



Views and hyperlinks expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of The Judge Advocate General, the Department of the Air Force, or any other department or agency of the United States Government. The inclusion of external links and references does not imply any endorsement by the author(s), The Judge Advocate General, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense or any other department or agency of the U.S. Government. They are meant to provide an additional perspective or as a supplementary resource. The Department of the Air Force or any other department or agency of the United States Government does not exercise any responsibility or oversight of the content at the destination.



**Article Reprint  
Timeless Leadership Series**

# Seven Pillars for Building Tomorrow's Air Force Leaders

*The Reporter*, Volume 31-3 (Sept 2004)

**Timeless Leadership Series:** Article Reprint  
By Lieutenant Colonel Timothy Cothrel

**Timeless Leadership Series:** This edition analyzes the importance of building strong foundations in the practice of leadership.

## Importance of Leadership

Alexander the Great once said, “I do not fear an army of lions, if they are led by a lamb. I do fear an army of sheep, if they are led by a lion.” Like all of us, he recognized the tremendous importance of leadership in military success during both war and peace. And, as the technological and political arenas in which we operate become even more complex, leadership becomes even more important. That is why so many Air Force (and other) senior leaders frequently remind us that the ultimate function of any leader is not to attract more followers, but rather to create more leaders.

In spite of this, we rarely analyze leadership. We may have a gut instinct that helps us recognize good or bad leadership when we see it, and a sense of what is leading versus following,

but we generally do not deconstruct the leadership role or process sufficiently to identify the specific value a leader adds to unit mission accomplishment. As a result, we may understand enough about leadership to practice it ourselves, but in order to teach it, to create and educate that next generation of leaders, we must dig to the very bedrock of its definition. While the seven principles below are in no way the complete or final word on leadership, they hopefully provide at least some insight.

## 1 Leadership is Something You Do

As Donald H. McGannon, former CEO of Westinghouse Broadcasting, observed “Leadership is action, not position.” This is illustrated by Sacagawea, the Indian woman who guided the Lewis and Clark expedition through

Modified Illustration: © Deemerwha studio/stock.adobe.com

the Dakotas and beyond. While Lewis and Clark were technically in charge of the group, she was the one actually leading it—she was deciding where the group would go, when it would go, and how it would get there.

## 2 Leadership Creates Progress

Progress is more than mere activity—it is activity with direction. No matter how much effort you exert or how good your intentions may be, if in the end the group is no closer to your organizational goal, you failed to lead it effectively. In Sacagawea's case, the goal was a physical destination. For many Air Force leaders, the goal may be performing the mission better or faster or cheaper or with higher morale. No matter what the goal may be, as a leader your job is to find or create the right route to reach it, then guide your people along the way.

---

To lead people, then, is to help them achieve their successes; that, in turn, requires that you understand their objectives ....

---

## 3 Leadership Responds to the Needs of the Followers

“Battles are sometimes won by generals; wars are nearly always won by sergeants and privates,” wrote scholar F.E. Adcock. Also, General George S. Patton, Jr. said, “One of the most frequently noted characteristics of great men who have remained great is loyalty to their subordinates.” Yet, there is sometimes a temptation among civilian and military leaders to regard their followers as resources at their disposal.

In truth, as Dee Hock, founder and former CEO of VISA International observed, “If you don't understand that you work for your mislabeled ‘subordinates,’ then you know nothing of leadership.” To lead people, then, is to help them achieve their successes; that, in turn, requires that you understand their objectives, the obstacles they face in reaching those objectives, and the action necessary to remove those obstacles.

Obstacles to progress are not necessarily the mountains or rivers Lewis and Clark needed to cross—they are anything that may become an excuse for failure, including lack of training, lack of equipment or materiel, and lack of motivation.

## 4 Leadership Inspires Enthusiasm

Manipulating behavior is not necessarily leadership. After all, with a whip and a chair, a lion tamer can get a 400-lb. man-eater to sit up and beg, but nobody characterizes him as a leader.

In fact, five-star general and President Dwight D. Eisenhower defined leadership as “the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.” Similarly, Peter F. Drucker, a pioneer in the scientific study of management, defined leadership as “lifting a person's vision to higher sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.”

In the long run, you cannot rely on fear or intimidation to achieve progress. Creating the hunger to succeed requires that you provide the group with instruction, encouragement, vision, communication, and, most importantly, an example.

## 5 Leadership Requires Standards

Discipline is an essential element of leadership. Bestselling author H. Jackson Brown said, “Talent without discipline is like an octopus on roller skates—there's plenty of movement, but you never know if it's going to be forward, backwards, or sideways.”

There are individuals in the Air Force who are unwilling or unable to make the journey with the rest of the group. Allowing them to continually impede progress or jeopardize success would be unfair to the group. As a leader, you must live up to the unpleasant responsibility of dealing with those individuals in a swift, fair, and effective manner. However, no leader can expect her followers to uphold standards unless she is willing and able to do likewise, and then some. As the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu observed, “Mastering others is strength. Mastering yourself is true power.”

## 6 Leadership Opportunities are Everywhere

As the first principle states, being a leader is not a matter of having a certain rank or job title. Everyone can exercise leadership simply by taking responsibility for the welfare of other people, making decisions and taking actions that contribute to their progress, or passing on knowledge to them. You can seize the opportunities to be a leader at work, home, church, or school, in a club, a team, or a family. More importantly, you can help your subordinates find opportunities in their own lives where they can practice the leadership skills they will one day need to accomplish the Air Force mission.

---

Good leaders may change course,  
but they never quit.

---

## 7 Leadership Perseveres

Like many things, leadership must to a large extent be learned through painful experience rather than taught through essays or articles. Along the way, disappointments and setbacks may slow leaders down, but they never keep them down. To function as a leader, you must remain focused on your destination, your plan, and your people, and soldier on in the face of any adversity.

Legendary football coach Vince Lombardi summed it up perfectly when he said, “Leaders aren’t born; they are made. And they are made, just like anything else, through hard work. And that’s the price we’ll have to pay to achieve that goal, or any goal.” The Greek philosopher Aristotle said, “We are what we repeatedly do; excellence then is not an act, but a habit.”

When Vince Lombardi and Aristotle agree on something, it has to be worth noting—good leaders may change course, but they never quit.

---

Layout by Thomasa Huffstutler

### About the Author

---

(2004 Biography)

#### Lieutenant Colonel Timothy J. Cothrel

(B.S., Bowling Green State University; J.D., University of California Davis Law School; LL.M., Temple Law School) is a former Circuit Trial Counsel with an LL.M. in Trial Advocacy. He is currently the Staff Judge Advocate, 5th BW, Minot AFB, ND.