

Interview of Christopher Vaughn, 2018 MPS-PSYLD Graduate

Interviewed by Paul Obidinski, Psychology Professor of Practice, 11/22/2019

I'm Paul Obidinski, for those of you joining us a participant, Professor of Practice in the psychology of leadership program, perhaps, I've worked with several of you in Psych 833 or someone courses long way.

I wanted to welcome you today to our alumni interview with Christopher Vaughn and will give a little more of an introduction to Chris here in just a minute. But I wanted to go over some general ground rules for how we're proceeding with the webinar today. How you may be able to participate.

Other than Chris and I everyone else is in a listen only mode. So, you'll have the opportunity to see Chris and I have our conversation and you'll be able to hear both of us. If you would like to submit any questions you may do so by using the chat feature which you should be able to access toward the bottom of your screen and then we'll try to go ahead and answer some questions as they come up or at the end of the session as may be appropriate if there are additional topics anyone out there may wish to discuss with Chris. So that said, I think we'll just go ahead and get started, just a brief introduction of Chris

Over the last 18 and a half years or so. Chris has held several senior leadership positions in the United States Air Force and currently serves as superintendent within the presidential Airlift Group in the Washington DC area.

His role is multifaceted. Amongst other responsibilities Chris manages workforce planning employee relations, team employment leadership oversight and strategic direction for the ongoing development of the next generation of Air Force One, the VC 25 which Chris can describe a little bit better as we get into the discussion a little bit.

But first I wanted to start with some questions about Chris's experiences in the MPS program and then certainly we'll get into some dialogue around his particular role and experiences and leadership items taken from the MPS program which have perhaps been helpful in his current role and then we'll open it up to any other thoughts that may be out there. So first, Chris, welcome. And thank you for joining us today.

My first questions are what drew you to our MPs program. And why did you select this program in particular?

Christopher Vaughn

Okay, well first, if I could, I would be remiss if I didn't take a moment to thank you for setting this up I think any platform that creates a bridge for myself as an alum to use my experiences to bring value to others. So, certainly, something that I appreciate. So. thank you for setting this up and considering me to be a resource for others, hopefully.

Paul Obidinski

Happy to do so.

Christopher Vaughn

Now, to your question. You know what drew me to the MPS program it, it actually began from a question that I received a few years ago, I went to a leadership seminar and at that seminar was comprised of civilian military in all types of leaders and basically what happened is right before the seminar started a question popped up on the screen, which simply asked why should someone be led by me.

And I remember all the chatter in the room. Prior to that question. But once that popped up on the screen.

I mean, you could almost feel the reflection of everyone in the room, you know, really trying to digest and understand, well, why should someone be led by me.

So at that point, you know, I really started to lean into my own understanding of what I knew about leadership.

And from the wake of that question. I tried to understand both personally and professionally. I know what I knew about leadership and I felt like it wasn't enough so I felt I felt like there are things out there beyond just the self-help books. So, I wanted to get into more of an atmosphere and study research based leadership concepts and also wanted to make good on a promise that I made to myself several years prior, which was to get a masters degree so my search initially began with pursuing an MBA. So in search of an MBA, even though I had no aspirations for the business side of it. I was curious about the leadership and managerial aspects.

So in search of the MBA. I noticed they had concentrations in various facets of leadership, you know, executive leadership.

Organizational Leadership leadership psychology. I mean, the list goes on. So, even though it wasn't really keen on the business aspects I became even more curious about the study of leadership. So I changed my search a bit to see if there are any programs that focus solely on those leadership components and essentially that's when I discovered Penn State's offering of the psychology of leadership program and I read through the curriculum. The course descriptions and everything matched perfectly with what I was looking for.

Even though I think there were 10 classes required plus a capstone, I walked away wanting to take every single class. Sure.

You know, I looked at the other logistics of what Penn State offered just in terms of being a military friendly school

Solid online platform and just a brick and mortar school. I mean everything matched up perfectly. So ultimately that's what drew me to Penn State to sign up for this program.

Paul Obidinski

Great, I appreciate that very, very thorough response and I think you're a great example of what we hope our students will experience while going through the program and take away from it. So, we really appreciate that introduction.

You know, as you entered the MPS program obviously in your professional career you have many commitments. What did you feel where some of the greatest challenges just in terms of working, maintaining your current role and roles as you were a student and how did you balance your work and school at the same time?

Christopher Vaughn

So, I mean, you pretty much nailed it in the question in terms, my biggest challenge. I mean it was just that it was balance.

