

# Learning Leadership in the Military

## Key Developmental Events and Lessons from Senior Officers

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## Executive Summary

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Military officers attending the Center for Creative Leadership's (CCL®) Leadership at the Peak program participated in a survey of their key developmental experiences and the lessons learned from those events. The research indicated that events involving **Positive Role Models**, **Negative Role Models**, and **Failures and Mistakes** were the most frequently reported development experiences, and produced lessons on **Managing Subordinates**, **Executive**

**Leadership**, **Communication**, **Integrity**, and **Decision Making**. Understanding the types of events that lead to these vital lessons can provide current and future officers a greater ability to guide subordinates with opportunities to learn, plus identify situations that can deliver important leadership lessons. These key events also assist practitioners when creating tools and processes to enhance leadership development.

# Introduction

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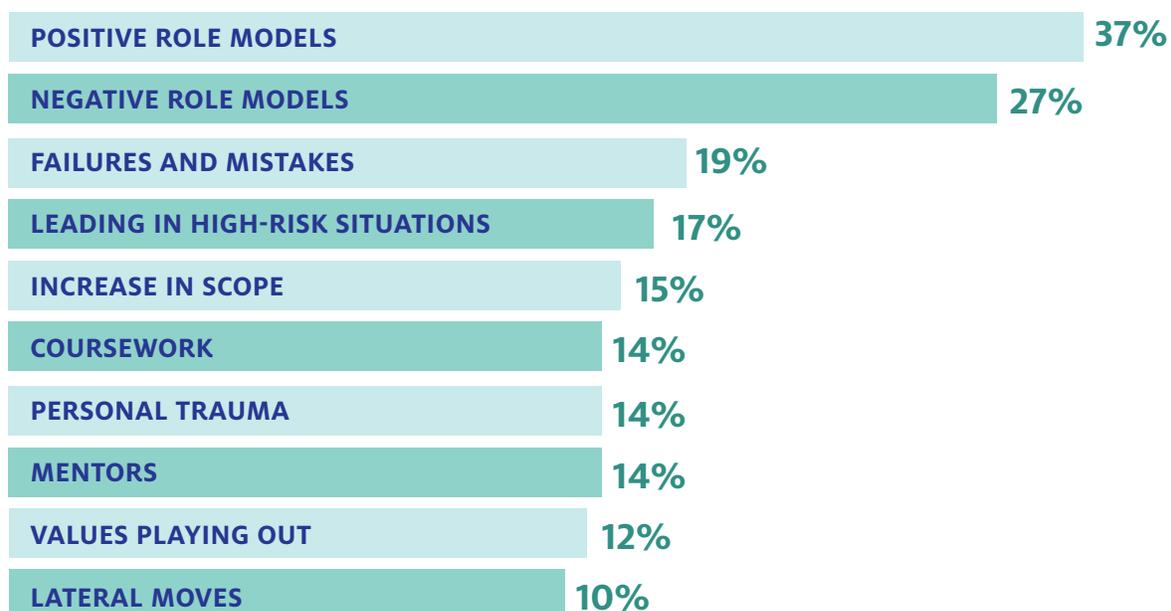
On May 30, 2011, President Obama introduced his choices for the next chairman and vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as well as the Army Chief of Staff, stating that America's servicemen and women are "the best our nation has to offer, and they deserve nothing but the best in return, and that includes leaders," according to news reports. These and other high-level military leader selections impact thousands of individuals and processes that make up our military, which means these leaders need to be effective and resilient. **Yet how do military leaders learn the lessons of leadership?** Traditional wisdom tells us that classroom leader development and battlefield experience are perhaps the key places where officers learn about leadership, but is there a broader set of experiences that have important developmental impact? What lessons do military leaders actually learn that they come to see as most valuable? And how can we draw upon their experiences to avoid future mistakes and build on past successes?

Until recently, no one had gone directly to senior military officers and asked these questions. This report presents the results of a survey of 52 senior military officers who participated in the Center for Creative Leadership's Leadership at the Peak program. **By gaining a greater understanding of what is learned from the key experiences of these officers, assignments can be more highly tuned to the lessons individuals need to learn.** In addition, leader development practitioners can better create tools and processes to assist these leaders in not only charting the best course for their own development, but also reflecting on what has been learned from the opportunities they have had.

