

Leadership in the Volunteer Environment

Our corporate values urge, no they require, that we, as commanders and leaders, create an environment for our members that cultivates our future leaders. We are tasked with missions that we must be successful at achieving for the Civil Air Patrol to remain relevant and thriving as the Auxiliary of the United States Air Force and a corporation. So, how do we balance that requirement with the need to provide meaningful opportunities for our members to learn, succeed, and even fail? Long gone are the days of "Because I said so." The answer need not be complicated, for our values of integrity, respect, and excellence lead us directly to the solution.

Leading in a volunteer environment yields some unique challenges and opportunities. Most of our members have or had a full-time career, and some have even been leaders in those careers. They understand the term leverage, and we have all experienced that leverage; however, in a room full of volunteer members, that is not a tool that we can employ with great success, if any success at all. So, what do we have in our tool belt as volunteer leaders? World-renowned leadership coach Simon Sinek stated there are "two ways to influence human behavior: you can manipulate it, or you can inspire it."

A successful leader can transform the mission into a bigger picture and, even more importantly, convince other members that they have a stake in it. How do they inspire their members to want to see the success of the mission, which means also seeing their role in the bigger picture? There is a proven way to do this, and it's all about how we lead. President Dwight Eisenhower was speaking to the Annual Conference of the Society for Personnel Administration when he defined the essence of leadership is, "by leadership, we mean the art of getting someone else to do something that you want done because he wants to do it, not because your position of power can compel him to do it, or your position of authority." This closes the circle and brings us back to the core values.

Servant leadership creates a culture where the leader places the needs, opportunities, and successes of the members above those of their own. You may ask yourself why someone would sacrifice their own success for that of another. When a leader makes a conscious decision to employ integrity, respect, and excellence in every interaction and decision, we see that the members become empowered with opportunity, knowledge, and yes, even failures, and suddenly...the bigger picture becomes crystal clear. They are now vested in the mission's success and realize they play a critical role.

The Civil Air Patrol has given us tools that we can use as servant leaders to create strong members who are ready and willing to take an active role in their own success and the success of the corporation. We, as commanders and leaders, must encourage our members to work through the education and training program, progress through the specialty track levels, and take on duty assignments within the units that create growth opportunities. If we do not make this a priority, then complacency, boredom, and frustration start to cloud the bigger picture. However, when we step aside and put our own ambitions in the back seat by putting the core values of respect, integrity, and excellence in the front seat, we all create the best environment for astounding volunteer service.

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