

Leadership: A View from the Middle

Mitchell Boling

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LEADERSHIP

A View from the Middle

...

MITCHELL BOLING

SMSgt, USAF, Ret.

*For my grandson,
Michael Edward Boling, Jr.*



CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Disclaimer</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
Part 1: Learn From It	7
The World's Greatest Roller Coaster	9
Leading by Example	29
Power	35
Active Listening	43
The Importance of Food	49
Complacency is a Killer.	55
The Go-to Guy	65
Pressure	75
Suicide	85
Tough Love	93
Part 2: How not to be a Leader.	107
Incentive Ride	109
Motivation	119
Cliques	129
The E-Nine	139
Relationships	147
Volunteer	157
Transitioning	165

Part 3: Being a Manager.	179
The Flying Fiends	183
Leadership Training	197
Business Communication	207
Situational Leadership	223
PJC	229
Mission Statement	239
Courage	255
<i>Conclusion.</i>	275
<i>About the author</i>	285

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The first person is U.S. Air Force SMSgt (retired) Andrew Walls. Drew was an outstanding leader for me, early on in my career when I needed one the most. His actions and positive examples affected me for the remainder of my career. In fact, his leadership actually provided the genesis for this book in my mind.

Next up is U.S. Marine and U.S. Air Force CMSgt (retired) Thomas Schroeder. Tom was my leader when I first became a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer in the Air Force. He taught me how to remain calm in the face of adversity, and I'll never forget it. His steady handed leadership style and the lessons he provided, helped me to become more successful as I entered the latter stages of my career.

Last but not least, is U.S. Air Force MSgt (retired) Jason Roach. I met Jason when he was a bright-eyed kid on his first duty station in the Air Force. Through circumstances, I became his leader and we worked together for a few years. This was the only time we officially crossed paths but nevertheless, had kindled a long-lasting friendship over the years. I consider him one of my dearest, closest friends in the world. Jason was the first person I told about my wanting to write this book, something I had kept close to the vest. He then became my sounding board and confidant throughout the entire process. Thanks for keeping my secret, Skippy!

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DISCLAIMER

All of the stories in this book are from my own experiences as a member of the U.S. Air Force and following that, as an employee of a Department of Defense contractor. Although my experiences have described the operation and maintenance of jet fighter aircraft, at no time has any classified information been disclosed. Further, any suggestions or opinions made in this book are my own and are in no way the views of the U.S. Air Force or the contractor.

Unless otherwise noted, all names provided in the stories are fictional. There have been no mentions of former or current coworkers' names, unless specifically identified therein.

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INTRODUCTION

Today I picked up a book on leadership, and as I started to read it I began to lose track of what I was reading. I had to put it down, although it had been written by a well-qualified authority on the subject. Why then, did I stop reading it after only one and a half pages? Because it was a dry read. It was difficult to keep track of what the author was saying, and was downright uninteresting to me. How many of us has picked up a college textbook, only to set it right back down, never to be picked up again? I'm sure it has happened many times to nearly every college student. It may have even happened to a business professional looking for some leadership guidance. *I'll just get the Cliff's Notes*, they might think. Or worse, they simply fake it through their course of study, and not read anything at all. I'm sure it has happened to many people. But the bottom line is, those of us who are interested in actually learning, *must still read the book*. So how does an author make his book easy to read? By making it interesting, of course!

During one of my graduate courses, I was assigned to read various chapters of *The Leadership Challenge*, by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner. Typically, in college we weren't required to read an entire book, rather just those chapters that pertained to the lesson plan. But when I picked up their book and started to peruse it, I couldn't put it down! It was very interesting, written unlike most other text books that I had read before. They utilized storytelling techniques, taken from numerous business leaders around the world, and eloquently related those experiences into valid teaching points about becoming an *exemplary leader*. I ended up reading the entire book, cover to cover — twice. Today I keep their book, full of dog-eared pages and numerous yellow highlighted text, on my desk in plain view. Everyone in the office has free reign to

grab it and sit down to read, as long as it eventually makes it back to my desk.

Having read their book and appreciating their writing style, gave me the courage and motivation to actually write my own book. I felt that I could present my thoughts and ideas in a manner that might be interesting for the student, business professional, veteran, or anyone else who has found themselves in a position similar to mine. As a veteran myself, I know that many fellow veterans will easily relate to my stories. My goal is to provide some insight into leadership that can help those interested in advancing their own careers, as seen from a different perspective that I call *The Middle*.