# Top 10 Developmental Experiences: Definitions

Respondents were asked to reflect on their careers and to share the key developmental experiences that led to a lasting change in the way they lead or manage. Ten key developmental experiences emerged from this study. Developmental experiences include, but go well beyond, traditional classroom work and battlefield experience as sources of leader development.

Figure 1



\*Percentage based on number of participants reporting event. Because respondents report more than one developmental event, percentages do not add up to 100%.

On the following pages, each experience category will first be described and expanded before providing specific lessons that grew from these officers' experiences. (Verbatim quotations from respondents in this study appear in green type.)

## 1. Positive Role Models (37%)

- **Positive Role Models** are superiors with whom officers interacted or observed during the course of their careers and who were seen as positive and effective leaders.
- These role models were characterized as possessing exceptional skills or attributes and were indispensable to an officer's leadership foundation. For example:

“A previous boss was leading a very divisive issue. To bridge the gap, he would reach out and engage the critics—and even hire them to help define a solution. Learned that collaboration, inclusiveness, and political will to succeed are critical to success as a leader.”

## 2. Negative Role Models (27%)

- **Negative Role Models** are superiors with whom officers interacted during the course of their careers who treated them or others badly or who were ineffective in their jobs.
- As with **Positive Role Models**, each case described a person or group of people who profoundly influenced the officer's approach to management.

“Watching people senior to me who had high egos and were arrogant. Most are now gone. Learned low ego and caring for people is the best approach.”

## 3. Failures and Mistakes (19%)

- **Failures and Mistakes** are stories of managerial shortcomings (usually of the officer but sometimes those of others observed by the officer) that derailed goals.
- Sometimes failure to give or obtain necessary information, support, or agreement on specific issues curtailed or caused operations to fail. Sometimes these were personal mistakes but all had consequences.

“Passed a major inspection as Junior Officer—only to have higher echelon ‘fail’ it to make a logistics point related to supply. Significant impact on morale—learned to ‘look’ at a broad/full spectrum of factors versus just goal dead ahead, in order to ensure a win!”

## 4. Leading in High-risk Situations (17%)

- **Leading in high-risk situations** describes assignments where officers were charged with leading in combat situations, emergencies, rescue teams, and other life-threatening situations.

“As a senior commander in Afghanistan and Iraq I have been amazed at the great ideas even my lowest ranking Airmen have, so I go out of my way to solicit their thoughts.”

## 5. Increase in Scope (15%)

- **Increase in Scope** refers to an increase in responsibility (not necessarily a formal promotion) that is both broader and different from what had gone before.
- **Increases in scope** included switching to new responsibilities and massive increases in numbers of people, budget, and functions to manage.

“Assigned to command nuclear submarine. Taught me how important instincts and delegation are in the complex changing workplace.”

## 6. Coursework (14%)

- **Coursework** occurred as individuals drew lessons after receiving training or taking courses in their area or a new area of expertise.

“Graduating from USAF Fighter Weapons School. Importance of technical competency and high credibility in forging change in people/organizations.”

## 7. Personal Trauma (14%)

- **Personal Trauma** refers to crises or traumatic experiences with a powerful emotional impact.
- Officers described events in which their families, health, even their lives, were threatened by unanticipated tragedies or potentially life-threatening circumstances.
- These traumas stemmed from both work and personal life and included personal injury or illness, the death of others, divorce, and combat duty.

“Saw my Second Lieutenant daughter go off to war in Iraq, which crystallized my dedication to do all in my power to support soldiers with the resources they need to succeed.”

## 8. Mentors (14%)

- Officers reporting this event described the important role mentoring serves in the leadership development process.
- They described a superior who took special interest in their development, their devastation when their mentor

left the service, or the occasion when they successfully mentored another individual. A central theme in this category is the timing of the mentoring relationship in the individual's career.

“As a young Junior Naval Officer (2S) during Vietnam being given responsibility way above my experience level for 70-person line division aboard aircraft carrier in war zone and having crusty Chief Petty Officer (40 years old/20 years experience) teach me how to lead.”

## 9. Values Playing Out (12%)

- **Values Playing Out** events are snapshots of behavior occurring within the workplace. These are short-lived events involving a person (or persons) doing something to another person (or persons, or to self/self-destruct) that had a visible impact.

