

Mentoring Leadership

You can't teach leadership, **but you can learn it**



U.S. AIR FORCE

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Leadership is the subject of countless books, courses, and even entire schools. But it is something few really learn well. We can quickly recognize poor leadership, and with a little more experience we can identify good leadership in action. But we are hard-pressed to predict which of our peers will become great leaders and which will simply be added to a long list of leaders not to emulate.

As a U.S. Air Force officer, I was a subject of the military “leader factory,” designed to produce as many leaders as possible, as quickly as possible. The nature of military service meant a high-velocity throughput; assignments were rarely more than a few years in length, so the number of leaders digested by the system was high. And the results of this factory were hit and miss.

In the civilian world, a leader’s tenure

is longer, which means fewer will have the opportunity to lead. That extended tenure means a good leader isn’t quickly replaced, but that tends to be true for the poor leader, too. In my 20 years as an Air Force pilot, I think the ratio of good versus poor leaders I experienced was no better than 50%, but my 20 years as a civilian pilot reveal a ratio that is even worse. Why is that?

With that background in mind, a list of questions takes form: Are great leaders made or born? Can leadership be taught? Does good “followership” pave the way for good leadership? I contend that leadership lessons are best learned “under fire” and that you cannot really appreciate the lessons unless you have the risk of failure. And a good leadership mentor can provide you with the opportunity to fail, which translates into the opportunity to succeed as a leader.

A rite of military leadership: the change of command ceremony

Is Leadership an Innate Skill? Are Great Leaders Born?

By the time I had been in uniform for 10 years, I sensed that most flying squadrons were doomed to be led by either careerists who cared not a whit for their people, or by good pilots who didn’t have a clue on how to keep their people happy while satisfying the needs of the higher commands. Lucky for me, there was one year in which I was treated with the best commander I had ever served while at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland.

Lt. Col. Kurt Bock checked out as a copilot in the Gulfstream III (C-20B) and even though he was the boss, he did all

the things copilots had to do to satisfy the requirements of our high-visibility White House and congressional missions. He and I were seated next to each other, both planning missions, when his boss, the group commander, called. It seemed that we had a Gulfstream violate a diplomatic clearance while flying between Taiwan and Mainland China. His orders, as I heard screamed through the phone, were to fire the pilots immediately. Kurt said calmly, and with the needed diplomacy when addressing a senior officer, that he would get to the bottom of it.

A few phone calls later, Kurt made contact with the pilots. His opening: "This isn't one of those 'You are in trouble' phone calls, I just need to know what happened." The call ended with him saying, "I knew you guys were on top of it and I hope you get some time to visit the sights. Great job, get some rest." As it turned out our embassy in Beijing confused Zulu with local time and got the date of the diplomatic clearance wrong. Kurt then called the group commander who redirected his fire at the embassy. I told Kurt that I had seen several pilots in our squadron fired in similar circumstances and asked how he had learned his calm approach to this kind of high-stakes poker. "I don't know," he said. "I just think you should treat people the way you would want to be treated."

Kurt was not only respected by those who worked for him, but by those he worked for as well. That was bad news for us since he was promoted and taken away after only a year. In that time, I realized that Kurt's personality gave him what he needed to be a great leader. He was smart, humble and respectful. He was ambitious, but he wasn't about promoting himself over his people. I think he may have been born a great leader; he certainly had these qualities before he was commissioned as an officer.

Years later, at my first civilian job, we had one poor leader follow another. Both were former military officers with years of leadership training. The Air Force veteran tended to be too laid back and allowed the inmates to run the asylum while the Army veteran tended to be too dictatorial and unwilling to listen to negative feedback. In both cases, morale was low and the flight department segregated itself into factions. The pro-standards group thought the laissez faire group was a risk to flight safety; the laissez faire group thought the pro-standards group

to be one step shy of fascism. Nobody was happy.

