**The Colonel’s story (Blake)**

I took a deep breath and made the phone call to this man I had only heard of, but had never met. Who did I think I was, asking a Federal Security Director to sit down with me for 2 hours and tell me his very personal story of what it was like to move through retirement from 35 years as an officer in the United States Marine Corps to a leader in a large state agency that was comprised largely of social workers? I guess I thought I had a very puzzling question that he could help me answer, so it was worth a shot.

Fast forward one month, and I am walking across the concourse of a very busy airport to meet ‘The Colonel’ with my laptop and tape recorder in hand, ready to build a relationship of trust quickly. I was hoping that this man would tell me every intimate detail of his unique journey from military colonel to leader of a largely female government agency. The Colonel strikes an imposing figure, as he is well over six feet, not much hair left, very broad shoulders and a bit of hitch in his giddy-up – a souvenir of warfare. He gives me a broad smile and shakes my hand (what a grip…) and thanks for me for flying halfway across the country to talk with him – “I hope my story is worth it. Doesn’t seem like a big deal to me.” And so the story begins …

When someone leaves the military, it’s fairly common to move into law enforcement or some type of security work – it’s a good fit. He hadn’t given a great deal of thought to what was next; the military had been his career – more than a career really – it was his way of life. His wife had lived in 26 different houses in 32 years and “as long as she had budget to decorate” she didn’t really care where they lived or what he did. While he was getting used to civilian life, an opportunity presented itself. The Colonel moved into fighting white collar crime for about year. Security and mortgage fraud within government agencies was running amuck, and the state attorney’s office came calling for help to clean it up. He had about roughly 35 investigators working for him, and had a “great time locking up bad people.” He wasn’t sure how long this adventure would last, but he was still enjoying it when another phone call came. The person on the other end of the phone line was a judge, newly appointed as the Secretary for the Department of Children and Families for the state in which he was currently living. The appointment came amidst a firestorm of criticism; the Department had been labeled dysfunctional. 30,000 employees with 13 lawsuits on the books for various counts of mental and physical abuse, misuse of foodstamps and Medicaid …it was a mess. Until that Friday night at 10 p.m., the Colonel didn’t really know the Department of Children and Families existed, much less what they did.

Few things peak the Colonel’s interest as much as a big mess in search of a plan. So, he spent 2 hours locked in a room with the judge and a whiteboard on a Sunday afternoon (48 hours after the initial phone call) and they start coming up with a plan of attack. After two hours, the judge placed a call to the governor and said, “I’ve got the guy. I want him to take over and I want him to be in court with us on Monday for this lawsuit.” Are you doing the math? Less than 72 hours from the time the Colonel becomes aware that this department and this mess exist, he is sitting in court with the Secretary and the Governor. They fired the incumbent at 8 a.m. and at 9 a.m. Blake was standing in front of 30 newspaper reporters and TV cameras doing the interviews that go along with being the new guy. They all knew his background and were trying to figure out why this was a good choice and how things were going to work- they wanted his plan. “Give me 90 days and a chance to show you measurable progress” was all he said. In the courtroom, they had to fight hard to get the Colonel a chance to fix this mess in one particular county, because the preferred option was to bring in a federally appointed person to monitor the situation. The cases of child abuse were simply an embarrassment for the agency and they didn’t have much time to try and recapture any type of credibility. One of the arguments made was “Hey, why do we give them another chance? They have already hired and fired four guys. He’s just another one. It’ll be the same thing; they come up with a plan but they can’t execute anything.”

He got his chance, and every 30 days there was a check-in from the courts. His leadership was working. As a matter of fact, it worked so well, so quickly that he got another phone call. People were watching what he was able to do and they wanted it at the state level. After about two days of discussing things, the Colonel finds himself being appointed the Deputy Secretary. Making the decision was not something he did in isolation; it involved a conversation with his wife. As they talked, he kept thinking of how he never turned down a challenge. That is embedded in a leader’s head in the military, and he just felt he couldn’t turn his back on this challenge – especially because children and families were being taken advantage of and were paying a high price for someone else’s lack of leadership.

At this point, you get the picture of what he was up against and that he continued to be very successful, no matter what challenge they threw his way. When asked about the similarities in these roles, he smiled and said “we were still fighting a war against bad guys.” There were bad guys that were doing bad things to kids and there were bad guys abusing case workers and there were bad case workers abusing families. He saw this as a different kind of war, but still a war that had an enemy to be defeated. That isn’t the point of this story ; we need to understand how he was able to make such a dramatic shift in context successfully and what he experienced as he moved through this transition.

