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The cover shows the iconic Polaris Hall, at the United States Air Force Academy, which is home to the Center for Character and Leadership Development. In the background is the Academy Cadet Chapel.

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JCLD primarily publishes peer-reviewed scholarship, which typically includes critical editorial review, feedback, and often substantial revision. This special feature is different. The reflections in *Get Back Up* are primary source material from two senior leaders who have operated under real institutional and moral pressures. Each reflection captures lessons about resilience, judgment, trust, and service—topics that sit at the center of character and leadership research.

We publish these reflections alongside academic articles to strengthen the link between research and practice. Read in sequence, they invite careful interpretation: What is the situation? What virtues or skills are being exercised? What trade-offs are being managed? In that way, this series supports JCLD's mission to connect evidence, professional experience, and education in the development of leaders of character.

Eschelle L. English
Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Character and Leadership Development*

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Get Back Up

Dr. Heather Wilson
General Dave Goldfein, USAF (Ret.)

Dr. Heather Wilson served as the 24th Secretary of the Air Force. General Dave Goldfein, USAF (Ret.), served as the 21st Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force.

Introduction

Where It Started

Heather

It was 1976, and I was a junior in high school growing up in rural New Hampshire. The black-and-white television in my mom's bedroom reported on the evening news that the first class to include women had entered the United States Air Force Academy.

That was interesting.

Even at 15 years old, I was a competitive and adventurous kid, prone to do things a bit out of the ordinary. That image of women entering that beautiful campus in the Rocky Mountains stuck with me. A few days later, I went to talk to my grandfather about it. He had been one of the first pilots in the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force in World War I and came to America in 1922 in search of work. A barnstormer and mechanic, George Gordon "Scotty" Wilson opened little airports in New England in the 1920s and 1930s. In World War II, he was part of a group of civil aviators who patrolled for submarines along the Atlantic coast, towed targets for gunnery practice, and ferried parts to airfields to support the military. That group eventually became known as the Civil Air Patrol, the official auxiliary of the US Air Force.

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I deeply admired my grandfather. As his only granddaughter, I was something special to him. I knew he wanted the best for me, and he was proud of how well I was doing in school, but I was also a little afraid of what he might say. It was, after all, 1976. Opportunities were opening for women, but thinking about going to the Air Force Academy was more than a bit unusual.

He was sitting in his customary armchair in the living room of my grandparents' small house when I told him I was thinking about applying to the Air Force Academy. There was a long pause as he stared at his aged hands resting in his lap. Then, in his soft Scottish brogue, he said, "Well, I flew with some women in World War II— towing targets and ferrying airplanes. The WASPS. They were pretty good 'sticks.' So, I guess that would be okay."

With his blessing, I applied to the Air Force Academy.

On Saint Patrick's Day in 1978, my congressman's office told me that I had been accepted. It was a full ride scholarship and an opportunity to chart my own course.

A few days after graduating from high school that same year, I went to see my grandfather to say goodbye before leaving to attend the Academy. I was 17, the same age he had been when he lied about his age and joined the RAF. The same age his son, my father, was when he enlisted in the Army Air Corps just after the end of World War II.

My father, also a pilot and mechanic, died in a car accident when I was 6 years old. As a child, I don't think I really understood how turning the arc of my life toward aviation might have felt to my grandfather. Now with children and grandchildren of my own, I have a deeper understanding of what my decision meant to him.

The day I left for the Air Force Academy was the only time in my life I saw my grandfather cry. A single tear traced the wrinkles of his aged face. He didn't acknowledge it was there and neither did I. I wonder now what he was thinking about—about the son he lost too soon, about the life he had lived in aviation, about the granddaughter he loved and who loved him? I didn't ask. In that moment of emotional connection, it was likely some of all those things.

My brother drove me in his pickup truck to the airport in Hartford, Connecticut. I had a small brown suitcase with a single change of clothes, a dozen sets of white underwear, and combat boots we'd been advised to purchase early to break in. I had a 35 mm camera that was my high school graduation present from my mother. Most important of all, I had a one-way ticket to Colorado Springs, Colorado.

I was on my way. I didn't know it then, but it would be the adventure of a lifetime.

Dave

I was in high school at Ramstein Air Base, where my father worked as a colonel on the NATO staff. My older brother had been at the Air Force Academy for 3 years and was at the top of his class as a leader, eventually rising to wing commander—the highest-ranking cadet.

I applied to the Academy but received a polite rejection letter rather early in the process with every box checked as to the reasons why: academics, athletics, leadership, extracurricular activities, community involvement, the list goes on.

So, I applied to the University of Wyoming where my best friend, Bob Ihle, planned to attend. My passions as a teenager were scouting, the outdoors, and music. Where better to study forestry and pursue my dream of becoming a guitar strumming, back-country ranger at a national park? They let me in.

Then I got the phone call that would change my life. A lieutenant colonel from the Academy admissions office called me at the base commissary where I was bagging groceries for tips. "We haven't heard back from you on the preparatory school scholarship we offered," he said. "Are you going to take it?" The thing was, I had no idea what he was talking about. As it turns out, they sent an offer letter to my aunt in New York, but she never forwarded it to us in Germany.

I thanked him and kindly informed him I was headed to Wyoming to study forestry and to please give the scholarship to someone else. There was a long silence on the phone before he asked if I wanted to discuss it with my parents first. Meanwhile, my boss was yelling for a bagger. I quickly told him I would, though it wouldn't make any difference, because I knew I was set on Wyoming, and my first tuition check had already been paid. After all, Bob would leave in a week, and we'd already discussed him setting up our dorm room. I wasn't far behind.

I went home for supper.

My dad was reading the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper over a plate of lasagna when I casually mentioned the phone call and that I had turned the offer down since everything was in motion for Wyoming.

There was a long pause.

My dad slowly folded the paper and set it aside. His steely blue fighter pilot eyes that had seen combat over the skies of Vietnam locked onto mine. I remember my younger brother, Mike, also looking at me like I was a bit crazy.

"Let me make sure I understand this," my father said deliberately. "Someone from the Air Force Academy called you today and offered you money to go to school. And you told him no, that you would rather use my money to go to school."

Let's just say I called Lieutenant Colonel Jackson back. He didn't seem surprised and hadn't given the scholarship away.

A year later, after time at preparatory school, I received a different kind of letter from the Air Force Academy telling me that I had been accepted in the class of 1982.

I'm forever grateful to that lieutenant colonel.

Chapter 1:
Am I Worthy?

Dave

On a full moon night, while flying a combat mission over Serbia on May 2, 1999, I became a pilot with more takeoffs than landings. Once I pulled the ejection handle and rode the rocket seat out of my dying F-16, my life depended on the courage and commitment of a small team of special operators who risked everything to bring me home.

You can read more about the details of this experience and the leadership lesson it taught me in the next chapter, but besides "get back up," this experience taught me another equally important lesson.

During the final moments of the rescue, as the sun began to rise and as the team fought their way to me, overcoming surface-to-air missiles that enemy troops were firing from below, I thought about these brave young warriors and how lucky I was to be from a nation that wouldn't leave anyone behind. America was not going to rest that night until I was safely back in the arms of my wife and daughters.

Was I worthy of their risk?

This question—am I worthy?—thus became my daily "mirror check" in every position I was privileged to fill. It remains my mirror check to this day and will be for the rest of my leadership journey.

Leadership is a precious gift offered by those entrusted to our care. As servant leaders, we must work every day to earn and re-earn this gift. The way we do this is through how we act when nobody is watching, how we live our lives, how we approach the tough decisions when good options are long gone, and how we treat and take care of those who choose to follow us.

As soon as we start feeling entitled to either the position or the perks of rank and responsibility, we begin to deviate from true servant leadership. Trust grows over weeks, months, and years, but it can be lost in a moment of indiscretion or in a sense of entitlement.

To be truly worthy of the gift of leadership, we must also understand the difference between character and reputation. Character defines who we are and forms the very essence of a servant leader. Reputation is how others see us after watching our performance over time. If we focus on the former, then the latter will take care of itself. (The same is not always true in reverse.)

Knowing the importance of character in leadership makes us reflect on our own actions and values. In doing so, we are challenged to evaluate our worthiness through the lens of courage, humility, and service.

Am I worthy of the risk those young warriors took to bring me home those many years ago?

Am I worthy of the trust extended to me by the parents of the young men and women who chose to join the Air Force—those young people who are the greatest treasure in our nation's arsenal? Am I worthy of leading those who look to me to make tough decisions with character, courage, and competence?

Am I worthy of standing before my grandchildren, to whom I dedicate this book, in the hope that they, too, will be inspired to pursue a path of servant leadership? The only answer I have found appropriate over the years is one that brings me to prayer. Please God, I hope so. I hope I am worthy.

Heather

It was 2007. I was called into a briefing in the windowless hearing room of the House Permanent Select

Committee on Intelligence, which, at the time, was high in the Capitol building underneath the cast iron dome.

I had been working for over a year on oversight hearings and draft legislation to update our foreign intelligence surveillance laws, which failed to keep up with advancements in technology and the changing nature of global threats. We came close to an update in late 2006 but ultimately didn't get new legislation across the finish line.

Our government isn't set up to be efficient; it is set up to protect us from tyranny. Even easy, commonsense things are hard to get through the Congress. And updating intelligence collection laws—balancing national security with protection of civil liberties—in a technical area of the law wasn't easy. But it was important. The 2006 draft legislation died, as all legislation does, when the new Congress was sworn in. And with a change in power in the House of Representatives, I was now in the minority. I wasn't setting the agenda, but in that committee room, all of us knew there were problems with the wiretapping laws and all of us knew that they needed to be fixed.

The law on intelligence collection, written in 1978, was specific to the technology of its time. In those days, almost all local telephone calls were made on phones attached to wires—landlines—and almost all international calls were transmitted over the air, typically using radio waves. By 2007, however, the technology had completely reversed. Nearly all local calls were on cell phones using wireless communication networks, and a lot of international calls were routed by computers on fiber-optic cables laid on the ocean floor. According to the original text of the law, any communications sent over the air could be collected, but if intelligence agencies wanted to touch a wire in the United States—even to gather the communications of terrorists overseas—then they needed a warrant from a judge. That made no sense, and the law needed updating.

That day, underneath the Capitol dome, we were briefed on a particular case.

The Islamic State insurgency in Iraq was still threatening Americans, and three Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division had been captured by Islamic extremists in a dangerous zone in Iraq known as the "triangle of death." While the American military immediately began searching house-to-house to find the Soldiers, the Department of Justice went to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court in Washington, DC, for permission to collect communications on the group that the Army thought was responsible.

Think about that for a second.

To get information about the communications and whereabouts of the terrorists holding our servicemen hostage in a combat zone—terrorists who, mind you, have no rights under the US Constitution and have never stepped foot in America—the US Army was sending lawyers to go to a court in Washington, DC.

The briefer, a lawyer from the Justice Department, explained to Committee members how fast they had responded. Within 24 hours, a petition was written, and a warrant was approved by a judge in the middle of the night. My colleagues asked more questions about the missing Soldiers and what was being done to find them.

In congressional hearings, questioning alternates between Republicans and Democrats and proceeds in order of seniority. I had one question when my turn came.

"You say it took you only twenty-four hours to get permission to look at the communications of a terrorist group who might be holding Americans in a combat zone. If it was your son who was being held hostage, is that fast enough?"

The lawyer, who until that moment had vigorously defended the speed of their legal work, paused and looked down at the witness table. Then he looked up at me with sadness.

"No, ma'am. It's not."

When it was over, I left the hearing and walked in silence through the tunnels that connected the Capitol to the Cannon House office building. I stepped through my office door, flanked on one side by the yellow and red of the New Mexico flag and, on the other, the Stars and Stripes. I went into the small restroom in the corner of my personal office, shut the door, and looked at myself in the mirror, thinking about the laws we had not yet managed to change. I gripped the edge of the white sink with both hands, bowed my head, and wept.

We had failed them. I had failed them.

Article I of the Constitution grants the Congress the power to "raise and support" armies. Not the President, not the judiciary, but the elected representatives of the people. My constituents sent me to Washington to represent them, and, as a member of Congress, I felt I had not done my job well enough. We hadn't fixed this law.

As a servant leader, the "mirror check" means asking yourself, "Am I worthy?" This can be especially painful on days when you're not living up to what people have a right to expect of you.

Am I worthy of their trust?

Am I worthy of their hard-earned tax dollars?

Am I doing the best I can for the people who gave me the privilege to serve?

Am I worthy of their sacrifice?

As a servant leader, to be worthy of those we serve, our job is to do the best we can with the gifts we've been given. This is the task, but it is one of the hardest tests of leadership.

A little over a year later, after hundreds of hours of work and negotiation, I was in the Rose Garden at the White House when President George W. Bush signed the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act Amendments that updated our laws. To tell you the truth, I don't remember anything President Bush said that day. My mind was someplace else. I was thinking about three Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division.

Heather and Dave

Leadership demands that we ask hard questions ... starting with ourselves. Only by doing so can we truly understand that leadership is as much a gift as it is a burden, and that it is as much an opportunity as it is a challenge. As leaders, it is up to us to ensure that we never lose sight of the sacrifices made by others who have enabled and entrusted us to lead. Stories of those who have laid down their own interests and, for some, their lives, for a cause greater than themselves should set a high bar for what it means to be worthy of leadership. Such narratives are not merely tales of valor; they are the benchmarks against which we must measure our own commitment to service. The question "Am I worthy?" grounds us in our role and holds us accountable by demanding honesty and humility. It reminds us of the reason behind our positions of service and the people we are privileged to lead.

Every day, check yourself in the mirror and ask: Am I worthy?

RESEARCH

Character in English-Language Military Leadership Doctrine

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ABSTRACT

Background: Character is widely recognized as a critical aspect of individual and group performance, and character's applicability to the military is no exception. Character serves as an explicit entry requirement, a desired outcome within training institutions, and a focal point of emphasis across various military organizations.

Objective: This article examines how character is discussed within military leadership doctrine and how it is framed. More specifically, how has "good character" been understood and measured?

Methods: This study examined the leadership doctrine of six English-speaking militaries using the Leader Character Framework (LCF), a framework developed in recent leadership scholarship, to identify the dimensions of character that are emphasized. This examination is carried out using a simple quantitative analysis technique, using the keywords in the LCF as specific recording units.

Results: The findings revealed that while the six militaries identified similar character dimensions, they also displayed a lack of emphasis on several important dimensions, which could lead to character imbalances. Research on the LCF suggests that such imbalances can manifest in vices of deficiency or excess, rather than the intended virtuous state.

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Conclusions: This study offers several avenues for further research and highlights specific aspects of character that should be reinforced and emphasized to enhance military leadership.

Keywords: character, leadership, doctrine, military, anglosphere

Character in Military Leadership Doctrine

> *A strong character is one that will not be unbalanced by the most powerful emotions.*
>
> (Clausewitz 3.I)

While character has received considerable academic attention of late (Crossan et al., 2024c) as well as popular mention (McChrystal, 2025), it has long been a term that is referenced, invoked, and aspired to by many militaries (Australian Defence Force, 2023; Department of the Army, 2018; Queen's Regulations and Orders, 2024; Von Clausewitz, 1976). However, while the term "character" is used, it is rarely systematically defined and operationalized in a military setting. An exception to this trend, however, is recent work by Crossan and her colleagues (Crossan et al., 2017), which presents an opportunity to assess the state of character as it is presented in military doctrine.

