

ACADEMIC

Leadership Paradoxes

Cynthia Cherrey, President, International Leadership Association

Interviewed by: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: At the Air Force Academy, we develop leaders of character. We view leadership and character as integral to one another. The purpose of the Journal of Character and Leadership Development (JCLD) is to bring to light not only good scholarship that's coming from the Air Force Academy, but equally important is going out and finding good research and scholarship and bringing it here to help us influence what we're doing. We know that we do some things pretty well, but we also know that leadership and character is developmental, so it is an ongoing process. We are learning new things every day, and we don't want to be so insular that we don't pay attention to the great work that's going on around the world in leadership in such areas as community building, shared leadership, and authenticity. Knowledge that has robust findings that may not readily come to mind when you talk about the military, but we want them to be.

Cherrey: I agree. Today's military leadership is shifting and changing. There is much rethinking that is taking place in military leadership that we would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge. Military leadership is often at the forefront of new ways of thinking about, and practicing leadership.

Lindsay: I think you're exactly right because we're seeing things spur up around things like coaching programs, which we haven't really seen before. Also, the openness to have conversations outside of traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic type environments. Granted, sometimes that is driven by negative events that cause us to rethink and pause, but it is not to have knee jerk reactions, but to really be thoughtful about that processing. We are learning some important things that we are offering up, but we are open to what we can learn from others who are doing things really well, like what you are doing with the International Leadership Association (ILA).

Dr. **Cynthia Cherrey** is President and CEO of the International Leadership Association (ILA), a global community committed to increasing quality research, teaching, and practices of leadership contributing to the common good around the world. As president of a multi-sector and global professional association, she works at promoting rigor and relevance of leadership at the intersection of theory and practice. Previously, Cynthia served as Lecturer in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and Vice President for Campus Life at Princeton University. Dr. Cherrey's interests and research explore new ways to live, work, and lead in a knowledge-driven, interdependent, global culture. A sought after advisor, Cynthia serves on the editorial board of Asian Women and the President's Advisory Group at Carnegie Mellon University. She is a Fellow at the World Business Academy, a Royal Society of the Arts Fellow, and a recipient of a J.W. Fulbright Scholarship.

Cherrey: One of the shifts we are experiencing is away from a mechanistic, Newtonian way of thinking. It is how we often think of military leadership as very top-down structure, and control oriented. I'm not saying that doesn't exist anymore because it still does, and it still needs to in many ways. However, the military is looking at leadership differently in this interconnected world. As we think now about the shift to the digital revolution, it has impacted the military on how they work and how they lead. It takes time to make these shifts, and we often still think in mechanistic ways when other ways of thinking and leading are required of us.

Lindsay: We do, and I think one of the challenges with that is that the fact that the military is different in that we primarily grow our people from within. If we want a General Officer, we know it's going to take us over 20 years to get there. So, we know that when somebody starts that military journey to the time they actually get there, a lot transpires over that time span. We grow up in a system that we become comfortable with and that seemingly worked for us. It becomes very difficult to say that it worked for me but we need to change. For example, we have bureaucracy and a robust transactional part of leadership, but we also need the transformational side. So how do we do that? How do we ensure that voice is heard? It reminds me of what General Charles Krulak was talking about a number of years with respect to *The Strategic Corporal*¹. What Krulak was saying is that in today's environment, a brand-new soldier, has a voice and they can make decisions that can have strategic implications. If we fail to understand that, we're missing out on some very important information. So, I think you're exactly right. We've got to think about how we can step away from ourselves and our processes a little bit to see where we need to be and where we need to be heading.

¹ For more on this topic, please see: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a399413.pdf>

Cherrey: Yes. That makes me think about how we embrace paradox in the world we live in. For example, we have been talking about living in both the hierarchical world and the network world. It is an and/both - not an either/or. You also started talking about another paradox, that being the paradox of living and leading from the global and the local levels. What happens at one level can permeate and reverberate throughout the entire organization. It's the sense of how the local impacts the global, and the global impacts the local.

