

LEADERS in Action

Jason Womack interviews Brigadier General Troy E. Dunn



Brigadier General Troy E. Dunn is the Director of Military Force Management Policy, Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel and Services, for the U.S. Air Force in Arlington, Virginia. The directorate is responsible for establishing military force management policies for more than 500,000 Total Force military personnel. He was selected as a Congressional Fellow in the Office of Senator Trent Lott and as a distinguished member of the National Security Team in the Office of the U.S. Senate Minority Whip. His command tours include squadron, group and air base wing at the U.S Air Force Academy.

Q&A

Jason Womack: *Do you have a simple way to think about how leaders get better?*

Brigadier General Troy E. Dunn: Making time every day to process the day's events gives leaders the gift of deliberate self-reflection. Practicing and engaging in mindfulness can cleanse our mind and soul. After reading *The Art of Happiness* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and its sequel, *The Art of Happiness at Work*, I realized the power within to achieve happiness through training our minds and our hearts, by being intentional about what we do and how we do it.

I stumbled upon these books when our sons were diagnosed with autism. At the time, we were beginning to understand how to balance a successful career in the military along with their medical, educational, social, and communication needs. I was distracted, and I lost sight of my purpose, my happiness. *The Art of Happiness at Work* gave me hope as I learned to prepare my heart and open my mind to experience true happiness personally and professionally. I believe that the challenges and struggles we go through in life help us develop our leadership skills so that we are prepared to serve those we lead.

JW: *What was your Defining Moment as a leader?*

Brig Gen Troy E. Dunn: When I was about five years old, my father shared a motto with me to commit to memory: "All that you do, do it with your might. Things by half are never done right." This motto has been passed down generational lines, and my children also have it committed to memory. Of course, I share it with our Airmen. Growing up, I thought the phrase "all that you do, do it with your might," meant striving for perfection, a notion I was consumed with, until my dad reminded me that the quote was not about perfection. It's about excellence, specifically, excellence of character.

My dad is a retired Master Sergeant in the US Air Force. Throughout my own Air Force career, I would call him every weekend to share stories and experiences. At the end of every conversation, he said, "Great, now do more." He said this every time we talked...for years! At the end of one of our conversations, I was tired, I needed some affirmation, and I replied in a

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Q&A with Brigadier General Troy E. Dunn

Brig Gen Troy E. Dunn is a leader who values humility, self-care and connection.

In this interview, he shares his "battle rhythm," a morning routine that leaves him energized for the day's challenges and opportunities; his favorite books on leadership; and a family motto that has been passed down for generations.

heightened and elevated voice, “Dad, what more can I do!?”

He quickly replied, “First of all, son, you’re not going to talk to me that way.” Then he said, “If you have to ask me that question, then, you’ve lost your way as far as why you’ve been chosen to serve as a leader.” That hit me like a ton of bricks. I felt his disappointment and immediately changed my perspective. I asked the question again, “What more can I do?” Same question. Same exact words. Same order. Different attitude! He wasn’t telling me to do more because I wasn’t doing enough, it’s because I was in a position to do more. Now I ask, “What more can I do?” knowing there is more to do from a place of humility, modesty, and compassionate leadership.

JW: *What will leaders increasingly need to include that up until now they may not have had to study in great detail?*

Brig Gen Troy E. Dunn: I wrestle with this question as we look to the future and wonder how things are going to be. We’re entering the 4th Industrial Revolution. The First Industrial Revolution used steam power to mechanize production. The Second used electric power to create mass production. The Third used information technology to automate mass production. Now, the Fourth Industrial Revolution has ushered in advanced technology against the backdrop of globalization, changing security environment, and intense competition in all domains: economic, industrial, military, information, and even diplomacy. The world is more interconnected than ever before.

This is a clarion call for all leaders to study humble leadership. When we understand that our purpose is to take care of others, we realize humility is not that you think less of yourself, it’s that you think of yourself...less. When we strive to be an excellent – not perfect – leader, we have to be humble.

