True Grit: How Developing Emotional Intelligence Makes Better Leaders

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This article discusses the concept of grit and why it is important for leadership. Grit is the product of Emotional Intelligence (EI), the ability to identify, assess, and control the emotions of oneself and others in order to accomplish the mission. Cultivating EI instills grit and builds confident, committed, resilient, and goal-oriented leaders. Using examples from the Army Special Forces community and Squadron Officer School, this article highlights the critical role emotions play in leadership, the history of emotions and leadership, how EI influences leadership, and finally, describes how the Air Force can develop EI to instill grit and better leaders.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government, Department of Defense, or the United States Air Force.

To become successful leaders, we must first learn that no matter how good the technology or how shiny the equipment, people-to-people relations get things done in our organizations. People are the assets that determine our success or failure. If you are to be a good leader, you have to cultivate your skills in the arena of personal relations.

- General (Ret) Ronald R. Fogleman, 15th Chief of Staff of the Air Force

Background

In the iconic John Wayne classic, True Grit, U.S. Marshall Rooster Cogburn is hired to avenge the murder of young Mattie’s father. Cogburn tirelessly tracks down his quarry and leads his motley team comprising a know-it-all 14-year-old girl and bigheaded Texas Ranger through wild adventures until he finally gets his man (Hathaway, 1969). Mattie’s hunt for someone with “true grit” required an individual with perseverance and passion toward their goal despite adversity, hardship, and failure. Through sheer “strength or force of character” gritty leaders like Cogburn get the job done and cultivate strong teams (Duckworth, 2001). Yet Mattie’s early difficulty in finding someone with “true grit” before meeting Cogburn underscores the rarity in which it occurs.

Understanding grit requires a close look into the role emotions play in personal development and the interpersonal relations General Fogelman claimed are so important for leaders. Grit is the product of leaders with highly developed Emotional Intelligence (EI), a dynamic and fluid ability that enables them to identify, assess, and control the emotions of self and others in order to accomplish their mission. Leaders with high EI are resilient and committed, act with confidence and display goal oriented behaviors. This article will show how the Air Force (AF) can instill grit in by highlighting the critical role emotions play in leadership, detail the history of emotions and leadership, how EI influences leadership, explore AF views on leadership, and describe how the AF can instill grit in leaders.

Emotions and Leadership

An unlikely advocate to grasp the relationship between emotions and leadership was General George S. Patton. As a student at West Point he became interested in understanding why men fight. Researching the campaigns of Napoleon, Patton realized that Napoleon was able to leverage emotions, such as pride and fear, in order to motivate his men to fight. Patton noted in his 1927 essay, Why Men Fight, that “for the privilege of wearing a ribbon,” a man can be induced to fight with such tenacity that his effect on the battlefield was contagious (Patton, 1927). Patton observations, while unscientific at the time, recognized how leaders could use emotions “to actuate men as individuals to expose themselves to wounds and death... they may be utilized and stimulated so as to produce in our armies that fighting spirit which will spell victory in the wars which are to come” (Patton, 1927)

While hardly the first individual to express an interest in human emotion, few shared Patton’s notion that emotions were a useful tool for
leaders. Historically, emotions were viewed as impediments to effective leadership behaviors, and that leaders are identified by their charisma, specific traits, and superior intelligence (Livingstone, Nadjijwon-Foster, & Smithers, 2002). This attitude is dated and reflects American cultural nuances and military history. It also reinforces negative aspects of the American leadership style: shortsighted, individualistic and confrontational (Tang, 2010). Furthermore, cognitive intelligence may not be the end-all requirement for leaders and the definition of charisma remains dubious. Today, new research by psychologists like Dr. Paul Eckman, who inspired Fox’s hit series Lie to Me, has grasped the critical role emotions play in our lives and, when read, can provide deeper insight into the nuances and motivations across diverse groups of people (Sauter, 2010). Thanks to the research of Dr Ekman and others, we now know that emotions can be read and influenced in others. This ability to read and influence emotions, notes Harvard psychologist and author Dr. Daniel Goleman, is the hallmark of EI (Goleman, 1995).