One of the things a leader doesn’t realize he is losing is his understanding of the culture when he moves to a new organization. The leader will typically use the same approach he always has, until he bumps into a situation where that doesn’t work. For the Colonel, he hit this bump fairly soon in his new role. He didn’t anticipate there being any difficulties. “I’ve always been in leadership roles in my career. Handling people – guiding and directing – I’ve always been comfortable doing that.” “ I think the same principles of bringing organizations along is the same wherever you go; if you develop people around you and they know you are doing that and plan to take them to another level, then they’re going to give you a level of commitment that will make things work out.” “It’s about capturing their hearts and minds.” He didn’t realize that he might need a different method than he used in the Air Force. He told me the story of holding his first staff meeting.

“I get in front of this group of civilians and they have this look on their face like ‘my God, what is he doing here? He’s never been in our world.’ They are all trying to figure out why they hired me. So, I start by telling them who I am, share a few war stories, and talk about what I see as the key problems we need to fix and how I am good at figuring out a plan to fix problems.” After the meeting, the Colonel is back in his office when a knock comes on the door and a young lady, who runs public affairs is there, with a request to talk to him in private. She walks in, and asks if she can be open and honest with him. “Sure.” And then she unloaded. “What the hell was that? I gotta tell you I sat through that whole meeting thinking this isn’t going to work. First of all, I barely understood anything you said. The words and terms you used are foreign to our environment. Second of all, your presence is a bit intimidating. You can’t talk to us like that ‘cuz no one will listen to what you say or do what you ask.” At one point, she broke down and cried about what a terrible situation they were in and how much they needed a leader who could help them, and they had hoped he would be that leader, but she really had her doubts. She really was saying that he didn’t have a clue. They had been doing this work for 20-25 years and the fact that this guy who knew nothing about their work was pretending that he knew how to fix thing was ticking them off. “I almost wanted to hug her once I got over the initial reaction that her behavior was completely inappropriate – no one talks to their commanding officer like that. That might have been the first time during this transition when I realized how different this was going to be. I thanked her for being honest with me and went home that night to rethink everything.”

“Your new employer can give you a lot of things, but they can’t give you credibility. I didn’t know how to lead outside of a command and control environment.” The Colonel realized that he not only had to take a different approach, but he had to adopt a different style and use different vocabulary. “In a military environment, I’m not gonna think twice about who you are, where you are, what you are, what your background is … it doesn’t matter because you work for me and I need you to get this done. I handled it in a professional, not demeaning way, but it was about giving orders and you obeying. This was very different.” He might be a great planner and executor, but without a relationship with this new staff, his plans would be left on paper.

Reflecting back on the encounter with this staff person that first day, he was also reminded that he had never had a female staff member in his 35 years of leadership; that in and of itself, was an eye-opener. He came to appreciate female staff as powerful contributors to the work, in ways that men weren’t. “They have an intuitive sense that is unbelievable and they use their emotions as a strength in a way that I had never witnessed.” These case workers were mostly women, and they saw the children in their cases as their children. Emotions were a key part of every discussion with case workers, parents, psychologists, and school councilors. It was all about collaboration and that was not how the military worked. At the same time that collaboration was a good thing, there was a need at some point for someone to step up to the plate and say ‘I’m in charge’. As they taught him about collaboration, he taught them about accountability. We had to work through things like making decisions and measuring success. “Once I understood them and they understood me, we built a commitment to making things better and I had a team as good as any I had ever seen in the Marine Corps.”

It didn’t come easily; it was a ton of work. “I learned the word patience ten times more than I had ever dreamed of.” Interestingly enough, I thought he would have sought some perspective or advice from his wife on how to work with women, but he said it never occurred to him. He had never asked him wife for advice during his military career, and it just didn’t occur to him that he might have a resource at home that could help him see how to adapt his style to suit a civilian, female staff.