Lindsay: That's a great point because I think we get a sense how global gets down to local, and we pay attention to that. We also need the understanding of the local impact up to the global, and throughout the organization. It gets to how do we grow and share leadership capacity among those in the organization, and how do we build cultures? How do we build that sense of community within the organization? I think those paradoxes are critical because we often tend to think either/or and not and/ both. Diversity is important and inclusivity is important, but it's really about bringing both of those together. Because it is not just making sure everybody in the organization has a voice, but also making sure that we have the right people in the organization to have that voice. Paradoxes are a great way to think about some of these topics. With that in mind, as you look from your position as ILA President, are those some of those things that we're going to be seeing more of as we kind of look to the future, or are there some other ones that are emerging? What are you seeing as we come out of COVID and the different ways we have been working? What are you seeing at your level that you're wrestling with, hearing more about, or being asked to weigh in on more?

Cherrey: Today it is more like constant waves of change occurring simultaneously. One of the lessons from crisis leadership is it amplifies strengths and weaknesses. I would say as we've been going through this pandemic, it has amplified more and more the

importance of and the need for leadership. What Dr. Tedros Adhanom, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) said about the global pandemic requires our attention. He said the pandemic is not the major crisis, the major crisis is the lack of collaborative global leadership around the crisis.

We are seeing more and more of a focus around global leadership which is a fairly new field of leadership research. We have so much to learn and research such as how do we define the parameters of global leadership? We are seeing greater emphasis on the study of diversity, equity, and inclusive leadership. Another topic evolving even more since the pandemic is around virtual teams and virtual leadership, and of course, healthcare leadership. Big data and AI are evolving areas of research. What does leadership mean in this era of big data? Sustainability and climate change is another area that we're seeing more leadership activity as researchers and practitioners think about our interdependencies and changes in our local and global communities.

These are some of the questions that are top of mind in the leadership development and in the leadership research.

Lindsay: As I listen to that list, those are really challenging topics. I like how you talked at the end about development because it really is about development. It's very hard, right? We think about education as a process, and people will often approach leadership as training, but they don't really get to the developmental piece. It really is a journey. The things we're talking about like developing virtual teams and leadership, you have to value people and you have to understand connectedness to do that right. You need to understand what motivates people and how do they stay connected. How do we communicate with one another civilly, culturally, and contextually,

and understand that someone's different perspective can still be valid. But these different connotations of ethics may look a little bit different in terms of what's acceptable culturally. So, that developmental piece is really a challenge and gets that idea of education not to a degree, but that it is a journey. It is a trajectory that we are all on. It's not just about going to a leadership course and thinking I'm going to be better as a result. I think we are growing beyond that as a field to understand that that's not really it. Those are important inflection points, inoculations perhaps that will help with skill acquisition and refinement. Development is much more invasive than that.

It is one of the hardest things for us to do, to learn how to unlearn; how to let go of old ways of doing and thinking.

Cherrey: You are spot on when you talk about the leadership journey! This is, indeed, about development and education. It is more than a skill set; it is a developmental process. It is a way of thinking, doing, and being. It is about the inner self, inner development, and outer development. I believe it is important for all of us to think about how we interact and relate with each other, and to reflect on these experiences as we go through our leadership journey. I'd add one more aspect, that being not only on how we learn but also how to unlearn. It is one of the hardest things for us to do, to learn how to unlearn; how to let go of old ways of doing and thinking.

