

Leadership Means Seeing the Person Behind the Uniform

There is something powerful about sitting down with someone over a cup of coffee.

Maybe it is because coffee slows us down. It gives us a reason to sit still for a few minutes. It creates a space where conversation can happen without a podium, a meeting agenda, a title, or a uniform getting in the way. And sometimes, that conversation can make a difference we may never fully understand.

September is National Suicide Prevention Month. It is an important reminder that behind every uniform, title, position, accomplishment, and strong exterior is a human being.

We sometimes become very good at seeing the uniform.

We recognize the commander. We recognize the leader. We recognize the veteran. We recognize the person who is always at the meeting, always volunteering, always answering the phone, always helping someone else.

But do we recognize the person?

That may be one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves.

The person behind the uniform

Military service teaches us many valuable lessons. We learn discipline. We learn responsibility. We learn how to accomplish a mission. We learn how to keep moving forward when things become difficult.

But sometimes those same strengths can make it difficult to admit when we are struggling. We can become accustomed to carrying the load.

We may convince ourselves that asking for help is weakness. We may believe that other people have bigger problems. We may tell ourselves that tomorrow will be better.

Sometimes tomorrow does get better. But sometimes someone needs another person to step into today with them. That is where leadership matters.

Leadership is not simply about giving direction. It is not about having the answer. It is not about being the strongest person in the room.

Sometimes leadership means noticing that something has changed. The person who normally attends every meeting suddenly stops coming. The person who always answers the phone becomes quiet. The person who is normally full of energy seems distant. The person who spends all their time taking care of everyone else suddenly doesn't seem interested in anything.

Those things don't automatically mean someone is in crisis. But they can be reasons to reach out. And reaching out doesn't require a leadership title.

It requires caring.

Sometimes the most important question is simple

“How are you really doing?”

That question sounds simple. But asking it — and genuinely waiting for the answer — can be difficult.

We often ask, “How are you?” The automatic answer is usually, “I'm good.” And then we move on.

Maybe instead we need to slow down. “How are you really doing?”

Then listen. Not listen while thinking about what we are going to say next. Not listen while trying to solve the problem. Just listen.

We don't have to be counselors. We don't have to have all the answers. We don't have to understand everything someone has experienced. We simply need to be willing to care and help connect them with someone who can.

Sometimes the greatest thing we can tell another person is:

“You don't have to go through this alone.”

Comradeship has to mean something

In organizations like the VFW, we talk about comradeship. We talk about veterans taking care of veterans. We wear shirts that promote the mission. We attend meetings. We volunteer at events. We participate in programs. We advocate for veterans and their families. All of those things matter.

But comradeship cannot simply be something we talk about. It has to be something we practice.

It has to continue after the meeting ends. It has to continue when nobody is watching.

And sometimes, it looks incredibly simple. A phone call. A text message. A visit. A cup of coffee. A willingness to sit beside someone and say, “I'm here.”

We don't have to know exactly what to say. We just need to make sure someone knows they are not invisible.

Strength doesn't always look strong

One of the greatest mistakes we can make is assuming that because someone appears strong, they don't need support. The person who is helping everyone else may need someone to help them. The person who is always smiling may be hurting. The person who seems to have everything together may be struggling behind closed doors. And the person who says nothing at all may need someone to notice.

That doesn't mean we should treat every quiet moment as a crisis. It means we should know our people well enough to notice when something changes.

That's what relationship looks like. That's what caring looks like. And that's what leadership can look like.

We don't have to fix everything

There is another lesson here that is important.

When someone tells us they are struggling, our first instinct may be to fix it. We want to make the pain disappear. We want to give advice. We want to tell them everything will be okay.

But sometimes our job isn't to fix the situation. Our job is to stay connected. Listen. Take them seriously. Encourage them to get professional help. Help them find the appropriate resources.

And if there is an immediate danger, involve emergency services.

