

West Point: Teaching Leadership Through Interdisciplinary Education

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When I entered the United States Military Academy at West Point in the summer of 1986, the mission of the school was to create leaders for “a lifetime of service to the nation.” I’d committed to 4 years of West Point and 5 more years after in service as an officer in the US Army. When I graduated with my degree—a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering and English literature with most of a minor in Brazilian Portuguese—I’d been through one of the most intensive and integrated liberal educations on the planet. It’s been one of the bedrock experiences informing my work as a leader and a leadership coach.

Founded in 1802, West Point brought a crucially needed resource to nation’s young Army through a classically liberal education: technical leadership in the officer corps. The technical portion then meant things like ballistics for canons, engineering in the construction of forts. Over the years, it’s evolved to include understanding rapidly developing changes in engines and the internet.

But the leadership portion meant at least as much as the technical—and it meant understanding soldiers, and societies, and ethics, what is it like to inspire others and hold them accountable, among other things. It’s one thing to know how, technically, to complete a mission to build or secure a bridge; it’s quite another thing to lead the teams of men and women who will do so, sometimes at the risk of their lives.

The classical conception of a liberal education supports the student’s ability to think, to connect ideas and issues, to engage effectively in the broad stage that is life. It is not merely the lessons of mathematics and science, or arts and literature, though it includes them. It’s not multiplication tables or calculus, not the knowledge of foreign language or the scanning of a Shakespearian sonnet. It’s the sum and application of these things to living life more fully. What does the word *saudades* in Brazilian Portuguese bring to understanding American life? What makes a poem inspire? When does it help or harm to give advice?

West Point’s Influence on How I Coach Senior Leaders

Just as your own unique work as a coach flows from the unique integration of the wide variety of learning and experience in your life, what I do as a leadership coach has been driven by what I’ve learned and where I’ve been. In service of further considering the idea of coaching as a multidisciplinary profession, here are some reflections on the components of the courses at West Point that built different perspectives and abilities in my work as a coach.

In part, because I studied literature, sometimes I'm supporting the way people make meanings of their lives through metaphor, or helping them retool those metaphors to keep their strengths and winnow their weaknesses. Sometimes we create them anew. For example, one exceptionally talented CEO with whom I worked had played professional soccer; in the face of hypergrowth, we modified his metaphor for business, moving from a soccer-star's "I'm the best person to play the ball in the game" (so he took on many tasks, occasionally overwhelming himself, and stovepiping the opportunity for growth) to a team captain playing multiple simultaneous games in which there were some ball that only the team captain can play.

In part, because I studied engineering, sometimes I'm helping leaders bring rigor and detail to their thinking about opportunities and challenges. Often, helping someone clearly define the issue—even just to realize that the issue hasn't been clearly defined yet—sets the stage for more effective action. For example, I worked with the leader of a business function known for his brilliant judgment and exceptional influence skills and his consequent ability to generate amazing business opportunities—and unnecessary conflict. Among other things, we worked on creating rigorous distinction between facts ("he arrived late") and opinions ("he's lazy") about people—a precision which led to even better judgment and which made him even more effective as an executive leader.

Much more often, the components of my liberal education work in combination, in synergy, in sequence, or in parallel—and sometimes all ways at once.

Sometimes, the metaphors clients and I have shaped been from science: how would you define the equation for success as a CEO? How would you describe the vector for your goal? Sometimes, the rigor has been about language: what, precisely, does a leader mean by "I'm going to delegate more" or "we will be leaders in our industry?"

As a leadership coach for senior leaders in organizations large and small, sometimes I've had conversation with senior enterprise leaders about the neuroscience of stress—so they knew better how to leverage that energy for high performance. Sometimes I'm helping people consider what discipline means to them, or how to hold others accountable. Sometimes we talk about sacrifice and conflict; often we talk about peace and alliances. Most often, together, senior leaders and I shape a vision of leadership that blends achieving organizational purpose with taking care of people.