Lindsay: That really resonates with me when you mentioned power and authority. We tend to think of those as very autocratic and controlling aspects. But when I think about power, I think about who I can empower? Who I can enable? How can I use the authority that I have to pass on to others? How can I use that as a springboard for others? But that is flipping

it a bit because we tend to think, I have power, and not necessarily something that you can give and use to help. We talk about building leadership capacity and it's really about that right? It's about helping to enable and empower others to have that leadership. You also mentioned experiences, and it's not just about the experience, it is about how you lived those experiences. How I interacted with that experience. I grew up in the Midwest on a farm in Kansas, and I have a very different lived experience than many people I went to the Academy with. They were coming from lots of different places. We may have had some similar experiences coming through high school, but they were lived entirely differently. That shapes what we've learned, and what we may need to unlearn. I like that idea of unlearning. As I look at the theme for the upcoming ILA Global Conference of Reimagining Leadership Together and I think through the list of things you talked about, and that's exactly it. How do we reimagine it? I like the 'imagine' word because it's about what it can be, not just what it is, what it should be, and not what it shouldn't be. It's about the humanity and how we bring that together for the corporate good, and not just about business good, financial good, or economic gain. It's about more than that.

Cherrey: Agreed. Social responsibility is critical, especially now. In the business sector and beyond, it is about the greater good for social responsibility; about finding a greater purpose. Striving for financial good and for the social good is profoundly powerful and impactful.

You made me think of two other factors looping back to the earlier conversation on paradox. You brought this up earlier on transactional and transformational change. Both are important. There are transactional leadership activities we need to do that are important; and there is the transformational, which is critical for leadership for a better world.

The other item is something you mentioned about the power of authority and empowering others. You said it so well. What is the informal power we need? Is it persuasion and like you mentioned, influence, and trust? Trust in our governments, our institutions has diminished considerably. And we are seeing a decline of trust in each other. We trust more the person we do not know driving the car in the opposite direction of us on a freeway that they're going to stay in their lane, then we trust people we know. It's ironic.

Lindsay: It is and it is fascinating to kind of pick that apart. As I think about that idea of trust, it gets me thinking about power and authority and how they are related to trust. It is easy to get compliance from people and we can get people to do things by using that power and authority. But when we really want to look at purpose, we really want commitment right? We want people committed to the purpose committed to the cause. It is kind of what Simon Sinek talks about regarding the 'why'. It is that purpose that we really want to be a part of, and if we all feel like we're walking that way, then trust happens. We have the good things that we want within an organization, but violations occur, especially when they're public, and it really hits that notion of trust. If we look at the current environment, it just seems a general lack of trust and civility in terms of how we see people talking to one another and it's a little disheartening. As you mention unlearning, maybe we need to unlearn a little bit or selectively forget some of our negative experiences, and take people at face value again.

Cherrey: I like that. Selectively forget.

Lindsay: But it is hard. Especially when we have a psychological contract violation or we feel like it should be this way, and it is not.

Cherrey: Yes, maybe we should uncouple a few of those synapses we have in our brain, so we don't get stuck in neural mind ruts.

Lindsay: Exactly, and that is another area and how it's helping us learn about the plasticity of the brain and what neuroscience as a field can teach us about how we learn, how we develop, and how we interact. That's another area of growth within the leadership space.

Cherrey: A huge area and, circling back to our earlier question about healthcare and leadership in terms of neuroscience and biology. I would venture to say that this is one of our changing worldviews, a worldview where everything is connected and hyper-connected. Neural networks are a wonderful way of seeing this interconnectivity. We both grew up on farms, so we understand how systems are interdependent with, and for each other. Healthcare is another example of an interdependent system. The ILA held a Health Care Leadership virtual summit with doctors, coaches, nurses, neuroscientists, psychiatrists, social workers - all together in a virtual space connecting with each other and connecting with new ideas. The changes that are taking place around medical education, or as they call it the MEDED area, and infusing leadership into the educational process is quite astounding. It goes back to our earlier conversation about interdependent systems, and to think about healthcare leadership from a systemic perspective.

