



## MASTERING LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: UNITED STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY CASE

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### Abstract

Since effective leadership is the core element on the survival of organizations, leadership development has been one of the major goals of 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education institutions. As future leaders, graduates of those institutions are supposed to deal with complex and novel problems constantly changing in challenging environments. In this respect, teaching leadership skills through university programs and finding the ways leading to the acquisition of leadership skills in higher education is one of the essential concerns of educators. Military academies are well known for preparing students for leadership positions. United States Air force Academy (USAFA) is a military higher education institution graduating leaders for the Air Force through a four-year program. In this paper USAFA's leadership development program will be examined and cadets' journey from personal leadership to organizational leadership will be discussed on the basis of class levels: freshman, sophomore, junior and senior.

**Key words:** Leadership development, higher education, USAFA

### INTRODUCTION

Increasing rates of environmental change and team-based nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century works entail a workforce proficient in dealing with challenges presented in many different forms. In the new era, development of decision making skills is more important than ever for all successful leaders. In a world constantly changing and presenting more and more challenging business environments, it is higher education institutions' responsibility to endow the students with leadership skills in order to enable them to manage organizations and systems effectively. As future leaders, graduates of those institutions are supposed to deal with complex and novel problems constantly changing in challenging environments. In this respect, teaching leadership skills through university programs and finding the ways leading to the acquisition of leadership skills in higher education is one of the essential concerns of educators. Since leadership development has been a major focal point and goal in higher education (Thompson, 2006), mission statements of universities often point out the commitment to the development of students as future leaders and importance of curricular and extra-curricular activities leading to students' leadership development (Astin&Astin, 2000; Dugan, 2006a; Dugan,2006b). For setting an effective leadership development program and providing the students with best leadership practices, educators need a precise definition of leadership. In spite of the fact that there is no consensus on what leadership is and educators vary in regarding the skills essential to effective leadership; understanding one's values, strengths and weaknesses, interpersonal competence and communication skills, having the capacity for effectiveness in organizational, project and task management are the skills upon which educators mostly agreed (Rosch&Kusel, 2010). Some of the widely accepted definitions of leadership are as follows.

1. Leadership has been viewed as the process of leaders influencing followers towards shared goals (Velsor, McCauley&Ruderman, 2010, p.21).
2. Leadership is quite simply: The art of inspiring, guiding and directing the performance of subordinates toward achieving a common goal or result (Zadalis&Shrader, 2003, p.1).
3. Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives (Yukl, 2010, p. 8)
4. Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northhouse, 2010, p. 3).

5. Leadership is accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty (Ganz, 2010, p. 527).

Since the leadership construct is hard to define and there is an abundance of leadership definitions, instead of setting a commonly agreed definition of leadership, it would be a wise decision to argue on how to teach leadership skills (Doh, 2003). In spite of the everlasting argument concerning whether leaders are born or made, leadership skills could be taught and acquired via educational practices (Arendt&Grégoire, 2005; Tuleja&Greenbalg, 2008). Unfortunately majority of the higher education curricula lack leadership skills and have been criticized for failing to prepare students for leadership positions. In order to solve this problem in business schools some educators have emphasized the development of personal, interpersonal, and group skills that underlie effective leadership (Pfeffer& Fong, 2002).

Naturally like many other organizations, higher education institutions vary in demands and expectations of its members. The goals of the institutions and the members shape the leadership practices. As an organization military is demanding in nature and military leader development has a vital share in military academies' curricula. This study aimed at describing United States Air force Academy (USAFA)'s leadership development program which is actually a four-year journey through which cadets move from personal leadership to organizational leadership. The program is shaped with the concept of distributed leadership which lets diverse members of the organization to take part in and contribute to the process of leadership in reaching collective organizational aims. The two principles underlying the concept of distributed leadership are; Leadership is a shared influence process to which several individuals contribute and leadership arises from the interactions of diverse individuals which together form a group or network in which essential expertise is a dispersed quality (Ameijde et al 2009).