Then one day the dictatorial leader was fired and a civilian with no leadership training at all took over. Let's call him Keith. He sat down with the group and dispassionately listed the grievances of both groups. He then made note of our trajectory, which wasn't good, and enlisted everyone's advice on how to make things better. Within six months things were very good indeed, by his building a team out of the factions. In some ways Keith was Kurt's opposite: He wasn't ambitious and he certainly wasn't humble. But in other ways they were the same: Keith was respectful of others, smart, and didn't care about self-promotion. Keith was also born a great leader.

Is Leadership a Trained Skill? Can Leadership Be Taught?

My favorite squadron commander, Kurt, was a product of every Air Force leadership school offered to a lieutenant colonel at the time: a three-month-long "Squadron Officer's School," a one-year-long "Air Command and Staff College" and a five-day "Squadron Commander's Course." The schools served him well. But a few years before this, I was under the command of the worst squadron commander. Let's call him Greg.

I had heard that Greg was a line pilot in our Boeing 747 squadron before going off to a staff tour and two of those leadership schools. Early on, I thought of him as "Colonel Cliché" because he never failed to get a word in edgewise in an attempt to leave no stone unturned. His words were good, but his actions were poor. He often reacted positively in public to training mishaps with, "That's why we call it a training sortie." But then with equal swiftness he sought out retribution against any pilots who put him in a bad light. Those same schools that turned Kurt into a great leader seemed to have passed Greg by.

Of course, we in the military have an advantage in the leadership-scholarship routine. Since most military duty assignments are one, two or three years, there is a natural turnover of leaders. Turnover in the civilian world tends to be rarer. In business aviation, a chief pilot or director tends to stay until retirement or until the job goes away. Rarely is a flight department leader demoted or dismissed for cause; most companies are either loathe to confront the

problem or unaware one exists in the first place.

For my second civilian job I was hired as the third pilot in a three-pilot operation. The boss, let's call him Tom, had spent nearly 40 years coveting the chance to call himself the chief pilot. He read all the right books, took a few after-hours courses, and graduated from his management company's client aviation manager (CAM) school. The term CAM was new, but he wore it with an imperiousness that only got worse when we tripled in size to nine pilots. His decisions were hasty and not to be questioned. Requests from younger pilots almost seemed to prompt the opposite decision.

I flew with Tom a lot and he often talked about having to claw his way through the civilian ranks as an instructor and then flying canceled checks for a living. He had one horror story after another about suffering under the dictatorial hand of one chief pilot after another. Now that he was the big boss, he didn't have to take that abuse from anyone. "Remember what that great philosopher Bob Dylan said about that," I told him. "It doesn't matter who you are, you're gonna have to serve somebody."

Two years after I was hired, I recognized an alternate leadership structure in our 11-person flight department that can be poisonous for an organization. Moreover, I realized I was the head of that alternate leadership. Pilots and mechanics would come to me with their complaints and I would do what I could to get things changed. I was approached by every pilot in the organization, except Tom, with complaints about scheduling. Half the pilots were away 20-plus days a month, the other half were doing between five and 10. None of them were happy. I sat down with our scheduler and we came up with a chart to illustrate everyone's complaints were valid. Tom dismissed the chart, saying that his scheduling system was more sophisticated than a computer spreadsheet. I asked him which scheduling system he used and he pointed to his head and said, "It's all up here."

A year later, I resigned my position and found out the company had me earmarked to take Tom's place, and was simply awaiting him to retire gracefully. After I left, every other pilot also left and all but one of the mechanics departed shortly thereafter. Tom retired about a year later and we will never know if his exit was on his terms or as a response to the personnel turmoil.

