

# Ethics and Character Development

## Transcript: US Army Resilience Directorate Outreach Webinar

*August 24, 2021*

### **Presenter:**

Dr. Peter Kilner, John A. Hottell '64 Chair for Character Development at the United States Military Academy

Host: [00:00:13](#) Hello everyone, and welcome to the Army Resilience Directorate Outreach Webinar for August: Ethics and Character Development. At this time, all participants are in listen-only mode. However, you can ask questions at any time by placing them in the chat box, and we encourage you to do so. There'll be several opportunities for questions throughout the webinar, and we should have some time at the end as well. Please note the views of ARD Outreach webinar presenters are their own and are not endorsed by the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense. This month our special guest is Dr. Pete Kilner from the Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic at West Point. Dr. Kilner is the John A. Hottell class of 1964 Chair for Character Development at the United States Military Academy. In that capacity, he designs and develops West Point's cadet character education program and supervises its implementation and assessment.

Host: [00:01:08](#) He taught ethical reasoning and just war theory for 12 years at West Point, and he currently teaches courses on officership and character growth. Pete's service in the Army has been characterized by two long-term efforts, 1) leader development and military ethics, and 2) the moral justification of killing and moral injury. His work on leader development and military ethics has included co-founding the company command professional forum and serving on its leadership team during its life span from 2000 to 2014; leading the platoon leader professional forum for a decade; producing the "Company Command--Building combat-ready teams" monthly column in Army Magazine for a decade; co-developing the Leader Challenge method of learning; editing "Taking the Guidon: Exceptional Leadership at the Company Level"; coauthoring "A Platoon Leader's Tour"; teaching ethical reasoning and just war theory; and writing the "Strong to the Core" military ethics column in Army Magazine. Pete holds a Bachelor of Science from West Point, an MA in philosophy from Virginia Tech, and a

PhD in instructional systems from Penn State University. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Kilner to today's ARD outreach webinar. Dr. Kilner. Good afternoon, sir. Thank you for coming back.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:02:23](#) Good afternoon, Dave. Thank you for that very kind introduction. To everyone here, it looks like we have over a hundred, hello, thank you for being here, even though I don't know if I know any of you. Maybe we've crossed paths sometime in the Army. I do have a sense of confidence that if we did know each other, we'd get along because we care about the same things: Soldiers and Army families, and we have an interest in character education, character development, otherwise we all wouldn't be here. So I look forward to spending the next hour with you here, and I hope to see you around the Army. So with that, let's begin. In terms of what to expect, I'll give a presentation that'll be about 40 minutes, and then we will have at least 20 minutes (we can go longer if you want) for Q&A. So if you have questions and comments as this goes along, please enter them into the chat.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:03:25](#) So my thesis today is that good character, which is constituted by being a virtuous person, leads to a flourishing life and a good society. And so many of the destructive behaviors we see in the Army are a result of bad character. So perhaps rather than just trying to address those individually, if we focus more on developing the character of our Soldiers and creating a culture of character growth in the Army, then we can create a culture in which those bad behaviors just don't happen, or where they happen much less. So what to expect here: I'm going to introduce a conceptual framework. It's the one we use here that we've introduced just this year here at West Point we're beginning to teach to the cadets and to the faculty. It's one that borrows a lot of the intellectual capital from the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue at the University of Birmingham in England.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:04:32](#) Our character center here, the Simon Center, has gone from having two PhDs to eleven in the last year. We're really developing our own faculty. As West Point has always said, we develop leaders of character. And now the Army is really putting a lot of resources behind that. So I see this as three parts, I'll share a framework, I'll share some ideas as to how I think this framework and character education itself, character development, can help with a lot of the missions that you have out in the Army and trying to promote good behaviors and stop bad behaviors. Then we'll open up for Q&A and to share your ideas. I recognize a couple of things. One, you wouldn't be here

if you didn't care about character, so that's a good on you. And two, I don't have expertise on suicide prevention and SHARP and those things, and so I'll stay just in my terrain.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:05:36](#) At the end, I hope that you'll feel more confident bringing the language of character into your work and the concepts of character. "Character" is a lot like some of those important words, we don't spend a lot of time really thinking through what the word or the concepts mean, whether it's love and justice. Character is one of those, we've always known characters important, but growing up, we get classes on trigonometry and not character. So as much as we can in this short time to give you a greater confidence and familiarity, and then to hope spark ideas for you and your context about how this deeper understanding about character help you serve your people better.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:06:24](#) So, as we get started, let's do an exercise. And this primes our brain, it gets us really thinking about things. Think about the best person that you personally know, or at least a really good person that you personally know. Okay. And put their face in your mind, think of their name. And now think about what is so special. You've known tens of thousands of people over your lifetime. You probably know hundreds of people really well, yet this person rose to the top of your mind when I asked about who the best person you know is. So what are the characteristics and traits of that person? And I ask you to write in the chat two or three of them. What is so special about that person? What are their character traits that stand out? And as you write it in, then read what other people say.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:08:03](#) It's great to see. I do this exercise with my students every year where they would do it as an out-of-class assignment. Who's the best person what makes them so good? What are their traits? How do you think they became that way? When they came into class, I'd have them take boards and write the traits. And what I found is what we're seeing right now. It's the same character traits coming up time. And again, of what makes a good human being, what makes a good person? This is the list I've made ahead of time. And you see all these things here: they're kind, they're honest, they're hardworking, they're responsible, they're selfless, they're altruistic, resilient, humble, open-minded, a good listener. It's all the same things. And I point this out to say, we know what good is.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:08:58](#) Sometimes in the world of ethics and character I work in, people are like, "Who's to say what a good person is?" We are! We all know Aristotle said the same thing 2300 years ago. We