I believe in the leadership concepts that Edgar Schein and his son Peter wrote about in a book titled, *Humble Leadership: The Power of Relationships, Openness, and Trust*. Because the world is so complex

and is always changing, one person does not have all the answers. It takes humility to say, “I don’t have all the answers.” But, collectively, by bringing everyone in and working collaboratively, we can come up with the solutions we need.

JW: *What do you think are the most important questions effective leaders need to ask of themselves?*

Brig Gen Troy E. Dunn: Leaders need to ask, “Am I worthy?” There’s a follow-up question, “Am I worthy to lead America’s sons and daughters?” If we start with that question, it requires we do intentional self-reflection. We can ask ourselves, “Have I become a lifelong learner; a dedicated and committed student of people?” We need to understand the internal and external environments and be deeply curious to know their why. Not, “Why am I here?” But, instead, “Why am I still here? Why do I continue to serve?” Through that understanding, we can focus more of our attention and commit to doing more for those we lead.

JW: *What are some of your own habits or routines as an effective leader?*

Brig Gen Troy E. Dunn: When we talk about our Air Force core values: *Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do*, we sometimes look at that second core value and think, “I’ll take care of everyone else before I take care of myself.” However, I’m a believer in the concept of “Self-Care.” I refer to my routine as my battle rhythm: I wake up early and start the day with mental cleansing, meditation and Neuro Linguistic Programming in which I practice positive self-talk and meditative visualization. Then, I go to the gym for my physical care. After that, my goal at the office is for intellectual, cognitive care — reading. Then, I have dedicated open time on my calendar for mentoring. This is my connection-care time where I work to make deliberate connections so that people can feel that I care for them. That’s all before 8am.

Practicing these four self-care rituals — meditation, exercise, reading, and connection — makes it possible for me to be a more effective leader.

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JW: *How do you listen - and what do you listen for - so you hear more than what is just being said by those you lead?*

Brig Gen Troy E. Dunn: I always ask people to fill in this blank, “People don’t care how much you know until they _____.” Well, people usually answer quickly with, “...until they know how much you care.” And as soon as they say that, I say, “Wrong! Actually, people don’t care how much you know, until they FEEL how much you care.” That is the difference between leadership and management. Leadership is getting at the feeling and the heart and soul of people.

Cognitively, our Airmen know their leaders care about them. But, at times, they may not FEEL that we care. When we look into Airmen’s eyes and ask them to leave their family to defend freedom and democracy around the globe, they need to FEEL that their leaders care about them. They will do amazing things because they feel that their leaders and fellow wingmen care about them.

People will do extraordinary things on and off the battlefield when they feel their leaders care about them. That is the role of leadership.

In his book, the Dalai Lama challenges us to be deliberate and to connect with people. We all face challenges at work, at home, or maybe we aren’t getting along with a co-worker or even a boss. We need to show people that we care, and I do that by asking the question, “How are you doing?” I may have to ask that question two or three more times. “Really, how are you doing?” By the third time I ask – and that time a little slower, “How are YOU doing?” Then, it’s amazing how the walls come down, the masks come off, and you might hear them say something like, “You know, I’m not doing so well.” Your persistence shows that you truly listened for more than what was being said, and a connection is made.

JW: *How would you define your leadership philosophy in just one sentence?*

Brig Gen Troy E. Dunn: Humble leadership. As part of being a humble leader, every leader should have five words in their vocabulary: “Please, Help, Sorry, Thanks, and Wow.” Each of those words means something. Let me explain...

“Please” is a sign of Respect, a way to acknowledge the person we’re talking with and that every person has value and should be treated with dignity and respect. “Help” shows a sign of Strength, and it’s ok to ask for help. That’s important for Airmen to know that and the key to resiliency. “Sorry” is a sign of Humility. It’s a way to take connectedness one step further where we take ownership and accountability for our actions and also how our actions made people feel. “Thanks” is a sign of Gratitude. We work with some amazingly, talented Airmen, and to say thank you for what they do every day is essential for our Air Force. And finally, “Wow” is a sign of Amazement. Our civilian and enlisted officers wow us by the amazing things they do every day.

When we take the time to acknowledge that, we connect with others on a deeper level.

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