How EI influences Leadership

EI is “the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Livingstone, Nadjijwon-Foster, & Smithers, 2002). EI comprises two domains, self and social, and four core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management (Goleman, 2001). EI is not a new concept to the field of leadership but has undergone a spectacular ascendancy through Dr. Goleman’s prolific writings and related EI research. “The abilities associated with EI have been studied by psychologists for years, and a growing, body of research suggests that these abilities are important for success in many areas of life (Cherniss, 2000). Goleman embraces emotional depth and does not discount the value of cognitive intelligence but argues that successful leaders manage to harmonize “the head and the heart” Most importantly he argues, EI is more than the accumulation of key traits or IQ components and includes the ability to integrate these components across the thinking and feeling (neocortical and limbic) parts of our brain. This ability is the hallmark of emotionally intelligent leadership and a key predictor of potential (Goleman, 2001). Yet as the saying goes, leaders are grown not born, and the process of developing EI in leaders begins with building a foundation that develops self-mastery.

Self-mastery is achieved by developing self-awareness and self-management. Self-awareness is the foundation for all other components of EI and is the “purposeful monitoring of one’s emotional reactions to identify feelings as they emerge” (Latour & Hosmer, 2002). Self-awareness is a critical skill to master because the interval between an emotional trigger and its physical expression is nearly instantaneous. Each new experience with the unknown creates a library shelf of emotional responses for reference in similar situations, like equating darkness with fear (Goleman, 1995). Leaders who exercise self-awareness identify emotional triggers and move toward managing them, ultimately giving them control over their lives and behavior (R. W. Griffin, 2007). Classical theorists from Aristotle to Clausewitz wrote earnestly on the importance of emotional self-awareness or sophrosyne, “the art of self-mastery” (Goleman, 1995). By achieving this sophrosyne leaders act rationally and develop a highly tuned self-image (Abrahams, 2007). These leaders are open to frank and honest feedback from others without taking criticism personally (Goleman, 2002). More importantly, they are excellent decision makers who “seek out feedback and learn from their mistakes, and know where they need to improve and when to work with others who have complementary strengths” (Goleman, 2001). The Army Special Forces (SF) community believes self-awareness is one of the key components in developing grit. It creates an individual with: perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina... disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, [whereas] the gritty individual stays the course (Beal, 2010).

Grit derives from Goleman’s second competency, self-management, and “builds on the understanding of emotional origins derived from self-awareness to manage feelings appropriately as they arise” (Latour & Hosmer, 2002). Self-management is similar to stress inoculation techniques used in police and military training. This training induces stress by simulating fear and anxiety to inoculate the individual against the
flood of emotional and physical stimuli in order to achieve a desired effect, like moving towards the sound of gunfire (Grossman, 2008). This mental conditioning creates leaders who are “unfazed in stressful situations and can deal with hostile people without lashing out in return” (Goleman, 2001). Additionally, these leaders actively manage the emotions felt during stressful situations by reframing those stressors as interesting, challenging, worthwhile and something they can control (Goleman, 2002). An EI-Based Theory of Performance, 2001). Goleman cites the work of Dr. David McClelland and describes how this process occurs in the emotional regulatory part of our brain, the left pre-frontal cortex. It serves to “remind ourselves of the positive feelings that will come when we attain our goals and at the same time allows us to inhibit the negative feelings that would discourage us from continuing to strive toward those goals” (Goleman, 2001). These goal-oriented leaders are, as a result, innovative since self-management allows them to have a realistic degree of comfort with risk (Goleman, 2001). They are also team-oriented because they use emotions as an engine and actively encourage this type of thinking in subordinates (Livingstone, Nadjiwon-Foster, & Smithers, 2002).