know what makes a good human being good. We admire them for that. We strive to be this way ourselves. What you never see on this list are all the traits we have as human beings that are not character traits. No one said, "Oh, she's wonderful. She's tall." No one mentioned race or ethnicity. No one mentioned how much money they have? Sometimes people will say open-minded, but not straight up intelligence. And so let this be a reminder to all of us that what we admire, what makes a good person good, are their character traits, not their non-character traits, personality traits, genetic traits. And that should be encouraging to us.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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This line, this box at the bottom is a quote from Seligman and Peterson's book, kind of the Bible on virtues from a psychological perspective. And they said, "All people can aspire to have strong character in a way they cannot aspire to be good-looking." It's sad in one sense, but the good thing is when you look at character traits, these are things we choose. We judge people by their character because we recognize that we're responsible for our character. And they're responsible for theirs. Now they're not responsible for their height or for their race or for their gender. They're responsible for their character. And we admire them because we know they don't have to be that way. We know some people are kind, some people are mean, some people are honest, some are dishonest, some are hardworking, some are lazy.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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And most of us have little elements of both right within us. So those character traits, those things that we can choose and develop through our practice, are good ones, virtues, and the bad ones are vices. Now, sometimes people say, "Oh, that sounds like old-fashioned language or religious language." It is old-fashioned. It was the way it was up until a few hundred years ago, especially this was the language of what it meant to be a good human being or not, but it's not religious language. I was challenged by a general officer once on that. And I said, "No, just because religious traditions adopt concepts doesn't mean that they're religious concepts." So the history of virtues comes to us from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the Stoics. They were not coming from a religious tradition. So I just wanted to address that right up.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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So we know what's good and what's bad. We don't have to know why. Plato spent a lot of time trying to figure what's the form of the good and the beautiful and all this. And Aristotle said, "I don't know if we can ever figure that out, but we can look around us and know what is good and what is not." He took an empirical approach, and I think we can do the same

now. Now, from the research where they're trying to define, "What is a virtue? What makes a virtue a virtue?" Three main qualities come up. You have to bound the things. This trait is intrinsically fulfilling. That there's something about when you work hard, even if it doesn't work out, there's a piece of you that knows, "I did the right thing." And when you're honest, even if you get in trouble, you are still honest.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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And you're kind, even if it's not appreciated. There's an intrinsically fulfilling aspect of it, which is important for wellness. Then it's admired by others. When you thought about who you admire, who's a good human being, people just listed virtues, and it's beneficial to yourself and others in society. I encourage you to think back to that best person. Are they a happy person? Do they live a good life? Yeah, I bet they do. The virtues lead to a flourishing life because they lead to good relationships. When people feel good about themselves because they're fulfilling, they have good relationships with others. We all like to be friends and be around people of good character.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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Other things to understand about the virtues: They're malleable. That means that they can be changed. The way we are isn't the way we're always going to be. In fact, the way we are has been formed by our past, by our family, by the environments that we've been in, by the decisions we've made, and going forward, the decisions we make and the environments we put ourselves in will shape our character. In that sense, character is a lot like physical fitness. So my physical fitness today, how I could do an ACFT today, is a function of how I've worked out in all my days leading up to now, and perhaps environmental conditions today. If the weather is very hot and humid, it probably wouldn't be my best day. Or how much sleep I got. But people who know me could pretty much predict how I am, because my fitness is a product of what I've been doing up to this point.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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Your character is the same way. The decisions that we make, the things we do, the habits we create comprise the character we have today, but we're always in the process of becoming. So it's important to think. We're always probably getting a little bit better or a little bit worse, just like we are with our physical fitness. So it's generally stable. Just like, on my unit I could always say, I knew who was going to be pushing for a 300 on the APFT and who I was worried about passing. I can look to people and say, I know who I can really count on to always be honest and to get the job done and who I don't trust. It's stable. People can't change overnight, or they usually don't. Finally, character

