure to report" is itself considered an honor violation to less-threatening statements emphasizing a student's obligation to report. Similar to the evolution of collegiate honor codes, toleration clauses have also experienced a range of interpretations among the schools that have them. Each has their own understanding of what non-toleration means and how serious a case of toleration is considered to be. Table 1 provides several examples of current toleration clauses and mandatory reporting policies at a variety of honor code schools.

At one end of the spectrum, schools such as the United States Military Academy (West Point) and the University of Notre Dame have overt language on toleration included in their student oaths followed by a reporting requirement in their honor code guidance. Rollins College specifically includes failure to report a violation within 10 class days as an honor violation (Rollins College, 2024). On the other end, Princeton and the University of Richmond have imbedded the responsibility to report more covertly in their guidance without specifically identifying it as a toleration clause. Somewhere in between, the University of Georgia includes non-toleration in their student oath but clarifies in the guidance that there is no penalty for failure to report. It is also possible to take a proactive approach to student reporting expectations without mandating it (University of Miami, 2024; University of North Carolina at Chaple Hill, 2024). As an example, Hamilton College acknowledges the difficulty of confronting a suspected violator while promoting candor and honesty. They require student witnesses to

Table 1

Toleration Clause & Mandatory Reporting Policy Examples

University	Undergrad Enrollment	Peer Reporting Language	Requirement Location	Data Source
United States Military Academy-West Point	4,393	"A Cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or **tolerate** those who do." Cadets violate the Honor Code by tolerating if they **fail to report** an unresolved incident with honor implications to proper authority within a reasonable length of time.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	Simon Center, 2024
United States Air Force Academy (USAFA)	4,085	"We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor **tolerate** among us anyone who does. Furthermore, I resolve to do my duty and to live honorably, (so help me God)." Toleration is the **failure to promptly address** a suspected violation of the Honor Code. If [after confrontation] the cadet does not report the matter, you have the **obligation to report** it.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	USAFA, 2024
Virginia Military Institute (VMI)	1,512	"A Cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, nor **tolerate** those who do." A cadet who has knowledge of a breach of the Honor Code, and who **does not report** the same is guilty of toleration. Toleration is a violation of the Honor Code.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	VMI, 2024
The Citadel	2,695	"A cadet does not lie, cheat, or steal, nor **tolerate** those who do." Toleration is the **failure to report** a case of lying, cheating, or stealing to a member of the Cadet Honor Committee.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	The Citadel, 2020
Norwich University	2,854	"A Norwich student will not lie, cheat, steal, or **tolerate** those who do." Toleration is **failing to act on and to report** potential violations of the Honor Code.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	Norwich University, 2024

(*Continued*)

Table 1

Toleration Clause & Mandatory Reporting Policy Examples

University	Undergrad Enrollment	Peer Reporting Language	Requirement Location	Data Source
University of North Georgia	17,256	"On my honor, I will not lie, cheat, steal, plagiarize, evade the truth, conspire to deceive, or **tolerate** those who do." A **failure to report** violations of the Honor Code may subject a cadet to discipline.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	University of North Georgia, 2024
Rollins College	2,263	If a student has reason to believe that a violation of academic integrity has occurred, he/she is **required to report** it to the Academic Honor Council. Violation #9: FAILURE TO REPORT AN HONOR CODE VIOLATION. **Failure to report** occurs when a student has knowledge of or is witness to an act in violation of the Academic Honor Code and does not report it within 10 class days.	Honor Code Guidance	Rollins College, 2024
Davidson College	1,904	Each Davidson student is **honor bound** to report immediately all violations of the Honor Code of which the student has first-hand knowledge; **failure to do so is itself a violation** of the Honor Code.	Honor Code Guidance	Davidson College, 2023
William Jewell College	829	"As a member of the William Jewell College community, I commit myself to the highest personal standards of conduct and integrity. I will not cheat, lie, or steal, nor will I **tolerate** these actions by others within this community." Students who possess factual knowledge of any committed violation(s) of the Honor Code are **honor-bound to report** said violation(s).	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	William Jewell College Honor Code, 2024

(*Continued*)

Table 1

Toleration Clause & Mandatory Reporting Policy Examples

University	Undergrad Enrollment	Peer Reporting Language	Requirement Location	Data Source
University of Notre Dame	8,971	"... I will not participate in or **tolerate** academic dishonesty." Students witnessing a violation of the Honor Code or otherwise having reason to believe that a violation has occurred may use discretion in choosing among several possible courses of action. These include: [**confronting then reporting, reporting to the instructor, or reporting in writing]** to the Honor Code Committee.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	University of Notre Dame, 2024
Virginia Tech	30,434	"I will not lie, cheat, or steal, **nor will I accept the actions of those who do**." All persons in the Virginia Tech academic community (students, faculty, staff, and administration) shall be **responsible for reporting** alleged incidents of academic misconduct that come to their knowledge.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	Virginia Tech, 2024
Old Dominion University	18,375	"I pledge to support the honor system of Old Dominion University. I will refrain from any form of academic dishonesty or deception, such as cheating or plagiarism. I am aware that as a member of the academic community it is my **responsibility to turn in** all suspected violations of the Honor Code. I will report to a hearing if summoned."	Honor Oath	Old Dominion University, 2024

(*Continued*)

Table 1

Toleration Clause & Mandatory Reporting Policy Examples

University	Undergrad Enrollment	Peer Reporting Language	Requirement Location	Data Source
Princeton	5,604	Every student is **obligated to report** to the Honor Committee any suspected violation of the Honor Code that they have observed. Students have a twofold obligation: individually, they must not violate the code, and as a community, they are **responsible to see that suspected violations are reported**.	Honor Code Guidance	Princeton University, 2023
University of Richmond	3,145	It shall be the **responsibility** of every member of the student body of the University, having knowledge of or being witness to a possible violation of the Honor Code, **to report** the possible violation, or ensure that the student in question makes a self-report, within 5 days.	Honor Code Guidance	University of Richmond, 2011
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	32,695	It is the **duty and responsibility** of students and instructors **to report** promptly any suspected violations of the Honor Code.	Honor Code Guidance	University of Michigan College of Engineering, 2024
Williams College	2,152	If you are aware that another student may have violated the honor code, it is your **responsibility** as a Williams student **to report** it. Our honor code specifically describes this obligation.	Honor Code Guidance	Williams College, 2024
Baylor University	15,213	All students, faculty members, and staff members are **expected to report** violations of the Honor Code... in all cases, the incident and sanction(s) **must be reported** to the Office of Academic Integrity.	Honor Code Guidance	Baylor University, 2024
Marquette University	7,528	The honor code **obliges** students: **To report** any observed breaches of this honor code and academic honesty.	Honor Code Guidance	Marquette University, 2024

(*Continued*)

Table 1

Toleration Clause & Mandatory Reporting Policy Examples

University	Undergrad Enrollment	Peer Reporting Language	Requirement Location	Data Source
Dartmouth College	4,458	Any student who becomes aware of an alleged violation of the Academic Honor Policy is not merely an observer but is **bound by honor to report** it to an appropriate authority, such as an instructor, department or program chair, academic dean, or the Office of Community Standards & Accountability. Failure to do so threatens both the spirit and operation of the Academic Honor Policy.	Honor Code Guidance	Dartmouth College, 2024
Rice	4,494	It is the **obligation** of every student and faculty member to not violate the system, to not aid in any violation, and **to report** any violation seen or suspected.	Honor Code Guidance	Rice University, 2023
Emory	7,101	Apathy or acquiescence in the presence of academic misconduct is not a neutral act. ... All members of the Emory University community–students, faculty, and staff–share the **responsibility** and authority **to challenge and report** acts of apparent academic misconduct. Any member of the Emory University community who has witnessed an apparent act of academic misconduct ... is **responsible for promptly notifying** the course instructor, a member of the Honor Council, the Honor Code administrator, or the dean.	Honor Code Guidance	Emory University, 2024

(*Continued*)

Table 1

Toleration Clause & Mandatory Reporting Policy Examples

University	Undergrad Enrollment	Peer Reporting Language	Requirement Location	Data Source
University of Maryland-College Park	30,353	Any member of the university community, who has witnessed an apparent act of Academic Misconduct, or who has information that reasonably leads to the conclusion that Academic Misconduct has occurred or has been attempted, has the **responsibility to promptly inform** the Office of Student Conduct.	Honor Code Guidance	University of Maryland, 2024
Texas A&M University	57,512	"An Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal or **tolerate** those who do." Students have the **responsibility** to confront their peers engaging in compromising situations, and if unsuccessful, to report the matter to the Aggie Honor System Office.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	Texas A&M University, 2024
Middlebury College	2,773	Any member of the college community (student, faculty, or administrator) who is aware of a case of academic dishonesty is **morally obligated to report** it to the professor or the Office for Community Standards.	Honor Code Guidance	Middlebury College, 2021
University of Georgia	30,714	"I will be academically honest in all of my academic work and will not **tolerate** academic dishonesty of others." There is **no penalty for failing to report another student's dishonest**y or for failing to testify in an academic honesty proceeding.	Honor Oath & Honor Code Guidance	University of Georgia, 2024

Note. Undergraduate enrollment obtained from the U.S. News & World Report Top 100 Best National University Rankings for 2024 at https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities

take appropriate action—which could be confronting, consulting faculty, reporting, or even simply tapping a pencil on a desk during an in-class exam (Hamilton College, 2024).

In addition to the obligation to act or report misconduct, a third interpretation of non-toleration simply refers to how students are responsible for and oversee the honor code's judiciary process (Streeter, 2019). This interpretation acknowledges how student-run honor systems remove violators from their institution, as they are deemed intolerable within the student body. This interpretation has also been linked to zero-tolerance and used to justify single-sanction policies (Holcomb, 1992).

From the Beginning

Of the five Virginia schools with claims to the earliest student-run honor systems (Merhar et al., 2024), there is no clear consensus on the value of non-toleration policies. Two schools—the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and the University of Richmond—maintain toleration clauses with mandatory reporting. Meanwhile, at the University of Virginia, the first entirely student-run honor system originally included a toleration clause but eventually dropped it. The final two schools—the College of William & Mary and Washington & Lee University—never adopted them in the first place. The variation in sentiments among these five schools highlights long-standing and conflicting views on mandatory reporting policies.

The College of William & Mary proudly claims the first collegiate honor code and has never had a mandatory reporting policy. From their founding, they viewed their students as inherently trustworthy and felt they should not be insulted by "impertinent surveillance" (Geiger, 1922, p. 399). Rather, those viewed as "spies and informers" were not tolerated within the community (Geiger, 1922). Furthermore, the administration felt mandatory reporting goes against basic human nature and is nearly impossible to enforce.

In stark contrast, VMI proudly links its zero-tolerance policy with its single-sanction honor system. Students are required to report suspected violations, and those found guilty are automatically disenrolled. Cadets express both fear and reverence for the code, and they equate non-toleration not only with reporting but also with their tradition of drumming out violators (Crouch, 2024). Alumni routinely hail the code as VMI's greatest strength and a point of pride at the heart of their institution (Jumper, 2021). With such wide support, VMI has no intention of changing its single-sanction approach (VMI Alumni, 2022).

Meanwhile, the University of Virginia's honor code started with clear non-toleration language, stating, "To ignore these acts committed by another student is to make one an accomplice and equally guilty of a violation of honor." However, in 1979, the Honor Committee voted to soften the language and ended-up removing it altogether due to its unenforceability (Streeter, 2019). Some students feared that removing the clause would undermine the system and allow unreported violators to flourish. However, after an initial decrease in reporting, it recovered, and no long-term changes in reporting rates were noticed (Streeter, 2019). A quarter century later, in 2005, the Faculty Senate unanimously recommended reinstating the toleration clause, but the students chose not to revive it. Today, there is still ongoing debate over the pros and cons of such a policy.

Marching to Different Drums

Opposing positions on toleration policies are perhaps most apparent at the Military Service Academies. Of the 11 Military Service Academies and Senior Military Colleges, eight have a toleration clause and a mandatory reporting policy. At West Point, the expectation for students to report peer misconduct was referenced as far back as the 1820s, and an unwritten code obligating students to report misconduct was acknowledged by the Superintendent in 1921. However, it was not formally written in their honor code until 1970 (Gebicke, 1995;

Sorley, 2009). The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), Norwich University, and The Citadel similarly modeled their honor codes after West Point, including a toleration clause (Sorley, 2009; The Citadel, 2020; USAFA, 2024).

Meanwhile, when the United States Naval Academy (USNA) adopted their Honor Concept in 1952, they chose not to mandate peer reporting. They feared it would create an unthinking code, and model leadership grounded in fear rather than aspiration (Forney, 2000). They felt the decision on what action to take should belong to the student. To this day, midshipmen are allowed to approach and counsel each other without formally reporting a violation (Gebicke, 1995; Manuel, 2020).

In a 1994 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, senior officers from USAFA and West Point praised their toleration clauses as "essential" and "the keystone" of their honor systems. In contrast, leaders from USNA argued that "more is gained without a non-toleration policy" (Senate Committee on Armed Services, 1994). Aligned with these sentiments, a 2024 survey of those who oversee collegiate honor codes revealed a strong preference for the status quo. Of the 57 cadets, midshipmen, and staff from 11 Federal Service Academies and Senior Military Colleges, 56% believed that modifying their school's toleration policies would harm their institution's culture. 21% felt a change would have no impact.

Over the Years

Though there is no master list of schools that have mandatory reporting requirements, we know their adoption rate has fluctuated over the past century. In 1915, a review of 85 honor code institutions found that 30 (35.3%) required the double obligation to report other students (Baldwin et al., 1915). By the end of the twentieth century, three separate studies reported that four of 30 (13.3%), 28 of 51 (54.9%), and 64.4% of honor code institutions obligated reportage (Bush, 2000; Fass, 1986; Kibler, 1994). Today, of the top 100 American Universities, 40 have honor codes, and 13 of those have a mandatory reporting requirement (32.5%). Beyond the United States, international institutions are also debating toleration policies, including Jordan, where 8 of 23 (34.8%) honor code universities obligate students to report peer misconduct (Alahmad, 2013). Though non-toleration and reportage policies are not a dominant feature in collegiate honor codes, they do exist in a wide variety of domestic and international institutions of higher education.

The Intent

Toleration clauses and mandatory reporting policies were established with good intentions. They are grounded in the ideals of upholding ethical standards and building moral courage. Cole and Conklin (1996) argued that, for an honor code to be effective, mandatory reporting should be required and enforced. The theory is that doing so establishes clear expectations and helps neutralize student aversion to it. Key arguments in favor of these policies include their potential to deter cheating, promote peer accountability, increase student ownership of the honor code, and symbolize an ideal the community aspires to.

Student Ownership

Student ownership of the honor code is a key for its success (Lyman, 1927), and schools that have toleration clauses often perceive them as imperative to the success of their honor code, guaranteeing student ownership (Manuel, 2020). Those who have them frequently believe the entire honor system would be threatened without including "failure to report" as a violation (Sorley, 2009; The Citadel, 2020). If students are to be entrusted with running an honor system, they should also be expected to enforce it. This self-policing is seen as essential to emphasize that an individual's duty to society outweighs the bonds of friendship (Gebicke, 1995).

Peer Accountability

Honor code schools often espouse a mission to develop leaders of character. Accountability is central to this character development, and peer accountability is the most challenging. Mandatory reporting policies embrace the mindset that a failure to challenge misbehavior effectively encourages it—if you allow it, you promote it. The toleration clause was established to encourage honorable individuals to confront wrongdoers and correct dishonest behavior (Charles, 1968), skills deemed essential for the moral and ethical development of students (Sorley, 2009).

Academic Integrity

Beyond student development, reporting policies have also been embraced for their perceived ability to increase reporting rates and decrease student cheating. Enlisting students to monitor their peers is commonly expected to inhibit potential cheaters (Gardner et al., 1988). Multiple researchers have claimed that such policies provide the most powerful influence on a student's inclination to report and reduce the incidents of cheating on college campuses (Ayala-Enriquez & Guerrero-Dib, 2024; Bowers, 1964; Burrus et al., 2013; Carrell et al., 2008; Curphy et al., 1998; Jennings, 1991; Konheim-Kalkstein et al., 2008; McCabe & Trevino, 1993; Tatum et al., 2018; Trevino & Victor, 1992). They challenge the individualistic attitude that cheating is a personal rather than a group offense—an attitude that enables cheating and dooms students to complacency. Culiberg and Mihelic (2020) argued that without the expectation that students will monitor each other, an honor code simply provides dishonest students a convenient way to cheat.

