

Keynote Address for the AMCSUS Annual Meeting—February 21, 2016

MISSION GUIDANCE

A favorite quote and thought for the day:

Oliver Wendell Holmes is credited with having said the following:

“I give not a fig for simplicity on this side of complexity; but

I would give my life for simplicity on the other side of complexity.”

The object of this Head of Schools or President’s game, in my mind, is to reduce matters to their most simplistic form and then act on them honestly and objectively. So this is how it all began and what I have learned in the process.

Eighteen years ago I had only heard of military schools three times, not counting Norwich, the Service Academies, and OCS.

The first was when a young man from southern California walked into my Admissions Office at St. Paul’s School, a toney eastern prep school with outrageously high academic standards, and told me somewhat boldly, he wanted to apply for a position in our 10th grade. I asked him why he wanted to leave his school—I asked him where he went: CMA—and he said, “I want to attend Stanford and your school gets more kids into Stanford than mine does.” He added, “I might have a better chance if I did not spend so much time marching tours for demerits.” I had no real concept of what he was describing as tours and why anyone would do this. I loved this kid, his honesty and goal orientation and I admitted him; he went to Stanford; and we became lifelong friends.

The second was when my youngest brother became a part time athletic trainer at Fork Union while he was doing graduate work at UVA. Pam and I drove down to see him one weekend and we spent a day touring the school. It just seemed like so many schools we had seen, and we certainly did not witness anything unusual that would have kept this at the top of my mind, except Eddie George was their running back!

The third was in the recurrent radio ads I had heard as I was driving from New Hampshire to New York City for Trustee meetings, in which an upstate Military School promised that if parents sent this academy their broken children, they would fix them and return them as men. I remember thinking this sounded like a short term strategy, but also that we had a few at our school who might benefit from the program as advertised.

None of these memories were still with me when I received a call from a search firm in 1998 asking me if I would be interested in applying for the job as President of Culver Military Academy. I responded, almost reflexively, that I did not believe I was properly trained to be the president of anything, did not have the background or credentials for leading a military school, and then added that I worked closely with a

Lt. Col. I had great respect for, who ran our facilities program for and might be the perfect person for the job. The call lasted all of two minutes.

However, in the next three weeks I received calls from an architect I respected, another head of schools I admired, and a business leader whose judgment was sound. All said that Culver represented an opportunity I should consider looking into carefully. They were the salesforce sent to recruit me. Pam and I visited the campus, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Two things happened between my appointment as the new Head of Schools and my first day. The first was I had the opportunity to focus the academic work I was doing while on sabbatical studying for my Doctorate on the subject of the military as a leadership model for teenagers. Second, I realized I needed to understand the specific challenges of Culver. I had to understand where the school had been in order to determine where it might go. Then I needed to set goals, create a plan of action, and chart the course to reach that destination. I understood that leadership was not only about having a vision; it was also about moving the proverbial needle. I realized that my job had two components: to create the picture that would go on the front of the puzzle box and then to make the picture come to life. But this picture had to include trucks, horses, parades, sabre manual, and rank and promotion—all things not in my playbook!

So I hit the books. I researched adolescent pro-social development and compared that model to classic military models. I read extensively all the “leadership” literature I could find; I read West Point’s 10 year accreditation document, and I studied Peter Senge on Systems Thinking and Ichak Adizes on Change Management and Managing Corporate Lifecycles. I read the Lencioni books on organizational dysfunction, and compared the traits of his leaders and leadership teams to those in my new environment. And I tried not to channel TAPS as I reviewed models of student leadership. Most importantly, I focused on the concept of Mission.

As a long-time educator, teacher, and coach, I understood mission well. I realized that your philosophy needed to be fully aligned with your values, your policies, and your programming. I also remembered reading that when the Culver family decided to create a boys’ school in Indiana, Mr. H.H. Culver was clear that would not be Norwich or a West Point or Annapolis; rather, it would always be Culver’s own brand of military school. I had to be clear in my own mind first what that meant, and that brought me solidly back to what we should aspire to be. We already had a storied history and values and principles that had served the school well for over 100 years. But given what I had learned in the search process we needed clarity, intentionality, and, most importantly, a system for measuring our progress. We are, after all, what we measure. We needed a Mission the School’s leadership—the Trustees, my team and I—could endorse without reservation.