has to be exhibited across contexts. So if you're nice to your family and kind to your family, but you're mean to people at work or to strangers on the street, you're not a kind person; you're a person who is kind to your family. But to be that person, to say that you have that virtue, it needs to be exhibited across contexts because we are ourselves across contexts.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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I want to say one thing about the distinction between values and virtues because in the military and government, people use the language of values. We have the Army values. So values are more general. They're just motivational preferences. Values don't have to be necessarily good or bad. They don't have to be personal. So I can go to work, and if I'm a stock broker or I work for a company, I can say my organizational values at work are to maximize shareholder value. And I may screw customers to maximize shareholder value, if that's the organization's values. That's where their incentives point to, and that's what they expect out of you. Another way of thinking of values is they're ideals. So I value health and fitness. I gained a bunch of weight over the pandemic, and I still want to be healthy and fit, but I've gotten into bad habits now.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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I value health, but I'm not living it the way I want to be. Virtues are good values that have been embodied into a person through habit, through choice, where it becomes just a part of who they are. Because a virtue is not just saying, I think something's good. It's saying, I think something's good. And now I pay attention to it, and I practice it so that I notice it. And I've thought deeply about it. So I know when it is too much honesty, and when it's not enough honesty. I know when it's too much generosity, or not too much generosity, depending on the situation. Every virtue has an excess and a deficiency. It's having the right emotions. Really virtuous people are just happy being virtuous. I've always been amazed at the people who, when they see someone in need, when they're driving down the highway, and something's broken down, they just pull over. And they're not doing it to pump their chest and make themselves feel good. That's just what they love doing: helping people. When you think about who's that best person, a lot of times when you get into conversations, people say, "They're just naturally that way. They're just naturally forgiving. They're just naturally helpful." Well, they are now, but that's a product of the decisions they've made and the self that they've worked to become, so it's become a part of their identity. So again, virtues embody good values; vices embody bad values.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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So now that we've done immediate definitional stuff with a smaller virtue level, I want to share the framework that we're

using here at West Point to help us understand flourishing, because really what we want for cadets is for them to flourish as human beings. If they're good, happy human beings, they're going to be good, happy Army officers and spouses and parents, and for the rest of their lives. So first I'm going to cover the domains of different virtues because there's different kinds of virtues in different aspects of our lives. So first: moral virtues, being a moral person. Now, when we think of character, that's very often the only thing or the first thing we think of: that person is honest, that person's kind, that person's generous. Absolutely. It's essential. So a lot of the virtues: honesty, kindness, respect, and compassion are all character traits that show that we respect the dignity of other people, of ourselves and others. And we respond to that human dignity with honesty and kindness and compassion. It's very interpersonal. So if you're at the commissary or the grocery store and you see someone walking out and their bag breaks and cans and everything fall, and you stop to help them out, that's just being a kind helpful person. That's showing good moral virtue.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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But there's another kind that's related, and that's the virtue of being a good citizen. So there are some people who only care about their friends and their family. They don't serve the community. They don't serve their nation. They don't serve mankind. It's more insular. It's an important virtue. To help those outside of your immediate realm. And so, going back to the grocery store. Let's say you park, and as you get out and you're walking in, people have selfishly left grocery carts out in the parking lot. Now you can walk on past, since you've already safely parked. But if you say, "I'm going to just take some of these and put them away on my way in." It's a little out of the way, but you're helping people you don't know. You're making society work better. So whether it's taking extra clothes and dropping them off so they can be given out to the poor, giving to a food bank, voting, or marching for justice, you're saying, "I'm doing my part to create a better society." So character traits that serve and promote the common good. Those are civic virtues.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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Intellectual virtues. So we all are born. Genetically, we have a range of maybe our raw intelligence, but how we use that intelligence can be developed so that we learn better and think better. We can develop our curiosity and creativity and critical thinking skills so that we think well. Just because someone has natural intelligence doesn't mean that they think well and make good decisions, that they learn how to separate good information from bad and all those other things that are so

important in our society today. So these kinds of character traits can be developed, and they're really important.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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And the fourth big category, or domain of virtues, are the performance virtues. These are the virtues that enable us to get things done, the ability to plan and to concentrate and to work through adversity, and to have the grit to achieve longer term goals. This is performance virtue. We see it so much. I think the Military is great at it. West Point is great at it. Think about all these things. We admire people who are good, critical thinkers. We admire people who are tough and who drive on and accomplish the mission. Half of YouTube, the ones that bring me to tears, or when you see that runner fall down and they get up and they don't quit and they keep pushing and they come back and win. So these are performance virtues and all of these are really important.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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Because if you can really think and solve problems well, and you work really hard and you know how to get things done, but you don't have moral virtue, you could be Hitler. But if, on the other hand, you really care about people, and you really want to make a difference in the world, but you're lazy, well you're just someone with good intentions who doesn't get anything done. Maybe have really good intentions, you want to get things done, and you work really hard for it, but you haven't through the plan. I feel like that's the United States military the last 20 years. We really wanted to do what's right for the people in certain countries, we worked incredibly hard, but we didn't have a strategy. So if we don't have all of this virtue, something is really missing, especially among leaders, but really among anyone. If you're going to trust someone, you have to trust that they care about people, that they are actually serving something larger than's good, that they can think through their problems, and that they'll actually follow through and get things done.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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So these domains of virtue are cross-cultural. When you break down and people have done this in other countries: what do they admire in each other? It's very much the same list. Again, I'll point to Peterson and Seligman's 2004 book, but there's other studies on the same. They fall into these categories. Now here at West Point, and I think most of us are in the Army, there are certain human virtues that need to be put on steroids. We really need to accelerate their development because within this profession, certain virtues are exceptionally important. Patriotism. Everywhere in the country, people should be patriotic by paying their taxes, voting, following the rule of law, those kinds of things. In the military, these people are willing to



die for their country, literally. Think about courage. Everyone needs some courage. You need a lot more in the military. Discipline, obedience, you get the idea. If another profession, say the medical profession, or the clergy or accounting, they may have different virtues human virtues that they say really have to be developed well. These are some of the ones here at West Point we think need to be developed well.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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So bringing it all together in one slide, I want to bring up this idea. So there are domains and virtues, and there are dotted lines because loyalty can be to a person or to a group. You can have intellectual humility or interpersonal humility. They're not discrete categories in that sense. We know that some of these virtues need to be held up and developed more intentionally because they're important for our profession. But finally, and this is an important piece for our lives and for our profession, the goal in all of this is to develop good judgment, what the ancient Greeks called "phronesis." It's a meta-virtue. It's the virtue that knows when there's conflicting virtues between doing your duty and being loyal to a friend or something. How do you manage that?

