Character into Action

How Officers Demonstrate Strengths with Transformational Leadership

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Society today is both bewildered and tarnished by major lapses in character that cause serious moral and psychological harm to people. Every day the news media bombards us with accounts of ethical scandals, distortions of the truth, and tragic failures of humanity to reach its potential for excellence and prosperity. Such accounts include corporate manipulation of financial reports despite legislation and international standards to prevent it, pervasive cultures of sexual harassment (e.g., Harvey Weinstein, 21st Century Fox, the Miss America pageant), child abuse by clergy and university coaches (e.g., Jerry Sandusky at Penn State), racists

seeking to further divide society, inhuman treatment of customers by airlines, distribution of fake news in the media, data breaches at companies such as Equifax, spinning of false narratives by politicians, and an inability of political parties to collaborate for the collective good of the nation. Unfortunately, these examples are not only limited to corporate and political sectors but also extend into the US military with accounts of mismanagement of sexual assault prevention and response at the USAFA in 2017, Army (USA) Maj Gen Joseph Harrington's racy texts sent to the wife of an enlisted soldier, and the sanctioning of more than 500 US military officers for ethical lapses since 2013.[1] Such occurrences mock military honor codes that espouse time-honored core values that are supposed to create ethical climates in military institutions. They also degrade the collective character of the very institutions in which citizens place their trust for the global defense of our civilization.

The US military has taken action to create new opportunities for military leaders to enact core values of their institutions with their innate character strengths and leadership behaviors. For example, the USAF has invested $1.6 million in providing Green Dot training for Airmen to decrease interpersonal violence in the service. The Green Dot training regimen addresses ethical issues such as sexual assault, abuse, family violence, and suicide.[2] Such initiatives pose new opportunities for military leaders to put their character strengths into action to empower their subordinates so they can successfully achieve their missions in moral and psychologically positive ways. Some leaders, like General Harrington, put the dark side of their character on public display, and in doing so, deface the core values of military institutions and destroy the trust of those in the profession of arms and the citizens they take an oath to protect. Others, like USAF Lt Gen Steven Kwast and USA Maj Gen John Gronski, work hard every day to emphasize, role-model, and teach the aspects of character that reflect Air Force and Army Core Values through their leadership behaviors. In doing so, they strive to develop the full potential of servicemembers who are knowledgeable in the art of war and profession of arms.[3] In this article, we show that the full development of military members in ethical ways requires officers to display transformational leadership that demonstrates relevant aspects of character to others while inspiring, modeling ethics, sparking innovation, and developing the talents and strengths of subordinates.

The reported events we present below are based on the results of focus group discussions with 120 officers serving the USAF, other services, DOD civilians, and international allied forces attending a leadership course at Maxwell AFB, Alabama in 2017. These officers provided accounts of how they infuse aspects of their character into their leadership in military functions, including flight operations, acquisitions, logistics, information technology support, financial and legal services, and special investigations. Important leadership development lessons drawn from these events are then provided.

Character Transmission through Leadership Behavior

In recent years, scholars and practitioners have shifted their attention to character-based leadership processes that describe how leaders can raise the level of moral,

psychological, physical, and spiritual development of subordinates, and thus, build strong ethical climates in organizations. The focus of this interest is on character strengths or dispositions "to act, desire, and feel that involve the exercise of judgment and lead to recognizable human excellence or instance of human flourishing."[4] In other words, character strengths represent the absolute best in humanity and reflect the virtues, or moral excellence, that both Eastern and Western philosophers and theologians first advocated centuries ago. For example, the Gallup Organization, a popular management consulting firm, developed an assessment tool to measure a unique set of 34 character strengths sorted into strategic thinking, executing, influencing, and relationship building capabilities.[5]

Scholars have established a more streamlined research-based classification of 24 such character strengths sorted into six virtues: (1) wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, and perspective); (2) courage (bravery, integrity, persistence, and vitality); (3) humanity (love, kindness, and social intelligence); (4) justice (citizenship, fairness, and leadership); (5) temperance (self-control, prudence, forgiveness, and humility); and (6) transcendence (spirituality, hope, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, and humor).[6] Research has determined that each of these character strengths is associated with beneficial psychological, physical, spiritual, and/or organizational outcomes.[7] For example, previous research on corporate executives and middle managers conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership has found the character strengths of integrity, bravery, and social intelligence to predict managerial effectiveness as rated by corporate board members and top executives.[8] Other research has found self-control related to enhanced relationships and interpersonal skills, optimal emotional responses to difficult situations, the performance of desired behaviors, and inhibition of undesired behaviors.[9] Bravery, social intelligence, integrity, and self-control also reflect core military values that we now define and describe.

