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Brigadier General
James Demarest

AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 25

Joint Force Leadership with Brigadier General James Demarest – Part 2

HOST: MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN, USAF

GUEST: BRIGADIER GENERAL JAMES DEMAREST, USAF

In Part 2, we continue the discussion of the joint force leadership triad, focus, and the last pillar trust. We discuss how to monitor trust through the debriefing process, including how fighter pilots conduct debriefings as a best practice.

MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:

Welcome to part two of our interview with [Brigadier General James Demarest](#), the Chief of Staff of the Florida Air National Guard, co-founder of the consulting firm [Joint Force Leadership](#), and former active duty F-15 pilot, who later became a JAG. If you didn't hear part one, please consider listening to the previous episode where we discuss Brigadier General Demarest's background, development of his leadership philosophy, and two of the three pillars of the joint force leadership triad including communication and focus.

In this part two we continue in the discussion of the joint force leadership triad on focus, then the last pillar, trust, specifically in how to build trust in yourself, your team, and your processes. We discuss how to monitor trust through the debriefing process, including how fighter pilots conduct debriefings as a best practice.

We cover how his consulting firm teaches Fortune 500 companies, and professional organizations like the NFL, and conclude with a discussion on his new book, "Joint Force Leadership: How SEALs and Fighter Pilots Lead to Success." Here are a few clips from part two.

SHOW EXCERPTS, BRIG GEN JAMES DEMAREST:

And if we give them commander's intent we are implicitly trusting them to use their own experience and judgment to figure out how to get there.

Don't hold a debriefing for a train wreck. If you want to try debriefing, first debrief something that went well.

ANNOUNCER:

Welcome to The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School 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.

GOALS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Sir, you also mention in some materials about hanging your goals in a prominent location. Have you found this to be beneficial? I'm assuming you've seen this both maybe in the civilian world, and maybe in the military as well.

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

I have, and I think it's somewhat organizationally dependent. I moved into my current position in Florida a few months ago, and this past weekend was the first time I've been in the office, in my new office. And the first thing that happened was that we photocopied and put up our command priorities. They had to blow them up because the font is too small for me to read, but I do put them up there because I want to have a visual. I'm a kind of visual person, a lot of people are, and if you see them up there it reinforces the fact that all the things that we're gonna do and talk about fall under that. And when they don't we're gonna ask why not?

I've seen organizations that publish their goals, and put them up in their break room, and when they do a presentation the first slide always talks about here's the goal we're working under. Part of that is a culture of your organization. I'm not a fan of wallpapering the entire office with things. And I think you have to kind of work with what works best for your team, but I do think that if you're gonna spend the time deciding what your vision, your mission, your goals are, that it's worth having them out there so that people know this is where we're going. It's a constant reminder as to where we're going.

I think we have a perfect example of that in the JAG Corps recently. When TJAG came out, and aligned our strategic plan with the NDS. Every time TJAG spoke that came out of his mouth, and that was on the slides to the extent that people may have started to get tired of seeing that or hearing that. I haven't talked to TJAG

about this, but I'm sure it was done on purpose because he understands and appreciates what I have seen, and that is there is no substitute for repetition and exposure.

So you can't tell people too much really about where you want them to go because not everybody gets the message the first time, and there's nothing like constant reinforcement. So I'm a fan of that and believe it to be important. If you're gonna spend the time to plan, and put this stuff out there then you ought to use it 'cause the flip side is what we see a lot of times, right? A team will go together, they'll strategic plan. They'll do this great strategy, they'll print it out. They'll put it in a desk drawer never to be seen again until it's time, once again, do strategic planning. And that quite frankly is a waste of time.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

How often should the team then be discussing their goals, or looking at their goals, or anything to that effect with their goals?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Yeah, to me, it's scalable. So, an individual probably has goals, or objectives to accomplish on a weekly basis. Your teams depending upon the size and scope of your teams, those things are typically a month, or months long. And the important part is let's say I've got a project that's gonna take six months. We're going to basically review our goals based upon the calendar or events.

So I look at that and say if it's a six month project we're gonna check in every 30 days to make sure that our goals are still aligned with where we want to go, and to make sure that we're advancing the ball on those goals, but if there's a seismic shift, take COVID, for example. If there's an event that causes a seismic shift that impacts our goals then it's time to call a time-out, and say, what adjustments, if any, do we need to make to our goals given this event out there? And it's true in the military as well as the civilian.