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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And doing the right thing in the right place, in the right way. Going forward with multi-domain operations and everything else, I'm convinced if we have a high intensity war, the laws of war are not going to be able to keep up. They're not going to apply. We're going to need people who can exercise good judgment and just be able to think "What is called for in a good person here?" And to think through the problems. In the military, we tend to have a behavioral rule-following idea of character, and character is so much more than that. Compliance and rule following are the start. But when you think about really good people, they understand the why behind the rules, which also helps them understand when the rules don't apply or when to make an exception. And with that comes a great confidence and a sense of self-efficacy.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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So we've talked about the domains of virtue. Often that expands our thinking beyond just moral character, but moral civic, intellectual performance. Now let's think about how does character develop? And again, borrowing from the Jubilee Center, we use the language of character is caught, taught, and must be sought. So first, primarily we catch character. Culture trumps curriculum, even though I'm responsible with curriculum here, I say the culture is so much more important. We grew up developing from the culture of our family, from our community, civic organizations, religious organizations, it's almost just the water we swam in gaining the norms of what are good and bad

behaviors. Now everyone in the military leaves that environment and comes to a whole new environment in the military, so we have a great ability to reshape people's understanding of right and wrong, but rewards and punishment, what an organization really values through its actions, the relationships people have. Friendship is a huge impact on people's behavior and on their character. It's sometimes hard to separate ourselves from the group. It just made me think back, when I was a company commander, we had in the battalion a good program when new Soldiers came in, they always got matched up with a really good soldier to show them around. There's a lot of times it would be the worst Soldiers who would try to get their claws on the new Soldiers coming in. So character is social and relational. We need to understand that, accept that, and say, "How do we create a culture, and how do we foster relationships that help people grow the right directions and character?" Character can be taught. Now, a lot of times people say, "You can't teach character, a classroom can't teach right and wrong." True.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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And just like taking a class on kinesiology or reading the doctrine of the principles of fitness isn't going to make you fit, but it can help, because it can allow us to reflect on our own performance. Understanding things can help us set goals. We learn so much from talking to other people, but to talk to other people, they have intelligent conversations. You have to have a shared vocabulary. And that comes through character literacy, shared concepts and terms. There's also a piece of character, when very often people know what they should do, and they just don't do it. It's called the "moral judgment action gap." And a big part of that gap is confidence: Do I know what to do here and not look totally foolish? And then courage, to actually get it done. And so character training, when you're training people on intervening, where there's a potential of sexual harassment going on, or a risk of a sexual assault. If they haven't practiced it, if they don't have scripts of what to say, if they haven't done it, it's really hard to do it in real life.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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When you're thinking about the Army battle drills, we do everything: crawl, walk, run. We talk it through, and we walk it, then we do it a little faster, then finally you get to combat speed. And so we can take the same approach to a lot of the things we're doing. Give people battle drills. Give them scripts, and walk them through to practice some of the skills. So now once they know what's right, if they have the skills to do it, they're much more likely to actually do it, and that's training. We can help people do that.

- Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:31:41](#) But ultimately, and this is important, character must be sought. The Army can't give people good character. It can make people comply when they're being watched, but compliance isn't character. What we want is people who do the right thing, even when no one's watching, even when they can get away with doing the wrong thing. And that has to be something that's a part of their identity, of who they want to be in this world. And so, as we develop people's character, we have to let them be aware that this is on them. Your behavior is on you. Don't blame the environment; it's on you. Practice it, own it, reflect on it, take pride in it. And then, you'll do the right thing and you flourish as a person. Be a much happier person, and part of that is not just all on them.
- Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:32:38](#) It's thinking about how do you choose the situations you go into? How do you choose the friends you hang out with? I want to live, and so I don't go up on cliffs and go out on wires and then put myself at risk. That would be stupid. Something for people to think about are the situations you put yourself in, are you setting up for success or failure? Who are the friends you're hanging out with? Are those friends that help you become a better person? Or are those friends you're uncomfortable with and you're your worst self with? And I think it's important that we talk to people about these.
- Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:33:16](#) So again, character can be caught, can be taught, but ultimately must be sought. This slide here just shows the golden triangle at the center and how we're organizing our character education efforts here at West Point. We're hoping to be able to export some of this for the Army as we're doing this and assessing it. The baseline is the Cadet Honor Code, the Soldier's Creed, the Army Values, SHARP, EO, it's in doctrinaire. It's do this or don't do this foundational. And that's important because people come from all different environments into the military. Let's get on the same sheet of music, but we have to go beyond that. And that's to teaching them about virtues, because virtues are about themselves, about taking pride in being a particular person. It's easier that the rules of the Army make better sense when you see them from a virtue perspective because you see how it's helping you flourish and the organization flourish and do better.
- Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:34:30](#) Then we have specific areas we call "relational characters"---a new concept. It's virtues applied to all your relationships and really thinking it through from whether it's senior subordinate relationships, friendships, intimate relationships. How do we understand and succeed and have healthy relationships using the language of character (virtue) and then professional

