



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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*The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and to further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. **The CAL periodically publishes Leadership Insights** to feed and shape the leadership debate within the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership. The views expressed in **Leadership Insights** are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official thinking of the British Army or the Ministry of Defence.*

## Putting the Heart into Character

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*Good character is more to be praised than outstanding talent.  
Most talents are to some extent a gift. Good character, by contrast, is not given to us.  
We have to build it piece by piece – by thought, choice, courage and determination.*  
John Luther

The [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) (2021) defines leadership as 'the combination of character, knowledge and action to inspire others to succeed.' In the recently published [Followership Doctrine Note](#) (2023), character is cited as that which leaders are, is informed by their core values, and drives their behaviour.

Within military circles, the term 'character' is used often. We demand it of our people, our training seeks to develop it, and I suspect we can all recall a moment be it on a log, in a bog, or on a slog where hardship reigned supreme and the words 'character-building' bellowed from the Directing Staff's lips. Yet, despite all these references to it, I do not recall character being defined. This *Leadership Insight* is split into two parts: first, it looks to define character and to situate its importance in leadership; second, it offers an alternative view that shines the light on its softer side. It argues that character strengths like forgiveness, humility, kindness, or love separate the good leaders from the great ones and that these traits play a critical role in forging the leader-follower bond ever tighter to inspire success – the unifying purpose of Army leadership.

We all value leaders who we can trust, rely upon in times of need, and who will do the right thing for the right reason, in the right way and at the right time. As much as this is good leadership, it is also excellence in character. Petrick and Quinn (1997) consider

character to be the ‘pattern of intentions, inclinations and virtues that provide the ethical or moral foundation for behaviour’. The [Oxford Character Project](#) define it as the ‘guiding core of who we are – a mosaic of personal qualities that are developed over time and govern how we consistently perceive, think, feel, and act’. Character is what sets us apart from each other; it includes our aspiration to be a certain kind of person and how we choose to act on our values and concerns as we solve moral dilemmas.

Where character is cited within the leadership construct, it tends to be in tandem with the moral and ethical dimensions and its focus on values. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) suggest that the ‘ethics of leadership’ is built upon the moral character of the leader, the ethical legitimacy of the values embedded within the leader’s vision and the morality of the process of social ethical choice and action that leaders engage in.’ Character matters within the confines of ethical leadership since it represents one’s humility, loyalty, virtue, generosity, and forgiveness. It is the essence of what a person believes in, their values and their ethics. One’s philosophy of life, on the other hand, is defined by what we value, one’s character is defined by actively living out what we value (Gini and Green 2014). Character, therefore, is the healthy balance between the personal qualities by which someone is known and the sustained and consistent living according to moral commitments and values. If personality is how you respond on any normal day, character is what helps you to successfully navigate your worst day – and it is character that ensures you stand by those same values when the chips are down.

In *The Character Edge*, former superintendent at Westpoint Robert L. Caslen Jr and Michael Matthews (2021) refer to character as ‘the moral values and habits of an individual’ – and it matters that they are consistently practised and lived. Such is character’s importance at Westpoint that its mission statement is ‘to educate, train and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character’; Westpoint contend that if you fail in character, you are failing in leadership. Caslen and Matthews assert there are character strengths that pertain to the *gut* like courage, instinct, and bravery; the *head*, including creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, and perspective; and the *heart*, comprising softer attributes like love, gratitude, forgiveness, and kindness. When one reflects on our doctrine or military history, the unique nature of our profession means that our focus tends to be on those attributes that pertain to the *head* and *gut*, to the detriment of those of the *heart*. While courage and bravery take centre stage; components of intellect or conceptual acumen are a support act; and those of the *heart* like kindness, gratitude, love, and care are a mere understudy in the wings. This is not to say they are not represented, but one might have to dig a little deeper to find them.

Leaders who people choose to follow today will have the characteristics of being themselves; of being passionate about what they are doing; and communicating it in a heartfelt way that touches the souls of others (Stephenson 2011). Research conducted by Sweeney in 2003 on behalf of the US Army just prior to the invasion of Iraq identified that morale was higher and soldiers were more ‘all in’ when they were led by officers and NCOs who demonstrated competence and character and authentically displayed the ability to care (Caslen and Matthews 2021). Professional sport provides plenty of examples in this domain. The success of Vince Lombardi, the renowned and revered Green Bay Packers American Football coach, was down to his innate ability to *lead with love* and those who played for him contend they had never experienced that form of love from anyone other than from those within their family (Maraniss 2000). UCLA basketball coach John Wooden was evangelical in his belief that love for his players and theirs for each other was the most