On the organizational level when you talk about long-term goals and strategy we just published the strategic plan in Florida that has a five year planning horizon, and a 15 year long range lookout. We talk a little bit about the 15 year goal, but the further away you get, the less specific you can get, but we are really focused in on a five year strategy that we're gonna assess and review every quarter.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Sir, can you perhaps provide an example of a situation, whether in the military, or in civilian world, where a team had a specific goal or goals that they had all agreed to, they were working diligently on it, and then something occurs, right? And I'm kind of thinking with the COVID situation right now, and they had to pivot, right? The team had to make a pivot, an adjustment. Could you offer any example where you've seen a team do that very well?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Yes, I think that there are a lot of examples out there. Some of them have been maybe a little slow to come to pass, but I think that a lot of what we had decided, or have been doing over the past number of years was very travel and meeting specific. So we would spend a lot of money to fly people in, and do meetings, and, look, I understand that, and there's a tremendous value in face-to-face meetings, but I think we got maybe too far afield on that, and could have gotten away with doing less.

They're now, for example, there is a big exercise that's done called HOMEX. It is the Homeland Defense and DSCA exercise that we used to bring people in from all over the country, and run through a scenario like a pandemic, like an earthquake, like a catastrophic hurricane strike in a multi-state environment. That was always a face-to-face, bring people in, and I get it, they establish relationships, they work together—that's being done completely virtually, and we're gonna be using the Microsoft Team application. We'll lose a little bit in the translation, I'm sure it will, but you know what? Hurricane season is upon us, and if we sat back and just said, well, no meeting, no training, we'd be in dire straits.

And we're gonna see more of that. I've seen teams do a lot of pivoting around meetings to figure out how to accomplish things virtually. And I think the win here is that we're gonna find some efficiencies, and some dollars that we're gonna need to find in the face of the upcoming budget battles that everybody's talking about in the years ahead. I think we've done it as a JAG Corps, and I'm sure we'll continue to figure out, and innovate in that way, but I think it's a great example about this in person, and really deciding what has to be in person versus what can be done via another tool.

TRIAD: TRUST

MAJ HANRAHAN:

So focus, obviously, a very important component of this triad, and we've discussed communication and focus, and I'd like to kind of move into our last component here of the joint force leadership triad which is trust. I think we could probably all likely agree, sir, of the importance of trust, but to me the real question seems to be how do you establish trust?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

I think establishing trust first starts by showing trust in others. And we talk about this regularly when we delegate responsibility for getting stuff done to make sure that we also delegate the authority to do that. If you give someone the responsibility without the authority what you're really telling them is you don't trust them with the resources they need to get the job done. And we might not think of it in that draconian way, but that really is the message that we are sending.

And so it really starts by empowering people, and giving them the resources and authority to do the jobs that we've asked them to do. Commander's intent helps that a lot because it reminds us as commanders that we need to tell our team where we need them to go, not how to get there. And if we give them commander's intent, we are implicitly trusting them to use their own experience, and judgment to figure out how to get there. And so I think that's the first step is showing trust in others.

The second thing is I think demonstrating trustworthy behavior, and that's a 24/7, 365 event as far as I'm concerned. So, as leaders, your people are watching what you're doing, and if you operate in a trustworthy manner they see that. And if you don't they see that, too. Not unlike what we do as parents, right? In our household it's more important what you do than what you say because talk is cheap.

And so give an example. People look at your TDY and they say, hmm, when the TDY to Hickam comes up, the boss always goes. When the TDY to Minot comes up, the boss never goes. And that might seem like a little thing, and some would say, well, rank has its privileges or that, but if you're not willing to go where you're willing to send your people, how do they trust that you have their best interests at heart if you're taking the good deals?

It seems like a little thing. And, look, there are some trips that you have to go to as a boss, but being transparent in the use of resources whether it's the government car, or how you use your computer, if you're running a business, and it's come up maybe more in the Guard, we have to be very mindful about how we use government equipment because all of us have civilian businesses. And we take a very close look at what are you doing during duty hours when you're on military orders? So I make it a very specific point not to use my military email, or those resources, to do any work for Joint Force Leadership. I keep them separate. And so acting in a way that is worthy of trust is I think a second key component.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And, sir, within that commander's intent piece how do you convey maybe, or should you convey like those left and right boundaries? Because I could see situations where you're delegating certain tasks, certain things to your team members, and they will more or less, quote, unquote, "take the ball and run with it", but that also opens yourself up, or the team up to things where maybe you weren't expecting them to go.

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Yeah, great question because the rewrite of the AFIs that we've just seen has pushed, or attempted to push a lot more decision-making down to lower levels. And so the risk that we're buying by doing that is that we're gonna be empowering people at a lower level in our organization with less experience with more responsibility.

So I always start with the regs, or the guidance, and say, okay, let's pull out the written guidance. Let's make sure where we understand the written guidance allows us some maneuver room. Let's identify left and right limits by what the guidance clearly says we cannot do.

