

Geointeresting Podcast Transcript

Episode 15: U.S. Air Force Gen. Darren McDew

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Recently, U.S. TRANSCOM commander, Air Force General Darren McDew, visited NGA's Springfield, Virginia, headquarters as a part of NGA's director's Distinguished Speakers Series. General McDew spoke to the NGA workforce about the importance of keeping honor above personal gain, thinking at mock speed and thanking people for the work they do every day. Stay tuned for Geointeresting!

McDew: Thank you very much for allowing me to be here, and I'm not sure exactly what I'm going to say. I'm not kidding, actually. Here's what I want to do. I'd like to have a dialogue with you about one of my favorite subjects: leadership. And I really want to get to some of your questions, so what I'm going to do is I'm going to throw some things up on a wall here that hopefully will spur discussion because I've spent now 34 years of my life, doing what I thought at first was going to be engineering; what I then thought was going to be becoming a pilot. What it has been, all along the way, is leading people. And it took me a while to actually recognize that, that is what I did, but now I know for a fact that is about all I did because I don't actually produce anything anymore.

So the first thing you'll see is the slide on the wall. How many of you have ever been in a room and been subjective to me speaking before? Only a handful. Well, that's interesting, so that's good. So you'll need to know that picture up there is actually me. It's not as easy today to see that it is me, as it was 20 years ago when it was taken. And people go, "Well, you have lots of photographers following you all over the place. Why do you still use that picture?" Well there are three very very important reasons. One, simply is because I was a lieutenant colonel flying airplanes. I flew an airplane this morning, matter a fact, and let me tell you, I was better at it then. As a matter of fact, in that picture I was instructing someone else to fly an airplane. And the guy in the left seat was getting one of his first air-refuel stories. And if you know anything about that picture, we are actually not where we are supposed to be; you can't actually refuel from that left engine, and we should be lined up behind the belly of the airplane. So we are not quite where we are supposed to be, but I'm letting him find his way, and I'm talking to him. So it takes me back to the time when I flew airplanes for a living, and I was particularly good at it. Second, you see I was a lieutenant colonel; I was a squadron commander. It was my first meaningful command. It was the command where you get to know your people personally, and I tell you, I had 170 people in that squadron; I knew every one of them by first name. I could match every single spouse to the right military member. We had about 1.5 gazillion children in the squadron; I could get most of the right children to the right parents, and that was pretty good. But I took great credit and pride in the fact that I knew my people very well. And for an introvert, an engineer, that took work. It can be done; it just takes work. But the most important reason I use that picture today in every single brief and beyond is it reminded me of those monumental places in my career and because I look good in that picture.

I have a couple [of] things I want to go through. Then I will get to the meat of the things, which is your questions. Let me begin with something I promised to do a long time ago. This is something we don't do enough of. I have never met an audience, ever, that has told me they are sick and tired of being thanked. I have challenged every single person in all of my commands,



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which I think I'm at eight or nine now — I didn't count them up recently — and I've challenged them with this: when I leave, I want the following IG complaint lodged against me, "He thanked us far too much. He got us far too much recognition for the things we have done, and we are sick and tired of it." I've tried hard, and I've never got that done. I've never gotten a complaint that "We are sick and tired of you saying, 'thank you.'" It cannot be overdone if done sincerely. I just spent about an hour plus in a room getting briefed, and some time with that with your boss in a dialogue about what you do. And I thought I understood it; I have a greater appreciation for it now. I say that I get a chance to run the best combatant command in all the Department of Defense, and some people think that is arrogant, and no, it's not arrogance; it's true. It's just fact.

The other combatant commands do a great job. They have a great mission, and everybody knows who they are, but I get to represent a bunch of folks who live in the cornfields of Illinois. Those folks in the cornfields of Illinois will never find themselves in the history books. Those people in the cornfields of Illinois will never find themselves on CNN. Their boss is the least known combatant commander in all of them. And we do a unit climate assessment annually, and it tells me they love what they do. They are proud of what they do. They get great satisfaction from what they do. Therefore, I call them the best in the whole Department of Defense. I find it cute and quite adorable when the CENTCOM commander and PACOM commander say how much countries they have in their AOR; how much responsibility they hold for those vast number of countries. It's cute. Our AOR is the globe, just like yours. You don't fraction yourself off to one region. You're across the globe.

I told my people that sometimes we forget what we do is not deliver stuff, but deliver options. When trouble spots occur around the world, the world still calls one place: 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. I don't care what the rhetoric says; that's the phone number on everybody's speed dial when they really find the crap hitting the fan.