character. We do a lot of case studies and role plays about what are the particular challenges you're going to face in the military profession? What does loyalty mean in the military profession? For example, what are the conflicts you're going to run into? That's the way we organize things.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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Sometimes when I talk on these kinds of things, people have a hard time picturing, "Okay, what's it all about?" So this slide, I know it's busy, I don't know if you can see it, but from the left to the right are the freshmen, sophomore, juniors, and seniors here at West Point. These are the character classes they're getting this semester in our main, main character education program. The things written in red are all about their individual virtue development. So all of the cadets are starting. The sophomores or freshmen did that this afternoon. Online is a character survey that's an assessment. At the end of the assessment, when they complete the survey, they get an industry piece of information that says, "Here's your answers." Here's how all your answers compare to your classmates. Because one of the hard things about characters, it's hard to get feedback. Academically, you get a GPA of how you did on tests.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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In physical fitness you do tests. You see how you stand in comparison to everyone else. And it's, that's a necessary part that we take for granted for development. So we're just introducing this this year of being able to see how they compare to others. And next year, and the years beyond, they're going to be able to compare themselves to see how they've grown and developed over time. But also you have an exercise on an online intervention on optimism, which is really about growth mindset. They'll have a testimonial on integrity, moral courage from Scott Mercier, who was on the US Olympic cycling team. He was one of our top cyclists. It was a medalist. Then when Lance Armstrong joined and everyone started cheating, he refused to cheat, to blood dope, and then he could no longer compete. He was the only person on that team who refused to cheat, and he lost his career.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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But he'll come to talk about it. It's important for cadets to understand that it doesn't always work out well in the immediate time, and that character is not just a military thing. Every human being is going to have choices where they have to decide who they are going to be. And it's nice that now Lance Armstrong begs to go for a ride with Scott Mercier. The world knows who did the right thing. The classes in green are ones that focus on the Army ethic, and you can see for the upperclassmen, there's a lot more on that. How does character apply to being a Soldier? So they're going to have a

reenactment or a presentation on a Medal of Honor recipient, Chaplain Kapuan. I'm going to give them a class on my academic specialty, the moral justification of killing and war.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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And they have a couple of case studies. These are all real situations recent graduates have faced. One of them is that a field artillery/fire direction officer and his more senior first lieutenant, field artillery platoon leaders drinking out of training, getting drunk. The other is where their battalion commander is falsifying pre-deployment ranges so they can get deployed. And how both of those leaders, these are situations last couple of years, the cadets will engage and think through how they would have handled those situations. So I just want to give you an idea. The ones in blue are relational characters. Fraternization: they prepare you for character challenges on leave before they go on leave. The upperclassmen will come to the underclass and talk about what their parents' expectations are. What are their friends' expectations when they go home? What are going to be the dangerous areas for their character? What are they going to do to mitigate those? And take a risk assessment towards character for them. So really it's about just helping people be conscious and then helping them hopefully succeed and grow.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

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So I want to come back to here and this'll be the end of the presentation piece of it. And I'm very open to your questions and comments. But when I look at the domains of character, domains of virtues, to me it seems really obvious how they can help us avoid a lot of the destructive behaviors. There's so many of us here trying to fight against moral character. The more people get to understand and see the dignity of every human being, to treat them with respect. If they can get that heart, if they can develop the lens of seeing every person as a person and not as something to be used, that takes care of problems. There are other moral virtues of gratitude. I pulled out this quote, I just happened to read it last night, and loved it. "It's not happiness that makes us grateful. It's gratefulness that makes us happy."

Dr. Peter Kilner:

[00:40:16](#)

Last spring, right before graduation, we did an exercise with the whole Corps of Cadets, where they all did an exercise on their own, where they thought about everyone who had helped them in their academic life, in their military development, in their physical fitness development, and in their character development. To think consciously, some were thinking back to high school, write the names of all the people who helped you. And now here's thank you notes. Write a thank you note to one of them. And then we had sometimes had to teach them how to

fill out an envelope and to mail a letter. And it really went over really well. We kept the cards out and hundreds more got picked out and sent. It's about developing both the habit of gratitude, but also we know all the research shows that the more we express gratitude towards others, the happier we are, the more humble we are, the more we are focused on the positive rather than the negative. So that's the thing I think could be done almost anywhere. There's a lot of research on keeping a gratitude journal and that kind of thing. We actually do have, for some of our plebes now in a course, a gratitude journal.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:41:28](#) Civic character. The more involved you are in your community as a contributor, that brings such meaning to life. It brings social connections. That's all good; it helps you think about the future.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:41:43](#) Intellectual character. The more people can develop that, the less likely they are to make bad decisions, short-sighted decisions that harm themselves.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:41:53](#) Performance character. And the Army's generally really good about this. It's about challenging people to do more than they know that they can do. There's enormous pride, confidence, and self-efficacy that comes from developing performance character.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:42:09](#) So we have incorporated wellness into the character program at West Point for a couple reasons: One, good character leads to wellness. Some of the things I just talked about here, the other side is if you're not well, if you're upset, if you're in a spiral, if you're not seeing the world well, because of mental health problems or relationship problems, it's hard to be good. It's hard to focus on others when you're having so many problems yourself. So the arrow goes both ways, and we really think that holistic wellness and character, the relationships are such that we should be seeing how they work together. And with that, I will jump over and start looking at some of your questions and comments.