For this study, we employ the definition of character as offered by Crossan et al. (2024b), and we reproduce the definition here in full, with character defined as:

> an interconnected suite of embodied and virtuous habits. These habits are virtuous insofar as they collectively influence judgment and human flourishing. The dimensions of character can be observed, assessed, and developed. Character is universal, yet reflexive to context and can manifest toward deficient or excess vices when high levels of one dimension are not supported by high levels of other dimensions. (p. 653)

Several key components of this definition are important to highlight. First, this definition emphasizes the importance of balance, both within an individual dimension and between dimensions. This view of character is rooted in the ancient Greek concept of the *virtuous* or *golden mean* (Aristotle, 2001), in which any dimension can become problematic when it falls out of balance with other dimensions. Second, it emphasizes that character dimensions can be observed, assessed, and, more importantly, developed through intentional practice that emphasizes awareness (Niemiec, 2006). While universal, the dimension of judgment, which Aristotle viewed as "practical wisdom," means that character is exercised in a specific context. In this study, we rely on the Leader Character Framework (LCF) developed by Crossan et al. (2017) because it satisfies all aspects of the definition. Specifically, we ask how character and, more precisely, "good character," have been understood and measured within leadership doctrine?

To address this research question, we conducted a content analysis of leadership doctrine from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the Republic of Ireland. We used the LCF to compare the emphasis on character dimensions in leadership doctrine, and the study reveals how unevenly character has been treated across these cases. Given the imbalances in emphasis across dimensions, the LCF suggests implications for how virtues of character can manifest as vices when not supported by other dimensions, and it points to opportunities to consider more robust approaches to employing character in the military.

We begin by examining the literature on leader character in workplace settings, focusing on its military application and how it has been measured in terms of a military's doctrinal foundation. We then outline the theory and method guiding the research, which includes a description of the LCF and its application in conducting the content analysis of 19 leadership doctrine publications. We conclude by providing recommendations for policy and doctrinal development to address the character imbalance in leadership doctrine.

Military Doctrine and Leader Character

Military doctrine describes assumptions, routines, concepts, and practices to be passed on (Høiback, 2013; McKitrick and Chiarelli, 1984). Doctrine is at once a tool for command, a tool for education, and a tool for change. As a tool for command, doctrine defines what to do, and as a tool for education, doctrine explains why. Lastly, as a tool for change, doctrine describes what is to be (Høiback, 2013, p. 157).

Within the body of literature considered "doctrine," a hierarchy exists. Certain doctrinal publications will create the framework for subsequent, subordinate doctrine. Known as boss texts (Breede and Coombs, 2024; Taber, 2009), these volumes form the "ideological code of the dominant narrative" (Taber, 2009, p. 30). For example, Canadian boss texts include *Trusted to Serve* (2022) and *Fighting Spirit* (2024), both of which articulate an ethos and understanding of the profession of arms from which all subsequent Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) doctrine flows (Breede and Coombs, 2024). Common-level doctrine applies to all branches and services within a given organization. In contrast, service-level doctrine is written by and for a particular service, like an army, navy, or air force (Breede and Coombs, 2024).

Character and the Military

In Western philosophy, character is most often associated with the ancient Greeks through the concept of virtue (Mordacci, 2021). Additionally, it has its origins in Confucian thought (Wang and Hackett, 2015). Moreover, the concept of character as virtue has parallel origins in Taoist, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Judeo-Christian thought (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Character as virtue can also be found within the Seven Sacred Teachings of Indigenous communities in North America (Department of National Defence [Canada], 2024).

Although character has received consistent philosophical treatment, much of that understanding has been disconnected from practice. Character is generally viewed in terms of ethics, morality, and overall trustworthiness, and is often perceived as something people either possess or lack. Moreover, a gap has existed between research and practice, leaving practitioners without a structured and coherent approach to understanding, developing, and embedding character in organizations (Crossan et al., 2024a). More recently, definitions and concepts have coalesced around the idea that character is about virtue and habit (Crossan et al., 2024a; Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Rea et al., 2023).

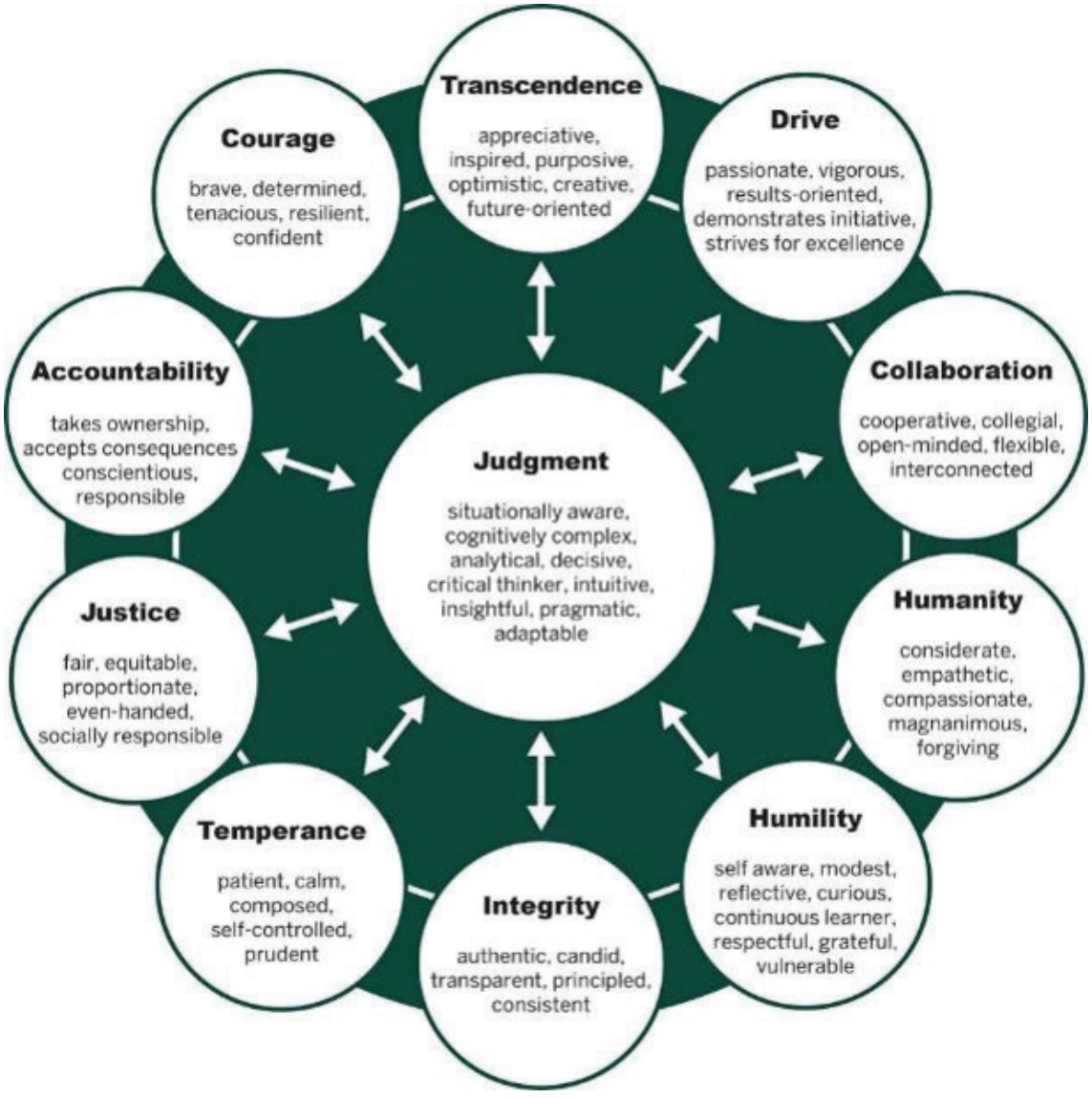
While character has a long tradition in military organizations, it is often treated as an emergent concept, the result of arduous shared experience or something innate. For example, the United States Military Academy at West Point (USMA) has a long-held vision to "educate and inspire leaders of character" (Department of the Army, 2018), while the CAF clearly articulates "strength of character" as one of its five entry requirements into the service (Queen's Regulations and Orders, 2024). And yet, how character is both assessed and developed is addressed indirectly. Character is often referenced but rarely discussed; instead, it is assumed (Boe et al., 2015; Ender, 2008; Queen's Regulations and Orders, 2024; Shay, 1994).

Research supports the idea that character is multifaceted, composed of virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Rea et al., 2023) or dimensions and elements

(Crossan et al., 2017). It reveals that character can not only be measured (Damian et al., 2019; Park and Peterson, 2006), but it can also be developed (Crossan and Crossan, 2023; Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Rea et al., 2023). Finally, consistent with the character definition, it reinforces that any virtue can operate as a vice when not supported by the other dimensions.

While broadly consistent with other frameworks (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Rea et al., 2023), the LCF (Figure 1) emphasizes the interconnected nature of the character dimensions, which reveals the importance of balance as a key aspect of character strength. Indeed, each dimension influences the other, with strength in one dimension potentially

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



manifesting in excess when not supported by other dimensions. For example, strong courage can manifest as recklessness when not supported by temperance and humility. The remedy is not to reduce a strength, but to strengthen the weaker dimensions (Crossan and Crossan, 2023).

We employ the LCF developed by Crossan et al. (2017) for several reasons. First, it offers a robust theoretical and empirical framework that builds upon and incorporates insights from other frameworks, such as Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Niemiec (2006). Second, the LCF bridges theory and practice through the method known as engaged scholarship. Thirdly, it focuses on observable behavior, whereas the Peterson and Seligman (2004) approach includes items that relate to intention, not just observable behavior. Because intentions are not observable, intentions alone are insufficient. Therefore, it is important to focus only on those behaviors that can be observed in character assessment.

Finally, whereas Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Niemiec (2006) treat character strengths as independent, the interconnected nature of the dimensions, centered on judgment, is a key concept. The LCF creates a character architecture whereby imbalances that would otherwise lead to vices are, in fact, simply dimensions that are unsupported by other underdeveloped dimensions (Crossan et al., 2017).

Methodology

This study analyzes the highest levels of leadership doctrine across six English-speaking countries. In some cases, leadership doctrine was held at the common level, meaning that the leadership doctrine applied equally to all services or branches of the armed forces. In other countries, such a common-level doctrine does not exist; in these cases, our analysis focuses on the different service-level doctrines that are available. A total of 19 publications from six countries were examined.

Within the countries examined, leadership doctrine was approached in three ways. The first, used by the United States and the United Kingdom, left doctrine to individual services, resulting in five U.S. publications, one each for the Marine Corps (2024), Army (2025), Navy (2017), Air Force (2023), and Space Force (2023). While UK doctrines for the British Army (2021) and Royal Air Force (2020) were consulted, we were unable to find any reference to leadership doctrine for the Royal Navy aside from their website. The second approach, used by Australia, involved creating common-level boss texts while allowing services to develop their own doctrines. Australia produced five documents, including the Australian Defence Force (2021, 2023) as well as service-level doctrines from the Army (2002), Navy (2010), and Air Force (2013). The third approach, used by Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland, held doctrine at the common level only, resulting in six texts being examined. These included Canada's four-volume series (2005–2007), New Zealand Defence Force (2018), and Defence Forces Ireland (2023). The leadership doctrine of the six countries comprises just under 1750 pages across the 19 volumes and ranges in publication dates from 2003 to 2025. Table 1 offers a complete listing of all 19 texts consulted.

Measuring Character

According to the LCF, character comprises 62 elements grouped into 11 dimensions as depicted in Figure 1. Combining the terms *Character*, *Vice*, and *Virtue*, along with the 62 elements and 11 dimensions, yields 76 terms for the content analysis. All occurrences of the terms were verified as being used in the correct context, with noun and verb tense variation leading to several occurrences being discounted and appropriate derivations included.[1] Following this

1. As an example, several references to "drive" were omitted as they related to a factor "driving a decision" or words to that effect. Conversely, "composed" was expanded to include "composure" in appropriate contexts.

Table 1

Data Sources

Code	Title	Pp	Year	Country	Level
US1	MCWP 6-11 Leading Marines	124	2002	USA	Service
US2	ADP 6-22 Army Leadership and the Profession	132	2019	USA	Service
US3	AFDD 1-1 Leadership and Force Development	92	2011	USA	Service
US4	NLDF Navy Leadership and Development Framework	14	2017	USA	Service
US5	USSF Handbook 1-1 Guardian Spirit	13	2024	USA	Service
UK1	AC 72029 Army Leadership Doctrine	86	2016	UK	Service
UK2	(website "leadership")	Webpage (Sep 2025)	n/a	UK	Service
UK3	AP 7001 Royal Air Force Leadership	52	2020	UK	Service
AU1	ADF 0 Command Leadership	72	2021	AU	Common
AU2	ADF 0 Character in the Profession of Arms	54	2023	AU	Common
AU3	LDW 0-2 Leadership	303	2002	AU	Service
AU4	The Royal Australian Air Force Leadership Companion	118	2013	AU	Service
AU5	The Royal Australian Navy Leadership Ethics	12	2010	AU	Service
NZ1	NZDDP-006 Leadership	80	2018	NZ	Common
DF1	DFMD-J2 Defence Force Leadership Doctrine	128	2016	IE	Common
CF1	Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Doctrine	44	2005	CA	Common
CF2	Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations	144	2005	CA	Common
CF3	Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Leading People	90	2007	CA	Common
CF4	Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Leading the Institution	159	2007	CA	Common

control, over 7800 context-correct occurrences associated with character terms were captured. To confirm consistency, we randomly selected documents and re-checked certain terms' occurrences against the context rules used to confirm and if needed, update counts.

We used quantitative content analysis to identify and analyze the character terms, and the complete results can be found in the data annex to this article. We employed three basic techniques to describe and analyze the data to include frequency, depth, and balance. To analyze balance, we employed a simple graphing technique that

visualizes the relative emphasis each of the 11 dimensions of character received, while frequency was simply a raw count. Depth was measured by comparing the frequency of the term character against the frequency of the various elements in each document.

Absolute frequencies represent the total occurrences of particular terms, while relative frequencies represent the normalized score for those terms. Higher frequency values indicate increased emphasis on the term as a character dimension. We elected to normalize all scores to address document lengths (from a few hundred words on a website to several hundred pages in a book). A summary chart is presented in Figure 2.

To measure depth, we took the ratio of the frequency of the word character against the sum of the frequency of the dimensions and elements. For example, a detailed treatment of character would not only mention character but also a significant number of the character-related dimensions and elements as well. This is represented in Figure 3.

To measure balance, we created a radar chart for each document, service, and country using the character dimensions as axes. The absolute values of the frequencies were then plotted on each axis, a summary of which is provided in Figures 4 and 5 as a series of character maps for services and militaries as a whole. All doctrinal documents were verified against the most recent publicly available editions as of September 2025. Future updates may alter the results if the analysis is repeated.

Scope and Limits

This study employs a content analysis based around the use of keywords as they appear in doctrine in terms of their frequency, depth, and distribution. As a result, there are certain limitations that this method implies. First and foremost, our work captures only that which is articulated in doctrine. It does not capture how well this doctrine is operationalized into training within the formal training and professional military education systems or the informal socialization that occurs within individual unit lines.

This means that the findings and discussions to follow from this study are limited to the idea that what we have captured is simply the authoritative guidance offered by doctrine and is by no means a comprehensive analysis of how militaries enact leader-character.