So I like to start with the governing rules, and as a JAG that's the law, but for a lot of our other members it's what's the AFI guidance. We're always gonna operate within the AFI left and right. We're always gonna follow the appropriate ethics rules left and right. Those are non-negotiable things, but the next thing I say is that assuming that that guidance provides us left and right limits, I said, I trust you to operate within those limits, but as you get closer to the left or right side, it's time to involve more people.

And it doesn't mean I have to be involved, but I want you to tabletop this, and get the opinion of others because working or team storming these ideas we'll make sure that we get more of a consensus as we get closer to the left and right limits. If you're ever worried that you are up against, or maybe crossing a left or right limit, that's when you bring in leadership, or other helping professionals.

And I offered my services as a JAG in that area. When the commanders thought that they were approaching a left or right limits I would advise them to say, please get me involved. I said this may be legal advice, it may be just command advice, but I want you to hear my perspective. And more importantly, I want to document the left and right limits so that you have something in your hand that may protect you down the road in the event that your decision gets called into question.

In my role as a military leader, I tell the team, I am willing to weigh in and assist you in any way if you think you're up against those left and right limits, but absent that I'm gonna assume that you're operating within those unless I think otherwise. And, of course, I'm always gonna get the last vote, but I think if you give them left and right limits, and identify these other resources they'll come to you when they have those kind of questions.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And, Sir, we've discussed some of this here, but in one of your resources you taught, you mention how trust has three components including, one, yourself, number two, the team, and number three, the process or processes. I'm kind of interested in the third part on processes. Can you elaborate a little bit more on the importance of placing trust in the process.

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Yeah, and I believe that our processes whether they are military, or civilian processes represent what we believe to be the current thinking on best practices. Doesn't mean that they're set in stone. Doesn't mean that they're perfect in any way, but we talk about using the current process, or developing a process in place as a starting point from which and from where to deviate as necessary.

So some of our processes are very straightforward. How do we process an article 15? We have a checklist, we have very specific steps. If you follow those things, we believe that you conform with all the rules and regulations. A lot of our Airmen are dealing with a variety of other processes, and those checklists are perhaps less formal, but they are a starting point.

So, let's use an example we talked about before. If someone comes into me and says, "Okay, we're gonna sit down and have a goal setting session."

I'm gonna ask, "Okay, who are you inviting into the room? And what process are you gonna use?"

"Well, sir, we're gonna use the SMARTS goals. We're gonna go through the SMARTS process."

I said, "Okay, great starting place"

And my point there is that SMARTS is out there for a reason, and that is it's been widely used and accepted, and it covers most all of the major issues you need to think about. And before we start coming up with the latest and greatest, or new way of doing thing, let's try the process first.

Same in aviation, in the fighter pilot world, we have a variety of different checklists. When an emergency pops up here's the guidance. It's analyze the situation, take corrective action, land as soon as practical, okay? That's the overall guidance. And then you have a checklist that says, okay, if you have a left engine fire you're gonna retard the throttle to idle. You're gonna look at the temperature. And we go through that process. In the absence of any compelling reason to deviate from that that's what you're gonna do, but there may be times where shutting down the engine is not the right answer. You're over enemy territory. You've been hit by AAA [anti-aircraft artillery], and you're right over the bad guys you just dropped bombs on. Maybe not the time to retard the throttle to idle. That's a flying example, but I've seen it all the time that our folks get in trouble because they try and reinvent the wheel, where if they would follow the SMARTS process, or a checklist that we had, they would be more efficient and more effective. And then once they get good at the process then they're probably qualified to make some tweaks, or adjustments.

So I just think that that's important because as my Navy SEAL co-author says, when you step onto a two-way shooting range for the first time that is not the time to brainstorm. Now is the time to execute decisions you've made. Follow your training and your processes. They will lead to mission success and survival. Brainstorming at that moment, not the best use of your time.

DEBRIEFING TOOL

MAJ HANRAHAN:

So let's assume that your processes are in place. You have trust in yourself, your team, and now you're taking action on whatever that particular mission is that you have with your team. How do you monitor and track the success of your trust?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

I'm a huge believer in the fact that the tool that the Air Force taught me called debriefing is one of the most powerful ways to assess mission success, and to answer your question, how are we doing on the trust piece, because a debrief is designed to measure your results against your objectives. Identify what went well so we can capture that, and what didn't go well so that we can fix it.

And so let me dive a little deeper into that because it answers a question about trust. As we assess a court-martial, an article 15, a sales plan execution we get to the end. It's not enough to say that we met the metrics. If our sales quota was \$5 million, and we got 5.1, great. If we got the conviction or we got an acquittal, and we met the metrics for how long it should take that's not the end of the discussion. That's the beginning of the discussion. And all too often we find that organizations are too outcome focused rather than focusing on the process and improving it.