Symbolic Ideal

Streeter (2019) further proposed that the power of mandatory reporting policies is purely in their ideals—an obligation of accountability and trust within a self-governing community—rather than their practical applicability. Theoretically, requiring a student to report on their peers should force them to wrestle with the dilemma of community versus individual values (McCabe et al., 2001). Baldwin et al. (1996) further explained that students need guidance on how and when to address the ethical misconduct of their peers, and the existence of a code that requires action should hypothetically encourage witnesses to step-up and report (Rangkuti et al., 2022).

The Controversy

Despite the perceived benefits of mandatory reporting, there is wide disagreement around the benefit of such policies in collegiate honor codes (Gambill, 2003; Gibbons, 2007). Researchers, faculty, and students have all expressed concerns with mandatory reporting requirements for over a century (Gebicke, 1995; Lyman, 1927; Mathews, 1930; McCabe et al., 2001; Sheldon, 1901; Zoll, 1996). Though there is little disagreement with their intent, there are concerns that these policies do not meet reality and make the honor code philosophically hard to digest (Borman, 1976). The greatest concerns are unenforceability, stifling the development of ethical judgment, a disregard of societal norms, the complex dynamic with peer loyalty, and the risk of creating an environment of fear and avoidance.

Unenforceability

First, for any regulation to be truly effective, it must be enforceable. Unfortunately, mandatory reporting policies are hard, if not impossible, to enforce. Among 335 schools, Cole and Conklin (1996) were unable to identify any with a non-toleration or reporting clause that also enforced it. In 1976, after a cheating scandal at West Point, the Borman Commission claimed that toleration clauses actually weaken honor systems due to their unenforceability. Columbia University specifically removed their reporting requirement for this reason (Cole & McCabe, 1996). When a policy is enacted without enforcement, it is not only destined for abuse but may slowly undermine the effectiveness of other policies as well (Hoekema, 1994).

Undermining ethical judgment

Mandatory reporting policies have also been criticized for assuming students will not report misconduct based on their own personal integrity and, as a result, require coercion to do so. Forcing students to report without allowing them to take the action they personally feel is appropriate can reduce the development of ethical decision-making skills (Gebicke, 1995; Manuel, 2020). In 1990, Derek Bok, the 25th President of Harvard University, wrote, "to try to force students against their will to turn in friends who violate the code might actually erode rather than strengthen respect for ethical standards" (Bok, 1990, p. 87).

For most individuals, moral behavior is closely linked to their sense of self (Axelrod, 1997; Beatty, 1992), and external motivation to uphold rules can divide these two aspects of an individual. Character cannot be developed by moral regimentation (Charles, 1968), and students should not be intimidated into honesty (Cole & Conklin, 1996). The experience of successfully grappling with peer accountability when students witness misconduct is invaluable in their development (Cole & Conklin, 1996).

Furthermore, multiple studies have found that the more time students spent under an honor code, the less compliant they felt toward the toleration clause. They experienced diminished internalization of this principle as a value, even as moral development increased, and those at higher levels of moral reasoning were reluctant and often unwilling to report their peers for academic dishonesty (Goodwin, 2007). Specifically, toleration of misconduct among cadets at West Point and the Air Force Academy has been shown to increase as they progress through their four years (Roffey & Porter, 1992; Staats, 1975). Part of the problem may be the simple, dualistic nature of a clause that mandates reporting in all situations. Morally developed individuals prefer to critically analyze the facts and weigh relevant variables rather than mindlessly following rules (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Roffey & Porter, 1992)—a skill that should be desired in our future leaders.

Manuel (2020) made a valuable comparison between mandatory reporting requirements in collegiate honor codes and the Model Rules of Professional Conduct for attorneys. Though the Model Rule technically imposes a duty to report on fellow lawyers, it also empowers them to make a judgment on the severity. Lawyers are only expected to report violations in which "a self-regulating profession must vigorously endeavor to prevent." To develop this skillset in future attorneys, there is a 50-50 split among the top 100 American law schools on how to do it. Half utilize a mandatory reporting policy, and half do not.

Conflict with Societal Norms and Peer Loyalties

Kish-Gephart et al. (2010) identified unethical behavior as any action that violates widely accepted (societal) moral norms. Unfortunately, this means that reporting policies conflict with the long-standing and deeply ingrained public sentiment that reporting peers is dishonorable (Ball, 1997; Hall, 1996; Rennie & Crosby, 2002; Sheldon, 1901). Overcoming this stigma to meet the expectations of peer reporting can be challenging, and no one should underestimate the difficulty of doing so. Beatty (1992) argued that compelling individuals to pledge their loyalty to both an oath and their peers results in self-alienation, undermining both morality and moral sensitivity, ultimately causing individuals to experience moral hypocrisy and shame. Student surveys further confirm this conflict between honor codes, being a team player, and personal loyalty (Gebicke, 1995). It divides allegiances for students who desire to be responsible citizens while maintaining relationships and group affiliations (Axelrod, 1997).

Fear and Avoidance

Honor codes flourish when they foster a sense of trust and cooperation, and there is concern that pressuring students to report every wrongdoing could jeopardize the stability and trust within a group. Instead, it has

the potential to drive a culture of fear and defensiveness, inhibiting a student's willingness to participate in enforcement. Some students have even admitted they would rather pretend they never observed misconduct than risk a potential honor violation if they fail to report (Gebicke, 1995). In 2006, Duke University revised their honor policy from an "obligation to report" to an "obligation to act" to place a greater sense of trust with their students and encourage more confrontations (Ruderman et al., 2006).

Effects on Academic Integrity

Finally, though there are multiple claims that mandatory reporting policies will increase student reporting and reduce cheating, there are also counterclaims—sometimes even by the same researcher. McCabe initially expressed support for mandatory reporting policies, claiming they serve as a deterrent to students contemplating cheating (McCabe & Trevina, 1993). However, by 2001, he concluded that peer reporting responsibilities are not a very strong influence on actual reporting (McCabe et al., 2001). Other scholars have also challenged their effectiveness. Borman (1976) suggested that mandatory reporting policies may actually contribute to large-scale cheating scandals. In a 2006 study of 288 Chief Academic Affairs Officers and Provosts from 4-year public and private colleges/universities and community colleges in the United States, participants perceived that penalizing those students who do not confront cheaters will increase, rather than decrease, scholastic dishonesty (Boehm et al., 2009). In 2013, Barnard-Brak et al. claimed that reporting academic integrity violations may not be effective over and above verbal reprimands and grade penalties, and faculty and students at three institutions of higher education agreed that penalizing students for failure to confront peers would have no impact on cheating at their schools (Saathoff, 2018).

The Recommendation to Act

Of those who have studied academic integrity, honor codes, and peer reporting policies, the overwhelming recommendation has been to require students to take *some form of action* in the face of peer misconduct (Borman, 1976; Cole & Conklin, 1996; Zoll, 1996). In their final report, the six-member Borman Commission recommended that the toleration clause be retained but change the interpretation to allow a cadet the option to counsel, warn, or report the violator (Borman, 1976). Zoll (1996) conducted the most comprehensive study of peer accountability among college students and similarly proposed that students should be required to take some form of action—whether that be seeking advice, confronting the individual, or reporting the incident—as opposed to complicit acquiescence. These recommendations are fully aligned with McCabe's definition of non-toleration (Cole & McCabe, 1996).

A requirement to act acknowledges the challenges of reporting and offers a level of trust and respect for students to effectively deal with complex situations. It creates a logical middle ground—upholding the ideals of non-toleration while allowing students to use discretion—and minimizes the risks associated with mandatory reporting policies.

Conclusion

When developing leaders of character, there is no debate that upholding ethical standards and promoting peer accountability is essential. The ideals of a toleration clause are both worthy and noble, and their existence sheds light on an institution's values (Fass, 1986). Yet, the decision to mandate student reporting as part of a toleration clause is much more nuanced. It comes with compelling arguments from both advocates and critics, and many institutions have struggled with their decision to adopt or remove such policies.

Mandatory reporting policies should not be naively implemented with blind optimism. Institutions that have or plan to adopt them should be fully aware of their associated risks. Otherwise, the repercussions can be worse than the absence of mandatory report-

ing—driving cynicism, undermining other policies, fostering a culture of fear and avoidance, and pushing toleration underground. Managing these risks requires strong, thoughtful, and intentional organizational commitment—proactive student engagement, transparent conversations on expectations and enforcement, and constant reinvestment. The end goal should be a culture where honor violations are openly discussed, addressed when someone oversteps, and reported when appropriate (De Graaf, 2010)—an ideal environment for developing leaders of character.

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PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

Leading with Character: A 30-Day Online Course to Cultivate Leader Character

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 332 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.332

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces Leading with Character, an innovative online course designed to cultivate virtues of character as the foundation of effective and ethical leadership. Developed collaboratively by the Oxford Character Project at the University of Oxford, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, the Legatum Foundation, and leadership experts and educators from around the world, the course addresses the urgent need for leaders to cultivate virtues, such as purpose, courage, love, and hope in order to successfully navigate today's complex challenges. The course is rooted in academic research in character and leadership development, combining academic rigor with practical application. It includes reflective exercises, real-world examples, and habit-forming practices through which participants develop the personal qualities and inner strength essential for leading positive change. The course is organized into four thematic modules, each focusing on a key leadership virtue. By blending theoretical insights with actionable exercises, the modules guide participants to reflect on personal values, enhance leadership qualities, and drive meaningful change in their communities. Leading with Character aspires to foster a global community of leaders dedicated to advancing the common good through character-based and purpose-driven leadership. By placing character at the heart of leadership development, the course offers a transformative framework that equips individuals to make a positive impact on their organizations and broader society.

Keywords: character-based leadership, leadership development, contextual leadership, values-based leadership, online course

Introduction

The Oxford Character Project (OCP), based at the University of Oxford's Department of Politics and International Relations, is a pioneering initiative dedicated to character and leadership development for the common good. Founded in 2014, OCP addresses the global need for leaders who combine expertise with moral integrity and social responsibility. Through innovative programs based on interdisciplinary research in leadership studies, virtue ethics, and character development, OCP equips emerging leaders with the virtues and skills needed to navigate complex challenges while promoting ethical and sustainable decision-making.

At the heart of OCP's mission is an emphasis on virtues of character as the foundation of leadership, aligning with the University of Oxford's broader objective to deliver an education that "equips students with the values, skills and intellectual discipline that will enable them to make a positive contribution to society"

(University of Oxford, n.d.). Character is understood as a constellation of dispositions or habits that shape how individuals think, feel, and act. Good character is central to both personal and societal flourishing. Through its work, the OCP aims to cultivate "wise thinkers and good leaders," an aspiration that complements a focus in higher education on cultivating values, skills, and intellectual growth (Brooks et al., 2024).

The OCP advances its mission through innovative programs like the Global Leadership Initiative, which fosters virtues such as gratitude, humility, and service in postgraduate students. Through collaborative partnerships with universities and organizations worldwide, it delivers contextually relevant leadership development programs. OCP also leads efforts like the SDG Impact Lab and the Global Leadership Challenge, which equip leaders to address global challenges and advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through ethical and effective leadership. In addition to its educational efforts, OCP conducts research to evaluate the impact of its programs and explore the qualities of effective leadership across fields, such as business, law, and technology. By integrating education and research, OCP contributes to a deeper understanding of character-based leadership while fostering virtuous leaders globally.

Building on this foundation, Leading with Character is a 30-day online course that places character at the forefront of leadership development and is accessible to participants worldwide. The course was created in collaboration with the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University and the Legatum Foundation, with input from a diverse working group of leadership scholars and practitioners from various countries worldwide. Drawing from research in moral philosophy, psychology, and leadership studies, the course focuses on cultivating four virtues that are essential for effective and ethical leadership: purpose, courage, love, and hope. Delivered through four thematic modules and daily habit-forming exercises, the course provides participants with a robust framework for integrating personal virtues with actionable leadership practices.

Course Overview

The Leading with Character course is founded on the principle that virtuous character is central to good leadership, and that it can be cultivated over time through deliberate practice. Leadership is presented as a form of influence rooted in virtues, such as justice, courage, and humility, accessible to all and refined by reflection and practice. Leadership is context-specific, responsive to cultural and contextual factors, and essential for advancing the common good. The course includes a diversity of perspectives on leadership from countries and contexts around the world and encourages participants to deliberately practice leadership in the local communities and institutions of which they are a part.

The course is structured around four key virtues, beginning with the need to identify clear direction (purpose) and working outward in a concentric design from leading self (courage) to leading others (love) and leading forward (hope). Purpose provides vital clarity and enables leaders to align mission and strategy to achieve meaningful goals that further the common good. Courage, emphasized along with humility, is the strength leaders need to overcome fear, make decisive choices, and persist through challenges. Love focuses on the inescapably relational nature of leadership, which requires the fostering of trust and supporting others' growth. Hope empowers leaders to envision and consistently work toward a better future, even in complex or adverse situations. Together with practical wisdom, which is held up as the virtue that provides balance and enables good judgment in the face of complex challenges, these virtues offer a comprehensive approach to character-based leadership, progressing from personal conviction to broader transformative impact (see Figure 1 for the full course structure).

The course integrates theory and practice through thematic modules, each combining interactive learning with a 5-day practical challenge. These exercises require about 20 minutes daily and include reflective journaling and real-world application. For example, in the "Why lead?" module, participants reflect on past leadership struggles to identify strategies that can help them renew purpose and apply these insights to their current leadership contexts. The courage module includes tasks such as supporting colleagues through leadership challenges and developing actionable steps to overcome fear and anxiety in order to address situations where they might otherwise withdraw or remain silent. The hope module invites participants to create a "hope journal" and compile a "playlist for hope," selecting music or creative materials to nurture positivity and resilience. This structure enables participants to better understand the nature and importance of leadership virtues while building the moral muscles to apply them effectively in their unique contexts.

Designed for a global and diverse audience, the course encourages participants to embrace leadership opportunities in their local contexts while connecting with a wider community of leaders who can offer advice and encouragement. Developed collaboratively by a global team of academics and practitioners from countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, France, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, the UK, and the USA, the course draws on expertise in leadership studies, virtue ethics, business, education, sustainable development, and social impact. For example, Adeyinka Adewale, Associate Professor of Leadership Ethics and Entrepreneurship at Henley Business School, explores courage as critical for organizations combating systemic corruption. Carlos Danel, founder and Board Chairman of Gentera, a financial services company in Mexico, shares his experience to demonstrate how purpose-driven leadership can address societal issues by expanding financial inclusion for underserved communities in Latin America.

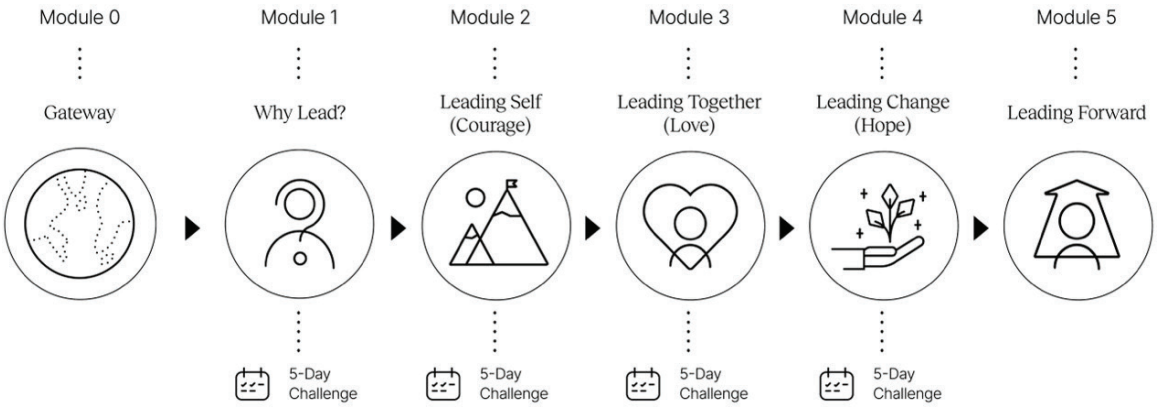
The course integrates understandings and approaches to leadership from various cultural traditions and includes a range of role models to emphasize the importance of leading in a way that is suited to the context. For instance, Adewale (2024) explores the Yorùbá concept of *Omoluabi* in West African culture, which emphasizes virtues such as honesty, diligence, loyalty, wisdom, and self-control. This concept frames character as a lifelong journey, nurtured through learning at home and from elders. In this tradition, morally competent individuals act as role models, imparting wisdom and virtues to younger generations. Participants also engage with inspiring contemporary exemplars, such as Pete Reed, an Olympic rower who embodies hope and courage in his approach to life and leadership through the severe challenge of paralysis that has left him unable to walk, and Lina Tori Jan, a policy officer and advocate who elevates and supports Afghan refugee women leaders by equipping them with the essential resources needed for effective advocacy. By weaving together such narratives, the course encourages participants to align their leadership with their personal, cultural, and professional contexts, fostering meaningful and transformative change.