Bravery can be defined as "not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it."[10] This definition emphasizes a professional moral courage that extends beyond physical courage and involves standing up for what is right in one's job and personal life. The USA uses the label of "personal courage" to represent bravery in its Seven Army Core Values that highlight the importance of fearlessness and valor for successful mission accomplishment.[11] In terms of the USAF's Core Value of "integrity first," such forms of courage are required to take "necessary personal or professional risks, make decisions that may be unpopular, and admit our mistakes."[12]

Social intelligence can be defined as "being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick."[13] Among the Seven Army Core Values is *respect* for self and other human beings, which entails knowledge and appreciation of the people and cultural differences within the area of operations.[14] The USAF's Core Value of "service before self" alludes to social intelligence in its requirement of "treating others with dignity and valuing them as individuals." Social intelligence allows for a greater understanding of diverse Airmen and their unique personal characteristics gained through more skilled social interactions.[15]

Integrity can be defined as "speaking the truth but more broadly as presenting oneself in a genuine way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions."[16] Integrity entails both authenticity and honesty in one's words and actions. It also refers to the alignment between one's words and actions, and promise-keeping. Being truthful, sincere, and transparent builds the trust that bonds all human relationships. The USA identifies integrity among its Seven Army Core Values, defining it as doing the right thing, even when no one is looking.[17] Similarly, the USAF lists "integrity first" among its core values and requires the honesty of Airmen whose words and reports must be unquestionable and accurate.[18]

Self-control can be defined as "regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions."[19] Scholars have considered self-control to be "the master virtue" that regulates when individuals use or override their natural or predisposed traits, think about or desire certain things, express or recognize emotions in self and others, and behave in certain ways to make a point or enact their values.[20] As such, self-control serves a regulatory function regarding who we are (our traits), what we feel (our emotions), what we think (our cognition), and what we do (our behaviors). This self-regulatory function is essential to military leadership as reflected in the Seven Core Army Values, particularly the value of honor that requires living up to the Army values and developing the *habit* of carrying them out in all aspects of life.[21] Self-control is essential to the demonstration of all three USAF Core Values. Putting "integrity first" requires Airmen to habitually control their impulses and act ethically. Modeling "service before self" requires Airmen to have the discipline to follow regulations and be self-controlled regarding the beliefs, authority, and diversity of others. Enacting "excellence in all we do" requires discipline and commitment to a life of restraint and continual growth.[22]

Simply possessing one or more of these character strengths does not ensure that an officer will display character-based leadership. Good leadership, plain and simple, is about influencing subordinates and others in a positive way. What officers say and do are important forms of influence that pique the attention of subordinates. To the extent that "leadership is in the eye of the beholder,"[23] this influence process suggests that leaders' character strengths must be transmitted (i.e., manifested) through their behaviors, and these behaviors must be properly recognized and interpreted by subordinates. Just as a radio signal is sent via a transmitter and picked up by a radio receiver, research suggests that leaders signal their character strengths and core values with their words and behaviors that are perceived by subordinates who are influenced by them.[24] Without proper reception or perception by the intended audience, namely radio listeners or subordinates, transmissions cannot have their expected influence on their audience.

More than four decades of research has found transformational leadership to be most effective in influencing the performance and development of subordinates in corporate, military, educational, and religious organizations all over the world.[25] Training and educational programs in transformational leadership have been commonly delivered in military services such as the USA and USAF. Transformational leadership entails four behaviors: *inspirational motivation*—inspiring collective action through the articulation of an evocative vision; *idealized influence*—modeling high levels of ethics and performance; *intellectual stimulation*—challenging thinking

processes through the questioning of assumptions and consideration of different perspectives; and *individualized consideration*—coaching and mentoring subordinates while recognizing and appreciating their unique differences. These behaviors build trust among subordinates, empower them to work effectively on missions that require collective action, and enhance their performance and satisfaction with the leader.[26] For example, Gen Lori J. Robinson's extraordinary influence of United States Northern Command and the North American Aerospace Defense Command has inspired thousands of Airmen. Brig Gen Robin Olds' intrepid actions as a "triple-ace" fighter pilot in World War II and Vietnam motivated many aspiring pilots. Col John R. Boyd's ingenious air combat tactics highly influenced military strategies. Lt Gen William H. Tunner's relentless dedication to reduce deadly accident rates for his military airlift crews saved many lives.[27] Such examples demonstrate the power of these leader behaviors.

