

LEADERS in Action

Jason Womack interviews Chief Master Sergeant Todd M. Simmons (Ret.)



Chief Master Sergeant Todd M. Simmons served as the Command Chief Master Sergeant for Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL.

Air University provides the full spectrum of Air Force education, graduating 50,000 resident and 120,000 non-resident officers, enlisted, and civilian personnel each year from commissioning programs to the highest levels of professional military education.

Q&A

Jason Womack: *Do you have a simple way to think about how leaders get better?*

Chief Simmons: Leaders get better by being lifelong learners; specifically, learning how people operate. Daily, I put myself in a position to be “at my best;” in fact, it’s on my calendar. From 0700-0715 every morning, I mentally prepare for the day as well as reflect on my mission and purpose.

For several years, I’ve become conscious about processing opportunities, pursuing some, declining others. The more I learn about my mission, the people I work with, and my own personal purpose, the better I’m getting at this.

At work, I greet my colleagues, listen and observe. My intent is to bring a “focused enthusiasm” to the office; I demonstrate my dedication to the mission while being as aware of my surroundings as possible.

As a lifelong learner, I recognize that the more present I am with people, the greater the chance I’m able to assist with a project or just talk through an opportunity or challenge they face. I hope they’ll see me leading with curiosity and bring that same enthusiasm to the mission, and work collaboratively.

JW: *What was your Defining Moment as a leader?*

Chief Simmons: In the spring of 1995, I was here at Maxwell AFB as a 19-year-old, having a very hard time; looking back, I can self-assess that I was deeply depressed. One night, in a phone booth outside my dorm, I told my mother I was suicidal. As hard as it is to admit today, that was my reality.

The next thing I knew, a First Sergeant who witnessed this emotional phone call somehow talked me down from my distress, and I carried on through my training. That moment in time became the starting point for my new life. That First Sergeant took me under his wing. He helped me think about

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Q&A with Chief Simmons (Ret.)

Chief Master Sergeant Todd M. Simmons is a leader committed to asking the right questions, and being patient while exploring the answers.

In this interview, Chief Simmons shares the importance of creating routines and time for reflection, which allow for him to better lead with curiosity and “focused enthusiasm.”



the future – an Air Force world full of opportunity. Because of him, I renewed my commitment. We sat down with a map of the world, and I chose to leave the USA and work abroad. In fact, I spent 17 years living outside the USA; a huge difference from the life I knew in rural South Carolina.

I hope others have the kind of mentor or sponsor they need to support them through tough times and see that there exists a bigger, brighter picture they can step into.

JW: *What will leaders increasingly need to do that up until now they may not have had to study in great detail?*

Chief Simmons: An important characteristic of great leadership is “following up.” My own childhood was void of much appreciation or acknowledgement of who I was or what I did, and I’m convinced this is one of the most important roles a leader can take on as they build an effective unit or department. I write cards. I begin each morning by acknowledging someone for something they’ve done; whether it’s a project they completed, a mission they accomplished or an award they achieved.

Though often deemed a “soft skill,” showing appreciation is a trait of compassionate leadership; it’s a demonstration of a higher level of emotional intelligence. I know that the military has a history of “tough love” leadership; of course, there IS a time and a place for being tough, but research – and common sense – shows the benefit of empathy.

The best way I know how to demonstrate this level of caring is to become a better listener. First, listen to yourself as a leader. *What do you care about? What is your mission? What is your “Why?”* Then, listen carefully to those around you. *What is important to them? How can you acknowledge their efforts and their successes?* And, perhaps most important, *How can you find out what’s important to them and help them move in that direction?*

That is what happened that night at the phone booth. Someone took the time to hear me, to help me, and to encourage me to be a better version of myself.

JW: *What do you think are the most important questions that effective leaders need to ask themselves?*

Chief Simmons: There are two questions that I need to ask more: *What should I say no to? What can I say no to?* As I shared earlier, I review my tasks and responsibilities regularly. I remind myself of what my purpose is; knowing what to say no to is a most important leadership skill.

There’s more to it than that. I need to communicate – both up AND down the chain of command – what I’m saying no to, and perhaps more importantly, “why” I’m saying no.

This allows my staff and superiors to know where my focus resides, and my thought processes. It also provides me more time and energy for the things I’ll say yes to.

One more question I hope leaders ask themselves every day is, *“What’s my purpose?”* If you constantly chase your purpose you can better serve as a role model to others; they can see that it’s ok – and even expected – to continually improve and connect more deeply to the mission, not just at work, but in life and to their family as well.

JW: *What are some of your own habits or routines as an effective leader?*

Chief Simmons: It all starts in the morning. Actually, each night my wife and I recommit to our routines for the following day. By 0445, we wake up and exercise; I go to the gym, and she practices yoga. This physical routine gets us started, and grounded, every day. After my workout, I reflect on my purpose. Not just my purpose at work and in life, but my purpose for that day. If I’m speaking to a group of leaders, meeting with a boss, or working on a project, I want to remind myself of not just WHAT I’m doing, but why.

Leading with, and on purpose, is what I want to be known for. I review and process my day as it relates

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to me fulfilling that mission, and I expect it of my teammates. I want people's input in the decisions we make, so I share as much as is appropriate and possible with them about why I do what I do. This is a way to build that camaraderie this job demands.

My childhood was devoid of family routines, so I've worked diligently to create a place for connection, and ours is the family dinner table. Even now, our daughter who is in college looks forward to these meals together. It is a time to hear what is (or maybe isn't) being said, and serve my family as a mentor, role model, and partner in life. I love these dinners.

JW: *How do you listen – and what do you listen for – so you hear more than what is just being said by those you lead?*

Chief Simmons: I want people to know I care. I listen to what they are saying as well as what's not being said. I watch their body language, I listen to the words they use, their inflection, and the questions they ask – or allude to. As much as possible, I try to communicate with people face-to-face. This often means traveling 30 minutes to another location for a 45-minute meeting, but in the end it's worth it... every time.

Finally, I focus on asking the right questions, and being patient as we explore the answers. Often, an opportunity may not have an obvious or immediate solution, but through conversation, we come up with a resolution.

To reiterate: I need to hear what is – and isn't – being said.

JW: *How would you define your leadership philosophy in just one sentence?*

Chief Simmons: I want to create an environment where people can thrive and feel valued.

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