#### **United States Air Force Academy**

United States Air Force Academy is a military academy with a mission; to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the United States Air Force in service to United States of America. The vision of USAFA is to be the Air Force's premier institution for developing leaders of character (USAFA Strategic Plan 2010). The academy is located in north of Colorado Springs and the number of male and female students attending the academy is approximately 4,000. The faculty is composed of approximately 500 military and civilian instructors. USAFA offers undergraduate education in thirty-two academic majors. At graduation, each cadet earns a Bachelor degree and a commission as a second lieutenant in the United States Air Force. The United States Air Force Academy is a unique higher education institution in that graduation entails completion of a program involving not only a regular undergraduate education but also a four-year military training composed of physical education classes and competitive athletics, and continuous activities aiming at character development. The program starts with Basic Training which is a very tough military training period carried out during the summer right before the freshman year. Basic Training is the first phase of an integrated military, academic, athletic, and airmanship curriculum leading to a Bachelor of Science degree as well as being commissioned as an officer in the U. S. Air Force (USAFA Outcomes). The Air Force Academy is the only commissioning source for the United States Air Force where young men and women are recruited as high school graduates and carefully developed throughout a four year top-ranked university experience completely under Air Force control, with the objective of preparing them to serve their country as leaders of the United States Air Force (USAFA Diversity Plan 2009).

#### **United States Air Force Academy Leadership Development Model**

USAFA is a leadership development center where cadets develop leadership abilities through attending activities and accomplishing the given tasks. Those tasks leading to leadership development are designed in accordance with the cadet ranks and positions so that the cadets can exercise leadership skills at progressively more challenging levels (USAFA Diversity Plan 2009). USAFA leadership development program is a continuous process starting with Basic Training and finishing at graduation. It embraces the air force core values: integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. Cadets are supposed to internalize those core values through numerous activities embedded in a four-year undergraduate program launched to prepare the cadets for a military career. Those valued are expressed briefly as follows;

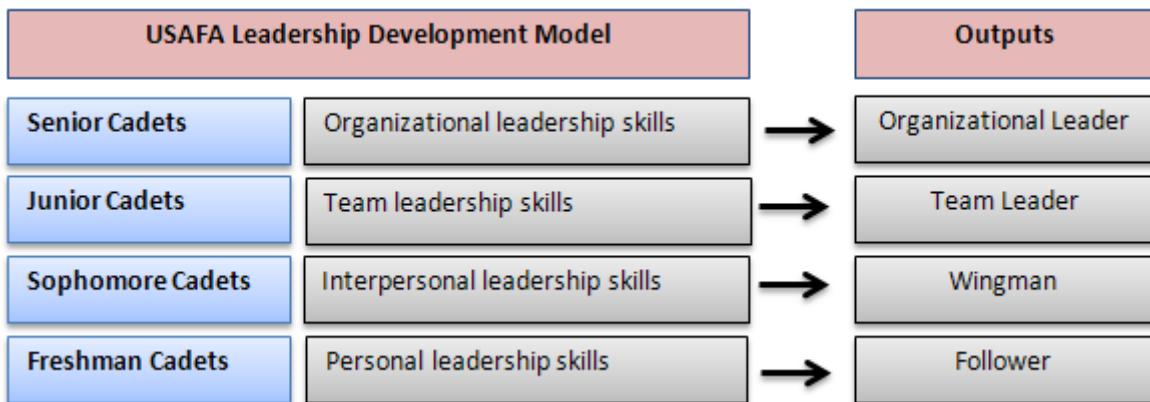
Integrity is the willingness to do what is right even when no one is looking. It is an essential part of ones' character and achieved through one's self-control. Integrity forms the basis for trust in the Air Force and it is the foundation of the military profession.

Service Before Self is a core value entailing dedication to duty and determination to accomplish the mission and to serve the nation despite risk, danger or personal inconvenience. Service Before Self means personal sacrifice and doing what is best for the nation without considering personal interests.

Excellence in All We Do is the third core value for cadets and it means doing one's best at all times with all tasks. Unlike the previous two values this value does not apply only to one's self, but requires an individual to support others when they fall short of the preset goals.