A Human-Centered Approach

The Leading with Character course places character at the heart of leadership development, framing it as the foundation of ethical, effective, and contextually adaptive leadership. Character is defined as a set of enduring habits and dispositions that shape how individuals think, feel, and act (Kristjánsson, 2017; Snow, 2010). This approach highlights that good leadership transcends functional capabilities, rooting itself instead in the personal formation of leaders as human beings.

This emphasis on character reflects a growing recognition of its necessity amidst global challenges marked by complexity, precarity, and eroded trust in leaders (Brooks, 2021). These challenges have prompted a paradigm shift from power- and control-driven leadership to

Figure 1
Leading with Character Course Structure



values-based and human-centered approaches (Clark et al., 2024). This emerging paradigm emphasizes service, collaboration, and ethical responsibility, recognizing virtues such as humility, hope, and compassion as essential for fostering trust, collaboration, and long-term societal impact. By placing character at the center, the Leading with Character course aligns with this evolving vision of leadership as a service to others, advancing both individual and organizational flourishing.

Research supports the transformative power of character in leadership. Studies demonstrate that character-based leadership enhances team performance, strengthens organizational culture, and contributes to societal outcomes such as corruption prevention and policy implementation (Wang & Brooks, 2023). Leaders with strong character are also associated with increased follower well-being, job satisfaction, and innovation (Cameron et al., 2004; Meyer & Li, 2023; Rea et al., 2023). Practitioners echo these findings. For example, Hubert Joly, former CEO of Best Buy, exemplifies how prioritizing noble purpose and human dignity over profit creates sustainable and impactful organizations (Joly, 2021). These insights reinforce the need for leadership development initiatives that go beyond professional competence to cultivate the moral and intellectual virtues necessary for effective decision-making in complex environments.

The Leading with Character course contributes to this field by providing a structured framework for cultivating character at the core of leadership development. Its design integrates reflective exercises with habit formation, enabling participants to internalize virtues and apply them in diverse contexts. Moreover, the course situates leadership within broader systems of cultural, social, and organizational influence, encouraging participants to consider how their practices align with the values and traditions of their communities while engaging with global perspectives. This approach acknowledges that good leadership must be contextually adaptive and culturally sensitive. By fostering an understanding of character as both an individual and relational construct, the course empowers leaders to create meaningful impact within their spheres of influence.

Pedagogical Framework: Integrating Theory and Practice

The Leading with Character online course integrates teaching with practical application to develop leadership virtues through intentional practice. It draws on the OCP's seven research-based strategies for character

and leadership development (Lamb et al., 2022): (1) habituation through practice, (2) reflection on personal experience, (3) engagement with virtuous exemplars, (4) dialogue that increases virtue literacy, (5) awareness of situational pressures and biases, (6) moral reminders, and (7) friendships of mutual accountability. These strategies are embedded throughout the course, offering a robust and cohesive framework for fostering sustained character growth (see Figure 2).

Habituation Through Practice

Central to the course is the idea that character is developed through its repeated enactment, grounded in the Aristotelian view that virtues are habits that are cultivated through consistent and intentional practice. Virtues develop as individuals repeatedly engage in appropriate thoughts, emotions, and actions, gradually internalizing these behaviors until they become second nature (Lamb et al., 2022). This idea parallels mastering a craft, musical instrument, or sport such as golf where mindful and intelligent practice refines skills over time (Annas, 2011). Learners undertake 5-day challenges at the end of each module, encouraging them to practice virtues repeatedly in real-world contexts. For example, in the courage module, participants identify a challenging situation and take deliberate steps to address it over several days, building moral courage through specific and repeated actions.

Reflection on Personal Experience

Reflection is a second key component of character development included in the course, enabling participants to critically evaluate their leadership journeys and deepen their self-awareness. Reflection helps participants assess their existing character traits, identify areas of development, and monitor progress over time (Lamb et al., 2022). In the course, reflective journaling prompts, such as "What does leadership mean to you?" and "What values have shaped your decisions so far?" guide participants to articulate their personal philosophies and identify areas for growth. This structured approach fosters introspection and helps cultivate practical wisdom—the capacity for moral discernment and deliberation necessary for ethical and contextually appropriate action (Brooks, 2025).

Engagement with Virtuous Exemplars

Virtuous exemplars serve as powerful sources of inspiration and learning. Reflecting on such exemplars—whether historical figures, contemporary leaders, or personal mentors—helps to elevate moral vision, reshape moral imagination, and deepen motivation for ethical leadership (Lamb et al., 2022; Miller, 2017). The course features diverse stories of leadership, ranging from CEOs and former Olympic athletes to school teachers and refugee advocates. Exercises enable learners to engage in reflective admiration, critically analyzing the habits and principles exemplified by role models in order to discern how the virtues demonstrated by exemplars can be adapted to their unique contexts (Zagzebski, 2017). Beyond well-known figures, the course encourages participants to identify personal exemplars from their own experiences, recognizing that relatable role models often have the most profound influence (Han et al., 2022).

Dialogue that Increases Virtue Literacy

The course emphasizes the role of dialogue in shaping moral understanding and leadership practices. Drawing from Aristotelian and Socratic traditions, dialogues foster virtue literacy by encouraging participants to engage in discussions about the meaning, importance, and development of virtues (Brooks, 2025; Kristjánsson, 2014; Lamb et al., 2022). The course includes learning materials from diverse cultural and philosophical traditions to broaden perspectives and has discussion forums encouraging participants to share their opinions and learn from each other. By developing a vocabulary of virtues and engaging with diverse cultural frameworks, participants gain clarity in articulating concepts such as love and hope, enabling them to articulate and enact virtuous leadership.

Awareness of Situational Variables

Leadership occurs within complex cultural, social, and organizational systems, and the course emphasizes the importance of understanding and responding to situational variables that may shape both our character and the kind of leadership required. While situational pressures influence behavior, they do not negate the importance of character (Miller, 2014). Instead, developing awareness of biases, incentive structures, and other institutional and relational influences enables leaders to identify and counteract pressures that may undermine important virtues of character (Lamb et al., 2022; Miller, 2017). The course encourages participants to critically assess how their leadership practices align with community values while remaining aware of systemic biases and constraints. The course also highlights the role of leaders in shaping organizational systems. Activities are designed to help participants foster organizational cultures that promote ethical behavior and collaboration, demonstrating how individual virtues can influence broader systems.

Moral Reminders

Moral reminders are tools to sustain character development, reinforcing participants' commitments and aligning their actions with their moral identity. Research shows that reminders, such as signing an honor pledge or recalling ethical principles, can significantly reduce unethical behaviors (Mazar et al., 2008). This course incorporates email prompts to encourage participants to remain focused on their goals and integrate virtuous habits into their daily routine. Additionally, participants are encouraged to identify reminders that resonate personally and are provided with examples and guidance as to how they might deploy them.

Friendships of Mutual Accountability

Finally, character development flourishes in the context of supportive and meaningful friendships. The course emphasizes friendships of mutual accountability as vital to character development. Inspired by Aristotle's view of friendship as central to virtue cultivation, these relationships provide mirrors for reflection, feedback, and mutual encouragement (Kristjánsson, 2022). In the course, participants engage with peers through discussion forums to exchange diverse perspectives. These interactions provide opportunities for mutual learning, creating a collaborative environment for sustained growth and a global community of like-minded leaders. Beyond the course, a global alumni network supports continued growth and shared commitment to character-based leadership.

Thematic Modules

Purpose

Defined as a forward-looking intention to achieve goals meaningful to oneself and beneficial to the common good (Damon et al., 2003), purpose connects personal values with broader societal needs. It provides clarity, motivation, and resilience, empowering leaders to inspire others and address challenges with integrity and vision. Research has shown that purpose enhances

Figure 2

***Seven Strategies for Character Development,* based on Lamb et al. (2022)**

well-being, strengthens resilience, and improves organizational performance (Hill et al., 2016; Lleo et al., 2019; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

This module frames purpose as a virtue of character that is cultivated through reflection and practice. Journaling prompts such as "Why do you lead?" and "What are the most meaningful aspects of your life?" encourage participants to deepen self-awareness. A 5-day challenge translates these reflections into concrete steps, including reflecting on leadership moments and encouraging others. Purposeful leadership also transcends personal ambition, fostering shared goals and collective well-being. The course emphasizes the relational dimension of purpose, encouraging participants to act as catalysts for positive change within their communities and beyond by connecting their individual aspirations with societal challenges.

Courage

Courage is presented as an essential leadership virtue, enabling leaders to act with integrity and overcome challenges. Courage is more than boldness; it involves aligning actions with core values despite fear, resistance, or failure. The course also highlights the interplay between courage and humility. Courage empowers leaders to take decisive action, face fears, and uphold their values even under pressure. Humility, on the other hand, ensures that this courage is tempered by self-awareness and openness to growth.

Leadership exemplars play a vital role in the courage module. By reflecting on the actions and values of public figures such as Nelson Mandela and personal exemplars from their own experience, participants gain insights into how courage manifests in leadership. For example, Mandela's perseverance during imprisonment and his commitment to reconciliation upon release exemplify how courage can foster trust and drive change (Mandela, 2008). Verónica Fernández, Director of the Virtue and Values Education Centre at Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, shares the story of Diana, a rural teacher in Mexico, whose leadership journey is grounded in introspection, humility, and deep listening. Diana's leadership catalyzed collaborative projects across 475 middle schools, improving education for thousands of children. Participants are encouraged to identify role models from their own lives, analyzing the qualities that make their leadership courageous. This reflective process helps participants connect abstract concepts to real-world examples, deepening their understanding of how courage can be adapted to different contexts.

Love

Leadership is inherently relational. The course introduces the concept of "generative love" as a relational virtue essential to leadership. Distinct from romantic or sentimental love, generative love is rooted in the intention to seek the flourishing of others and actions that are focused on advancing their well-being, creating trust, and fostering personal and organizational growth (Lee, 2022).

Generative love shifts power dynamics from dominance ("power-over") to partnership ("power-with"). Leaders who embody this virtue create psychological safety, allowing team members to communicate openly, solve problems collaboratively, and learn from setbacks. Research highlights how such environments promote innovation and resilience, enabling organizations to thrive under pressure (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

The love module equips participants to integrate generative love into their leadership practices through reflective exercises, role model analysis, and practical exercises like active listening, expressing gratitude, and supporting team members. For example, "thinking pairs" exercises enhance listening abilities (Kline, 1999), while "giver strategies" encourage proactive engagement in empowering others (Grant, 2013).

Hope

The course highlights hope as a core leadership virtue, defining it as the disposition to envision a better future and commit to achieving it despite challenges and uncertainty. Hope is not passive optimism but an active and sustained effort to maintain resilience, overcome despair, and motivate others toward shared goals. It enables leaders to focus on opportunities amidst adversity, fostering a sense of possibility that unites teams and communities in the pursuit of meaningful change.

While hope inspires a vision for a brighter future, practical wisdom helps leaders discern the best course of action, balancing competing priorities and contextual complexities. For instance, a leader might rally a team to address systemic challenges by articulating a hopeful vision while using practical wisdom to navigate obstacles and identify realistic solutions.

This module helps participants distinguish hope from optimism, explore its relational dimensions, and engage with exemplars who exemplify hope in action. Through journaling and discussion forums, participants examine personal barriers to hope and identify strategies to foster it within their teams. The module concludes with a 5-day challenge, where participants apply hope in actionable ways. Exercises include crafting hope-filled narratives, identifying sources of hope, and developing strategies to sustain it. For example, participants write a letter to their future selves, setting goals and envisioning how to overcome obstacles, anchoring their leadership in a hopeful mindset.

Pilot Phase

The pilot phase of Leading with Character was conducted between March and April 2024 to evaluate the course's content, structure, and usability. A total of 37 participants from diverse cultural, professional, and leadership backgrounds participated, representing both seasoned leadership experts and those new to character-based leadership. This diversity ensured a comprehensive evaluation of the course's design and impact.

Participants offered positive feedback on the course's emphasis on character virtues, its academic rigor, and the range of learning resources provided. The integration of practical exercises with reflective prompts and real-world examples was particularly valued for its ability to bridge theoretical concepts with actionable leadership practices. Additionally, the course was commended for its potential to inspire and equip leaders globally. Constructive feedback identified minor areas for refinement, aimed at further enhancing the course's effectiveness and accessibility across diverse contexts. To further evaluate its effectiveness, a research project is underway to examine its impact among university students worldwide, providing valuable insights into its influence across varied settings.

Conclusion

The Leading with Character online course represents a human-centered approach to leadership development, placing the cultivation of character at the core of effective and ethical leadership. In today's increasingly complex and interconnected world, the course addresses the pressing need for leaders who can effectively navigate challenges with wisdom, integrity, and a commitment to the common good. By combining theoretical insights with hands-on exercises, the course fosters the development of essential virtues such as purpose, courage, love, and hope, equipping participants with both the mindset and practical tools needed to lead with impact.

The course's structured modules and experiential learning approach guide participants to reflect on their leadership journeys, cultivate virtues, and drive meaningful change in their communities and organizations. As the course evolves, its long-term vision is to develop a worldwide network of leaders committed to advancing societal flourishing through character-based leadership. By prioritizing virtues and fostering collaborative action, Leading with Character aspires to contribute in a small but meaningful way to the transformation of organizations, communities, and the broader global context.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to extend their thanks to Juliette Ash and Colin Webb for their invaluable administrative and technical support throughout the development of the Leading with Character course. We also wish to express our gratitude to our course development partners, whose expertise and collaboration were integral to the course design and build: Miguel Amigot, Ashlynn Brown, and the entire team at IBL Education; Angela Adams, Celeste Bruwer, John Jeppsson, and the team at Construct; and Kit Debuse and Joe Russell at Land of Plenty.

The development of the Leading with Character online course was generously funded by the Legatum Foundation. Additionally, this article and the research into the efficacy of the Leading with Character course were made possible through funding from the Templeton World Charity Foundation. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Legatum Foundation or the Templeton World Charity Foundation.

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PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

A Case for Intentional Teamwork Development at USAFA: The T3C Model

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ABSTRACT

Teamwork is a crucial element in effective military leadership and mission execution and, hence, is a necessary component in officer development at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA). DoD, USAF, and USAFA doctrine and guidance have numerous references spotlighting the necessity of effective teamwork across the military enterprise. Specifically, the USAFA Leadership, Teamwork and Organizational Management Institutional Outcome requires cadet proficiency in the foundational principles of teamwork. To define foundational teamwork principles, the members of the USAFA Athletic Department developed the T3C Teamwork Model and incorporated it into the execution of physical education team sport elective courses.

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 324 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.324

This model offers one option to advance teamwork principles and development in future military officers as well as other populations.

Keywords: teamwork, competence, communication, commitment, respect

The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) mission is to build leaders of character and quality. The emphasis on leadership is institutionally and socially predominant; however, a major subcategory, *teamwork*, is less directly and intentionally developed. To ensure mission accomplishment, teamwork—a critical component of effective leadership and mission execution—must be more deliberately defined and cultivated throughout USAFA's 4-year development process.