We all handle heavy workloads and stress differently. The colonel’s approach to a difficult problem is to work long hours – like 4 or 5 hours of sleep a night. He shared a picture of the gym where he would go to work out and spoke of how important it was to continue his exercise program. “I was working ridiculous hours, but I knew that I had to keep my body strong. I made sure that I got into the gym several times a week to run. The piece I cut out was the weight work. I couldn’t spend enough time there to do it all, and I thought that taking care of my heart and lungs were a bigger deal.” As part of this interview process, the Colonel visited the gym because it was an important part of his transition. The weight machines caught his attention. “I remember going through a phase where I was mentally exhausted. I was handling the physical demands pretty well, but I was not used to feeling mentally fatigued. That was part of the cost of this new job. It took so much more mental energy to do this job. At some point, the military stuff became second nature, but this …this was really hard. It occurred to me as I looked at the weights that there was a correlation between physical strength and mental strength. Without lifting weights regularly, I felt weak and just didn’t have the strength to battle through some hard things. When I figured this out, I made the time to lift weights again, and I felt a big difference in how I could handle difficult times. It wasn’t just the mental strength; it was also hooked into my confidence. ” I had never thought about the extra toll our bodies would take during a time of significant transition until that conversation; now I pay attention to my exercise routine very closely when I have a lot of changing going on in my life. The weights give us the strength to keep lifting ourselves every day. “It wasn’t just in my head. My chief of staff at the DCF (department of children and family) would notice if I hadn’t been to the gym in three or four days and would say, ‘you need go –you’re not yourself’. She saw it faster than I saw it.” He believes in the power of exercise so much that he builds it into the plan when a group or organization is going through a big change.

The colonel admitted that this transition took a toll on him – physically, mentally, and emotionally – but that it was a good toll. He made a point to end every day with a positive. Regardless of what ‘crap’ the day held, he refused to dwell on the negative so he looked for the positive and if there hadn’t been one, he created one.

As we discussed what he missed about the “old days”, I asked about relationships. He said that he had gotten used to people coming and going at a fairly rapid pace – “they are just going to change – it’s a given”. When asked what he missed the most, he made an interesting point. “I didn’t miss the words I used to use, I missed the natural feeling of not having to think about what I said.” Part of what he missed was the camaraderie of the Marine Corps. As I noticed the pictures on the wall of the Colonel with his buddies, it was clear that Semper Fi was something he was very proud of and had a strong attachment to. When asked about being a Marine and how that affected his leadership transition he said , “In the Marines, we were taught to be flawless in front of the troops. We had to appear as if we had it all under control and couldn’t expose any soft underbelly. A Marine commander didn’t create an environment where questions were asked, but in the Department of Children and Families “I wouldn’t have had any followers if I had continued to lead like a Marine.”



Another photograph that helps tell the Colonel’s story is that of a home that is under construction. He compared that building project to his transition in that he was not the general contractor; he didn’t get to call all of the shots. The foundation had been poured and that wasn’t going to change. However, he had an opportunity to decide what the house would look like and what materials were used. He could help make the house durable or functional. He admitted to spending too much time initially fighting with the legislature (his bosses) about the foundation. Once he realized that wasn’t going to change, and that his job was to finish the house, things moved along much easier. The actual conversation went like this:

“The picture of this house reminds me of when I first got to DCF. It had a structure to it, but it was empty inside - the frame wasn’t completed. I felt like I had to build that. How do you develop the guts of an organization so it really functions well? Then, how do you finish off the outside so you’ve got the external piece that you need to interact with and is shown to the rest of the world? Notice there’s nothing around this house. There’s no other houses. As a leader, you really are doing this and driving this alone – initially. Ultimately, there will be others with you, but you are solo for awhile. When it comes down to accountability for what the house looks like, the governor (in my case) is coming to you – he’s not coming to your staff. That’s when the feeling of loneliness creeps in.” Perhaps one of the difficult parts of coming into a new leadership role is that you have to work with the existing structure – the frame is set. It might not be worth the energy required to fight to have the frame torn down. For the colonel this was especially difficult when some of the people who had built the structure were young kids. “I had a couple of times when I was dealing with legislators who had about 3 years of experience in business and I was coming off of 30 years. I remember saying, ‘You talk down to me once more, and this conversation’s over’. That was not helpful, but I thought I knew better about what to do.” Again, he felt himself battling the old military paradigm of authority and earning your stripes. Just as he had to learn to appreciate what women brought to the workplace and challenging situations, he found himself needing to rethink his beliefs about years of experience equating to knowing what was best.

Remember the colonel might be described as a tough, gruff, demanding, uncompromising, battle-scarred man; some of his stories about his years of military service revealed that side. That persona served him well in many situations, but in his years with the Department of Children and Families, he learned to adopt a different face. Some of it, he worked at, and parts of it came naturally as a result of the type of work it was and the people he worked with. He made it clear that both the Marines and DCF had great people, but they attracted very different personalities – he needed to figure out a way to hang on to the parts of leadership that worked and let go of the security of what didn’t. He told a story, through a picture, that revealed another side of this tough, old colonel.



