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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 3

10 Leadership Legacy Lessons with Colonel Cynthia Kearley - Part 2

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As part of an oral history project, 10 leadership legacy lessons learned from Brigadier General Chester Taylor, Jr.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Welcome to another episode from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School. I'm your host Major Rick Hanrahan. This episode is part two from a two-part interview with Colonel Cynthia Kearley on 10 leadership legacy lessons where we cover lessons six through 10. If you didn't get a chance to listen to the first part of this interview where we covered the first five lessons please do. Here are a few clips from part two.

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Aligning your life and your goals with a larger picture like a legacy will definitely give you more purpose and I think also relieve a lot of the anxiety people feel today. And he holds his wife's hand as they lift off the ground and they're returning back to the U.S. after a particularly challenging overseas assignment and he says to her,

10 Leadership Legacy Lessons

1. **Be proactive.**
2. **Value the humble job.**
3. **Appearance matters.**
4. **Practice ambassadorship.**
5. **Be relatable in the sense that relationships matter.**
6. **Show interest in your subordinates.**
7. **Confidence is gained through meeting challenges.**
8. **Take the ball and run with it.**
9. **Have compassion and gratitude.**
10. **The overarching lesson of leave a legacy.**

“There is nothing that the Air Force can give me now that I can’t do.”

Announcer:

Welcome to the Air Force Judge Advocate General’s Reporter Podcast where we interview leaders, innovators, and influencers on the law, leadership and best practices of the day and now to your host from the Air Force Judge Advocate General’s School.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Moving on to **lesson number six show interest in your subordinates**. Now I would presume this means genuine in fact care for your people not just because you should but because you actually want to. How does one though show this interest ma’am?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

I think you get to know them. You have to spend some amount of time with them and I personally think that you look at them through a lens of looking at their strengths and seeing what each person can bring to the team. Personally I believe that everybody has a unique set of talents and the job of the leader is to really look at those talents and get and pull them out of the person so that they can reach their maximum potential and the only way that that can be done is by spending time with them and getting to know them, seeing them at their best moments and reflecting upon that and looking for proactive ways to build on those strengths.

In the oral history one of the stories **General Taylor** shares that I think a lot of people in any profession can relate with is that sometimes the headquarters or the senior leaders don’t come down to visit until there’s a problem. And so, that’s maybe when you get a little attention from them. And fortunately I don’t think that that’s the case these days but General Taylor said that that was something he witnessed at times in his career. And so, when he got to the point where he was that senior leader he made sure to visit the people that the subordinate legal offices that he was responsible for before there were problems. And he wanted to make

sure that then they met him under good conditions and he said comments like, “A little handshake goes a long way down the road.” It’s just, he knew that it’s important to go see people. And in those visits he ended up getting them better offices, just improving their work environments, and getting them adequately resourced in ways that he would not have been able to do if he didn’t proactively go and show interest in his subordinates.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Which ties into leadership lesson one being proactive and all these lessons seem to all interrelate to each other. I think this lesson six is a great segue into lesson seven. You mentioned in lesson six that you should look at the strengths of individuals and that a leader doesn’t just visit when there’s a problem you’re actually going to visit to get to learn your people. So moving on to **lesson seven confidence is gained through meeting challenges**. So one of the ways I’ve looked at this is through the lens of failure. How should one view failure through this lesson, i.e. is failure perhaps even encouraged to a slight degree? In other words if you’re not failing from time to time, you’re not trying hard enough, you’re not growing, you’re not trying to be innovative. Can you perhaps speak to that point?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Absolutely. It’s a mind shift change for a lot of us and probably even harder for legal professionals because the stakes of failure are pretty high for us. But there’s some failures that you can recover from pretty easily. We do need to encourage people to try and I think we spend a lot of time, I just graduated from the Air War college. We spend a lot of time there talking about the wisdom of our senior leaders who have been in the arena a few times. And sometimes you fall when you’re in that arena but you get up and you keep going. And just the value of all that life experience. And it’s important that we recognize number one that a lot of our success is spawned from some of those failures. And that we let people that are working with us and for us have those opportunities too and opportunities to excel and ideally

if we're involved they might make a little misstep or wish they did something better but they're not going to have a complete failure. But they're not going to get any better if they're not trying.

