



By Sean Finnan

Several years ago, I came across this quote:

“If your absence doesn’t affect them, your presence never mattered.”

As I was nearing the end of my O-5 command, I began to reflect on what I was leaving behind. Would my absence affect the squadron? Did my presence matter? Like all of us, I’m human. In a way, I wanted to be missed. I wanted to think that my presence over the previous two years had made a difference. I think we all naturally feel that way. But as I thought more about those questions, I realized that if I truly accomplished the second part of the concept (making a difference during my time), then the first part (my absence affecting the squadron) likely would not occur. That was a good thing.

The key to making our presence matter is adding value to the organization, and that value is not measured in the present. It is measured and realized in the future. If we have improved our critical thinking skills, if we have built strong relationships, if we have established well thought-out and repeatable processes, and if we have left something better than when we found it, our presence mattered. The true test of whether our time there mattered is if all those things endure after we are gone. Therefore, if our presence truly mattered, our absence should have no effect on the organization.

This mantra is particularly true when thinking about our most important value-adding leadership action - positively influencing individual people. The mark we leave on those who will replace us is the true testament to our presence mattering. While in command, unfortunately I had to deal with a young man who drove under the influence. Through the legal process, we discovered he had a long-term drinking problem which led to security clearance issues, a promotion delay, and a temporary job transfer. But throughout the months working this issue, I continued to remember that he was a person, not just a statistic. I educated him on the governing regulations, kept him apprised of key milestones, explained the why behind my decisions, shared my thought-process on each matter, and, most importantly, remained empathetic. Because of his tremendous attitude and work-ethic to overcome this set-back, I knew the influence I had on him would carry over to those he led in the future.

In his book, [*Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About the Business of Life*](#), James Kerr says, "Our greatest responsibility is to honour those who came before us and those who will come after, to 'leave the jersey in a better place.' We are the stewards of our organization, the caretakers of our own lineage. Our actions today will echo beyond our time." That young man did recover. His security clearance was reinstated, he did promote, and he did return to his career field. He's now thriving within the service as a supervisor and a leader. While that's certainly great, what's most satisfying is that years later, he says the handling of his situation changed his life in a very positive way - both personally and

professionally. He's a better person and a better leader because of it, and guess what? I'm absent. The influence we have on individuals no doubt shapes the organization and infuses into its lineage. Our presence starts that infusion and our absence should not affect it.

I really hope that was the case for the squadron and I think it was. That is the beauty of a military change of command. On the day of the ceremony, I passed the flag to the next commander, I walked off the stage, and I was a 'has-been.' The squadron embraced the new leadership, it continued doing what it does, and the mission rolled on. Sure, there were some tweaks and some changes, but the fundamental framework of our mission accomplishment and human development continued in our usual, extraordinary manner. That was not because of what I did. It was because of what WE did.

The great Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote:

A leader is best

When people barely know he exists

Of a good leader, who talks little,

When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,

They will say, "We did this ourselves."

As you inevitably move from unit to unit, reflect on this: Maybe your presence mattered. But you really won't know until your absence doesn't.

Col Sean Finnan is a command pilot in the United States Air Force with over 3,100 hours in several variants of the C-130. He has flown missions throughout the world, including in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy,

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