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Lorenz on Leadership

Stephen R. Lorenz, Gen (ret), USAF
USAFA, Class of 1973

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Lorenz on Leadership

Stephen R. Lorenz, Gen (ret), USAF
USAFA, Class of 1973

Lorenz on Leadership, Part I^{1,2}

In 1987, I was commander of the 93rd Air Refueling Squadron at Castle AFB in Merced, California. Late one night, I sat down and wrote out a list of leadership principles. There was nothing magical about them—they were simply useful precepts I had learned over the years. Today, especially after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, our leaders need to reflect on the principles that guide them. I do not seek to instill mine on the readers of this compilation. Rather, I only ask that Air Force leaders reflect on what their principles are, regardless of whether or not they have written them down. That said, I offer the following for consideration.

Keeping Our Eyes on the Ball

In order to prevail, leaders must always keep in mind what they want to accomplish and not become distracted, regardless of the task. They must articulate the mission to their people. During my tenure as director of the Air Force budget, I didn't consider the budget the mission so much as I considered it a means for our service to defend the United States through the exploitation of air and space. In the Air Force, this means that leaders must connect actions and troops to the mission and never lose sight of this important relationship.

Those Who Do Their Homework Win

The equation for this principle is simple: knowledge = power. For example, take the battle for scarce resources. The person who has the most compelling story, backed by the strongest data, gets the most resources. We have seen this principle, which applies universally to all other undertakings, demonstrated repeatedly throughout history—especially military history!

The Toughest Word to Say in the English Language

According to an old adage, the most difficult word to say in English is No. But I have a contrarian's view. Saying no finishes the situation; saying yes, however, carries with it additional tasks, commitments, and responsibilities. For instance, when I agree to speak to a group, I have taken a more difficult path than I would have by declining. If I say no to a request for funding an initiative, my job is finished. If I say yes, then I must take on the task of finding resources. Leaders should also consider the effects of a response on working relationships. If a leader responds affirmatively 95 percent of the time, his or her people will readily accept the fact that the leader has carefully considered their request

1 This article is a collection of reprints from the Air and Space Power Journal (2005-2010).

2 Lorenz, S. (Summer 2005). *Lorenz on Leadership*. *Air and Space Power Journal*, 19, 5–9.

before responding negatively. I never say no until I research the issue and look into all of the alternatives. To this day, it still amazes me that most of the time I can say yes if I do a little work and make a personal commitment.

New Ideas Need Time and Nurturing to Grow and Bear Fruit

In order to overcome some of the challenges we face today, we need people to think and act out of the box. Furthermore, we must have the patience and faith to stay the course. Things do not happen overnight; people have to work very hard to make things happen. They must sell their ideas and do their homework without concern for who gets the credit. This principle is very important to remember as new generations of Airmen enter the Air Force to help fight the global war on terrorism.

Work the Boss's Boss's Problems

This principle goes one step beyond the adage “work your boss’s problems.” Most people make a decision through a soda straw, but if they would rise up two levels above themselves, they could open the aperture of that straw and get a strategic view of the decision. Looking through the eyes of their boss’s boss allows them to make a much better decision. That is, leaders must become deeply committed to the organization and make their boss’s challenges their own. If they can achieve this type of commitment—regardless of who the boss is—the only thing that matters is enhancing mission accomplishment by making the best decisions possible and doing the right thing under the circumstances.

Self-Confidence and Motivation: Keys to Any Great Endeavor

We can attribute most successful endeavors to persevering and putting forth maximum effort.

Whenever I speak about leadership, I always begin with a quotation from Sir Winston Churchill: “To every man there comes in his lifetime that special moment when he is figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered that chance to do a very special thing, unique to him and fitted to his talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds him unprepared or unqualified for that which would be his finest hour.”

I am particularly attracted to this statement because of the great things Churchill accomplished, even though he faced failure and defeat many times. Regardless of the difficulty or hardship, he remained committed and motivated and never gave up. Churchill’s words represent a call to action that has helped me overcome such challenges as surviving engineering courses as a cadet as well as serving as a wing commander, commandant of cadets at the Air Force Academy, and budget director for the Air Force despite having no prior experience in budgetary matters. Although I lacked in-depth knowledge of budget and finance, perseverance got me through, as always. I never gave up. My best advice? Never give up. Never, ever give up!