The necessity for intentional teamwork development at USAFA is supported by the widespread evidence that the U.S. Air Force considers teamwork a mission imperative and foundational to successful operations across the enterprise. Air Force doctrine highlights teamwork as "essential to triumph at every level" where "Airmen recognize the interdependency of every member's contribution toward the mission..." (The USAF Blue Book, 2022). U.S. Air Force competency modeling describes teamwork as the "action of collaborating effectively with others to achieve a common goal or complete a mission task" (AFH 36-2647). Additional U.S. Air Force references, such as the Airman Leadership Qualities and Pre-commissioning terminal learning objectives, also point to the critical importance of teamwork.

At the USAFA institutional level, teamwork references are also plentiful. Policy dictates that each mission element (ME) will align education, training, and experiences with the Leader of Character (LOC) Framework, which explicitly demands the inclusion of leadership styles that build effective teams (USAFAMAN 36-3526, para 3.4). Teamwork development is further mandated in the USAFA institutional outcome of Leadership, Teamwork and Organizational Management (LTOM), most importantly with the specific imperative to "apply foundational principles of teamwork to maximize mission accomplishment" across the 4-year course of instruction (USAFA, 2024). Additionally, the USAFA Superintendent emphasized "effective teams accelerate accountability" through its ongoing culture transformation campaigns.

There is a large body of scholarship and literature on teamwork in the broader context. The Academy recognizes the fundamental idea that "a group of individuals working together to achieve a common goal is better than the collective performance of the individuals" (USAFA, 2009). Similarly, Linda Riebe et al. (2016) describe teamwork as two or more people working interdependently toward a shared goal, objective, or mission. Moreover, multiple scholars have highlighted the importance of teamwork for the development of individuals, groups, and organizations to achieve a goal (Costa, 2003; Duel, 2010; Tarricone & Luca, 2002).

Despite the prevalent societal and institutional mandates and clearly established requirement for teamwork proficiency in our future officers, a USAFA institutional definition of the foundational principles of teamwork referred to in LTOM Proficiency #5 has been largely left to the interpretation of the individual MEs. One could argue this dynamic creates a vulnerability that diminishes the opportunity for optimal and complimentary cadet teamwork education and training throughout the 4-year developmental landscape. While teamwork

is referenced throughout USAFA leadership and curricular development activities, a common definition of teamwork principles has not been established. A gap exists in the formal delivery and assessment of teamwork, necessitating a standard teamwork model to use at USAFA.

Members of the Physical Education Division (ADPE) identified the gap and set out to create a model to distinguish the foundational principles of teamwork in this USAFA context. This division was well-positioned to develop a teamwork model, as purveyors of the long-standing team sport course requirement for all cadets. Cadets take one of the following physical education (PE) courses to meet this USAFA Course of Instruction requirement: Volleyball, Basketball, Soccer, or Softball. Each of these four courses inherently fosters teamwork but lacked a common curricular teamwork framework to specifically facilitate teamwork development in cadets.

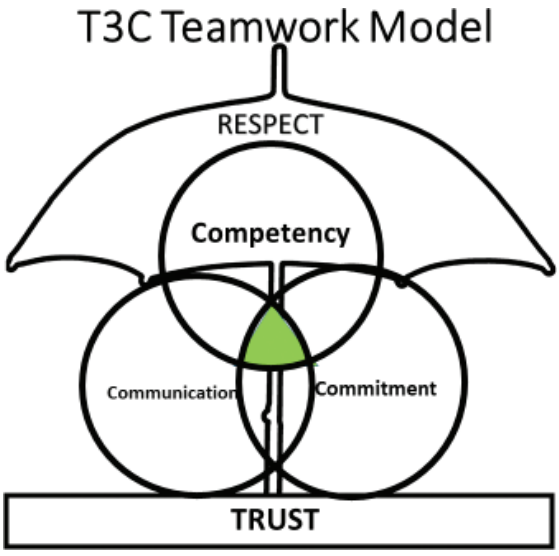
In 2016, cognizant of the importance of curricula standardization in teamwork delivery and inspired by the course director's volleyball coaching experience, the ADPE division director began an informal study and inventoried common teamwork qualities to determine the most critical elements. To develop this model, ADPE conducted a literature review of military and civilian sources and engaged in informal discussions with coaches. 74 teamwork attributes emerged, including many with strong interrelated correlations. The themes of trust, competency, commitment, and communication were prominent among the teamwork attributes. It was a goal that the resulting model be simple, succinct, and easily relatable, similar to the three component Air Force Core Values design (Integrity, Service, and Excellence) and designed to improve teamwork proficiency in the PE team sport courses. With this goal in mind, a teamwork model that focused on the foundational attribute of trust and the recurring themes of competency, commitment, and communication was created.

Trust appears prevalent throughout teamwork literature and was adopted as the principle foundational requirement. Trust not only facilitates openness and support but also drives commitment and enhances performance (Costa, 2003; Sheng et al., 2010; USAF, 2009). Furthermore, the absence of trust is considered a dysfunction of a team where the failure to build trust is damaging, setting the tone for another dysfunction: conflict (Lencioni, 2010). In the military, trust is defined as the shared confidence between all parties to effectively carry out the mission—a necessity for all operations (AFDP 1, *The Air Force*).

Building on this foundation of trust, a natural grouping of teamwork attributes further evolved in the three principal categorizations of Competency, Communication, and Commitment. These three attributes are referred to as the "3Cs." Competency, the ability to do something successfully or efficiently emerged as a critical component to teamwork. Skill, knowledge, and ability pervade research as critical components of goal achievement. But competence paired with the social dimensions of commitment and communication lifts others and enhances the skills of teammates toward mission success (Mohammad & Dumville, 2001; Oettl, 2012). Communication, the imparting or exchanging of information, also appears in numerous studies as it is a critical component to achieving team efficiency and success (Costa, 2003; Sheng et al., 2010; Tarricone & Luca, 2002). Finally, Commitment, the dedication to a cause or activity, rounds out the third "C," positively influencing teamwork behaviors often associated with trust and effectiveness (Costa, 2003; Sheng et al., 2010; Tarricone & Luca, 2002). A simple hypothesis emerged, asserting that optimized team performance would occur in the confluence of the "3C" Venn diagram, where simultaneous high competence (skill, strategy, etc.), clear and effective communication, and authentic and sustained commitment from team members all existed.

Figure 1

T3C Teamwork Model (©2024 Scott R. Nelson).



Finally, the "3Cs" function optimally under an umbrella of respect, a well-founded mission imperative. Respect encompasses self-respect, mutual respect, and organizational respect. This three-dimensional view drives us to embrace the unique value of all individuals and treat everyone with dignity, regardless of rank or position, creating an environment conducive to teamwork. Consistent with Maslow's and Bandura's foundational principals, mutual respect and the actualization of psychological needs strengthen teamwork while supporting a teammate's ability to develop in areas of the model (Bandura, 1982, 2018; DePorres et al., 2024; Maslow, 1943). Ultimately, respect completes the model as the hedge of protection to cultivate effective teamwork.

The resulting model named T3C (depicted in Figure 1) represents the foundational component of trust, the "3Cs": Competence, Communication, and Commitment, and the overarching necessity for respect among teammates.

The T3C Model compliments the U.S. Air Force Core Values, the USAFA institutional outcome of LTOM, and the LOC Framework. It was enhanced over several years by applying it while coaching youth volleyball with great anecdotal success. The model was found to provide a useful focusing mechanism, easily understood by team members. ADPE incorporated the T3C Model into USAFA PE Volleyball curriculum in fall 2020, including the addition of evaluation and grading components.

In March 2021, with the intent to further validate and refine the model, ADPE initiated a "Teamwork Attributes" survey targeted toward Athletic Department teamwork experts (coaches, instructors, and sport administrators) asking them to list their three most critical attributes of ideal team members. This study comprised 47 respondents (38 coaches and 9 administrators/faculty) yielding 141 attributes. After grouping the attributes, three key observations emerged: (1) data collected aligned well with the existing model; (2) there were no attributes collected in the study that presented glaring deficiencies in the model; and (3) commitment-related attributes were favored by the respondents and indicated primacy over competence and communication.

ADPE then partnered with the Lifetime Sports Area Coordinator to further refine assessment and grading, and the incorporation of the T3C Model into the remaining three teamwork courses. The Basketball and Soccer courses adopted the model in fall semester 2021, and it was added to the Softball course in fall 2023. Furthermore, in April 2021, ADPE presented the T3C Model at the Center for Character and Leadership Development-sponsored USAFA Teamwork Summit, where it was well received, and the model implementation in PE continued.

ADPE continues to validate, refine, and implement the T3C Model. Furthermore, they seek collaboration partners, with the objective of providing an institutionally recognized and adopted model that will enhance officer development through teamwork. Moreover, the model enhances focus on the importance of trust,

competence, communication, and commitment, levied under an umbrella of respect. These principles are vital for future officers to adopt and apply in their imminent roles as Total Force enhancers and multipliers.

There are numerous opportunities for future enhancements and applications of the T3C Model at USAFA. Recommendations include the following: (1) establishing T3C as a foundational teamwork model for all USAFA organizations; (2) align T3C with the LTOM proficiency in order to contribute to teamwork literacy development in cadets; (3) advancing teamwork assessment efforts; (4) developing key performance indicators that assess the teamwork proficiencies; and (5) establishing standardized grading scales or rubrics for use in different teamwork contexts such as military training, PE courses, or academic group projects. These efforts will help refine practices, ensure continuous improvement, and advance USAFA's alignment with USAF Commissioning Education Learning Objectives.

Longer range initiatives might include establishing a USAFA Teamwork Task Force and promoting cadet research and development on teamwork practices. This initiative could help further develop teamwork literacy through athletics (intercollegiate, intramural, and club sport settings), military, academic, and airmanship activities to develop, evaluate, and optimize cadet teamwork acumen in their respective areas. Another possibility is the establishment of a USAFA "Teams of Authentic Character" program to incentivize and recognize exemplary teamwork across all USAFA MEs.

The T3C Model is an operationalized example of foundational teamwork competencies currently used in the USAFA PE curriculum. This model and its principles are derived from the body of literature on teamwork across various disciplines and applications. Moreover, the TC3 Model has been further validated by a survey of practitioners in the field of athletics, applied to athletic team settings, and used to teach the concept teamwork and team development in PE courses. It is effective in explaining the foundational principles in a way that students and athletes can remember and apply in the context of sport. The model can also be applied in their daily lives as members of other teams and units and as leaders of military units and larger organizations. Beyond these applications, this model is likely very adaptable to other settings of leadership development, as well as government, businesses, and other organizations, to maximize effectiveness through teamwork. Nonetheless, further study and assessment are needed to understand the effectiveness of applying this model outside of athletics.

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INSIGHTS

Continuing to Serve

John Troxell, SEAC (USA, Ret.), Former Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff & the University of Health & Performance

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Would you mind talking through your career in terms of where you've been, how you ended up as the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (SEAC), and critical moments along that journey.

Troxell: I was born in Springfield, Illinois and I grew up in Davenport, Iowa. I went through school without any real purpose, motivation, and direction. But I saw older kids from my neighborhood that had joined the military and when they came back, they were different. They were motivated, they were a little bit more boisterous. They walked with their head held high, their chest out, and they were very fit. I thought, I don't know what they are doing in the military, but I want some of that. So, I joined the Army after I graduated high school. I joined when I was 18 and became an armored reconnaissance specialist, basically focusing on reconnaissance operations. In total, I spent 1 month shy of 38 years on active duty and started as an E-1 and rose up through the ranks. Ultimately, I finished off my career as the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (SEAC) from 2015 to 2019. As the senior enlisted person of the Department of Defense (DoD) where I advised General Joe Dunford and General Mark Millie, as well as various Secretaries of Defense, Ash Carter, Jim Mattis, and lastly was Mark Esper.

In the military, I gained that purpose, motivation, and direction. I became part of something bigger than myself. I became part of a high performing team and I had to be high performing to make sure that my teammates on my left and right could count on me. Along the way, I met my wife when I was a young private and we got married and we've been married 41 years. She was on that journey with me the whole way and was providing me the motivation and inspiration from the home front. She took care of raising our three sons. But the significant event for me was I got assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division, which was the rapid deployment division in the 1980s. I was an E-5 at the time.

I had served in heavy mechanized units in Germany, and that's when the wall was up with the Soviet Union. We would do the tours on the border and stare down the East Germans and all that stuff. But it was like we were going

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 334 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.334

through the motions because we never talked about going to war. But when I got to the 82nd, the language was you've got to be ready to go to war. You've got to be ready to fight and win... 18 h wheels up anywhere in the world. You've got to be ready for that physically, mentally, emotionally, technically, and tactically. And initially, I wasn't prepared for that because I came from the heavy mechanized land. The first day I was there was the beginning of All American Week, the annual celebration of the 82nd Airborne Division. It starts off with a division run of 18,000 paratroopers on Long Street on then Fort Bragg, North Carolina, running in formation led by the Division Commander and Command Sergeant Major.

The pace is quite fast, and I fell out of that run. I had 18,000 paratroopers just hammering me, go back to where you came from. You don't deserve to be here. In that event, I had not only embarrassed my unit and my teammates, even though I had only been there one day, I embarrassed myself and I felt I let my family down. I said, "Never again!" I got myself into shape, got myself physically, mentally, and emotionally where I needed to be, along with technically and tactically to be prepared to go to war 18 h anywhere in the world. Along the way, I did things like become a Jump Master. I went to Ranger School and Pathfinder School. I did all these things to make me the best I could be. In December of 1989, it happened.

We got the call for Operation Just Cause and I did the combat jump there. Within 24 h of getting that call, we lost a paratrooper specialist, Alejandro Manrique Lozano. He was killed in action by Panamanian Defense Forces. That's when I realized another significant event about this job that I'd been in the last 7 years, kind of just going through the motions, it's real, the enemy gets a vote, and people can die. So, I told myself, I've got to continue to be the best leader I could be. Seven months later, we turned around and deployed for Operation Desert Shield. That again taught me a lesson that I've got to be ready to fight tonight. So, throughout the rest of my career as an E-7 platoon sergeant all the way up to the SEAC, I focused on making sure the men and women in my charge or that I influenced were prepared physically, mentally, emotionally, technically, and tactically to fight tonight. You could even throw spiritually in there as well because I think that is a huge aspect of individual and collective readiness.

I am going to be the best example that I can be as a leader to influence those people to look at me and say, "I'm going to follow that guy," or "I'm going to be in the worst situations with that guy." So, those were several significant events that shaped me. Those along with the professional development that I was going through with my military schooling, and the people and leaders that I was working around. I worked around guys like retired Brigadier General John Lair, who was my Brigade Commander during the surge in Iraq, which was the bloodiest combat tour I had. I got to work with a guy like retired General Curtis Cap who was a former Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and he was my commander in Afghanistan. He was my commander in Iraq and at Joint Base Lewis McCord. Then, ultimately, a guy like Joe Dunford who was the consummate elder statesman. Just a phenomenal example as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Along the way, those leaders shaped me into who I was.

Lindsay: You mentioned you were looking for purpose when those young guys came back. It sounds like you found that but when you went in, you probably weren't thinking, I'm going to serve 38 years. When did you come to the point where you said, I'm going to do this for as long as I can, or what was that decision process like? Or, did you just always know that you were going to continue on?

Troxell: I was going to do my initial tour and I was going to get out. I was assigned to Fort Bliss, in El Paso, Texas. That's where I met my wife. I was only there a

year, and we ended up moving to Germany. In Germany, my first tour there, I did not have the best examples of non-commissioned officers and I was a little short on mentorship. So, I had the silliest, most inane reason why I wanted to get out. I had to wait until midnight to watch NFL football on Sunday, and sometimes, three o'clock in the morning. I said, I am living in an upside down world here that I'm not happy with. I went to my wife, we were about a year out from my enlistment being up, and I told her that I think I'm going to get out. She said, "Well, where will we go?" I said, "We'll go back to Iowa where I'm from." She responded, "What will we do?" I said, "We'll figure that out. We'll stay with mom and pop until we figure things out." She goes, "You don't know how to do anything else but be a soldier."