Research suggests that the transmission of the character strengths of bravery, social intelligence, integrity, and self-control can be accomplished through the display of the behaviors associated with transformational leadership. Based on this research, we expect bravery to be transmitted through the display of idealized influence and intellectual stimulation behaviors. Bravery enables leaders to act consistently with their core values and beliefs and inspires others to also meet organizational expectations. Bravery gets subordinates to rethink their assumptions about what they stand for and are willing to sacrifice for the good of the organization.[28]

We expect social intelligence to be transmitted through the display of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration behaviors. Social intelligence allows leaders to more effectively understand the motives and feelings of subordinates and better identify and develop subordinates' talents. When subordinates see they are being recognized and developed, they become inspired to work harder toward collective goals. A keen understanding of the dynamics of organizational politics can also allow a leader to better model the organizational values and personify high-performance standards that's expected of all organizational members.[29]

We expect integrity to be transmitted through the display of idealized influence behavior. Integrity involves both honesty and authenticity. Integrity requires the moral imperatives of speaking the truth and holding oneself accountable for one's actions. To the extent that idealized influence reflects the highest moral standards such as being honest and true to oneself and others, leaders' integrity can be manifested to subordinates through the display of idealized influence.[30]

Finally, we expect self-control to be displayed through the idealized influence and intellectual stimulation behaviors. Self-control involves the accurate interpretation of events and feedback from others, tempered responses to one's impulses, thoughts, and emotions stemming from them, and adjustments to one's behavior to meet societal expectations. Tempered responses to personal characteristics involve cognitive processes of rethinking one's responses and psychological states, often associated with intellectual stimulation. Behavioral adjustments that meet societal expectations are required to maintain one's role model status, which idealized influence strives to achieve.[31] We now describe a test of our expectations.

Evidence from Operational Experiences

As part of a leadership course at Maxwell AFB, 120 officers from the USAF, other services, DOD civilians, and international allied forces participated in optional guided discussions regarding their display of the character strengths of bravery, social intelligence, integrity and self-control. The officers (grouped in 10 class sections of approximately 12 students) were asked by the section instructor (1) how often they talk about or demonstrate each character strength with their subordinates during military operations, (2) how they do this, and (3) what happens as a result. The instructors responded to each participant's focus group event comment, representing an *event* for this study, with a brief summary to ensure that they understood the essence of the event but did not conduct "member-checking" per se, which is a limitation of this study. The instructors then recorded the event responses onto written transcripts which were subsequently coded by two graduate students to assess the extent to which the character strength is displayed through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and/or individualized consideration behavior. Any coding differences were reconciled by the graduate students under the supervision of the first author. The results of these analyses are summarized in tables 1–4, which display the reported events associated with the transformational leadership behaviors of this study's population of 120 officers for the character strengths of bravery, social intelligence, integrity, and self-control, respectively.

The Display of Bravery

Results summarized in table 1 indicate that bravery manifests primarily through officers' display of idealized influence and intellectual stimulation behaviors. As illustrated by events B1 and B3, idealized influence allows officers to act bravely by standing up for high standards of performance and holding discussions about ethics despite potential career risks or current practices that ignore ethical considerations. Idealized influence also allows officers to demonstrate bravery by highlighting important espoused institutional values (ethics) and relating them to actions not currently enacted within the officers' unit, as shown in events B2, B6, and B8. Perhaps most importantly, idealized influence supports the modeling of bravery so that subordinates can learn how to enact bravery by observing it displayed by their commanding officers, as shown in events B5 and B13.

Table 1. Bravery character strength events and manifestation through transformational leadership behavior