Lindsay: Absolutely. Barbara Kellerman always talks about the leadership system and understanding the system and the pieces in it. The medical community is another one of the traditional organizations. It is so skill and education based, and the importance of the point of impact with the doctor and the nurse with critical care in the moment. We tend to think of that as what are your skills, but we realize that even health care within an individual is about a system. So, we need our doctors talking to our nurses, talking to our social workers, talking to our counselors- all the people involved - and it is good to see the hunger for that in the medical community. Understanding that we need to recognize the whole system. I saw some articles a couple months ago about the almost barbaric

nature about how we grow doctors and nurses with the residencies and the long hours. I understand it and it can be a great way to get repetition on cases, but we need to understand that it may not be the only way. There may be other ways, more developmentally, that we can develop them. There is so much to learn from that community. Amy Edmondson's work on psychological safety within the medical community is fascinating in terms of how we build trust and how we can speak up. The surgeon has power and authority, but so does the nurse, so does the anesthesiologist, and so does the technician who's running the life support equipment. All of that is part of that system and it is critical to understand it. It's great to hear that that's a growing area in ILA and in the leadership space.

Cherrey: It is, indeed, a growing area in the ILA membership. You know, residencies are kind of like the boot camp of becoming a doctor. It may be good training, but you may not want them learning on you when they've been up for 20 hours straight!

Lindsay: Exactly. You may be the best doctor, but when you are sleep deprived, you might miss something. So, it becomes how we leverage what we're learning. It's an evolution. How do we understand what we have learned about learning to help influence that system? As an example, maybe we don't need as many reps like we think we do by putting them in sleep deprived states. Maybe we let them optimally perform. One mental model is, to run you and put you through as many repetitions and patients as possible, and then you'll learn through that process. Another approach might be to increase the fidelity within a patient and let you go deeper within a patient for the learning. You don't have quite as many patients, but you get a more holistic approach. I'm not saying that is right, as that is not my domain of expertise, but it is a different mental model of approaching the same goal. Our learning models and developmental models can help inform where we're going, and how we learn about learning.

You are the president of ILA and you've been that for a several years. You probably didn't wake up one day and say I'm going to be the President of ILA. I know you have an education background, but how did you get from there to where you are today? What was that journey like for you?

Cherrey: College was a transformative experience for me. Like so many of us, I had a desire to give back in my own small way by assisting, challenging, and supporting students through their college journey. I was in higher education administration and teaching for many years. There were some themes that were prevalent in my work at every place I had the privilege to work. One was around the first-generation experience. Being first gen myself, it was important to me to pay particular attention to students who were first in their family to attend college, to assist with how to navigate the college bureaucracy, how to advocate for themselves, how to engage with academic and college life, and how to toggle between the different worlds of college life, and home life.

The second theme has been leadership development. Creating learning environments for students to develop their leadership capacity of who they are, who they can be in relation to others, and about how they can live, work, and lead in their communities and in a global society. So, leadership has been integral in my work.

The third theme was because of my leadership interest, I had the good fortune of being involved in a program at the University of Maryland that was funded by a W.K.K. Kellogg grant. It brought together 45 individuals, predominantly scholars from different disciplines, and what I would call scholarly practitioners. We met for four years at UMD to look at the three areas of ethical leadership, followership, and transformational leadership.

That program was followed by a conference held at the University of Southern California in 1998 where I worked at the time, and I had the good fortune to assist Georgia Sorenson and Barbara Kellerman in their planning. It was called "The Meeting of the Minds" where 150 people gathered to continue the leadership conversation. It was the first time that Warren Bennis, who came from a business discipline of leadership, and Jim Burns, who was a political theorist, met. They knew of each other, knew each other's work and they had talked on the phone, but that was the first physical meeting. I'll never forget the two of them sitting at that table deep in conversation about leadership from their different perspectives.

At the close of the conference, there was a unanimous support to create a professional membership organization to continue the leadership work for all those who study, teach, and practice leadership. It was decided to call this newly formed organization The International Leadership Association—the ILA. Jim Burns always believed strongly that theory needed to be informed by practice, and practice needed to have good theory. The ILA, from its inception, does its work at that nexus of leadership theory and practice. Barbara Kellerman was the first Executive Director of the ILA and I served on the initial Advisory Board. When Barbara accepted a new position at Harvard University, I was asked to take on the role as the Executive Director. The ILA was small at the time and was under the umbrella of the Burns Academy at UMD.