- The officer, as an actor in the scene or as an observer of it, drew a value-laden conclusion from it. Events of this type almost always were of short duration, occurred in chain-of-command relationships (though these can be done to a senior person), and were discussed “out of context”—that is, the “snapshot” had survived while the larger scenario in which it happened had dimmed.

“As a midshipman I was asked if I ever left the USNA area (not allowed by rules). I answered yes but received no punishment—learned that the organization valued integrity above all else.”

## 10. Lateral Moves (10%)

- These events involve reassignments (not necessarily by choice) from combat roles to staff roles, or laterally between different functions.
- The purpose of these assignments was to teach officers the “other side” of the organization and/or to expose them

to different strategies and cultures, but the assignments themselves varied greatly.

- Sometimes what is described are multiple moves over time or temporary moves, such as in the example below.

“Served as a White House Fellow for the director of OMB in the White House during the Reagan second term. Taught me executive leadership techniques and broadened my cultural horizons immensely.”



## Top 10 Developmental Events: Discussion

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The top three events (**Positive Role Models**, **Negative Role Models**, and **Failures and Mistakes**) provide a greater understanding of the types of experiences that lead to leadership lessons and improved leadership behaviors in the military. **Military officers perceive role models as clearly the most influential development experience in their careers.** Sixty-four percent of the respondents reported **Positive** or **Negative Role Models** events, and these provided their greatest opportunities for leadership growth in the military. Of course, not all role models they described were seen as models of good leadership. **Negative Role Models** taught them what not to do and are not an experience we would suggest should be intentionally designed into anyone's career. **Positive Role Models** were those from whom officers learned critical lessons about how to effectively lead others, what effective executive/strategic leadership looks like, how important it is to have integrity, and how to communicate effectively.

**Failures and Mistakes** were reported as key developmental events by 19% of participants and offered the second-highest level of opportunity to learn lessons of leadership. In high-stakes situations, while in the spotlight of powerful audiences, and during day-to-day operations, these **Failures and Mistakes** events were vital experiences that impacted top officers' approach to leadership.

**“Watching staff report to commander and noting that high conflict/high-risk potentialities were not completely explored leading to suboptimal decisions. Learned to develop multiple sources of information.”**

The fourth event, **Leading in High-Risk Situations**, emphasized that officers felt “tested” in these situations and found the opportunity to develop greater levels of emotional intelligence.

**“Combat: Passing the test of combat leadership gave me a sense of contentment and made me more compassionate.”**

**High-risk situations** were reported as developmental by 17% of participants and led to lessons about how to best **Manage Subordinates**.

The next event, **Increase in Scope**, commonly reported by senior executives in the corporate sector, was reported by 15% of military participants and led to additional insights into how to most effectively **Manage Subordinates** at various levels in the organization:

“How to delegate—held five commands and went from trying to do it all and micromanage to trust.”

**Coursework**, **Personal Trauma**, and **Mentors** were each reported by 14% of military leaders. These events provided officers with lessons on **Managing Subordinates**, **Career Management/Life-Work Balance**, and **Decision Making**. **Coursework** provided a fascinating look at the main lessons officers continue to learn with valuable training in the areas of increasing integrity and improving working relationships with subordinates. For example, one officer wrote:

“The New Flag Officer Training Symposium, June 2003. Learned the value of 360° feedback, sensitivity to impact on subordinates and Senior Executive expectations beyond those I had assumed.”

**Personal Trauma** was the only event within the top 10 events that led to lessons of **Career Management/Life-Work Balance**, or gaining a sense of how to balance both following a career path while handling life activities. For example, one leader wrote:

“I recently had two civilian members of my team get killed in combat conditions in Iraq. I learned that my responsibilities (in certain situations) go beyond the office environment and extend to the personal need of my team members. We all have support systems and these systems are connected to the people we lead behind the scenes. I learned how important and ‘attached’ these support systems are through getting to know the families of our two fallen heroes.”

These lessons also grew from traumatic events impacting family, which, in turn, affected the way the officer approached subordinates.

“Spouse diagnosed with breast cancer shaped thinking as senior officer on priorities.”

**Values Playing Out** was reported by 12% of respondents and led to lessons on **Integrity**, emphasizing one of the core values of the military.

“Accused of a significant airmanship violation. Commander got all the facts and I was exonerated. Taught me to get the facts before you act.”