I had been the 3rd Armor Division Soldier of the Year and I had been inducted into the prestigious Sergeant Audie Murphy Club. I was doing very well and I was promoted below the zone in every promotion that I had. For 2 days my wife wouldn't talk to me. She was upset. She knew I was about to throw away the best thing we had going. After 2 days I couldn't take it anymore. I went to her and I said, "Alright, you win. I'm going to re-enlist, but we're going to go where I want to and we're going to go to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I want to be a Paratroop in 82nd Airborne Division." She said, "Okay." The minute I reenlisted, I said this is what I'm going to do for the rest of my career and there's no turning back.

We made the trip to Fort Bragg and as we were driving through the gate, there was a five-ton truck in front of us that had paratroopers in the back of it that had camouflage on their face. They had just come off the drop zone. They were filthy, and I was like, wow, look at these guys. My wife says, "I don't know if I'm going to like it here. These guys look scary." And I said, "Now you know why we're here." The minute I got into that environment, and the minute I fell out of that run, I knew that I had to up my game. I said, if I'm going to be a career soldier and I'm going to serve in units like this and I'm going to be somebody that people can count on, then I need to be in shape and I need to get right mentally and emotionally to be a teammate that people could rely on.

That's what focused me. After that, I looked for ways of how I can be better at who I am and what I am. How can I be a better teammate? How can I be a better father, a better husband? Holistically, I was focusing on getting better at everything I was doing at work and at home. It took one moment by 18,000 paratroopers that really know how to use adjectives and nouns that told me I will never be this embarrassment for myself, my family, my unit or the United States Army or the United States of America again.

Lindsay: I think we all can think of a moment or two where we have to ask ourselves how are we going to react to a negative situation? Am I going to lean into this and be who I know I can be? Or am I going to just step back and go, yeah, that probably wasn't for me. What do you think it was that caused you to go, I'm leaning in, not away from this?

Troxell: I knew if I didn't get my act together that I was going to embarrass my family back home. The guys I grew up with back home. It was that guilt and shame. I told myself I'm better than this. I've proven that I can do great things in the military, and I just have to get in peak operating form to be able to get after that. As I was going through that process I could feel myself physically, mentally, and emotionally getting better and the tactical and technical tasks I was expected to do came easier. The more I leaned in the more I was able to understand better. I was able to start creating a vision of not only where I wanted to go with my career and set goals, but I could also do that for others. I was serving with purpose now, as opposed to where I had been in the past in Germany. It had all been about individual achievement, but I wasn't going down the road that was bringing others along with me. So, I think I realized at that time that

there were people looking at me. There were young privates looking at me, and I've got to be the example for them. That was my fuel. Then, throughout my entire career after that, I wanted to be that example. I wanted my soldiers to know, my service members to know they needed to look no further than me to know what right is. And to be able to do that, I had to hold myself accountable before I could hold anybody else accountable. I had to set standards for myself. That I would be the example for others and say, "Hey, follow me and I'll get you to a to a band of excellence."

Lindsay: I think what you just said right there is pretty powerful. Certainly, achievements are great and it's nice when we can have that success, but if it's only about the achievement and it's only about collecting schools and badges, you miss the opportunity that you just talked about. It's about being the best at what you do so that you have a more powerful message and example for those that you're leading and that you're serving alongside.

Troxell: Absolutely. I will tell you one of the most demoralizing things that happened to me as a leader, as a young platoon sergeant in the 82nd. I had a very young sharp sergeant, an E-5 that was going places. He wanted to be a Jump Master like me, so I coached him. We got him down to take the pre-examination to get him signed up, and then we got him a slot into the Jump Master Course. Now, the Jump Master Course in the 82nd Airborne Division has a 30% graduation rate, so you have to be on your game. A lot come back and they retest and they try to come back and graduate. But it's one of the toughest courses I've ever been to except for the U.S. Army Ranger course. So, this young sergeant goes through and he gets down to the last exam, the Jump Master Personnel Inspection, and he failed it. But that was the only thing that he failed. He came back and told me he didn't make it. I said, all right, we'll send you back. He only had to go back and pass that part of the course. He went back and he failed again. He only had one remaining opportunity. I coached him up, I rehearsed him and sent him back. He failed a third time. I felt that I somehow failed him as a leader because I wanted this for him. I wanted him as a young 21-year-old sergeant, which is almost non-existent to be a Jump Master, I wanted him to be that guy. And it didn't happen. Now, it didn't mean he was any less of a soldier or a sergeant or a leader, but I saw the dejection on his face from all of this and the impact it had on him, and it had an impact on me because I wanted this for him.

After that, I said, I'm going to continue to focus my efforts on the people that are in my span of control and make them the best that they can be, but understand that there's going to be failures along the way. And I, as a leader, have got to be there for them through the failures. If they're honest mistakes like this was, then I've got to underwrite them and I've got to continue to pump them up and inspire them to set other goals. In this example, after you fail it three times, you're not going back. You're done. So that had a significant impact on me as a leader. So, turning from individual accolades to selfless service and leading by assisting others is what I was all about after that. And to the point, every time I would leave a duty station, they'd say, well, we're going to give you an award. I don't want an award. You get to a point in your career where that stuff doesn't mean anything. The award or the reward for a leader ought to be the accomplishments that the young men and women that you had the opportunity to mentor and what they accomplished. Seeing them happy and focused and starting their brilliant career, that's what you ought to walk away with as a leader and saying, "I'm glad I was able to help."

Lindsay: That can be a bit of a burden at times as well, can't it? How do you as a leader carry that burden, that responsibility, and still show up every day to be who you need to be?

Troxell: I think it is through a level of positivity. I told that young sergeant, "Hey, things didn't happen the way

we wanted it to, but you're still a great non-commissioned officer, you're still a great fire team leader. Those three soldiers down there in the company are expecting you to come back and still lead them. So we're just going to push on with the mission, alright?" As an effective leader, you have to have a level of positivity about you. Don't get me wrong, adversity is right around the corner and Murphy gets a vote and bad things happen to good organizations and to good leaders. Sometimes you get upset about that. If there's some disciplinary issues, obviously you've got to put your foot down. But if you as a leader are negative in your nature and it's just the way you are, you're going to turn people off in a hurry and it's going to affect morale and eventually it's going to affect readiness and it's going to affect efficiency, especially if you're getting ready for a deployment or a combat operation. So, try to focus on positivity. And I'm not talking toxic positivity. Not, the ship is sinking and you're saying, "Isn't this great?" It's positive in a way that you look at the negative things that have happened, but your perspective is in a positive way and the outcome is going to be in a positive manner. That's what I tried to focus on as I moved forward.

And when people were running around with their hair on fire to bring me bad news, I'd say, thank you for letting me know, but I'm not going to run around with my hair on fire. I'm going to figure out courses of action that we can advise the commander on how to fix this problem. But I'm not going to be that person that exacerbates the negativity that's already going on. I'm going to come with some positive outcomes on how we can get through this. Then in the after action process, how can we have some positive actions that would make sure that this kind of stuff doesn't happen again?

Lindsay: I like that and I think you're right. I think if it's positivity for positivity's sake, people look through that and go, he's blowing smoke. But when there's a frame of reference of positivity about what we can learn from it, it starts with an acknowledgement of what happened. I think a lot of times people are afraid to talk about the failure or talk about the mistakes. The challenge with that is you don't go back and acknowledge that it happened and validate that this is not the standard we need. It doesn't allow you to build on it because then you're just trying to act like it didn't happen. You acknowledge it, you come up with a course of action and you figure out how you move on from there and you get after it, right? Here's what we're going to do so that we hit the standard next time. It is a positive orientation, but you're right, it's not that fakeness of, "Hey, this is great, it's all going to be good," and acting like it never happened.

Troxell: Exactly. A good example to kind of amplify that is when I was a squadron level command sergeant major in the invasion in Iraq. Our operations officer, who I didn't have a great relationship with, said that there was an improvised explosive device found on route Tampa. He thought we should shut down our convoys moving north and south. I looked at the commander and I said, "Sir, I absolutely disagree with that." The operations officer said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I am not scared of one improvised explosive device. I'm not afraid of a bunch of guys that are putting bombs out there." He said to me, "With that kind of cavalier attitude, you will get people killed." I said, "Let me explain something to you major. I know the size of the enemy. I know their composition, I know their disposition, I know their strength, I know their morale. I know their most likely and most dangerous courses of action. And I've developed courses of action that we can take if we come under attack and courses of action that we can do to find, fix, neutralize, or defeat any kind of improvised explosive device. I'm confident in the people that I have in my patrol, that they are trained and they understand that this is not me with some swashbuckler hat on and a cavalier attitude saying, I ain't afraid of these guys. I've studied them and I've been out there around them. I know exactly what they're capable of and I'm not going to let one Improvised explosive device (IED) shut down an entire squadron's operation." The commander said, "With that analysis Sergeant

Major, I think you need to execute." My point in all of that is some people will look at a senior enlisted leader, and when I make a statement like I'm not scared of guys putting bombs on the side of the road, that I have this cavalier attitude and I haven't studied the enemy. But, I have studied the enemy. I made my troops study the enemy. I made us go through the military process all along the way throughout that entire deployment. And for one officer to look at me and say, well, you're being cavalier was an insult to me because I had done these kinds of things. It wasn't toxic positivity in my response to him. It was positivity based off of analysis, training, certification and confidence and trust that the men and women in my patrol and myself we're going to do the right thing, whether we are attacked or not. Now, again, the enemy gets a vote, but I was confident that we were going to be okay. Low and behold, guess what? We were okay. I wasn't going to let one IED shut down an entire U.S. operation and we had our Iraqi partners with us. I wasn't going to let one potential threat stop what we were doing. I was confident we could handle it.

Lindsay: I think strong leadership can often be intimidating to weak leadership. I've seen leaders that can sometimes be intimidated by a stronger leader below them that is really challenging them to be the leader that they need to be. I often get the question, what happens if you're working for a bad leader or a toxic leader? What advice would you give or what's your experience with that if you're having to lead up because the person above you is either not doing their job, they're incompetent or they're just standing in the way?

Troxell: The operations officer didn't want to be on the decision line to send people out there because he didn't know the training readiness and effectiveness of the force we were going to put on that road where the IED was. So his thing was, if we just shut it down, then I'm not on the blame line. In another example, I wanted to facilitate the commander and wanted to support the commander, but I needed to have a teammate that could help me out. So, I went to the Executive Officer and I said, we collectively, me as the senior enlisted guy, you as the second in command are here to support the commander and assist him in making sound and timely decisions. We've got to be able to communicate with him, mitigating risks with our subordinate level officers and senior enlisted. How do we set conditions that he will be more comfortable making decisions? So, I think to answer your question is one, you've got to talk to the person. I mean, I would go in and have frank conversations with him, but alone, him and I, it was this is just the sergeant major disagreeing with him. However, if the Executive Officer and I went in talking to the commanding officer, now it's his senior most officer under him and his senior most enlisted under him that are telling him. So, I think there's got to be that eyeball to eyeball, kneecap to kneecap, tactful, respectful kind of dialogue. And then, if that's not helping, there's got to be some art to it between people that are influential to that commander to make sure that we're getting the mission done and that the troops understand the direction we're going.

When I was a young sergeant first class in the 82nd, I would get these young West Point second lieutenants, just like the second lieutenants from the Air Force Academy, that would come in bright-eyed and bushy tailed. They've been through the most prestigious military academies on the planet, and they get here and they've got everything going for them except common sense. I was the common sense hammer that had to put it in their face sometimes in a respectful way, but not in front of the troops. I would let them know that sometimes they needed to slow down and be quiet and watch and learn from their non-commissioned officers. I used to say this all the time, The company commander's going to make you a good officer. I'm going to make you a good leader, especially in charge of this platoon. So, we've got to work together." That was some of the art of influencing that I tried to do to help commanders or leaders above me that were struggling a little bit.

Lindsay: With that idea of a good leader in mind, what is good leadership? What do good leaders do?

Troxell: First of all, I think they have a measured level of energy and enthusiasm. I say measured because it doesn't have to be a "Kill 'em all, let God sort 'em out" kind of thing. But you come with energy and then you're enthusiastic about what you're doing. Good leaders look people in the eye when they're talking to them. They give off their time to others. And like I said before, they have vision, they have purpose, and they are positive in their approach. They are consistent with their subordinates delivering the why. People will sometimes say, "Why do we have to tell the troops why they have to do something?" Well, we do it all the time in our orders process. Here's your task...here's your purpose. Here's what I want you to do, and here's why I want you to do it in an operations order. We are constantly telling the why. It could be the worst mission on the planet under the most dangerous conditions, in the most austere environment with an unknown completion time of when this deployment's going to be over with. But if we deliver the why on why we're doing it, it may suck, but the troops will accept it. They may not like it, but they will accept it. I always wanted the troops to know what the hell we were doing all the time. I think a good leader brings a measured level of energy and enthusiasm. They lead through their physical example more than so within what comes out of their mouth. They have vision, they're purposeful in their actions and they are positive, and they bring a positive attitude to work every day. I want people to be excited about coming to work. I want them to, when they come to work, they're like, "Yeah, let's get after it!" So, it's that level of positivity and I keep bringing that up because it is what brings people back. And it's contagious. A leader must also be able to admit when they're wrong and say, "Hey, I screwed this up."

Lindsay: Because your people already know it. Right? It goes back to that point of acknowledgement.

Troxell: Here's an example. I had a great leader and he thought he had lost a very sensitive item. We were out at the Joint Maneuver Readiness Center doing an exercise. He came to me and said, "Hey, I can't find this sensitive item." As you know, if you lose something like a sensitive item, it shuts the whole thing down. I said, "Okay, what we're going to do is we're going to pull everything out of our vehicles, everything in the load plan, and we're going to look and make sure before we report this higher up to make sure the item is truly lost." I told all my squad leaders, I said, "Hey, start laying all your Bradley fighting vehicle's equipment out." Well, as we were about an hour into laying all this stuff out, the lieutenant comes back to me and he says, "Sergeant Troxell, I found it." I said, "Where was it at, Sir?" He said it was in his Gore-Tex jacket, in the pocket. He asked me to get the whole platoon together. So, I gathered up all 30 of our troops, we gathered in a semicircle, and he said, "I found the sensitive item. I wasted your time, and I sincerely apologize for wasting your time and making this a significantly emotional event. I'm going to learn from this, I'll get better. But this was on me." I thought, this guy's going to go places because he could've tried to cover it up, but instead he owned it. After that, all 30 of those soldiers, including myself, would've followed that guy to the gates of hell because he owned his mistake. But what he did that day as a leader set the best example any leader could have done when they make a mistake. And to this day, I respect the man for it.

Lindsay: You've mentioned several times throughout our conversation about purpose and vision. After 38 years culminating with the highest enlisted position in the Department of Defense, that's a tough act to follow. So, what does purpose and vision look like for you now?

Troxell: I always use this phrase, and I learned it from a scholarly type as we were getting ready to go into the surge in Iraq. He said, "Do not be lost in your museum." We all have museums from our military service, and we have all these accolades we have and awards and memen-

tos from our service. But don't get lost in that. You've got to focus on what is next and what is your next mission? When I finished as the SEAC, I still wanted to serve others. So, I came up with three focus areas. The first is how can I continue to pay it forward to the men and women in uniform right now? Whether that's as a motivational speaker, as someone that helps them with their lethality, their readiness, their fitness, or however I can help them. Second of all, what can I do to give back to my fellow veterans through things like supporting the University of Health and Performance[1] or veteran service organizations? What can I do to help them? And three, I wanted to be able to take on the corporate world. I wanted to see if I could be a small business owner, have my own consulting firm, and have my own leader development company. Really, how can I do things to make life comfortable for my wife of 41 years that was on this journey with me, for my children and make a future for my grandchildren? And those are the three things that I focus on right now in that order. That's what drives me every day.

I have this phrase, and I got it from Morgan Freeman in the movie Shawshank Redemption... "Get busy living or get busy dying." I see too many of my peers that are in their sixties like I am, that are focusing more on dying than they are living. So, I'm going to continue to PT with the troops. I'm going to continue to look after my health. I'm going to continue to be a positive influence on my family, on others, on my military and on my nation. That positive influence that fuels me every day is I want to get up and make today better than it was yesterday.

