



Book The West Point Way of Leadership

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Recommendation

The United States Military Academy (USMA) in West Point, New York, has graduated presidents, generals and corporate leaders. Although its military tradition and patriotism are pivotal to West Point's purpose, developing leaders is the focus of its mission and curriculum. Since 1802, West Point has been turning out young men and, in more recent years, young women, who are prepared to fill leadership positions in the U.S. Army immediately and who are trained to be leaders for the rest of their lives, in business, philanthropy or the military. Cadets receive a world-class education that includes an intense leadership curriculum designed to transform them into leaders and outstanding moral exemplars. Here, West Point grad and former teacher Col. Larry R. Donnithorne (Ret.) details what the USMA's leadership training involves, how it is structured and how it meets its goal. He may make you envy the young students who are getting such a thorough grounding in how to lead. Donnithorne will hold your interest as he conveys the meaning and merit of West Point. If you want to learn about leadership – military or civilian – *BooksInShort* recommends this overview from a dedicated West Pointer.

Take-Aways

- West Point, the U.S. Military Academy, has been training leaders since 1802.
- Famous leaders among its graduates include presidents, generals and CEOs.
- West Point trains cadets in distinct “passes” that correspond to four years of college and four progressively higher levels of leadership.
- Its 4,000 students learn “followership,” “direct or face-to-face leadership,” “indirect leadership,” and “executive leadership.”
- These leadership lessons shape cadets’ careers in the military or in business.
- The West Point Honor Code stipulates that cadets will not lie, cheat or steal, and that they will not countenance other cadets violating these principles.
- The honor code helps develop the cadets’ character and foster strong ethics.
- Integrity and altruism leads to better leadership and more success reaching difficult goals.
- While cadets must subordinate themselves to senior military officers, they also learn to exercise independent judgment.
- Leaders must base their decisions on the impact they will have on the widest possible number of people.

Summary

The Business of Building Leaders

Since 1802, the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) at West Point has been in the business of developing strong, effective, inspirational leaders, not only for the U.S. Army but also for civic and corporate life in America. This training is based on the conviction that the core concepts of leadership go beyond the subject matter that pertains to any particular professional field.

“At every *Fortune* 500 institution in America, people are taught ethics. At West Point, people are taught character.”

Military officers must know the inner workings of the Army just as corporate officials in manufacturing or directors of government agencies must be experts in their industries. Across every field, the core concepts that govern the way leadership functions remain the same. West Point's leadership training covers military expertise, but it also focuses on building character. The graduate is supposed to be trustworthy in all situations, including those fraught with peril. Leaders from West Point are trained in both of these arenas:

1. A leader must have the necessary expertise, “knowledge, skills, methods and techniques” for his or her industry or area, be it military operations or manufacturing

or medicine.

2. A leader must develop outstanding character traits and solid ethics that guide his or her professional and personal “outlook on life.”

“A West Point education is a powerful curriculum for meeting the demands of leadership.”

In the course of four years of study, the USMA trains cadets in “four passes of leadership.” These stages of leadership correspond precisely to the levels of leadership professionals in an area pass through during their careers. The school puts students through this learning process to build abilities that matter equally in military and civilian life, and that apply in all businesses.

“Followership”

During their first year, or “first pass,” at West Point, students learn the school’s value system, the critical role of teamwork and the Honor Code. The Academy sees “followership” as a vital component of leadership training. To become a leader, you must first become an alert, obedient follower. As first-year students, cadets quickly learn that they are subordinate to everyone else at the Academy, and must follow the rules and meet exacting standards. Eventually, cadets move from “subordination to self-confidence,” but the process is challenging and rigorous.

“The primary leadership responsibility of all executive leaders...is to continually inspire their members to move toward the larger goals of the institution.”

In followership (whether as a “plebe” at West Point or as an entry level auditor in an accounting firm) students learn that most important lessons stem from self-discipline. Only those who can govern themselves and who can learn to follow effectively for the benefit of their companies can become great leaders.

“Leaders should not be afraid to direct their organizations to stand for something good.”

