

Leading in the Third Dimension

Lt Col Sharon M. Latour, USAF

If the abstract realm of mathematics constitutes a reasonable area of intelligence, why not the abstract realm of the spiritual?

- Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*¹

Précis

This article explores the emerging field of leadership responsibility with regard to a person's spirituality, or the realm that is neither body nor mind, but soul and spirit. Exploring this superficially addressed, but *not discussed*, aspect of leadership should have a positive impact on US Air Force leader effectiveness.

By leading in the third dimension, we mean expanding a commander's focus beyond the mental (mind) and physical (body) concerns for the people, and intentionally including aspects of the member's spiritual nature (spirit) as commanders lead.²

Our concern is especially acute due to recent, radically different combat experiences our people have faced and continue to face, especially in the last 4 years. They are not limited to, but are especially concentrated on, the Afghanistan and Iraq situations.

Brief Background

In a bold treatment of the subject in the workplace, *The Soul at Work*, the authors define it this way:

In complex adaptive systems, how we interact and the kinds of relationships we form have everything to do with what kind of culture emerges, has everything to do with the emergence of creativity, productivity, and innovation. When more interactions are care-full rather than care-less in an organization, a community of care and connection develops, creating a space for the soul at work to emerge. "The soul at work" is a double entendre: it is at once the individual's soul being allowed to be present in the workplace; and it is the emergence of a collective soul of the organization.³

While these two authors are particularly noted for award-winning work in complexity science/business and developmental psychology, they describe what any good leader of teams knows: If people feel they are cared about, the vital "trust glue" takes hold between the leader and the follower and the followers among themselves. The resultant dynamic is the foundation for exemplary performance by that team on any mission given them. The authors suggest a trust culture consists of individuals bringing their whole being, with creativity and innovation essential to success in our ever-changing world. The leader is responsible for creating and

sustaining such a “command climate.” But we need more specifics about this spiritual dimension. Are we spilling over into religion? Isn’t that what chaplains deploy for?

A Significant Emotional Event⁴

In the summer of 2003, a student visited an instructor upon arrival for 10-month duty as an in-resident Professional Military Education student. She’d not only been given only two-weeks’ notice to come to school she’d just returned from AC-130 gunship duty to Iraq. (And she’d only had a couple of weeks home between a deployment to Afghanistan and the more recent Iraq war kick-off mission.)

As the weapons control officer on the low flying, slower-moving gunship, this non-complaining, happy-to-be-a-snake-eater Air Force major described the in processing routine back to the States after her last tour of duty. When asked how the system works, she described:

We had a lot of paperwork to fill out and a very complete exam. Yes, I told all about what I’d seen. One night we counted a hundred people our crew personally killed. And you’re so close; you can easily count the people you’re shooting. The one question my doc asked me after all the details I’d written down might surprise you. She looked through all the papers, and then looked up at me. With a very concerned look, she remarked, “You’re not getting five fruits and vegetables a day.”⁵

And that was the only person who had contact with our Weapons Control Officer (Responsible for, literally, calling the shots on targets.) who asked any sort of “How are you doing?” questions. The Air War College Special Operations students initiated weekly breakfast get-togethers for all the Special Ops types stationed in PME at Maxwell. Our student attended religiously.

While our student has peer support to keep a perspective about the work to which Air Warriors are called, who is looking after the others once they’ve come home? Recent surges in suicide and anger-related crimes are alarming.

In a 26 March 2004 article, Associate Press writer Robert Burns reported highlights from the Army’s recent survey of mental health in the Iraq combat zone. “From April to December last year, 23 soldiers killed themselves in Iraq or Kuwait. At least seven others killed themselves upon returning to the United States. Dr. Paul Ragan, a psychiatry professor at Vanderbilt indicates that this is a statistically significant number, A milestone. This suicide rate figures out to be 17.3 per 100,000 soldiers, compared to an Army-wide rate of 12.8, last year.”⁶

There is a leadership imperative at hand, and it is leadership’s responsibility to address it; not automatically delegate it away to the Chaplain corps. To this point, the military leadership literature has not struggled with the definition of this part of a person that is difficult to pin down and too often brushed away “because we don’t talk about religion.” Spirituality is not limited to religion, which is generally defined as “a system of beliefs.”⁷ It is much broader.