If you or someone you know is struggling or thinking about suicide:

Call or text **988** in the United States to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

Veterans: call **988** and press **1**, or text **838255**, to reach the Veterans Crisis Line.

Online chat is available at **VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat**.

If someone is in immediate danger, call **911** or go to the nearest emergency department.

Asking for help isn't failure. Getting professional help isn't weakness.

Sometimes it is one of the strongest decisions a person can make.

One person. One conversation. One cup of coffee.

So here is this week's Coffee Cup Challenge.

Don't try to save the world. Don't create a complicated program. Don't wait for someone to ask for help.

Pick one person. Someone you haven't talked to lately. Someone you care about. Someone who has been carrying a lot.

Call them. Text them. Invite them for coffee. And ask:

"How are you really doing?"

Then listen. You may never know what that conversation means to them.

Maybe it changes nothing. Maybe it brightens their day. Maybe it reminds them that somebody cares. Or maybe, just maybe, it becomes the conversation they desperately needed.

We may never know the impact of a simple act of caring. But that shouldn't stop us from doing it. Because at the end of the day, people matter more than positions. People matter more than titles. People matter more than accomplishments.

And no uniform should ever make us forget the person wearing it.

That's the heart of this Coffee Cup Family. Not one person. Us.

Looking out for each other. Checking on each other. Listening to each other. And making sure that when life gets difficult, nobody has to believe they are fighting the battle alone.

One person. One conversation. One cup of coffee.

Sometimes leadership really is that simple.

COFFEE CUP FAMILY WORKBOOK

Episode 12

SEEING THE PERSON BEHIND THE UNIFORM

Leadership isn't just seeing what someone does.

Leadership means seeing who someone is.

This week's challenge is not about fixing someone else's problems.

It's about being present. It's about noticing.

It's about caring enough to make the connection.

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. Think About Your People

Take a few minutes and think about the people you interact with regularly.

Who are the people you normally see?

Who haven't you heard from lately?

Is there someone whose behavior, attitude, or participation has changed recently?

2. Look Beyond the Uniform

Think about someone you know who is often viewed as “the strong one.”

What makes other people see that person as strong?

What challenges might that person be carrying that others don't see?

A reminder. We should never assume what someone is experiencing. The goal isn't to diagnose people. The goal is to care enough to check in.

3. The Conversation

Before you make your phone call, send your text, or sit down for coffee, think about what you want that person to know.

Complete this sentence: “I want you to know that...”

Now complete this one: “If you’re having a difficult time, I’m willing to...”

4. The Listening Challenge

When you have the conversation, remember:

Don't

- Don't immediately fix.
- Don't judge.
- Don't minimize.
- Don't compare their problems to someone else's.
- Don't rush the conversation.

Instead

- Listen.
- Ask questions.
- Be present.
- Take what they say seriously.
- If they need help beyond what you can provide, help connect them with appropriate professional resources.

Which of these is hardest for me, and why?

5. Your Coffee Cup Challenge

One person

Who will you check on this week?

Name: _____

One conversation

How will you reach out?

☐ Phone call

☐ Text

☐ In person

☐ Coffee

☐ Other: _____

One question

Write the question you will ask.

One action

What will you do after the conversation?

6. What Did You Learn?

After the conversation, take a few minutes to reflect.

What did you learn by simply listening?

Did the conversation change the way you see this person?

What will you do differently because of this conversation?

7. Leadership Reflection

Complete these statements.

Leadership isn't always about...

Sometimes leadership means...

The people around me need me to...

I can become a better leader by...

8. Remember the Resources

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Online chat is available at **VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat**.

If someone is in immediate danger, call **911** or go to the nearest emergency department.

You don't have to be an expert to care.

You don't have to have all the answers.

You simply have to be willing to make the connection.

This Week's Takeaway

Write this somewhere you'll see it:

"Don't just see the uniform. See the person."

Then put it into practice.

One person.

One conversation.

One cup of coffee.

And remember:

Our people matter more than our positions, titles, or accomplishments.

One Person. One Conversation. One Cup.