Too many people are looking back. I was the SEAC, but now I advise a guy that was an E-4 in the Wyoming National Guard, or a guy that was an E-5 in the 10th Mountain Division, or a guy that was a Coast Guardsman that got out as an E-4. I don't get caught up on what I was. I don't need to. I'm proud of my service, proud that I spent 38 years and proud that I retired as the SEAC, but I'm John Wayne Troxel and I am here to help. How can I be a good teammate? That's what I focus on. I think the more leaders as they transition, if they focus on things like that instead of how can I keep my status that I had in uniform, they'll have a much better time after their military journey is over with. So that's what I do.

Lindsay: That's a good point. I think a lot of people focus on what they do or what they've done instead of who they are. And if I'm hearing what you're saying, your mission and your purpose is to be of service. And if your purpose is to be of service, you never get done with that. You don't get lost in the weeds because there are always people to serve, whether it's your family, veterans, the active duty, or whoever that is. There's always a ton of service available to do so you don't get caught up in the museum. It's good to reminisce. It's good to think about that, to have value of what it was that we contributed, but I think a lot of times where people have trouble with that transition is they never really came to the realization who they are and what they want to be about.

Troxell: Here's an example. I was a brigade sergeant major during the surge in Iraq. I lost 54 soldiers and had over 500 severely wounded. Hundreds of my soldiers are still suffering in silence with PTSD and traumatic brain injury. One of them reached out to me and says he lives in the local area where I live, and asks if I would come and speak to his son's boy Scout troop? I said, Absolutely! He asked, "What's it going to cost me?" I said, "Nothing. You paid me back in 2007 by being on patrol every day, taking the fight to the enemy, being there for the men and women on your left and serving as an awesome warrior." So, I was going to do this because I knew what it meant to him. I wanted him to know that I was going to be there for him. He was there for me 17 years ago in combat by getting out there and getting

1 www.university-hp.com

after the mission every day. Things like that still fuel me to help serve others. One of my fellow warriors asked me to come and do something and I was going to be there. And Doug, I do that probably three dozen times a year. As a matter of fact, Friday I'm heading to Buffalo, New York. A guy that is in the New York National Guard said they're having their company ball on Saturday. He served with me in combat and asked if I would come and be the speaker? And I made it a point that on my way back from South Carolina, I'm going to stop there to do that, because I know that's a big deal.

Lindsay: I like that. If you look at service as a life purpose, you are never done. Which I think is the beauty of it, because we are always striving to serve. So, the last question is what advice do you have for young leaders?

Troxell: That you have been put in a leadership role for a reason, and it's based on your potential to lead. With that comes a lot of responsibility and you ought to look at it as a privilege to lead, mentor, and coach the men and women in your charge. Do not take it lightly. Be the best leader you can be. One that treats people with dignity and respect and looks them in the eye when you're talking to them and is there for them. A leader who knows them, knows their family, and knows what drives them. Know your people. Look out for them. And don't take it lightly because it is a privilege to be a leader. So, you have to maximize that opportunity. It's not about you, it's about the people that you are providing purpose, motivation, direction, inspiration, and influence to. Focus on that, and I guarantee you, you're going to be good.

INSIGHTS

Character in the Age of AI

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We need Guardians who do the right thing. Why? For one, doing the right things attracts the right partners to help us win the next war. It is also a generative energy that fuels the warfighter and bonds people together – ultimately, we fight for the guardian to our left and right. It is a strategic advantage, and it behooves us to practice and develop character just as we develop our intellect and physique. How? By practice. Doing the right – and often difficult – things even when "No good deed goes unpunished." In the dawn of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and quantum physics, character will play an outsized role in who wins the next war.

The word Character in Greek is kharakter, which means "a distinctive mark." It is something that distinguishes one thing from another. Kharakter was a stamping tool used to distinguish an object and set it apart – lending it a unique identity derived from its essence. It is not only one of the Space Force's four values but also the most elevated one. According to the Space Force Guardian Spirit Handbook (SPFH 1-1), Character is "above all." As a matter of fact, at the annual Space Force Heritage Dinner hosted at CORONA Fall by the Chief of Space Operations, General B. Chance Saltzman, there are four candles at each dinner table, but one of the candles is always taller than the other three in order to represent Character Above All.

The SPFH 1-1 defines character as our "inner moral compass" that we rely on to pursue the mission. And first among the three traits (or personas) of the Guardian is a Principled Public Servant: "Guardians who exhibit the Guardian Spirit are principled members of the profession of arms who possess Character beyond question." Webster's dictionary defines the word principled as "acting in accordance with morality and showing recognition of right and wrong." Distinguishing between right and wrong is essential to competitive endurance since one of its three tenets is to "conduct *responsible* counterspace campaigning." So threaded throughout United States Space Force (USSF) doctrine, we see that character lies at the heart of mission success. It is part of our identity (principled public servant), and it is literally a mark of distinction. So how might we get after it? And, what's at stake?

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 335 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.335

Critical thinking plays no small role in how we might deliberately develop character. In September 2024, approximately 120 operators from Delta 9 participated in a professional development event led by a cross-functional team from the Naval War College, Naval Post Graduate School, and NAVSEA Warfare Center Carderock. They participated in a condensed version of an executive leadership course on metacognition – essentially thinking about thinking. Minding our mind. It challenged Guardians to step outside of themselves (figuratively speaking) and observe how they perceive and draw conclusions. Ultimately what it reveals is that our minds and perceptions sometimes deceive us. And being aware of how we can critically think through a situation, and develop muscle memory over time through practice, can heighten our ability to make better choices – and more ethical choices. In essence, deliberately engaging in the ancient practice of metanoia, which is a noun meaning "a fundamental change in character or outlook." The word meta means "beyond" and noia means "perception," where one changes how they perceive the world around them and interprets the signals differently in order to make a wiser decision. In the Bible, the Greek word metanoia is interpreted as repentance since there is a powerful transformation that occurs in one's identity when they begin to perceive the world in a different way.

Warren Buffet, the owner of Berkshire Hathaway and a renowned business management guru, has famously declared that integrity is the most important character trait he looks for in people when hiring new employees. He goes on to observe that if you don't have integrity, the other two qualities he looks for in people – intelligence and energy – will be harmful. The authors of this article believe there are military advantages to exercising character: it attracts partners to win the next fight, serves as a generative energy for the warfighter, and builds trust and camaraderie.

In his famous Moon Speech given in 1962 at Rice University, President John F. Kennedy urged the nation to seek "preeminence in space." Not superiority or supremacy – but preeminence. The word comes from the Old French for "prominent" or "rising above others," and, in the 16th century, came to mean "distinguished in character." It also comes from the Medieval Latin preeminare, which means "to transcend, excel, rise above." Not literally in the physical sense of being higher above but rather in character and moral distinction. In fact, in the Catholic Church, cardinals are addressed as "Your Eminence" to show respect for cardinals who are seen as set apart. In his speech, JFK talks about how "space science, like nuclear science and all technology, has no conscience of its own" and urges Americans to lead with a conscience: "Whether [space science] will become a force for good or ill depends on man, and only if the United States occupies a position of pre-eminence can we help decide whether this new ocean will be a sea of peace or a new terrifying theater of war." And here is the caveat – the real politic: "I do not say that we should or will go unprotected against the hostile misuse of space any more than we go unprotected against the hostile use of land or sea, but I do say that space can be explored and mastered without feeding the fires of war, without repeating the mistakes that man has made in extending his writ around this globe of ours."

Stewardship in, from, and to the domain is necessary for our nation to maintain access to space and freedom of movement within. Access and movement are decisive advantages in any coming conflict – particularly when the adversary might outnumber us. Losing access to space has an asymmetric impact on nations at war if our adversary outnumbers – or out resources – us. That's why in C-note 16, General Saltzman declares the Guardian's dual function of protecting both the security *and* prosperity that the nation derives from space. That dual function lends the Guardian a dual identity of Sentinel-Steward. So, the first "I Will" statement in the Guardian Commitment states: "I will act with integrity, honesty, candor, fairness, and transparency." It is the first of 12 "I Will" statements and applies to team leaders and members. It is a solemn promise.

There is a duality about the Sentinel-Steward that distinguishes the warfighter. They are always vigilant not only for threats and challenges but also for opportunities. They are not simply looking to dodge the opponent's punch but see it as an opening for a counter-punch. Christian Brose writes in the *Kill Chain* that the U.S. Department of Defense culture does not make an important distinction between preventing bad things from happening and enabling good things to happen. He says this is an important distinction and one that is necessary for advantage in warfare. The Sentinel-Steward does both. Like the Greek demigod, Bootes – who graces the 72nd ISRS/Detachment 5 patch – the Sentinel-Steward wields a spear (defensive tool) in one hand and a sickle (harvesting tool) in the other. Bootes, also known as The Ploughman in mythology, is the ancient gardener; he keeps the wolves at bay with one hand and keeps the fig trees prospering with the other. It is no small coincidence that the word Guardian comes from the Old French for gardener.

In an age where the word morality or ethics might sound quaint, it is also making a resurgent comeback thanks to the advent of AI and quantum physics. With heightened computing power and speed, there are also heightened tensions around whether having the human in the decision loop is an asset or a liability. As the USSF endeavors to gain pre-eminence in space, it must not shirk but rather embrace the responsibility that comes with it – to grapple with these important issues of morality and conscience to role model what leadership in space looks like and, as a consequence, help humanity redefine its relationship with the cosmos.

The ethical use of AI to address these technically complex situations will require Guardians at all levels to develop a new set of ethical skill sets and battle drills to ensure they are trained and ready to lead with integrity in the age of AI and Quantum computing. Moral choices are the cornerstone for building trust within the USSF, the Department of Defense, and our allies and partners, setting an important precedent in the global space and technology domains.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has introduced an Ethics of Computing class that is available to undergraduate and graduate school students. Students grapple with the question "How do we make sure that a machine does what we want, and only what we want?" Naval Post-graduate School (NPS) teaches an "AI at War" course that looks at mobilizing a community through conversation, where computer science meets human science to enable the adoption of new technology in a manner that aligns with purpose, vision, and values. Guardians coming out of the Commit Phase of Space Force's Space Force Generation (SPAFORGEN) model can take these courses during the Prepare and/or Ready Phases in order to bring the newly gained perspective back to the fight.

The potential dilemmas AI presents are not easy to recognize; therefore, Guardians must become proficient in developing ethical skill sets guided by a moral code to ensure they can identify the right course of action. To accomplish this, now is the time for the USSF to ensure every Guardian receives AI-based ethical training designed to equip members with the necessary skills to recognize ethical challenges when they arise and the knowledge and experience to resolve them successfully. In an era of the current geo-political environment and collaboration in space exploration, character guided by ethical skill sets can distinguish Guardians as principled leaders who prioritize the greater good over short-term gain.

There are numerous situations daily where one's character and/or cherished values might conflict. These potential "gray zones" represent situations that do not easily fall into either a "right" or "wrong" category. What do Guardians do if and/or when asked to choose between two competing values: for instance, developing AI algorithms and automated systems to detect potential adversaries versus the importance of main-

taining human oversight in these system during critical decision-making? Helping Guardians resolve these values-based challenges not only impacts the mission but their holistic wellness.

Equipping Guardians with AI-based ethical training can ensure they are ready to leverage AI and Quantum-based technologies to meet mission requirements aligned with our USSF and national values. Ultimately, a commitment to character and the ethical use of AI and Quantum can empower Guardians to lead decisively and ethically while embodying their dual roles of Sentinels and Stewards in safeguarding the security and prosperity we all derive from the space domain.

INSIGHTS

American Warrior Ethos

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American military and political leaders increasingly suggest a strong warrior ethos is key to the military's ability to succeed (McMaster, 2021). As with many widely-used phrases, "warrior ethos" is open to various interpretations. A shared understanding of warrior ethos, however, is foundational to our ability to maintain national security in today's volatile, uncertain, and rapidly changing technological and geopolitical environment. *Who* fights—and *why* they fight—and how warriors see themselves, are not merely academic questions. They profoundly shape how we conceive, prepare for, and counter threats to our way of life.

At the most fundamental level, a warrior is one who fights. Across cultures and languages, the idea of "warrior" has existed for millennia and is closely associated with violent killing, in pursuit of culturally approved (though not always universally endorsed) objectives. Warriors have fought for their lives, comrades, homes, communities, and countries since time immemorial (Fromm, 2010). One scholar describes the "classical Western image of the ideal warrior" as "a man whose astounding prowess in battle earns him power and respect among his peers. His display of skill, courage, and brute strength entitles him to recognition and favor within his community" (French, 2003).

The word "ethos" has many nuanced meanings but broadly refers to a way of being: a characteristic spirit and culture of a group of people that shapes how members of the group think and act. Because war has always directly involved life and death, the ancient concept of a warrior ethos packs a formidable emotional punch.

Americans have a complicated relationship with their warriors. The Constitution of the United States, ratified in June 1788, committed the American people to "*form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to [them]selves and [their] Posterity*" (U.S. Constitution, Preamble). Crafted and agreed in the wake of the Revolutionary War, this familiar preamble established a social contract—providing for the common defense—that generations of the American military have sought to fulfill in various ways as conditions seemed to demand. Colonial militias were raised, provisioned, led, and fought on their home territory to establish independence from Britain's monarchical rule. In the next century, the fledgling Army and Navy extended America's territorial boundaries, countered piracy on the high seas, repelled a Canadian incursion, and fought a bloody civil war. This experience reinforced a deeply

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 331 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.331

ingrained culture that placed decision-making primacy in elected leaders and fostered deep skepticism about large standing armies.

The 20th century began with more of the same until the First World War changed existing U.S. military habits. Technological innovations, such as aircraft, and the unprecedented deployment of an American Expeditionary Force to fight in Western Europe marked a major departure from earlier uses of America's armed forces. Postwar contraction began a period of introspection, followed by the Second World War's dramatic expansion of American armed forces to over 8 million men. President Truman's subsequent attempts to reorganize and shrink this massive military force had limited success, constrained as they were by the onset of the nuclear arms race and the Korean conflict. Throughout the following decades of the Cold War, the conflict in Vietnam echoed the kinds of ground and air combat seen in earlier 20th-century wars. At the same time, the Air Force's Strategic Air Command (SAC) was building the most destructive arsenal in human history under the motto "Peace Is Our Profession"--which was itself an ironic nod to SAC's real purpose to deter both conventional and nuclear attacks that could wreak havoc on American and allied territory. After the Berlin Wall fell in 1991, U.S. military forces began a dramatic downsizing from Cold War levels, but conflicts in the Middle East tempered further reductions. The U.S. entered this century with somewhat less global capacity and a continuing focus on regional conflict.

In short, throughout its first two centuries, the U.S. military mostly fought in episodic rather than continuous combat, primarily relying on citizen-soldiers and sailors, led by a small core of full-time career personnel. A deeply rooted warrior culture existed in some elite units, but warrior as a common term was relatively rare. Indeed, in a comprehensive year 2000 study of U.S. military culture, the word warrior does not appear even once (Collins, 2000).

As wars changed, our vernacular changed. Afghanistan and Iraq counterinsurgency conflicts of the last two decades began to require repeated rotational tours from many U.S. military personnel. Emphasizing an expeditionary mindset and continuous lethal combat operations, these experiences molded an entire generation of servicemembers and shaped the public understanding of military service. To encapsulate the warfighting mindset associated with those operations—and perhaps as convenient shorthand to include all soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen—servicemembers were increasingly referred to as warriors, and the idea of warrior began to be institutionalized. For example, shortly after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the U.S. Army promulgated an explicit Warrior Ethos consisting of four statements: "I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade" (Warrior Ethos, 2025). The Marine Corps increasingly referred to a warrior as part of its combat arms training (Jamison, 2004); the Air Force promulgated warrior ethos in an "Airman's Creed" in 2007 (Gettle, 2007). Unsurprisingly, it is commonplace today to hear all American military members collectively referred to as warriors.

