

THE CENTRE
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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 so further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. **Leadership Insights** are published periodically by the CAL to feed and shape the leadership debate in the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership. The CAL actively seeks new authors for its Leadership Insights.*

Black Hearts – A Reflection

From a speech by Charlotte Greensit

On the theme of 'Moral Courage and Human Behaviours In Leadership'

Jim thought he was writing a story of arms and men, about a particular U.S. Army deployment at a particular time and place. But as he worked on *Black Hearts* he realized that the events of that deployment contained some universal lessons for human conduct, especially for those seeking to be moral and upstanding leaders in the most trying of circumstances. As Jim studied the unit, he kept coming back to the deployment's chain of events and the error chain. Even with the best intentions, men make errors in judgment and initiate courses of action that are counterproductive to their goals. Fortunately, in complex environments, individual errors or even long chains of mistakes can often be corrected or they simply dissipate before they cause any adverse effect. But sometimes a singular combination of errors come together to unlock something abhorrent.

Within an error chain, all it takes is one courageous, good decision to abort a catastrophe. As he met and interviewed almost all of the soldiers and officers involved in the main arc of the events described in the book, Jim found there was no doubt they were all

trying to do their best, making decisions on the fly and under fire, in unspeakably difficult and dangerous circumstances. And yet: While there was a tiny, tiny fraction of this unit that actually planned and perpetrated a truly immoral and illegal act, there were a litany of bad decisions that, considering the outcome of the deployment, do take on a moral dimension.

Years after the fact the commander of that Battalion's Headquarters and Headquarters Company, remarked to Jim, "Clearly a lot of what happened out there can be attributed to a leadership failure. And I am not talking about just the platoon level. I am talking about platoon, company, battalion and brigade. Even I feel in some way indirectly responsible for what happened out there. I mean we were all part of the same team. We just let it go. And go and go and go. And these things happened. And you can say, 'It was Green's fault. He was a criminal.' But it goes beyond that. We failed those guys by letting them be out there like that without a plan." And so, as many of you prepare to take your first leadership positions in the Army, I ask that you never stop looking for places where you can be the one to break the error chain. Jim had a couple of suggestions for how you might do that. I should note that I try to apply these to my life, and in my own leadership role in the admittedly far less dangerous civilian world.

Be very suspicious of all the flattery that's heaped upon you. Don't believe your own PR.

Studies have shown that everybody thinks they are a good driver, even the terrible ones. After three years of speaking to military leaders of literally every possible rank, Jim didn't meet a single officer who told him they were bad at their job or had been promoted beyond their capabilities. I think *Black Hearts* makes a fairly persuasive case that there were some very good leaders in Bravo Company and 1st Battalion, but there were also some very poor ones. And quite reliably, those who had the highest opinion of themselves were, in Jim's opinion, actually the weakest leaders. People's capacity for self-deception, especially in the face of failure, is limitless. People will do almost anything to believe that a negative outcome was just bad luck or something beyond their control. Truly the most enlightened leaders my husband met during his reporting were those who acknowledged their share of responsibility, attempted to learn something from the experience and incorporated it into their life moving forward

Do not fall for clichés. Do not mistake talking about leadership with leading.

It's easy to talk about the importance of 'engaged leadership', or to 'teach, coach, mentor' and to advocate 'doing the harder right versus the easier wrong.' If you're going to say these things, practice these things. Saying it isn't the same as doing the deed.

When faced with dysfunction, diagnose; do not belittle. Take in far more data than you give out. You have to speak up.

One company's executive officer told Jim: "Nobody would stand up. The people who do stand up get squashed. The problems clearly had to do with lack of manpower. There's a culture in the military of just keeping your mouth shut, for some reason, and saying you can do stuff. And when people underneath see people who try to speak truth to power getting crushed, it shows them that speaking truth does not necessarily pay. What that means is that people up top get bad feedback. You can get reports that XYZ is fine when XYZ is not fine - in fact, XYZ is the opposite of fine. I've seen this happen. It's not that that one little piece of information is going to lose the war, but when you see the cumulative effect of information becoming distorted or washed in order to tell a story that a commander wants to tell to their higher, then you get real problems. That's the more sinister side of it."

Figure out your values, cultivate humility and communicate. Set your moral compass. Reset your moral compass. Subordinates have to know what right looks like. Lead from the front. Walk around and feel what your people are feeling.

Self-awareness is crucial. Emotional intelligence is absolutely key in any leadership role. Not everyone has it but everyone can work hard to get it. We all have the power to break an error chain. The only question is, will you recognize what's at stake, and will you act on it?

Jim learned an incredible amount about how to conduct his life and his own leadership roles from his experiences reporting *Black Hearts*. I would encourage him to talk to the most junior staffers, to find out what's going on at the ground level. Jim learned a lot about how you get one chance to make your mark upon this Earth, that life can be very short. He sat with the wives and girlfriends of those who lost their lives during that deployment, he sat with those whose lives were irrevocably damaged. He learned to live wide and he taught me to do the same. On that note, on shaping even just one mind, I should say this: I am a widow. The hard truth is that it's likely that you will know other young widows during the course of your careers. I would ask you do this: don't just write when someone passes. Reach out a year or 3

years later, on the anniversary, a holiday or just out of the blue. It means so much to someone who faces an empty chair day after day. I think the biggest fear is that others will forget, will move on.

Jim Frederick's book Black Hearts, about one U.S. Army platoon's descent into madness during the Iraq war, is a fascinating case study in leadership, ethics and organizational breakdown within war-fighting units. This Leadership Insight is extracted from a speech by Charlotte Greensit, Frederick's widow, given at the Apr 2017 West Point Mission Command Conference. Parts are based on a speech by Jim Frederick at Annapolis in 2014. It can be used as a tool for those who wish to reflect on the contents of Black Hearts, or for leadership education. It is reproduced here by the kind permission of Charlotte Greensit.

Questions:

1. If people know the difference between right and wrong why do they choose to do the wrong thing? How can a leader create a culture that changes this?
2. Do you create a culture where people can stand up and speak? Would your subordinates tell you if something is wrong?
3. What techniques help create this culture? What behaviours damage it?
4. How do you see through the flattery (and self-flattery) you receive? How can you force yourself to identify your shortcomings as a leader?
5. What can a leader do to try and identify the 'error chain'. Does a leader have a moral responsibility to intervene in an 'error chain' outside of their chain of command?
6. *"And when people underneath see people who try to speak truth to power getting crushed, it shows them that speaking truth does not necessarily pay. What that means is that people up top get bad feedback."* Who has the responsibility and power to deal with this problem – the leader or the subordinate?

Further Reading:

Maj SL Phonexayphova, US Army. *Lessons from Yusufiyah*

http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art017.pdf

AKX Resources: [Black Hearts Leadership Study Session](#)

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