What is Spirituality?

Theological Ph.D. Corrine Ware in good academic company when she acknowledges the commander's plight, with regard to understanding spirituality, as a common dilemma:

The word is often used but rarely defined; it is difficult to pin down its precise meaning. Spirituality often refers to those things that have to do with the intelligent and immaterial part of a person, that part that experiences the transcendent. It also can mean all those attitudes and activities that characterize one's attempts to make connection with Deity.⁸

Howard Gardner, Ph.D. continues to wrestle with his idea of a spiritual "intelligence" in addition to the others he'd identified in his career:

Any discussion of the spirit—whether cast as spiritual life, spiritual capacity, spiritual feeling or a gift for religion, mysticism, or the transcendent—is controversial within the sciences, if not throughout the academic world. Language, music, space, nature, and even understanding of other people—all seem *comparatively* (italics in original) straightforward. Many of us do not recognize the spirit as we recognize the mind and body, and many of us do not grant the same ontological status to the transcendent or the spiritual as we do to, say, the mathematical or the musical. Even those who cannot identify with the spiritual realm or domain recognize its importance to most human beings—indeed, some might quip, its excessive importance.⁹

But, while readily acknowledging the importance of spiritual things, in short order, we see this prolific researcher and author flail, as it were, where he appears to lament:

. . . The content of spiritual knowledge may seem relatively straightforward. In practice, however, identifying the content being mastered by the putatively spiritual knower—its realm, truth, value, limitations—is problematic and controversial. Indeed, having read numerous accounts of the spiritual realm, I am tempted to conclude it refers to everything: mind, body, self, nature, the supernatural—and, sometimes, even to nothing! This conceptual sprawl contrasts sharply with the domains of science and math, which are relatively delimited and uncontroversial.¹⁰

Today, with our limited awareness, leaders of every type are not unwise to take cautious steps back from the entire domain that involves spiritual things. But we have a moral imperative to care for our people. Not to care just for the visible bits, but the elements that take far more effort and time investment, also. Curiously, it may be easier than we think. But it requires our willingness to rethink some basics we already understand.

Spirituality by Other Names

Let's use Lewin, Regine, Ware, and Gardner as we explore the possibility that Air Force leadership is already very much in the business of spiritual matters. We'll begin with our Core Values, and move to our Enduring Leader Competencies for good measure.

Basically, each of our authors talks about spirituality as those things *not* of the mind or body. Lewin and Regine cited creativity, productivity, and innovation. Ware defined it as the intelligent and immaterial parts of a person, the part that experiences the transcendent. And in, we might argue, exasperation, Gardner says spirituality refers to everything!

Perhaps, rather than defining what the spiritual realm *is*, it's simpler for the layman to define spirituality in terms of what it is *not*. It is not directly concerned with issues to do with the mind or the body. Gardner may be closest, if in the end, spirituality encompasses everything else!

The Core Values and Enduring Leadership Competencies

Our Air Force Core Values are profoundly spiritual: Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do. A leader cannot conduct a discussion or deliver a speech on core values without tapping into the spirituality of the listener. These values are the shared, corporate soul of the Air Force.

Myriad books direct our attention to successful approaches often taken to improve worker motivation, levels of commitment, or sheer increased productivity. But as related by Lewin and Regine, even the best popular psychology/management techniques fall short of sustained excellence or individual integrity and organizational commitment, if the leadership is simply practicing techniques without substance.