So at the end of our event, and again, I use the debriefing tool based on an event, or the calendar. So let's say that we've gotten to the end of a major project, we're gonna sit down as a team. We're gonna close the door. And as the leader of that team, I'm gonna talk about, the very first thing, what I could have done better because I want to establish an environment where people understand that it's not about me. It's not about rank. It's really about establishing an open and honest dialogue so we can talk about what went well, and where we can improve.

And I always start with what went well. I'm afraid that a lot of military organizations, and a lot of teams that

move at a high rate of speed don't take the time to do that. I think it's a mistake. Our people deserve to be recognized, acknowledged, and rewarded when they do a good job. And I want to make sure that they understand that I've seen the results of their good work, and I appreciate their contribution to the team.

I also want to figure out what's the root cause of that. Why is it that we were successful? Is it because I gave you good commander's intent? Is it because you felt empowered and trusted? Sometimes the answer to that is yes. Sometimes the answer is, no, we just got lucky, and you know what? I still will take the win. If we were lucky in execution and we were successful, great, but what I know going forward is that we can't count on being lucky again. And so how do we have to modify our execution to continue winning at a high-level?

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And, sir, obviously, the debrief it's part of the culture in the pilot community, especially, the fighter pilot community. How could you compare and contrast the debrief that's done within the pilot community versus how we may, or how we do it in the legal community?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Yeah, and I feel uniquely qualified to answer that question having used it in both. Let me describe to you first sort of the environment we create as fighter pilots. When we get into a debrief and we close the door, literally, your name tag is on Velcro it comes off. Your rank is left outside on the door. We completely level the playing field. And part of that is our culture. In the fighter community your rank really doesn't matter. It's what is your experience, and what position did you occupy on that flight? So we had times where we're flying four F-15s, the flight lead is a first lieutenant, and numbers two, three, and four are lieutenant colonels and O-6s. That first lieutenant runs the debrief. That first lieutenant calls out the O-5 and the O-6 if they deviated from the plan, or made a mistake. Now it's done respectfully, but we want respectful truth over artificial harmony. I'm really not that concerned about your feelings. And the

reason that we can do that is because we understand it's not personal. I'm not attacking Jim Demarest. I'm letting you know that Boots, the number two man, didn't execute this part of the mission, and we could have lost an airplane, or been mission unsuccessful. That's a cultural component that we have in the fighter world that does not necessarily translate to the JAG world.

So you have to do it different ways. And I think my benefit is that I've been doing this work in the business world where that same culture doesn't exactly exist. You're not at liberty to tell the boss they're an idiot in front of other people unless you have a pretty special relationship. And so the way that I think I've used it as a JAG, is that I always start the debrief by talking about what I could have done better, so that people in the room understand that this is not a finger-pointing exercise. That my intent is for all of us to learn from all the good things and others that occurred.

And so what I've done is I always start the debrief off with criticizing my performance. I then go around the room, and I let everybody talk about something that went well. And I think that's really important in the debrief because people think of a debrief as a punishment. When something goes wrong we're gonna go debrief that. And that's absolutely the wrong, I think, attitude to have. So you start with something that went well. After you kind of establish that, hey, this is an environment where we're gonna be open and honest, and talk about what we did well, it makes the conversation about improvement a little bit better.

And one of the ways that I've seen very effective in the JAG Corps is that it's not about captain so-and-so, or major so-and-so who made a mistake. It's that defense counsel could have been more effective by making this argument. Government counsel passed up an opportunity to use this particular technique, or call a particular witness. You'd be surprised at how exchanging position for a name helps depersonalize the experience just enough that it doesn't quite sting as if they say, Boots, you're an idiot. And it sounds like a little thing, but it can really help.

And then what we always do with the debrief is we wrap it up by going, okay, we did this well, we could have done this better. Going out of here what lessons are we gonna learn so we can do it better the next time? And we always kind of end it that way so that people kind of walk out of the debrief feeling like it was a good use of their time. It wasn't a browbeating. It was really a genuine exchange.

And when the debriefing door opens up, what goes on in the debrief stays in the debrief. I think that's really important. And sometimes the JAGs have a hard time with that. What comes out is the lessons that we learned. Here's how we're gonna do it differently, or the same way next time. What goes to the debriefing is whose mistake was it, or whose idea was it? That information doesn't come out because all we really want to do is pull forward the goodness and improve on the badness next time. It doesn't happen the first time you debrief, but I think with practice and the right attitude, and if you set the tone as a leader, and let everybody know.