Referring back to the description of grit among the SF community; these leaders have programmed themselves to see things positively and view stress as a challenge. The ability of these leaders to transfer this type of thinking on others is profound and illuminates self-management’s importance as a precursor to managing others (Abrahams, 2007).

The most dynamic range of human interaction occurs in the social domain where leaders must exercise a constant state of awareness to adjust, organize, or control the flow of activity through social-awareness and relationship management. Social awareness, argues Goleman, is the people skill (Goleman, 2002). Social awareness is “feeling empathy and awareness of the emotions of other individuals. Empathetic leaders are sensitive to the differences in how people feel about things and can step outside themselves to evaluate situations from another perspective” (Latour & Hosmer, 2002). More importantly, social awareness allows leaders to detect unstated needs and concerns, as well as “currents and political realities in groups” (Goleman, 2001). Socially aware leaders read non-verbal cues, facial expressions, and remain objective and empathetic towards others.

Returning to Dr. Paul Ekman’s research, given mankind’s diversity, our emotions are the only universal language we possess. This awareness develops strong interpersonal relations and more importantly, steers diverse groups towards the leader’s goals (Goleman, 2001). Social awareness has captured the US Army’s attention and become a part of their formal leader training as the Advanced Situational Awareness Training (ASAT) course. By simulating the dynamic range of emotions in combat, ASAT incorporates the science of body language, proxemics, kinesics, and human behavior, to enable leaders to detect and address anxiety, fear, and stress in the soldiers under their command before they are unable to perform their mission (Little, 2012). Courses like ASAT underscore the significance social awareness has on performance and a leader’s ability to effectively manage relationships.

Leaders build cohesive and high-functioning teams by exercising solid relationship management skills. Goleman endorses this argument, stating, “the effectiveness of our relationship skills hinges on our ability to attune ourselves to or influence the emotions of another person.” Relationship management occurs when leaders “detect and manage the organization’s emotional environment…developing a wide-ranging competence for sensing subtle shifts in the social atmosphere” (Latour & Hosmer, 2002). These leaders, Dr. Bernard M. Bass argues, “behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their followers work” (Livingstone, Nadjiwon-Foster, & Smithers, 2002). They are enthusiastic, committed, cultivate team spirit and get their followers involved in envisioning attractive future states (Livingstone, Nadjiwon-Foster, & Smithers, 2002). This phenomenon is known as the hardy-leader influence hypothesis. “Hardiness is a psychological style associated with resilience, good health, and performance under a range of stressful conditions” (Bartone, 2006). Hardy leaders leverage commitment, control, and challenge, effectively transferring their inner resilience on the team. They sustain high functioning teams, a necessity in the military since, by nature, military units are group-oriented and highly interdependent (Bartone, 2008).

Again, the Army SF community recognizes relationship management as another key component of grit, becoming so enamored with this phenomenon that it included relationship management into its candidate-screening program. They desire candidates with the grit to
not only pass such a demanding selection process, but also hold the emotional stability and relationship skills to sustain a tight knit community in a variety of high stress and complex environments (Bartone, 2006). The AF may consider this lead and focus its leader development on instilling grit in Airmen by cultivating EI throughout an Airman’s career.

The AF and Leadership

The AF holds a unique view towards leadership, which it defines as “the art and science of motivating, influencing, and directing Airmen to understand and accomplish the Air Force mission in joint warfare” (AFDD Volume 2, 2011). The latter half of this definition, implying leadership is a science, draws from a rich service culture that evolved around technology. Since the beginning of the Cold War the AF has “worshipped at the altar of technology” and demanded of its Airmen a likewise inclination towards this pursuit (Builder, 1987). Over time, the AF evolved into a highly technical and specialized service, fueled in part by Secretary of Defense McNamara’s “technocrats” and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s “corporatizing” of the Defense Department (Ricks, 2012). Reliance on numbers, data, and complex metrics played well with the AF’s strategy to meet technology with technology. Today, Airmen share this technological inclination and have strong emotional attachments to their jobs, in part because they require significant amounts of individual time and energy to master (Dunlap, 2007) (Al-Rodhan, 2008). This deep identity with their job and service, leads Airmen to frame problems through the lens of their own career field, relying on “concrete, organized, and rational level” thinking (Worden, 1998). As a result, Airmen tend to be progressive and eagerly embrace new means to go about their work, a cultural nuance described as “go over, not through” (Thornhill, 2010). Taken together, these elements combine to form a culture characterized by individualism, intelligence, and innovativeness (Magruder, 2009). While Airmen make no apologies for their culture, it does present challenges for leader development.

