

Frances HESSELBEIN Leadership FORUM

LEADERS in Action

Jason Womack interviews LT GEN CHRIS BURNE



Lieutenant General Christopher F. Burne, [The Judge Advocate General](#), Headquarters U.S. Air Force, serves as the Legal Adviser to the Secretary of the Air Force and all officers and agencies of the Department of the Air Force. He directs all judge advocates in the performance of their duties and is responsible for the professional oversight of more than 2,200 judge advocates, 350 civilian attorneys, 1,400 enlisted paralegals and 500 civilians in the Total Force Judge Advocate General's Corps worldwide. General Burne oversees military justice, operational and international law, and civil law functions at every level of command.

Q&A

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

Lt Gen Chris Burne: First, love learning. I was educated by the Jesuits — I studied Latin, Philosophy, History and Science. By being a Renaissance man or woman, leaders can be open to new ideas, new people and new concepts. Renaissance leaders are interested in the beauty and the gritty stuff that is humanity. Seek out mentors, attend classes and lectures, study history, tap into new technology...never lose your sense of wonder.

Second, listen, analyze and utilize the words and actions of the people around you. Every conversation is important, no matter the setting, circumstances or topic. Allies and adversaries all provide pieces of valuable information.

Finally, find the operating space between being risk-averse and reckless. If we don't, our organizations will be marginalized, ineffective and unable to compete. I preach to our young lawyers all the time that we can't be so risk-averse that we paralyze the mission. We must strive to get our clients to "yes," but have the moral courage to say "no" when no is the right answer.

JW: What was your Defining Moment as a leader?

LT GEN CB: I was a young captain. I had just deployed to Operation DESERT STORM. Upon arriving at an airfield in Saudi Arabia, our planeload of Airmen was given a task and, although pretty junior, I was the "senior ranking" and put in charge. In the midst of the task, someone shouted for us to "don our [gas] masks and take cover." We heard missiles overhead. At some point, I decided that lying in the sand wasn't the position I wanted to be in and decided to stand up. When I stood, I looked around and every Airman under my charge followed my lead, and stood up. Why? Because their captain stood up. I wasn't expecting that.

It was a leadership lesson I have always carried with me. Members of an organization watch what leaders are doing. They watch and act accordingly.

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Q&A with Lt Gen Chris Burne

Lt Gen Chris Burne is a leader who thinks comprehensively and long-term, who asks of himself, "Is our work promoting the mission?"

In this interview, Lt Gen Burne discusses what it means to be a Renaissance man or woman in today's climate; the importance of collaboration and listening; and developing "a sense for the sensitive."

They will follow leaders they trust, leaders who care about them, leaders who appear competent and confident; and they will reject false leaders.

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

LT GEN CB: In today's ET (Everybody Transmits) world, the reality is that everyone is sharing via social media. Leaders' actions are under constant review and unprecedented scrutiny. This is not something to fear, but leaders must be keenly aware of what I call the Wi-Fi tsunami and gear their actions and communications to take advantage of this reality.

Another new age reality is that some in leadership roles tend to become entrenched or fixed on a position very early in the development stage. They ought to resist stepping into quick-dry concrete. This is a little back-to-the-future, but leaders need to be open to new facts, new ideas, and new solutions that may differ from their preconceived answers.

Earlier this year, I had a conversation with Senator Bob Dole. He emphasized that when he was the leader of the Senate, he could sit down with his counterparts across the aisle and craft legislation through collaborative effort... a little compromise allowed them to accomplish "we the people's" business. We need to get back to that.

Collaboration is a focus of my work. I could never compromise on a core principle, but it is rare that building solutions to advance the mission gets to that level. I know of no relationships whether professional among peers and competitors or personal between spouses or friends that can survive without a little bit of collaboration and compromise.

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?

LT GEN CB: Listen aggressively (meaning actively, intently, completely) and ask questions. Leaders must have a sense for the sensitive. Be open to listening, learning, analyzing and utilizing the

conversations and communication that are all around you. Listen for the subtle details. Sometimes it's what's not being said. Always operate on both the tactical and strategic levels. Let conversations and accompanying visuals feed your solutions. Leaders need to think comprehensively and long-term. It does no good to win the battle and lose the war.

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

LT GEN CB: "Does our work or decision enable commanders (or directors, partners, managers, subordinates) and promote the mission? Are the actions we are taking fair, just, and transparent (meaning visibly just and defensible)? For my legal colleagues: Are we ACTIVE advocates...that is, aggressive, comprehensive, timely, independent, versatile, and effective?"

Finally, as a leader, ask yourself, "How is talent being developed?" Explore ways to help members of your organization get better. Mentorship is incredibly helpful in this regard. I encourage people to seek mentors, and for leaders to seek out mentees — when you run across real talent, reach out to that person.

This may be a convenient time to say just a few words about mentoring. I was fortunate to have had several platinum mentors, starting early on with my parents and continuing to present-day colleagues, who passed along invaluable leadership and interpersonal life lessons. A mentor can sometimes be a boss, a peer, or a subordinate, but a mentor is always an invaluable resource for professional development and personal growth.

(My #1 mentor continues to be my WWII vet/Distinguished Flying Cross father. He turned 93 years old earlier this month...Happy Birthday, Dad, and thanks! My other most important mentor is my beautiful wife. She offers encouragement, but honestly critiques my ideas. Leaders need that... thank you, Robin!)

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

LT GEN CB: I normally leave the Pentagon after 6:30. The hallways are quiet then. On the way out I thank those who are still there making it nice for us... cleaning floors and restrooms. Everyone contributes to the mission in some way. Sometimes we have to remind ourselves of that.

When I get home, I walk my dog and then discuss the day's activities and upcoming events with my wife, my partner of 29 years. Of course, I don't mention classified or attorney confidential information, but in discussing other issues, Robin often helps me focus on details, like family impacts, that I may have overlooked.

I then spend some "quality time" on the computer... answering email, writing performance reports, editing position papers, etc. As it draws near turning into bed, I read... I love history and biographies. As was General Patton's habit, I also read the Bible praying for wisdom, health and courage. I encourage spiritual enrichment – whatever that term means to you. I firmly believe we need to stay fit and refresh ourselves spiritually, not just physically.

Finally, I catch up on the news, and then — and this is critical — update my weekly to-do list of tasks, calls and meetings. I always have a top-ten list. To paraphrase Yogi... *If you don't know where you're going, you might not get there.*

When I wake up in the morning, I check email, adjust task lists, jump on the treadmill, feed the dog and by the time I'm eating breakfast, I am totally energized. My mind is racing... I can't wait to attack the to-do list and discuss twenty other ideas that have since come into play.

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

LT GEN CB: My staff kids me that our flagship is The Black Swan with a battle cry of "expect the unexpected." I do call a few audibles throughout the day. So I laugh with them when they say we're setting sail, but it actually fits my belief that leadership requires aggressive listening, comprehensive analysis, real caring, and bold action.

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