

# Leaders are Teachers

Captain Aaron Volk

As I prepared to join the Air Force, my dad, CMSgt Volk, gave me a lot of advice on how to be successful. Knowing that I sought a commission, he prepared me for that responsibility by frequently telling me, “Leadership is teaching.” At the time, and as a symptom of youthful bravado, I thought I knew exactly what that meant. I thought it meant having all the answers. I thought it meant being the smartest person in the room. It did not take long for me to realize how wrong I was!

Upon arriving at my first assignment, I was surprised when my commander told me to draw a beret from supply and sew a badge on my uniform, so I could command a flight despite not yet attending the Security Forces Basic Officer Course. I was immediately confronted with a conundrum: I was not the smartest person in the room; I did not have all the answers; I was expected to provide guidance and direction to Airmen who knew the job better than me and had been doing the job longer than me. I recall one night when SSgt Joseph Hooker briefed me on a situation and asked, “What do you think I should do, Lt?” I had no idea! But, still suffering from a bit of that youthful bravado and not fully understanding my dad’s words, I thought for a moment that I was going to fail SSgt Hooker as a leader. What was I to say?

Margaret Mead, an American cultural anthropologist, said, “[People] must be taught how to think, not what to think.” As a second lieutenant standing dumbstruck in front of SSgt Hooker, I made my best attempt to employ that teaching philosophy, asking him questions about what he was trying to accomplish and how he thought he could get there. He ultimately came up with a solution to the problem on his own, and that is what CMSgt Volk was trying to convey to me. Leaders are not the people with all the answers. Leaders are the people who help us recognize that we have the capacity to find the answers. Leaders are teachers.