True leaders – people who uphold the values of their organization, engage their subordinates, and push the place further – are always in high demand. But are great leaders born, or can they be developed? The Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD) at the United States Air Force Academy believes that a great leader is not simply luck of the draw. Instead, they believe that through thoughtful habit formation, environmental learning, and accountability to peers, they can develop leaders of character – people who “live honorably by consistently practicing virtuous habits, lift others to their best possible selves, and elevate performance towards a common and noble purpose.” The great leader does not necessarily need to be found, they say. She can be made.

When Colonel Joe Sanders, head of the CCLD, presented at the Notre Dame Deloitte Center for Ethical Leadership’s third annual forum, he explained how to go about forming and maintaining these leaders of character. Training and education don’t suffice, he said. Even hard-wired habits are not enough. In order to develop leadership and make it stick, you have to learn habits “on the court,” understand and commit to the thought behind your actions, and then maintain your habit in a community that holds you accountable.

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Especially when people are in high-stress situations, what they decide to do and what they actually do don’t always line up. Sanders calls this the Decision-Action Gap, a phenomenon in which individuals justify or rationalize failing to honor their intentions. For future members of the military, this gap can prove deadly.

Enter the Awareness-Reasoning-Decision-Action (ARDA) framework. The method is habit based rather than merely theoretical. Awareness challenges leaders to recognize that even the smallest moments may have ethical implications and Reasoning charges them not only to consider the ways to think through an issue, but also to reflect upon their own biases, the values they have committed to upholding, and the action that would befit the leaders they hope to be.
Finally, Decision and Action task leaders to stand by their commitments and use their competence and confidence to take the right step, even if it is difficult. “It’s not just ‘read a step, do a step,’” Sanders explains, “it’s about expanding the capacities to think and act.”

Sanders insists that this method is only effective when it is directly tied to the realities of the cadets’ lives. When learning the model, cadets anticipate ethical issues or difficult moments that may arise in their careers, and then apply the ARDA to those moments. Sanders argues that this piece of the training is imperative, stating, “if you don’t really get on the court with them, then when the pressures come, the training’s not going to be of any use.”

As good as the ARDA is for individual development, Col. Sanders is quick to note that the method will fail without a supportive social context. The process develops habits, but the environment must support those habits. The Air Force Academy responds to this in a few different ways: by establishing a common language with which to talk about development, by having cadets’ commanders pledge to support cadets in their development goals, and by allowing cadets to present their goals to their squadrons, asking their peers to hold them accountable.

So how can we apply these practices to create a more engaged and ethics-based work environment? By duplicating not only the emphasis on thoughtful habit formation, but also the team accountability. Employees should learn and implement habits in teams, pre-scripting their possible ethical dilemmas, committing to their own leadership development, and holding their teammates accountable for their goals. This not only teaches your employees tools for confronting difficult decisions, but it also develops a team environment in which no one stands alone.

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**Key Points**

Want better leaders? Be like our Airmen: Set a clear and concise standard for the kind of leader you want, implement thoughtful habit formation, and promote individual ethical development by fostering accountability to teams of peers. You will develop empowered, engaged leaders with long-standing habits for making ethical decisions.