The middle refers to the middle of the workforce. Those of us in the middle have already been down at the bottom, in the weeds, and have clawed our way up to the middle. In the middle we will find folks who are individual contributors, followers, and informal leaders. Also found in the middle are formal leaders and managers, those who have already started their climb up and out. In some cases, those in the middle might have become stagnant, and cannot seem to gain that next rung in the corporate ladder. It is my hope that after reading my book, those effected will learn from my experiences and find a renewed vigor to climb to the next rung in their own careers.

Every person in the workforce today must transition through the middle before they can reach the top. *Every person*. I've found that many books written on the subject of leadership are written from the perspective of the top. The author might be a CEO or an academic expert on the subject. Not to say their books aren't helpful, they are (see above), but I believe that I might be able to shed some light on the subject by sharing my experiences from the middle, and how we might be able to climb out up and out of it. I feel that my book can help and maybe, provide entertainment along the way.

The art of leadership is truly that, an art. The ability to influence those around us to gravitate toward a common goal is an art, and those who choose to tackle that responsibility are leaders, plain and simple. Artists

invest months and years perfecting their work. An oil painter may spend numerous months poring over the details of his or her project. As the artist practices, he or she gets better, as in any profession or hobby or activity. This is the same with leadership. The key is that when we keep practicing, we tend to become more proficient. The study of leadership is not for everyone, but for the vast majority of people in the workforce, it may be a way to find balance in oneself, personally and professionally.

The balance we must find in our personal and professional lives can also be seen as satisfaction, or more specifically, *job satisfaction*. If we are satisfied in our job or career, we will tend to become satisfied with our personal situation. After all, we work most of our lives, and the work performed directly affects us personally through the salary and benefits we earn, leading to quality of life. In order to continually build the quality of life we seek, we must advance our careers. A way to do this is through the study of leadership. As stated above, leadership study is not for everyone, but it is my belief that in order to climb out of the middle and gain positions of higher authority and responsibility, we must have a solid base of leadership experience and education.

In order to attain our personal and professional goals, we must have a “tool box” full of leadership tools. This is common in the study of leadership and as leaders, we must keep adding new tools to our box, using them throughout our career as needed. The study of leadership involves a vast continuum of subjects. Some of these include oral and written communication, change management, situational leadership, emotional intelligence, transactional versus transformational leadership, power, and the list goes on. I encourage anyone to delve into the different subjects of the art of leadership, because the more tools added to the box, the more effective leaders we become.

This book will touch on some of the subjects mentioned above, and more, through storytelling. Storytelling is in itself, a leadership tool. One way to establish trust in a relationship is through the use of storytelling. Storytelling helps us to get to know our coworkers and subordinates, as well as letting them see a little bit of us and see how we tick. We must

also remember that storytelling, being a form of communication, is a two-way street. A large part of communication is listening, so we must be sure not to dominate the session. We need to listen to their responses, as well as their stories. This is a way to build comradery and also boost a leader's standing in the eyes of their followers.

The series of stories that I will relate in this book are from my own personal and professional experiences, and are not meant to be in any chronological order. They are arranged in such a way to present ideas and examples that lead from one leadership-related lesson to the next. These stories may even be understood and enjoyed as standalone lessons. Some of them are humorous, some dead serious, and some might even present a risk of personal embarrassment, due to them being my own experiences. I've put myself out there with the hope of providing a positive example for people who are interested in learning more about leadership as they grow in their careers. One thing to be assured of, is that each and every story has a leadership component to it. My hope is that the reader will learn something from the lesson provided after each story, while being entertained at the same time.

The book is written in three parts. Each part of the book begins with an exhilarating ride in the back seat of an F-16 Fighting Falcon. At first glance one may think, how could riding in a fighter jet possibly equate to a leadership lesson? Well, it's like this. I wanted to bring a sense of excitement while at the same time delivering a lesson in leadership. As I began going through my memories, I realized that nearly every experience I thought of had a leadership component to it. Even the rides in the fighter jets. What this boiled down to was a realization that we can look inside ourselves and learn from our own unique past experiences, even those that don't seem to include a leadership element at the time. We can think back on these experiences and see that there may very well have been a leadership component. What resulted for me as I wrote the book, was that I learned more about myself as a leader. This made the act of writing it very therapeutic for me.

In the first part, *Learn from It*, I relay stories and experiences that assisted me in my quest to become a better leader. Each story has a moral at the end, and each one taught me a lesson. In the second part, *How Not to be a Leader*, I convey stories and experiences of where I had made mistakes as a leader or witnessed other leaders make mistakes. This part of the book illustrates what I think we should not do as leaders, with suggestions on how to avoid these leadership pitfalls. The last part, *Being a Manager*, discusses my ideas on how to approach leadership once that management position has finally been attained. This will include my thoughts on how to be an effective manager by utilizing the leadership skills attained through past experience and education. After reading my book, the reader should take away something positive that will help them on their own journey. After all, this book is my view from the middle, and how to climb out of it. Before we jump in, I need to explain the similarities between management positions and job titles in civilian organizations compared to the U.S. Air Force. This will help the reader who has never served in the military, relate to my experiences.