Implications

The technical nature of the AF tends to cultivate task-centric and technically minded managers who are attracted to process driven models and efficiency practices “without fully understanding the leadership requirements to make [them] work” (Vermillion, 1996). Task-centric leaders, according to Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo, focus on the “technical aspects of leadership, setting agendas, standards, providing informational feedback to achieve group goals” (Zimbardo, 2008). This task-centric leadership style led to the multitude of issues affecting the AF nuclear missile career field. The intense pressure for perfection and zero defects resulted in an “unrealistic and unobtainable nuclear culture that required the complete elimination of human error” (McCullough, 2014). Tellingly, Lt General Stephen Wilson, commander of Global Strike Command and caretaker of the AF’s nuclear arsenal, made the statement “this approach is unrealistic.” Secretary of the AF Deborah James echoed this claim and gave nod to the human factors affecting the career field: “This is a lot about addressing people issues” (McCullough, 2014). Tackling these people issues requires socio-emotional leaders who are “sensitive to the needs of their organization and engage in activities that will promote the positive quality of group membership” (Zimbardo, 2008). Socio-emotional leaders have the grit to embrace the challenges facing the AF nuclear career field and balance their mission with the needs of their people. Outside the nuclear career filed, the AF has a fresh opportunity to embrace the grit socio-emotional leaders bring to bear under current Chief of Staff of the AF, General Mark Welsh, and Secretary James. Together they have rekindled Gen Fogleman’s assertion underscoring the human context of leadership, “it’s about the people” (Cloys).

Incorporating EI Into Future AF Leadership Development

Building gritty leaders requires developing EI. Remember however, EI is an ability based measure of leadership effectiveness and future potential that requires committed and deliberate care and nurturing (Livingstone, Nadjiwon-Foster, & Smithers, 2002). It is foolish to pick leaders who demonstrate a proclivity for EI over others, effectively ignoring the benefits gained from investing effort throughout a career. Although the AF cannot make up for early childhood and adolescent experiences, incorporating Goleman’s four skill sets early in leader development instills grit throughout a career. The AF could study and consider implementing the Army’s Warrior Transition Unit (WTU) methodology to develop the self-domain of EI early in Airmen’s careers and adopt the Emotional Skills Assessment Profile (ESAP)
survey to instill grit by developing self and social domains throughout an Airmen’s career.

Focusing on the self-domain early in military training (Basic training, Reserve Officer Training Corps-ROTC, Officer Training School-OTS) develops self-awareness via emotional conditioning similar to the ASAT program mentioned earlier. Positive emotional conditioning early in training can identify emotions common to military life and, more importantly, the triggers that cause them. The Army uses this process (known as adaptive reconditioning) in its WTU’s who work with wounded soldiers to “optimize their physical and emotional well-being” in the next phase of their lives (US Army Warrior Transition Command, 2014). Just like wounded warriors struggling to make the transition from military to civilian life, new recruits experience similar difficulties transitioning into military life. The WTU encourages participants to build strong goal-oriented behaviors, dedicate themselves to a team, and develop positive coping mechanisms for emotions such as anger. One study analyzing anger in AF basic training recognized anger as a significant contributor to poor mental and physical health (McDaniel, 2011). Tellingly, the report emphasized the need to develop an emotional conditioning program to build better relationships and give “form and meaning” to behaviors (McDaniel, 2011). The WTU seeks to give this meaning to behaviors by learning and developing all four EI skill sets from the ground up, ultimately reconditioning individuals to be independent, self-confident, and possess the ability to build strong relationships with others (US Army Warrior Transition Command, 2014). In other words, they instill grit.