What I tell people is don't hold debriefing for a train wreck. If you want to try debriefing, first debrief something that went well. And so think about that for a minute. How often do we call time-out, and debrief something that went well? Almost never. We say, good job, thumbs up, onto the next thing. And so people get the mindset that the debrief is a punishment, or only used when things don't go well. You can shift the culture of your organization by creating an expectation that we're gonna debrief to capture goodness, and fix the things that could have gone better.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

It's really interesting what you mention about the fighter debrief. Obviously, it's a different culture in the legal community than it is in the fighter pilot community, but it's just kind of done many different ways. I think it's something we can get better at in the legal community.

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Totally agree. So here's some ways to make that happen. First of all, if you don't put the debrief on the schedule, then it's not gonna happen. So as part of the planning process one of the events that gets put in there is the debrief. Longer projects will have intermediate debriefs that are typically driven by Gates in the project, but if you don't put the debrief on the calendar as part of your post-trial checklist, or whatever, then it happens in a haphazard way, so that's number one.

Number two, culture happens by design or default, okay? The fighter pilot community has designed the debrief into our culture. The JAG Corps could do the same thing if you designed it in. We've defaulted to something less than that. And it's easy to justify, oh, we don't have enough time, or blah, blah, blah. And the way that I answer that is always, "So what you're telling me is we have time to repeat the same mistakes over and over again."

And when I say that they laugh out loud, "No, we don't."

I said, "Well, if we're not debriefing that's in effect what we're saying."

So, I think it's completely within the realm of possibility. Look, I've been in the business world 15 minutes. If I can teach NFL players how to debrief, which I've done, I can teach lawyers and paralegals how to debrief. And it's not rocket science it really isn't. A debrief is a two-way exchange of information. It's not a one size fits all. When I worked with the NFL team, the way a professional or college level D1 program works, after the game they look at game film. They look at every play. The players are graded on every play. And then the coach tells them corrective action. It is not a dialogue. It is a one-way communication. It's not a debrief. The players don't get a chance to ask questions. Having a senior person tell me what I did wrong and did right that's only half true. So I think there's opportunity.

If the SJA was sitting in on a court, man, what a golden opportunity to sit there and debrief. Here's what went well. So, anyway, it's absolutely doable. It's not just a court-martial thing. It could be done in a lot of different ways, but in order to have a debrief, you have to have a specific goal, and a metric against which to measure it, and then debrief it.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And so, obviously, we get into debriefs it could be a whole other topic in and of itself. And I'm thinking of debriefs probably from trial counsel standpoint, right? Especially a new trial counsel, and all the things they can learn there. So, obviously, great points here, sir. Hopefully, folks that are listening can take some of that in consideration for the next time they may need to use a debrief.

BETTERING THE BASE LEGAL OFFICE**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

So with that, sir, I'd like to kind of transition to some concluding questions, and leave the final remarks for you. I'd like to ask you a little bit about your consulting firm. Now, your consulting firm has been around you said for over 15 years. You have a partner that was a Navy SEAL. Could you kind of walk us through the process of how you assist companies in bettering their leadership with kind of the base legal office in mind?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Sure, so let me just clarify something that maybe wasn't clear before. I have 15 years of consulting experience. 12 of it was as an independent contractor with another company, and then three years ago, I branched out on my own. So I do have the experience, but I haven't been self-employed in this space by myself until about the last three years. So given that clarification there. Kind of how the process works is I think that listening is really important.

And so, for example, when I got to my first base legal office, I was a deputy SJA. We had an experienced SJA, a paralegal, and I think it's really important when you come into a new situation to listen very carefully. The way I explain it to a lot of people is that we were given two ears, and one mouth for a reason. I think as JAGs we tend to be more spring-loaded to use our mouth first. If you can use our ears first, it could be helpful.

And so I'm always asking open-ended questions kind of like you would on direct examination, and getting my client, or the people in the base legal office to explain to me what's going well and where their pain points are. And really it's just a series of questions. In the first book that we wrote, there's a number of questions at the end of each chapter that kind of help spur along the conversation, but I think that's how you would apply it to a base legal office. What things are going well and what things are not, because I think it's really important to leverage, and understand the strengths of the office first.

So if I use focus, trust, and communication as a baseline, I could look at it and say, boy, the trust factor is great. The wing commander, the vice wing commander, they trust the base legal office. They bring us all their issues. We're invited to all the right meetings. We're good there. On the focus front, perhaps there's room for improvement because we've got our junior officers running in 100 different directions. We're chasing metrics versus chasing legal services. And then the communication piece there's always room to do that better. And I try and assess that at the base legal office two ways. How are we communicating as a team? And what is our communication like with our external partners both on base, and in the JAG Corps?