Knowing intellectually that relationship building is widely said to be valuable, Jeff tried to develop team-building skills. But he applied these skills in a very mechanical way, like tricks he pulled out of a magic bag. He had strategies for talking to people, engaging them, providing opportunities. But he wasn't really there; he was only going through the motions to reach certain ends. He didn't see genuine relationships as being very important or having much value—it was more an obligation and something he did initially for team building, because it was the thing to do. . . He thought developing genuine relationships was a waste of time. Because there were no relationships holding the team together, when they encountered a particularly stressful period. . . they had nothing to fall back on, nothing to hold on to. And the team fell apart.¹¹

There are two vital aspects or levels, to our values discussion: individual and collective. It is important to differentiate the opportunities values awareness affords each Air Warrior, as well as the dynamics involved in creating a strong values-centric organization.

Ware offers an especially valuable description of what occurs for emotionally healthy people who interact in society.

We cannot integrate the potentially enriching experiences of others into our own self-understanding unless we first have a self; to gain a self, we must first relate to and then differentiate from community. It is a continuously enriching circular movement of interaction and definition.¹²

It's common to see people rushing to accommodate the rules, requirements, rituals, reward structure, etc., of their organization, including the military culture, that the exquisitely human experience of seeing one self as both connected to and individuated from the group, is missed.

Ware cites psychiatrist Margaret Mahler's work in development theory when she highlights that,

“. . . Separation refers to the child's movements away from fusion with the mother, while individuation consists of those steps that lead to the development of an individual's own persona and unique characteristics so that the separation can be endured.”¹³

Often, people never experience this invaluable but difficult experience of becoming distinct from the authority figures in one's life. Ware suggests that *individuation* describes distinction from the whole (group, organization.), and *integration* describes effectively fitting together into the group. But one must be distinct individual in order to be a fully effective, contributing member of a group. Leaders play a significant role in this aspect of follower development.

In a brief look at the newly published AFDD 1-1, *Enduring Leadership Competencies*, we see profoundly spiritual requirements, across three distinct levels. The first category called *Personal Leadership* is like a primer on spiritual awareness at the individual level! These are the current Enduring Competencies listed at this, the initial and foundational level: Use sound judgment, Adapt/perform under pressure, Inspire trust, Lead courageously, Assess self, and Foster effective communication.

While offered as “basic” or fundamental leadership competencies, they are *extraordinarily sophisticated* from a spiritual point of view. Sound judgment is based on what? How does one master appropriate responses under pressure? How does one inspire and sustain trust? Where does courage come from, and how can we train it into our people? Who among us has the tools to objectively assess oneself? And what is effective communication and how is it perpetuated across environments? This is a true mentoring challenge, but essential to be done first, on an individual basis, before entering a collective or team level.

Effective leaders, who understand the *Enduring Leadership Competencies*, especially the second category called *Leading People and Teams*, embrace their role in fostering each AF member's passion as well as the work that must be done collectively, for mission accomplishment. The first competency in that category is “Drive performance thru shared vision and values.” Another is “Mentor and coach.” And still another is “Partner to maximize results.”

Let's return to Lewin and Regine who offer the following observations they refer to, comprehensively, as “Deep Work”:

Deep work places the work of reevaluating operating policies, business goals, a learning environment within a context where authentic, connected, caring relationships are also being cultivated. It's doing work not in boxes but with people. That is to say, cultivating honest conversations about business concerns that include our uncertainties and anxieties, our not knowing. Only through these kinds of conversations, which are supported by quality relationships between people, can a true reality and a real assessment of the organization emerge and with it an opportunity to address what really is. Only by addressing what really is can an organization genuinely evolve, adapt, learn, and be sustainable. . .

Organizations that undertake deep work, we also saw, can be expressive in their care and don't have to worry so much about sexual harassment suits because, underpinning these expressions, *which is missing in harassment cases*, is a connected relationship between people.¹⁴

While harassment is not our focus here, it is noteworthy that harassment is an *indicator* of a failure in establishing genuine, caring interpersonal relationships. And according to our Enduring Air Force Competencies, "Fostering Teamwork and Collaboration" and "Building Relationships" are on the list for Leading People and Teams.