Host: [00:43:08](#) Well, folks we have a great opportunity here. Sorry, Dr. Kilner, I'm stepping on you; I apologize for that. But folks, we have an opportunity here with a with a bit of time left. Some of these are some serious discussions, some in-depth thoughts here and discussions. So take a minute to ask Dr. Kilner to expand on anything you think needs expanding on. And while folks are typing, just go ahead and type them in the chat box. We had a great discussion this morning, and one of the things we talked about, Dr. Kilner, was personal development and character

development. What about institutional development along those lines? I think that's important in the Army, but how do we do that at the institutional level?

Dr. Peter Kilner:

[00:44:05](#)

Yes. Well, I mean, that's incredibly important because you can't separate...I mean, almost the assumption of character development is we're shaped by our community. And so some people say, do you start with the individual or do you start with the organization? Really have to start with both, or do both. The great thing about the Army is we're very leader-oriented, somewhat systems-oriented, but very leader-oriented. And I think if we start with getting leaders, anywhere in the Army where leaders speak out for what's right, and then back it up, they're going to have a really good climate. That's essentially a culture of character growth. Between this morning's session this afternoon's, I got a phone call from someone who's taking brigade command next month. And one of the things I talked to him about is, (because I've known him since he was a lieutenant)... and I said, "A lot of times you had struggles. You knew what was right, but you didn't know if your boss would support you. Now you're in a position to say, I'm the brigade commander. I want you to do things the right way, take them through some scenarios and let them know you understand how messy things can be. You'll back them up in being honest and not falsifying reports and everything else." So that's something we can do where the institution supports it. This year, West Point has really tried to look out and say, "Are there places where our left hand and right-hand are pulling different directions? Are our systems in place? Are our rewards and punishments?" So one thing that gets me is if someone does something bad, we have a lot of systems to punish him pretty quickly. But what about when someone does the right thing?

Dr. Peter Kilner:

[00:45:45](#)

We don't really give awards for ethical goodness. And so we probably should. And we've instituted some here at West Point. We have a Character in Sport award. But there's not enough. You know, cadets can get things on the uniform, academic excellence, military excellence, physical fitness excellence. We need one for character excellence, but that's why we have to learn to measure it better. Now, one of the questions that I get that in these and that came up the last session is: "What do you do when someone makes a mistake, like a Soldier who does a bad thing in the Army? Do you cut bait or do you just chat with them, or do you try to rehabilitate them? And how do you make that decision?" And I think if the Army brings them in, and we already have the Army values, which are good, I think this is better because it's more holistic.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:46:39](#) There's nothing wrong with the Army values. People know what's expected and not, at a minimum, I would think when they're a junior enlisted, work to rehabilitate, as best we can. And maybe perhaps part of becoming an NCO is a certain certification that, "Hey, you've had time. If you sought character growth that it would have happened." And if you haven't done it at this point, then we're less forgiving on things. I know it's hard to talk about a whole organization, and part of good character is good judgment. Leaders should always use their judgment, but that's one that comes up. Another question that comes up a lot is should we use character at accessions? Should we test people? There's some...to try to weed out people who may be problems. And I don't know enough about the science of that.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:47:36](#) I do know that I love the idea that the military is the place where people who have struggled from bad backgrounds and difficult home environments, where they leave all their friends behind. I mean the big thing on habit formation, if you want to change your habits, you've got to change your physical environment. You want to change as much as you can so that you create new cues. The military does that. And so I think we have such a great opportunity to make a difference in people's lives. Our purpose is to fight and win our nation's wars and protect our democracy, but we can make a difference in people's lives. Give them those three or four years, and if they haven't owned it by the time they're in NCO, okay. Then maybe we have to cut, but I hope we could give people as many choices as we can. So let me look at some of the newer questions.

Host: [00:48:33](#) Dr. Kilner. We've also posted a couple under the presenter tab. They're directly to you. In the chat, you should see a number of things.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:48:47](#) "Can you dive a little more into the concept: if you are not mentally well, what can leaders do from their level?" I guess that was where I was talking about how wellness affects character. I know when I'm stressed out, when I'm tired, I'm not the kindest person. Sometimes you just get all caught up in your own world. I do think leaders should be educated to think. I'm not saying they're not holistically looking at your organization. That's why rules and standards are important to understand, but you also have to know when to make exceptions, such as "Hey, the people are really tired. Let's get them extra sleep. Maybe we can reduce; maybe we can pull off some tasking so that people can get some, some rest. Maybe they need to come



in and to have some conversations with the chaplain." Units do that kind of thing all the time.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

[00:49:43](#)