These experiences help to develop leaders who apply their core values to everything they approach. To assist these leaders, **value-based experiences can be used, shared, and applied to encourage leaders to gain and use these lessons of integrity across a variety of situations.**

The final event among the top 10 key events, **Lateral Moves**, was reported by 10% of participants. These individuals experienced how to navigate challenges in new positions and to rely on others for expertise and support.

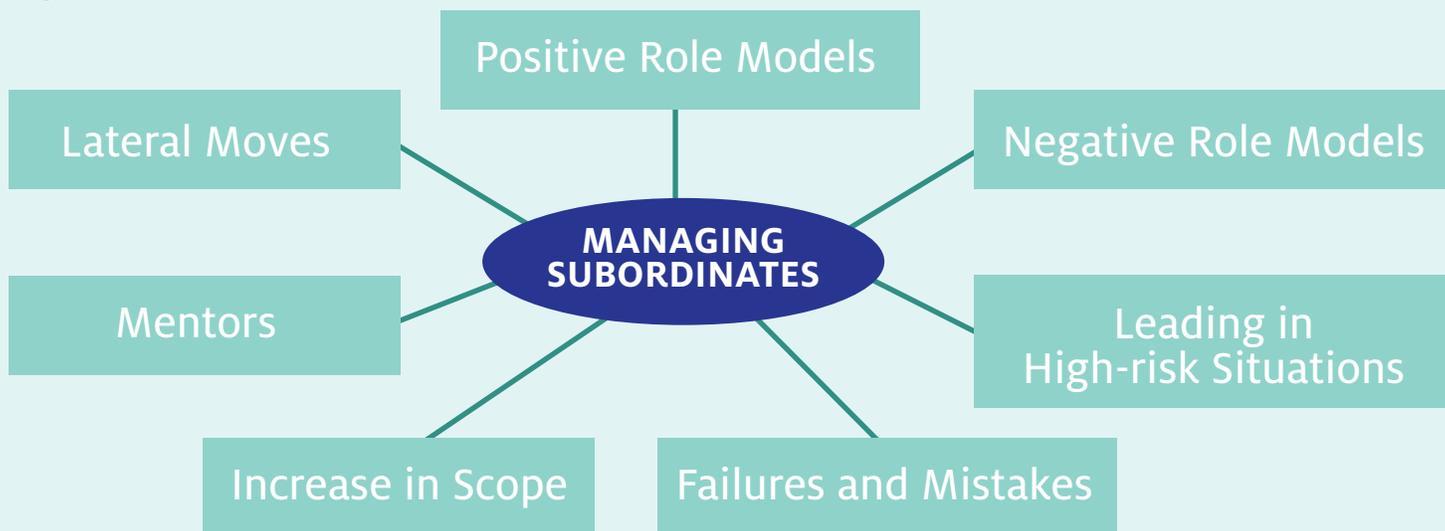
“Brigadier General Wing Commander of an outfit that I knew nothing about—I was not a personal expert in the airplane and its employment—had to rely totally on subordinates and make value judgments on my faith in them.”

## Lessons Learned

Across all events, the lesson that emerged as most frequent was **Managing Subordinates**. Guiding individuals through crisis, building teamwork, and preparing others for high-stress combat situations is the greatest lesson that top military leaders learn from every event they described except **Personal Trauma** and **Values Playing Out**. Eighty-six percent of all respondents learned something about **Managing Subordinates** from positive and negative role model events. **Managing Subordinates** lessons can be highlighted as an area

for reflection and learning during future training and mentoring while providing valuable pathways for the next generation of leaders. Military leaders are expected to value, protect, develop, and manage performance problems in their subordinates. And when managing people, it is important to keep in mind that subordinates are watching the type of leadership officers model and how they handle and learn from their **Failures and Mistakes**. Figure 2 illustrates the experiences that led to lessons in **Managing Subordinates**.