What our job is, and yours too, is to provide options for the nation that no one else has. And I'm quite proud that we deliver that, and I thank you for doing it. You underpin what this nation is capable of doing. You underpin the best that we have, and sometimes, you become numb to it because everyone around you is doing it. It shouldn't stop you from appreciating what you do and enjoying the fact that you get to do it right now. So this is where I pause and make eye contact with as many of you as I can. With as much sincerity as I can, I say simply thank you very much for what you do, why you do it and the way you do it, and I greatly appreciate it now that I know more about it; now then after the time I spent with [inaudible].

How many of you have ever seen me talking about the cube? A few of you. OK, it is probably the most requested thing that I do because I believe when you are a leader, the one thing in common you have with every other leader is people. I don't care what title you have. I don't care what you think you're doing as a leader. It all comes down to people. And if you don't understand the aspects of this cube, you are not fully understanding, appreciating [and] dealing with your people effectively, in my opinion.

So, this is the snapshot of the cube because I was told that most of you got it already, but it looks like that is not true, so let me do a quick summary. OK, I'll do a quick summary, just so you have this baseline.

In this cube you will see there are two axes, performance and potential, and it runs low to high in each direction. And what you need to understand is that every single human being you know fits somewhere on this cube. I have to pause here for a second. Someone in the audience is a technical person. Someone understands math and science. Someone right now is thinking, this is not a cube. Someone is thinking in their mind — it's probably you, sir. You're probably telling me this is a parallelogram or a square. You're probably saying to yourself that a cube has to have three dimensions, and you can't call this a cube. How dare you call yourself an engineer. And I will go back to you, it is my briefing, mind your own business. It's cute. Deal with it. You can have it; call it what you want, I call it a cube.

In the cube you will see there are four quadrants, and there are 10 percent on either end of this bell-shaped curve. The top 10 percent: the stars. Unfortunately for most of us, most of our organizations believe there are 90 percent of the organization filled with these 10 percent. But the math doesn't work. The bottom end of the spectrum, the deadwood, are the folks people are in denial that they actually exist in the organization. Most of you don't believe you have these people, or you're in denial. There are only two people in an organization that don't know that deadwood exist. Anybody know who they are? The deadwood themselves, because they believe their performance appraisals; they believe those [inaudible] to be right. So they think they actually do walk on water and their feet don't get wet because we don't give them honest feedback. Who is the other person that doesn't know these people exist? The supervisor. And everyone around the supervisor is chipping away at that supervisor's credibility because they are failing to act on that knowledge.

Then I talk about the other two quadrants. The vast majority of our organization fit into two categories — one is your solid citizens; those are the folks that get your work done every single day. They are the folks that if you have a widget-producing company, and your goal is to produce 100 widgets per day from 7:30–4:30, your solid citizens come to work at 7:30. They produce 100 widgets, and they leave at 4:20 because they are out the gate by 4:30. But between 7:30 and 4:20, they produce every single day. You must set realistic goals for them because they won't innovate into 105, even when they are capable of it. But they won't underproduce, either. And if you appreciate them, that's the thank you. They will literally die for you. And in my business it's important to have that relationship.

Then there are the folks in the upper — I guess your left — learners, and people think that is a pejorative term. It can be a brand-new person in the military coming out of basic training. It could be a new entry into your organization. It can be a brand-new general, a brand-new chief master sergeant, a brand-new ... anybody in a new position trying to do something different. They need someone to role model for them; they need someone to show them the way. Not bad, but the potential is there for them to be better because you spent time with them. I was a fledgling basketball player. I probably could have made it to the NBA if I had a little more height and some talent, but I did play on a bunch of all-star teams. I played legitimately through most of my life before I decided that I needed to give it up and go pro at something else. And what made me a better ball player was someone willing to spend time shagging those balls that I missed, showing me how to shoot a layup time and time again because you can't get better unless someone is willing to spend time with you.

I spent a lot of time on that foundational place and this cube because it is that important to understand who your people are and what they need from you as leaders. Those taglines up

there are what each of those folks need from you as a leader. OK, so we now have that foundation. That's typically an hour, but you need that to be what I'm going to do now, though.

A little about me. True, I'm a husband, a father and now a grandfather. That is like the greatest thing in the world. I should have skipped the kids. I should have gone right to grandchildren because Henry is the greatest little dude I've ever met in my life. My son was OK, but Henry is awesome because I give him back to my son. Henry can now jump. He can climb on granddad, and that's really, really good stuff. I can talk all day about Henry. So I've been doing this for about 34 years. Somebody added those up; I didn't know — 19 assignments, 11 different locations. I did start out in the KC 135. I've flown now about eight different airplanes; [the] only thing that means now is that I'm old. I'm about to go speak to a group of folks that are celebrating the 60th anniversary of the KC 135, and I'm going to have to prove to them that I wasn't at the first delivery.

