Be, Know, Do:

Forming character the West Point Way

Conventional wisdom says that by the time young people reach college, it's too late to change them. The U.S. Military Academy begs to differ. The civilian world can learn a lot from the way West Point instills values, shapes behaviors, and builds character.

by Scott Snook

In 1989 the world—my world—changed. The Berlin Wall came down, the Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War ended. Gone was the relatively stable and predictable bipolar world that had shaped American military identity for nearly half a century. At the time I was teaching the core course in leadership at West Point, and I recall watching CNN with cadets as celebrations broke out across Eastern Europe. All the while I wondered what this profound geopolitical event might mean for these young leaders and the institution charged with preparing them.

In large part as a result of this dramatic change, West Point embarked upon an intense institutional conversation that continues to this day. We questioned our basic assumptions and reexamined our very essence. In a world that had been remade virtually overnight, what was the purpose of the U.S. Military Academy, and how exactly should we go about meeting that obligation?

Our conversation reconfirmed for us that our purpose was to provide the nation with leaders of character. Those leaders initially served in the Army, of course; but in the long run, our graduates serve the nation as leaders of character in a variety of settings—in their communities, in business, and in nonprofit organizations. Our vision then became clear: to be one of the world's premier leader-development institutions.

Since then, the world has changed several times over. The most far-reaching and traumatic change, of course, arrived with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The world was suddenly a much more dangerous and uncertain place, with a different kind of enemy fighting a different kind of war. In addition, other, more recent crises have forced us to rethink our fundamental assumptions about some of society's most prominent institutions and leaders. Business continues to be rocked by scandal. The moral authority of Roman Catholic Church leaders has been severely eroded by their mishandling of allegations of clergy sex abuse. The legitimacy of the U.S. war against terrorism has been called into question by evidence suggesting that intelligence estimates were exaggerated to justify the invasion of Iraq.

Each alarming breakdown raises the question of failed leadership. Can we trust our leaders to act honestly, ethically, and in the best interests of society? Are they, in short, leaders of good character? And what, if anything, can be done to shape the next generation of leaders?

Those are the very questions that preoccupied us at West Point as we confronted the post–Cold War world. It was painful to address fundamental questions of institutional identity. But the exercise gave us a clearer sense of our role in society, a renewed appreciation for the importance of character, and some new ideas about how to develop leaders for the nation. I offer a few hard-won lessons here in the hope that leaders in other domains might learn from our experience.

Perishable Knowledge

For almost 200 years, our primary mechanism for developing leaders at the Academy was the rite of passage. This approach, known as the Plebe or Fourth-Class System, assumed that the best way to develop character was for freshmen ("plebes," short for "plebeians") to endure a year of hazing at the hands of the upper three classes. And indeed, surviving that experience might build character. But the system encouraged sophomoric and sometimes demeaning behavior on the part of upperclassmen. By supporting it, West Point was unofficially condoning an approach to leading that was inconsistent with Army values and clearly out of step with what would be required of its graduates in an increasingly volatile and complex world. Something had to change.

The Army already had a well-established leadership doctrine, built around three short words: **Be, Know,** and **Do.** There are certain things that a leader must **be,** certain things that she must **know,** and certain things that she must be able to **do.** Those three dimensions form the basis of the Military Academy's emerging leadership model.

We assessed ourselves in each of these areas and concluded that we were pretty confident about the Know and the Do, but not so sure about the Be. As a top-tier university, we felt that we had a pretty good idea about how to educate our cadets—we had a handle on Knowing. As for Doing, the Army is one of the world's most successful training institutions; we were equally confident in our ability to change people's behaviors. But the answers didn't come as quickly or with such clarity when it came to Being—the identities, character, world-views, and values of our cadets.

Knowledge and skills are important, but we are all much more than the sum of what we know and what we can do. In fact, knowledge and skills are largely perishable. What you learn today is gone tomorrow if you don't use it. And with the pace of change in our world today, much of what we teach today may be largely irrelevant tomorrow.