Figure 2
Character Dimension Frequency (All Publications)

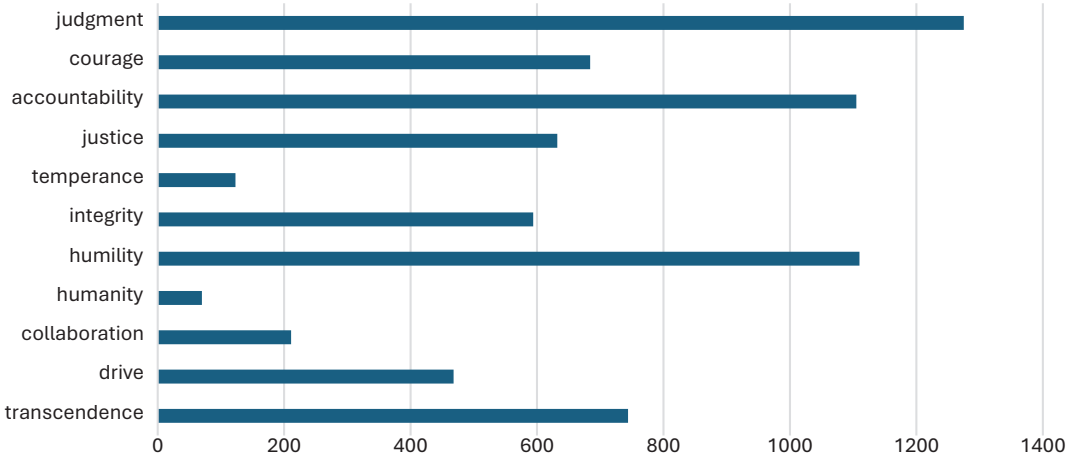
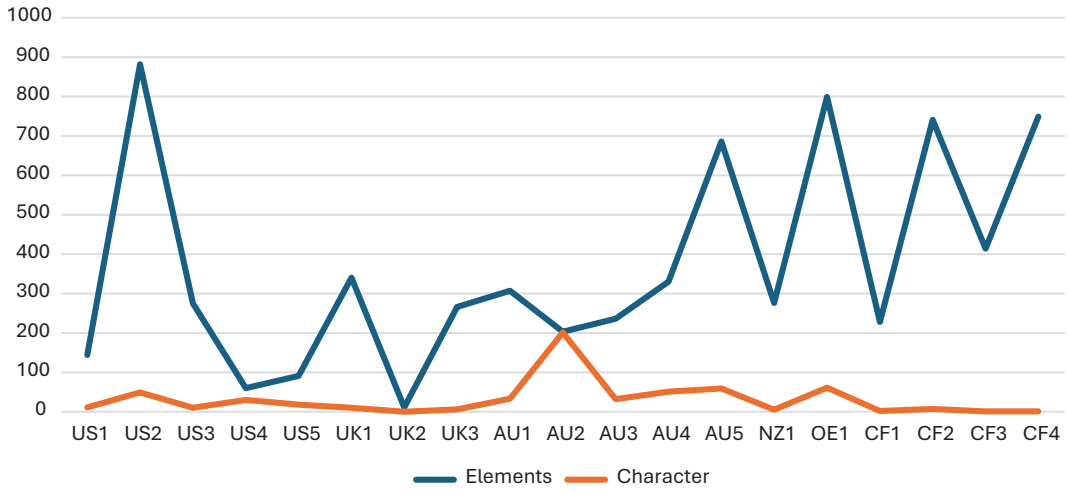


Figure 3
Doctrinal Depth of Character



Accordingly, references to potential risks or imbalances should be understood as interpretive implications grounded in theory rather than demonstrated causal effects. However, it is a helpful starting point nonetheless and provides some valuable insight and foundation for further study.

Findings and Discussion

The Basics—Character Frequency

The most frequently mentioned dimension, along with its related elements, was Judgment (1115 occurrences), followed by Accountability (967 occurrences) and Humility (946 occurrences). At the opposite end of the analysis, the three least frequently mentioned dimensions and related elements were Humanity (61 occurrences), Temperance (94 occurrences), and Collaboration (210 occurrences), as shown in Figure 2.

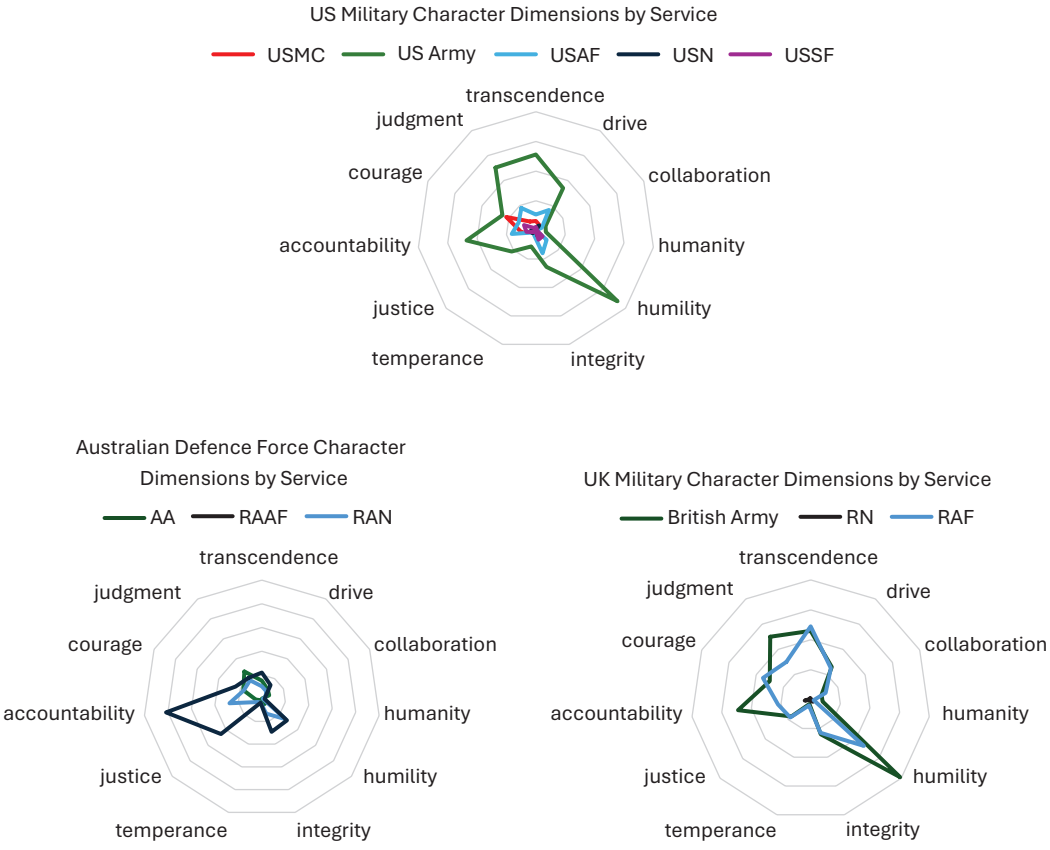
The Basics—Character Depth

A comparison between the frequency of the term *Character* against the frequency of the dimensions and elements reveals the depth to which character is treated. Figure 3 provides a visualization of this measure for all 19 publications. Table 2 is a sample that illustrates how character depths were measured.

The image in Figure 3 dramatically illustrates the variation in depth associated with the concept of character across the 19 publications. While the frequency of explicit mentions of character is relatively consistent across all but one of the doctrinal publications (Australia's *Character in the Profession of Arms* at 201 mentions of character), there is significant variation between the publications regarding the depth to which character is expanded by mentioning dimensions and elements. Documents from the Royal Australian Navy (AU5), the Canadian Armed Forces (CF2), and the Irish Defence Force (OE2) appear to delve into the details surrounding character, while others, such as publications from the US Navy (US4) and the Royal Navy (UK2), provide less depth. Interestingly, while the four volumes from Canada (CF1–4) make almost no mention of the term character itself, they do extensively mention terms associated with the elements and dimensions of character.

Interestingly, US military publications are relatively thin on character when compared with the other five

Figure 4
Character Emphasis Maps for Service-Level Doctrine (by Country)



countries examined. Also notable is the almost complete absence of character discussion in the Royal Navy's publication. However, this is likely attributable to the fact that their leadership doctrine is absent, with the exception of some references to leadership principles found on their website. Setting aside the Royal Navy, the remainder of the UK character doctrine we reviewed is consistent in its pattern of emphasis across character dimensions.

The Emphasis Maps—Character Balance

We combined the various service and common-level publications by country and mapped the context-corrected occurrences according to their 11 dimensions. We then presented this mapping by publication and country. Figure 4 is a collection of radar graphs that illustrate the character map for each publication, in the cases where individual services provided their own leadership doctrines.

The maps suggest an imbalance of character across all service-level publications. Notably, the UK and US share similar profiles, with a strong emphasis on Humility in both the US Army and the British Army. Additionally, we observe a cluster of Transcendence, Judgment, and Accountability in both the UK and US land components. Australia is unique in its emphasis upon Accountability and Justice within its Navy. All services, across all three countries, place little emphasis upon Collaboration, Humanity, and Temperance. Lastly, the

Figure 5
Country-Level Character Emphasis Maps

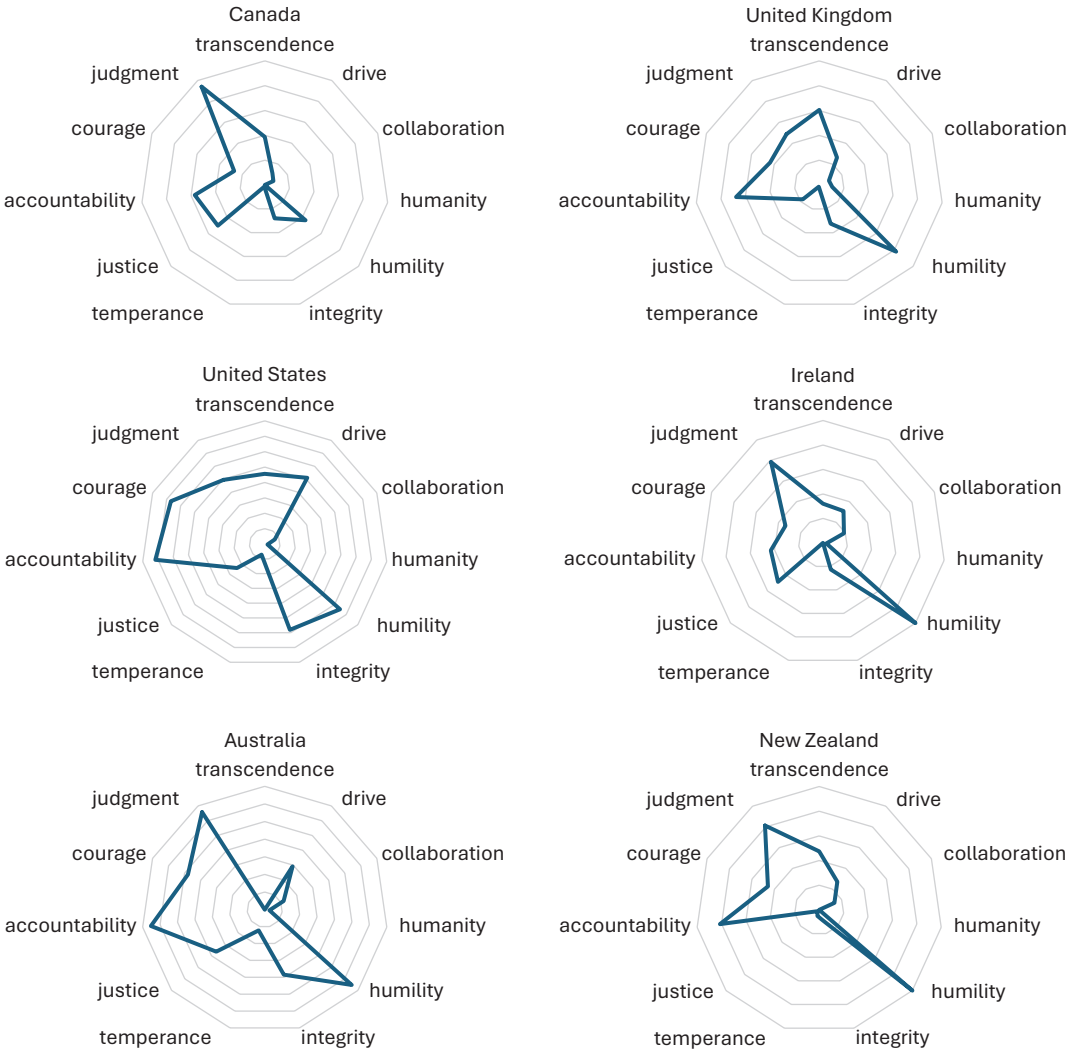


Table 2
Sample Doctrinal Character Depth Measure

Document	Country	Code	Character f	Element f (all)
Defence Forces Leadership Doctrine	Ireland	DF 1	61	734
US Army Leadership and the Profession	USA	US 2	49	882

relatively thin treatment of character in the Australian Army is notable as well, especially when compared to the UK, where the British Army and Royal Navy have an opposite relationship in terms of character emphasis compared to the Australian Army and Royal Australian Navy.

These findings allow us to conclude that the service-level doctrine in the US, UK, and Australia treats character in an unbalanced manner. Because the theory of leader character cautions that character imbalance through weak (dimensions in a deficit state) or unsupported (dimensions in an excess state) dimensions is an indicator of inconsistent or even risky leader behavior (Crossan et al., 2024c, p. 58), this is a notable finding.

Examining the dimensions for each country, we compiled the individual service-level doctrine results and included the common-level doctrine (where applicable) to create a single measure of character for each country and applied the same radar graphing technique. Again, this analysis reveals striking consistencies as well as curious outliers.

First, Canada's leadership doctrine is unique in that it does not share the emphasis upon Humility that we see in the other five countries. Additionally, the Judgment-Accountability-Transcendence cluster appears to be unique to the UK, US, and Australia, with both Canada and New Zealand downplaying the importance of Courage and Transcendence. However, Judgment remains a central focus for all six countries. Finally, Australia, Ireland, and Canada all share relative strengths in the dimension of Justice.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, but no less of a concern, is the underemphasis upon the character dimension of Humanity across all six countries. Given the nature of the profession of arms, which involves preparing for and engaging in the brutal process of warfighting, it may explain the underweighting of Humanity. However, this interpretation would be shortsighted. Whether in combat or collaboration, weaknesses in Humanity can compromise Judgment. In combat, it is essential to be able to regulate strong Humanity with Justice and Accountability, as instances of low Humanity can lead to egregious situations of failures in Judgment, such as those that might lead to violations of the laws of armed conflict or unethical behaviour.

Failures in judgment, however, need not be limited to warfighting to be of significance to the profession of arms. Canada's recent experience with its long-running challenge of sexual misconduct within the ranks is a compelling, non-combat example. Between 2020 and 2023, two consecutive Chiefs of the Defence Staff (the highest-ranking member of the military in Canada) were removed from their positions due to allegations of sexual misconduct. Additionally, several other high-ranking general and flag officers faced similar accusations (Burke and Brewster, 2023) and stepped down. While these senior officers caused tremendous harm to their victims, they also harmed the institution and demonstrated a profound lack of judgment as individual leaders. Strength of character matters all the time. While character has yet to be incorporated into CAF leadership doctrine (Department of National Defence, 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b), it now features centrally in the recent Profession of Arms doctrine (Department of National Defence, 2022, 2024). This new emphasis on character is a direct result of these recent experiences with failures in judgment.

The underemphasis of Humanity, Temperance, and Collaboration across all six countries suggests another area for potential development. Also of interest is the almost universal underemphasis of Courage and Collaboration. In all six countries examined, Courage and Collaboration receive far fewer mentions in leadership doctrine than other dimensions and elements. This is not only additional evidence in support of our claim of uneven character development, but also particularly

noteworthy given again what militaries are asked to do. Courage and Collaboration would seem to be natural attributes of an effective military, and yet these are relatively absent in these cases.

An underemphasis on the dimension of Courage has implications beyond the battlefield. While it may be that courage – as a general concept – is fundamental to the military in the context of close combat, this assumption does run the risk of overlooking the important role of courage in day-to-day interactions that constitute much of the experience of members of the profession of arms. Courage is more than just demonstrating selflessness under fire; it also involves the willingness to engage in a necessary, yet difficult, conversation with a colleague or to admit to a mistake when it would otherwise be far easier to ignore it.