	Event	Transformational leadership behavior			
		Idealized influence	Inspirational motivation	Intellectual stimulation	Individualized consideration
B1	An Airman spoke up to commander whose plan seemed to be ineffective and bad for others in unit, despite threat to his career advancement. This created consternation for the duration of the mission.	Standing up for high standards			Shows concern for others
B2	A pilot refused to stop providing watch over a ground unit. He polled aircrew and then told command and control agency they would not come off of their over-watch mission.	Using personal ethics to decide on mission	Acting decisively with team input and collaboration		
B3	An Airman challenged culture that does not discuss or consider bravery topics except in professional military education. He suggested bringing up such topics in daily briefings.	Standing up for ethical discourse		Questioning of cultural values	
B4	An Airman noted that being tactically brave is easier than being strategically brave by questioning and/or revising strategy models or business models.			Questioning assumptions	
B5	A squadron commander climbs into jet and leads four aircraft on a risky mission inside of a surface-to-air threat.	Modeling of bravery			
B6	A junior officer often talks to janitors in the hallway to demonstrate the recognition of human dignity and respect despite social perception by others.	Highlights important ethical values			Shows concern for others
B7	In North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operations or other big exercises, an officer sometimes talks to subordinates about bravery because bravery is expected. Instead, he spends his time talking about safety, humility, and teamwork.	Reinforces core values through team discussions			

Table 1 continued

	Event	Transformational leadership behavior			
		Idealized influence	*Inspirational motivation*	*Intellectual stimulation*	*Individualized consideration*
B8	A NATO maintenance officer talked about being brave by making an informed decision and letting time determine if it was right.	Linked core value to decision-making action		Emphasized rationality for decision-making	
B9	A NATO maintenance officer noted that his organization was not always sure about how their actions would fit in with other agencies in the future so he engaged others to work together.		Consideration of bigger picture and overall mission		
B10	A NATO maintenance officer stated that the ambiguous environment allowed for second guessing at many organizational levels and across unit, which called for bravery.			Questioning assumptions	
B11	A NATO maintenance officer stated impact of their decisions was widely debatable due to timing of the end goal shifting further away. This required making difficult decisions based on the information they had to create a common vision. They needed to be brave enough to open themselves to ridicule and put themselves in a very vulnerable situation.		Common vision inspires team synergy	Emphasized rationality and evidence-based decision-making	
B12	On a weekly basis, a USAF flight instructor verbally connected bravery to students' call to fly rescue helicopters into combat and taught skills necessary to free their mind for the difficult mission conditions by "putting away fear."		Reiteration of mission/vision with bravery discussion	Thinking differently to put away fear	
B13	A USAF instructor demonstrated contextual nature of bravery by making tough decisions, delivering bad news, and assuming risks in ambiguous situations. He noted that "bravery is contagious much like a flame. Bravery inspires others to act in brave ways, even when courage is lacking."	Modeling bravery and spreading it through social learning			
	Event count (percentage)	8 (40%)	4 (20%)	6 (30%)	2 (10%)

As expected, intellectual stimulation appears to allow officers' bravery to manifest through the questioning of assumptions and cultural values that may no longer be appropriate (e.g., looking out for oneself in a collectivistic culture), as shown in events B3, B4, and B10. Bravery is also demonstrated through intellectual stimulation when officers emphasize rationality and evidence-based decision-making (events B8 and B11) instead of relying on emotions, group consensus, or political considerations. Furthermore, intellectual stimulation helps officers demonstrate bravery to their subordinates by getting them to think differently about the situations they face so that they can put aside fear and take action (event B12). Putting aside fear requires thinking differently about one's preparedness and confidence and reassessing the degree of danger or risk involved in an action. Shifting the focus of one's thoughts from fear to one's training, abilities, and experiences can promote a sense of readiness and allay fear.[32]

While not as prevalent as idealized influence and intellectual stimulation, officers commented that inspirational motivation and individualized consideration can also support the manifestation of bravery. Inspirational motivation promotes collective input for making tough decisions (event B2) and visioning processes that motivate subordinates to work toward a common goal (events B9, B11, and B12). Whereas we expected inspirational motivation to be a primary transmission mechanism for bravery, it was not mentioned by officers as frequently as idealized influence. We did not expect individualized consideration to play a role in the manifestation of bravery, but idealized influence appears to sometimes support brave actions that show concern for the best interests and dignity of others despite cultural or social norms that suggest such behaviors are not expedient or often practiced by others (events B1 and B6).

The Display of Social Intelligence

Results summarized in table 2 indicate that social intelligence manifests through a mix of officers' display of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation behaviors. As expected, idealized influence allows officers to set aside personal interests for the good of the unit (event SI3), thus demonstrating a socially intelligent focus on others, an interdependency among team members, and making personal sacrifices that demonstrate the core military value of "service before self." Idealized influence also allows officers to model social intelligence by intervening in conversations that aggravate rather than inspire others (event SI4) and managing subordinate's social infractions by holding them accountable for their words and actions and teaching them how to interact properly with others (events SI5 and SI7).