In the end, we realized that, as an institution, we cared deeply about the Be component of development. If we could get that piece right, we could teach our cadets to do anything. But just how should we go about shaping the "Be-ing" of our cadets, their character? As an institution, we knew how to *in*form, but we had never clearly articulated our underlying assumptions and beliefs about how to *trans*form. How do you take more than 1,000 incoming cadets each year, from all over the country, with different backgrounds and beliefs, and somehow mold them into leaders of character for the nation?

By focusing our attention on the Be component of development, we became much more intentional about how to design and implement the 47-month West Point experience. Our ultimate goal was to increase the likelihood that we would graduate commissioned leaders of character who are, in the words of the academy's mission statement, "committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and a lifetime of selfless service to the nation."

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The Conversation Begins

In my experience, institutional conversations about character development typically revolve around four fundamental questions: Should we develop the characters of our students, volunteers, or employees? Can we? What should we teach? And how should we teach it? Intelligent and well-meaning people can and do disagree—quite often passionately—about the answers to those questions. If real progress is to be made in the domain of character development, the tension behind each issue must at least be recognized, if not resolved.

The first question is one of appropriateness. Many institutions ask themselves if they even belong in the business of character development. "That's a job best left to the family or the church," or so the argument goes. The next challenge that you're likely to hear may sound something like this: "Even if we decide that character development is an appropriate goal to pursue, let's be realistic: by the time we get them, it's too late to change them." Frequently this discussion finds opponents impaled on the twin horns of the "nature versus nuture" or "born versus made" debate.

Even if you agree to take on the work of forming character and are optimistic that you can make a difference, what is the message that you'd like your people to internalize? At West Point, the answer is clear: the words "Duty, Honor, Country" are chiseled into stone. Is the answer as clear in your organization? Do you have a set of shared values that you want your leaders to adopt?

Finally comes the difficult question of process: How do you build character? Since West Point's founding in 1802, we've had the privilege of focusing most of our attention on the last question, the first three being largely moot. The people of the United States expect us to graduate leaders of character, so whether we personally believe that it's appropriate or even possible is irrelevant. As an institution, West Point will be judged by the character of its graduates.

Come to think of it, how unique is West Point in this regard? Is there any institution or organization that is not judged by the character of its people?

Character Development: Content and Process

What does it mean to be a leader of character? How do you go about developing it? Were we doing it right? Is shaping character the same as teaching engineering or history? Could we train it the same way we did rifle marksmanship and land navigation?

To answer those questions, we needed first to be clear about what we meant by "a leader of character." West Point defines the term as someone who "seeks to discover the truth, decides what is right, and demon-

strates the courage to act accordingly, always." Or in the words of our Cadet Prayer, a leader of character is someone who chooses the "harder right instead of the easier wrong."

Based on this definition and years of study, we concluded that there are three capacities cadets must develop to become leaders of character. The first is **moral sensitivity.** Unless cadets frame an issue as one with moral or ethical implications in the first place, they won't even get to the second step, which is **moral judgment.** This is the capacity to balance competing demands and decide what is right. Once you've decided on the correct course, it often takes **moral courage** to translate judgment into action. In our experience, consistent ethical behavior is the product of all three capacities acting in concert.

We also learned that sensitivity, judgment, and courage seem to be largely independent and orthogonal variables. Each capacity calls for a different kind of intervention. Yet even at West Point we relied heavily on traditional classroom experiences targeted primarily at building moral judgment. Other organizations may be susceptible to the same error. After all, it's much easier to hold a seminar on moral judgment than it is to develop sensitivity or inspire courage—capacities unlikely to be influenced by traditional classroom-type experiences. Character development demands creativity, a keen eye for making the most out of everyday opportunities, getting people out of their comfort zone, and helping them make sense of their experiences. Here are a few examples from West Point.