My ace in the hole during this process of discernment was that Lt. Colonel I had recommended for the job. He went to work full time, on his own time, preparing me and training me for this assignment. In a series of notes I have saved that he wrote me he suggested the following:

- Check out Norwich and a guy named Admiral Schneider. They had all sorts of challenges there before he arrived. He is doing a credible job early on in his tenure. You could learn something from him--1998.
- I am working on a reading list for you, but I am not a scholar so it is a time-consuming task. Try Major Boatner on Military Protocol and The Last Hero—Wild Bill Donovan (and your great-grandfather is featured in that one on pages 302-307).
- Visit West Point and learn what they are doing on leadership and character development and in their BS&L department.

This all proved to be great advice, but I understood that everything hinged on Mission. First, we had to get that right. Every word of the mission statement had to carry weight and imply direction. We could not be sloppy or imprecise. For instance, would we be first and foremost an academic school, as Culver had advertised for more than a decade? If we were, why were we spending so much time on other matters... like marching and tours or leadership classes and not AP's? Did we care about the character of our students or just their behavior? Did we care about our students' and staff's health? What were the outcomes we sought? If we said we were a "whole person" school interested in "mind, spirit, and body," were we serious about that or was it simply code for classes and sports? I realized that to compete in this 21st century market, we had to be distinctive. And we needed to provide solutions for today's problems, not those of the Vietnam era or the Cold War.

I had been taught in 30 years of being a leader of programs and departments in a boarding school that the old adage was true: If you don't know where you're going, any path will take you there. I wanted to go somewhere special/distinctive, and as a wise and very successful college wrestling coach—Bob Bubb of Clarion College—had told me once, "Don't tell me what's important to you; I will see how you spend your time, and I will tell you." Regardless of what we say actually matters, what we spend our time on is what actually matters. Are they aligned?

I did not know exactly where I was going, but if we were to have a chance of being a wholly integrated program, where everyone in the School was pulling in the same direction, we needed an unambiguous mission. I wanted people in our school to know the What and the How and I knew how to operate a school. But much more important was the Where and the Why. So, I needed to figure out this military, acronym-driven, behaviorally-motivated culture that was so foreign to me because "No culture worth mentioning is built and sustained accidentally."

As I mentioned above, my family had had a long tradition of service in the military and in the helping professions—medicine and education. I had always been taught that if you seek to lead, seek first to serve. My uncle was a Navy pilot who flew P-51 Mustangs and tragically lost his life during a routine surveillance run. My grandfather and father served in the medical corps, and my grandfather earned the Silver Star. My brother served in the Coast Guard. My great grandfather, Col. Buxton, was the officer who talked Alvin York off the mountain and into the service of his country—as the story goes, and worked with Wild Bill Donovan to set up the OSS and the Selective Service. So, I always have had great respect for the military and its traditions, but I believed there was a distinct difference between boot camp and OCS. I also understood there was a difference between working with teenagers and young adults. 14 year olds did not in my experience need to be torn down and then rebuilt. They needed challenge and support in equal measures. Then they would thrive.

I envisioned more of the OCS or Senior ROTC leadership model than the survivor model for Culver. I carried in the forefront of my mind that we were preparing young people for leadership, people who would be able to carry out mission guidance. I kept thinking about the difference between an order to “take that hill” and one prescribing “advance 300 meters, take a left, do an accountability check, proceed to the north....” I also had been taught never to underestimate the importance or value of support staff, especially Sergeants and CPO’s. You need good people surrounding you always and you need to train them on the Mission.

I understood further that at Culver we needed to be committed to teaching 21st Century skills so we could develop critical thinkers, team members who cared for one another, problem-solvers, communicators, and, most importantly, people of character who would work hard, take others seriously, and tell the truth. This would work because this was my working definition of leaders and leadership. Now I needed to figure out what this would look like lived and in a military school.

Enter AMCSUS...the next chapter of the education of a neophyte military school Head. I had an inauspicious start to say the least. In my first year as Head of Schools my commandant did not even invite me to the AMCSUS Annual Conference. I fear he may have thought I was not interested in attending, or as disturbing, that he worried I might say something inappropriate or embarrassing. Guilty as charged I’m afraid. I appreciated his caution a year later when we had a new commandant and I was now leading the Culver contingent. I had been to old boys’ clubs before but never to any, where uniform or dress code seemed to matter so much. At an AMCSUS Annual Conference in those days, the Colonels and Captains looked underdressed. And those of us in tuxes—required dress code then—felt and looked as though we’d taken a wrong turn in the lobby. The Generals and Admirals were larger than life and really had more important business to conduct with those who understood what they had experienced and knew what they knew than with someone like me. And I imagine

that they assumed that the guy drinking Military-lite at Culver would not add much to the conversation. I was fascinated, somewhat in awe, and eager to learn.