The underemphasis on the dimension of Collaboration manifests as unhealthy interservice rivalry within a military or through interoperability challenges between militaries in alliances and coalitions. In short, it impedes the ability of a force to work together. While this is somewhat counterintuitive, given that warfighting is a team effort, history is filled with examples of clashing egos (Ricks, 2012, p. 95) and an inability for various services to work together (Hamre, 2016). Emphasizing the importance of collaboration at all levels is an important point that has been overlooked.

Policy Implications

All six countries—even those that devoted considerable effort to explain character and its development—did not recognize the interconnected nature of the dimensions and elements of character, as well as how important the concept of balance is within their various leadership doctrines. As was remarked earlier, focusing on only a few dimensions of character runs the risk of creating unbalanced character, and this is a risk that particular doctrines examined revealed. As our research has reported, strength of character must be balanced to hedge against its potential virtues manifesting as vices.

Just as leader character is most effective when integrated into doctrine, so too will it only result in improved decision-making when it is integrated into what units already do. This means that individuals need to have habituated the awareness, self-reflection, and inner work that encompasses the idea of character development. Moreover, the benefits of character development will only manifest during an operation if the members have put in the time to train and develop their character beforehand. The time to think about developing your character is not when you are in the attack position, immediately prior to H-hour, about to launch an assault on an objective. Instead, like physical fitness, the improved decision-making that comes from character work is the result of "embodied and virtuous habits" (Crossan et al., 2024b, p. 653) that you do before needing to make the decision. The payoff comes from sets and reps.

While this study's findings reveal some challenges to how character is treated within the six militaries examined, these challenges can also be viewed as an opportunity, as there is clear guidance available through the application of the LCF. Where character dimensions have been underweighted, there is an opportunity to strengthen those dimensions to avoid the risk that strong dimensions will manifest in a vice state. The advances in character development, such as habit development, relying on exercise science theory and practice (Crossan et al., 2024b), offer innovative approaches to character development.

A key limitation of this study, however (as stated earlier) is that, as the analysis focuses on the doctrine, it does not account for the work being done daily in training institutions and line units. Many of the vulnerabilities identified in this study might have received attention from curious and dedicated leaders devoted to their leadership craft. However, as doctrine provides authoritative guidance for what militaries do and how they do it, the

analysis reveals significant gaps, guiding the architecture of character and its development more intentionally and deliberately. Embedding the idea of leader character into doctrine will help militaries get over the temporary bump of cultivating awareness (Crossan et al., 2024c, 2025) to realizing strategic impact, which tends to occur when energetic and well-meaning leaders try to move the proverbial needle in building a positive workplace culture.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the publications, we observe that certain character dimensions receive greater doctrinal emphasis than others, and more problematically, this selectivity runs counter to recent research on character and character development, particularly work associated with the LCF, which treats underdeveloped or over-weighted dimensions as a potential risk to sound judgment.

In addition, the treatment of character development tends to emphasize informal means, most often viewing character as an emergent or otherwise "as is" component of leadership. Character rarely receives formal (to be both deliberate and intentional) forms of development in doctrine. The findings suggest that doctrine does not consistently reflect the interconnected architecture of character articulated in the LCF.

Because doctrine provides authoritative guidance for professional development, greater intentional integration of balanced character dimensions may strengthen alignment between theory and practice. Future research should examine whether and how these doctrinal patterns translate into training environments and ultimately the behavior of military leaders. Our research indicates that character matters in the military: we consistently found references to both character and the dimensions associated with it throughout the 19 volumes examined. However, without clarity on what character is, how it can manifest in deficient and excess vice states, and how to develop it, we risk compromising judgment and well-being. This study points to a significant opportunity to enhance military leadership by raising these questions. Put simply, our study identifies patterns of emphasis in doctrine, and further work could help make the connection to training and leader development outcomes crystal clear.

Acknowledgments

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PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

Core Values and Corps Values: Transforming Character Development Training at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy

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ABSTRACT

In 2023, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy initiated a redesign of accession-level character education following senior leadership direction associated with Operation Fouled Anchor and the Accountability and Transparency Review. This article describes *The Shield*, a revised Core Values education program implemented during Swab Summer. Drawing on adult learning and social learning principles, the program shifts from a primarily lecture-based model to one centered on peer facilitation, guided reflection, and case-based discussion. Junior cadets are prepared and supported to lead small-group sessions with incoming freshmen (swabs), using recent administrative hearing cases to explore the Honor Concept and expectations for conduct. This article presents *The Shield* as a practice-oriented institutional case study, detailing the program's rationale, structure, and delivery,

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with the aim of informing character and Core Values education efforts at service academies and related institutions.

Keywords: military training, character education, honor education, core values education, peer facilitation, service academy, U.S. Coast Guard Academy, institutional case study

Introduction

Character development is commonly described as the comprehensive effort to bolster the ability to respond to adversity by favoring what is right. Character can be understood as the collection of dispositions and judgments that guide individuals to behave in accordance with their morals and virtues (Shubert et al., 2019). In this institutional context, character development is understood mainly as cultivating judgment and accountability through structured engagement with the Honor Concept and guided reflection. At the U.S. Coast Guard Academy (USCGA), cadets are expected to comply with the Honor Concept, which states "Who Lives Here Reveres Honor, Honors Duty" (United States Coast Guard Academy, 2025b). Furthermore, the foundational axiom of "Cadets neither lie, cheat, steal, nor attempt to deceive" is central to the Honor Concept as set out in cadet regulations (United States Coast Guard Academy, 2024b). Cadets are expected to live up to a higher standard, and the Honor Concept is a nuanced requirement introduced to incoming swabs during their initial accession training, Swab Summer.

The Honor Concept differs from a code in that failing to report an honor violation in the domain of lying, cheating, or stealing is not simply an honor offense, but rather a major offense that may lead to disenrollment from the Academy. Regimental Process Guide Six explicitly states that "violations of the Honor Concept are breaches of our Core Values and may result in disenrollment" (United States Coast Guard Academy, 2024b, p. 4). Moreover, Code 1235 in the *Cadet Conduct and Discipline Manual* details that "a cadet commits this offense [not honor] when they fail to report a major offense of which they have personal knowledge to the appropriate authority," and a toleration clause is not specifically spelled out in the conduct system (United States Coast Guard Academy, 2024a, p. 19). Cadets are expected to uphold high standards of academic and personal integrity—honor not only prohibits certain acts but also requires affirmative conduct in holding oneself and others accountable to a higher standard of behavior. The Honor Concept is intended to train prospective officers to live with integrity in preparation for service and to discern right from wrong in morally ambiguous situations where judgment is tested against loyalty to self, others, and the organization.

Swabs report to the Academy in late June. They represent a cross-section of American society bringing biases, values, virtues, and behaviors. Indeed, as of 2025, the Corps of Cadets was representative of all 50 states (United States Coast Guard Academy, n.d.a). Prior to entry, cadets complete a psychometric questionnaire using the Values-in-Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths (United States Coast Guard Academy, 2025a). Among cadets completing the VIA inventory, the most frequently endorsed strengths were fairness, honesty-integrity, and teamwork (United States Coast Guard Academy, 2025a, p. 38). While cadets self-report that honor is important, they do not have a shared definition of honor as it relates to service expectations for prospective officers. Once sworn in, students undergo values alignment with service standards. This initial training and education help bridge

the gap between what students purport to believe are Coast Guard Core Values and how the service defines those Core Values according to doctrine. The program enables students to bridge the gap between their initial conception of the Core Values and how doctrine defines the them by developing a shared definition, requiring affirmative conduct, and prohibiting certain behavior.

At 100 weeks into the 200-week experiential Leadership Development Program, Academy juniors are at a developmental crossroads and are expected to transition from leading self to leading others. At this stage, they also begin formally mentoring incoming swabs by facilitating Core Values and honor training, placing them at the center of the Academy's character development effort.

As a practice-oriented institutional case study, this article focuses on describing the rationale, structure, and delivery of *The Shield* as implemented during Swab Summer. Because *The Shield* is facilitated by juniors, we also briefly describe the preparatory training that supports its delivery. We do not attempt to assess program effectiveness or make causal claims about outcomes, given the program's early stage and the limits of available data. Any early observations are offered as context for ongoing refinement, with the expectation that more formal evaluation will require additional time and effort. Our descriptive account draws on program materials and de-identified instructional case examples approved for training use; we do not report identifiable cadet information.

Development of the Program

Background

Before 2024, the Core Values education provided to incoming freshmen, or "swabs," was facilitated over five blocks of instruction during the first 7 weeks of the 200-week practicum. Instruction consisted of introductory lectures from mid-grade officers (O-3 or O-4), followed by breakout sessions for case-study review of honor offenses, suspected honor offenses, and administrative hearing results with faculty and staff. This model persisted through 2023.

In response to Operation Fouled Anchor's revelation of the generational persistence of sexual assault and general misconduct from the late 1980s through 2006, the former Commandant of the Coast Guard, Admiral Linda Fagan, directed the Accountability and Transparency Review (ATR). Following the ATR, the Coast Guard directed a comprehensive analysis of character development at every accession point (United States Coast Guard, n.d.), including the Coast Guard Academy. Specifically, those directed actions included a reorganization of the "Coast Guard Academy's Swab Summer to help cadets adjust to the military environment and align with the Service's Core Values" (United States Coast Guard, n.d.).

This direction prompted action at the Academy to review best practices in adult learning theory, benchmark approaches at other service academies and accession points within and beyond the Coast Guard, and engage stakeholders in developing a revised approach to initial character education.

Approach and Implementation

Positive personality traits, the role of the mentor-mentee relationship, reflection, and the integration of case study are critical elements for measurable results in character development (Mar et al., 2025). Following the ATR, the Commandant directed actions to "improve the cadet summer training program and increase the supervision of cadet leadership" and to "provide tailored training to help personnel, from the newest recruits to senior executives; better act upon the Service's Core Values, understand organizational expectations, and cultivate a positive workplace climate" (United States Coast Guard, 2023). The approach to reimagining the Core Values program was benchmarked against best

practices from other leadership programs, notably, the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) at West Point. The USMA's *Beast Book* is the doctrinal handbook and guide for junior-to-freshman conversations on character development, virtue, and acclimation to the Corps of Cadets during the new cadet training known as "Beast Barracks" (United States Military Academy, 2022). The Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University was also leveraged as a near-peer institution in terms of character development. Academy staff borrowed techniques outlined in the Doerr Synthesis Group Coaching Program and Catalyst Leadership Workshops (Besozzi and Taylor, 2020). By benchmarking peers in both military and civilian domains, the USCGA developed a better understanding of how to elevate character education.

Through engagement with the Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic and others at USMA West Point, the Coast Guard Academy team was introduced to a cadet-to-cadet approach in which juniors are tasked with providing initial character training to swabs. Building on this framework, the team at the Coast Guard Academy reviewed legacy case study material from previous Academy administrative hearings, injected new case studies from recent conduct cases, and thematically organized lessons within the different domains of honor. Building on the USMA model, all juniors who were expected to facilitate sessions for incoming swabs received structured training during sophomore year to prepare for the new Core Values education program. Unlike USMA or other near-peer institutions, 100% of the junior class was expected to participate in training incoming swabs, or trainees in other Academy summer programs, including rising high school seniors participating in the Academy Introduction Mission (AIM). In addition to their year-round military training curriculum, all juniors completed a 2-week cadre training program with an intensive focus on preparing them to lead swabs in a basic training environment as part of the leadership journey.

Juniors were provided with instructional materials 6 months prior to Swab Summer. They rehearsed lessons under the supervision of seasoned instructors, commissioned, noncommissioned, and retired officer mentors during the Mid-Grade Cadet Transition course at week 100 (of 200) in their cadet careers. Students provided peer-to-peer feedback in practice "teach-back" sessions and were coached by instructor mentors. Student-instructor training was scaffolded into the training curriculum, based on the Zone of Proximal Development concept, in which More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) guide near-peers toward success (Vygotsky, 1978). Support for juniors in facilitating the Core Values program was gradually removed as they progressed and began to gain confidence and demonstrate proficiency. Specifically, juniors were taught a sample lesson by instructors, then presented a lesson to peers with coaching from instructors prior to receiving swabs. During the first few iterations, juniors were observed silently by instructors from afar and provided coaching. Over time, juniors were expected to develop the confidence and proficiency to facilitate the lessons without supervision, supporting growth in self-efficacy and leader identity.

Adult learning theory was introduced to each junior cadet facilitator, grounded in the principles of self-concept, prior experience, readiness to learn, and structured opportunities for reflection and dialogue (Knowles, 1984). In this context, adult learning theory functions as a framework for structuring sessions around reflection and facilitated discussion rather than lecture. A culture of infantilizing swabs was strictly prohibited in line with Commandant directives beginning in 2024.

Swabs read case study material, reflected on the content prior to discussion, and engaged in facilitated discussion with junior cadet facilitators in small groups (fewer than 10 participants). They synthesized their reflections daily in their confidential student guide. By leveraging adult learning theory as the framework for character education instead of the traditional

pedagogical approach used previously, the revised approach beginning in 2024 assumes cadets are adult learners capable of taking an active role in discussion rather than simply receiving lectures, weighing case-based scenarios against prior experience, and participating in smaller forums to discuss shared notions about the Honor Concept. Rethinking character education through the lens of Knowles (1984) marked a substantial shift in instructional emphasis, designed to encourage students to take a more active role and think more critically without relying solely on instructors for the "right" answers.

Social learning theory suggests that people learn, in part, by observing others (Bandura, 1977). Within *The Shield*, this framework helps explain the program's emphasis on peer facilitation and small-group discussion. While the previous framework of Core Values training served as the Academy's standard approach, placing the onus of instruction on juniors was intended to engage cadets in contemplating ethical dilemmas and revisiting Core Values that they had not considered in over 100 weeks since their respective accession point training. The revised framework requires engagement from both facilitators and swabs and is designed to support learning through repetition, participation, and guided discussion rather than lecture alone.

Bandura's core observational-learning processes—attention, retention, reproduction (practice), and motivation—are reflected in the program's design (Bandura, 1977). Swab learners are encouraged not only to receive instruction, but to weigh in by sharing their own perspectives, feelings, and judgment with one another and facilitators. This approach allows juniors to reflect on their own development as they approach commissioning, while instructing swabs who will inevitably become instructors for future swabs in less than 2 years. Juniors are scaffolded towards leading unsupervised and without a script as they approach commissioning in less than 100 weeks—there is no "instructor" or "handbook" present when a newly commissioned officer is faced with a deadly use of force scenario, an ethical dilemma, or a complicated problem in the field. Bandura (1977) is cited here to clarify the theoretical rationale for this peer-based structure and repeated engagement with realistic cases, not to imply measured effects or demonstrated program outcomes.

Launch and Initial Feedback: 2024–2025

After discussion and deliberation, the revised approach to Core Values training was branded *The Shield*, derived from the symbol found on all Coast Guard uniforms—the gold shield with 13 stars and stripes. *The Shield* contained daily lessons where juniors participated in different groups and interacted with swabs other than those they were directly responsible for, unlike at other near-peer institutions. The tone of the military environment explicitly shifted to a classroom environment, with a more academic approach where swabs and juniors discussed lessons in the barracks. Deliberately changing facilitators to work with unfamiliar swabs and conducting the training in an academic tone was an important shift, intended to create a lower-stakes discussion climate during evening sessions, relative to the daytime training environment. In the spirit of change, the Academy sought to transform cadet trainers, challenging the juniors to shift from intense drill instructors during the day to thoughtful teachers, mentors, and leaders in the evening. This code-switching mirrors Coast Guard expectations that junior officers adjust their conversational pitch every day from directing others in stressful operations to looking out for others personally and professionally after the mission is complete.