A common management hierarchy used in many companies can be characterized in the following manner, each with more authority and responsibility than the previous. Assistant manager, associate manager, manager, senior manager, and director. Above the director would be the executive suite of vice president, general manager, executive vice president, and finally, the CEO. Many companies have unique titles for their different levels of management, and the U.S. Air Force is no different.

For comparison purposes, the typical organizational structure of the Air Force is as follows: the lowest level is a squad which is a small group of workers. Next is a flight, which is a group of people in an organization that can be as small as twenty or as large as a hundred. A unit is larger, then comes a squadron, group and finally, wing. Civilian companies can relate the leaders in these positions as such: flight chief — manager. Unit or squadron chief — senior manager. Group chief — director. The wing level is the entity responsible for the entire Air Force base, akin to a vice president in the executive suite. This is the wing commander

who is a full colonel or brigadier general. Above this level we have a Numbered Air Force and Major Command, the leaders of which would be akin to a general manager and executive vice president in the civilian world. Above these is the Air Force Chief of Staff, the CEO of the entire Air Force. A myriad of other commands, positions and entities exist, but what has been outlined here is the basic organizational structure of the U.S. Air Force.

Another thing to keep in mind is that there are different job titles for employees in any company, the Air Force included, regardless of their pay rate. Throughout the book I will tell which rank (or pay rate, if you will) I was at the time, as well as what position I held. For instance, Technical Sergeant is the rank of someone who held the position of expeditor. Master Sergeant is the rank of someone who held the positions of flight chief or production superintendent. It is important to understand that the rank is different than the position. While the rank establishes an employee's seniority in the pecking order, the position is simply the title of the job they held. In fact, throughout the book I refer to flight chiefs and production superintendents as managers, and vice versa, because that is exactly what they are, in relation to a civilian company. Now, on with the book, I sincerely hope you enjoy it.



PART 1 : LEARN FROM IT

“**LEARN FROM IT**” was a phrase I would tell my children after they had made a mistake growing up. It has actually become an endearing statement to them, and any time I say it today, they would each get a smile on their face. Yes, they “learned from it” in their formative years. As leaders, we can learn from it as well, as the study of leadership should be a life-long practice. One can always learn from other’s experiences, and in this part of the book I will relate some stories that should help the reader hone their own skill sets in the realm of leadership.

The lessons we will find in this part include followership, leading by example, power, and active listening. These are arguably the four most important tools in our leadership tool box. Continuing on, we will discuss bonding with our followers over the sharing of food. We will then learn about how complacency can be a killer, sometimes in a literal sense. This will lead to taking responsibility for our mistakes and being able to laugh at ourselves. Next, we will see how becoming indispensable to an organization can delay us in our journey out up and out of the middle. Lastly, we will take a look at how we might deal with pressure, suicide, and finally, death. These last few chapters might sound difficult, even out of place, especially in a book about leadership. But as leaders, we may find ourselves in extremely tough situations from time to time, which we must learn to deal with.

Followers always look to their leader to show them the way through tough times. As leaders, we must find the internal courage to take the

reins during these times and lead them in the proper direction. We must influence those around us to go in the same direction; specifically, to *want* to go in the same direction. We do this through tough times and good times, by using the tools in our toolbox.

One of the most important tools in our toolbox is *communication*. I write a lot about this throughout the book, as it is very important aspect. For instance, a leader may use communication techniques to bring an individual into the fold. A key way to accomplish this is to show the individual how he or she fits in the organization. Explain to them that what they do matters, and how their contributions advance the cause of the organization. Once an individual realizes this, he or she may become a follower.

Before one can become a good leader, he or she must become a good follower. This is true because without followers, there are no leaders. As followers, we gravitate toward our leader, entrusting in them to show us the way. It is also important to realize that everyone can be a follower, from the entry level employee to the CEO. No matter what level we climb to in our respective careers, we will always have a leader to follow. It is for this key reason that we must learn how to become a follower, first and foremost. The follower must also know his or her standing within the company, and know how he or she contributes to the overall mission or company success. I learned this lesson early on in my career, after experiencing a ride on the World's Greatest Roller Coaster, otherwise known as the F-16 Fighting Falcon.