And so that kind of assessment is how I do that. And then after I had been the deputy for a while I sat down with the SJA and walked him through this. I said, here's what I see, what do you think? There's a lot of value of asking your new folks in the office what they see, but the great thing about the active duty Air Force, among many things, is that you have turnover in the office, which

some people look at as a problem. It's just something to manage. I look at it as a phenomenal opportunity to cross-train best practices, and for people to say, you know what? We've tried that other places, here's the problem with it. And so I try and pull in everybody from the office to leverage their best practices.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And, sir, if I could ask, I mean, currently you're a general, but I'm sure you're aware that folks may not speak to you as a general because of your rank with, quote, unquote, "complete candor", right? And even if you were a colonel or lieutenant colonel, obviously, it's all relative to the people you're speaking with. How do you encourage this candid and open discussion?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Yeah, I think if you want candor, you have to show candor. And so when I first meet, I actually was just doing this at our first drill here because I've not been in a Joint Force Headquarters role for the past three years. Most of our enlisted force, I don't know very well. And what I mean by candor is, I don't mean telling them that I have a cat, or we're about to get a puppy. That's interesting information, but that's not real candor about what's going on.

So, for example, as a general officer I have access to other information that may not be widely distributed. And while my job is not to inundate people, I try and share those things that I think are important to that particular Airman and group to let them know that I'm listening to issues that are important to them, and that I'm willing to trust them with information that has been entrusted to me, but it does take some time. I think people need to get to know you.

So I typically will explain it and say, I have a lot of different roles. I said, I'm a general officer here at the Guard. I'm an owner of a leadership consulting company. I'm a husband and we have cats at home. I said, when I start feeling too important I go in and scoop the litter box to remind me that that's still one of my jobs. And I think if

you humanize yourself it helps people understand sort of where you're coming from. I also never pass up the opportunity that if I've made a mistake or misspoken that I own up to it and fess up to it. There is no better builder of trust and rapport then admitting that you've made a mistake because the opposite is poison.

Think about this for a second. If I go in and say something that's wrong, not only do I know it, but everybody else in the room knows it, too. If I don't own up to it, then I've made a pretty clear statement as to where I stand on things, and people will modify or conform their behavior to that.

Doesn't happen overnight. You're not gonna get people to tell you their deepest and darkest secrets, but if you start that, and you base your relationship on mutual respect, and a healthy exchange of information, and you explain to them what a debrief is, you kind of lead by example, and demonstrate that behavior by example, it won't take people long to catch on as to what's important to you, and how you're willing to go, how you're willing to expose yourself for the betterment of the organization, and they'll catch on.

HIS BOOK

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Thank you for that, sir. Well, we've talked about this in passing through our discussion today, and it has to do with your new book that was just recently published called "[Joint Force Leadership: How SEALs and Fighter Pilots Lead to Success](#)." Could you provide for our listeners a little background on the impetus for writing this book, and what readers could expect to learn in reading the book?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Sure, "Joint Force Leadership" is a combination of my experience as a fighter pilot, and my co-author, Commander Mark McGinnis's 24 years of special operations experience as a Navy SEAL. And our idea behind "Joint Force Leadership" was to identify those key attributes that we

think are common to effective teams of any nature. And the book is designed to acknowledge the fact that we bring together a lot of different capabilities whether it's in a military organization, in a business, and each one of those components comes with its own language, its own culture, its own objectives and goals. And the objective behind this is to get together, and unite behind a common purpose to get the job done.

And so our idea behind this was that we did not want the book to be overly scientific, meaning that we did not do a lot of social science type of research. What we decided to do was to take our collective 30 years of business experience, and 50 years of military leadership experience, and boil it down to its essence. And so as we've discussed the three key pillars are focus, trust, and communication. Under each of those pillars in the book we've decided there are four or five key sub-components, many of which we've talked about here on the podcast. And we decided, look, we're gonna explain each of the sub-components. And then we're gonna bring the book to life by telling stories. I don't like reading long books that are technically based, and neither does Mark. And so we said to ourselves if someone was walking through the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, and picked up our book, we want them to be able to have it pretty much done, and understand it by the time they land in LaGuardia.

And so the book it's 25,000 words, it's 100 something pages, but it's mostly stories. And for every example we have in there, we tell a SEAL story, we tell a fighter pilot story, and we tell a business story, but we are very mindful not to tell combat related stories. In our experience those are hard for people to relate to. They might be interesting, they might be cool, but they don't really serve our purpose. So all of the SEAL stories have to do with Mark's experience in a training environment. All my fighter pilot stories come from my fighter pilot experience in a training environment. And then all the business stories come from actual organizations, or professional teams that we've worked with.