Disciplined Reflection

More often than not, character is formed not in the heat and confusion of battle but in quiet moments of reflection after the battle. Making time for such moments, however, runs counter to our military's strong cultural bias toward action. On its surface, the very term "structured reflection" sounds touchy-feely. In practice, it looks far too much like navel-gazing for any self-respecting warrior to make time for it on a training schedule. And yet, schedule it we must. Why?

First, because meaningful reflection doesn't come naturally to most of us. I know that I will rarely sit down and seriously reflect unless I am forced to do so. And second, most organizations are seduced by a well-meaning tendency to overschedule. At West Point, every waking moment of a cadet's day is filled with endless rounds of drills, classes, labs, sports, and a mind-boggling array of other activities.

The institutional tendency to overengineer largely succeeded in keeping cadets out of trouble and teaching them time management, but it also produced several unintended consequences. Without meaning to, we encouraged mediocrity. There simply weren't enough hours in the day for normally high-achieving cadets to do everything we asked, at least not to a high standard. And far too many cadets experienced their time at West Point as a breathless 47-month dash from one event to another. As a result, cadets missed out on much of the potential learning value from many of these activities.

We decided to do less and to do less, better. In part, that meant learning how to build disciplined reflection into cadets' daily routines without adding any additional activities to their already full plates. Beast essays, Cemetery Walks, and CTLT mentors are three examples of how we tried to help cadets get more out of their experiences.

Beast Essays

Ask cadets to name the most profound developmental experience at the Academy and they'll no doubt tell you "Beast Barracks." In the summer before their freshman year, new cadets endure a grueling six-week camp officially titled Cadet Basic Training. But to those who have suffered through it, it will forever be known as Beast Barracks, or simply The Beast.

In social science terms, such a process is known as abasement. Beast Barracks is an intensive, full-immersion, highly demanding experience designed to force new cadets out of their comfort zones and facilitate the transformation from high school senior to Army soldier. Or to put it another way, Beast Barracks socializes new cadets by systematically breaking them down and putting them back together again.

Such an experience is profoundly unsettling. It's supposed to be. In those moments of confusion and questioning, we have a rare opportunity to shape character and mold professional identity. Until recently however, we never systematically made the most of it. Here was perhaps the most salient, potentially developmental experience at the academy, and for years we had missed the back end.

That has changed. Cadets at the academy are now required to write a series of reflective essays about Beast Barracks. We don't add anything to their workloads. Cadets already have to write diagnostic essays in freshman English. But instead of asking them to read an article and write a few paragraphs about it, we now ask them to reflect on their summer experience and write essays about what they learned about leadership, the Army, and themselves. One such essay was written by my son, Sean, who, like his parents before him, joined the long gray line at West Point. Here is an excerpt:

> Selfless service became a way of life during those six weeks. No one could have survived BEAST if they had thought of themselves. I made my roommate's bed, cleaned rooms, and swept halls one night. It was a series of tedious duties that I did not personally benefit from. Frustration and selfishness would have come to mind in my previously undeveloped self. Instead, I was giving time and effort to others without thinking about it. I wouldn't even blink. It had become natural to help others. This summer I was taught that selfless service, a key Army value, was not only necessary to be a competent leader, but also to being a morally correct person.

The integration of reflective essays into our curriculum affected faculty members as well as cadets. We had to revise our notion of what it means to be a college professor. No longer

"An army does not have constant force or have constant formation. Those who are able to adapt

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could we view ourselves narrowly as chemistry teachers or math instructors. Each of us now had a broader and perhaps more important role to play as leader developer. Not everyone accepted the additional responsibility with enthusiasm. Many argued that it simply wasn't their job. But cadets already saw them as role models. Like it or not, faculty members were already in the leader development business. Why not acknowledge it explicitly and do it well?

The Cemetery Walk

The West Point mission statement says, in part: "The mission of the United States Military Academy is to *educate, train,* and *inspire* the Corps of Cadets." Once again, we felt that we were pretty good at the first two verbs, but what about that third one? We knew how to impart knowledge and change behaviors, but how were we doing with the inspirational part of our mission?

