

# Leadership Principles for the Successful Company Grade Officer

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As an Air Force officer, you will be in the company grades for more than half of a 20-year career. The leadership you develop as a company grade officer is analogous to the foundation of a building. The size and strength of a foundation will determine how large a structure you can build. To support a large structure, the foundation must be solid and reinforced. You must have this foundation in order to handle the responsibilities of being a leader in the Air Force.

The art of leadership is really a composite of 10 common-sense principles. Your relationship to these principles is comparable to your relationship to the law of gravity; you do not have to like them, understand them, or believe they exist; you just have to suffer the consequences if you violate them. Let's take a look at these principles that will help you create a strong foundation for your future success.

## Leaders Have a Positive Attitude

Your attitude determines your altitude. While this catchy phrase applies to flying, it also applies to life. Some of you might feel that ability or aptitude is the key to success, but it's not your aptitude or ability that determines your success; it's your attitude. Attitude is "knowledge charged" and it can be either positive or negative. While a positive attitude will allow you to soar with the eagles, a negative attitude will ultimately cause you to crash and burn. As a leader, you determine the attitude for your entire organization. Remember, no one wants to follow someone who is drowning. Be positive. You have a responsibility to look for the good, the silver lining, in all situations. Successful people look at potentially negative situations as opportunities to learn. A positive attitude can turn any negative situation into a positive one, giving your troops hope and encouragement. Henry Ford said, "If you think you can or you think you cannot, you're right." It's your choice; you actually choose your destiny. Do not be the person who, while telling the boss it cannot be done, gets interrupted by someone doing it. People are drawn to those with a positive attitude for leadership. Likewise, they are drawn to those with a negative attitude when they want sympathy. Your boss, peers, and subordinates will know more about you from your attitude than from your background or experience. As a leader, you must have a positive attitude. Never forget success is 98 percent attitude, 2 percent knowledge, and another 50 percent hard work.

## Leaders Have Goals

A goal starts out as a dream. Woodrow Wilson once said, "We grow great by dreams. All big men are dreamers. Before anything great is ever achieved, it is born in the mind of a dreamer." Whether you are talking about a cure for AIDS, a new supersonic engine, or setting the world record for the high jump, these are examples of someone with a dream. Add a date to that dream and now you have a goal. All leaders are goal-oriented. They have a vision as to where they want to end up and a timetable to get there. Do they always reach their goal? Of course not, but a goal has an interesting characteristic. It has a magnetic effect, pulling dreamers along the path of self-improvement even if they never reach their destination. To decide upon your goals, you start out with a dream. How do you get a dream? You surround yourself with dreamers!

You quit hanging around the naysayers, and find some achievers. Read books written by and about those who excelled in life and you will find they were all dreamers. Once you have a dream, protect it as if it were the most important thing in your life, because it is. Best-selling author Napoleon Hill said, "Whatever your mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve." Those who have a dream will lead those who don't. Thoreau said, "Dreams are the touchstones of our character." So if you want to be a leader, make sure you have a dream. Success is not an accident; it is a planned event.

## Leaders Discipline Themselves

Self-discipline is vital for success. First you find your dream, next you turn it into a goal. Now all you have to do is roll up your sleeves and get to work achieving that goal. In order to succeed at anything you have to motivate yourself to push toward your dream. It is not your boss's job, your spouse's task, or the government's responsibility to keep you motivated. As an officer, it is imperative to have self-discipline. This means holding yourself to a higher standard, staying in shape even if you don't like to work out, and watching how you look in uniform (fork-to-mouth discipline), just to name a few. We have a tendency to judge others by their actions, but ourselves by our intentions. This will not work for a leader. We must be our own best example. What you do speaks so loudly others can't hear what you are saying. Success is an inside job.

## **Leaders Encourage Teamwork**

“Teamwork makes the dream work.” As a leader, it is your job to encourage teamwork in your organization. TEAM stands for Together Everyone Accomplishes More, and it is part attitude and part structure. The attitude and structure must start with the leader. The entire organization must understand that it is a team, equal in importance and responsibility. The structure of the organization must allow different groups to work together, share resources, and most importantly, share the credit. Just as children learn from their parents, both good and bad, your organization will learn from you. If you don’t consider your own organization as part of the bigger team, willing to pitch in for the overall good, don’t be surprised when that same attitude becomes apparent within your organization. A rising tide raises all the ships. Teamwork is contagious! Make sure you are infected. True success in the Air Force is not a solo event.

## **Leaders Are Enthusiastic**

Enthusiasm attracts people to you. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, said, “Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come for miles to watch you burn.” The enthusiasm of a group is determined by the enthusiasm of the leader. Be enthusiastic as a leader. You cannot light a fire with a wet match! If you want to know why there isn’t any excitement in your organization, look in the mirror. You not only have to be enthusiastic, but you must look enthusiastic and speak enthusiastically. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” Success is something to be enthusiastic about!