Cultivating Followers When Leaders Are Needed

It is clear that some great leaders are born and not made, as if leadership was part of their genetic makeup. It is also clear that while leadership can be taught, it is rarely learned well. My training was in the Air Force, what the other services will tell you is the least military of the military branches. I often think that leadership is the art of convincing your followers that they want to do what you want them to do. I doubt many wartime leaders would place that high on their list of leadership and command tenets. For the opposite side of the leadership coin, it is hard to envision a more autocratic environment than that aboard a U.S. Navy nuclear submarine.

its own nuclear reactor for its propulsion. Needless to say, the Navy did not entrust leadership of such a formidable warship to just any officer.

Marquet notes that if an organization measures success only in the short run, a top-down, leader-follower structure can be appealing. "Officers are rewarded for being indispensable, for being missed after they depart. When the performance of a unit goes down after an officer leaves, it is taken as a sign that he was a good leader, not that he was ineffective in training his people properly." This approach also leads to what Marquet calls "induced numbness." It absolves the followers of the need to think, to make decisions and to be responsible. "Hey, I was only doing what I was told."

But there is another cost to the organization: It robs followers of the training needed to become leaders.

Marquet was diverted from one command to another when the captain of the USS Santa Fe unexpectedly quit. Marquet was taking on problems. The Santa Fe was then the worst performing submarine in the fleet, with poor ratings and low personnel retention. Moreover, it was a different type of sub that he knew little about. About a month into his command, he was running a drill to simulate a fault in the nuclear reactor. He ordered a shift to an electric propulsion motor and ordered, "ahead two-thirds," an order his deck officer repeated. After nothing happened, he learned that there was no two-thirds setting in the electric

The USS Santa Fe (SSN-763), off the coast of Australia



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Retired Navy Capt. L. David Marquet writes about this in his excellent book, *Turn the Ship Around!* As the commander of the USS Santa Fe (SSN-763), a fast-attack submarine, Marquet bore the responsibility of leading a crew of 110 on missions throughout the world. Besides her torpedoes, the Santa Fe's armament included land attack missiles, anti-surface ship missiles and mobile mines. In addition, the Santa Fe housed

We see this kind of institutional numbness in the civilian world, too. When you are worried about your paycheck, you tend to do what you can to please the boss. When the boss doesn't receive negative feedback, the boss assumes everything is going well. A flying organization can fall into the trap of operating inefficiently, and even unsafely, when the troops keep bad news from the person responsible for flight operations.

motor, but his crew would not challenge the captain's orders. He realized that in this leader-follower environment, his crew would do anything he said, even if it was wrong.

Subsequently, he began treating his crew as leaders, not followers. He gave them more control, contrary to their previous training. The Santa Fe quickly started excelling in all its exercises, morale improved and retention rates

soared. Even more impressive, I believe, is that the Santa Fe's winning ways continued long after Marquet's departure.

When Leaders Fail to Mentor

I've flown for a number of management companies as a check airman and standards pilot, occupying the jump seats of various aircraft to observe crews in action. My job was to ensure they were following company standard operating procedures and to provide them an avenue for feedback to management. I liked to learn about the crews I was observing and spent some time in "chat mode." I met many pilots with very different backgrounds, none of those more interesting than one I will call Clyde.

We were flying one of the nicest Falcon 900s I had ever been on and both pilots were doing a fine job until the top of descent (TOD). For some reason their flight management system (FMS) indicated that TOD was about 100 nm too early. We were at 35,000 ft. descending into an airport near sea level. The "TOD" symbol appeared at 200 nm and that's when they started down. I was happy to have a few innocuous critique items.

"I'm not a Falcon pilot, but I have a few questions," I started. "I am surprised we cruised at 35,000 ft. for hours and wonder if you would have gotten better fuel economy higher."

"We aren't really comfortable much higher than the mid-thirties," Clyde explained. "So, we pretty much avoid the forties."

"I am also wondering why you started down so early," I said. "You ended up flying below 10,000 ft. for quite a while as a result. That has to cost some extra gas, too."

"The airplane tells us when to descend," Clyde said. "That's pretty much what we have to do in this airplane."