I loved hearing the stories about the officers' "charm school" experiences—especially the ones where the wives received their due, the one about pumping gas; and I came to understand that it was true that when officers became general officers or flag officers, one of two things happen: they grow or they swell. But they were only human, and life really is about the polarity of self and others, whether you're working with the highest ranking members of the military or with students. Any good secondary school educator knows that adolescents are all about filling up their own cups—metaphorically and even literally sometimes; but that they are eager to try on adult roles. Our job in schools is to provide them with roles and responsibilities that are more adult-like and other-directed...more selfless than selfish—and keep them from acting adult-like in less healthy ways.

I appreciated the formality of AMCSUS and the dignity of the occasion—especially at mealtime, but I was concerned that we were often spending our time on statistics and stories that did not inform or uplift us. Declining enrollments, dismissals, and discipline: a depressing 3-D movie. However, I did find the leadership I was looking for as an inexperienced head when seated at a table for dinner with any number of distinguished professionals. Their wisdom was impressive. They had something to teach me.

Still, AMCSUS, like Culver, seemed to be in need of mission-driven change as it considered its relevance in a world where the challenges of modern life threatened the existence of its historic schools. Maybe the things that characterized our schools when they were founded felt less appropriate in this society...no less important or needed, but certainly less appreciated. If we wanted to be clearly relevant, what did we need to do? In characteristic military fashion all of the virtues and values of military leadership came to the fore. Creative, thoughtful, service-oriented Presidents and School Heads stepped forward in an effort to address those dislocations between simply identifying problems and actually solving them. We addressed the five dysfunctions of an organization. Leniconi would have been proud. We began to focus more on what really mattered, and we all grew.

During that early period I was channeling Plato's Citizen Soldier, Aristotle's concept that "We are what we repeatedly do," and the philosopher, Harvard's William James, and his seminal essay (and speech) in the early 1900's entitled *The Moral Equivalent of War*.

While you are undoubtedly familiar with Plato and Aristotle, you may be less well-acquainted with William James. He was a pacifist, yet he understood that there were certain virtues our society needed that unfortunately seem only be honed in the context of war. He suggested a utopian vision in which our country would find other ways to ensure that young men would learn the ideals associated with militarism. And

this may be worth a slight digression since it impacted my own planning for Culver. James wrote:

Militarism is the great preserver of our ideals of hardihood, and human life with no use for hardihood would be contemptible. Without risks or prizes for the darer, history would be insipid indeed; and there is a type of military character which every one feels that the race should never cease to breed, for everyone is sensitive to its superiority. The duty is incumbent on mankind, of keeping military character in stock – if keeping them, if not for use, then as ends in themselves and as pure pieces of perfection, – so that Roosevelt's weaklings and mollycoddles may not end by making everything else disappear from the face of nature.

James then quotes H. G. Wells and says:

Wells adds that he thinks that the conceptions of order and discipline, the tradition of service and devotion, of physical fitness, unstinted exertion, and universal responsibility, which universal military duty is now teaching, will remain a permanent acquisition when the last ammunition has been used in the fireworks that celebrate the final peace. I believe as he does. It would be simply preposterous if the only force that could work ideals of honor and standards of efficiency into English or American natures should be the fear of being killed.

During the two decades surrounding this speech, hundreds of military schools were established—Culver among them, partly one could imagine as a response to James' clarion call for some formal instruction in the ideals and virtues that sober young Americans in preparation for service to their society and the Republic. These encouragements, in partnership with the teachings of Thomas Dewey's experiential learning theory; and the pride Americans had in the truly American approach to education exemplified at our military colleges, resulted in the popularity of military schools (450 of them) in the US. at that time. Now I had a mission. I now sought more Operational Guidance.

At about that time I was also introduced to an article in the **Harvard Business Review** by Professors Kaplan and Norton about strategic thinking for organizations. They explained that what differentiates great companies from average companies arises from both the choice of activities and how they are performed. The essence of strategy, they explained, is choosing to perform activities differently from your competitors so as to provide a unique value proposition. Your sustainable strategy then comes from a system of activities, each of which supports the others. Eureka. I was back to my fully-integrated model.