It is interesting to note that ESAP and related assessments have been used with military men and women returning from deployment back to help families and communities with this important transition (Nelson, Nelson, and Trent, 2012). The ESAP serves multiple purposes of facilitating the learning of EI (grit) in education and training as well as readjustment back from duty.

Emotional reconditioning develops self-management abilities by linking identity to personal beliefs and ethics. Reinforcing the AF’s core values; “integrity first, service before self, excellence in all we do” provides the sophrosyne that Aristotle argued leaders needed to guide their actions. Reinforcing the core values requires deliberately defining the term Airmen, changing its current definition within AF Doctrine Volume 2 as a catch-all phrase describing the Total Force (Active Duty, Guard, Reserve, Civilians and Contractors) (AFDD Volume 2, 2011). Linking an Airmen’s identity to the core values follows the WTU model, conditioning an individual to strengthen their “beliefs, principles or values that sustain and provide resiliency” (US Army Warrior Transition Command, 2014). This allows Airmen to actively manage behaviors by harnessing their core values, asking themselves, am I acting with integrity, am I putting the needs of my service above personal desires, and finally, am I doing this job to the best of my ability? The active use and reinforcement of the core values as adaptive coping mechanism enable Airmen “to build inner strength, make meaning of experiences, behave ethically, persevere through challenges and be resilient when faced with adversity,” all hallmarks of a gritty leader who is ready to lead others (US Army Warrior Transition Command, 2014).

The transition to managing others requires building self-awareness and self-management skills in Airmen. This requires incorporating an EI competency survey into the AF’s formal feedback process. Squadron Officer School, (SOS a BDE course) an early adopter, uses the Emotional Skills Assessment Profile (ESAP) survey to measure students in the four dimensions of EI: interpersonal communication, personal leadership skills, self-management skills, and intrapersonal skills. ESAP is a self-scoring booklet developed as a guide to explore and develop EI skills (Nelson, 2004). Individuals score in areas such as: aggression, deference, comfort, empathy, drive strength, and commitment ethic. Scores are listed in each area under develop, strengthen, or enhance categories. Problem areas are aggression, deference, and change orientation and have a score that falls into low, normal, or high, with high scores indicating problem areas (Nelson, 2004). Since the ESAP is a self-assessment measurement and human beings are inclined to inflate their own abilities, SOS approaches this dilemma by following stringent ESAP guidelines stipulating the survey should only be given by “professionals” (in this case- trained instructors) and administered only after rapport is established with the test taker and the purpose of the assessment is clearly understood. Students receive a one-hour lecture on EI and the ESAP survey with a follow-on classroom lesson. The ESAP surveys are analyzed and interpreted through
instructor-guided discussions within their 14-member flight (class). Although not required, many instructors use ESAP to view student scores alongside their actual academic, physical, and team performance. This provides an intimate holistic look at a leader’s ability against how they view themselves and reinforces development of the self-domain for students (Nelson, 2004).

From this intimate self-portrait, students receive an accurate look at their strengths and weaknesses in light of their own perceptions, but more importantly, compare their self-assessment against their peer feedback. This process occurs twice during SOS through feedback sessions in the middle and end of each course. Students are profoundly affected after discovering their peers are in conflict with their leadership style, perhaps because of their aggressive nature or because they exhibit low empathy. SOS carefully screens flights for diversity across gender and career field to ensure these varied perspectives occur. As a result, SOS is, for many, the first critical look at their leadership style they experience outside their own career field. This slow deliberate process of developing social awareness conditions students to be sensitive to the differences in how people feel about things and evaluate situations from another perspective (Latour & Hosmer, 2002).