And at the end of the day, you get to the end of each chapter, and there's a series of questions that really are designed to make you think about where am I, and what do I think are important about these three components? And so when you get to the end of that, you understand why we think focus, trust, and communication are critical. What some of the sub-components of that are. And it's designed to make you think about, okay, where are my strengths, and where are there opportunities for me as an individual to improve my skills and my lifelong leadership journey?

MAJ HANRAHAN:

That's great, sir. It sounds like that this book is more or less action-oriented than with the questions at the end of the chapters.

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

It is, it is. We're working on the second book right now, which is more to here's how you do it. Although there are some tools in the first book as to how you do it. The first book we decided to make the case for why we think this is important, and how it impacts organizations. So it's meant to be an enjoyable read, make you think.

And then, like I said we're about 75% done with the second book, which dives into a series of tools that allow you to diagnose, and start to solve some of these problems. And there are tools about building culture, how to become an elite communicator, how to drive and demand accountability. And some of the other tools that we think are important to put in the hands of our leaders so they can start to use them and leverage them right away.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

And to kind of reiterate to our listeners, again, the book is called "Joint Force Leadership: How SEALs and Fighter Pilots Lead to Success." And it is available on Amazon. And, obviously, you can find other information on jointforceleadership.com. With that, sir, are there any other resources and materials where our listeners can learn more about today's topic?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

Well, I think you've highlighted the ones that we are most familiar with, and the ones that we are putting out there. For those who are interested, if you go to the website and put your email in, there's a PDF five pager that outlines in a little bit more detail the focus, trust, and communication methodology. It also identifies many of the questions that we put in the book. So it's an easy way to get a high-level overview and recap. Those are really the main sources of information for joint force leadership that exists as of this podcast.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Yes, sir, and as we do for all our guests, I'll leave the final thoughts for you. The question here if anything else you would like to discuss on today's topic about the joint force leadership?

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

So, as we talked about early on, I have experience 10 years as a fighter pilot, and 10 years as a JAG, and while those jobs are significantly different I think one informs the other and vice versa. To our military listening audience, the tools that we've been taught in the military have application not only to the military challenges and opportunities that we face, but they're also applicable outside of the military. For our non-military listeners, don't be intimidated by tools that work in the military because I work with great people in the military. I work with great people in civilian organizations. The common thread in high performing organizations are the people.

And whether you're wearing a uniform or not, all of us have room to improve our leadership skills. I think it's a lifelong study. We call it a journey, not a destination. And so look for opportunities to learn things either here on this podcast, on other podcasts, any sources. If you make yourself a lifelong leader, excuse me, a lifelong reader, and a lifelong study of leadership, your leadership skills will evolve. And that's the one thing that I talked about earlier, and do believe is that it's a constant evolution.

COVID presents some leadership challenges that the tools that we already have will help solve, but there's always room for the development of new tools. And my challenge to you as a listener would be find the tools that you like, put them in your toolbox. Always look for opportunities to add new tools because once COVID is over the next challenge is just around the corner.

MAJ HANRAHAN:

Well, sir, we are very grateful for you taking time out of your schedule today to speak to us, and our audience. Lots of wisdom, lots of leadership insights here. Thank you again, sir, for coming on today to talk with us.

BRIG GEN DEMAREST:

It's my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me and best of luck to you and the AFJAGS, the JAG School, and all of our listeners

TAKEAWAYS

MAJ HANRAHAN:

That concludes our interview with Brigadier General James Demarest. For my main three takeaways I'd like to walk through some of the highlights I gleaned through the joint force leadership triad with the three pillars of communication, focus, and trust.

Number one, communication. As Brigadier General Demarest said across the board without exception the highest performing teams are the ones that are able to communicate effectively. Effective communication does not mean bombarding folks with messages and information. It is absolutely a balance. Effective communication is getting the right information to the right audience at the right time.

Brigadier General Demarest also spoke a good deal about commander's intent, which is an extremely valuable tool. It has military roots, but widespread civilian application. It's about properly articulating the end state you want, but avoiding at all costs, how you want your team to get there. There is a very powerful distinction here. Commander's intent is about strategic vision, and not

about the tactical Xs and Os. This allows subordinates to come up with their own tactical Xs and Os, i.e. solutions to the challenges, and problems the team faces. And this breeds a natural culture of innovation. In order to create commander's intent, the leader must determine what is really important, and clearly define success. This is simple in concept, but highly challenging to master an application. As Brigadier General Demarest stated many leaders fail in this endeavor. I would venture to guess that many leaders never take the time to truly define what, quote, unquote, "success" looks like. They likely have an idea in their minds, but if not clearly spelled out to the team, adopted by the team and tracked by the team, a high-level of success is unlikely to occur.