A cursory review of our curriculum and training schedules revealed a simple truth. Few if any events or formal activities were designed explicitly with inspiration in mind. And yet just as you can't train character, you can't educate or train commitment either. You have to inspire it. That third verb was there for a reason.

As part of our efforts to help cadets develop a stronger sense of professional identity and personalize what it means to join the long gray line, we developed an exercise known as the Cemetery Walk. Cadets are given the name and obituary of a West Point graduate who has made the ultimate sacrifice for the country. They must go to the cemetery, locate the headstone, and meditate about how the life and death of their assigned graduate helps them better understand their evolving commitment to a "lifetime of selfless service to the nation." Then they're required to write a short essay describing what the experience meant to them. This is what Cadet Scott Stroiney had to say after visiting the grave of Major General Francis Henry Lanahan, West Point class of 1920:

> After sitting by his grave this morning and wondering about all he had done for his country throughout his 38 years of service, I concluded that there is no way that the society that he spent almost half his life serving and protecting could ever repay him for his contributions. I admire his courage for wanting to serve that long and I envy the satisfaction he must have felt by serving. The only way a man could do this is to internalize the true sense of the meaning of duty. I hope that one day someone can look back upon my life and say that there lies a man who has given more than he received.

There are no right answers, of course—the meaning is what cadets make of it. In the very act of meaning-making, character is formed, and terms like service and sacrifice become more than mere abstractions. There's the value of that third verb.

CTLT Mentors

A sort of empty formalism is a constant risk in a highly structured environment like that of West Point. Each activity stands discrete, a box on a training schedule to be checked off and quickly forgotten in the rush to the next one. Unless a conscious institutional effort is made to connect experiences, the rationale for many activities is lost along the way. They simply become so many arbitrary events, with seemingly little connection to either previous or future experiences, let alone the big picture, whatever that is.

CTLT Mentoring was an experiment designed to help cadets see the larger purpose behind their frenetic activity. During the summer after either their sophomore or junior year, we send cadets all around the world to regular Army units for a month of Cadet Troop Leader Training (CTLT). The cadets experience firsthand what it's like to be a second lieutenant in a real unit. They are given real responsibilities and lead real soldiers on real missions, just as they'll do when they graduate.

Second only to Beast Barracks, CTLT is perhaps the most potentially powerful developmental experience in their four years. But as with Beast, cadets weren't getting the most out of the training. Actually, we had no idea what they were getting out of it, because we never checked. After going to great lengths to schedule every cadet for a CTLT assignment, we never prepared them for what they would face, never facilitated their learning while on assignment, and never followed up to see what they had learned.

Through the CTLT mentor program, small groups of cadets meet with officer mentors who help them get the most out of their upcoming summer assignment. Before departing, CTLT mentors typically ask their cadets what they want to learn from their month in the field. They also offer suggestions, such as spending time in the motor pool with a mechanic and learning how to inspect vehicles, or visiting the base hospital to see how soldiers are cared for. Most mentors also ask their cadets to send weekly e-mails summarizing each week's top three lessons or questions. After returning to West Point, cadets typically write short reflective essays and share them with their mentors in small group discussions.

Before this experiment, cadets were no doubt making sense out of their rich experiences on CTLT. But we forfeited much of the learning potential by not paying enough attention to their efforts. Having an expert mentor to add some structure and discipline to the process helps cadets get more out of what was designed to be a significant life event.