And there's a great quote by Theodore Roosevelt about getting in the arena and the whole challenge is that's the man, that's the woman that we respect, the one that's in the arena that gets up after being hit down and continues on. And I know that I would probably trust a leader who I knew had had some challenges and overcame them or that tried some unique or neat cutting edge programs and projects versus the person who always played it safe. Personally I think that people are in better position to mentor, and give advice, and lead others when they have been in the arena a few times that they have accepted some challenges.

I mean we can all relate with the way you feel when you do something that's challenging, or scary, or hasn't been done before and you do a great job, that feels wonderful. But we also need to recognize that if it doesn't work out quite as we had wanted it to there are so many valuable lessons we learned through that process. And so, I think the leader's job is to say, "Hey, that isn't failure that's just a chance to redirect and find and grow from that." That's called wisdom and wisdom is something we value. It's something we should celebrate and honor. And so, I think it's important to encourage people to realize that confidence is gained through meeting challenges.

There is in General Taylor's oral history he talks about this scene where he's leaving a job that was particularly challenging and he was a major so he was a mid career officer at that point and he gets on the airplane and he holds his wife's hand as they lift off the ground and they're returning back to the U.S. after a particularly challenging overseas assignment. And he says to her, "There is nothing that the Air Force can give me now that I can't do." I mean this is as a major, this is what made him a general because he got that lesson early. He learned mid career that there is nothing he can't do.

He knew that he could overcome any challenge. And so many of us will learn that at the more senior levels which is fine, but that earlier that people can embrace that and understand it and have that level of confidence the further they can go themselves and the further they can take others.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

That was a very moving point when I listened to your presentation with General Taylor ma'am and still to this day when I hear it even gives you little goosebumps when you hear that because it's truly amazing. That's also a great segue into our next lesson which is **number eight take the ball and run with it**. I presume the quote ball refers to maybe a work assignment, a task, or a duty, but then the next question becomes how far do you run with it before perhaps you seek further confirmation, clarification, and or approval from your leadership? And this is a segue with what we've been talking about on the lens of failure. For most in the military they fear making a mistake especially in front of a supervisor or peers. So how do we view this lesson number about taking the ball and running with it, with that lens of failure perspective that we were just discussing?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Sure. It was funny during the interview General Taylor specifically said that that's his to newly minted judge advocates. He says, "Take the ball and run with it." And he gave a few examples as a brand new JAG he had to draft he called them treaties between different countries and he said that those hadn't been done before and so he just had to figure it out and that was early on in his career. So, I think to answer your question will supervisors appreciate this type of attitude, absolutely. I have supervised now a good amount of judge advocates and paralegals and when I see somebody who if I discuss an idea or a tasking and they just run with it and they move forward and the next time we talk about it they're updating me on all the progress they've made and I don't have to go seek them out to find out what's happened that sticks out to me. It's huge. It makes me feel

that they value their role and that they really understood the significance of whatever that work was and so that shows initiative.

I mean taking the ball and running with it is basically showing initiative and that's a critical trait to have as a professional. And supervisors, I think good ones will definitely appreciate that attitude. You might have a few that are afraid of somebody going a little too far with the ball and again I think it comes down to how engaged and approachable the supervisor is going back to some of General Taylor's other lessons. If they're relatable then the person who is running with the ball won't have any problem asking for a little guidance along the way and and steering him in that right direction. I mean it's all about coaching really and just getting them where they need to go.

Demonstrating it early on in their career could really set them apart from others. Unfortunately there is some level of competition I think among any I guess group of professionals where you do want to stand out. And if somebody really takes the ball and runs with it early on in their career number one they're going to have the benefit of gaining confidence that's met through challenges but they're also going to set themselves apart from those who aren't showing that level of initiative. And so, they're going to get the next great project and then maybe the next one after that. So, they're proving themselves early on that they can do some of the neat opportunities that we can give them.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

So is this something that our leaders perhaps should provide to maybe the junior JAG's to give them those left and right boundaries on maybe what their expectations are? And then even from the perspective of the junior JAG if they're not told that and they have some idea perhaps they go to communicate the idea to their supervisor to see what those expectations are. Is that a good way to look at it ma'am?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Yes. Yeah, absolutely. That's a great way to look at it. So, supervisors should, especially if they're supervising newer attorneys and paralegals, they should definitely give them their expectations for how far to take that ball before checking back. So that's good. They can do that up front. A lot of times we in a traditional legal office the most senior attorney approves some of the more significant work product before it goes out the door and that's of course a great practice.