Table 2. Social intelligence character strength events and manifestation through transformational leadership behavior

	Event	Transformational leadership behavior			
		Idealized influence	*Inspirational motivation*	*Intellectual stimulation*	*Individualized consideration*
SI1	An Airman seeks commitment from members of group when trying to institute cultural change.		Building team consensus		
SI2	A company grade officer interacts with peers in other career fields to get things done without higher levels of command.		Building team consensus	Seeking different perspectives	
SI3	A USAF exchange officer noted that US society is individualistic, "sets up walls," and glorifies "Rambo." In contrast, Eastern cultures are more open to consensus and work like "a group of detectives solving a crime."	Setting aside personal interests for good of the team	Building team consensus	Solving problems from different perspectives	
SI4	An instructor at a military institution facilitated a discussion on domestic politics that slipped from respective to abusive attacks on persons instead of positions. He quickly stepped into the conversation to refocus the class on the idea of attacking policies, strategies, theories, or ideas—not the people who hold them. "By intervening, I was attempting to model my expectations of social intelligence as a leader."	Modeling of social intelligence		Encouraging rationality in discussions and thinking at a deeper level via perspective-taking	
SI5	An Airman rarely talks about social skills in his community, but he once overheard a colleague speaking poorly about a politician. He told the colleague "not to talk this way in public" because "military can only talk about politics in a private environment."	Pointing out inconsistency of colleague's action with cultural values			

Table 2 continued

	Event	Idealized influence	Inspirational motivation	Intellectual stimulation	Individualized consideration
		Transformational leadership behavior			
SI6	A NATO maintenance officer created a "shared identity as a maintainer as the common point from which we could then relate the policies, limitations and aspirations of the organization. It gave us a reference point to discuss critical issues from, despite our social and cultural differences."		Building a shared identity for common vision and collective action		Appreciating cultural differences and viewpoints
SI7	A USAF flight instructor discusses social awareness, tact, trust, and emotional intelligence for pilots' career progression.	Talks about trust and tact			Appreciation of diversity
SI8	An Airman pulled subordinates aside to say, "Did you see how uncomfortable she appeared when you said 'x'. . ." or "I got the feeling he wasn't understanding your intent..."			Provides feedback for rethinking words and actions	
	Event count (percentage)	4 (28%)	4 (28%)	4 (28%)	2 (16%)

As expected, inspirational motivation can allow officers to showcase their social intelligence by building team consensus in complex situations that involve multiple functional areas of expertise and diverse cultural backgrounds (events SI1, SI2, and SI3). Inspirational motivation also creates a shared collective identity that values all members of the team so that they can take action to achieve a vision they all embrace (event SI6). Socially intelligent leaders work to build such visions in ways that allow them to cooperate well with team members working toward the vision.[33]

To the extent that social intelligence helps officers get along with and influence a variety of subordinates, intellectual stimulation provides a means for officers to seek different perspectives from their subordinates and use these perspectives to solve old problems in new ways (events SI2, SI3, and SI4). The questioning of assumptions that intellectual stimulation encourages allowed the Airman, described in event SI8, to provide constructive feedback to her subordinates so that they could rethink their inappropriate words and actions, and learn from their mistakes. Contrary to our expectations, intellectual stimulation was mentioned more often than individualized consideration by officers as the means to manifest social intelligence.

The Display of Integrity

As expected, results summarized in table 3 indicate that integrity manifests primarily through officers' display of idealized influence behaviors. Idealized influence allows officers to discuss with subordinates the importance of ethical values, which

are an integral part of military culture, as illustrated by events I5, I6, I7, and I9. Several other events (I2, I7, I8, and I9) show that idealized influence also allows officers to model integrity for subordinates, so they can learn how this important core military value is practiced. Event I3 illustrates another important form of idealized influence; it allows for the managing of the integrity of others; namely, acting on and enforcing ethical regulations and holding subordinates accountable for their legal and/or ethical breaches.