But all through all that, I've had a number of things that I have learned that I want to share, and I continually share them because someone shared them with me. I either got them through personal testimony, through people spending time with me, or reading in books. And so you; you get the old guy himself, right here. I'm going to walk away through my career and a few lessons learned. Thanks a lot!

So I did attend the Virginia Military Institute. I did go there, probably when African-Americans were not that prevalent, but my classmates didn't care. They cared about a few things: were you a good teammate? were you who you said you were going to be? and could they count on you? And that is what made me as a young person.

When I found myself in my senior year about to become core commander, which had never crossed my mind, by the way, my classmates were the first ones who said it to me out loud. And this was a group of 420 young men; we were all men at the time. And there were 20 African-Americans when we started; there were three when we finished, and they had decided that I ought to lead them. Now they didn't get the final vote; the super lieutenant did. But it was whether I could be counted on when they needed me; whether I could perform to the level that I needed to perform, and was I always going to be the example that I should be? It framed for me everything afterwards.

I'll tell you my customer grade officer time. We will go almost by rank, but I won't [speak] about every assignment. Some key things here, thinking at mock speed. As a young engineering student, I could have told you 1.67×3.23 was some number; I can't do it today. Let me tell you what it means: when you are in pilot training, you are flying 238s, supersonic aircraft. When you are flying down initial and about to fly down to your approach, and you're traveling at 300 knots, and you've got to calculate in your head — I'm going to need this later — and you are traveling at 300 knots, and you've got to calculate your landing speed at 300 knots, and landing speed calculation is, and I still remember, its 155 knots plus one knot for every 100 pounds of fuel you have over 1,000. So you got look at your gauge, see how much fuel you have, take the difference between 1000 and whatever you have, add a knot for that, add 155 and land. And you're going 300 miles an hour. So, if you did 1.67×2.63 , it might take you a minute; you don't have it. How significant are those digits? What I learned then was if some things are insignificant, it becomes two times three is six, and you move on. There are things that you spend a lot of time on; they may not be as significant as you once thought they would be.

Determining what those things are is important when you become a leader and more and more senior. And then I found that there were things that I thought that may be beneath me, but the [inaudible] where you [inaudible] says there are no unimportant jobs. The more senior I got and the more leadership positions, I realized that every one of those jobs that someone gives you, that you think, 'really me' is important. If you are willing to do it, then sign your name to it, you'll advance. I did not understand that then; I do now.

So when I became the voting officer, I became the savings-bond officer, I became the snack officer, and I've done all of those jobs. If you name an additional duty in a flying squad, I've had it. I had the best snack bar you'd ever see.

My voting-bond drive before the days of PowerPoint; I hand drew my cartoon; I did posters myself. I sold savings bonds. Try selling savings bonds. I sold a lot of savings bonds because it was important to get done. And then about 150 years ago, I made a decision that I was going to do — yes about 150,160 years ago — and that decision was, as long as I was going to wear this uniform, I was going to wear it. And the day I could no longer wear it and the day I can no longer wear it appropriately, I need to take it off. And in my business it means a couple [of] things. If I'm hanging out with soldiers and marines, guess what that means? I better be with PT. I have to be able to get out there. If its pull-ups, push-ups or running, I've got to be able to do it, and they don't care how old I am; I've got to be able to maintain that standard. I set a goal for myself of 100 on my PT test; I've had one that wasn't. I had an injured wrist. I had an exec that made me get a nine on my push-ups instead of 10. I got a 99 once. Haunts me to this day.

And then I realized I'm not really a fun producer, so this is me having a really good time. This is me sad. This is me angry. You really do own the ability to make fun yourself, and you don't have to wait for someone to give it to you. I told my commands I'm a fun enabler. I spent my field-grade years, my earlier ones, at the Pentagon, and actually, at the White House — I don't have that graphic on there — and I learned a number of really important lessons. The most important on that slide, though, two; the top one. If you are a young captain at the Pentagon or a young major at the White House, how do you get stuff done? You don't have any position of authority. It's about getting to know people as human beings and getting them to trust you; getting them to understand you are a good teammate, and you are going to be what you say. I learned that back when I was a youngster. It scales forever. It still works. If I'm hanging out with four stars, I can't order another four star to do anything. How do I get them to do anything? Personal relationships. Can they count on me in a clutch? Those things are important.