SOS ratchets up the pressure by giving students increasingly difficult tasks in order to, as school founder Col Russell Ritchey professed, provide “opportunities for leadership to occur” (Ritchey, 1950). Students must evaluate problems and issues from other perspectives, carefully balancing the dynamic social environment in their flight with the added stress to perform well at SOS.

Examples of this intense, comprehensive process of self, peer, and instructor learning and evaluation with ESAP were reported (Hammett, Hollon, & Maggard, 2012). Their article emphasized how self-assessment with EI can be blended within an evaluation process in a self and leadership development process.

This constant pressure induces, what Col Ritchey characterized as, “fear, frustration, and fatigue,” forcing students to manage relationships in a diverse group towards the pursuit of a common goal (Ritchey, 1950). To build gritty leaders, SOS is committed to putting students through the proverbial ringer. ESAP acts as a mentoring tool to evaluate individuals against their own self-assessment and the inputs of their peers to develop grit by developing all four EI competencies. While some may argue the ESAP score is simply another metric, it is not factored into a student’s overall academic and team performance score. Individuals attempting to “game the system” by inflating their responses are scrutinized through direct observation by their mentor and peers. This concept mirrors the Army’s SF peer assessment process where candidates in the brutal selection phase evaluate each other in physical fitness, teamwork, motivation, responsibility, judgment, and decisiveness. Researchers analyzing this system discovered that a candidate’s peers place substantial emphasis on interpersonal performance and motivation when evaluating overall performance and future potential (Ritchey, 1950), (Zananis, 2001). The study illuminates how socio-emotional leaders had the grit to succeed (Zananis, 2001). SOS, in similar fashion, leverages its own peer feedback system to instill grit in students. Again, the goal is to provide students a realistic self-assessment and reinforce positive behaviors that lead to their success in certain areas and cover behaviors that their peers felt inhibited team cohesiveness. ESAP facilitates this process by giving individuals an accurate look at themselves and, when used as a mentoring tool, develop the grit they need to become confident, committed, resilient, goal-oriented leaders.

Conclusion

Building these gritty leaders for the AF requires dedicated investment in developing EI for Airmen. From Greek philosophers, Patton, and the modern SF community, all agree that developing EI is the means to instill grit in leaders so they can accomplish their mission and balance the human element of leadership. General Fogelman’s prophetic assertion on the importance of interpersonal relations underscores the AF’s need for gritty leaders. Leveraging its unique cultural identity, the AF can use the Army SF community and SOS programs as guides to build the socio-emotional side of its leadership paradigm. Most importantly, the film True Grit reveals the rarity of leaders with true grit and highlights how the AF cannot wait a decade or more hoping Airmen develop “the full complement of cognitive and affective traits” required to be the leader need today (Latour & Hosmer, 2002). Developing EI in Airmen gives them the grit they need today for future success tomorrow.
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Author Note

I was first exposed to Emotional Intelligence when I went through instructor training to teach professional military education at Squadron Officer School, the US Air Force's premier leadership institution. Fresh off a deployment in Afghanistan, and like many mid-grade officers, "emotions" and "leadership" were not two words I thought to be interdependent. Luckily, the insights of a fantastic teacher, Dr. Patricia Maggard, made me realize how closely related the two really are. I used EI every day behind the lectern teaching young captains, civilians, and international officers the science of leadership. For over five weeks we put our students through the proverbial academic ringer: briefing, writing, physical fitness, and team events all designed to cause fear, frustration, and fatigue to force our students to come to terms with the very crux of EI- to master others you must master yourself. Eventually my instructor tour concluded and today I lead over 23 intelligence airmen at Joint-Base Elmendorf's 611 Air Operations Center who defend the sovereignty of the United States. I have an amazing team of Airmen for this complex mission and EI has given me the tools to succeed as a leader. I'm humbled at the opportunity to publish my own small contribution to such an important field and would love to hear from you at mikewilliams2@live.com.