Figure 2

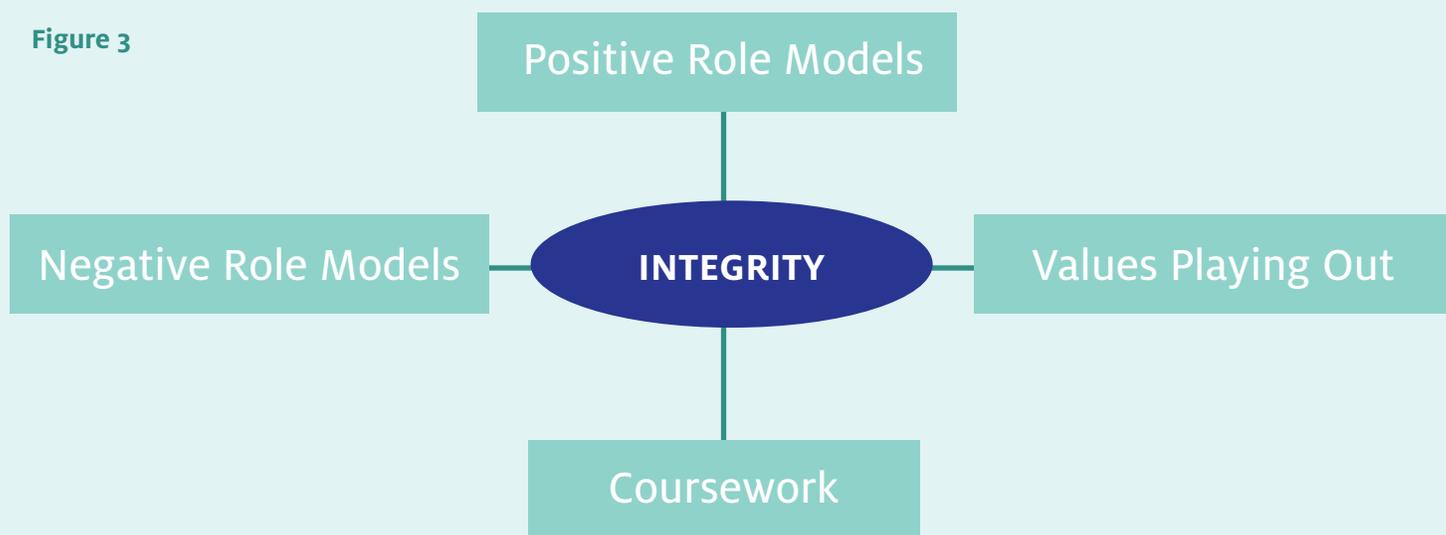


**Integrity** was a second significant lesson that stood out in this study.

“Inspired by senior leader with great moral and personal courage. Officer stood up for me when I made a mistake that could have derailed me.”

As **Integrity** is at the heart of soldiers’ lives, summarized by the Air Force core values: “Integrity First,” “Service Before Self,” and “Excellence in All We Do.” This lesson continues to grow as an officer builds experience in his or her military career. **Integrity** was most often learned in the event **Values Playing Out**. The lessons gleaned from these events included building on character and approaching future situations with honesty. Figure 3 illustrates the events that led to lessons in **Integrity**.

Figure 3



Other important lessons ranked somewhat lower in this data set were **Innovation/Risk-Taking** and **Perseverance**. Among the most prominent thought leaders in the US military is Army General Martin Dempsey, who was recently selected to serve in America’s top military post as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Finding new ways to grow innovative leaders who can manage complexity is at the top of his agenda.

“It should be clear to all after nine years of conflict that the development of adaptive leaders who are comfortable operating in ambiguity and complexity will increasingly be our competitive advantage against future threats to our nation.”<sup>1</sup>

**Dempsey has also called attention to the role that experience plays in teaching leaders to be adaptive.** As commander of US Army Training and Doctrine Command, he described “training, education, and experience” as the three pillars of leader development and proposed personnel policy changes that would create broadening experiences for rising mid level Army officers.

“Only when we adequately address all three pillars of leader development—training, education, and experience—can we state that we have an effective, functioning leader development program.”<sup>2</sup>

Figure 4 lists the 10 top events and the lessons learned from those events.