The other is the bottom. So I was at the White House for two years as aid to the president of the United States, and I wasn't told no for two years. There is a couple [of] different ways to take this. One is, you become arrogant; OK, I get that. No, what I really took from it was someone has the power to say yes; you just have to find them. And it also taught me don't harass the person saying no; that may be the only power they own. You are wasting your time. Find the person that can say yes. Then harass them. Sometimes, you are working at the wrong level. I tell this to people in my squadron. When you have a problem with the PX, don't harass the cashier. That is why God invented managers. They can change something. A cashier can only do what a cashier can do.

This is about a fascinating a time as I've ever had in my entire life and probably eclipses every command I've had since; OK, every command ever since. That is when I was a squadron

commander and lieutenant colonel because, I told you before, it is where you make decisions that impact people's lives, and you can see the impact every single day. That is important to me. And what I had the opportunity to do was to go through some of these lessons. I had a brand-new squadron in Charleston, flying a brand-new airplane, the C-17. And believe it or not, morale was kind of low. You're in Charleston flying C-17s; how could morale be low at all? Well, it was, because we were the second C-17 squadron in the Air Force, not the first. The first C-17 squadron in the Air Force used to call us names; made fun of us because we were the second C-17 squadron. See we were lesser [inaudible] then them. And I just simply said to my squadron, internally, that we have one simple goal in life — to be the best C-17 squadron in the United States Air Force. Now that was one of two at the time, but that was the goal, and I said we were going to do it this year. By the end of this year, we are going to be recognized as the best C-17 squadron in all the Air Force. And it was a building block on, how do you bring spree and comradeships to an organization? The 14th aerial squad, and I'll give you a couple tips.

That mighty patch there. There were a couple C-17 squadrons. By the time I took command, there were three C-17 squadrons, the 14, 15, 17, and one of them had an eagle as a mascot, and I had secretly hoped I'd get that one. I had all kinds of eagles in my repertoire; all kinds of quotes. I was ready to be the eagle's commander. I got the 14; the pelican. That majestic bird. How do you rally people around the pelican? Well, you can. The first thing I started doing was I didn't introduce myself as the 14th aerial squad commander. I introduced myself as the Pelican Squadron. I was Pelican One and proudly stated it. No longer when I went to the club for an official function — you know those little table numbers? I only sat at table 14. I could have been at table six, [and] my squadron would go find table 14 and put it at my table. We had an award system; you know, quarterly awards, that kind of thing, and people would win them. My predecessor had this plaque in the shape of South Carolina that he would hand out, but my folks didn't have an office; what would they do with this plaque? There was a set of pens, a pen-and-pencil set, in the squadron colors, and at the top of the pen, the squadron patch. On the pen it said, "Quarterly Award Winner," and had your name emblazoned on it. I decided I would make a bigger deal out of that pen-and-pencil set. So I'd hand them the plaque, and we would eventually get away with them once we got rid of the whole supply. And I would stand up in front of the entire squadron, and I hold up the pen and pencil like this, and I'd say, "The reason these two things are important are because all of a sudden you now have to live up to the fact that you are a quarterly award winner or annual award winner. Because as I put these in your pen pocket," in your flight suit you have two pen pockets, "you will now be reminded every single day, and everyone who sees you will see you as an award winner". So, I would walk over to them, take whatever pen and pencil they had in there, because everyone's got one, take them out and throw them away, and I would ceremoniously put each one in their pockets, smack it and move on. Less than a quarter later, people outside the squadron, who had left the squadron and gone on to other jobs, said, "I was a quarterly award winner in my squadron. Could I get a set of pen and pencils?" No. You have to earn them; you cannot buy them. You must earn them. They were cheap: 15 bucks. Everybody wanted a set. And it didn't take long at all to get there. As a matter of fact, when I left one of the things that almost brought me to tears, if I had a heart to come to tears, was they gave me a set that said "Pelican" on it when I left. That squadron has won Squadron of the Year; won it the year that I declared that we would and won it about every commander since. I'm very proud of the fact that we didn't just start the squadron, we developed a culture and perpetuated and developed leaders. More general officers have come out of that squadron during that time period; there have been six so far out of one squadron, flying

squadron. There have been more chiefs than I can count, more squadron commanders than I can count; and it started right there with a little bit of [inaudible] from Pelican One.

And the other thing is if you see a problem, you can't ignore it if you are the leader. If you walk by a problem, you just validated that it is okay. To include the deadwood in your organization because everyone else thinks you know about them.

There are too many things on this slide. From what I've learned, if you look at them, they all come into the category of things you kind of know. So every commander thinks they should build a vision. Ever notice that? Everybody needs a vision statement. Sometimes they get too fancy and too complicated. The note I've got about, what do you want?