And that, finally, is the point of the conversation that West Point embarked upon in 1989: how do we help cadets squeeze maximum

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and change in accord with the enemy and achieve victory are called divine. —Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

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meaning from their time at the academy? The answer entails changing both what we teach and how we teach it. It is a risky, painful, and difficult undertaking—and absolutely essential to leader development. If you are serious about developing the future leaders of your organization, I encourage you to start a conversation of your own. I hope our experiences at West Point will help you in your own journey of discovery. ■

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article should not be confused with* Be*Know*Do: Leadership the Army Way, *published by the Leader to Leader Institute, with an introduction by Frances Hesselbein and General Eric K. Shinseki (retired), former U.S. Army Chief of Staff. General Shinseki is a member of the Center for Public Leadership's board of advisers. For more about the book, see page 48.*

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power. But with time, technology will spread to other countries and peoples, and America's relative preeminence will diminish.

Even more important, the information revolution is creating virtual communities and networks that cut across national borders. Transnational corporations and nongovernmental actors will play larger roles. Many of those organizations will have soft power of their own as they attract citizens into coalitions that cut across national boundaries. Political leadership becomes in part a competition for attractiveness, legitimacy, and credibility. The ability to share information—and to be believed—becomes an important source of attraction and power.

This political game in a global information age suggests that the relative role of soft power to hard power will likely increase. The most likely gainers in an information age will have:

- multiple channels of communication that help to frame issues
- cultural customs and ideas that are close to prevailing global norms
- and credibility that is enhanced by values and policies.

Soft power resources are difficult to control. Many of its crucial resources are outside the control of governments, and their effects depend heavily on acceptance by the receiving audiences. Moreover, soft power resources often work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy, and sometimes take years to produce the desired outcomes.

Of course, these differences are matters of degree. Not all hard power actions promptly produce desired outcomes—witness the length and ultimate failure of the Vietnam War, or the fact that economic sanctions have historically failed to produce their intended outcomes in more than half the cases where they were tried. But generally, soft power resources are slower, more diffuse, and more cumbersome to wield than hard power resources.

Information is power, and today a much larger part of the world's population has access to that power. Technological advances have led to dramatic reduction in the cost of processing and transmitting information. The result is an explosion of information, and that has produced a "paradox of plenty." When people are overwhelmed with the volume of information confronting them, it is hard to know what to focus on. Attention rather than information becomes the scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable information from background clutter gain power. Editors and cue-givers become more in demand.

Among editors and cue-givers, credibility is an important source of soft power. Politics has become a contest of competitive credibility. The world of traditional power politics is typically about whose military or economy wins. Politics in an information age may ultimately be about whose story wins.

Reputation has always mattered in political leadership, but the role of credibility becomes an even more important power resource because of the paradox of plenty. Information that appears to be propaganda may not only be scorned; it may also turn out to be counterproductive if it undermines a reputation for credibility. Under the new conditions more than ever, the soft sell may prove more effective than a hard sell.

Finally, power in an information age will come not just from strong hard power, but from strong sharing. Such sharing not only enhances the ability of others to cooperate with us but also increases their inclination to do so. As we share with others, we develop common outlooks and approaches that improve our ability to deal with the new challenges. Power flows from that attraction. Dismissing attraction as merely ephemeral popularity ignores key insights from new theories of leadership as well as the new realities of the information age.

V. Conclusion

Soft power has always been a key element of leadership. The power to attract—to get others to want what you want, to frame the issues, to set the agenda—has its roots in thousands of years of human experience. Skillful leaders have always understood that attractiveness stems from credibility and legitimacy. Power has never flowed solely from the barrel of a gun; even the most brutal dictators have relied on attraction as well as fear.

When the United States paid insufficient attention to issues of legitimacy and credibility in the way it went about its policy on Iraq, polls showed a dramatic drop in American soft power. That did not prevent the United States from entering Iraq, but it meant that it had to pay higher costs in blood and treasure than would otherwise have been the case. Similarly, if Yasser Arafat had chosen the soft power of Gandhi or Martin Luther King rather than the hard power of terrorism, he could have attracted moderate Israelis and would have a Palestinian state by now. I said at the start that leadership is inextricably intertwined with power. Leaders have to make choices about the types of power that they use. Woe be to followers of those leaders who ignore or devalue the significance of soft power. ■