Figure 4

| TOP EVENTS                                    | MOST FREQUENT LEADERSHIP LESSONS LEARNED  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>POSITIVE ROLE MODELS</b></p>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing Subordinates</li> <li>• Executive Leadership</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Integrity</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>NEGATIVE ROLE MODELS</b></p>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing Subordinates</li> <li>• Integrity</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>FAILURES AND MISTAKES</b></p>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision Making</li> <li>• Managing Subordinates</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>LEADING IN HIGH-RISK SITUATIONS</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing Subordinates</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>INCREASE IN SCOPE</b></p>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing Subordinates</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>PERSONAL TRAUMA</b></p>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career Management/Life-Work Balance</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>MENTORS</b></p>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing Subordinates</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>VALUES PLAYING OUT</b></p>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrity</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>LATERAL MOVES</b></p>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Functional/Technical Knowledge</li> <li>• Managing Subordinates</li> </ul>                                     |

# Implications for Practice

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This research provides insight into the lessons successful military officers learned from specific experiences. As such, it can inform the personnel policy decisions that are intended to produce senior leaders with particular leadership competencies by providing them with the experiences that develop those competencies. What stands out from this study is that individuals gained the most from experiences with **Positive** and **Negative Role Models**, and the greatest lessons they learned were about **Managing Subordinates**.

**Officers learn from role models how they should and should not lead others.** Regardless of the insight they have into the rationale behind their superiors' decisions, they are witness to superiors' behaviors and how those behaviors impact others. **Role models** also shape officers' impressions of who they might become by continued military service. A positive role model can inspire a commitment to a career of military service, while a negative role model can cause an officer to change careers. Self-aware, empathetic leaders replicate themselves by their example and through mentoring relationships with promising subordinates.

**Managing Subordinates** emerges from the data as the most frequent lesson and is connected to the majority of reported experiences. This finding emphasizes the need for leaders to learn as much as possible about their own leadership style, the impact of their behaviors on others, and their approach to communication. It also means that, while designing careers to create the broadening experiences that will grow adaptable leaders, the military should ensure that officers have developmental experiences that teach them how to manage others.

Military services can leverage mentoring and coaching programs for people rising through the ranks in order to develop senior officers who are positive role models with superior coaching and mentoring skills. **Officers with the emotional intelligence to skillfully manage individual subordinates through professional challenges and personal traumas can set a tone that creates a healthy command climate within the organizations they command.** Whatever an officer can do to become a better role model and mentor will have ripple effects that positively influence the development of subordinates throughout their careers.

# Research Methodology

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During 2005 and 2006, 52 high-level military officers attending the Leadership at the Peak program at the Center for Creative Leadership answered the question, "Please identify at least three key events in your career, things that made a difference in the way you lead or manage now. What happened? What did you learn?" The Lessons of Experience team qualitatively analyzed each survey answer and coded experiences based on the lessons of experience coding protocol. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, after events were coded by researchers, advice and analysis from active

and retired military soldiers and officers confirmed correct understanding of situations, acronyms, stories, and military culture. Events were then linked to lessons using the co-occurrence method within the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti. Once links were discovered and calculated, each lesson frequency was calculated to pinpoint the exact percentage of the event represented. The research team was interested in how often each lesson linked to an event and how that link could provide clear pathways to the lessons gleaned from certain experiences.

# Acknowledgements

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We would like to thank Leadership at the Peak participants from the military for their willingness to share the events that have impacted their leadership and the lessons they learned from those events. We would also like to thank Roger Conway, who had the vision for this study and worked with us through the early stages, and retired Chief Master Sergeant Marcelle Hureau, MA, who supported the writing of this paper.

## About the Authors

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**Corey Criswell** is a faculty systems design Associate at CCL in Colorado. Corey is the coauthor of *Creating a Vision* (2010) and *Building an Authentic Leadership Image* (2008). Her current research focuses on the critical challenges faced by senior executives and the behaviors that result in successful outcomes. Corey has a BA in biology from the University of Colorado at Boulder and an MS in marine ecology from the Florida Institute of Technology.

**Katie Puryear** is a research assistant at CCL in Colorado Springs, CO. Katie's research focuses on senior executive challenges, intercultural leadership, top management teams, women's leadership, succession management, and lessons of experience. Katie has a BA in applied communication and an MA in communication with an emphasis in intercultural and organizational communication from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

**Neil Hollenbeck** is a US Army infantry major, selected to serve as a leadership and management instructor in the Department of Behavioral Science and Leadership, United States Military Academy at West Point. Neil served as an infantry platoon leader and company commander in the 82nd Airborne and 3rd Infantry Divisions, leading soldiers in Iraq during four separate deployments between 2004 and 2010. He is an MBA candidate at Duke University, where he also teaches as a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Military Science. Neil has a BS in history from the United States Military Academy.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Dempsey, M. (2011, Feb. 26). Leader development. *Army Magazine*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

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