

Lessons in Leadership

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Long after I graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy, my classmates decided to collect our insights as a way to “pass on the lore” to future generations. My friends at Dixon Valve asked me to share my observations about leadership with the readers of BOSS.

In our academy days, we had a series of lectures in leadership. At the time, I grasped that early sponsorship of bright junior officers was a critical factor in their later success. I came to appreciate, if not during the lectures themselves but during combat over Vietnam, that leadership is what it is all about. Our commander was an incredible combat leader and the wing's success was directly attributable to his leadership prowess. In later years, I learned firsthand that he actively kept in touch with his guys and mentored them along the way by letter, calls and visits. That mentoring continued long after he retired to the ski slopes of Colorado. The rolls of future Air Force wing commanders and general officers would contain the names of many whom he counseled and mentored and cajoled and helped. The first practical lesson for me: *Leadership doesn't stop when you leave the unit.*

Later I had the good fortune to work for a four-star general when he served as CINCSAC (commander in chief, Strategic Air Command). He never gave up on his guys. He treated everyone as though they had unique self-worth. He gave people leadership challenges they never would have dreamed up on their own. He, too, never stopped caring, working with and for you long after you (or he) moved on. The second practical lesson for me: *Be thoughtful, be nice. There is nothing in your job description that requires you to be an unmitigated S.O.B.*

As a new general officer myself, I worked for another CINCSAC.

He excelled at all that Robin Olds and Russ Dougherty [had done so well]. He used to keep our medical records in his office. We had to check them out to go to the hospital. He rode roughshod over anyone who smoked or was overweight and made sure his guys' physical health would support the physical and mental challenges he provided. He and his wife were a great team and they worked to ensure that their folks were successful teams. The third practical lesson for me: *Leadership is about all aspects of life, personal as well as professional.*

In the Joint Staff, I worked for two different chairmen, Joint Chiefs of Staff. They each had an amazing grasp of the obvious and an ability to make complex truths and realities understandable. But what stood out for me was their ability to laugh at themselves and to use humor as an effective leadership tool. The fourth practical lesson for me: *Don't*

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When I retired, I became a senior mentor (at the operational level of war) for the Joint community and worked for a past commander of the Joint and Combined Commands in Korea. Although he had a Ph.D. in operations research, and was every bit as smart as anyone I'd ever worked for, he excelled at making others feel good about themselves and their efforts to solve knotty problems. He regaled people with simple, funny stories about the truths he'd learned along the way, struggling with the same challenges they were

wrestling with. Wherever we went, people lined up to say hello, remind him of their service together, and he always took time to welcome them, remember them, joke with them, call them by some nickname he'd made up especially for them. The fifth practical lesson for me: *Leadership is about them, not you. People will do amazing things if someone loves them and cares for them, and wants them to do well.*

Now I am retired from mentoring and have assumed the role of apprentice to a custom furniture maker and artist. I make more mistakes, and do more dumb things than I ever thought imaginable. My boss never gets mad, never raises his voice, never gives up on me and my efforts to learn the trade. He always reminds me that he has already made all those mistakes many times over. He helps me fix the problem and pats me on the back when I do something right. The last practical lesson:

Leadership is understanding that someone else can't make any mistake you haven't already made.

In my 36 years in the Air Force, the 12-plus years of mentoring new flag and general officers, and more recently during five years as a now humble, wet-behind-the-ears apprentice, I have arrived at one final lesson: *Leadership is ultimately about payback. I didn't make it on my own. I didn't get to be a general officer on merit. I didn't even succeed solely on good fortune (though there was a lot of that). I did as well as I did because others invested nickels and dimes, time and energy, in me. They deserve a return on their investment.* ■