Table 3. Integrity character strength events and manifestation through transformational leadership behavior

| | Event | *Transformational leadership behavior* | | | |
		Idealized influence	*Inspirational motivation*	*Intellectual stimulation*	*Individualized consideration*
I1	A judge advocate general got her community to consider how they are handling ethics through rule enforcement and personal actions. She wanted them to internalize rules and execute them based on their personal and USAF ethics.	Internalization and advocating of ethical values			
I2	An officer's superior commanded him to send a colleague to a staff position who didn't meet the criteria. He refused but then referred back to orders given by a higher superior. He then briefed the higher superior who backed him.	Standing by rules and criteria models integrity			
I3	A chaplain had to fire a 70-year-old church organist turned thief who worked there for 30 years. The firing caused conflict in the unit because she publicly badmouthed his leadership.	Acted on and enforced ethical values			
I4	A fighter pilot noted that integrity is highly ranked in his culture. However, it is difficult to practice due to intense competition among pilots within and between fighter aircraft type units. He communicated with the groups to help them understand each other and maintain squadron integrity.		Set aside competition to foster team synergy and shared vision		Listening to team members' intentions to better understand them
I5	A leadership trainer often refers back to integrity as a core value when mentoring junior officers and enlisted Airmen.	Discussion of ethical values			

Table 3 continued

Transformational leadership behavior

Event	Idealized influence	Inspirational motivation	Intellectual stimulation	Individualized consideration
I6 An Airman sometimes talks about integrity and how hard it is to regain once lost for dishonesty. He emphasizes being empathetic regarding those who have made mistakes within the military culture.	Discussion of ethical values			Listening to team members' intentions for more effective understanding
I7 A NATO maintenance officer pointed out cross-cultural difficulties with integrity as individual ethics differ, but many commonalities exist, also. The officer spoke about individual integrity serving the greater good of the entire organization by building a sound and thorough maintenance organization.	Discussion and modeling of ethical values	Emphasis of working together to achieve a common purpose		
I8 A flight officer led by example. "I discussed and modeled integrity on every flight. . . . There were a few methods, but the most prevalent were adherence to flight rules and standards, taking ownership of general knowledge about the aircraft and associated rules, and, most importantly, I owned my mistakes when I made them."	Modeling of ethical values and taking pride in one's knowledge and competence		Emphasized rationality and analyzing mistakes to learn from them	
I9 A leadership instructor noted that integrity is "doing what is right, even when no one is looking. Every day, leaders model integrity in both obvious and not-too-obvious ways. Transparency and honesty are obvious ways to demonstrate integrity, but self-control is also linked to demonstrations of integrity (e.g., a full stop at stop sign when no other cars are around). What I have found in most cases is that people are around and watching even when you think they are not. They see your actions, and as a result, learn how to act in situations."	Discussion and modeling of ethical values and teaching them through social learning			
Event count (percentage)	8 (61%)	2 (16%)	1 (7%)	2 (16%)

While not nearly as prevalent as idealized influence, both inspirational motivation and individualized consideration can be used to showcase integrity. By promoting team synergy, collective action, and a shared vision, officers who use inspirational motivation get subordinates to see integrity as the common-core value that brings team members together and forges collective action (events I4 and I7). By empathizing with team members who have experienced an ethical failure, officers who use individualized consideration are able to listen to subordinates' intentions and better understand them before teaching them how not to repeat their mistakes, as suggested in events I4 and I6.

The Display of Self-Control

Results summarized in table 4 indicate that self-control manifests primarily through officers' display of intellectual stimulation behaviors. As expected, intellectual stimulation allows officers to question their underlying assumptions about what they feel, think about, react to, and how they are predisposed to act, as illustrated in events SC1, SC2, SC4, SC7, and SC8. These events also show that officers' self-control manifested through intellectual stimulation supports cognitive processes that encourage rationality and awareness of how emotions influence thinking, and vice versa. Such self-awareness can bolster future self-regulation of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.[34]

Table 4. Self-control character strength events and manifestation through transformational leadership behavior

	Event	Transformational leadership behavior			
		Idealized influence	Inspirational motivation	Intellectual stimulation	Individualized consideration
SC1	An officer's second-in-command put out information that was not in line with his superior's thinking. The officer had to restrain himself from overriding the order due to his assessment of the commander's lack of perspective.			Questioning of assumptions and perspective-taking	
SC2	A leadership instructor considered a popular book on willpower to change his perspective on life. He sent copies of the book to his close colleagues. He also kept snacks stocked and gave them to students to boost glucose levels and promote improved thinking and willpower.		Sharing enthusiasm and positive knowledge with others	Promoted rationality and thinking effectiveness	Shows concern for others