The Shield consisted of two books—a student guide and a facilitator guide. Once the learning period commenced, junior facilitators introduced themselves to the swab students and immediately prompted them to engage in the pre-reflection exercise, which posed the following questions to the students every day: "What did you do today that you were proud of?"

and "What could you have done better today?" Two additional questions were also posed each day, germane to the topic about to be discussed. For example, with regard to a lesson on balancing loyalty to service and loyalty to peers, the questions "How would YOU define loyalty?" and "Have you ever had to put a team's interests ahead of a friend's interests?" are usually posed. Following the silent, individual brainstorming warm-up, the facilitator reviews a case study introduction where a cadet engaged in misconduct, engages in guided conversation as outlined in the facilitation guide, and challenges the group to arrive at an answer about what they think happened, or what should have happened to the accused cadet. Then, the results of the administrative hearing are revealed, and the students are guided by the facilitator with follow-up questions, such as "Why do you think the command adjudicated this character violation as such?" or "Why or why not was the punishment justified?" or "Have you known someone in a similar situation in high school, and what was the outcome?" Students were challenged via the Socratic method as adult learners to draw their own conclusions and glean insight from prior misconduct and "near-miss" successes where a cadet encouraged a peer to self-report or a crucial conversation resulted in positive behavioral change. This placed the facilitator and the students in discourse rather than lecture, with the goal of helping students reflect on Core Values and character each night before "lights out."

Case studies used in 2024 and 2025 were drawn from administrative hearings as recent as 2 years prior, refreshing the discussion and subject matter for the first time since the early 2010s. Case studies related to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) were introduced for the first time as well, based on feedback about cadet infractions and "near-miss" infractions with prohibited use of AI tools in the classroom beginning in 2021. Initially, swabs and junior cadre were presented with straightforward cases—clear-cut cases of lying, cheating, and stealing. Progressively, more complex lessons learned from recent Core Values infractions were introduced, especially those related to ambiguous situations where no right or wrong answer was self-evident. This was intended to challenge both students and facilitators to think critically, tying subject matter to past and future behavior by presenting cases with no clear answers. Students were not evaluated based on whether they found the "correct" answer, but rather on how they reasoned through the case study and its alignment to the Honor Concept.

Following 2024's inaugural run and feedback, *The Shield* was adjusted prior to 2025. To enhance reflective activities for facilitators, the team deliberately wove additional leadership training into the cadre-only evening sessions in 2025, led by senior-year cadets and supervised by Company Officers and noncommissioned senior enlisted members. Responding to student feedback, the frequency of training was reduced from daily lessons to a more balanced approach with guided discussion on even calendar days and personal introspection and guided reflection on odd calendar days.

In 2025, the first class of cadets to administer the new Core Values program via *The Shield* with the amended reflective exercises for juniors was the Class of 2027. This coming summer, the Class of 2029 will be the first group of students both to administer the program and to have experienced it themselves 2 years earlier. As the program evolves, further tweaks are in order for summer 2026, including further discussion on cadet culture, navigating "gray" areas in cadet regulations, and identity development in the domain of character as a prospective Armed Forces officer.

This article has described the development and implementation of *The Shield* as a revised approach to Core Values education at the USCGA. The focus has been on describing the program's design, instructional methods, and the use of peer facilitation, guided reflection, and case-based discussion during Swab Summer. As the program

is in an early stage, this case study does not attempt to assess its outcome or effectiveness. Future work may be able to examine the effects of the program once additional time and evidence are available. For now, this account is offered as a descriptive institutional case study for readers interested in how character and honor education can be structured within a military training context.

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INSIGHTS

A Case Study in Resilience: Lessons from Israeli Hostages

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on five publicly available hostage accounts involving four Israeli women and one Israeli man held between 54 and 484 days in Gaza following the October 7, 2023 attacks, this practice-oriented case study highlights resilience strategies described as supporting endurance under extreme captivity. As a case study, it does not involve statistical sampling, designed experiments, or outcome evaluation; yet case studies can be suggestive, instructive, and enlightening. This case study uses selected testimonies to clarify mechanisms of meaning, connection, spirituality, and agency relevant to leader development. Across the accounts, a sense of self-transcendent purpose—meaning derived from commitment to values, faith, relationships, or responsibilities beyond one's self-interest—appears repeatedly, expressed through spirituality and social connection and described as helping preserve a sense of personal agency. These strategies resonate with established psychological research and align with the U.S. Army's Holistic Health and Fitness framework, particularly its emphasis on spiritual readiness as a foundation for resilience.

Keywords: resilience, hostage captivity, meaning-making, spiritual readiness, leader development, coping strategies

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Introduction

Resilience—the capacity to withstand adversity, adapt, and recover—is essential for military readiness and leadership (Department of the Army, 2019; Masten, 2001). Soldiers face isolation, ambiguity, powerlessness, boredom, and danger (Bartone, 2006). Resilience to cope with these challenges requires emotional regulation (Preece et al., 2025), positive thinking (Carver and Scheier, 1985), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and social support (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Purpose, faith, and prosocial behavior are well-established contributors to resilience—principles reflected in the Army's Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) emphasis on spiritual readiness (U.S. Army, n.d.).

On October 7, 2023, militants from Hamas and allied groups launched a brutal, coordinated assault on southern Israel, killing about 1,200 people. Approximately 250 individuals were abducted and taken hostage into Gaza—the vast majority of them civilians, including children and older adults.[1] Over the subsequent months, hostage outcomes unfolded through a combination of negotiated exchanges and military operations (Reuters, 2024, 2025). Some hostages returned alive, while others were later confirmed dead, with some remains recovered subsequently (Reuters, 2025, 2026). This practice-oriented case study presents five accounts, based on publicly available firsthand and secondhand testimonies, of Israeli hostages kidnapped on October 7, 2023, and held in Gaza. Their experiences are used here to illuminate resilience-relevant mechanisms under extreme adversity, not to draw causal conclusions about outcomes.

1. Counts vary slightly across authoritative sources. Major reporting commonly cites 251 people taken hostage into Gaza on October 7, 2023, whereas the UN Commission of Inquiry documented "at least 252" people abducted to Gaza as hostages; minor discrepancies reflect differing classification rules and evolving identifications (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, 2024; The Associated Press, 2025).

Scope and Approach

This article uses the term *case study* in an illustrative, practice-oriented sense. The cases are presented as exemplars drawn from publicly available survivor accounts to illuminate resilience-relevant themes under coercive captivity. They were selected because they contain relatively detailed, publicly documented descriptions of coping under captivity and include enough narrative material to illustrate recurring resilience-relevant themes. The aim is interpretive and practice-facing—connecting real-world testimonies to established resilience research and to the Army's H2F framework—rather than empirical (i.e., it does not claim systematic sampling, prevalence estimates, or causal evaluation of coping strategies). Quotations are presented as reported in the cited sources (including published translations where applicable).

Importantly, the accounts are used to illuminate resilience-relevant themes, not to imply that survival or recovery is determined primarily by individual mindset, meaning-making, or spiritual grounding.

Case 1: Sapir Cohen

Sapir Cohen was 28 when she and her boyfriend were kidnapped by Hamas terrorists on October 7. She spent 55 days in captivity. In later accounts, she described how her spiritual coping began in the weeks before October 7, when she was drawn to recite Psalm 27 in an attempt to manage anxiety. In the tunnels of Gaza, she turned to this practice. She described harsh conditions, but emphasized focusing on small opportunities to make a difference. She recounted bringing strength to an older man—who was paralyzed from the waist down—telling him that he had to make it out alive. When a young girl was scared going into the tunnels, she lightheartedly referred to the tunnels as the "number one attraction in Gaza," bringing a smile to the girl's face. It was then she realized that even in this terrible situation, she could choose to make the situation a little bit better.

Even without formal authority, Sapir exercised influence through compassion, perspective, and purpose, uplifting those around her. Sapir reflected "I felt that all my life, I hadn't done something truly meaningful ... And then I realized—even in captivity, I could be the most meaningful person in that room. I just had to choose it" (Levy, 2025).

Case 2: Moran Stela Yanai

Moran Stela Yanai, 40 years old, was at the Nova festival (Supernova Sukkot Gathering) selling jewelry when, after nearly escaping twice, she broke her leg and was taken hostage. Dragged by 13 terrorists and beaten, she found herself in Gaza, with the city celebrating around her. She spent 54 days in captivity. Under constant threat of sexual and physical abuse, she described how she told herself, "This is my war. And if I break, he wins." Almost every day, she felt like she would die—whether from bombings around her, or guns pointed at her for crying (ITV News, 2024). Moran describes how at her lowest point, when she was starving and angry and not sure how to go on, she heard a Hebrew prayer on the radio, which inspired her to continue to look for other signs of hope, whether it was half a pita, a bucket of water to wash her face, or even recalling a beautiful memory. "It was amazing how many signs of hope I could find in a windowless, dark room when I searched for them" (Gutfreund, 2024). She focused on being grateful for life, realizing that any second it could be taken away. Moran also spent days teaching a fellow captive the prayer she knew by heart from lighting Shabbat candles (M. S. Yanai, personal communication, May 28, 2024).

Case 3: Emily Damari

Emily Damari, a British-Israeli 28-year-old, was born and raised in Kibbutz Kfar Aza. On October 7, after being shot in her left hand, she was kidnapped and spent 471 days in Gaza. In later accounts, Emily described repeatedly questioning her captors (e.g., asking how tunnels were built and how much money they made) until she was told she was forbidden to ask questions. During at least some of her time in tunnels, she described being held in small cages with several other hostages at a time. She recalled that the floors of the cages were sandy, wet, and crawling with cockroaches. "They let you go to the bathroom once or twice a day – you have a hole in the ground. It stinks ... they would hide food from us and tell us we were never leaving Gaza" (Human Rights Voices, 2025). She also described periods when six hostages were crammed into a cage, making it difficult to lie down and limiting visibility. Across accounts, Emily emphasized standing up for other hostages and improving morale. She described how during a lice outbreak in the tunnels, she held a lice competition, entertaining her fellow captives. "Even at the hardest moment, I didn't look down. I always looked up. I didn't let the terrorists have the satisfaction of seeing me break. They have not broken me" (Fox News Digital Staff, 2025; JNS Staff, 2025).

Case 4: Agam Berger

Agam Berger (19 years old at the time) was serving as an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) observation soldier at the Nahal Oz military base, near the Gaza border, when she was captured. After 482 days of captivity, Agam Berger was freed. Agam was particularly known for having braided the hair of the other captives—an act that became public when younger captives were released before her with their hair braided (All Israel News Staff, 2025). One of those earlier released captives later called Agam's father to wish him a happy birthday on behalf of his captive daughter, a detail that further underscores how peers described Agam—as someone focused on others. Other hostages also highlighted Agam's focus on helping others, describing her as a source of strength and support. Agam also remained steadfast in her faith—refusing to light a fire on Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath) and praying regularly. When she was picked up by the Israeli military helicopter, after reports described deprivation, abuse, and intimidation during captivity (Cuddy, 2025), she was handed a whiteboard. On it, she wrote a message to the people of Israel. Her message was "I chose the path of faith, and in the path

of faith I returned." Her resilience was also reflected in her stated intention only days after her release that she wanted to return to military service (Litvak, 2025).

Case 5: Keith Siegel

Keith Siegel, an American-Israeli hostage freed after 484 days, was 65 years old and weighed 110 pounds upon his release. After his release, he said, "I was starved and I was tortured, both physically and emotionally. When the war intensified, the terrorists who helped me treated me even worse than usual. They kicked me, spat on me, and held me with no water, no light and no air to breathe" (Soriano and Doba, 2025). In a recent Instagram video, he described how he began reciting a couple of simple Hebrew prayers—one of them he learned from television while he was in Gaza. His brother described how he searched every day for something to be grateful for, using simple orientation and gratitude prompts (e.g., noting the day, who he was with, and thanking God for food). Keith spent a cumulative six months of his captivity alone, his brother said, adding that the last two months of his captivity were spent entirely alone. During this time, he reportedly had conversations in his imagination with his family. His family recounted, "When they forbade him to speak, which happened all the time, he would tell himself he would talk to Aviva, to the children, to the nephews, nieces, cousins, to all of us. That's how he stayed grounded" (Maariv Online Staff, 2025).

Lessons Learned

Across these accounts, a common theme is the power of having self-transcendent purpose in adverse conditions. Self-transcendent purpose is a sense of meaning grounded in commitment to goals, values, or responsibilities that extend beyond one's own self-interest (Frankl, 2006). Acting on self-transcendent purpose means serving a cause, vocation, or value system rather than inward psychological fulfillment (Maslow, 1971). By directing attention and resources outside of their brutal conditions, the hostages appeared better able to retain a sense of agency. Finding or making meaning appeared to support the hostages' resilience. Agam grounded herself in faith; Moran framed her endurance as a form of resistance—"If I break, he wins"; Sapir reframed captivity as an opportunity to become "the most meaningful person in the room." The experiences of other hostages, whose accounts are not detailed here, show similar patterns. For example, Eli Sharabi, who survived more than 491 days in captivity, has spoken about anchoring himself—despite starvation, isolation, and torture—to a singular mission: to stay alive to see his family again (tragically, he returned to find that his wife and children were murdered) (Sharabi, 2025a, 2025b). His account reinforces that when individuals connect suffering to a larger meaning, identity, or responsibility, they may be better able to maintain psychological coherence under extreme stress (Frankl, 2006; Masten, 2001). These accounts are consistent with Army leadership doctrine emphasizing that purpose—whether grounded in values, faith, family, or responsibility—is a stabilizing force that strengthens persistence and adaptive functioning under hardship (Department of the Army, 2019). In the cases described above, purpose was often inspired by focusing on others (social connection) or by spirituality.

Social Connection

A central pattern across survivors' accounts was the role of connection—both real and imagined—in buffering the psychological strain of captivity. Even when physical freedom and autonomy were stripped away, hostages sought ways to preserve relational bonds, social identity, and a sense of belonging. Connection, in varied forms, helped regulate fear, maintain coherence, and interrupt the isolation that captivity was designed to produce.

Many hostages coped by directing attention toward others. Sapir's encouragement of a paralyzed older captive and her attempts to ease a child's anxiety reflect prosocial coping known to buffer stress (Raposa et al., 2016). Agam braided children's hair, maintaining dignity and routine amid chaos. Aviva Siegel, the wife of Keith Siegel and also taken hostage, recounted how Liri Albag and Agam Berger cheered up Keith during a particularly dark time.

Agam Berger responded that Keith often cheered them up (60 Minutes, 2025). Humor was employed to uplift others. For example, Sapir referred to the tunnels as "the number one attraction in Gaza" and Emily held a lice competition. Humor and prosocial behavior may help shift attention away from fear and despair, anchor individuals to roles beyond "victim," and build community.

Keith's imagined conversations with family members illustrate the resilience-enhancing effect of perceived connection. Remembering their social connections, through inner dialogues, religious rituals, or visualizing loved ones, was a coping strategy for many hostages. For example, one hostage, Omer Shem-Tov described how on Fridays, he could feel the warmth of his mother's Shabbat candles being lit (at his home) (Israel National News, 2025). Whether real or imagined, humans can draw on relational bonds to sustain hope and emotional stability in adverse conditions.