I think leaders should be very aware of the wellbeing of their formations, and that's why it's important to know what's going on in their lives, what's going on at home and everything else. I think we do more of that in the military. The argument that developing their character to become the best human beings they can be and leading to good wellness I think is more of a new idea within our profession. To some extent, people are very comfortable talking about leadership. They're less comfortable talking about character and ethics. This summer at West Point, their evaluators in some of our training... when they do AARs after every mission, when they had three missions a day, a mini ranger school here called Leader Development Training. We always talk obviously about tactics and leadership. And this time they said, "That's just the way people do AARs." And we said, "No, let's also talk character. What performance character do they show? When people were tired and exhausted and things didn't go well, how do they treat each other? How was their moral character? Did the leader leverage the knowledge and experience of the group intellectual character? Do they try to do everything themselves?" And so we did add that third lens on, and the feedback's been really good.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

[00:51:10](#)

Maddie, I'll get to you. I remember Maddie as a cadet. How do you deal with the hidden bias that are only revealed under certain circumstances? Well, that's why character can't be faked so long. One argument for really doubling down and trying to build up peoples; character is that our behavior is almost always a combination of our character and our environment. So when our environment is such that we're all rested and there's no stress and the weather's good, it's pretty easy to be good. Doesn't take strong character. But when you're in combat and you've just had Soldiers killed and you're exhausted and everything else, that's ripping apart. That's why you need to have really strong character because everything else gets torn away. And that's why you don't think about only the behavioral stuff, like when we say just treat people with respect, that's good, but that's surface level.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

[00:52:11](#)

I think we should say, learn to love and to respect the dignity of every human being. That's a stronger statement. And over time, I think if we talk and think that way, then there's a switch that can switch where you begin to see what you have in common with everyone, whether it's a civilian on the battlefield, whether it's a wounded enemy soldier, whether it's an enemy Soldiers shooting at you. That we can still see them as a human being

and empathize and see things from their perspective. Empathy is a virtue. That is where you get real moral virtue, seeing the humanity of every person. And so if we get to that level, rather than just stay at the behavioral level, but we get to the attitude, we get to what we see, to really where our heart is, then we eliminate as many of the biases as we can.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:53:18](#) I've been thinking this week about the in-group/out-group bias. In the United States, people tend to think about race, but I was in Afghanistan three times, and there it's about tribe and a little ethnicity and the littlest differences. It's like human beings have driven that in-group out-group. Two hundred years ago, it was all about religion. It was in-group/out-group, let's have a hundred years war. That is the one I'm wondering, how do we break that down? And I don't know.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:53:51](#) So Maddie says, "How do we tell Soldiers who watch a leader do the right thing and make the hard decision and they get crushed for doing so, because higher levels don't want to hear it?" Well, that's sad. It's why we need to have a good culture. That's why it's critically important that leaders higher up consciously reach out and make clear that they want people doing the right thing.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:54:21](#) I know my attitude when I was lower rank, I did some things that fought the trends, and looking back, I'm proud of myself because I was doing what was ethically right. Sometimes I thought I was going to get crushed and then actually people treated me real well. The other side of it is that the oath you take is to do everything you can to serve the country and do that to the best of your ability. If for some reason the organization says "We're not going to have you if you're doing it right." I haven't seen much of that go that way. But if that did happen, I think we can, with a clear conscience take the hit. But I just thought of Martin Luther King. A lot of times at the moment, things aren't going well, but I'd like to think that over time, as people look at things as people's reputations, as people's true character gets revealed that usually justice wins out. All I can say to the soldier is, "If you did the right thing, remember virtue is inherently satisfying." People just need to know that there, that it's helpful for them to know that others notice them for doing the right thing.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:55:38](#) "What about the fundamentals that are missing in order to receive this? Like the difference between an external and internal locus of control, sense of identity that leads a behavior outcomes?" So it's very important that people have a growth mindset internal locus of control, but they have to be one, some of these have empirical evidence to show it, and there's other

kinds of interventions. There is one we're doing on September 13th here with the plebes that can help people see that about themselves. so we're still learning and still assessing, but you're right. There's a lot to be done. If you just look at surveys, a third of the people in the world think that your character is set by the time you're 18, and there's nothing we can do. And that was the dominant view a hundred years ago. But the research doesn't show that that's the case. "In terms of loyalty, moral courage, what are some ways to voice your objection to a popular decision while not being labeled with the 'not the team player tag'?"

Dr. Peter Kilner:

[00:56:41](#)

Google "Dark Side of Loyalty" here. Loyalty and Kilner. I wrote an article just on that thing. I hate that loyalty is the first Army value because almost every time things are going wrong in a unit that things are unethical, it's a misplaced, misguided sense of loyalty. I think it's important to turn to the standard of what's right, of what's legal to not make it personal with people, especially the person who's doing the wrong thing. And then try to find a good out. So when I was a lieutenant, I discovered we had a gambling pool. I was asked to give money to a gambling pool on gunnery, and people were cheating and paying off the Bradley crew evaluators. And so I was upset about it. My company commander wouldn't do anything about it. He was worried about his OER; he was in a SARC Majors program.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

[00:57:36](#)

And so I was doing my support form and said, "I'm responsible for everything that unit does or fail to do." And I said, "Well, that's my unit. My platoon is not participating." So against my platoon sergeant's objections, we went and got our money. I said, "We're not playing in the gunnery pool." And then the next day the battalion canceled the gunnery pool. Just because it was almost a shame or worry that not everyone was going along. So looking back, I think I got lucky. I didn't take the direct approach and go try to tell our sergeant major, the battalion commander they were wrong. I just said, "I'm just not participating. My Soldiers won't." My Soldiers weren't happy about that, but that was almost an indirect way. So I know it's one thing to do the right thing yourself, and in that case, it influenced others.