Some of the corporate human resources language may sound rather touchy-feely; the bottom-line is still the "bottom-line" for them. If they don't stay competitive, e.g. consistently yield expected profit margins, then they've failed in mission accomplishment. People get fired.

How much more important for us, who marshal lethal force in defense of democracy, to pay attention to human relationship effectiveness among those who regularly synchronize their energies to get the defense mission secured? And key among the elements involved in forging ongoing, a successful human relationship is the ability to face reality honestly so necessary adjusts can be readily incorporated.

How does a leader ensure their team functions consistently well under pressure? Lewin and Regine offer several observations.

There are no simple solutions. But it begins with altering our perspective. It is to pay as much attention to how we treat people—co-workers, subordinates, customers—as we now typically pay attention to structures, strategies, and statistics. . . to see people as people, not as employees. . . It is in recognizing a job well done, not just with money but with genuine appreciation. . . remember people are inventive...it is to believe them. . . creating trust and commitment. . . these feedback loops can transform the system.¹⁵

These authors underscore the impact acknowledging others can have on the individual. Many times, they noted, increased *loyalty* and *commitment* were closely associated with people's experience of being recognized for their contributions. Commanders and leaders at all levels would do well to realize this connection between developing and caring for the individual and sustaining team performance under duress. The next section brings this into even clearer focus.

A Combat Chaplain in Baghdad¹⁶

Recent stories from Baghdad illuminate vastly different levels of leader preparation for dealing both with their own and their Air Warriors' traumas around up-close violence and death. A chaplain recounted several examples of how leaders in Iraq touched the spiritual aspects of their charge's lives.

One medical commander in Baghdad felt comfortable enough to pray and invite others to join him, when soldiers were brought in with severe and life-changing combat wounds. He did not require anyone to join him, but under such dire life and death circumstances, it was not surprising to the chaplain that, most of the medical staff was open and appreciative of the opportunity to draw strength from their faith publicly.

An intelligence officer became a conduit for donated clothing for Iraqi children. An Army Sergeant Major, whose unit regularly conducted convoys through dangerous routes, regularly shared his faith with troops and encouraged them to draw upon their own spiritual life for strength under the constant threat of danger.

OSI agents found themselves in theological discussions among themselves, based on the religious and cultural challenges they faced in the various Iraqi communities. Far from being an impediment to their work, they told the chaplain that, sharing in the spiritual realm helped better prepare them for often dangerous contacts with the local population.

But the chaplain shared another story. About a rated officer, an Air Force group commander.

On 19 August 2003, I was working at the Baghdad International Airport when the Canal Hotel was bombed. Housing many U.N. offices, twenty-two people were killed, including UN special envoy, Sergio Vieira de Mello.

During the long night, the staff struggled to determine exact causes of death, and often couldn't even tell if the individual was male or female. I was there throughout.

Running into the Group Commander near the mortuary tent where the body bags were being loaded carefully into a refrigerator truck, the commander and I began to comment together on such senseless losses of life.

Almost abruptly, the commander pointedly asked me, "How do *you* do it?" Realizing that in our former Air Force culture, seeing death up close, as opposed to 20,000 feet, was rare for pilots, I saw a very personal need this leader was expressing.

I gently replied, "I can do it, Sir, because my faith tells me this isn't the end of life." And expressed my faith in the Christian promise of eternal life after death.

All our military members deserve to be both technically trained and spiritually prepared for these events that can happen during combat or other crisis situations, anytime and anywhere.

Spiritual Leadership Planning

This article sought to create a foundation of understanding for two things: 1) We are “gun-shy” when it comes to addressing the humanity (spirituality) of our people directly, and 2) We cannot afford to ignore the leadership imperative facing us today.

