

The purpose of this paper is to share with the audience what I call my “crucible experience” that has defined what my personal leadership style, philosophy and beliefs are today. I will also discuss how this experience relates to the Organizational Development model and how it will influence me as an organizational leader.

It all started in Puerto Rico sixteen years ago when looking for a meaningful way to earn a living I decided to enlist in the United States Air Force. I made this decision after completing my engineering degree, with no previous military experience and without ever being outside the island for more than three weeks. When I arrived at Lackland Air Force base for basic training I wished I had paid more attention to my English instructors in high school and college, but by then it was too late (In Puerto Rico the main spoken language is Spanish so I never had the need to speak English on a regular basis). Since my English was less than perfect and I spoke with what they call a “thick accent,” my basic training instructors/peers more than often made comments about my “broken English” and inability to communicate effectively. Because of that, I was only assigned menial jobs and was kept from doing anything important, that was the future they saw for me in the Air Force. That is when my crucible started; instead of alienating myself and becoming bitter at being marginalized I decided to do something. I understood that in order to be taken seriously I had to improve my communication skills (self awareness). I did not feel bad for myself and stop talking to avoid embarrassment, on the contrary I started talking more and practicing my verbal communications. During the day I worked harder than anybody in my squadron and at night I was reading English grammar books. I felt empowered to overcome all the stereotypes about Puertoricans and to demonstrate my abilities and potential. At the end of basic training without losing my identity, I was a squadron leader and I had gained the respect of

my instructors and peers. The same scenario had repeated itself a few more times but the outcome has been always the same.

Those experiences back then have influenced my personal leadership style and beliefs. I truly believe that if you commit yourself and work hard you can accomplish anything you want, there are no excuses or limits besides the ones you create. Every individual regardless of their background or education has the potential to do great things. I bring this approach to every organization that I am assigned to and I share my experiences with my colleagues and subordinates. As an organizational leader, my crucible helps me understand that every individual in the organization is valuable and has something to offer. For groups and teams to become relevant, each person has to be challenged and empowered to become better for them and for the organization. For organizations to succeed, leaders must create the necessary conditions for a healthy climate where everybody is respected and feels safe to contribute regardless of their background. A healthy climate will lead into a productive and positive organizational culture. That is the basis of a learning organization: an organization where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.¹

My crucible is also a good example of the importance of leader development especially when it comes to self awareness since I understood that I needed to improve my communication skills to become a better asset to the Air Force. I think that the term “thin skinned” must not apply to leaders. As leaders it is imperative that we must remain open at all times to accept criticism and to maintain self-awareness. The questions: How am I doing or how do I become better? must be asked continuously and constant self assessment is critical in order to become

better as a leader. You will gain the respect and trust of your subordinates by leading by example and constantly improving yourself and demonstrating competence in what you do. Without their support your impact as a leader will be minimal and your organization will not be successful.

In conclusion, what I learned from my crucible experience has stayed with me all these years. It has been a continuous process that has helped me transform into a stronger individual, more sure of my purpose as an Air Force officer. My experience is a true example that if you work hard with discipline and commitment anything is possible for you to accomplish regardless of your background. As organizational leaders, we owe our troops a positive working environment where they feel safe to contribute without embarrassment and are allowed to participate freely and succeed. Finally, we must never become complacent, it is our responsibility to perform periodic self assessments and continually improve our leadership skills and become smarter at anything you do.

¹ Peter Senge; The Fifth Discipline