



Focusing on the Regiment Education, Training, and Experience

By Ms. Shirley A. Bridges

Lieutenant General Robert L. Van Antwerp, 52d Chief of Engineers, spoke at the 2009 ENFORCE Conference, using many of his own experiences when growing up to illustrate various aspects of education, training, and experience that were applicable to Army leaders. And instead of giving his views on the current state of the Engineer Regiment, he handed an index card to each person in the audience, and throughout his speech, he mentioned areas where he wanted input from the attendees to be written on the cards. Several of his topics came from books that are being used in the Building Great Engineers campaign.

“We did a little thing with the commanders yesterday,” he said. “We had them think about, or write down, the name of someone they really admire, and then write one characteristic of that person that they admire. It’s interesting that a number of them said, ‘It’s my father.’”

LTG Van Antwerp spoke of his father as being someone he greatly admired. “Speaking of education and training, we built a number of houses all along the way. My dad’s a mechanical engineer, so I’m a mechanical engineer. Because he loved it, I love it. And so it just was a natural. In one of the houses, we put a grease pit in the garage because he loved cars. And the grease pit was cool—it had steps going down to it, and we had a steel plate that was on rollers, so it was easy to roll that back and expose the pit, then you could drive in and never have to jack your car up.”

He said that it was in that garage with his dad that he first learned the principle of *quantity* and *quality* time. And one of the considerations he thinks we have today is how to give the right amount of quantity and quality time to the units for which we have

responsibility for oversight, but that are not at our own installation. “How do you do that so a captain or a lieutenant doesn’t feel abandoned out there?” he asked. “How do you do it when the battalion headquarters is gone and several of the companies are still on the installation? I think we’re under stress in that today.”

“Here’s what I learned from my dad,” he said. You never get to the quality time until you give the quantity. I know with my kids, you can say, ‘How was your day?’ and you won’t get the quality. But if you go out and wrestle and you play some football and stuff and then you’re all sweaty and you’re sitting on the front porch drinking some Gatorade®, you might find out how their day went. But it takes that. So I’m into quantity. And that’s why this week, I hope you felt you had the time to actually spend some quantity time and get to that quality.”

Van Antwerp said that he drove a 1953 Riley convertible to high school. He explained that for those who didn’t know what a Riley is, it’s an English car that looks like a big MG. “It was really a cool car,” he said, “but it spent a lot of time in our garage because the Riley

was no longer being made and parts were hard to find. My dad was a great mechanic, and he was also an inventor. He had a machine shop in our basement, and once when my Riley needed a valve, my dad found one from a GM vehicle, and he redesigned it on a lathe to fit my car. And that was my dad.”

He said that in that garage, he learned how to train himself and others, which has come in handy during his 37 years in the Army. At first it was him watching his dad work. And his dad would say, “I need a 3/8-inch wrench—or a 10-millimeter wrench”—or whatever. And whichever tool he asked for would be perfect for that job. “That was an art,” Van Antwerp said, “but after spending so much time doing that sort of thing, my dad just knew what he needed. But it was very interesting; at first, I just handed him his tools and watched closely. I learned how he organized things.”

“The unit has to buy into you before it will buy into where you want to go. So you establish that through your character, your principles—through your being. And then a lot of them will go with you. That’s the personnel part.”

“I learned a lot from my dad,” he said. “Some of it was from spoken things, but a lot of times it was from just observation. Books will tell you that 90 percent of learning—especially for men—comes through your eyes. And my dad knew that; we would talk some, but a lot of it was just silent movement. As I continued to help him, I wanted to learn to hand that 10 millimeter box wrench to him before he asked for it, so I started to anticipate what he’d need. And then over time, the conversation changed to ‘Why don’t you go ahead and take that nut off?’ or ‘You go ahead and put that part back together.’ Then eventually it was, ‘Hey, Dad. I’m doing this; can I use the garage?’ And he would say, ‘If you need any help, I’ll come out.’”

“That’s how I learned to train,” Van Antwerp said. “And it was an awesome upbringing that I had. So I bring that to the table. We’re all products of our experiences. So the message here today is that your example is enormously important to our Army and what you’re doing.”

He later spoke of the example that the Regiment leadership is trying to set. “We want to set the example of getting the right people in the right seat. We try and match up your skills, your experiences, your education—but the other thing we’re trying to do is match what you want to do to your job. Because we all know that if you’re passionate, if we can

get you in that place where your passion can come out, that passion just increases your talent, and it also makes it easy for the people you work for. That’s what I want. If we get you in, all we have to do is give you the boundaries and keep you from just going off, but we know you will do it.”

He said that in this day and age, he thinks we automatically dismiss any kind of individual personnel replacements. “The truth is,” he said, “in the Army, the Corps of Engineers, we have 20 or 30 percent of our people going in on individual replacement. So it isn’t a pure ARFORGEN; maybe for a brigade combat team (BCT) it is, but not necessarily for us. So there are two types of handoffs going here—you have handoffs of units, and then you have handoffs of people.”

Then he asked the group to write three things on the index card that they’d been given earlier:

- Disciplined people
- Disciplined thought
- Disciplined action

Using the framework from the book *Good to Great*¹ by Jim Collins, *disciplined people* refers to having the right people on the bus and in the right seat on the bus. It has the notion of a Level 5 Leader—one with personal humility who has an insatiable will for the organization to go where it needs to go. And he or she sees that picture and is going to take you there—through persuasiveness or influence. “But,” he said, “if you get into a unit and you think the first thing you’re going to do is put your plan into effect, I suggest to you that there’s one thing that has to happen before that: The unit has to buy into you before it will buy into where you want to go. So you establish that through your character, your principles—through your being. And then a lot of them will go with you. That’s the personnel part.”