As related in “The Significant Emotional Event” related earlier, we are not “re-calibrating” our people when they return from deployments. Especially deployments where acts of violence were experienced. Leaders owe a more compassionate and complete re-introduction of members to their non-combatant realities. They owe a structured, even mandatory, “processing opportunity” for the member and their families upon return to “life as normal” is a fundamental responsibility of commanders everywhere.

Leaders, who heed the remarks made by these experts on creating spiritually robust teams, already have a head start. But once warriors know they are headed home, what measures must be taken to ensure the best possible processing of their combat experience and re-introduction to normal American life takes place at the right time?

Spiritual Leadership Implementation

Key commander guidance, offered in any worthwhile commander preparation course, highlights the mandate to use all available resources in caring for people. The spiritual care of Air Warriors is complex, and overlaps with elements of mind and body, as well as spirit.

Commanders are wise to create and maintain the closest of ties to chaplain (remembering supervisors can suggest but *not require* members have a connection to the chaplain), medical corps (including Life Skills), and JAG support networks. No commander is equipped to do this alone. The operational pace and sheer numbers of assigned personnel taxes even the most capable and independent of leaders.

The good news is: there are many trained professionals ready to help. And there is an AF website being lauded regularly by Life Skills practitioners for all AF members’ use.

In the introduction to the *Leader’s Guide for Managing Personnel in Distress* at: <https://www.afms.mil/afspp/products/default.htmwe>¹⁷ read:

The purpose of the Leader’s Guide is to help unit leaders. . . recognize distress related behaviors, provide support to individuals within the unit, and collaborate with helping agencies to meet the needs of individuals in distress. . . The guide is focused on helping leaders employ awareness in intervention strategies *before* a person has reached the threshold of debilitating distress. . . provides guidance to leaders on giving emotional and material support to individuals across the continuum. . . from prevention to severe distress.¹⁸

As indicated in the *Guide*, utmost to executing our leadership responsibility in caring for Air Warriors and their families, is creating a trust climate in a unit well before deployment. Once

deployed, reliance on the support network kicks into gear in earnest. (See the checklist for Peer Support (B.A.S.I.C.) in the *Guide*.) But, the front-burner issue is the re-calibration of AF members upon their return to “normal life” with significant others.

Especially relevant checklists included in Section 5 of the *Leader Guide* website are labeled: Pre-deployment, Deployment, and Post-Deployment. The lists include pertinent actions and agencies, as well as symptoms of specific stress indicators. While nothing substitutes for personal contacts with the supporting arms (e.g. chaplain, Life Skills, etc.) this site is a great help for many who have little familiarity with all the trained personnel at their disposal.

There remains one more, pivotal, military-cultural problem: Perception of weakness if we seek help. To this end, it's suggested that *mandatory* pre- and post-deployment personnel assessments be made through either the Life Skills or Chaplain support arms, as part of the out-and in-processing procedure. That a certified chaplain or mental health professional see the member, and if possible, the member and their families.

There is an important opportunity to remove the stigma around seeking support for, if you will, heartaches, not just body-aches. If your body hurts, no one quibbles about you seeking out the doctor or physician's assistant. Or the dentist for a toothache. Isn't it time to simply admit when we need encouragement, redirection, revalidation or other sorts of spiritual-side support? Or admit that we don't know what we need, but things “Just aren't okay right now.”

Making whole-person assessments (not just inquiring about fruit and vegetable intake) a requirement, will be a vital first step in changing our current culture of reluctance around seeking support from Life Skills and Chaplains.

Summarizing and the Road Ahead

The argument that leaders have a responsibility to be aware of the spiritual in human relationships may or may not be compelling to the reader, even now. So in an effort to summarize the various elements in a slightly different way, a conference paper is cited, which is now a chapter in a new book on Organizational Ethics.