When I became a first-time wing commander at Scott Air Force Base, actually, I was doing the whole off-site coming up with our strategic vision and my colonels looked at me and said, "Sir, what do you want?" Nobody had ever asked me that before. And I said simply, "I want us to be the place you call if you want to know how to do something right. I want us to be the showcase for air mobility commands." So the tag line became "Air Mobility Commands Showcase Wing, renowned for excellence, committed to superior service and exceptional support." And Showcase Wing became that moniker in 2002, and if you go there today, it remains. And part of it is because they are afraid to get rid of it now. But it remained a long time before they were afraid to take it away because it had resonated with the civilians that had been there for a long long time, and they understood where it came from.

Lots of other things you've heard about. One of those — I make fun of myself. You have to look like you are having fun. Do you sometimes enjoy what you're doing, but you look like this while you're doing it? Who then wants to be you when they grow up? Nobody. So I have to remind myself periodically to let it out that I enjoy the heck out of what I do and show it. I struggle with that.

Believe it or not, general officers still learn stuff. I have to remind myself periodically that I have a boss because I can be quite autonomous. I live in the cornfields of Illinois. Nobody pays attention to what I do. I can just do stuff, but I remind myself I do it on the behalf of someone for some reason; to stay connected to a larger enterprise and not just for the sake of what I want to do. Although, that would be pretty darn cool. But that's a reminder, as you get more and more senior, don't forget that. Those other things are things that can trip you up; the social presence thing. I have about eight Facebook pages every other week until the security guys take them down because now I'm a target as well, so you've got to be careful of that. So I've got a Facebook page, but you can't find the real one. All the ones you find are not the real one because I'm really dormant on social media because of that. And the bottom one — I'll get there because I really want to get your questions — is diversity.

Diversity scares people. Just the pure talk of it scares people because some people take it as I might lose something. An opportunity that was there for me before might be gone away because of diversity. I guess if I were in the majority, I might understand that feeling better, but I grew up with the majority. I mean I was in a situation of 420 young men with 20 of them African-American; there were no women. So, I understand some of that, but let me tell you what I believe about diversity. It's an [inaudible]. It's an understanding that we make better decisions when people around us don't always tell us yes. It's not necessarily about race, gender or

ethnicity. However, in this country, the only way to measure it is through race, gender and ethnicity. People would like to say, "I would like to get diversity a thought." Sure, measure it. I will tell you this, if you have different race, gender [or] ethnicity on your table, your likelihood of having diversity of thought goes up, not down. Can you get that and still have groupthink? Absolutely. Less likely. I challenge my team; I have for a long time. When I'm hiring for a new position, I want a representative of a group of people to select from. I don't select for diversity; I select the best candidate. What I have found is that if you have a diverse list, you have a greater chance of getting diversity on your team. If your list comes time and time again and has no diversity, challenge the list. There are qualified folks out there that don't look like you that deserve an opportunity to perform. If they don't, treat them like they did; and move on to the next candidate. Never hire the wrong person to get diversity; that just puts the cause backwards.

Here is a bunch of stuff — kind of a summary set of things that would cover just about everything I talked about. I'm looking around the audience, and most of you can read. A few of your lips are still moving, so I'll pause the slide for a little bit. I still challenge myself in these things regularly because I find them that important.

So, at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia — Stonewall Jackson was a professor at VMI. It made it interesting when I got there, by the way. When I showed up at VMI, it had just graduated its first black cadets in 1972. I showed up in 1978; it was an interesting, interesting place. The class of 1920 and '22 was still around and one of the first classes I had the chance to speak in front of when it was announced that I would be the core commander the following year. They weren't all that excited about the idea. So they still played Dixie at VMI when I got there. Another I could talk for hours about that as well. It's a whole other book. But Stonewall Jackson still has some inspiring lessons.

So I walked every day thorough this archway called the Stonewall Jackson Arch and it said simply, "You may be whatever you resolve to be." And I resolved that day that I was going to be a VMI graduate. No matter what they did to me, I was too stubborn to leave. And then as I've grown farther, I decided I was going to be somebody's good-leadership example. At first it was just my own, then it was my crew, my flight, my squadron, and now it's U.S. Transportation Command. I can only do what I can do, but the one thing I can control is the example I am to others. So I would challenge you to be the best you that you can be. In most cases, it's pretty good.

I start and end the same way. Because you haven't challenged me yet, or I've overdone it yet.

So there are a lot of things that need fixing, a lot of things that need to change, and most people are looking for someone else to do it. The great philosopher, the Lorax, I think has the answer and the answer is you. Most of you get this.

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