Yet, unlike warrior castes in earlier centuries, American warriors are part of a military *profession,* and that profession's nature affects how we should think of warrior ethos. In 1957, Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington characterized the expertise of the military profession as "management of violence" (Huntington, 1957) – which at first glance seems consistent with the idea of military professionals as warriors. However, Huntington defined the military profession much more narrowly than it is defined today. Writing at a time when the vast majority of the U.S. military was composed of draftees, he considered only experienced active-duty officers to be members of the military profession. Reservists, many support-specialty officers, and all enlisted troops were "military" but not "professionals," and while a fraction of junior officers would naturally progress over time into the military professional category, the majority of

military members never attained the competence to be part of the profession. Huntington also mentioned a professional ethos of "corporateness" among these senior officers—a tight-knit, mutually supportive, self-policing, and exclusive society reminiscent of warrior codes in many cultures (Huntington, 1957, p. 16). Lastly and importantly, Huntington identified the military professional's responsibility as the "military security of his client, society" (Huntington, 1957, p. 15).

Two-thirds of a century later, today's all-volunteer force is nearly unrecognizable through Huntington's lens. Since 1973, Americans in uniform have served only voluntarily, are recruited from every demographic of American society, and many remain in uniformed service for decades. Our understanding of "the military profession" has broadened to include those whose competence is far beyond the straightforward management of violence. Today's military professionals fill a vast (and still expanding) range of specialized roles across air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace domains requiring significant levels of specialized training, experience, and judgment. Some of these military professionals manage or inflict lethal violence; others provide essential military functions through acquisition of military capabilities, operating and defending national space assets, securing and operating in the cyber domain, planning and executing logistics, personnel management, and many other critical tasks. "The phrase "military security of society" is far more ambiguous today than when Huntington wrote it, because the military has become responsible for some functions previously done by civilians (or which were nonexistent); and government civilians and the private sector are increasingly responsible for functions directly exposed to attack and requiring active defense.

Just as warfare evolves, so must the warrior ethos. Military professionals from the most junior to the most senior have a responsibility to understand the evolution of warfare and to adapt the warrior ethos to conform to the demands of victory in the future.

That future differs from our instinctive grasp of it, because "war" increasingly includes significant contests in the domains of cyber and space, materially affecting the way warfare is traditionally fought in maritime, land, and air domains. Actions in those new contested spaces can and will tilt the outcome in violent combat, and just as easily cross boundaries into our homeland in new and threatening ways, affecting American lives and prosperity and posing new challenges. Rather than honoring a clear distinction between peacetime and wartime, our adversaries have far less respect for such dividing lines, as exemplified by the Chinese approach of "unrestricted warfare" (Liang and Xiangsui, 2020).[1] Sometimes called "political warfare" (Jones et al., 2023), this approach to imposing one's will on an adversary encompasses far more than the violent combat we associate with war and warriors, and demands a far broader national approach to countering it. In the words of Sir John Keegan, "it is toward the disintegration of human groups that battle is directed" (Keegan, 1976). Beyond warfare of old, the disintegration of human groups can be now pursued in orbit, in hundreds or thousands of computers or phones or electrical substations or vehicles, or in more traditional battlespaces. Old frameworks for war, battle, attack, and defense no longer serve us well.

Because war is changing, future battles will happen in both the familiar physical domains of air, land, and sea, and in the new, far less tangible domains of space and cyber. War will almost certainly touch our homeland in ways it has never done before, either directly or indirectly. As a result, the warrior ethos must change to

1 This excerpt from the 1999 People's Liberation Army colonels' work makes crystal-clear the conceptual challenge the American military must prepare to confront: "*In terms of beyond-limits warfare, there is no longer any distinction between what is or is not the battlefield. Spaces in nature including the ground, the seas, the air, and outer space are battlefields, but social spaces such as the military, politics, economics, culture, and the psyche are also battlefields. And the technological space linking these two great spaces is even more so the battlefield over which all antagonists spare no effort in contending. Warfare can be military, or it can be quasi-military, or it can be non-military. It can use violence, or it can be nonviolent.*"

encompass combat in both new and old battlespaces. American warriors will need to fight in traditional and non-traditional ways, alongside combatant and "non-combatant" partners. The attributes called out in the military officer's commission—patriotism, valor, fidelity, and abilities—are essential, but their manifestation will vary greatly depending on the specific abilities modern warriors bring to "the fight." Warrior ethos isn't an "either/or" where we can choose to define it around old warriors or new warriors—it's both. Warriors in old domains and new domains must fight, and either win or lose, together. To function in battle—violent or not—they need to understand each other and work as a team. In the same way, the society they serve must understand and support them all.

As war evolves, the emotional issue of recognition for those affecting the combat from "outside the battlefield" (Lamothe, 2015) raises the question whether service members not directly orchestrating lethal combat can truly be called "warriors." Can they embrace and demonstrate attributes like a will to win, a willingness to accept risk, and a capacity to inflict harm on an enemy? Just as crucially, are those attributes themselves still essential to a modern warrior ethos?

The Air Force Academy's 23rd Superintendent, Lt Gen Tony Bauernfeind, recently addressed related questions about warrior ethos in a clear and powerful way. In his view, warrior ethos is a *mindset* that demands a *mastery of one's craft,* developed through leveraging one's natural abilities, relevant experiences, and dedicated study to be able to perform required military duties. The ethos requires continuous mental, physical, spiritual, team and family readiness to execute those duties. It requires accepting risk with intelligence and courage, along with the resilience to encounter adversity, adjust, prevail and lead a team to mission accomplishment through the most difficult circumstances.[2]

2 Lt. Gen. Tony Bauernfeind (Superintendent United States Air Force Academy) remarks to cadet audience, November 20, 2024.

This description of warrior ethos captures the contemporary American military professional ethic far better than Huntington's expression "management of violence" does; it is agnostic of the exact skills demanded. Today's military missions demand a range of traditional and non-traditional military expertise that is far more diverse and demanding than Huntington ever imagined. Thus, expanding the concept of warrior *skills* is necessary and appropriate. Yet even as the definition of what warriors *do* becomes broader, the last quarter-century of deployed military operations has produced mixed messages about why American warriors serve: are they warriors by nature, or warriors for a purpose?

Here, we return to the American military's origin story. From the colonial militias serving under George Washington to those who were deployed to Afghanistan to eliminate the Taliban as a host to terrorists attacking the United States, the American military's core responsibility has been to "provide for the common defense"—or as the oaths of enlistment and commissioning specify, "to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). Fulfilling that duty—having the warrior ethos that suits an American military professional—requires much from every person who wears a U.S. uniform. It draws from the ancient warrior's well: the indomitable will to take risk and to act decisively to succeed in deadly contests. It is fighting through smoke and bloody chaos to destroy an enemy in a firefight; maneuvering a helicopter or aircraft or submarine or tank at the ragged edge of its limits to reach, identify, and destroy a target; it is protecting innocents from friendly or enemy fire. It also draws from a different but no less essential well; it means staying cool under pressure in a quiet air-conditioned space, outthinking an enemy to employ and protect critical space assets or cause cyber disruption tens of thousands of miles away. Warrior ethos is also ensuring teammates at the tip of the spear are sustained by the rest of the spear in battle, no matter what. Some of these things require physical strength, endurance, and split-second judgment in the face of death; some demand feats of disciplined intellect and

composure; all require devotion to duty and to the values of the Service in which that duty manifests itself. It is fair to conclude that all who act with that kind of dedication to defend the "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" of their fellow citizens, while engaged in a lethal contest with an enemy—are warriors worthy of the name.

Those who fight on behalf of the United States serve for many reasons, but first among them are those noble objectives. They lead, follow and are empowered by respect and loyalty to their fellow soldiers, sailors, Airmen, Marines, Guardians, or Coast Guardsmen. American warriors do not kill or destroy on behalf of their nation for glory or satisfaction; they train, prepare, and act when directed in service of the society they have sworn to defend. American warriors must be military professionals first, deserving of the trust of the society they defend as their highest and most constant purpose. They must also think and act as warriors when called to action. They are defenders of the Constitution and American interests, territory, and people; they train and employ as warriors to achieve that purpose. They cannot be one without being the other.

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INSIGHTS

Unifying Air-Mindedness: Every Airman a Drone Pilot

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine demonstrates how technological advancements in unmanned systems are reshaping the character of war and democratizing military capabilities. This evolution underscores the need for the United States Air Force (USAF) to address a longstanding cultural gap—a lack of air-mindedness. This paper argues that embracing drone operations at all levels of the USAF provides a cost-effective and practical means to reinvigorate air-mindedness and prepare Airmen for the dynamic demands of great power competition. By fostering a unifying ethos of adaptability, innovation, and mission command, drone training offers a unique opportunity to integrate emerging technologies while enhancing strategic and operational contributions to the Joint Force. Practical implementation begins with the USAF Academy, where foundational programs can educate and empower Airmen to apply these principles in decentralized, high-tempo environments. Ultimately, incorporating drones into USAF culture ensures relevance and effectiveness in modern warfare while preparing Airmen to shape the next chapter of airpower excellence.

Keywords: Air-Mindedness, First-Person-View Drones, Great Power Competition, Airpower, Military Technological Adaptation

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 330 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.330

Close analysis of Russia's Special Military Operation reveals changes in the character of war that will affect the course of future conflicts (Kagan & Kagan, 2024). Ukraine has proven the proper utilization of precise mass across domains can allow an empirically inferior military to compete against a great power to achieve a bloody stalemate or outright success now and in the foreseeable future (Horowitz & Schwartz, 2024). The Ukrainian's improbable achievement also demonstrates how new paradigms in the pace and direction of technological advancements, specifically involving unmanned systems supporting combined arms warfare, have accelerated exponentially, ultimately resulting in a rapid democratization of capabilities in readily accessible commercial forms. As these innovations continue to transform modern battlefields, the United States Air Force (USAF) has a unique opportunity to shore up a perennial issue within the service—the absence of a strong culture of air-mindedness. Embracing drone operations at the unit level provides a means to reinvigorate the concept of air-mindedness throughout all ranks of the Air Force and will ensure every Airman is prepared to integrate emerging technologies and concepts to support the Joint Force.

Introduction

According to Elon Musk and others, the USAF has been caught flat-footed, while it continues to pursue the most expensive program in Defense Department history, the crewed F-35, at the expense of unilaterally pursuing unmanned drone technology (Suciu, 2025). While this punditry contains elements of truth, it is an oversimplification of the complexities and capabilities of projecting military power through control and exploitation in, from, and through the air.

However, rather than reflexively rejecting such criticism, airpower apologists should view such heresy as an opportunity to embrace innovation and adapt to new battlefield realities highlighted in the Ukrainian conflict. With appropriate resourcing and support, the proliferation of drones in modern warfare offers the USAF a chance to cultivate a unifying sense of air-mindedness that has been lacking since the dawn of the Air Corps Tactical School. Embracing the capabilities and inherent requirements to operate drones could be utilized to impart tenets of mission command throughout the force and enhance the concept of Mission Ready Airmen—two key pillars of the service's rhetoric surrounding lines of effort to re-optimize for great power competition (GPC).

Ostensibly, restoring a unifying culture of air-mindedness allows the USAF to ensure that all echelons of the service develop a strategic and operational understanding of how airpower integrates across domains to achieve Joint warfighting objectives. Additionally, it offers an opportunity to ensure every Airman is an active participant in the evolution of airpower doctrine and theory, connects them to all of the Air Force's Future Operating Concept key "fights," and addresses the Secretary of the Air Force's (SECAF's) recent initiative to ensure all Wings instill a strong threat awareness within its personnel (USAF, 2023).

Air-mindedness is much more than simply connecting Airmen to the mission, however. It is an ethos that values adaptability, ingenuity, empowerment, self-reliance, and an aggressive approach to problem solving—vital qualities that the service will need to successfully address the evolution of warfare (Johstono, 2024). Embracing the burgeoning proliferation of drones as a means to rededicate the USAF to air-mindedness ensures the service remains agile and effective amid the rapid democratization of warfighting capabilities, encourages concept development surrounding the seamless integration of emerging technologies with traditional platforms, and emphasizes another critical lesson resident within the Ukrainian conflict—the importance of iteration, experimentation, and empowerment on the battlefield (Kagan & Kagan, 2024).

Culture of Air-Mindedness

At its core, air-mindedness should serve as a unifying ethos that aligns every Air Force member, regardless of role, with a shared vision and understanding of how airpower contributes to the Joint Force. Much like the Marine Corps' mantra, "every Marine a rifleman," air-mindedness ensures that every Airman, whether a pilot, maintainer, intelligence analyst, or force support member internalizes the strategic and operational imperatives of airpower, and how they connect to warfighting. Creating a practical, contemporary means of institutionalizing this culture will help foster a collective identity rooted in the mastery and application of air capabilities and more fundamentally, a passion for airpower.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, which dates the first appearance to 1927, air-minded means to be "interested in or enthusiastic for the use and development of aircraft" (Trew, 2019). The term was widely used during the interwar years between WWI and WWII, with American military airpower advocates capitalizing on the idea along with public zeitgeist to argue for an individual air arm. Early aviation leaders such as Major Alexander de Seversky, General William "Billy" Mitchell, and General Henry "Hap" Arnold recognized that the air domain offered novel ways of overcoming the challenges inherent to industrialized warfare and how properly wielding airpower demanded and inspired innovation and ingenuity (Trew, 2019). Since the early zealous interwar years of air-mindedness, the Air Force has struggled to maintain and articulate a cohesive vision, mission, and culture that resonate throughout the service (Builder, 1994). Historical critiques underscore the persistent challenges of defining a unique identity and purpose within the service.

After struggling under the dogmatic doctrinal stranglehold and rigid checklist culture of Strategic Air Command, a group of junior USAF officers authored an unpublished brown paper in 1989 titled "A View of the Air Force Today." The report offered candid criticism of senior leadership and highlighted perceived institutional issues (Builder, 1994). More importantly, it offered earnest proposals to rectify the issues.

These officers argued that to its detriment, the USAF identified itself with aircraft and a myopic commitment to achieving technological superiority at all costs instead of focusing on an integrating vision grounded in fundamental airpower theory. As a result, the primary *means* employed by the service—i.e., the aircraft it flew—became the *ends* in which the service focused on at the expense of a coherent strategy. The authors further explained that this created loyalties to airframes and commands, which served to fracture the Air Force into factions devoted to distinct platforms rather than a unifying mission (Builder, 1994). The Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) at the time, General McPeak, acknowledged this in a 1992 policy letter stating "I suspect the absence of a clear mission statement contributed to our reluctance to organize ourselves properly. People built loyalties around their commands, intense loyalties in fact, rather than loyalty to air and space power as whole, to a broader, more comprehensive mission" (Builder, 1994).

Identities tied to specific aircraft rather than the institution, theory, or air-mindedness resulted in arguments over preferences for bombers versus fighters, stand-in versus stand-off aircraft, platforms versus weapons, and manned versus unmanned aircraft instead of a needed focus on integrated effects and capabilities to support the Joint Force. In addition, because aircraft maintained their distinction as the preferred means, aviators retained control of the service and created a caste of have and have-nots devoid of ties to a unifying ethos (Builder, 1994). This divisiveness within the service caused destructive effects to morale, dedication, and values and resulted in a sense of occupationalism focused on airplanes and flying. The brown paper authors concluded presciently decades ago that "the Air Force seems to have lost its identity and unique contribution," a criticism that still rings true to this day (Builder, 1994).

Currently, without a unifying ethos, the Air Force risks being perceived as a support element for other services rather than as a leading contributor to the Joint Force. A cultural vacuum also leaves Airmen disconnected from a broader sense of purpose and mission. Universal air-mindedness within the service offers a solution to this enduring problem. By fostering a shared understanding of how airpower integrates with other domains, it provides the Air Force with a unique contribution to the Joint Force that extends beyond advanced platforms or technologies.

To reinvigorate its culture and ensure its relevance in the face of modern threats, the Air Force must reimagine air-mindedness as the foundation of its identity. This foundation should inspire creative thinking, bold initiative, and a willingness to embrace uncertainty and hardship. Historically, air-mindedness has thrived on ingenuity and resourcefulness, transforming daunting obstacles into opportunities for innovation and progress. By institutionalizing these qualities, the Air Force can foster a resilient and adaptable ethos, uniting Airmen under a shared vision of purpose and possibility. This collective identity—rooted in the strategic and operational imperatives of airpower but untethered from specific platforms or technologies—will empower the Air Force to meet the complexities of modern warfare with creativity, determination, and an unwavering commitment to its role as a decisive force in GPC. In doing so, the service can restore its legacy of excellence and ensure its position as a leading contributor to Joint warfighting.