Table 4 continued

		Transformational leadership behavior			
	Event	*Idealized influence*	*Inspirational motivation*	*Intellectual stimulation*	*Individualized consideration*
SC3	An Airman recognizes when he is using his willpower forcefully because he believes that pushing his team too hard can break the institution's pacing.				Shows concern for others
SC4	A leadership instructor taps his self-control through stoicism and self-awareness. "A stoic leader is even-keeled; and does not allow the highs or lows to drive impulsive behavior. Impulsive behavior could be an overabundance of caution, or an excessive tolerance of risk. Stoic leaders stay the course. Stoicism is a habit of behavior that is molded through habits of mind. When someone is able to recognize their actions or words are out of line with what they want their character to be," they can act more deliberately. Self-aware leaders recognize the stimulus that caused a response in them. Then they can plan how they will react next time the stimulus is encountered to improve their self-control.	Modeling of aspects of emotional intelligence		Promoted rationality and seeing connection between cognition and emotions	
SC5	An officer felt he typically maintains high self-control because he proactively works to keep things under control. At other times, when he is pressed for time, the result is better if he doesn't react by first impression in a complex situation. "For more self-control, it is better to step back and make better decisions when being relaxed and with more data."			Seeking different perspectives beyond first impressions and evidence-based decision-making	
SC6	A NATO officer used self-control daily to deal with continual delays and changes in mission and priorities with his unit. "Self-regulation became required for the ability to endure. . . . It was extremely difficult to maintain professionalism when you were asked to shift attention. . . . I had to look people in the eye and ask them to shift their focus in a new direction and shelf the project that had once been so vital. . . . At times, self-control created an unemotional scripted message that was transmission of our new marching orders without the belief that they were relevant in anyway. It took on an almost disingenuous tone which was almost as bad as no self-regulation at all."	Consideration of ethical values of authenticity and truthfulness	Shifting team priorities and mission through self-controlled articulation redirects their focus		

Table 4 continued

Transformational leadership behavior

Event		Idealized influence	Inspirational motivation	Intellectual stimulation	Individualized consideration
SC7	An Airman taps his self-control daily but is challenged by it because of initial negative reactions and emotions. "I use self-reflecting questions to level my emotion. . . and I think about the root causes of my reactions or the situation to get a better response. The result: I still lose my temper, judge things as unfair, complain, my heart races, and I lose time and energy to that process. . . but I also become more aware, slowdown that process, and reduce my anger or frustration."			Rationality shifts emotions from negative to positive and prompts learning from emotional reactions	
SC8	A USAF instructor uses self-control daily to regulate her thoughts, emotions, and strengths. The more she uses it, the easier it is to automatically self-regulate. "It's like a muscle—use it and it gets stronger; don't use it and it atrophies."	Self-control maintains ethical standards for regulating other strengths		Self-regulation fosters questioning of one's behavior	
	Event count (percentage)	3 (23%)	2 (15%)	6 (47%)	2 (15%)

   Event SC5 illustrates an important aspect of officers' self-control is displayed through intellectual stimulation. Instead of making rash comments or decisions, self-control appears to allow officers to slow down their decision-making processes and seek different perspectives beyond their first impressions. This slowing down of thinking processes can allow them to make more informed decisions and have more controlled reactions to events.[35] The seeking of different perspectives helps officers not to act based on first impressions or thoughts in complex situations. It also slows down the decision-making process so that more information can be gathered and analyzed. Decisions made with more information in a careful and thoughtful manner tend to be more effective than those made based on first impressions or stereotypes.[36]

   Contrary to expectations, idealized influence was not mentioned by officers as frequently as intellectual stimulation as playing a primary role in the manifestation of self-control. However, several events alluded to idealized influence as allowing for the modeling of emotional control and regulation required of military officers (event SC4), considering the ethical values of authenticity and truthfulness (event SC6), and maintaining standards regarding the regulation and control of other character strengths (event SC8). These events provide partial support for idealized influence aiding in the manifestation of self-control.

Recommendations

Based on the results of our analysis of the events provided by military officers, we offer several recommendations for leaders interested in putting their character into action. First, leaders should use idealized influence to project images of bravery, social intelligence, and integrity to their subordinates. Idealized influence, which reflects the moral/ethical component of transformational leadership, was most pervasive among the four transformational leadership behaviors in reflecting the character strengths considered in this article. Its pervasiveness suggests usefulness across the many situations that demand the manifestation of bravery, social intelligence, and integrity in military settings. Learning how to role-model the core values of the institution, encouraging others to consider ethics in their actions and decision-making, enforcing compliance with ethical standards, and holding oneself up to high performance and ethical standards are effective ways to bolster one's idealized influence.[37]