When the ILA became a 501 (c) 3 organization and independent from the university, we had grown to over 2,500 Members from 70 countries. The staff had also expanded to accommodate the increase in members and programs. At that point, the board rightfully said in addition to the competent staff, a full-time CEO was needed. So, I have been involved with the ILA since its launch in 1999, and in the full-time role since 2015. The ILA continues to grow its members, the

programs and events, member services, and resources for our members.

The ILA, through its members, continues to explore leadership questions such as what leadership principles can be embraced across all cultures? Questions like, in this changing world of ours how do we look at the parameters of global leadership differently? What are the profound and provocative questions that need to be researched in that area in the global context for the future?

But, to your question about how I got into this, it has been a theme throughout my professional life. I believe strongly in the work we are doing and how the ILA was established as a professional membership association. A professional membership association that brings together professionals, in different disciplines and different sectors, all thinking from the theoretical and the practical aspects of leadership. I feel very honored and privileged to be able to serve in this capacity. What can leadership do to create a better world for all? That, to me, is a driver for the work we do every day.

Lindsay: I like the theory and application nexus approach. There are lots of people that do the leadership theory stuff really, really well. They understand the leadership science part. You also have a lot of great practitioners and consultants really at the leading edge. However, being able to be at that nexus of bringing what we know from the science to enable our practice with information going back and forth- that is powerful. How we make those linkages? How we assess them? That connective piece is critical. If you just do theory, we will understand something very well, but how does that help inform what we're doing? We can have practices, but if that isn't anchored to how people learn and develop, it can be its own end and we could get off track. So, being that connective part is vital for the field of leadership and leadership in general. Going back to what you said earlier, it can help us to learn and unlearn some things. There is a lot

of stuff out there that I think that sounds good, but it's not always grounded, and it can confuse the space for people.

Cherrey: There are challenges in our work. One being making sure we're challenging each other to ensure our work is rigorous and relevant. Another is to move beyond romanticizing leadership because quite frankly, the practice of leadership is hard work. Yes, there's inspiration and aspiration in leadership, but it's hard work. Yes, there is transformation, but it is hard work. One of our overriding goals is to ensure that ILA events and programs are of the utmost quality, and the resources are rigorous and relevant. We always should strive for quality and rigor, but in the leadership area, we need to be ever so much more vigilant because there is considerable work being done in the name of leadership that is not grounded in sound theory. That's what gives leadership a bad name sometimes. So, as a professional association, our members do and should expect rigor and relevance in all that we co-create together.

Another challenge is for the ILA, in addition to creating new knowledge with our members, is how to disseminate that knowledge for the general public to take advantage of the quality work being done. For example, how can we help others to think more broadly about leadership—moving beyond the individual leader role? It is not solely about the positional leader, right? I've been impressed with the work that Keith Grint has done around followership. There are many doing great research in this area, but Keith has done some interesting research in the military field. He is wicked smart, brilliant, and funny. He's an ILA Fellow and is writing blogs for the ILA. Some of Keith's work on fellowship is directly related to the work that you're doing.

Lindsay: I appreciate that perspective on rigor and relevance. I remember in grad school where you would read these articles and you'd be like, "Okay, that

is interesting that you found an effect size, but what does that mean for the individual? What is that really telling us? It is important and critical information, so I don't want to diminish that it is very important that we understand how things relate to one another. But the piece that I found missing often was that as a science and as a field, we couldn't always articulate the practical value and what that means to someone who is not a leadership scholar and who is in the trenches leading. If they don't ever get that message, then we just we're missing that connected piece and we missed the opportunity to make that impact. That is what I loved about what you mentioned about the interdisciplinarity aspect of it. I think that is what really got me into the leadership space as well. I came in from an Industrial/Organizational side of things. But, I saw early on that you have to have the 'I' and the 'O'. You need that balance. It was a sum of the process and the people, and I guess, I leaned a little more toward the people side. It is the idea how every field really fits in and can contribute. Political science, biology, engineering, history and all the different domains, bring relevance and perspective to bear into the leadership dynamic to help understand it. Because you are right, it is hard work. When we start out in our careers, I think we romanticize this notion of, "Wow, it would be great to be the CEO." Then as you move through leadership positions, you realize that it's a lot of work and service. We need to kind of pull it back a little bit and let people see it is tough work because I imagine even at your level, at the highest level, you still have your own leader development journey that you're on. I'm sure you read, listen to podcasts, and you are still on that journey determining where you want to be on that on that journey.