For the junior members that are trying to show that initiative early on what Major Hanrahan said is absolutely good advice in terms of just seeking your supervisor's guidance and approval and you have to proactively do that. I know I myself have been the beneficiary of several supervisors that are maybe even out there listening to this that I want to say thank you for some of the talks at 4:30, 5:00 PM when the office got quiet and I was able to circle back with you on different projects. But I definitely got that guidance and advice from them at that time and sometimes that's just when we are able to really focus and give them some guidance.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Great words of wisdom there ma'am. Moving on to **lesson number nine, have compassion and gratitude.** Wow. This is a very big one. Books are written on just this topic alone. I've heard quotes from many professional development gurus that gratitude is one of the healthiest of all human emotions. Zig Ziglar is quoted as saying once, "The more you express gratitude for what you have the more likely you will have even more to express gratitude for." Others have said, "The more grateful you become the more present you become in your own life." And then when we think of compassion I think of compassion more or less as the golden rule, treating others as you want to be treated, showing kindness and care for others. Ma'am, could you provide perhaps any recommendations on how to instill this in your everyday life and in your professional capacity for our members in the core?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Sure. Let's start with everyday life. I think it's part of your routine. At first you might have to be deliberate about it. There was a time where I specifically set aside as a goal about 20 minutes each morning to reflect on the things that I was particularly grateful for and there's formal ways to do this, there's gratitude journaling, you could just do it in your own journal just write three things that you're grateful for that day. But that was now it's natural and it still is part of my morning routine, but it's not even something I have to track it's just it sets my day up properly.

I think there are ways that you can do that even at the end of the day too so that's another discipline. There's a planner called the High Performance Planner that's out there that has a practice for that where you reflect on the day and say, "Here's what I accomplished, and here's what I'm grateful for, and here's what will make tomorrow better." But having a harder gratitude I also think you'll naturally do it if you see people through the lens of their strengths. I think you're going to be grateful for what each person brings. And then, you'll look at your work like that. You'll look at every task that you have to do, "Hey, this task has this particular aspect about it that I'm grateful for." And so, I think it really is a practice but it's just like a muscle it's something you can develop through deliberate time set aside to think about what you're grateful for.

And you talked about compassion and I saw that in General Taylor's life of so many instances in his oral history where he showed compassion to either a witness that was there for a court martial and just didn't have somewhere to eat dinner. He showed compassion for the people he worked with. He showed compassion to that village in the Philippines. He showed throughout his life compassion for others and even in his 80's the compassion he showed to a younger generation of judge advocates was incredible. The time he spent giving us his oral history and preparing for it to the point that he didn't even need notes. He would say first and

last names of people he had worked for 40, 50 years ago without looking at a note and highlighting the great things that they did. What a way to thank people by putting in a recorded oral history all the great work that they did alongside you. So, I really think that was part of his nature and it's again part of what made him so successful personally and professionally and it's a great example to us all.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Ma'am, can you provide any tips for modeling gratitude for our listeners?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

I have seen this modeled so well by people that I have worked for in the past. I had the opportunity to travel with one general officer who literally on the plane would start writing thank you letters to people or save some time the next day carved out on their schedule to recognize, and thank, and show gratitude to people who helped make their trip meaningful and did some good work there. I also think as a supervisor providing timely feedback, and reports, and decorations, all the things that we do in the military that can be difficult with other time constraints and projects that take us away, or our focus away from some of that. But the people programs are really important. We call those people programs where we're recognizing the folks who work with us.

And then I also think you show gratitude when you take the time to watch them at their best. My mom taught me this when I was a new mom raising kids. She said, "Get out there when they're doing their best and watch them." And whether it was a sports event or maybe just the five minute segment where they're actually doing the morning announcements or something. But if they're proud of it and they are good at it catch them at their best. And I think as supervisors that's one way that we can show some gratitude to our folks is just being aware of when they're giving the big presentation or they're maybe giving an argument in court that they've been working really hard on. And just getting out there and

watching them and then maybe sending them a little note that tells them they did excellent work. And that's a couple of tips on how to show gratitude that I've seen

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Moving on to our last lesson and perhaps the linchpin of all these lessons is to **number 10, leave a legacy**. I think it's safe to say that when most people think of, "Legacy," they think of it from the standpoint of maybe a larger than life figure or a celebrity like the president, or a world class athlete or coach, or a high ranking general. But ma'am, can legacy be more encompassing than that for the, "Average person?" How would you define legacy?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

I think your legacy is going to be what people think of off the cuff when they hear your name. So we hear terms like, "Oh, you know Joe, he's a great guy." Okay, so that's, we get it but maybe more specific. Like we hear in the Air Force JAG Corps, "Oh, you got to work for Colonel so-and-so. They were one of the best mentors I ever had." Or, "They taught me everything I needed to know in this particular job." Or, "Oh, I still seek her advice to this day." That's a legacy, that's making an impact. And I think it's really every life that you touch you have an opportunity to impart a legacy on that person whether it's over a series of a two year assignment or maybe over a career lifetime.