Spirituality

For many, faith and spiritual practice can provide purpose in life. So too, in the horrors of captivity, faith appears in these accounts to have helped strengthen resilience. Agam described choosing "the path of faith," grounding herself in religious observance even when it required bold acts such as refusing to light a fire on the Shabbat or praying under guard. Sapir repeatedly recited Psalm 27, a ritual she had begun before October 7, using its familiar words to regulate fear and remind herself of God's presence in the tunnels. Keith used gratitude statements to help him regulate his emotions. Moran drew strength from a brief Hebrew prayer she heard on a captor's radio—an unexpected spiritual signal that helped her hold on during her lowest moment. She also described actively searching for "signs of hope." Eli Sharabi talked about how the captives he was with attempted to keep a Shabbat ritual together saving a little pita for the Shabbat bread (Sharabi, 2025a), and Omer Shem-Tov described how faith sustained him (Israel National News, 2025). Spirituality here wasn't always about a theological certainty; for many, it was about a rhythm, a relationship, or a reminder of identity, consistent with research showing that religious coping can restore meaning, reduce isolation, and fortify perseverance under extreme stress (Pargament, 1997; Schwalm et al., 2022).

Preserving Agency

Captivity can create conditions ripe for moral injury, a deep distress that can come from committing or witnessing actions that violate one's fundamental moral beliefs. In captivity, the helplessness, forced compliance, degradation, and the erosion of personal agency can increase the risk of moral injury (Litz et al., 2009). In these accounts, self-transcendent purpose is described as a way of preserving personal agency. Viktor Frankl wrote that "everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances" (Frankl, 2006). Several survivors echoed this insight, describing moments when they feared they would lose their moral compass or sense of self. Resilience here took the form of refusal—not necessarily the ability to resist physically, but the refusal to surrender internally. Emily refused to "look down"; Moran defined collapsing as "letting him win." Faith, helping others, and thinking of those at home fighting for them, were all ways to preserve agency.

Stories from captives throughout history include similar resilience strategies being employed, with a focus on self-transcendent purpose. For example, the Turkish prisoners during the Korean War are noted for their resilience, maintaining morale by staying unified and socially connected (A News, 2024). Navy Vice Admiral James Stockdale, who spent seven years in Hoa Lo Prison in Vietnam, focused on his leadership, organizing a system of communication and expectations for prisoner behavior codified by the acronym "Back US" which included "Unity over

Self" (U.S. Naval Academy Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership, n.d.). This helped socially connect the captives, as well as helped give them a sense of purpose and agency. At the same prison, Navy Lieutenant Porter Halyburton credits his survival to recognizing he could retain agency with his attitude, echoing Frankl's quote above. He looked for meaning and signs of God, whether it was a ray of sunshine or a green leaf poking in through the shutter, and maintained social connection by writing poems and songs for his family and praying with captives (Johnson, 2024). Louis Zamperini, an Army Air Force Second Lieutenant held as a prisoner of war by the Japanese in World War II credits his faith, hope of seeing family, and seeking opportunities to influence his environment for the better as supporting his resilience (Houston, 2020).

In Army H2F doctrine, one pillar of health is spiritual readiness, which is the ability to "endure and overcome" adversity through beliefs, values, and purpose that guide actions under pressure (Department of the Army, 2020). The hostages' accounts suggest the importance of focusing on self-transcendent purpose. The Army deliberately seeks to develop capacities for resilience long before soldiers encounter hardship by cultivating character, reinforcing shared purpose, supporting ethical decision-making, and fostering cohesive, service-oriented teams (Department of the Army, 2019). Preparing for future challenges, therefore, is not only about anticipating external threats but about cultivating the internal capacities—a sense of purpose, growth orientation, connection, and personal agency—that enable individuals to endure when circumstances exceed their control (Department of the Army, 2020).

Implications for Leader Development

These accounts offer practical insights that fit the themes above and the Army's focus on spiritual readiness within H2F.

1) **Help people build a "why" that holds under pressure.**

Across the accounts, the survivors describe holding on by focusing on faith, family, duty, or a clear inner determination (e.g., "if I break, he wins").

2) **Support spiritual readiness through concrete practices.**

In these accounts, spiritual readiness often shows up through simple, repeatable practices—prayer or Psalms for some, Shabbat observance when possible, and gratitude routines. Leader development can highlight that concrete practices can help people stay grounded under stress, without prescribing any particular practice.

3) **Train to notice "choice points" and make small choices for agency.**

Survivors describe small, repeatable choices—directing attention from despair to optimism, using self-talk, keeping simple routines, looking for "signs of hope," and small acts of caring for others. Training can help people practice noticing these moments and taking the next constructive action under stress.

4) **Use connection to build morale.**

Connection helped people endure: mutual support, small caregiving acts, and even imagined conversations with loved ones when isolated. Several accounts describe humor and small acts of service (e.g., braiding hair, simple competitions) as ways to support dignity and morale—without denying hardship.

5) **Keep resilience talk realistic.**

Resilience does not guarantee survival. The goal is to help people endure and keep integrity, while staying honest about what no one can control. These accounts illustrate constructive coping under coercive captivity, but they should not be read as implying that those who were killed or traumatized lacked purpose, faith, or inner strength. In deliberate brutality, many outcomes

remain outside individual control; leader development should teach resilience with humility about those limits.

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INSIGHTS

The Middle Matters!

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ABSTRACT

Middle leaders, often overlooked in favor of executives at the top and frontline staff at the bottom, are the essential connective tissue of organizations. They bridge vision and execution, shape culture through daily interactions, and translate values into practice. In times of volatility, they become steady hands and trusted voices, guiding teams through uncertainty. Yet these leaders face shrinking ranks, expanding responsibilities, and insufficient support. To close the growing leadership gap in the middle, organizations must reframe middle management as a strategic asset, developing, empowering, and honoring these leaders as indispensable drivers of culture, performance, and moral leadership.

Keywords: middle managers, leadership gap, moral leadership, organizational culture, values-based leadership, leadership development

Introduction: The overlooked power of the middle

Leadership is often framed through the lens of either those at the top in positions of authority (the visionaries setting direction) or those at the bottom (the people on the front lines executing strategy). Yet between these two realms lies a crucial, yet often underappreciated, powerful force: the middle. Across the public, private, nonprofit, and government sectors, those in the middle (some titled with positions of authority such as "Middle Managers") act as the connective tissue that sustains influence, shapes culture, and drives long-term impact. It's not just "tone at the top," it's also "mood in the middle" and "buzz at the bottom" shaping an organization's ethical culture and probability of success (Ethics & Compliance Initiative, 2018).

Studies on peer effects in performance (Carrell et al., 2009) and leadership networks (Brass, 1984, 1995) highlight that influence is often driven laterally rather than strictly hierarchically. Previous work published in the *Journal of*

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Character and Leadership Development has explored themes of leadership and moral development across levels, emphasizing how peer-driven learning environments can strengthen character and leadership (Born and Caliguiri, 2024; Born and Megone, 2019; Born and Yemiscigil, 2024; Cook et al., 2021; Dimmock and Born, 2023).

The importance of middle-level leaders is recognized across sectors. The Project Management Institute (PMI), for example, emphasizes the central role of project leaders in "leading change via teams" to deliver value, shifting away from a narrow focus on "management" to a broader perspective that aligns with contemporary organizational demands (Project Management Institute, 2021). The role of middle management has become both more complex and, in many cases, more overlooked in organizational strategy (McKinsey and Company, 2023). During the pandemic, many organizations eliminated middle management roles as part of hierarchy-flattening initiatives (Chartered Management Institute, 2023). Now, amid ongoing restructuring, AI-driven job displacement, and persistent labor shortages, fewer professionals are stepping into these roles (Deloitte, 2024). Globally, 75% of employers report difficulty filling key positions—an all-time high (ManpowerGroup, 2024). This shortage is compounded by a growing reluctance to pursue managerial positions; for example, many new leaders enter their roles without adequate preparation, and nearly half underperform within the first 18 months (Sull et al., 2021).

At the same time, the capacity of those who remain in middle management is being undermined by insufficient training and evolving expectations. Drawing on research published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Zhang (2024) notes in *The Middle Manager of the Future* that today's middle managers are increasingly expected to shift from commanding to coaching, requiring a deeper focus on human-centered leadership (see Zhang, 2023). A McKinsey report (2023) echoes this concern, warning that organizations are "wasting their most precious resource" by failing to support middle managers with the autonomy, tools, and trust they need to lead effectively.

This challenge is further exacerbated by insufficient investment in professional development: 84% of U.S. managers report needing more training on leadership and people management skills (SHRM, 2022), and over half say they receive inadequate organizational support to succeed in their role and hybrid work (Gallup, 2023, 2024). Without intentional development, middle managers are left to navigate increasingly complex demands without the scaffolding to thrive.

This reinforcing challenge of declining interest in management, elevated expectations, and inadequate support has left organizations with a widening leadership gap in the middle. For example, 44% of U.S. professionals report that their company has reduced manager-level roles (Korn Ferry data cited in Gavett and Sawhney, 2025), and Gallup finds managers are experiencing the sharpest decline in engagement of any employee group (Gavett and Sawhney, 2025). AI is ushering in a new middle management era (CIO, 2024). And yet, in times of volatility, middle managers are often the most essential: they translate strategy into action, hold teams together, and model values under pressure (Gavett and Sawhney, 2025; McKinsey and Company, 2023).

These capabilities closely align with The HOW Institute's Moral Leadership Framework, which defines moral leadership as a practice guided by purpose, elevated by character, and demonstrated through behaviors such as building trust, leading with moral authority, and inspiring and elevating others (The HOW Institute for Society, 2026a). When middle managers embody these behaviors, they serve not only as operational leaders, but as cultural stewards who carry and scale values across the organization and beyond.

The HOW Institute's 2026 State of Moral Leadership in Business Report reinforces this urgency. While 94% of employees believe moral leadership is urgently needed, only 6% report that their top-tier leaders consistently demonstrate it (The HOW Institute for Society, 2026b). This moral leadership gap is most pronounced in the middle, where values must be interpreted and lived through daily decisions. The gap reveals not a lack of intention, but a lack of investment in the capabilities, support, and cultural alignment middle managers need to lead with moral authority.

Reframing leadership: The call to action

Ultimately, leadership may be less about formal position and more about the practices and relationships that bring it to life. There is growing recognition of the need to re-examine how leadership in the middle is understood, developed, and valued.

Leading from the middle can involve cultivating influence through relationships, character, and the courage to uphold shared values, while also incorporating diverse perspectives and contributions. Middle managers, in particular, can serve as translators, connectors, and curators of organizational culture. Their influence often emerges not solely from formal authority, but from how they live out shared values, foster trust, and navigate tensions across teams and levels.

In this vein, revitalizing the middle is not a matter of tacking on another initiative to an already crowded leadership agenda; it requires reframing middle managers as indispensable value creators who connect vision with execution, culture with performance, and strategy with the real-world experience of teams. Achieving lasting change demands investment not only from middle managers themselves but also from the senior leaders empowering them and the systems that shape the conditions in which they operate. In today's increasingly complex world and workplace, marked by shifting stakeholder expectations, accelerated change cycles, and heightened ethical demands, empowering effective middle managers calls for a deliberate shift in how senior leaders approach the middle. Four interdependent priorities, in particular, stand out:

1. **Cultivate translation skills.** Equip middle managers with the vocabulary, frameworks, and facilitation techniques needed to interpret and communicate organizational values and strategies. Create forums for collaboration (across silos) and invest in ethical decision-making training.
2. **Foster humility and courage.** Move beyond traditional leadership development to incorporate reflective practices, ethical scenarios, and feedback systems. Encourage peer learning communities that balance stepping back with stepping forward.
3. **Prioritize human connection.** Encourage empathetic leadership, build trust across teams, and remain attentive to human impact. Model relational leadership at the top and embed it in performance expectations.
4. **Make the middle a destination.** Recognize and reward excellence in middle management. Reimagine these roles as endpoints in themselves, not merely stepping-stones to executive positions.

The shift in PMI's PMBOK® Guide toward "leading change via teams" offers a powerful model for re-positioning middle leaders as catalysts for organizational agility, innovation and success. Rather than seeing them as mere implementers of directives, PMI's framework underscores their potential to bridge strategy and execution, shape high-performing teams, and adapt in complex environments, capabilities central to the *Middle Matters!* thesis.

This call for a new model of leadership reflects a broader movement toward a Human Economy, one in which trust, character, and moral courage are not only ethical imperatives but also defining strengths

in an increasingly complex and interdependent world (Seidman, 2017). In this emerging era, it is not only *what* leaders do that matters but also *how* they do it, with purpose, principle, and humanity. Middle managers are uniquely positioned to bring this "how" to life. As vital connectors between values and action, culture and performance, they occupy the moral space where organizational integrity is forged and sustained. When empowered to lead with moral authority, they shape organizations that are not only more effective, but more human, and ultimately more worthy of the people within them and the communities they serve.

As Dov Seidman (2025), Founder and Chair of the Board for The HOW Institute for Society, stated in a commencement address to the University of Miami School of Law: *"We are no longer living in a merely connected world, but in an interdependent one, where the consequences of our choices ripple across people, systems, and societies. In such a world, the question that matters most is not 'What can we do?' but 'What should we do?'"* This shift from possibility to responsibility calls for a new kind of leadership, one grounded in moral courage, human dignity, and principled actions. Nowhere is this more essential than in the middle.

Middle-level leaders, those who bridge vision and execution, must not only model values but animate them in the face of complexity. When they lead with purpose and moral authority, they become stewards of culture, translating ideals into daily practices and sustaining them over time. In doing so, they help build institutions that are not only high-performing but also high-integrity, institutions that earn and keep the trust of those they serve (Seidman, 2025; The HOW Institute for Society, 2026b).

Ultimately, the future health of our organizations will rest on how well we invest in and trust those who lead from the middle. When supported to act with courage, clarity, and compassion, these leaders deliver more than results: they safeguard values, strengthen trust, and weave the moral fabric that holds the institution together. The middle matters now more than ever, and how we empower it will define not only our organizations' effectiveness, but their integrity and legacy for years to come.

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INSIGHTS

Character, Warrior Identity, and Moral Leadership: Union Colonel Charles Gilpin at Monocacy and in Peace

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Keywords: American Civil War, character and leadership development, warrior identity, moral leadership, posttraumatic growth, survivor obligation, Charles Gilpin

No human endeavor matches combat for intensity, lethality, horror, and exhilaration, or more severely tests the character upon which effective command leadership depends. Character has been described as a deep quality that is inextricably linked to virtue, a conception especially relevant to officers because law alone cannot govern every moral demand of command.[1] As history has shown, the ability to inspire others can be exploited for the darkest of purposes; for that reason, character, leadership development, and the acceptance of responsibility for others' lives must be considered together.

Although the Civil War offers many case studies in this process, Colonel Charles Gilpin is particularly instructive. Significantly older than most Union officers and lacking previous military training, he nonetheless became an impressive combat leader. Examining his growth in uniform and postwar advocacy for African American equality through the literature of battle, the historical scholarship on Reconstruction and race, and research on veterans'

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powerful warrior identity and survivor obligation helps to clarify the relationship among character, combat leadership, and moral responsibility.[2]

Soldiers' Pride

When asked about his war experience, Sixth Pennsylvania Cavalry Sergeant Louis J. Boos, whose right forearm was amputated after being shot at Todd's Tavern, Virginia, on May 7, 1864, encapsulated the profound transition from civilian to soldier: "I do so with feelings of pride and wonder at the many trials through which I have passed, and which have better enabled me ... to bear the crosses of this life upon coming home to live as a private citizen."[3]

In 1994, the results of a study of male World War II and Korean War veterans, 40% of whom had been in combat, precisely matched what Boos expressed. Psychologists Carolyn M. Aldwin, Michael R. Levenson, and Avron Spiro III found the positive consistently outweighed the negative, with 11 desirable effects of service in the military reported by 90% or more of the men. These included "broader perspective," "became more independent," "positive feelings about self," "value life more," and "clearer direction and purpose in life."