Study the Profession and Read—Especially Biographies

During our Air Force careers, we have many opportunities to add to our education and knowledge. America’s future depends upon our maximizing and complementing these occasions with our own regimen of reading and development. As a lifetime student of leadership, I have an insatiable appetite for learning and regularly read two or three books at a time. I have dedicated myself to learning from other people’s experiences so that I do not waste time trying to reinvent the wheel. Studying and learning how other leaders overcame adversity will build confidence in one’s own ability to make tough decisions. I have found my study of

Gen Colin Powell and Gen Henry “Hap” Arnold especially rewarding.

Take Your Job (Not Yourself) Seriously

Every one of the current leaders in our military at some time made a conscious decision to become a defender, not a defended. Balancing this all together, we see that our leaders have a heavy burden leading others in the global war on terrorism. Every day they get up in the morning to lead, and they have to give it their very best—not their second best. They cannot afford to have a bad day! They must know who they are and how they lead; they must have their own list of leadership principles.

In order for a leader’s set of principles to be effective, they should be based on a foundation—such as the ideals embodied in the Air Force’s core values—and they must reflect who that leader is! It is never too early or too late to write down a set of personal leadership principles. Future leaders in today’s Air Force should start now—they will never regret it, and it will make them better leaders for our nation.

Lorenz on Leadership, Part II³

In the summer of 2005, when I was director of financial management and comptroller at the Pentagon, *Air and Space Power Journal* published an article of mine titled “Lorenz on Leadership.” Later, as the commander of Air University (AU), I sat down to proffer some additional thoughts on my favorite subject: leadership. I hope that you share my enthusiasm for the study of leadership!

Never, Ever Give Up

In my last article, I quoted Winston Churchill and briefly explained why I find him so fascinating. One of his most famous quotations was “never, ever, ever

give up!” Churchill was a man who met failure face-to-face many times in his life. He ran for parliament and lost, only to be elected two years later. When he was the first sea lord of the Admiralty (equivalent to the US secretary of the Navy), he planned the Gallipoli campaign in Turkey, which turned out to be an abject failure, and was fired. During the early 1930s, he railed against Nazi tyranny, but nobody listened to him. Then in 1940 he became the prime minister who led England in the war against Hitler. After the defeat of Germany but before the war against Japan ended, the people held an election, throwing him and his party out of office! Five years later, in 1950 he became prime minister for a second time. Wow! Talk about perseverance, tenacity, and strength of character! I admire Churchill so much because the story of how he overcame his struggles in life is an example for all of us to follow.

Life Is a Marathon, Not a 50-Yard Dash

We’ve all seen examples of athletes or teams that, in a moment of almost certain glory, celebrated too early, only to see victory swept from their grasp by an opponent who, not surprisingly, never, ever gave up. In our lives, it is important to remember that we must prepare to run a marathon—not a 50-yard dash. I’m sure that in your careers, you’ve seen military members start a task in a sprint only to find out it required marathon-like stamina. Their first inclination was to give up because it was too hard. They didn’t do their homework, so they spent all their energy in the early stages and couldn’t complete the task. You see, life is about training and being prepared for opportunities when they come—you don’t train for a marathon in the same way you train for a 50-yard dash! You must invest time and effort in understanding your goals and then in charting a course to accomplish them. I used the short-, mid-, and long-term approach, and I taught my people this as well. There’s a lot of truth to the cliché “What’s the best way to eat an elephant? One bite at a time.”

³ Lorenz, S. (Spring 2008). *Lorenz on Leadership: Part 2. Air and Space Power Journal* 22, 9–13.

Understand the mission; do your homework; and never, ever give up!

Never Develop a Sense of Entitlement

You will never get what you want when you think you deserve it. Rewards always come later than we are typically willing to accept. Since we are human, we frequently compare ourselves to our peers, but we should really compete only with ourselves—not others. We see others being rewarded, so we take an “I should have won that” or “I deserved that” attitude. If you get the feeling that “you deserve” something or feel that the organization “owes you,” immediately stop what you’re doing, take a deep breath, and reevaluate yourself because once you go down that path of “me, me, me,” it’s hard to turn around. Over the course of my career in the Air Force, I saw a number of people develop an entitlement attitude, only to end up disappointed and bitter. When this happens, the person loses, his or her family loses, and ultimately the organization loses. The Air Force or any job owes you only one thing—the opportunity to compete and serve!

It’s Not about You!

The sooner you can wrap your mind around this one, the sooner you can focus on what’s right and get out of your own way. Leadership is not about you; it’s about the organization and the people who work in it. As a leader, you set the tone of the organization and give your folks the tools to succeed; then you must get out of the way and let them do their jobs! Let’s take a lesson from sports. Professional football teams have coaches—folks who devise the strategies and the plays. They look at the team’s talent and put the right players in the right position for the best possible outcome, but they are not out there running the ball—their players do that.