## **Leaders Go the Extra Mile**

The difference between ordinary and extraordinary is just a little “extra.” If you want to stand out, if you want to be a leader, you don’t have to work twice as hard, just give 110 percent. There is very little traffic along that “extra mile.” H. Jackson Brown, author of the New York Times best-sellers, *Life’s Little Instruction Books*, said, “A racehorse that consistently runs just a second faster than another horse is worth millions of dollars more. Be willing to give that extra effort that separates the winner from the one in second place.” Leaders don’t look at the minimums; how little do I have to do or how early can I leave work? They look at maximums. My advice: don’t wait for the next job or more important tasking. Whatever you lay your hand to, give it all you’ve got. When the master retailer, J.C. Penney, was asked the key to success, he said, “Work half days, and it doesn’t matter if it is the first half or the second half.” Be prepared to work hard. Success is found along the extra mile.

## **Leaders Learn from Failure**

Failure is not the enemy of success; it is the teacher of success. We learn more from our defeats than from our victories. However, this will only happen when we view our setbacks

with this attitude. Henry Ford said, “Failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.” You must look at these defeats, setbacks, and potholes on the road to success as what they really are—opportunities to learn. Once you can do this, you’re on the road to success, realizing that failure is only a detour. No one wants to follow a leader who has never failed; such a leader can’t relate. Lloyd Jones said, “The man who tries to do something and fails is infinitely better than he who tries to do nothing and succeeds.” Hockey great Wayne Gretzky said it another way, “You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take.” Failure is not the worst thing in the world—the very worst is not to try. The fortress of success is built with blocks of failure.

## **Leaders Have a Mentor**

A smart person learns from his own mistakes; a wise person learns from the mistakes of others. You must learn from the mistakes of others; you can’t possibly live long enough to make them all yourself. Do you want to be first through a minefield or do you want to follow someone who has made it through? A mentor is someone who has navigated a minefield and thereby knows where to step and where not to step. He or she has made both good and bad decisions; you can learn from both. You start with the energy and excitement; they give you direction and focus. Finding a mentor is crucial. You must find someone who has gone where you want to go, whether in career, family, or anything else, and then ask for his or her guidance. There are many successful people who are willing to share their knowledge and experience. It is quite an honor to think someone wants to follow in your footsteps. Ask questions, seek counsel regularly, and take advice. Success is easiest learned from the lives of successful people.

## **Leaders Understand the Law of Sowing and Reaping**

You learned from parents, church, and the playground while you were growing up that what goes around comes around. So once you decide what it is you really want, learn to sow those seeds. If you want respect, then learn to sow the seeds of respect for others. If you want people to give 100 percent, then you must give 100 percent. Just as a farmer will never plant corn seed and get beans, you will never sow dishonesty and reap honesty. Too many times people hoard what it is they want, only to slowly lose it. Never eat your seeds. You must be willing to give away what it is you truly want. An organization gives back what it sees the leader giving. This can be time, commitment, and loyalty, or it can be laziness, sloppiness, and back stabbing. As the leader, you decide. What is it that you really want? Now, go give it away. To reap success, you must sow success.

## **Leaders Go on Faith**

The Bible defines faith as “the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen.” As a leader you must follow the above principles with the faith that they will bring about the desired results: better organization, improved morale, in-

creased productivity, and/or a promotion leading to more responsibility. You cannot dig up the seeds you have just planted to see if they are growing. Realize that all you can control is your attitude and your action; the rest is out of your hands. Faith allows you to do that. Elmer Towns, cofounder of Liberty University said, “All great leaders have one common spiritual gift—faith.” Faith also allows you to see what can be before it occurs: the potential of a subordinate, a smooth-running organization, or a completed project. With a vision produced by faith, you can inspire those around you. People like to follow those who know where they are going. Faith is that confidence. Success is in the mind before it is in the world.

### **Conclusion**

There is no skill involved, education required, or training needed to put the above principles into practice. It’s just a

decision backed up with action. A decision to have a positive attitude instead of a negative one, to have your own dreams as opposed to working for someone else’s dream, to encourage teamwork instead of individualism, and to be willing to go the extra mile and not say “that’s not my responsibility.” You must decide to discipline yourself or you will be at the mercy of someone who will. Learn from your failures but do not let them keep you from trying, and always be enthusiastic. Never let outside events, other people, or lack of will power dampen your enthusiasm! Decide to find a mentor; do not just “hope” you figure everything out yourself. Decide to give of your time, talents, and resources; you will reap what you sow. And finally, decide to step out on faith. Trust in these principles—a small decision that will change your career, your personal and professional relationships, and ultimately your life. From these you can build your foundation for success. Godspeed on your journey.