Pillar number two, focus. You've all likely heard the SMART goals framework standing for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-sensitive. Brigadier General Demarest builds upon this proven goal setting framework, and adds an extra S as SMARTS with the S standing for strategic. He states that every goal needs to be aligned with the strategic goals of the organization. If you cannot align your goal with the organization's strategic goals then the goal is likely not set correctly.

Consider asking the question, "How do we measure the goal with a strategic outcome?"

If you, or a subordinate answers, "I **think** we're right," it likely means that the commander's intent may need to be clearer.

Focus also deals to a very large extent in the systems for tracking and allocating one's time to accomplish priorities. You've likely heard that time is one's most valuable asset. So make sure to treat it as such. Evaluate your system. How do you track you and your team's accomplishments? Do you use Outlook, Google Docs, a physical calendar, a list on your iPhone, etc.? All great leaders have a system that they perfect over time for their particular mission and objectives. Find your system and stick to it.

Additionally, what do you do when your number one priority is hijacked by another, quote, unquote, "hot tasker" of the day? We've likely all been there. We've written down our top three tasks, or goals for the day. We start with the best of intentions in mind to work that number one priority then some other hot tasker pops up in an email, or walks into our office. What is the priority now? If this new tasker will impede your ability to complete your original priorities you may need to speak with your supervisor on this situation. If you're the leader, you'll need to evaluate the importance of the new tasker to your overall mission. Yes, some hot taskers must be done, but others likely don't need to be accomplished immediately, or they can be delegated. The key is to be mindful of these situations, and work to live with a proactive mindset, i.e. not a reactive one. Don't let the frenzy of the day hijack your priorities. You may have to close the door on occasion. You may have to say, "No." You may need to delegate. By gaining mindfulness to these situations, you'll become better at mastering the pillar of focus.

And number three, trust. Establishing trust first starts by showing trust in others as Brigadier General Demarest states. And he also states that if you delegate responsibility, you must also delegate the authority. And this involves risk of failure, but that is the trade-off. If you give someone the responsibility without the authority then you're essentially telling that person that you don't trust them. Now you can mitigate risk of failure by setting up left and right limits or boundaries from the onset. And as team members get closer to those left and right limits they should utilize additional team members in a team storming session for feedback to assist. It doesn't necessarily mean the leader needs to get involved. So it starts by empowering your people with the resources, and authority to complete their jobs, providing left and right limits, and basically getting out of the way until it's time to review performance.

A second consideration on trust is to demonstrate trustworthy behavior. Brigadier General Demarest

states this is a 24/7 endeavor both on and off duty, and that actions speak much louder than words here. So be transparent in the use of your resources. Are you sending your people to the places you don't want to go, and keeping the good TDYs for yourself?

Once you build trust in yourself and your team, then you must build trust in the processes. The processes should represent the best practices in your environment or industry. In other words, don't reinvent the wheel. Rather learn and master the current best practices. Then once qualified, look to make tweaks or adjustments. Most innovations as we've discussed in other episodes aren't home runs, rather they're base hits, singles, one after the next. A cumulative effect of which is significant progress.

Last, debriefing is one of the most critical tools to assess trust. A debrief is designed to measure your results against your objectives. As Brigadier General Demarest stated it's not about me or rank. It's about establishing an open and honest dialogue. He further states that he always starts off with what went well. People need to be recognized, and rewarded for their good work. That's important and often overlooked in our military organization. Don't just hold debriefings for a train wreck. That will often backfire and the team, and everyone will come to view the word debriefing as punishment. Try to work at all costs to avoid this.

In the fighter community debrief, the rank is literally taken off once the door closes. They seek truth over artificial harmony. They don't look to point the finger per se. Rather they look to evaluate, and discuss what can get better, and always end with courses of actions, or COAs, i.e. solutions for going forward. It will take time to get the debriefing, quote, unquote, "right". It won't likely be great the first time. However, the debriefing will improve over repetition. With practice, the right attitude, and proper leadership to set the tone, proper debriefing will improve team performance. That concludes my top three takeaways. Thank you for listening and see you on the next episode.

ANNOUNCER:

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GLOSSARY

- **AAA:** anti-aircraft artillery
- **COA:** course of action
- **DSCA:** Defense Support to Civil Authorities
- **JAG:** judge advocate general
- **Navy SEAL:** SEAL in full Sea, Air, and Land
- **NDS:** National Defense Strategy
- **SJA:** staff judge advocate
- **SMART:** specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-sensitive
- **SMARTS:** specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-sensitive, strategic
- **TDY:** temporary duty travel
- **TJAG:** The Judge Advocate General