As a leader, it’s your job to put the right folks in the right places to ensure mission success. I’ve seen

too many leaders who were afraid to trust in their subordinates and the organization; consequently, the pride and attitude of the workers suffered. Leadership is not about: “Hey, look at me. I’m the leader. Look at what my organization has done.” Those who pursue the awards, promotions, and accolades are often the ones exposed in time and eventually fall by the wayside. People see right through someone who has his or her own agenda, and that person’s ability to lead is immediately sacrificed. Leaders have to understand that it is about the people, the organization, and the mission.

You Never Know When You Are Going to Make a Difference

In 1996 I became Commandant of Cadets at the Air Force Academy. In my first two years, nine cadets died due to rock-climbing, car and aircraft accidents, and one to pulmonary edema at high altitude. She was a third-class cadet (a sophomore)—a 19-year-old who was as sharp as a tack! At the memorial service in the Cadet Chapel, I steeled myself to go talk to her mother and father.

What could I say? This family had given their national treasure to the Air Force, and she dies during training. In this moment, how could I attempt to assuage her parents’ grief? I walked up and introduced myself to her mother. “Ma’am,” I said, “My name is Steve Lorenz.” She immediately stopped me and said, “I know who you are, General Lorenz; my daughter told me about you. She had just earned her Superintendent’s pin for getting good grades, and you saw her on the terrazzo where all the cadets formed up and congratulated her for doing a great job. She immediately went back to her room and called us to say, ‘The Commandant of Cadets told me how proud he was of me for earning the Superintendent’s pin.’” This conversation with the mother is especially poignant to me because I do not remember talking to this young cadet at all, but this

is what the mother remembered. In a few seconds, I had made a difference in someone's life. You truly never know when you are going to make a difference.

Being in Our Profession Is All about Service to Others

I am reminded of the photograph of the chief master sergeant stationed in Iraq who, after working a full 12-hour shift, would go to the inpatient ward and hold a wounded Iraqi child who had lost her entire family. To me, this is what being in the military is all about—service. Harking back to the days when civilians referred to someone who joined the military, oftentimes they didn't say that "He/She joined the Air Force," or "He/She joined the Army." Instead they said, "He/She joined the service." Why?

Because that's what we're all about—service to others. I imagine that after his long shift, the good chief just wanted to go back to his tent and unwind, but he had made a commitment to make a difference and was prepared to execute that duty, no matter the cost. This is a lesson we can all use. When we raise our right hands to take the oath or when we put on our uniforms, we are saying "I want to serve" and "send me, I'll go." There is no distinction between being in the military and serving—they are one and the same.

What Will Your Leadership Legacy Be?

In my office, I have a quotation framed and positioned on my desk where I can see it every day. It says, "My biggest fear is that I will look back on my life and wonder what I did with it." Sooner or later, it will be time for all of us to hang up our uniforms and find something else to do. As I look back over my career, I continually wonder if I did enough—if I did all that I could to make a difference and be a positive influence on others. Hopefully I did. I was lucky

enough to travel with the Chief of Staff to Balad, Iraq. We visited the hospital there, and one of the many individuals I talked to was an Army lieutenant colonel—a tall, thin, lean, and gaunt man with dark circles under his eyes. He was very tired! He was a battalion commander who had been in the country for 11 months and was visiting one of his wounded troops. After chatting for a few minutes, I backed away from him to the other side of the tent, and people began to flow between us. As I stood there watching him, I said to myself, "You know, Lorenz, you've been a commander several times in the last 35 years. I just hope you are a good-enough leader to lead someone like that." You see, you must never, ever stop trying to be the best leader you can be.

Lorenz on Leadership, Part III⁴

When I first wrote down these principles, I certainly didn't intend to prescribe an approved way to think or lead. After all, none of these principles is unique. I took them from other leaders who influenced me through the years, hoping that readers would develop their own set of principles.

This Is a Family Business

Families are important—this goes without saying. When I say that this is a "family business," realize that the term family encompasses more than just your immediate loved ones. In this case, it also includes our extended Air Force family. I can't tell you the countless times I've heard people thank their "brothers and sisters in the Air Force family." Sometimes they do so at promotion or retirement ceremonies, but I've also heard the phrase at going-away parties and in daily conversations.

When we take time to reflect, we recognize the bond we share with others in the Air Force is stronger than that for most coworkers in the business world.