Kaplan and Norton presented a four-frame model for creating a balanced scorecard to measure one's progress against one's goals. At Culver, we knew we needed a point of differentiation. We were not going to out-Exeter Exeter academically. We actually

didn't want to or need to. We inhabited a different space in the education market. We were offering leadership and character training and formation. That said, we could not offer watered-down academic programs and poor results in the college process. Parents would not pay for that. Character education could not be code for weak academics. We had to do both, but always in the context of who we were.

What was important about this 4-frame model was that it gave us hyper-focus on our Mission and our strategy for delivering it as well as guidance in measuring our results. It took us from

- **Mission**, or why we exist, to
- **Core Values**, or what we believe in; to
- **Vision**—What we want to be—to
- **Strategy**—our game plan—to the Scorecard, or implementation and focus—then to
- **Strategic initiatives**—what we need to do, to
- **Personal objectives**—What I need to do

Now we had a templet.

If you think about your organization through meaningful lenses, you certainly need to consider your financial well-being. So the first frame is the financial frame. It is about growth and productivity. We all know that quality costs, so you need to be financially sustainable to be a viable organization.

The second is the customer frame. To achieve the vision, how must you look to your customers? You are selling a luxury item, and that means it needs to represent value.

The third is the internal processes frame: To satisfy your customers, at which processes must you excel?

The last of the four is the Learning and Growth frame: To achieve the vision, how must your school learn and improve? What are the feedback loops? How can you inspect what you expect?

Why was this so important to me? Because I knew that if we were not moving forward, we were moving backward. We thought we were temporarily stalled but we were actually losing ground. And people do not generally want to bail out a losing proposition. People want to support success. Just ask your development people. So we had a choice. Evolve or perish. We run businesses, and if as business owners we countenance unprofitable practices, we will not be business owners for long. I then remembered my first three encounters with military prep schools and thought I or they had missed an opportunity:

First, I could not take quality time from hard-working cadets and ask them to walk mindlessly around a square like my young friend. I could not afford to lose great young men simply because we could not align our outcomes with their goals. And, I could not run a student leadership system that relied on trust, by keeping the dogs on the leash.

Second, I could not afford to lose the opportunity to brand and sell my product by being unremarkable. Our BEHAG—big hairy audacious goal—was to ensure that when a visitor from outer space landed on the Culver campus—in a classroom, on an athletic field, in a barracks room, or in the faculty lounge—looked around for a minute or two, he/she would exclaim: “This must be Culver!”

Third, we could never position ourselves as the place using negative language. We would celebrate retention, never talk about attrition. We would talk about Culver only as a destination site. We would imagine the possible for our students, our faculty, and our families. Everything would have a positive cast.

Fortunately, during that same time AMCSUS has had the vision and courage to lead by example. It has drilled down on its mission and value proposition in the last decade and has modeled good behavior, challenged our status quos, and encouraged and enabled us to embrace best practices. We now share information on curricular development, best practices in marketing and admissions, and creative approaches to student life programming. We operate more like a team, as we work to be as mission-driven as I believe is necessary to progress to the next level.

There are many challenges facing us. The number of American or Canadian boarding students has dropped in all U.S. boarding schools by 4 percent in the last decade. Our boarding numbers are being supported only by increases in international students. Operating costs are going up faster than we believe tuitions should. We are pricing the middle class out of the experience. We face competition from charter schools, on-line learning, and even public schools with resources from tax dollars and an eye to offer more of what we claim to offer to the same students at no cost. Technology is expensive. Great staff and faculty cost. Physical plants and campus improvements feel like a black hole.

So I go back to Sir Oliver Wendell Holmes. If we focus on the simplicity on the other side of all of this complexity, we focus on Mission and Operational Excellence. Who are we, what do we want to be, what do we need to be, and how can we afford to get there? We all have a way to go and I know for certain, we will be more successful attacking these problems together.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge Ray’s excellent work on our behalf. Ray’s world is expanding and as a result so is ours. Thank you for your support and encouragement.

It has been my pleasure to be a part of this community of leaders and servant leaders.

Now, let's get started on solutions first thing in the morning.

John Buxton
Head of Schools
Culver Academies