Drones and Air-mindedness

During WWI, airpower proved itself as an integral part of combined arms operations and demonstrated potential to be even more useful in the future (Gray, 2012). This conflict also revealed the expanded roles and missions of military aircraft that are commonplace today, such as reconnaissance, air superiority, and bombardment. At the outbreak of hostilities, the role of air vehicles focused entirely on artillery spotting and reconnaissance. This was followed shortly thereafter by the concept of aerial bombardment, a development that precipitated the creation of pursuit aircraft to intercept incoming bombers, reconnaissance aircraft, and eventually to neutralize the escort aircraft accompanying them (Laslie, 2024). Thus, pure aerial warfare was born during the conflict. As historian Lee Kennett noted, air vehicles in WWI "developed according to the needs of battle more than according to a doctrine or in some deliberately chosen direction" (Kennett, 1991). The Darwinian evolution of airpower that Kennett described in the Great War has been resurrected in the drone warfare occurring across Ukraine and Russia.

The low cost and rapid attrition of drones throughout Ukraine has created an intense environment where any successful adaptation in capability or role quickly proliferates across the battlefield. Paralleling the development of airpower in WWI, Ukraine has modified its first-person-view (FPV) drones, initially used for artillery spotting, reconnaissance, and aerial attack to take out tanks, armored vehicles, and infantry, and transformed them into high-altitude interceptors (Hamblin, 2024). Seven-hundred-dollar racing quadcopters are now taking out hundred-thousand-dollar scout drones in and well above the "air-littoral" with a greater than 50% success rate (Hamblin, 2024). Additionally, dedicated FPV fighters armed with shotguns have now emerged, which will not only continue to bring down enemy attack and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance drones but also counter adversary pursuit drones (Shcherbak, 2024). Drone dog-fighting will soon become a marquee event across the skies of Eastern Europe, and it is not a stretch to imagine that these capabilities could organically grow to contest conventional air superiority platforms more rapidly than traditional Air Forces, which can develop counters to this burgeoning threat.

The evolution of drone airpower on the Ukrainian battlefield demonstrates that these platforms offer

multiple economical, low-risk, practical ways to develop air-mindedness within the modern USAF. It also offers a readily accessible means to inculcate lessons from current conflicts into all levels of the force.

Frontline observations of the Ukrainian battlefield are proving that archaic, centralized command and battle management are quickly losing relevance, given the democratization of capabilities and the tempo needed to gain fleeting windows of operational advantage (Kagan & Kagan, 2024). As a Special Competitive Studies Project (SCSP) paper recently noted, it is no longer true that the best intelligence and information resides at an Air Operations Center or airborne battle management platform like the E-7 (Hinote & Ryan, 2024). Instead, it is more likely that leaders at the edge have situational awareness that is superior because "they have real time access to the same information augmented with a localized awareness of what is happening around them" (Hinote & Ryan, 2024). In addition, it is unlikely that Airmen in the field will have continuous connectivity with any type of centralized command and control, which means they will need to utilize mission command and initiative founded in air-mindedness to take independent action.

Airmen at all levels will also have to embrace constant movement and full spectrum signature management to survive a "radical contraction of the kill web" that means any concentrated or fixed forces will be easily detected and destroyed (Hinote & Ryan, 2024). This does not eliminate the need for higher echelon operations centers that will still be necessary to fulfill the higher-level functions to enable mission command, including the imperative to provide a regularly updated commander's intent, mission type orders, planning, orchestration of operational and strategic logistical support, and battle damage assessment. However, these developments, including the Ukrainian use of crowd-sourced cell phone targeting applications to rapidly curtail targeting cycles, indicate a pressing need for drastic updates to leadership education, training, equipment, and tactics (Freese, 2023). The SCSP authors eloquently conclude that "only empowered leaders who have been trained and trusted to execute mission command in garrison will be able to dominate the cognitive and temporal aspects of future combat" (Hinote & Ryan, 2024).

Drones provide the means to train Airmen in garrison to develop the adaptability and initiative required to become the empowered leaders the service needs. Air-mindedness is characterized by individual and small team excellence and a boldness rooted in expertise, technical skill, and ingenuity to develop novel approaches through enterprising resourcefulness (Johstono, 2024). Drones exemplify these characteristics, as their operational success hinges on small teams capable of leveraging localized information, technical proficiency, and ingenuity under high-pressure conditions. Embracing and championing this level of tactical independence not only honors the legacy of innovation and daring established by early aviation pioneers but also equips the Air Force to excel in the dynamic and decentralized nature of modern warfare.

Drones can also cultivate a key principle of air-mindedness, one vividly demonstrated in the ongoing Ukrainian conflict: technical and tactical innovations emerge from the bottom-up (Hardie, 2024). Integrating FPV and drone training into Air Force culture will teach Airmen critical skills such as navigating the complexities of electronic warfare, programming, maintenance, and repair of these platforms, and even fabricating spare parts using 3D printing—lessons currently instilled at the fledgling Ukrainian drone academy (Kyiv Post, 2024). By cultivating such expertise and fostering bold, adaptive action, the USAF can position its Airmen to generate transformative effects that enhance its strategic impact within the Joint Force.

Practical Steps for Implementation in Today's Air Force

Despite ongoing efforts to address force presentation models for Agile Combat Employment and a persistent emphasis on mission command, the Air Force still lacks formalized training aligned with SCSP's recommendations. Moreover, the service has yet to adapt contingency operations to reflect the decentralized and resource-limited realities of GPC or foster a unifying culture of air-mindedness across its ranks. Practical, cost-efficient drone training, field exercises, and wargames offer a solution, equipping Airmen at all levels with the tools and mindset to navigate the challenges of mission command.

Outside of the specialized skills and knowledge of drone piloting, "the future will demand a broader array of expertise, including machine learning programmers, cloud technicians, specialized mechanics," fluency in the electromagnetic spectrum, and operators of more diversified systems. As noted earlier, drone operations foster innovation and integration of uncrewed systems in ways the service is only beginning to imagine (Solano, 2024). Additionally, drones offer an easy way to expose Airmen to the signature management, camouflage, concealment, deception, and base defense requirements needed to survive the threats small unmanned aerial systems pose to traditional airpower projection.

Considering the evolving demands on modern Airmen, the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) represents an optimal starting point for institutionalizing this shift. Leveraging the Academy's unique position as an academic and training center of excellence, USAFA could pioneer a program that seamlessly blends theoretical education with hands-on operational experience. By incorporating drones into the curriculum, the Air Force can help bridge the gap between academic concepts and real-world application, offering every cadet the practical experience with mission command, the roles of airpower, supporting missions, and the execution of tactical ingenuity.

Through wargaming scenarios that simulate dynamic combat environments, cadets could experience firsthand the challenges of decentralized operations and the need for rapid decision-making. These scenarios could function as leadership reaction exercises, requiring cadets to demonstrate initiative, adaptability, and coordination when confronted with real-world constraints. Furthermore, hands-on training with drone repair, programming, and maintenance would ensure that every cadet not only becomes proficient with drone technology but gains technical competence alongside invaluable leadership experience, preparing them to manage the complexities of GPC environments effectively.

Building on the success of the USAFA's pilot program, operational wings could then deploy initial drone fleets in garrison. By using these early units as a foundation, wings can develop targeted training exercises based on operational mission sets and lessons learned from the Academy's pioneering efforts. This approach would foster decentralized decision-making, cultivate tactical autonomy among units, and reinforce the innovation central to the air-minded culture that the Air Force requires to remain strategically relevant.

Ultimately, by weaving drone training into the fabric of Air Force education and operational strategy, the service would effectively cultivate a new generation of Airmen capable of thriving in the complexities of modern warfare. Airmen will be empowered to apply critical thinking, to overcome obstacles, and to lead with ingenuity—qualities that will shape the next chapter of airpower excellence.

Conclusion

In the same way that airpower development during WWI created new roles, capabilities, tactics, and

strategies, the ongoing revolution in drone warfare offers the USAF a chance to recalibrate and integrate emerging technologies into its operational framework. It also offers the ability to foster a unifying ethos of air-mindedness, a deeper connection to Joint warfighting, and allows for an open-sandbox to ingrain mission command into Airmen through hands on practice within the air domain. A practical way to instill this mindset is by making every Airman a drone pilot, starting with USAFA Cadets. This initiative is not simply about mastering a new skill; it is about cultivating a mindset that values adaptability, rapid decision-making, and operational awareness—all qualities fundamental to air-mindedness.

As General George C. Kenney, Commander of Allied Air Forces in the Southwest Pacific, observed in his memoirs, "Numbers, names and insignia mean even more to a military organization than they do to Masons, Elks, or a college fraternity" (Kenney, 1997). Yet, the enduring strength of airpower is not found in its institutions, symbols, or platforms but in the culture they inspire and the results they achieve. By ensuring that every Airman develops a tangible connection to airpower, the Air Force can reinforce its identity, fostering a culture of innovation, adaptability, and collaboration that solidifies its unique contribution to GPC. It is this mindset—embodied by bold action and resourceful ingenuity—that drives success, ensuring airpower remains a decisive force on the modern battlefield.

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INSIGHTS

10 Tips for Promoting Emotional Integration in the Military

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ABSTRACT

There is a recognized need for military service members to effectively regulate their emotions, especially when considering the extreme stressors of deployment and combat. Overreliance on suppression or other strategies that minimize the expression of emotions are associated with poor health outcomes. Research suggests that Emotional Integration training will help build self-awareness, regulatory skill, and an overall healthier relationship with emotions. Emotional Integration involves viewing emotions as information and subsequently being able to make an autonomous choice on how to respond to that information. We propose 10 tips to prepare our service members to better utilize their emotions and have healthier outcomes.

Keywords: emotional integration; emotional regulation; self-awareness; military; leader development

The Army highlights "emotional self-control" as being key to the leadership attribute of composure (ADP 6–22). Being successful in battle requires leaders to temporarily suppress fear, discomfort, and stress, while remaining calm in combat (Bryan et al., 2012); this approach is nested within a military culture that generally discourages open

1 Author Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Military Academy, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 326 - http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.326

expression of emotions (Bryan et al., 2012; Green et al., 2010). However, what is adaptive in combat and acute circumstances is not necessarily suitable as a long-term approach to emotional regulation. Research suggests that chronically ignoring or suppressing feelings can create long-lasting emotional difficulties (Davies et al., 2019; Gross, 2002; Gross & Levenson, 1997), which have been associated with alcohol and drug abuse, violence, and suicide (reviewed in Stanley & Larsen, 2021).

In contrast to suppression (pushing away or avoiding emotions) or reappraisal (changing one's thinking about a situation to alter emotional response), Emotional Integration (also known as Integrative Emotional Regulation) views emotions as data that can be explored to guide choices around suppression, reappraisal, or expression (Ryan et al., 2006). Thus, Emotional Integration requires first accepting emotions, taking an interested stance toward emotions (a key component) and using the information gathered to volitionally guide subsequent action (Benita, 2020; Roth & Benita, 2023; Ryan et al., 2006). Emotional Integration presupposes that emotions arise when a meaningful goal or value is engaged (threatened or advanced). Thus, rather than seeing emotions as "good" or "bad," emotions are informational inputs that can inform us of our values and help guide or motivate actions to align with our values or goals (Roth et al., 2019).

Empirical research has found that Emotional Integration is associated with a reduction of fear and physiological arousal (Roth et al., 2014, 2018), while also associated with promotion of well-being outcomes, including purpose in life, personal growth, self-acceptance (Benita et al., 2020), learning from failure (Sharabi & Roth, 2024), and increases in self-esteem (Brenning et al., 2015). Emotional Integration may improve interpersonal relationships, possibly mediated through increased empathy (Benita et al., 2017; Kalman-Halevia et al., 2023), and even predict prosocial attitudes and behavior toward outgroups (Ditrich et al., 2024; Roth et al., 2017).

Given these benefits, we bring aspects of Emotional Integration together with the ability model of Emotional Intelligence (Caruso & Rees, 2019) to propose the following 10 tips to help trainees have a healthier approach to emotions:

Identify and Label Emotions

Precisely identifying emotions is associated with well-being and is frequently considered the first step to emotional regulation (Kalokerinos et al., 2019). In fact, one study found a connection between emotion differentiation (labeling an emotion) and effective emotion regulation (Barrett et al., 2001). The development of self-awareness in leadership training should provide trainees with opportunities to practice labeling their emotions. Simply asking, "How do I feel right now?" can make a difference in how we regulate our emotions (Caruso & Rees, 2019).

Accept Emotions

The discomfort caused by difficult and unpleasant emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness can lead us to associate them with maladjustment and poor performance (Roth & Benita, 2023). Although counterintuitive, accepting these difficult emotions can actually reduce their intensity (Guendelman et al., 2015). An Emotional Integration approach considers all emotions to provide important pieces of data (Caruso & Rees, 2019; Roth & Benita, 2023). Adapting practices such as mindfulness can help individuals to accept and thus address their emotions.

Identify the Source of the Emotion

When an emotion arises, which is labeled and accepted, ask "what is the cause of this emotion?" (Caruso & Rees, 2019). Knowledge about the source of emotion predicts emotion-regulation attempts and well-being (Millgram et al., 2023). Helping soldiers develop greater self-awareness will allow them to make the link faster between what they feel and why they feel it.

Consider What Meaningful Goal or Core Value Is Being Engaged

Emotions arise when something meaningful is at stake. They provide people with information about themselves, their values, or the situation (Roth & Benita, 2023). After understanding the source of an emotion, consider, "What information is this providing me? Specifically, what goal or value is being engaged here?"

Journal About One's Emotions

Identifying, accepting, and exploring emotions requires intentional introspection and practice until it becomes automatic. Journaling about cognitive and emotional responses promotes self-awareness (Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). Each of the aforementioned questions can be explored in a journal.

Meditate

Meditation, defined as a variety of complex emotional and attentional regulation strategies (Lutz et al., 2008), can be used as another introspective practice. Some forms of meditation, including mindfulness and insight meditation, can be used as exploratory strategies to examine emotional experiences (Singer & Engert, 2019).

Incorporate Emotions into After Action Reviews (AAR)

A team reflection after a training event (AAR) may also be an appropriate time to ask emotion-related questions pertaining to the event. The power of sharing emotions was highlighted by data from active combat soldiers from the Israeli Defense Force. In their recent study, Shorer et al. (2024) found that self-reported emotional expression (efforts to express or share emotions) was even more predictive than emotional processing (understanding emotions) in building resilience and reducing posttraumatic stress symptoms. The previously discussed questions and practices can be adapted to use for an AAR.

Prepare for Emotions in Training

Training with simulations of high emotion has been shown to build emotional resilience (White et al., 2020). Exposure to such scenarios may be useful in practicing the aforementioned strategies.

In educational settings, as scenarios are discussed to sharpen decision-making, we can add an auxiliary question about how students might feel during or after a hypothetical situation and encourage them to connect their emotions to their values.

Model the Skill for Trainees

Like many skills, one way people learn to emotionally regulate is through observation (Wright et al., 2025). Leaders can model Emotional Integration for trainees—especially how to identify an emotion and understand it. For example, a leader can share "I felt sad, because this mattered to me…." or "I'm so excited about this, because I value…".

Respond Appropriately to Someone Else's Emotions

Adopting an Emotional Integration perspective that emotions are neither good nor bad, but simply information, allows us to respond accordingly to expressions of emotion from others. For example, a fitting response to a trainee statement of "I shouldn't feel this way" might be, "Your emotion is an automatic response. But, *why* might you be reacting this way? What does this tell you about yourself? How do you want to respond to this emotion in a way that is consistent with your goals and values?"

Conclusion

Emotional Integration is not at odds with suppression. Rather, it inserts a deliberate step between emotional arousal and action, promoting deliberation of suitable approaches to emotions, of which suppression is one of many possible options. As we develop our current and

future leaders, it is vital for resilience that they have a healthy approach to emotions, and know both when and how to reappraise, to suppress, or to express their emotions. Many of these techniques lend themselves better to training and educational settings. Investing the time to developing the habit of Emotional Integration can result in more self-aware and resilient soldiers and leaders who will integrate emotion appropriately as they exercise judgment.

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