Interpreting their findings, the authors concluded: "Apparently, combat exposure inoculated some ... against future stress ... Other men spoke of their battlefield promotions and ... pride in discovering that they could successfully command and protect other men. They felt that if they could cope with war, they could cope with anything."[4]

These results closely correspond with the Israel Defense Forces Unit of Military Psychology's study of Yom Kippur War veterans' "most frightening aspect of battle." Rather than death, limb loss, or other injury, the greatest fear of lieutenants, captains, majors, and senior noncommissioned officers was "letting down" those who depend upon them.[5]

Warrior Identity, Posttraumatic Growth, and Survivor Obligation

Contrary to interpretations that emphasize combat's destructive emotional effects,[6] what Boos, Aldwin, Levenson, and Spiro described are components of an evolving warrior identity, characterized by psychiatrists Samuel L. Bradshaw Jr. and James B. Horne and psychologist Carroll D. Ohlde in 1991.[7] This self-esteem, which is sustaining during armed conflict, underpins the personal and occupational success that has been characteristic of American veterans after they leave the service.

It is also consistent with posttraumatic growth, epitomized by White and Black Union veterans, who pursued unprecedented political activism through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and troubling widespread acceptance of the Lost Cause. As I argue in *One More War to Fight*, that civic engagement was often connected to how veterans perceived their service, survival, and ongoing obligations to fallen comrades.[8]

The following case study of Colonel Charles Gilpin, who commanded a Union Maryland Infantry regiment, exemplifies how soldiers' pride, a potent warrior identity, and personal character are all vital to the development of leadership in war, and, along with posttraumatic growth, in civilian life. For contemporary character and leadership education, Gilpin's case suggests that steadfastness, moral purpose, and responsibility for others may matter as much as prior formal military training in the making of an effective combat leader.

A Prominent Citizen Goes to War

By September 26, 1861, Charles Gilpin of Cumberland, Maryland, had led a successful tanning business and "large mercantile trade" for years, and was a happily married father of four young children. That day, he chaired a meeting that elected him and 12 others as representatives to a county convention of loyal citizens, across party lines, to maintain "the Constitution and the Union ... until the

rebellion which now unhappily exists, shall have been effectively subdued." But Gilpin's commitment didn't end there, as the 49-year-old left his family on January 30, 1862 to enter military service for the first time as Captain, Company D, Third Regiment, Potomac Home Brigade (PHB) Infantry, Maryland Volunteers.[9]

Assigned to the Mountain Department, the regiment fought the Army of Northern Virginia three times before being transferred to the Middle Department, and clashing with them again over September 13–15 at Harper's Ferry. After the besieged Union garrison surrendered, the Third, paroled upon exchange, was tasked with guarding the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad.

Promoted to lieutenant colonel in September 1862, Gilpin was leading the regiment on June 28, 1863, when it arrived at Elysville, where, as the *National Tribune* reported, "Two important iron bridges crossing the Patapsco [River] ... were threatened with destruction by [Jeb] Stuart's cavalry ... advancing on the right flank of the Army of the Potomac toward Pennsylvania." The B&O being the "principal route of supply and communication between Washington, Baltimore and ... Meade's army," Gilpin and his men saved the bridges, a considerable achievement done without "much personal danger and hardship."

Continuing to guard the railroad in Maryland up to Monocacy Junction, the Third PHB saw little action from fall 1863 through early spring 1864. Then, after his April promotion to colonel, Gilpin and the regiment would face their greatest challenge of the war.[10]

Jubal Early Invades Maryland on the Way to Washington

In early July, Major General Lew Wallace's situation was perilous as he awaited Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal Early's acclaimed Second Corps. Having cleared the Shenandoah Valley of Union troops per General Robert E. Lee's orders, they were now advancing through Maryland towards their ultimate objective, Washington, DC.

Lacking accurate intelligence from his superiors, Wallace stated it plain: "The task we then assumed was not an easy one. All Maryland from the Monocacy River to the Chesapeake Bay, and beyond to the sea ... to keep [by] ... the small total of troops left me by General Grant [which] was many times divided and widely distributed ... the operation was like gleaning in a lean field a second and third time."

Including Gilpin's Third PHB, "twenty-three hundred effectives" constituted Wallace's Eighth Corps. To make matters worse, the Eleventh Maryland and both Ohio National Guard regiments were "'hundred days' troops,"[11] and he had no cavalry. Luckily for Wallace, that lack was more than filled when the battle-tested Eighth Illinois, fresh from stalking Confederate Partisan John Singleton Mosby and his Rangers, arrived essentially out of nowhere on July 6.

Their commander, Lieutenant Colonel David Clendenin, immediately agreed to serve under Wallace, even though he and his 230 officers and men were in the Army of the Potomac, neither one had authorization for the arrangement, and they were complete strangers. Nonetheless, by following their instincts in an exigent situation, two citizen volunteers whom war, character, adversity, and leadership had transformed into exceptional professional soldiers forged a critical partnership.

Wallace then rode to meet "the officers of the several commands," where Brigadier General Erastus B. Tyler, the able First Separate Brigade leader, introduced him to Gilpin: "noticing his quiet manner, veteranish complexion, iron-gray hair, and the evident pride he took in his command, I set him down as one happily described by the French, 'Father of the Regiment'. ... I was not mistaken in judgment."[12]

July 7: The Battle Above and Through Frederick

Armed with key information Clendenin obtained the morning of July 7 by reconnaissance northwest of

Frederick, Wallace sought to reinforce Tyler, whom he had sent to "command at the stone [Jug] bridge on the Baltimore pike," by directing him "to put Gilpin's regiment and [Captain Frederic W.] Alexander, with three guns of his battery, on the [railroad] cars and hurry them to Frederick. West of the town Gilpin was to take position to cover it, and be ready to support Clendenin, slowly falling back."

Wallace's orders to Gilpin were crystal clear: "Upon your arrival at Frederick assume command of the post and organize your forces as far as possible. Should it become necessary to evacuate Frederick you will fall back upon the Baltimore pike and hold the crossing of the Monocacy at all hazards."

At 4:00 PM, Gilpin wired Tyler from his headquarters near Frederick: "The enemy have opened fire, and we are replying. We have sent all the horses we can obtain. Can you send all my regiment to me!" One hour later, "The enemy are pressing us, and the Eighth Illinois Cavalry have expended nearly all their ammunition. The telegraph operator has run away. What shall we do in the emergency!"

In his next dispatch, Gilpin coolly told Tyler that his command had "taken position on the hill, west of town; the enemy in full view, and have plenty to do. They are supposed about 800 strong"; at 6:15 PM, he sent this update: "Unless we are re-enforced immediately, both in men and ammunition, we will be forced to fall back on Monocacy .... The enemy are moving to our left and trying to get onto the National road .... Send ammunition by all means for infantry, artillery, and Sharps carbines. Our men fight well."

Wallace, unsure whether Gilpin could hold on, then "noticed a sudden reawakening of the fight ... the artillery and small-arms firing swelled, ... and became continuous ... Gilpin had charged the enemy and was driving him back towards the mountain." As for Clendenin, once "Colonel Gilpin ... came up, and being senior officer, took command of all the forces," the Eighth Illinois leader "moved to our left and with my cavalry dismounted engaged the enemy, fighting continually until dark, repulsing them effectually."[13]

Beyond their usual outstanding performance, the presence of Clendenin and his regiment surely had a galvanizing effect on the much less experienced Eighth Corps officers and men. Given the circumstances, the leadership displayed by Gilpin, and the dogged valor of his troops in locking horns with first-rate Army of Northern Virginia soldiers, were both exceptional, and superior officers gave them due credit.

At 8:40 PM, Wallace wired Gilpin from Monocacy: "You have behaved nobly," and in his battle report, Tyler would write: "Colonel Gilpin and Lieutenant-Colonel Clendenin conducted themselves in the most gallant manner, deserving great credit for their skill and efficiency from first to last. These officers speak in very high terms of the officers and men under them, and they deserve it all."

In his own August follow-up report, Wallace said "The forces opposed ... were about equal in number, yet [Frederick native Brigadier General Bradley] Johnson had the advantage; his men were veterans, while Gilpin's, with the exception of Clendenin's squadron, had not before been under fire, a circumstance much enhancing the credit gained by them."

On July 7, Wallace wired Lieutenant Colonel Samuel B. Lawrence, running the Middle Department for him back in Baltimore: "Think I have had the best little battle of the war. Our men did not retreat, but held their own. The enemy were repulsed three times." At 11:00 PM, he proudly informed Army Chief of Staff Henry W. Halleck of the Rebel attack "with infantry, artillery, and cavalry" that was "handsomely repulsed" in "a severe fight, concluding at dark."[14]

July 9: The Battle of Monocacy

With Wallace reinforced by the arrival of Brigadier General James B. Ricketts's Third Division of the Army of the Potomac's renowned Sixth Corps, the stage was set for the main event, with three Third PHB companies "posted to defend Crum's Ford – midway the stone bridge and railroad," and "Gilpin held in reserve at the railroad." Wallace's outnumbered and outgunned soldiers somehow held off the Confederates until he had no choice but to "burn the wooden bridge and the block-house at its further end, thus releasing the force left to defend them, I put into the engagement every available man except Tyler's reserves."

When Wallace later "saw the third line of rebels move out of the woods and down the hill" and "right after it came the fourth," he knew the die was cast: "I ordered General Ricketts to make preparations and retire to the Baltimore pike." About 4:00 PM, the Union retreat began, with retention of the stone bridge so imperative that Tyler "galloped [there] ... and took the command in person." He would later note that "Colonel Gilpin's regiment, with the three companies of the First Maryland Potomac Home Brigade that were assigned him, although serving in detachments along an extended line, fully sustained the enviable reputation they had won on Thursday."

Wallace pondered the human cost, "a heavy loss, illustrating the obstinate valor of the command. I am satisfied, however, that the casualties of the rebels exceeded mine ... Orders have been given to collect the bodies of our dead in one burial ground on the battle-field, suitable for a monument upon which I propose to write: 'These men died to save the National Capital, and they did save it.'"[15]

By delaying Jubal Early for a crucial 36 hours, Wallace and his pieced-together army had done their utmost to prevent the Rebels from capturing Washington, and forcing Abraham Lincoln's evacuation 4 months before the vote on his re-election.

Their work in Maryland complete, the Third PHB moved into Virginia and fought at Snicker's Gap on July 18. Having joined Major General Philip Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah, the regiment participated in four August engagements before it was again assigned to the Department of West Virginia.

From there, the regiment mustered out on May 29, 1865; Gilpin was already home, having left January 2 upon expiration of his 3-year term of service. Months earlier, Gilpin and his men, without firing a shot, had carried out another critical responsibility that demonstrated how drastically the views of those who fought for the Union had changed.[16]

A Border Slave State's Soldiers' Vote for Freedom

By early 1864, Maryland had reached a crossroad that mirrored what the nation itself was confronting. Responding to Governor Augustus W. Bradford's advocacy for a constitutional convention to abolish slavery, in February the state legislature enacted bills calling for a popular vote. On April 6, Marylanders, including Gilpin, who had been granted leave of absence to go home to vote, approved the call for convention by a 2:1 margin, and selected delegates for the historic meeting to convene on April 27.[17]

At the convention, all aspects concerning the vote of Marylanders in active federal military service were specified, though none applied to the ineligible 8,718 enlisted men in United States Colored Troops regiments. Overseeing the October election on adoption or rejection of the new constitution, state officers, and congressional representatives would be Wallace's Eighth Corps and Middle Department.

On October 22, the DC *Evening Star* reported "all uncertainty" stemming from delayed receipt of "official returns of the [soldiers'] vote" was "removed by the arrival to-night of the commissioner sent to collect the

vote in Sheridan's army"; as expected, "Several organizations, including the 3d regiment, in Western Virginia" would "considerably increase the majority." Slavery's death knell in the state of Maryland was declared by Bradford on October 31, the constitution to go into effect the next day proclaiming its abolition, with "all persons held to service or labor as slaves ... hereby declared free."

When the votes were tabulated, it was evident that the state's White soldiers had swung the election. Of the 29,799 voters who opposed the new constitution, just 263 were soldiers, versus the 2,633 soldiers among all 30,174 who supported its passage, a scant difference of 375 votes. Maryland civilians had rejected the new constitution by 1,995 votes (29,536 versus 27,541), but the 10:1 approving soldiers' vote provided a decisive 2,370 majority for its adoption.[18]

Gilpin's Postwar Life

Having survived war, personal tragedy struck Gilpin in January 1866 when Charles Jr., age 12, broke through the ice while skating on the frozen Cumberland River and drowned before help could reach him. Overcoming the loss, by 1870 Gilpin remained a successful merchant who shared a full household with his wife Julia, two grown daughters, two sons (14, and Charles A., 3), and two live-in female domestics.[19]

Like so many other Union veterans, Gilpin knew that the Civil War's "unfinished work" had changed from freedom to equality, and turned to politics. One of four Allegany County Radical Republicans voted into the House of Delegates in November 1866, his and another colleague's unseating by the Committee on Elections in February 1867 disappointingly overturned their majority.

In the 1872 presidential election, Gilpin, "an intelligent gentleman, a fluent and popular speaker," served as a district elector on the Grant Two Term Republican ticket. On November 2, the *Catoctin Clarion* further reported on a highly attended Mass Meeting and Torch Light Procession where "The Emmitsburg delegation ... include[d] many 'American colored fellow-citizens'." Gilpin, after "rapturous applause," spoke "for over an hour on the political situation, touching upon various points."

In April 1873, his contribution to Grant's successful campaign and Lloyd Lowndes's congressional election was acknowledged with a presidential appointment as Surveyor of Customs for the port of Baltimore. During Lowndes's 1874 victorious re-election run, he and Gilpin paid special attention to African American voters; four years later, Gilpin was among Allegany County front-runners for the Republican congressional nomination, which he did not receive.[20]

Over the next decade, the colonel remained a stalwart progressive and one of Cumberland's most respected citizens. In 1880, to aid in establishing the Union Street School's proposed public school library, he readily accepted an invitation to discuss "Macbeth," including "the great moral truths embodied in the tragedy."

That same year, after removal from his Customs House position by President Rutherford B. Hayes, Gilpin became president of the Central [James A.] Garfield, [Chester A.] Arthur and [Milton] Urner Committee, and leader of the anti-Hayes election faction. The Republican campaign events were characterized by a high percentage of Black participants, who in some cases outnumbered Whites—Gilpin's intimate involvement in these biracial events included speaking.

On October 31, the *Cumberland Civilian* extensively covered a Republican demonstration for Garfield, in which Gilpin played a major role. Predominantly

peaceful, it was marred by an ugly incident. When "the Cumberland colored club became separated by a train" from most marchers, a melee ensued, in which "some half-dozen pistol-shots were fired and several colored men were wounded." Amid claims and counterclaims, the *Civilian* stated outright that "responsibility for the disturbance rests with the law-breaking Democrats who interfered with the orderly right of men to parade our streets."[21]

By 1888, retired from business, Gilpin lost his oldest daughter Mary to pneumonia. Just two months later, he finally ran again for office, only to lose the Cumberland City Clerk election to the Democratic incumbent; 8 days later, he delivered the featured address at the Memorial Day program.[22]

Then, in a tragic irony, he was taking his usual morning walk on February 27, 1889 when, as the *Martinsburg Herald* reported, an "express train on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was entering Cumberland at a very rapid rate, being about thirty minutes late, [when] it struck Colonel Charles Gilpin with great force, and caused his death, after he had suffered terrible agony for about seven hours."