USAFA Leadership Development Program focuses on developing cadet competencies in the key skills required to be a fully developed officer. Leadership development in the academy is an ongoing process starting in the freshman year and lasting through the sophomore, junior and senior years. Leadership development tasks are designed in accordance with the maturity and position of each class of cadets. Based on this principle the academy's leadership development model i.e. *The PITO Leadership Model* focuses on Personal Leadership Skills for freshman cadets, Interpersonal Leadership Skills for sophomore cadets, Team Leadership Skills for junior cadets and Organizational Leadership Skills for senior cadets. This model is a four-year development process presenting challenges for the cadets in an order from simple to complex. Through the cadets' leadership skills development journey, they act both as leaders and followers just like the officers do at various levels of service. The four phases of the PITO Model based on classes is shown in Figure 1 and the model will be discussed in detail.

**Figure 1.** United States Air Force Academy PITO Model



#### ***Freshman Cadet: Follower***

Freshman cadet education program gives an initial foundation of the officer development system and puts emphasis on developing personal leadership and followership skills. At this stage values such as self-discipline, teamwork, duty and commitment should be acquired to proceed the further step i.e. sophomore class. Freshman cadets as followers learn and live by Air Force core values, mission, chain of command, and Air Force standards. Followers are supposed to;

- Master primary responsibilities, skills and knowledge,
- Build personal awareness of strengths, developmental needs and impact on others,
- Operate and comply with the intent of policies and directives,
- Hone followership abilities,
- Learn about leadership techniques,
- Set the example,
- Prepare to develop and practice Wingman leadership.

***Sophomore Cadet: Wingman***

Sophomore cadet education program aims at transforming followers to leaders. Main goal of the cadets is to become a role model and coach for the freshman cadets in the ways of the loyal follower. At this stage as they master the training and mentoring skill, cadets are supposed to successfully execute interpersonal leadership skills. They try to internalize the Air Force standards as they get prepared for the further steps requiring more and more difficult tasks. Sophomore cadets are supposed to;

- Continue to develop and practice personal leadership,
- Promote effective communication through attentive listening, articulate speaking and clear writing,
- Coach others to develop and achieve their personal objectives in all aspects of cadet life,
- Promote mutual respect, fairness and dignity in interactions,
- Commit to the well-being (health, morale, safety, training) of others,
- Prepare to develop and practice Tactical/ Team leadership.

***Junior Cadet: Tactical/Team Leader***

Junior cadets are the primary trainers of the freshman and sophomore cadets and their education program is designed to prepare them for this responsibility. Junior cadets are taught specific leadership and organizational improvement skills in order to get prepared for the senior cadet positions. Taking active roles in the chain of command, junior cadets receive instruction in practical leadership and supervisory skills. They supervise and lead the drills, ceremonies and train the freshman and sophomore cadets. At this stage the junior cadets master team leadership skills and they are supposed to;

- Continue to develop and practice interpersonal and personal leadership,
- Build positive group identity for cohesiveness, confidence and cooperation,
- Use knowledge and skills to support common squadron, wing and institutional goals,
- Applies team dynamics to focus efforts in unit goals,
- Employ effective decision making,
- Prepare to develop and practice organizational leadership.

***Senior Cadet: Organizational Leader***

Senior cadets in the academy occupy leadership positions throughout the cadet wing and serve as cadet officers. At this final stage the aim is to endow the cadets with organizational leadership skills. Senior cadets' education program is designed to prepare them for commissioning as a second lieutenant in the air force. Right before graduation during this last year in the academy, senior cadets assuming the responsibilities of a second lieutenant have the opportunity to practice leadership skills by leading and supervising the professional development of the freshman, sophomore and junior cadets. For those cadets the ability to effectively lead the organization essentially depends on the expertise gained in the three previous steps. Senior cadets are supposed to;

- Continue to develop and practice team, interpersonal and personal leadership,
- Create an environment where all members of the organization can reach their full potential,
- Drive organizational norms for high performance and professional standards,
- Integrate efforts of small units toward broader objectives,
- Influence procedures and policy to improve the cadet wing. (USAFA Catalog 2010)