Second, intellectual stimulation is a useful means for leaders to project images of bravery, social intelligence, and self-control to their subordinates. While idealized influence emphasizes the moral/ethical aspects of transformational leadership, intellectual stimulation focuses on the rational and cognitive aspects of transformational leadership. Military officers and the enlisted are problem-solvers by nature; they are frequently challenged to address ambiguous and complex issues facing them.[38] As such, we believe it is natural for them to respond positively to intellectually stimulating behaviors that showcase the character strengths of bravery, social intelligence, and self-control, as illustrated by the events provided in this article. To increase leaders' levels of intellectual stimulation, we advise them first to identify and work to remove roadblocks to intellectual stimulation such as negative attitudes toward creativity and innovation, institutional policies and practices that inhibit the adoption of new technologies, skepticism among subordinates, and self-doubts about their own creativity. Getting involved in the development and implementation of continuous improvement programs, leading brainstorming sessions, encouraging blue-sky thinking, and completing problem-solving and creativity training courses are also effective ways to enhance one's ability to intellectually stimulate subordinates.[39]

Third, leaders should not discount the importance of displaying inspirational motivation and individualized consideration since combinations of transformational leadership behaviors can also support the manifestations of the character strengths such as social intelligence. Accounts of officers' experiences suggest that inspirational motivation can help leaders to lessen any egocentric tendencies and better understand the interdependencies among team members and motivate collective action. Social intelligence represents the understanding of such interdependencies and knowing what it takes to motivate a diverse group of people in cultures with tricky organizational politics.[40] But through inspirational motivation, leaders can communicate this understanding to team members so they can work together to achieve their mission. Understanding how to motivate a group of people in a socially intelligent manner requires paying attention to their motives and feelings. Such attention to the needs of others can be achieved through individualized consideration.

As theologian and philosopher Fulton J. Sheen once wrote, "detachment from self is always the condition of attachment to others."[41]

For leaders to display higher levels of inspirational motivation, we encourage them to improve their strategic thinking skills through training or mentoring, be more optimistic regarding work projects, and study and practice using the rhetoric of charismatic leaders. Such rhetoric includes emotion-laden words, reference to core values of the institution, repetition of inspirational phrases, and rhythmic and enthusiastic delivery of speech passages. Leaders interested in learning to show more individualized consideration with their subordinates are advised to increase the amount of coaching and mentoring time they spend with their subordinates, pay attention to subordinates' personal situations and career goals, study the results of subordinates' personality and character strength assessments to learn about their unique traits and preferences, and place subordinates in positions where they can use and/or develop their own character strengths. These actions should individualize leader-subordinate relationships, build greater trust between them, increase the amount of information and resources shared between them, and ultimately increase the quality of their relationships and effectiveness.[42]

Finally, leaders should carefully ponder the idea of philosopher John Locke that "the discipline of desire is the background of character."[43] In other words, leaders need to pay particular attention to their level of self-control over their desires, predispositions, emotions, and actions. Self-control is considered to be the master virtue that regulates when they: (1) use or override their predisposed traits and character strengths, (2) think about or desire certain things, (3) express or recognize emotions in self and others, and (4) behave in certain ways to make a point or express themselves. In a related research study conducted with USAF captains and their subordinates and superiors, we found that the character strengths of integrity, empathy (a form of social intelligence), and professional moral courage (a form of bravery) were associated with leaders' ethical leadership, psychological well-being and performance effectiveness, but *only for those leaders with high levels of self-control*.[44] These results are consistent with observations made by an Airman who told us that she considers self-control to be "the moderator of all other character strengths. I have found that the more you practice self-control, the easier it is to automatically self-regulate and use your other strengths." Leaders interested in enhancing their self-control can do so by using it across as many life domains or situations as possible until it becomes habitual. As an Airman explained in event SC8, "It's like a muscle—use it and it gets stronger; don't use it and it atrophies," which is consistent with a large body of research.[45] Additional means to improve self-control include setting and working toward specific personal and professional goals, supplementing glucose intake during the day with snacks and candies, introducing exercise into the daily routine, and getting adequate amounts of sleep.[46]

Conclusion

We hope that our discussion of how character strengths can be transmitted through transformational leadership behaviors helps you to better understand how

to improve leadership effectiveness. The researched events, and lessons drawn from them, can provide a solid foundation for understanding how positive character development relates to the betterment of subordinates and organizational effectiveness. Applying these lessons to most of the situations you will face can guide your quest to put character into action which will help your organization flourish. ✪

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