



Intellectual Humility and Defining Success

by Chief Warrant Officer 5 Kevin G. Boughton
CCWO, U.S. Army Intelligence & Security Command (INSCOM)

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In 2018, I submitted an article to the *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin* that was republished in the *Newsliner* that outlines what I describe as the leadership attributes and characteristics of senior Warrant Officers. This article describes an additional leadership attribute (intellectual humility) and explains my leader philosophy for defining and sustaining success.

To recap the leadership attributes and characteristics of senior Warrant Officers, first and foremost the senior Warrant Officer must be a technical leader, not just a technical expert. The senior Warrant Officer must also be an ethical leader, a professional leader, a disciplined leader, and a steward of his or her profession.

While these five attributes help form a solid leadership foundation (similar to the leadership attributes and competencies in Army Field Manual 6-22), they do not encompass all leadership attributes or competencies required to be successful in the Army as a Warrant Officer.

The additional leadership attribute and leader philosophy are based on my personal lessons learned as the Command Chief Warrant Officer of the Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM), and on my engagements with hundreds of Warrant Officers across the Army.

The additional leadership attribute of "Intellectual Humility" enhances the five attributes mentioned above. A failure to apply this attribute can result in a loss of trust, career, and in the worst cases loss of life or limb. My leadership philosophy on success is an exemplar model to help shape a Warrant Officer's beliefs and behaviors across a career.

Intellectual Humility (Leadership Attribute)

The concept of humility is not an attribute or leadership characteristic normally associated with the military. However, Field Manual 6-22 "Leader Development" does mention humility as a "desired characteristic of organi-

zational and strategic leaders" (Army Field Manual 6-22, Leader Development, 2015, pp. 1-9).

"Humility is a desired characteristic of organizational and strategic leaders who should recognize that others have specialized expertise indispensable to success. A modest view of one's own importance helps underscore an essential ingredient to foster cooperation across organizational boundaries. Even the most humble person needs to guard against an imperceptible inflation of ego when constantly exposed to high levels of attention and opportunities."

While I agree humility is important for our strategic leaders, I firmly believe humility applies to **all** Warrant Officers, regardless of unit or echelon of assignment. Why is being humble important to the Army's technical leaders? First, a technical leader and expert who is humble understands that the strength of the Army is the collective knowledge, skills, and professional behaviors of its people, and no single Soldier holds all the answers.

I have personally observed the imperceptible – and more often quite observable – inflation of ego in the Warrant Officer cohort, specifically related to the principle of "intellectual humility." Gustavo Razzetti explains, "Intellectual humility means leaving the door open, even when you think you are right. You are receptive to new facts, instead of trying to protect yourself" (Razzetti, 2019).

When a Warrant Officer's ego does not allow him or her to be receptive to new ideas (and to be wrong), it can and does result in a breakdown in other desired attributes, such as disciplined leadership and stewardship of the profession.

When Warrant Officers believe they "know it all," they take liberty with authorities, processes, and critical workflows that often result in devastating consequences to a unit/organization's success, and in some cases even the very careers of those officers. When technical Warrant Officers fail to be intellectually humble, it can result in a loss of trust from commanders, peers, and Soldiers.

Within the Army Aviation Corps, this can lead to devastating, costly, and sometimes deadly results. Many Army aviation accidents are the result of overconfidence and lack of intellectual humility in some of our most senior aviators, especially evident when a pilot might question the need to

use a checklist or forget to use a checklist, even though they have thousands of hours in the cockpit.

Another exemplar of this phenomenon within the aviation and medical profession are described in detail in the National Public Radio Hidden Podcast Hidden Brain episode, “You 2.0: Check Yourself” (Vedantam, 2018).

Bottom line, technical expertise and experience often fail when coupled with overconfidence and a lack of intellectual humility. Army Warrant Officers should carefully guard against this natural tendency in ego as we grow in experience, knowledge, skill, and behavior in our specific technical disciplines. A lack of intellectual humility, tangled with personal ego and overconfidence, can be costly.

Defining Success (Leader Philosophy)

How do we define a successful Army career? Success should never be focused on achieving rank, reward, or accolades. It must be about outcomes, i.e. the effects of your efforts at every assignment and on every mission. My philosophy is to ask myself two basic questions.

- ◆ Am I contributing to the mission in a positive manner?
- ◆ Am I making a difference for the future of my family, the Army, and the nation?


I have spent my career focused on these two questions, as a basis of my philosophy on success. The decisions I make in regard to my Army career drive me to one foundational concept, and that is to “execute whatever mission I am given to the very best of my ability in an attempt to answer the two foundational questions.”

However, you cannot just leave success to chance, and just these questions. You must do your best to **prepare** for success. Attend Professional Military Education courses with a

positive attitude, striving to learn and grow. Look at every day as a new beginning, and new chance to learn and grow your skills and knowledge.

Approach every situation and every interaction with a positive attitude, and view these as opportunities to grow as a Soldier and a person. Treat all Soldiers and civilians with respect and decency. After all, even the most junior Soldier and the janitor have an innate desire to be recognized for the value they bring to the unit/organization.

How do you **maintain** success? I believe you maintain success by never forgetting where you came from. Stay humble, be positive, and demonstrate technical leadership – after all, there was a time, not that long ago, when you may have been an inexperienced private or young Sergeant, learning to lead.

Strive to demonstrate value to those around you through continuous focused efforts, maintaining a positive attitude, and never forgetting the two foundational questions. “**Am I contributing to the mission in a positive manner?**” and “**Am I making a difference for the future of my family, the Army, and the nation?**” 

Works Cited

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