



By Lt Col Nate Bump

Seeking timeless wisdom is a simple strategy to identify the leadership traits and behaviors necessary for effective military officers. This post will illustrate various timeless truths leaders must first avoid and then seek to apply them using an antifragility concept. It will also specifically identify traits, behaviors, and recommendations to assist younger officers who seek to improve their leadership effectiveness.

Nassim Taleb's book, [Antifragile](#), details the [Lindy Effect](#) and how certain facets of life stand the test of time. Specific examples include religion, texts, stories, currency, and societal systems. Taleb proposes certain "potentially perennial, non-perishable items" exist that actually "age in reverse." That is, for every additional day something 'lives,' its life expectancy increases! Using this framework, we can observe leadership traits and styles based on their staying power throughout the years (think decades and centuries) to focus on the areas (both good and bad) with the highest certainty of remaining relevant to leaders for years to come.

Let's consider first what NOT to do. In other words, how to increase your antifragility via avoiding what Taleb characterizes as 'big errors.' Although the below do not occur at high rates in proportion to the number in leadership positions, their damage is irreversible and

profound (Taleb characterizes these types of errors as a ‘blow up’). They are also Lindy-esque in their staying power over a long period of time.

1. **Ethical/Criminal Violations** — Like the rest of humankind, leaders are susceptible to foundational, character-based missteps with predictable negative results. The DoD even publishes a real-world [guide](#) of leaders who commit them via decades of case studies. Understanding this error’s magnitude is vital to begin increasing your antifragility. In other words, [prevent trouble by avoiding it all together](#).
2. **Hubris** — Excessive pride is another negative trait worth studying based on its powerful historical recurrences. From [Odysseus](#) to [modern military history](#), hubris unhinges egos, leaving you at risk of total destruction. Hubris’ power is important to understand as it can transcend the individual leader and take down entire institutions when leaders start to ‘believe their own hype.’
3. **Toxic leadership** — This modern term describes a set of historically repeated negative behaviors observed in leaders. The Army has gone so far as to [define and list](#) them from research written in the proverbial blood of fallen leaders. Simply starting with a ‘first do no harm’ approach can allow further study and turn into positive, time-tested behaviors.

Let’s now expand into the area of positive leadership traits that stand the test of time, using author Jim Collins’ seven distinct ‘leadership styles’ from his latest book [Beyond Entrepreneurship 2.0](#) ([amongst others](#)). Rich in detail and references from the past century, Collins focuses on what the best organizations and their leaders do consistently well. He uses their long-term survivability and market dominance as evidence of their effectiveness. In essence, he distilled Lindy-type characteristics from mountains of research and analysis to provide us seven styles. Below are these styles with a military perspective for leaders at all levels to consider.

1. **Authenticity**- Embody the values of the organization, day in and day out. Effective leaders demonstrate their conviction to something bigger than themselves consistently in the small, even mundane daily tasks. Eventually, subordinates and peers discover those who truly embody this characteristic, and those who do not.
2. **Decisiveness**- Develop a [system](#) for deciding and learning when to go fast and when to slow down. As you progress from a tactical to a more operational or strategic role, your ability to discern what and when you should decide is critical to effective leadership.
3. **Focus**- Manage your time and be ruthless about saying no to the tasks that are misaligned with your priorities. Time is your most precious, non-renewable resource and you must deliberately make time first for the things only leaders can do for the

team.

4. **Personal Touch**- Constantly build and tend to genuine relationships with your peers and subordinates in pursuit of the mission. Be the real you-fakeness damages trust and will be discovered. As Former Secretary of Defense and retired General Jim Mattis says in his book [Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead](#), “they don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”
5. **Hard/Soft People Skills**- Crimes vs. Mistakes...one is punishable under UCMJ, the other is an opportunity for a teachable moment. Be the teacher/coach/mentor everyone needs when they make an honest mistake. Making this move enables [Mission Command](#) by empowering subordinates, building trust, and increasing unit effectiveness.
6. **Communication**- Leaders stimulate communication in all directions and through all mediums internally within their teams and externally. Bosses, peers, subordinates, and outside-the-unit stakeholders rarely doubt their ability to communicate when necessary and regularly receive the intended message..
7. **Ever Forward**- An effective leader pushes themselves and their teams to reach mastery by setting high standards and goals on a never ending quest for continual improvement. The day a leader or their team has ‘arrived’ is the beginning of hubris-induced atrophy.

As a field grade officer (FGO) and Air Force Squadron Commander, I have observed some “Lindy-type” company grade officer (CGO) traits/behaviors beyond Collins’ work. From experience, study, mentorship and observation, I offer three traits specific to effective CGOs.

- **Initiative & Attitude**- Take action using commander intent with an infectious, positive attitude. Successful company-grade officers consistently display this trait within any role or task given.
- **Seeks Opportunities vs Finds Problems**- Junior officers can and do ‘put out fires’, but the most effective find and exploit opportunities as ‘intrapreneurs.’ That is, they look to solve problems that lead to exponential impact.
- **Constantly Learning**- Successful leaders at all levels make learning a [habit](#) and a part of their identity. They learn by doing, observing, and reading. Below is a “CGO starter pack” with Lindy-type wisdom for professional reading (and re-reading for senior leaders). These works are over 30, 80, and 1,800 years young! New ideas on leadership and learning are interesting, but by looking to the past, we can harness those with true staying power. As Taleb points out, “the future is in the past.”

1. [Meditations](#) by Marcus Aurelius (A guide for control, living, and leadership)

2. [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#) by Steven Covey (Clarify your purpose & impact)
3. [How to Win Friends and Influence People](#) by Dale Carnegie (Foundational, simple, and practical guide for new leaders navigating the human landscape)

Use timeless leadership wisdom to keep improving with an emphasis on first avoiding the timeless traps. By studying and applying the constantly demonstrated traits of successful leaders, we can increase our effectiveness regardless of our rank or roles. Lastly, if you're looking to increase your effectiveness as a junior officer, dive a little deeper into the demonstrated CGO behaviors units demand of their high performers and never stop learning.

Lt Col Nate Bump (USAF) is the commander of the 421st Combat Training Squadron at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, a career Mobility Air Forces pilot, and a SOUTHCOM Foreign Area Officer. He's also a perennial protagonist for leadership development and can be contacted via his LinkedIn profile: www.linkedin.com/in/nate-bump-a095b310.

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