Cadets quickly learn the importance of organizational and group values. Instructors teach them about the Army, and its traditions and practices. They must memorize much of this information must also memorize – and repeat instantly upon command – various historical West Point facts and figures. Through this process, cadets begin to feel a bond with famous alumni, including generals and other national heroes, as they become part of the Academy’s fabled “long gray line” of leadership.

“Two of the first three men to land on the moon were West Pointers.”

The earn-your-way, hierarchy-based reality of the business world can’t surprise West Point students after their plebe year’s training and experiences. During their first summer – called “Beast Barracks” – plebes live under strict regulations and learn what it means to be new on the scene. They address officers and upper-class students as either “Sir” or “Ma’am,” and are allowed to use only four responses to answer questions or commands from these high-ups: “Yes, sir”; “No, sir”; “No excuse, sir” and “Sir, I do not understand.”

“A leader’s primary responsibility is to the organization he leads, not to his own career or ambition.”

West Point teaches students to be honorable in all things, another lesson that gives them ballast and stature in the business world. Lying, cheating and stealing earn immediate remediation or disgraceful expulsion. Integrity is the watchword. Academy staff members bestow the Honor Code on the cadets at a special ceremony. This solemn occasion emphasizes how seriously West Point considers the subject of honor. Indeed, at the Academy, nothing is more important. As part of the Honor Code, cadets learn to “become their word,” to be direct and straightforward in all their conversations. Weighing words and coloring the truth has no place at West Point. To avoid even the hint of cheating, cadets must immediately drop their pens when an instructor says that exam times are completed. Cadets’ rooms are always unlocked. The idea that one West Point cadet would steal from another is seen as preposterous.

“The mastery of details is good practice for leaders – one that comes in handy when the stakes are high.”

The Honor Code not only stipulates that cadets will not lie, cheat or steal, but also that they will not countenance other cadets who do. West Point wants students to place their loyalty not just with the people around them, but also with the Academy, the Army and ethical behavior itself. Thus, the cadets learn to bond “with the values of honorable organizations.” They must uphold the concept of “the harder right,” which means making decisions and determining all their actions based on the impact they will have on the widest possible circle of people. Cadets strive to define the right course of action and follow it in every possible instance. They work hard to apply this principle immediately and automatically, without thinking. Doing right becomes their default behavior. On the battlefield and in the boardroom, leaders often must make such decisions instantaneously. West Pointers learn that when it comes to morality, there are no short cuts.

“There is a wide gulf between setting a goal for a group of people and getting it done.”

“**Direct or Face-to-Face Leadership**” During their sophomore year, students learn “moral reasoning, the basis of honorable leadership.” Although cadets quickly learn to subordinate themselves to all those who outrank them (for plebes, that’s virtually everyone), they also must exhibit “independence of mind” when necessary. Neither the U.S. Army nor the business world need automatons who cannot think for themselves. When necessary, a cadet must possess the wisdom and gumption to say no to superior officers, as a manager must have the starch to reject corrupt instructions from a dishonest boss. The school conveys the importance of independent thinking in its course on moral philosophy. Teaching morality plays a central role at West Point.

“Fear is not a bad teacher. Fear strips one of pretensions and flattens false bravado.”

West Point teaches face-to-face leadership to those who must guide others, often in small teams, through dangerous missions or difficult tasks. Leadership means showing each team member that the mission is all-important, as is each individual’s welfare. Insisting on high mission standards and maintaining rapport with the people in the trenches is the core of leadership.

“Third Pass”

During their third year, students practice self-reliance and learn the specific leadership skills that enable them to “lead people who lead others.” At this stage of their

leadership training, they learn how to handle themselves in morally ambiguous instances. The students follow a basic rule that says, “Go to extremes in matters of principle.” If this means putting one’s military – or business – career on the line for principle, so be it. Strong leadership requires nothing less. To help cadets become the moral exemplars, West Point teaches them how to distinguish right from wrong not only in black-and-white situations, but also when things are murky and confusing. As General Maxwell Taylor explained, “No great soldier ever rose to eminence as a military commander who was not primarily a man of character.”