⁴ Lorenz, S. (Fall 2010). Lorenz on Leadership: Part 3. *Air and Space Power Journal*, 24, 5–12.

This is especially true when we factor in the ties we create after remote tours, overseas assignments, and long combat deployments. You see, the term brothers and sisters in arms is no accident. As we live, train, sweat, and bleed together, these bonds grow so strong that the only language we have to describe our feelings for each other is the language of family—the Air Force family.

Building a strong Air Force family means that all of us share a commitment to our fellow Airmen, treating them in ways that reflect our commitment. We should all live in a way that maximizes our ability to touch the lives of others. This means that we should have a healthy focus on others, not on ourselves. Paraphrasing a wise person, we should not think less of ourselves; we should think of ourselves less.

Successful Teams Are Built on Trust

Although the Air Force family helps support and steer us through our service, trust is the foundation of our existence. This trust is a two-way street—both within our service and with the American public. When an Airman from security forces tells me that the base is secure, I know without a doubt that all is safe. Before flying, I always review the forms documenting maintenance actions on that aircraft. The aircraft maintainer's signature at the bottom of the forms is all I need to see to have complete confidence in the safety of that airplane.

On our Air Force team, everyone's ability to perform his or her function is what builds trust and makes the machine run so smoothly. Ultimately, we all share the same goal—the defense of our nation and its ideals. That's the common denominator, regardless of rank, where trust and mutual respect are paramount. At every base, in every shop and office, Air Force leadership (officer, enlisted, and civilian) consistently sets the example. We are all role

models and always on the job. Our Airmen live up to these expectations every day.

When you assume responsibility for others as a supervisor or commander, it is important to realize that you've taken a big leap in accountability. Simply put, you are accountable for the choices your people make. That is why you must lead by example. Your people need to see that you set high standards and live according to those standards. You must also enforce standards within your unit. You should correct deficiencies at the lowest level before they grow into something bigger. Remember this—units with high standards have high morale. It's been that way throughout military history.

Feedback Fuels Change

Trust and accountability rely on feedback for success. We all have blind spots—areas where we think things are better than they are. To correct these, we need to be aware of them. This means that we need to encourage dissenting opinions and negative feedback. We should ask open-ended questions: What are we missing? How can we do this better? What's the downside? What will other people say?

When our people answer, we must welcome their inputs, even when those inputs don't cast our leadership in the best light. In the end, our time as leaders will be judged by the quality of our decisions and the accomplishments of our people. The personal price we pay in the short term for creating candor in our organizations is well worth the long-term professional and institutional benefits of hearing the best ideas and eradicating our blind spots.

Objective Leaders Are Effective Leaders

Effective decisions require objectivity. The old adage “the more objective you are, the more effective you

are” has never been more accurate or applicable than it is today. It can be tempting to look at decisions through the lens of a small straw. Effective leaders must step back and gain a much broader view; they must open their aperture. I’ve always advocated looking at issues and decisions from the viewpoint of your boss’s boss. This approach helps to open the aperture and maintain objectivity.

In order to gain the broad, objective view, leaders must work to gather a complete picture of the situation. Some call this situational awareness; others call it a 360-degree view of the issue. In either case, that awareness involves considering all of the variables that weigh into the decision, the interests involved in the decision, and the potential consequences of the decision. The potential consequences must include possible second- and third-order consequences. Tough calls like these can involve individuals, organizations, and issues beyond those initially considered. Weigh the consequences against unit missions and organizational goals. Investigate how the decision will move things forward in the near, mid, and long term. This will provide the context for the decision and, although it will involve a lot of work, will result in the broadest view of the entire process.

It’s Your Turn

In the end, a leader’s true mission is to achieve a desired effect. As a result, I always approach each new assignment or responsibility with two main goals: to leave the campground better than I found it and to make a positive difference in people’s lives. Working toward these goals—in concert with the Air Force’s core values—helps us all to be servant leaders, focusing on others ahead of ourselves while accomplishing the mission. Once again, let me emphasize that these principles, like the others I’ve written about through the years, are merely my observations. They are—in no way—the single best way to lead nor are any of them unique or earth-shattering. These leadership principles are merely things I’ve noticed from other leaders who influenced me. I encourage each of you to develop your own set of leadership principles and share them with others. Not only will it help you become a more effective leader, it will also make our Air Force even stronger than it is today.

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Combining quality, peer-reviewed scholarship and the experiential perspectives of leaders at all levels, JCLD aims to enhance intellectual understanding and empower real-world development of the effective, character-based leadership that both individuals and organizations need to succeed in a complex and demanding world.



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