The Air Force Academy's efforts to developing leaders of character have been enforced by a center called *Center for Character and Leadership Development*. The center's mission is to advance the understanding, practice and integration of character and leadership development in preparation for service to the nation in the profession of arms. The vision of the center is to be the Air Force's premier center for integrating the development of character and leadership and the Academy's catalyst for achieving the institution's highest purpose. The Center for Character and Leadership Development aims at developing cadet character and leadership through high-quality daily interactions with faculty and staff (Retrieved March 20, 2013, from <http://www.usafa.af.mil/commandant/cclid/index.asp>) Center tries to elevate and integrate character and leadership development throughout the entire USAFA experience for all cadets and with a wide impact on cadets and staff its integration role of academies' leadership practices is crucial.



### Implications Of The USAFA Model

United States Air Force Academy curriculum as a blended learning program integrating coaching and peer learning sets an example of an undergraduate education program developing students' leadership skills. The standards and procedures applied in the academy can be a good starting point for higher education institutions to launch leadership development programs aligned with their peculiar contexts. Since the focus of those programs is on the development of skills, it is inevitable for higher education institutions to shift from traditional teaching practices to skill-based learning (Whetten&Camerun, 2007), and from knowing to doing (Datar, Garvin,&Cullen, 2010). Utilizing experiential learning strategies in higher education classrooms and campuses would contribute to the educators' efforts to convert learning to practice. Experiential education is an approach through which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities (Association for Experiential Education, 2010). Traditional teaching methodologies applied in higher education should be modified in such a way that all learners will be able to take part in learning process assuming the responsibilities of the process. At this point the instructors and educational administrators are supposed to transfer some of the managerial roles to the student leaders. Delegating responsibilities requires sacrifice and it is painful for educational administrators who are accepted as the omnipotent leaders of the educational institutions. Keeping the fact in mind that the notions of collaboration and partnering as two essential elements in a robust organization gave birth to shared leadership and distributed leadership, researchers studying the leadership construct should focus on not only the administrators but also subordinates taking part in the administrative tasks. USAFA leadership development program proves that leadership is not a top-down process as it has been viewed for years.

Experience has long been regarded as important in the honing of leadership skills (Datar et al., 2010, p. 124). In order to ensure experiential education in our educational institutions carefully selected experiences should be structured in such a way that the learners take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for the results just like it happens in United States Air Force Academy. Unfortunately, in undergraduate education programs many lack those practices due to the emphasis on mastering knowledge of the field. In this new era higher education graduates need not only to have a broad perspective of the issues concerning their profession such as social, environmental and economic issues, but also they have to have leadership skills to be able to act in managerial positions effectively.

Unlike the other state universities, USAFA offers academic courses accompanied by extracurricular activities carried out outside of class. Those academic classes linked with co-curricular activities shapes a program that makes USAFA unique as a higher education institution. Creating outdoor leadership development activities endorsing various leadership practices designed in accordance with the students' development level is important. Those activities will help the students experience and practice leadership, teamwork, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills. Such experiential activities provide students with opportunities to make positive choices, gain self-confidence, and learn lifelong development skills.

### CONCLUSION

Leadership development is a process entailing ongoing collaborative efforts. Endowing the students with administrative and management skills is essential for all higher education institutions. As it is illustrated in United States Air Force Academy case, identifying the target skills and designing a developmental program well suited to the maturity levels of students are vital in the success of any leadership development program. From the very first day in school students should be provided with experiences that give opportunities to develop leadership skills both in themselves and their fellow students. Leadership development is really a tough process and present some challenges. As the students are developing in a certain direction under the effects of non-academic experiences, educators are trying to develop those students in leadership. So, this is a real challenge for all institutions and leadership education is analogous to hitting a moving target. On the other hand it is a fact that educators can no longer regard the individual learner as a tabula rasa. Prior to attending the educational program the students are all subjected to some experiences and had personal experiences with good or bad leaders. Thus leadership educators' second challenge is the probability that the learners may receive the content in fundamentally different ways due to the previous experiences (Lindsay et al, 2009).



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