“The greatest tool for keeping control in threatening situations is intense, repetitive training.”

However, in war and in corporate life, people can develop “moral calluses” that make them less sensitive to important ethical questions, concerns and issues. West Pointers learn to be alert to this danger and fight it at every turn. This is crucial in “indirect leadership,” that is, “leading other leaders.” The example set by a leader with high-level authority inexorably transmits down through the ranks to the whole organization.

“Every leader is a follower. No one commands an organization without restraint.”

By this time, most cadets have become excellent problem solvers. Now they learn how to direct the efforts of large groups, how to handle different levels of command responsibilities and how to work together to achieve important goals. West Point teaches cadets how to set up and lead systematic efforts to solve problems. Delegation, which is integral to indirect leadership, does not come naturally to most individuals. Many people like to maintain total control over how problems are tackled. Others feel uncomfortable sharing responsibility. However, for any team to function well, each member must contribute. That is true in military organizations and corporate hierarchies. To prepare for such vital command authority, students must gain first-hand, daily experience leading other leaders.

“Executive or Organizational Leadership”

During their senior year, students learn the level of leadership they will need in the top echelons of military or corporate management. Executive leadership is a tremendous responsibility. The executive leader must stay on top of two questions at all times: “Who are we?” and “Where are we going in the long term?” If the executive does not know where the organization is heading, certainly none of his or her subordinates will know. This would be dangerous for any commercial or philanthropic organization, and utterly disastrous for an army in battle. Therefore, executive leaders must function within their organizations as expert receptors, not just doers. They must act as their organization’s sensory apparatus, in touch with what goes on inside and outside of the organization, and what the future holds for it. The ancient Mayans called such a leader an “echo man” – “a leader who picks up signals and sends them out.” West Point students learn the skills they will need to lead other leaders.

“No group of men has participated more fully than West Pointers in the century and a half that saw this raw continent transformed into the most powerful country of the world.” [– Thomas Fleming]

West Point’s 4,000 students unite to form its Corps of Cadets, a military brigade of four regiments. Each regiment has three battalions, which split into companies, platoons and, then, squads. At every level, each unit has an up-and-coming leader. At the top are the cadet officers who function as executive leaders, exercising indirect leadership over all of the junior leaders. Cadet officers learn to adopt a big-picture approach, so they see the Corps of Cadets as a single functioning unit. Cadet officers function as a “bridge” between the cadets and the school’s administration, as well as those outside of the organization. In any social environment, the executive leaders serve inside and outside constituencies. This requires intelligence, wisdom and finesse – virtues West Point strives to inculcate in all of its cadets.

“Give me anyone except a schizophrenic and I’ll turn him into a leader.” [– General Dave R. Palmer, former West Point superintendent]

West Point is mindful that its graduates must be excellent followers as well as leaders, because no executive leader exercises absolute power. In some form or another, everyone answers to someone else. Thus, in the U.S. military, top generals must answer to their leaders at the Department of Defense, who in turn are responsible to administration officials and ultimately to the president. The USMA views leadership development as an ongoing, career-long process. The Academy’s creed is, “Duty, Honor, Country,” a coda of leadership for the military, and for civilian businesses and civic organizations.

“Out in the World”

Despite its tough traditions, West Point teaches cadets that strong leaders do not treat their subordinates harshly or in a supercilious manner. Instead, cadets learn the importance of building organizational harmony. They practice establishing and maintaining fully productive relationships with their subordinates. However, this was not always the way at West Point, where hazing junior cadets was normal practice for much of the school’s history. No longer. The cadets and instructors now adhere to new humane guidelines, the “principles of leader-subordinate relationships.” Regardless of their level of command, all West Point leaders must ensure that their subordinates understand everyone’s shared commitment to the “highest values of the military profession.” West Point’s principles tell leaders to motivate their troops by example, not duress. Cadets learn to become “servant leaders” who always work to achieve the public good while respecting the dignity of those who report to them.

About the Author

West Point graduate **Col. Larry R. Donnithorne** (Ret.) taught economics, leadership and moral philosophy at West Point. He is president of the College of the Albemarle in North Carolina.