Dr. Peter Kilner:

[00:58:24](#)

I know it's always harder sometimes if you don't do anything, you're essentially a co-conspirator. You're looking the other way. You're all those coaches who looked the other way when gymnasts were getting abused. We never want to be that person, and so that's why sometimes a key skill is intervening, and that's why I think we should train that. We're doing that some here at West Point of "Crawl, walk, run." It feels stupid, but let's learn some of the scripts for how you step in in a way

that isn't personal, and isn't, "Oh, I'm holier than thou," but just saying, "Hey, here's a standard and this is wrong."

Dr. Peter Kilner: [00:59:09](#) "Is this taught to all enlisted Soldiers when they come in?" Well, this is just being taught. This is very new at West Point. And so we hope the Cape: The Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, they got closed down and consolidated with Center for Army Leadership. They did have a character development project. They've tabled that. So now we at West Point are thinking that this is probably what we'll develop and assess to develop good programs, so we hope to share them out to the Army. There is interest across the Army. So I think I'm at the end of my time, although I can stay around if people are interested to talk more

Host: [00:59:54](#) And thanks, Dr. Kilner, I think we're right at the top of the hour. So we've got time for maybe one or two more questions. And I just want to thank everyone for sharing some things here. And Dr. Kilner, even though we're going over a little bit, you talk about the folks that are out in units, folks that are out in different organizations. We have reserve component, National Guard. If some of these want to put this into some of their leader time or just their professional development time, are there any assets that you could recommend where folks could go and get some information that would help them put together, even just an hour's worth of teaching? Now everybody gets the four years you do at West Point, but any thoughts on that? And then maybe time for one more question.

Dr. Peter Kilner: [01:00:40](#) We are in the process of building internal and external websites. Actually, amazingly in last couple of years, we've had almost no web presence, which would include videos and other things. So it is doable that within 12 months, we will have character education and character development resources that people can download. So that's what we're going towards. Right now, I can say people can email me with what you're looking for, and I may be able to point you in the right direction, if I can't help you myself.

Host: [01:01:15](#) Alright. Thank you, Dr. Kilner. I appreciate you doing it twice today. I know classes just started up there, and so you've been teaching and presenting a lot, so we thank you very much for taking the time twice today to present this great information, these great things to us, and thank you all for joining us. So today's webinar, a couple things will pop up on the screen shortly, including a web survey. I know many of you have participated in these before. They take about just one minute, but ARD and the leadership is very interested in hearing

feedback from the field, hearing what you'd like to hear. We're getting ready to work on the next a year's worth of webinars. And so if you have ideas for topics, or if you've heard or know of a great presenter or a great organization that you'd like to hear from, please include that.

Host: [01:02:05](#) And that'll be looked at as we put together the next slate of webinars, because we want to do what works for you in the field, what you need to hear out there, and we can only do that with your input. So thank you very much ahead of time for taking the time to do that. And also, a reminder for those of you that joined late. There are several things on the screen today, and we'll keep this open for a while. In addition to the web survey slides, Dr. Kilner has graciously provided the slide deck, and you can download all of the slides from today's presentation, as well as the paper he mentioned earlier on, higher education and character development in higher education. Also included in the web links pod are some links to some previous articles that Dr. Kilner has written and his blog, where he talks about some of the things that he mentioned today.

Host: [01:02:58](#) There's also a link to the Army Resilience Directorate website. And that's your key for keeping updated on everything coming from ARD. That's also where you can sign up to receive invites and updates for webinars and other events. I know many of you participated in the recent PIF, but if you're not signed up, if you're getting these second or third hand, you can sign up directly at the Army Resilience website. You can sign up, and we put out a weekly media update. We just published our bimonthly newsletter, and this latest newsletter is a special newsletter with a focus on the upcoming suicide prevention month. So you can receive those directly in your inbox as well as other products and updates for the Army Resilience Directorate. So I encourage you to do that. And as always, I will stick around for a few minutes to handle any administrative requests. A reminder for those of you that are using this, not only for professional development, but to remain certified or to update your certification for SARCs and VAs, for this training, go ahead and download the survey slide.

Host: [01:04:07](#) Those are individual to each webinar. And so that will be proof of your attendance. We no longer send out certificates of training, but download that webinar survey slide and update your training annotate it on your DD29 50-1, and have your SARC sign off on it. If you are the SARC, have your commander sign off on it, and as necessary, update your records in DSAID. Just for everyone's benefit every month, prior to the webinars,

the Army Resilience Directorate submits a CEU request (continuing education unit request) to NOVA who certifies the SARCs and VAs, and so NOVA is tracking all of those that they have annotated for CEU credit. So once you're certified NOVA will look at that and see that they have already previously certified. The Army Resilience Directorate goes through that process and this webinar has been certified for one live CEU unit. So with that again, Dr. Keller, thank you very much. I really appreciate it. I know we all appreciate it. And thank you for joining us. Have a great rest of your day, and I will stick around for any administrative questions or follow-ups. Thank you all.