"Your FMS is pretty much the same as mine," I said. "There is usually a good reason for a top of descent error, but sometimes the box gets confused. You can double check it by multiplying the thousands of feet to descend by three to get an ideal descent."

"I think doing mental math in the cockpit is usually a bad idea," Clyde said. "The computer is smarter than we are."

"It wasn't so smart today," I said. "Besides, the math is easy. Today at 35,000 ft. you just multiply 35 by three to come up with 105. When the FMS told you to start down at 200, you would have known it was a mistake."

Throughout the critique, Mark, the other pilot, kept quiet. A few days later he called to ask how the "three times the thousands" technique works. He said he could never use the technique in Clyde's flight department, but perhaps he could after Clyde retired. Ten years later, I met Mark at an annual convention. He peppered me with questions about how to lead a flight department. He said that Clyde had just announced his plans to retire in a year. As the second in seniority, Mark was hoping to be elevated to the chief pilot position.

Mark's questions had little to do with leadership and more about the

mechanics of running a budget, paying bills and dealing with owners. "Maybe you should be asking Clyde these things," I said.

"I can't," Mark said. "Clyde keeps these things to himself and gets angry if you ask him about how he does his job."

Two years later, at the same convention, I met Mark again. He was working for a new company. "Our Falcon owner didn't think I had what it takes to lead and hired in a new chief pilot. The new chief had one of our guys so rattled that they both forgot the steering link and ended up aborting a takeoff and ended up off the runway. The airplane was damaged, and the entire flight department was fired. I heard they are trying to convince Clyde to come back, out of retirement."

Clyde's leadership style would have been a good case study for Marquet. Clyde was an autocratic leader who didn't listen to his people but somehow got the job done. After his departure, his followers rejoiced, but performance fell. Clyde failed to develop his successor and the organization, as well as his followers, suffered.

When Leaders Recognize the Need to Mentor

I was first assigned to the Headquarters U.S. Air Force at the Pentagon working for Col. (later Maj. Gen.) Gary Heckman. He was in charge of mobility requirements and I was a newly promoted lieutenant colonel wondering how to survive in the "Five-Sided

Puzzle Palace." We had 10 officers in our division, one who shared my rank but all of whom had more experience in the office.

During my second week we were tasked to brief a three-star general about

The Pentagon, aka "Five-Sided Puzzle Palace"

the Air Force's position on a new Navy program, something the Air Force was sure to oppose. The idea was to have transportable barges that could be lashed together to create very large runways, a kind of poor man's aircraft carrier. The program would save the Navy billions of dollars but could

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cost the Air Force a portion of its budget. (As strange as it may sound, that is the primary focus at the Pentagon: defending the budget.) Heckman assigned me the task with the instructions to defend the Navy's position.

I did my research and the next day presented the Navy's case to an Air Force general who proceeded to tear me to shreds. I felt devastated until the general dismissed me, saying, "Thanks colonel. Good job."

Heckman explained that the general wanted to see how I reacted under the brutal treatment because he was sure to get the same treatment from his boss, a four-star. When I tell my Pentagon peers the numbers of such events I was handed, events we called "chances to excel," they marveled at the fact a mere lieutenant colonel got so many chances. During my time with Heckman, I realized that was his leadership style. He gave his people the opportunity to do what he did, with just enough guidance to either succeed or fail. His people usually succeeded, but even the failures became invaluable learning experiences.

Heckman was promoted out of our office and his replacement had the opposite view of these chances to excel. He constantly worried that his people would get credit without his name in lights, so he took these opportunities and often failed. Comparing Heckman and his successor, I realized that you can get a lot more accomplished if you don't care who gets the credit.

How to Mentor

Are leaders born or made? When you are fortunate enough to work for a very good leader — think Kurt Bock, David Marquet or Gary Heckman — it would be tempting to think leadership can be taught. However, the evidence suggests otherwise because there are so many graduates of leadership schools that failed to grasp the lessons. But even if leadership cannot be taught, I believe it can be learned. You need to be an observant follower and learn what does and does not work. Your progress can be greatly facilitated by a leadership mentor. As leaders, it is our responsibility to mentor.