Cherrey: If one works in this space of leadership not continuing to engage in what we believe in and model, what we do, would not be good! So yes, absolutely. I also have the benefit of having so many opportunities to read articles and blogs written by our members, to listen to podcasts developed by our member partners,

and to represent and speak on behalf of the ILA. I am fortunate to be able to present remarks at different events in different areas of the world. For example, before the pandemic shut down borders, I had speaking engagements in Botswana and Mexico. I hope my remarks met expectations but what I receive in return, what I learn comes back tenfold. The benefit of learning from others is profoundly priceless. Being able to immerse oneself in another context, another culture is learning on steroids! How powerful it is to sit down with others, who are not like you, in a totally different sector, to talk about leadership?

Lindsay: Exactly, and they have the same passion and approach to it. I think that's one of the things that I've always enjoyed about ILA - is that global perspective, and just the ability to kind of just interact with people who have the same passion but a different opportunity. A different context on where they're coming from and just to change your mental model a little bit. I can imagine at your level, just the ability to be able to see the leadership space, and then be able to connect people when you see somebody over here who's got a need. Or you have someone trying to learn a particular domain and then being able to connect them with somebody that you know that is already in that space. That just has to be one of the serendipitous benefits of being in your position to be able to make those connections among people.

Cherrey: Yes. The Right Honorable Kim Campbell, former Prime Minister of Canada, said it so well. She said the ILA, has the "cachet of convening the conveners." because the people who are members of the ILA are those who do leadership development work. They come together to learn more about how they can do their work even better, or the research even better. Ron Heifetz describes the ILA as "the pipeline into the leadership field" and beyond in the communities. Jean Lipman-Blumen, I love it when she talks about the ILA. She says, "... at the ILA, we don't just talk about ideas, we talk about big ideas." Ron Riggio says the

ILA is “where you come to meet like-minded and other minded people.” The people who are writing about leadership, you get to meet and engage with them. Also, the people who are writing get to meet the other people who are practicing leadership and teaching it. It is a powerful synergy that mutually shapes and co-creates. I must give the shout out to James McGregor Burns and Georgia Sorensen who had the vision to create an association for all those who study and practice leadership to come together in a common space to share ideas, research, teaching, and best practices. That's what creates a unique and distinctive experience with the ILA. It is being in the moment on site where you can bump into that scholar whose book you just read or connect with longstanding colleagues.

Lindsay: It is. It is the coffees, the breaks, and really, the community. You certainly learn from the sessions, but to me, the true enjoyment is that connective piece that you just talked about. It's a different willingness where you know people are busy, but they're still willing to take the time.

Cherrey: I think something you just said, Doug, is very important. When we described the health care leadership summit, the participants were saying there is no hierarchy of roles in an ILA space, at an ILA event. Everybody brings their worth and their knowledge and their being to the ILA. If you're a nurse or you're a medical doctor, there's no status change, gain, or shifting in the ILA because you are there because you are interested in leadership in your profession and you come in on the same footing.

Lindsay: I think it is rare today, in general, but it is especially rare within a professional setting to be able to have that sense of community. Everyone has a place and has value.

Cherrey: Exactly. Earlier you were talking about imagination and doing things differently which reminded me of a quote by Albert Einstein that I

saw on a statue when I worked at Princeton. He said, “The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge, but imagination.” That quote stayed with me because it does help us if we get creative and innovative and release our imaginations, we can do great things.

Lindsay: I appreciate what you're doing and thank you for taking the time to have a conversation with me.

Cherrey: Thank you. The Air Force Academy is doing important leadership work. If I can ever be of service, please do let me know.

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