According to the *Cumberland Daily Times*, the 76-year-old Gilpin never regained consciousness, dying "without ... recognition of any member of the family or friends." The Elkton *Cecil Whig*, "pained to note the terrible accident," then said: "We were associated closely personally as well as officially for a number of years with Col. Gilpin and can testify to his high character both as a gentleman and an officer."

Having held a special meeting to make funeral arrangements, his Grand Army of the Republic Tyler Post comrades attended en masse the following afternoon, joined by Gilpin's family, the pallbearers who included later governor Lownes and other Republican luminaries, and additional mourners.

Ever since, the headstone of this admired moral leader in war and peace reads simply yet eloquently:

"COL

CHAS GILPIN

3RD MD. P.H.B. INF."[23]

Being under fire had not changed Gilpin's character; rather, it was the qualities and sense of responsibility he brought to military service that fostered learning, personal growth, and his development as a leader of men. Having run a profitable business for decades, he joined the Union army from a border slave state, and went to war at an age nearly double that of the average Northern soldier. His character, commitment to defending the republic, support for slavery's destruction, and command ability enabled someone with relatively little battlefield experience to rise to the occasion when his troops, and the country, depended on him most. The words on Charles Gilpin's grave reflect the warrior identity and sense of obligation that spurred his continued devotion in civilian life to advancing what he had fought for in uniform.

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INSIGHTS

Ten Tips for Developing Leadership Empathy

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Keywords: leadership empathy, two-way empathy, leader-subordinate relationships, leader development, military leadership

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings, concerns and motivations of others. Empathy creates *trust* between leaders and subordinates.

I say trust *between* leaders and subordinates because trust is a "two-way street." Subordinates will not trust a leader who does not trust them. A leader will not trust subordinates who do not trust the leader. For empathy to be effective at creating trust, empathy itself must also be a two-way street. That is why effective leaders have empathy for subordinates—and why effective leaders work to develop in their subordinates empathy for the leader, helping them better understand the challenges, constraints, and responsibilities that come with leadership.

When subordinates trust leaders and leaders trust subordinates, their combined efforts become far more effective.

A large body of research highlights the importance of leaders showing empathy toward their followers, demonstrating its positive effects on motivation, well-being, and performance (Kock et al., 2019; Muss et al., 2025). Far less attention has been paid to follower-to-leader empathy or to how leaders can actively foster *upward* empathy. Even theories that address mutual relationships, such as Leader–Member Exchange, tend to treat follower empathy as an *outcome* of leadership behaviors rather than a skill to be deliberately cultivated (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Developing this kind of two-way empathy has the potential to deepen trust and shared purpose between leaders and followers, making it especially vital in contexts where teams face difficult or high-stakes tasks.

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This article offers a practical framework for building such two-way empathy. I describe "ten tips" for leaders to develop empathy for subordinates while also fostering in subordinates a deeper empathy for leadership itself

Tip 1: A leader demonstrates empathy when they are able to do what they ask others to do.

This is a statement of skills and experience.

The Fighter Squadron Commander should be an experienced fighter pilot. The manager of a software development department should be an experienced software engineer. The leader's prior experience can create empathy for subordinates because the leader has experienced the difficulties that the subordinates are now experiencing. Likewise, subordinates may have empathy for the leader because they understand that the leader has the experience to understand the subordinates' difficulties.

It is not necessary for the leader to be the best at the task. It is necessary that the leader be a good teacher for subordinates needing improvement. As French and Raven showed in their foundational work on the bases of social power, leaders who demonstrate competence earn respect and trust (French and Raven, 1959). Absent relevant prior experience, a leader's attempt to teach subordinates will expose the leader's incompetence.

It may be best to decline a new position if one does not have the requisite prior experience.

Tip 2: Empathetic leaders are teachers who share their talent and experience with others.

I know of no better way of building a leader's empathy for subordinates and subordinates' empathy for the leader than to take the time to teach. Ingredients are:

1. **A receptive audience**. Empathetic teaching requires the student to be ready to listen and learn. As the saying, commonly attributed to Lao Tzu, goes, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear."

2. **A jointly perceived need**. Empathetic teaching requires that both teacher and student feel a need for education and improvement.

3. **Teaching by example**. Empathetic teaching works best with specific and personal examples.

4. **A commitment of time and energy**. Empathetic teaching requires that both teacher and student make a commitment of time and energy.

5. **A willingness to take the risk**. Empathetic teaching requires the leader to share a part of themself. One needs to cross the boundary between leader and subordinate. For example, "I once made the same mistake when I was in your position."

6. **An attitude of caring and concern**. Empathetic teaching requires a rapport based on honest concern.

Tip 3: Empathetic leaders work for the good of the organization, rather than for themselves.

To build empathy with subordinates, leaders must demonstrate that they are motivated by the good of the organization, and by the good of their subordinates, rather than by self-interest. This must be apparent in the leader's words and actions.

There is a saying: "The cream rises to the top—and so does the scum." Subordinates do not have empathy for scum. Subordinates find ways to undermine those they perceive as motivated by self-interest.

Tip 4: Empathetic leaders do not abuse power and authority.

To build and maintain empathy among subordinates a leader must not abuse special privileges available to them and must not abuse power over subordinates. Abuse of special privileges will be noted by subordinates and will reduce their feelings of empathy. Ingredients are:

1. Leaders should not discuss their special privileges with subordinates.
2. Leaders should not flaunt their privileges.
3. Leaders should act with restraint with respect to their privileges. They should show a lack of interest or concern for these privileges.
4. Leaders should not seek to enhance existing privileges. Doing so will lose the empathy of the leader's superiors.
5. When promoted to a new position, the leader should review the accompanying privileges and decide which are necessary to execute the job and which can undermine empathy of subordinates. Leaders should eliminate or not take advantage of the latter.

As Lord Acton observed, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Acton, 1887/1907, p. 504). The more powerful a leader becomes, the more important the leader's restraint and avoidance of abuse of that power. Ingredients are:

1. Imagine that a respected superior is present and observing when we exercise our authority. How would the respected superior view our words and our actions?
2. Place ourselves in the shoes of our subordinate receiving our exercise of authority. How would the subordinate view our words and actions?
3. Question our motives for our words and actions. Are they proper?

How then should a leader exercise their power over subordinates? Empathetic leaders are not petty, cynical or sarcastic. They are advised: "Always be tactful and well-mannered and teach your subordinates to be the same. Avoid excessive sharpness or harshness of voice, which usually indicates the man who has shortcomings of his own to hide" (Rommel, 1953, p. 239).

The objective is results. When results are not forthcoming the objective is education and training. Violations must be punished, but the empathetic leader does not gain satisfaction from punishing.

Tip 5: Empathetic leaders show respect for subordinates' abilities.

The empathetic leader shows respect for subordinates' abilities by assessing their ability to successfully perform a task. It is destructive to empathy between leader and subordinate to either underestimate or overestimate the ability of a subordinate to perform a task. Ingredients are:

1. **Delegative**. Empathetic leaders should use this model when both leader and subordinate feel that the subordinate is fully capable of completing the assigned task and may even have an ability superior to the leader in the execution of the task.
2. **Participative**. Empathetic leaders should use this model when both leader and subordinate feel that the task may or may not be successfully performed by the subordinate. Greater oversight and participation by the leader is appropriate in this case.
3. **Directive**. Empathetic leaders should use this model when both leader and subordinate feel that the task will be difficult for the subordinate to perform. Direct oversight and participation are appropriate in this case.

Note that these management models assume that the leader and subordinate are correct and in agreement

with respect to the subordinate's ability to perform the task. When leader and subordinate are not in agreement, it is best not to proceed until a more coherent understanding between leader and subordinate is reached. Moreover, as the assignment progresses, it may become evident that the subordinate does not have the ability to perform the task that both leader and subordinate initially thought they had. In these cases movement from one management model to another will be necessary.

Tip 6: Empathetic leaders implement a meritocracy for promotions, recognition and awards.

Critically important to the success of a leader is the establishment and enforcement of a meritocracy within the organization. Individuals should be selected for promotion based on their superior likelihood of success. This is the definition of a true meritocracy. There is no room for nepotism, cronyism, promoting someone that the rest of the organization does not believe is the best candidate, or promoting from the outside when there is an equally qualified candidate inside the organization. Note that promoting from within usually results in multiple promotions as the positions of the promoted subordinates need replacements.

Tip 7: Empathetic leaders criticize subordinates in private and praise in public.

Empathetic leaders never critique a subordinate in front of their peers or subordinates. Ingredients are:

1. **Critique from command distance**. The more levels between the critic and the receiver of criticism, the more traumatic the criticism can feel.

2. **Critique of delegated assignments**. Empathetic leaders critique results, not methods—unless methods are "low integrity" or "high breakage."

3. **Critique of participative activity**. When using a participative management model,
   i. Propose a more effective method rather than criticize a subordinate's less effective method.
   ii. Consider remaining silent to allow the subordinate to learn on their own.

4. **Critique from self-awareness.** The more the subordinate is upset with their own performance, the less the leader needs to say.

Tip 8: Empathetic leaders understand and use the teaching benefit of poor results.

This is a subtle phenomenon. In some cases the best strategy for the empathetic leader is to "stand back" and allow the subordinate to be impacted by the consequences of their own poor performance. There is no need for a leader to point out the benefits of a raincoat to a rain-soaked subordinate. Poor performance can be its own learning experience.

Tip 9: Empathetic leaders respond to problems subordinates have outside the workplace.

An empathetic leader has concern for the well-being of subordinates. When a subordinate is experiencing difficulties outside the workplace it must be second nature for the empathetic leader to be concerned, to show concern, and to provide assistance where possible and appropriate. Some adjustments at the workplace may be helpful. This needs to be genuine. One cannot successfully fake concern for others.

Tip 10: Empathetic leaders asssess and manage the empathy that subordinates feel for their leader, and the empathy the leader feels for subordinates.

Empathetic leaders need to assess and develop empathy for subordinates. They need to know "where they

stand" with their subordinates. Empathetic leaders also need to assess and develop the empathy that subordinates feel toward them. These leadership traits need to be authentic. It is not possible to fake empathy.

Summary

Leaders, especially military leaders, are called upon to ask subordinates to undertake difficult, even heroic assignments. If the leader has built a reservoir of empathy with subordinates and subordinates with the leader, subordinates will willingly do what they are asked to do. Absent empathy flowing in both directions, the result will not be ideal.

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INSIGHTS

The Fighter Pilot Debrief: Continuous Learning from 15,000 Feet

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Aerial combat can be quiet one minute and chaos the next. Winning a fight is the difference between life and death. This article describes an important skill that fighter pilots routinely use to increase their chances of winning: *the fighter pilot debrief*. Surprisingly, fighter pilot debriefing techniques are not widely adopted across many professional settings, despite the broader relevance of structured debriefing.

The fighter pilot debrief is best understood as a structured learning process. Research on debriefing suggests that teams improve when they deliberately reconstruct what happened, examine what went right and wrong, and carry those lessons forward into future performance (Arora et al., 2012; Tannenbaum and Cerasoli, 2013). In that sense, the fighter pilot debrief is more than a custom of military aviation; it is a disciplined method of learning from experience. Exhausting critique is the essence of a debrief, hardly enjoyable but a necessary gathering of those involved in a mission to discuss what went well, what went wrong, why, and how to apply those lessons in the future. Talking openly about mistakes is difficult, but it becomes easier over time as people recognize the benefits, and the process becomes part of one's culture.

The first requirement of a good debrief is to be open and honest about mistakes. This is not a process that comes naturally. It can be uncomfortable. It takes courage and humility to be open about mistakes. It is a leader's duty in the debrief to model such openness. The expectation is that every debrief participant is humble,

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approachable, and credible (United States Air Force Weapons School, 2025). In the Air Force, the concept of "safety privilege" is used after a mishap to allow those involved to share openly so that safety investigators can understand the root cause quickly (Segura, 2024).[1] Open discussions are conducive to learning, and a healthy culture is one in which every member learns continuously by sharing their experience.

Second, one must make the time for open discussion and honest feedback. The debrief is important and should not be rushed. A training mission requires multiple aircraft, hundreds of maintenance hours, and thousands of gallons of jet fuel. Every flight is a precious resource, and all that matters at the end of the day is the training value captured by those involved. The premium on learning couldn't be higher, and every training repetition matters.

After landing, pilots spend about an hour securing gear, completing paperwork, and preparing for their debrief. They determine a timeframe and the focus of the debrief—for example, 2 hours to figure out why an attack failed. They gather the raw data and consider how it might be filtered to expedite the process—for example, who was where and when? Who said what to who on what radio frequency? Who employed what weapons, when, and under what conditions?

Every teammate has a different perspective: aircraft are in different locations, hearing different frequencies and seeing different indications from their sensors. The same is true across professions, and a good debrief will integrate all perspectives with the raw data to establish a common understanding of how a dynamic situation unfolded. The following questions guide this process:

- What were the mission's objectives? Put another way, ***what*** did the team want to accomplish?
- Did we execute the gameplan? The gameplan is ***how*** the team intended to accomplish its objectives.
    - → If "yes," did the plan work?
    - → If "no," why didn't we execute the plan?
- What went right, and why?
- What went wrong, and why?
- What needs to be done differently next time, by the team and by the individual?

The answers to these questions help identify errors that significantly impacted the mission's outcome. A fighter pilot debrief generally attributes an error to one of the following three sources.[2] Then, a lesson is developed to identify and prevent a similar error in the future.

- Input Error—the operator misperceived a situation, invalidating their decision or execution and leading to an undesirable outcome.
- Decision Error—the pilot made an incorrect decision despite an accurate understanding of their situation.
- Output Error—the pilot perceived their situation properly and decided on the correct action, but execution was not as the pilot intended.

After a debrief, everyone on the team should have a common understanding of how a complex situation unfolded. They understand the initial intent and the final outcome. They understand how others perceived the execution, and what led to any deviations from the plan (deviations can be both good and bad). Lessons are formally captured for future refinement and review. For example, in the weeks before and after a phase of flight training, pilots meet to discuss such lessons and the most experienced fighter

1. Unlike an accident investigation, a safety investigation is a separate process that allows for the sharing of protected information.

2. This framework has multiple corollaries. One example is the I-P-O model associated with Six Sigma process improvement.

pilots talk openly about common mistakes, in part to teach junior pilots, but also to reinforce a culture of relentless improvement.

Helpful Reminders

- **Establish a timeline.** Fighter pilots may spend half an hour dissecting a 1-minute fight, 4–6 seconds at a time. Eight to 10 fights can become a 5 hour debrief. Do you have that much time?
- **Set a tone of accountability.** During a debrief, the leader will break down the team's performance. The leader should spare no criticism of themselves. Others respond similarly by highlighting any mistakes they may have made which otherwise might go unnoticed.
- **Ask the right questions.** Leaders ask penetrating questions to encourage truthful dialogue, while being careful not to provoke a defensive response. Before lessons can be drawn, the team must share a common understanding of precisely what happened and why it happened.
- **Don't overdo it.** If the team is tired, be mindful of their capacity to learn. You may need to focus on two or three big lessons that are the most important. It's about learning and improving—if people hate the process, the process is not sustainable.
- **Value every opportunity.** The debrief is generally formal, but the learning environment need not be. Valuable lessons may arise in a more social setting after the debrief. Do not overlook the value of informal opportunities, but do not force them.

"To err is human, to persist is diabolical."[3] Winners identify their mistakes so that they don't repeat them. The fighter pilot debrief is a standard practice in military aviation to achieve that objective and it can be applied to any competitive industry. Relentless improvement demands a process, and the fighter pilot debrief has been proven in combat.

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3. Compare Cicero, *Philippics* 12.5: "Cuiusvis hominis est errare; nullius nisi insipientis perseverare in errore."