And I also think it's important to record your insights. That was one of my lessons that I learned by interviewing General Taylor. He kept a lot of things that were important to him and in this age of decluttering, and getting rid of stuff, and going digital with everything, that's great. But he really, he kept cards that people wrote him that were, "Congratulations on your promotion," written by some famous general or just a friend maybe not anybody, a name we wouldn't recognize today. So he had a mixture of those kinds of things. He had speeches that he gave that he had saved. And in reading those speeches I could tell it was important for him to recognize the accomplishments of others and to really build a team. He wanted people that worked with

him to feel like they were part of a very, very professional law firm that was held in very high esteem. And I think that would be something that they felt and of course we know that many of them did.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

So ma'am in JASOC we recently started asking students to even write about how they want their legacy to look as a type of goal setting or a visualization exercise. And I personally found it fascinating to see that the majority of them focus more on the human piece of the equation than they did on the legal practitioner aspect. They still emphasize a strong desire to lead as a JAG practitioner. However, when they thought of legacy they mentioned such things as humility, and never letting another Airman down, and they wanted to be known as a person that was never, "Above a task or a person." And I found this very insightful that that's the way our young junior JAG's think of legacy. Could you perhaps provide any tips or recommendations for our listeners out there maybe as an exercise or something they could do to start thinking about how they want their legacy to be?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Absolutely. I think that the exercise that you did with the brand new JAG students is something anybody could do where they sit down and they give themselves an hour to write out what they would like their legacy to be and maybe divide it up into categories. "With my family I want my legacy to be this." "As a spouse, as a wife, as a husband I want my legacy to be this." "As an officer in the Air Force I want my legacy to be this." And then just fill it in and don't be ashamed to go big. I think people are afraid of putting out really big legacies. Like if they want to be known as just this incredible father or mother that changes their family's insights into closeness and connectivity for generations, or changes their wealth, or whatever it may be, or if they want to be the kind of officer that somebody takes an oral history on and then makes 10 leadership lessons about. I'm sure that that was not General Taylor's intention at any time but I mean that's the legacy he left.

And so, I think people could, what do they want to be known as and don't be shy about it. There's a few books about—well before I get into that I would say once they do an exercise like that then they should reflect on it once a year at least. And so, maybe even once every six months and just see how are they living and are they living in a way that will enable that legacy and spend some time in reflection there.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

In other words, are they living in congruence with the legacy that they wrote down maybe six months, a year ago? Are they actually living that out in their day to day life?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Correct. That's it. And if they're not, then that's okay, reassess and move forward. But these exercises are only as valuable as we give them opportunities to be reviewed and to reflect on them from time to time. It's a lifelong habit and I think aligning your life and your goals with a larger picture like a legacy will definitely give you more purpose and I think also relieve a lot of the anxiety people feel today.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Well ma'am this has been a very meaningful interview. I think our listeners will get a lot of value out of this. Is there any particular materials, or resources, or perhaps a book that you could refer to our listeners from your perspective on the discussion we had today to develop their leadership?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

There are so many great books out there on leadership and I think you have to ask people that you work with what they're reading because there's always something new that's great and thought provoking. But I'll give you a few books that I've personally enjoyed. One was recommended to me by a lifelong mentor and it's called ***The Art of Significance by Dan Clark***. And the concept there is that being significant to somebody or to some organization may be more important than the rank you

wear or the money you make and just really knowing how to be significant. When I think of what's important to people I think a large majority of us would want to be significant to somebody or a group of somebodies in a way that we made a direct positive impact on their lives.