Let me first say there is no one way to do this. How you mentor others to be leaders depends a great deal on your own leadership style and how you were mentored. It depends on the successes and failures you have witnessed, as well

as those for which you were personally responsible. So, what follows are my steps. They've worked for me; I think they will work for you. But only you can be the judge of that. At the very least, these steps will give you a head start on developing your own techniques.

► **Lead by (conspicuous) example.** Before you can be identified as a leadership mentor worth emulating, you need to be seen as an effective leader in your own right. This becomes complicated in aviation and other technical fields because you also have to be seen as an expert in your profession. If, for example, you are a pilot leading a flight department, your leadership will be greatly hampered if you are not seen as a good pilot. Step one, then, is to become a good pilot (or mechanic, or doctor, etc.).

Good leadership is so rare that it should be noticed, but you can help the process with a little strategic timing. There is a fine line between a self-promoter and someone who just gets the job done without thinking about getting credit. It is easier than you might think, however. Let's say one of your subordinates realizes no one from your staff remembered to attend an important and mandatory meeting with the FAA. The person attends for you, takes diligent notes, and leaves you a detailed accounting of what was said and what is due. You could thank the person in private and believe that you did a good job leading because you acknowledged the person's vital contributions. But what if you saved that thank you for when the subordinate was in front of his peers? Now a pat on the back from the boss goes a lot further.

► **Survey your people.** In just about every organization you will find people who openly aspire to leadership positions, people who secretly want the chance, people who are ambivalent about the subject, and even those who are openly fearful of the possibility. But you may also find there is an acknowledged hierarchy of informal leaders. If everyone senses you have made a choice of the person to mentor and, more importantly, one not to mentor, morale can be impacted. Playing "favorites" might be the right call and the best use of your time, but it can also be a poison pill in an organization with more than one aspiring leader.

Another reason to canvass the troops is to learn what the organization is thinking about you and your potential "mentees." This can help you address potential problems and to

anticipate what these mentees need to work on.

► **Sponsor/develop relationships/counsel.** It may be a common practice in business to identify a mentee and then schedule time together to develop a mentor/mentee relationship. This makes it clear that the leader has full faith in the mentee, putting pressure on both to follow through with the relationship.

I've never found it advantageous to formally sponsor a mentee, but perhaps that is because I've never felt that I was being formally sponsored. I have felt many times that a leader was pushing opportunities my way and actively sponsoring me up the hierarchy, but I never felt their fates were tied to mine. I like this method better than active sponsorship. Over the years I've had several people openly refer to me as their mentor, even though we've never discussed any kind of formal sponsorship. I consider the fact they think of me as a mentor to be the highest compliment a leader can receive.

► **Advocate and challenge.** You will often hear that the best thing about having a sponsor is that they will advocate for you up the hierarchy, getting you noticed and opportunities for further advancement. I think that is true, but I think a good leader should be doing that for everyone with the potential, not just a chosen mentee.

You should always strive to challenge your people to reach the next thing just out of their grasp. If a person has zero leadership experience, give them a task that will change "zero experience" to "some experience." If a person has done everything possible from their level in the organization, try shifting them to someplace that broadens their horizons. When these people do well, sing their praises up the hierarchy. If they fall on their faces, take full responsibility, give them a few pointers, and look for another opportunity for them.

► **Teach.** Regardless of how you intend to mentor, your position as a mentor should mean that you have something to offer those being mentored. You are an instructor and should be aware that not only are your actions being used as lessons, but everything you say can (and will) be used. Everything is a teachable moment.

Can leadership be taught? Sure. But it is best learned situationally. Having an effective leadership mentor can pave the way for the next generation of leaders. As a leader, mentorship is one of your most important duties. **BCA**