important element that contributed to repeat years of basketball success in the 1970s (Wooden 2005). Each coach recognised the importance of love and affection in developing and inspiring their teams, cementing their loyalty to the profession, the team and its craft and had no problem expressing it or indeed in placing kindness and consideration of others at the fore. It is worth emphasising here that when we talk about love or care and the softer dimension of character, we are not talking about emotional intelligence (EQ), although they are related. Where, as defined by Daniel Goleman (1995), EQ is ‘a person’s ability to manage their feelings so that those feelings are expressed appropriately and effectively’, love or care refer to a deep concern for, or attachment towards, those in one’s team and is built upon a desire to support or nurture their well-being. Love in this construct is an emotional state that is premised upon connection, care, and concern for others – but it can be expressed through one’s emotional intelligence.

Contrary to the expectations of some, this perspective is not an entirely new phenomenon within military circles. In his 1848 *Recollections of Rifleman Harris*, Harris refers to the importance of behaviour in securing the trust and ‘caste’ of one’s comrades. He points to the closeness with which an officer is observed. He highlights the depth of soldiers’ pride attributed to officers of courage but counsels that this sentiment is strengthened when kindness and consideration is shown to soldiers beneath them (*Serve to Lead* 2013). General Sir William Slim talks of the attributes most readily associated with efficient soldiering, like courage, endurance, skill at arms, adaptability, and discipline but he also argues that the ‘British Soldier’ has something more still, ‘gentleness’ – for time and again the soldier is called upon to combine real toughness in hardship and battle with gentleness to the weak, the defeated, the displaced, the broken. In Slim’s words, ‘the British soldier is, bless him, a grim fighter, but a bad hater’ (*Serve to Lead* 2013).

The image of love to be conjured in this context is not one of romance or passion but an emotion fuelled by care, compassion, a sense of responsibility and duty to those served. Loving leaders hold their followers in unconditional and positive regard. Thomas Aquinas offers the most pertinent of definition that challenge perceptual attitudes concerning it: love is ‘the willing of the good of the other as others’, to consistently will and choose the good of another, a mainstay for families and friends, but prominent in high-performing teams (Davies 1993). Wholesome goodness is an important human attribute, a fundamental necessity in life and a key component of leadership. This is not about pandering to others, but rather a conscious and selfless commitment to help others. Augustine opined that all people are to be loved and counselled on the need to celebrate the good but amend the bad. Since one cannot be good to all, Augustine argues, special attention should be paid to those who, by the accidents of time, place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you (Post 2003). The unique nature of military service, the length and frequency of unaccompanied, overseas, or operational deployments, the proximity within which soldiers and officers operate and the intense and austere environments in which they are forced together points to a cohort who would or should be subject to the ‘special attention’ to which Augustine refers. When Wellington states ‘I consider nothing in this country so valuable as the life and health of the British Soldier’ (*Serve to Lead* 2013), he is talking of love for his soldiers: altruistic, companionate, and compassionate.

In the *Art of War*, Sun Tzu is explicit and says, ‘regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look on them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death.’ In President Theodore Roosevelt’s words, ‘soldiers won’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.’ Instead of

leadership approaches that have been borne out of fear or intimidation or autocracy, love in leadership enables an atmosphere and environment to be founded upon mutual respect, trust, dignity, service, and moral values. As John Wooden (2005) opined, 'a life not lived for others is not a life; there is no greater joy than doing something for others; love is not soft, it is essential.'

Good character is about displaying integrity and having honourable intentions. Every Officer Cadet's report at RMAS has a section dedicated to it – a recent addition which points to its pertinence. US Army General Matthew Ridgway (1966) contends that 'without character, particularly in the military profession, failure in peace, disaster in war or, at best, mediocrity in both will result.' Therefore, as this *Insight* has sought to illustrate, character does matter – it is why it is an explicit inclusion in the Army's definition of leadership; it is why we demand leaders of good character, and our training institutions work so hard to develop it. But for me, the emphasis on 'heart' and 'love' at its centre is most worthy of note here – for it is the leaders of good character who seek to love those under their command and their capacity to do so will have the most profound effect on those who have the privilege to follow.

## Questions

1. What is 'character' to you? Who is the best example of 'character' and why?
2. Research by Sweeney in 2003 refers to the importance of character, competence, and care. In your view, which matter most and are they situation or context dependent?
3. Should character strengths of the heart like kindness, care and compassionate love be more prominent in military leadership? Why?

## Resources

[Army Leadership Doctrine](#) (2021)

A British Army [Followership Doctrine Note](#) (2023)

[Oxford Character Project](#)

Theodore Roosevelt Centre at Dickinson State University – [Theodore Roosevelt Quotes](#) page.

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