





by Dr. Robb M. Randall

I attended an Air Force sponsored leadership class some years ago, the subject was along the lines of leading through conflict and change.

At that time in my life, I considered myself having superior vision beyond anyone in this particular class (or anyone appointed over me, if I'm being completely honest). Working through an ongoing group exercise, I had a snappy, seriously-funny retort that was guaranteed to get a few laughs and illustrate that superiority (group exercise defined as: the class separated into multiple groups simultaneously working through solutions to the assigned complex problem, the instructor walking through each group's discussion).

In my brilliantly-laid quip, I loudly projected how things *should* be organized to lead through complex change or conflict. It's possible I phrased it in a way to highlight the inability of my higher headquarters to run an organization. Either way, my thoughts, no doubt, had a depth of wisdom certainly not seen by anyone in the class.

As an observant type of leader, I saw the class facilitator, a fully-certified psychologist, process my comments. He stopped walking, restrained himself from looking toward the direction of the comment (me), and went into a focused thought for a minute.

After snapping out of it, he raised his voice and held up his hand to ensure he had the class's attention. He intended to provide helpful knowledge to benefit all. In this case, however, I knew it was prompted by *my* comments. I was poised and ready to hear my wisdom shared with the rest of the growing leaders in the room, told through the one accepted expert.

As I began to smile in a gloating satisfaction of superiority he said, "You know, in the stories we tell, we always describe ourselves as the hero...*never the villain.*"

You know that movie trick they do in Hollywood, the one where the main character is completely oblivious to what is going on around them.

Then. They. Get. It.

The camera does a bunch of zooming-in motions, focusing in and out of each and every one of the pertinent things that describe *exactly* what is going on. Yea, well, that happened in that room that day — and within a matter of seconds, I realized one thing: **I was the villain.**

NOT the hero, not even close.

I was the villain, the one in the room that always had a detailed diatribe, usually beet-face red, explaining with superiority why some decision or process was not going to work (with no solution offered, might I add.) Oh, and I always added a full spoonful of tone that basically said, "Is everyone in this room a total idiot?"

Of course, there are multiple lessons, vital to being an effective leader, learned from that day of epiphany. Lessons other than me being arrogant and self-centered. I realized I couldn't truly work through all of those lessons and apply them into my leadership processes until I entered a world that I didn't take seriously enough before that day. I had to enter the world of introspection. Honest, deep down, no-kidding introspection, self-reflection, self-evaluation, and measurement.

Call it what you will, but the fact remains it has to be done, [it's one of the most important qualities for a leader to inculcate and hone over their careers.](#)

Even [Sun Tzu](#) pointed to it as a fundamental tenet:

*Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril.*

He states it from an enemy point of view, but the reality he paints is simple: without knowing yourself, you will lose. Period. And that truth infiltrates throughout every aspect of your leadership being.

Ok, so now what? It is difficult to sit down and write your own accomplishments for your annual report let alone a comprehensive critique of an inward-focused assessment. It's not something that is really taught, so where do we begin? Action has to be taken, and as one who loathes books and advice that fail to answer the vital question: "how do I actually do that—for real?" I offer the following:

1. Start with ADP 6-22 (Section 6). This will set the framework within which you can focus your reflection. [ADP 6-22](#) calls it "being self-aware" and is a great reference to start digging into the weeds about why it is so important to hone the habit of taking stock in your strengths and weaknesses. Actively committed to examining your own behavior across the spectrum of conditions and situations. The desired outcome is to

develop a clear, accurate self-perception and an honest picture of your capabilities and limitations.

2. You can't do it alone, because in your mind you are Luke Skywalker, not Darth Vader. You must surround yourself with at least the main three: mentor(s), truth-telling colleagues and, yes, subordinates. When used right, you will find the whole spectrum of insights about yourself. Some you didn't know existed and some you were a bit intimidated to truly uncover.
3. To get into the mindset and habit of assessment, start with your basic After-Action Reports. They are an assessment of mission, training, workshops, etc. In addition to focusing on the facts of the events, start turning the corner and examining yourself. Figure out how your actions affected the event. Ask some basic questions: what you did, how did you act, how or if your direction was received and understood. And then dig a bit deeper, find out why it was received (or not) the way you intended it to be.

If this is too big of a leap, start with something you do well and start writing down how you do it, as if you were going to mentor someone on the subject. For example, I routinely give individuals the task of documenting how they put together a briefing. I ask them to really think about how they internally organize a briefing even before it is put together. How do they construct the material? Why do they use the images they do? Is it in story format or just a dump of info...why? Most of the time they had never really thought about it, they just did it. That's the point, it's imperative that we transition our minds to thinking about *why* we act the way we do.

4. Journaling is equally beneficial. Get a [Green Notebook](#) and start writing down your thoughts, self-focused ideas, and leadership questions.
5. Take the time (by the way this is extremely important - you must find and give yourself the chance to ponder and reflect) to [read blogs or listen to podcasts](#), you will learn something new within the same article or interview as your leadership journey evolves. Take some notes about how your thinking has changed, how to apply that in your current leadership challenge. Even here at *From the Green Notebook*, Jacob and Joe ask each of their podcast guests to discuss their "why" - based on [Simon Sinek's](#) book "Start with Why." You can't answer that question unless you have spent the time really thinking about your own thought process. So far, not one guest has said they wanted to be a villain...just saying.

Two other great examples that I'll highlight for you to ponder:

A fantastic example of the introspection and action taken based on the reflection is in this [courageous post by Dana Darby after she lost her Company](#).

[\*Eating Glass: The Inner Journey through Failure and Renewal\* by Marc D. Jacobson](#). This book is the ultimate example of introspection.

So, to transition from the inner villain in you, start looking inward and you will be amazed. It's a necessary step in being an effective leader. What will you find?

Hopefully, you will discover that you're not the Luke Skywalker of the story either...as a leader, you are Yoda.

*Dr. Randall is a retired Air Force Officer, with 35 years of service and experience. Currently leads the DEVCOM-Army Research Laboratory's (ARL) Atmospheric Science Center and Atmospheric Dynamics and Analytics Branch. Prior to his current position Dr. Randall has served as the Senior Climate Scientist, 14th Weather Squadron USAF, as a USAF Squadron Commander, in Special Operations, as a FOA Military Deputy Director and Division Chief, Advisor to the Iraqi Air Force Staff, and an Air Force Institute of Technology Professor. Connect with him on twitter @AtmoFX or via [Linkedin](#).*

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