Disciplined thought is what you do when you get the right people and they put disciplined thought against your business. “Let me give you a thought on priorities,” he said. “The reason I use a timer when I speak is to have a little fun, but the other part of it is that we have to operate efficiently—and within the time we’re allotted. And one of the things we cannot create more of is time. A lot of you may wonder—and people often ask me: ‘How are you doing it? How do you manage your time?’”

“Well,” he said, “I’ll give you a little insight into how I do it. I believe very much in a simple principle called the Pareto Principle—a 20-80 principle. For a long time I’ve thought about how to get this done when you go into a new job. And how do you do it so that you are getting the max out of your time? Well, here’s what the principle says: If you have a picnic, 20 percent of the people you invite will eat 80 percent of the food. Here’s what it means in your priorities: the top 20 percent of your priorities will produce about 80 percent of the productive results. I would also suggest that 20 percent of your time yields about 80 percent of the results—those really focused efforts.”

Van Antwerp said that an interesting thing is that if you're a lion trainer and you go into a lion cage, you take two things— a whip and a chair. Normally, between the whip and the chair you're going to get the lion to sit down. The chair has four legs on it. Since a lion or a wild animal is used to attacking a single thing, when you put that chair in the face of the lion, it paralyzes the lion. "What is it about the chair that paralyzes the lion? Well, it's those four legs coming at it, all at the same rate. And the lion can't figure out which leg is the most important. It's all about focus."

"If we aren't careful, we can do the same thing to our people. We can give them so many things that they're all coming at them, and if we don't say, 'That leg up there—that is the important leg,' they won't know what to do first. But I have plenty of time to do what I do. My saying is that I have plenty of time to do what God needs me to do; I don't have all the time to do what I want to do, but you have to have some focus on this. So that's what we have to be about."

In the *disciplined people* part of their card, he asked the group to write their advice to him or the Engineer School commandant on something they should take up that has to do with the people part of this. "I know we have some groups that are doing the *Building Great Engineers* thing, and it's going to be a great day tomorrow as we look at that," he said. "But if you think we have a real problem with putting our arms around our engineers who are in other locations where we don't have the lieutenant colonels and the colonels, then let me know."

Van Antwerp said that he also wanted the attendees to put on their card what they think the Regiment should be putting *disciplined thought* into today. "It may be something that you know we're already taking on, and you just write that down and put an exclamation point—that's where you ought to be going," he said. "But if you're thinking about something that you haven't heard here—and you think the Regiment needs to be thinking about it—then write that on your card. I talk a lot about Wayne Gretzky and hockey because I love it, but when Gretzky was asked 'What's your secret?' he said, 'I skate to where the puck is going to be.' That's the disciplined thought part for leaders—Where is the puck going to be?—so help us out on that one."

"Finally," he said, "if you think we're at the point where we should be putting *disciplined action* into something we're not putting it into today—something that we're still talking about and you want to say, 'I wish we'd stop talking about this and just do it'—then put a 'Just do it!' on the bottom of the card."

Van Antwerp reemphasized with attendees his "Big Four" for great organizations. He said that some of these apply directly to their organization, and some apply more to the Corps of Engineers. "But there's one thing you have to do for people if you're going to take them somewhere—you have to create a picture of what it looks like there. Here's my picture for the Corps of Engineers":

You have to deliver a superior performance every time. He said that that's what we're ultimately paying for. "We have that in our creed," he said:

'I'll always place the mission first.' You have to deliver. When that BCT commander turns to you and asks, 'Engineer, where can we put a forward operating base so we can have running water and some security? Tell me what I need—barriers, T-walls, all that.' You don't want to walk backward and give them the impression you don't know what you're doing there, so how do we make sure that we have the right people there and that we can deliver? We *have* to deliver. Those of us who have experienced Katrina know that we're only as good as our last project."

You'll set the standard for your profession. He said that if you're in real estate, get a real estate license; if you're a program or project manager, get a program management professional (PMP) certification; if you're an engineer or an architect, get your professional engineer (PE) certification. "Let's crank it up professionally, and then when you deal with our contractors and other partners, you're dealing at the same level."

Where you (as a unit) and you alone can make that unique contribution to this nation or other nations, you need to do that. He said that in the Corps of Engineers, one of those unique things is about water. "We know a lot about water. We're very developed, compared to Africa or other places, on reservoirs and how to deliver hydropower. Another thing, something that only we could do, was build a fence along the southern border of this country. Why? Because they needed our regulatory expertise, and they needed our real estate. And we have many other projects."

You have to make sure your unit is built to last. Jim Collins wrote *Built to Last*² before he wrote *Good to Great*; that is one of our marks. For the Corps of Engineers, what does that mean today? "Having the right people right-seated on the bus," he said, "and we need 3,300 more of them than we have. We know what we need to do to get the job done. And what we don't want to do is hire temporary workers to do that; we want to hire Department of the Army civilians so when we come through this, we're going to look back and say we built this to last. So, those are our markers."

"I so appreciate all of you," he said. "It's an honor and a privilege to be a part of this. I wake up every day and express in my heart what a privilege it is that I get to do this—for whatever time they'll leave me here. And I hope it's forever."

"God bless you all; keep up the great work."



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Endnotes

¹*Good to Great* by Jim C. Collins, Harper Business: New York, 2001.

²*Built to Last* by Jim C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, Harper Business: New York, 1994, 1997.