We begin with “spirituality.” Although spirituality is a popular term today, its meaning varies greatly and is often vague. The ambiguity of “spirituality” comes in good part from multiple meanings of its root, “spirit.” Two meanings are especially relevant. One meaning of spirit is God, the Great Spirit. So frequently people use spirituality to refer to their relation with God or, more generically, the Sacred or Transcendent. A second meaning of spirit refers to the human capacity to transcend immediate circumstances and search for meaning in life. To be spiritual is to exercise the capacity and affirm some over-all meaning, whether it includes belief in a transcendent reality or not. Spirituality is then the deliberate endeavor to live out this meaning in one's existence.¹⁹

We see a broad continuum from relationship to Deity to simply searching for meaning in life. But, these authors make a compelling case that there is an element of spirituality in organizations whether *acknowledged* or not.

First, we should recall that the business world is not spiritually neutral. . . spiritualities of materialism and success are already there, and they have tremendous power to entice and coerce. Second, whether or not one recognizes it, a leader's spirituality and values fundamentally affect his/her leadership. Our character is shaped by our commitments, what we value. . . Our scale of values influence our perception, what we notice. . . Our values also form our motivation. What energizes us? What moves us to action and keeps us going when there are difficulties? . . . Our values also have a powerful bearing on our choices. While circumstances generally put constraints on our decisions, our choices inevitably reflect in some measure what matters most to us.

Leaders at all levels must respond to other people when the leader and the others are at their best and their worst. Leaders must make choices whether circumstances are favorable or unfavorable. All this frequently happens when there is an insufficient supply of information, time, resources.

It is easy to react on the spur of the moment, to get caught up in the present whirlwind. In the midst of this complexity an openly declared spirituality can add consistency to one's leadership in several ways. In times of great pressure and fast moving events, the intentional practices of one's spirituality may help the leader stay in touch with his/her deepest values, gain a broader perspective, and tap a deeper source of strength.²⁰

This summary captures what we learned from our chaplain at the Baghdad International Airport, and what we already believe about how our Air Force Core values operate. So what's the uniqueness here?

This paper names that part of a person that is not readily apparent, and is issuing a call for leaders to take their responsibility for the welfare of their followers a vital, perhaps life-saving, step higher.

As the sad statistics are showing, we've already missed the opportunity to adequately reach out and care for too many honorable American warriors. The responsibility and privilege to turn it around lies with each of us.

Notes

11. Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 53.

12. Frederick C. Mish, ed., *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dict.*, 10th ed. (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2001), 1222.

13. Roger Lewin and Birute Regine, *The Soul at Work* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 26.
14. See sociologist Morris Massey's work on Significant Emotional Events and their impact on (re) development of values and beliefs.
15. ACSC major, Class of 2004
16. Burns, Robert, *Army Survey: Mental Health Support for Troop in Iraq is Lacking*, The Associate Press, 26 Mar 2004.
17. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Ed., 2001, 985.
18. Corrine Ware, *Discover Your Spiritual Type* (Bethesda: Alban Institute, 2000), 10.
19. Gardner, Ibid. 53.
110. Gardner, Ibid. 55.
111. Lewin, Ibid. 299-300.
112. Ware, Ibid. 13.
113. Ware, Ibid. 12-13.
114. Lewin, Ibid. 329-330.
115. Lewin, Ibid. 27.
116. A great debt is owed to Major (CH) Paul Sherouse, Maxwell AFB, AL, for generously sharing these anecdotes.
117. A great debt is owed to Lt Col Marlin K. Moore, PhD (BSC), Clinical Health Psychologist at Dyess AFB, TX, for his experienced guidance here.
118. <https://www.afms.mil/afsp/afsp/products/default.htm>
119. Pave, Moses, Ed., *Spiritual Intelligences at Work: Meaning, Metaphor, and Moral. Research in Ethical Issues in Organizations*, Vol. 5, New York, Elsevier, 2004, 6.
120. Pave, Ibid. 15-17.

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