“The picture isn’t very clear, I’m sorry but I had to take it between swipes of the windshield wipers as I drove the car in the rain – there was nowhere to pull over and stop. I have driven past these young trees every day for several months. I initially noticed them because the place has been all torn up around here and when they created this boulevard, the first thing they did was plant some trees. Notice what’s around the trees. There’s some wooden stakes and lines or cables attached to the stakes. I realized that the most important thing to me after all of these years is to develop and strengthen my subordinates – I’m here to prop up the young people. It’s with guidance, education, teaching, motivation, that kind of thing. I am really growing the next generation of trees. I am here to make sure they grow strong and straight, not bent over or beat up from lack of self-confidence. Some days it’s not easy to be held in place by these cables when the wind is blowing; it’s not easy for the tree and it’s not easy for the cables, but it’s necessary. And, it’s constant. They put these stakes and cables in place the day they planted the trees. They don’t remove the cables on days that the wind doesn’t blow. It’s like raising a child. I can’t forget about the child from age 10 to 12 and pick him up when he’s 13. It doesn’t work like that. The other thing I notice in this picture is that it’s raining. I think it’s easy to be there working with staff when the weather is bad, but that isn’t enough. It isn’t like they are only growing when it rains – they grow on sunny days, too, and as a leader I need to be there to gently pull them into place in all types of weather.”

I’m not sure why I love that part of the story so much. Perhaps it’s because it came amidst stories of being in Baghdad with bullets flying or commanding 30,000 troops. That all sounds so much like being a warrior, shouting out orders, doing whatever it takes to survive and he was very good at it. He has all sorts of medals and pictures to prove he was an excellent leader in times of war. I would never have thought that someone could make it work in an environment that was so completely different, and yet, I was talking to him after he had left the DCF (he was there for 4 years) in a very good place with no lawsuits on the books, great processes in place, a plan for how to be successful, and a staff that knew how to plan and problem solve and get tough in the face of adversity. He had moved on to another very different environment that required a bit more of “the colonel” with the edges rounded and the skin softer after working through a time of leadership ambiguity. I don’t believe he ever lost sight of who he was or what was important to him, but the way he got the message across to others went through a complete transformation.

I was most interested in what was the anchor or what stayed the same when so much seemed to be changing in his world. The colonel described his anchor as core leadership beliefs that he developed early in his career and stayed with him through every leadership role he filled … in and out of “work”. I’ll use his words because they deliver the message in a way that is reflective of who he is. After spending time with him, I am convinced that people under his leadership never doubted that he had a clear picture of where they were headed, he was willing to “take a bullet for any of them” and he was not too good to “be in the trenches beside them”. I believe he did look at most days like a new battle and planned maneuvers for this “troops”. In the words of the colonel,

* “loyalty – you gotta have it to get tough stuff done. It doesn’t come automatically – you gotta build it.”
* “tradition is a big deal – I know that sounds corny, but there is something about legacy and doing the name proud, whether it’s the name of your family or organization or team.”
* “gotta set the example – how can I ask people to do things that they don’t see me doing?”
* “I am always thinking about building the next generation of leaders – it’s not about me – it’s about them”
* “people hear about it when they screw up and I am all about giving praise. I want to be involved with what they are doing so that I can see what they are doing right and point it out. You don’t find me in an office somewhere far away – I like to mix it up with the people doing the job – that IS my job”

**LESSONS LEARNED**

* I love to help people feel better about themselves and when I am doing that, I feel as if I am a good leader.
* I am well-rounded now. I made another switch back to working with military leaders after my time with the Department of Children and Families, and I was a better leader after the transition.
* I developed patience, tolerance. I’m a better listener. I was a good problem solver, but now I do it collaboratively.
* I approach things more slowly, not as quick to react because I take time to understand and the results are always better.
* Culture is a big deal and you can spend a year talking to the wrong people. There is a core in every organization that can really help you understand how to be successful in a new situation. I wish I had a silver bullet to tell you how to find the right people, but I don’t. Listen to your gut, because much of culture is intuitive.
* It’s more than okay to be real with people – it’s critical. When I am real, I get real back.
* Instead of putting energy into burying or restraining my emotion, I have learned to use them as strength. I am grateful that I was able to work with women, as they taught me that.
* My communication skills improved. I learned to think about what I was saying; it had become automatic and while automatic takes less energy, it’s not necessarily a good thing.
* I learned how to eat my pride, which I had never done. I made every mistake in the book, but I also learned how to handle myself better.