



Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

November 20, 2015

Topic – November 20: “Leading with Honor: A Personal & Professional Journey”
featuring Lee Ellis, President & Founder – Leadership Freedom LLC®, Colonel USAF (Ret) and former Vietnam POW.



Lee Ellis spoke at Women in Leadership on how to lead with honor personally and professionally. Lee is the Founder and President of Leadership Freedom LLC®, a leadership development firm that’s goal is “free leaders to lead higher.” Lee is a prolific writer, blogger, and thought leader, and he’s most well-known for his latest book, [Leading with Honor®](#). We were privileged to have Lee speak to us about his experiences as a Prisoner of War during the Vietnam War and how those experiences shaped him into the leader he is today.

Lee opened his talk with background about his personal history. Lee said that he is a big proponent of women in leadership, which he traces back to his mother. She was the first great leader in Lee’s life. He stated that her leadership skills came from her balance of being relationship-oriented yet tough. Lee’s personal journey in leadership started when he was accepted into the University of Georgia ROTC program. Once he graduated from the program, his assignment was flying the F-4 Phantom in Southeast Asia, which meant he went to war as soon as he was trained. His natural talents and behavior matched the role of a young, confident, bold USAF fighter pilot, so he felt ready for the challenges of war. After 53 missions though, his plane was shot over enemy territory, and he was taken as a prisoner of war. From here, Lee continued his story by outlining few of the critical lessons from his book that he learned during his time in the Hanoi Hilton.

- Know Yourself
 - Lee knew himself well, but he said he learned much more about himself as a prisoner of war. You can’t manage yourself well without knowing the good and bad about yourself – Lee believes it’s critical to understand how to leverage the parts of you that aren’t strengths. You must learn to be authentic because when you are at your most authentic, that is the best you’ll ever be.
- Guard Your Character
 - When things are scary and aren’t going the way you anticipated, that’s when it’s most important to guard your character and act with courage.
- Stay Positive
 - When times are tough, staying positive is what can keep you from spiraling down. Believe in tomorrow.

- Confront Your Doubts and Fears
 - Fear, greed, and pride will drive you toward being a leader without integrity. Be the person who leans into the pain of your fear to do the right thing even when it doesn't feel natural or safe.
- Over-Communicate
 - Communication is important because without clarity, you can't have accountability. Clarifying allows people to have complete understanding of a situation. Also, communicating leads to collaboration which is critical for people to work together more effectively.
- Celebrate Success
 - At the end of the day, your successes are worth celebrating. Celebrating what has been accomplished helps to drive people to move forward and continue achieving.

Lee closed the talk by summarizing these leadership lessons more succinctly:

- Have character. Know yourself and guard your character. Commit to your values and engage a support team to keep you accountable.
- Have courage. Confront your doubts and fears.
- Competence is key. Don't undervalue the importance of clarifying mission, vision, and values. When in doubt, over-communicate the message. And make it a priority to develop your people. Always have a balance of importance of your mission and your people.
- Finally, we must believe. Must believe in ourselves and others, in our families, in our country, and in faith that we can live with honor.

Q&A

In terms of a secret code, I think there's a lot of that that happens in the corporate workspace. What is your advice in learning how to tap that corporate code?

- Generally the military is more direct and open than the corporate world. It really comes down to the ability to build relationships and collaborate and earn respect. A lot of the corporate world is about how to use your influence and build your credibility. Wisdom is coming out of people, though you have to remember their expertise. You want to be the kind of person that people respect – you probably have more power than you think you do.

How did you see how the characteristics you mentioned in other POWs, despite their young age?

- Well most of the fellow POWs I was with were older, so they had been around the military and had learned from experience about leadership. Being accountable and responsible was very important. Since we were in the crucible and put to the test, we all supported each other to remember our values and maintain our character.

What were the resources for POWs after the war?

- We decided we were the healthiest people around when we got home. We weren't concerned about the material things as much. We spent a lot of time adjusting to the changing times. But the two years we spent in the "live and let live" POW culture, we worked a lot on letting go of the anger and fear we felt, and we decided to not go home a mess. Being able to talk about the pain and difficulty of what we went through made a huge difference. We had a little bit of PTSD but didn't know what it was called then. I noticed it in myself in that I wanted to control everything, but you have to find a way to regulate that and continue to live your life in a healthy way.

Did you have any kind of routine you followed as a POW and what did you do to occupy your mind?

- We were still in shock during the first two to three months, and then it settled down a lot. At about three months, I started exercising. I spent a lot of time praying and reflecting. There was also a lot of time to learn new things, so if one person knew a language, we would all learn them.

What was the re-entry process like? Did you have to adjust?

- Well I was never a person who could sit down and think – I'm an action person. So when we came home, we were ready to go and get back into life. I took three months of R&R and worked on our farm at home, visited friends, and re-acclimated to life over here.

What's next for you? What have you not done that you want to do?

- I'm working on a new book on accountability – it will be called *Winning with Honor™* and will be about putting healthy accountability on the leader to be successful. I'm doing a lot of work for the Air Force right now too as well as the corporate world. And I'm having so much fun now that I just look forward to what comes my way next.