Other books, anything by **John Maxwell**. He's written a lot of leadership books. There's some great ones out there. There's some easy ones to just kind of look through for a daily reflection. I also really like leadership podcasts so you may have to listen to a few to see what's out there that you personally like. There's one that I've been enjoying, the **Craig Groeschel Leadership podcast**. It's about a 20 minute lesson published once a month and there's a variety of them that you can just listen to in your car, at the gym. But I find that is a good time to reflect on some of the ways that other people who are just crushing it in their fields are handling situations and also some of the insights they've gained.

Biographies are terrific for that. So I would say if there's any public figure that you're interested in learning more about. I just finished **Michelle Obama's book *Becoming*** and there's some great leadership insights there. We did something really neat here at the JAG school Major Hanrahan might remember this about six, seven months ago, but we actually pulled in all of our coworkers and we discussed what books we were reading that were useful in the leadership arena and we shared what podcasts we're listening to and maybe any other areas that we found particularly useful and I think any organization can do something like that and we can all learn from each other. And of course the **Chief of Staff of the Air Force has a reading list** which for any person interested in professional development Air Force or not it's a good list of books and a lot of them are focused on leadership lessons. And so, that's always a good place to go for some inspiration too.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Great ma'am thank you. And we'll make sure to put all those resources you mentioned in the show notes. So to wrap up today, we've been going for a while here,

any final thoughts on this topic of 10 leadership legacy lessons that you want our listeners to consider?

Col Cynthia Kearley:

So I had a unique opportunity in the chance to interview one of our retired JAG Corps members with General Chester Taylor. I would encourage anybody who has the chance to sit in an oral history interview just do it. It is such a rewarding experience. You will learn more than you ever thought you could both about the historical aspects of your career, maybe of your family if you interview a family member, things that you just didn't know or a lot of things will make sense after those kinds of discussions and gaining that insight. And then when you do that take some time and pull out lessons to you. Maybe it's leadership lessons, maybe it's lessons in life, maybe it's business lessons, maybe it's lessons in raising a family. But we can learn so much from the insights of each other. And I didn't have any kind of formal training for this but it was just a wonderful experience.

And I do want to thank the people that allowed me to participate in it which included our judge advocate general at the time **General Christopher Bernie**. It included my supervisors and my mentors and of course Colonel Marlisa Scott who just invited me as maybe a mentoring opportunity just to join her on this experience. And Colonel Lisa Turner who met General Taylor and said, "Hey, we should record your oral history." And he was just so thankful as well. So I just, I encourage people to get out there and gain the insights because when those insights are recorded and then shared they can be a gift to so many.

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Ma'am, well with gratitude thank you so much for coming in today to talk to us and our listeners. We really appreciate you taking the time and providing your wisdom to the Corps. I'm sure people are going to get a lot of value out of this. We really appreciate you coming in today ma'am.

Col Cynthia Kearley:

Thank you, Major Hanrahan and this was a wonderful, wonderful way to spend a morning. Thank you.

TAKEAWAY

Maj Rick Hanrahan:

Well, that was another jam packed interview. In summary, I think you'll agree that these 10 leadership legacy lessons are timeless and lessons that we can apply directly to our lives today. Colonel Kearley's opportunity to interview Brigadier General Taylor shows the value of these lessons and brings to light the human aspect of leaving a, "Legacy." The 10 lessons again include: one, be proactive; two, value the humble job; three, appearance matters; four, practice ambassadorship; five, be relatable; six, show interest in your subordinates; seven, confidence is gained through meeting challenges; eight, take the ball and run with it; nine, have compassion and gratitude; and 10, leave a legacy.

It's clear that Brigadier General Taylor left a lasting legacy and he did it through these timeless principles. Legacies are not just for the epic war generals, presidents or celebrities. Rather, our legacy is played out in the life we live each and every day. For many of us our daily tasks and duties may seem little, inconsequential, or even mundane at times. However, as Brigadier General Taylor showed through his example it is often the, "Little tasks that pave the way for golden opportunities that otherwise wouldn't be there."

To me this is one of the most powerful takeaways. It's about consistency and striving for excellence even in the humble job. Last, consider writing down how you want your legacy to be. How do you want to affect others? How do you want to lead by example? How do you want others to talk about you when they mention your name? Think of legacy as an action verb and the first step is lesson number one, be proactive. So take the initiative, own it, and create a legacy like Brigadier General Taylor or others that you seek to emulate.

With that thank you for listening to another episode from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School. If you liked this episode please consider subscribing on [iTunes](#) and leaving a review. This helps us to grown an outreach for the betterment of the Air Force and JAG Corps. Until next time.

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