Paul Obidinski

Ok

Christopher Vaughn

I realized fairly early on that our life obligations don't necessarily stop because make the decision to go back to school. So just as an adult learner. I had to make the decision to be sure I didn't neglect other areas of my life in terms of being a father, a husband traveling and all those work obligations. So the biggest thing was trying to balance so that I can maintain success and all those different areas of my life but also I think there was a mental challenge. Well, because I wanted to leave myself vulnerable to receive what I didn't understand or know about leadership. Initially, the see what I can get out of the MPS program.

And I realized fairly early on. I had a false impression of leadership, because my thought process was more two dimensional

You know, and I wouldn't say that's what the military trains us but being a hierarchical system. You know, you have the leader and you have a follower, but I didn't really focus in on that third dimension, which is the the process and those

influential properties. So just leaving myself vulnerable to learn and really understand what leadership was I think was a challenge. Initially, but you know, I think I opened up to it and it served me well throughout the program. But one other thing I'll add is rather than focusing on managing my time, I had to manage my energy because I had so many other things going on. And so just taking care of mind, body, and spirit which allowed me to be centered as I sat down and focused and tried to, you know, really lean into this academic space with something that was important. So the sort of it is balance and then just managing my my energy versus just managing time. Okay.

Paul Obidinski

And I would assume that similar advice is what you would give to our current students and it's really just finding the right balance between private your current priorities, your education and having that mindset.

Okay, well, you know, let's, talk a little bit about your current work, which is very interesting, and I know you've been in the Air Force a long time, and thank you for your service and for all the work you've done again you currently serve as senior project manager superintendent for the BC 25 be communications in the Air Force, can you give us a little bit of an overview what your primary responsibilities are in this role. I mean, it's probably difficult to summarize, I'm sure there's a lot, but if you can kind of give everyone for participating today some idea of primary nature your role that would be much appreciated.

Christopher Vaughn

Sure. So, I mean, the role is multifaceted as you alluded to, but the short of it is I'm leading the development of the communications on the next Air Force One

You know, I'm not necessarily, you know, the top of the food chain. But in terms of the operational expertise in the development, you know, that's where I come into play. So, a lot of the engineers and subject matter experts that are in charge of the design and interpreting, you know, some of those ambiguous requirements, you know, they reach out to myself and some of my colleagues that are still in that operational space.

To help them, you know, create the right design for those next generation of operators.

I do this job probably 70% of the time. But when not, you know, and the programmatic roll the other 30 plus percent of the time I'm still active Air Force one crew member. So, you know, I still fly frequently with the current administration...been flying big materials for almost 15 YEARS, BUT IN THE PRESIDENTIAL SIDE. I've been doing it for almost 10 so you know I'll continue to do this for the next year or so until I retire, but it is multifaceted as you alluded to,

where I have the programmatic side helping develop, you know, our nation's next flagship but when I'm not doing that, I still fly as a current crew member

Paul Obidinski

Fantastic. Great, great background. And again, really appreciate you sharing that. And it's certainly some high-level work. So, we're really happy to hear of all that you're involved with

The question I have is, you know, obviously, you're all you've worked with folks at all different levels. I would guess obviously very high-level folks and entry level folks as well.

What are your thoughts around when you have to meet with someone new, and take the example of someone at a high level capacity. What do you do to prepare for an initial meeting with someone new who is in a high level role?

Christopher Vaughn

I mean, I think, like with any relationship, you want to set a good impression

I try not to get starstruck, so to speak. So try to appear dynamic, you know, as much as practical

I think that will alleviate a lot of the distress, you know, in a collaboration. But no, you do your due diligence when you know you're setting up any sort of meeting in terms of you know, breaking it down to the lowest levels, you know, understanding the purpose of the timeframe that you're going to collaborate, whether it's a one time plan or, you know, an enduring process.

So, you think of what's the problem that's going to be solved, but I think it's also an opportunity to queue up your top priorities, you know, within your team and your organization so that they can be shared with that higher level leader. So have your data points and all those things queued up for discussion.

But I also think is important not to overwhelm them with too much information, especially in that initial meeting, but ultimately you want to walk away with the impression for them that you know your stuff that your team has prepared and hopefully you can create some alignment towards that organizational vision.

Paul Obidinski

After you're starting a new initiative and you've had that initial meeting obviously you'll be working with the team we covered a lot of teamwork throughout the MPS program. What are your thoughts about working with teammates to ensure cooperation and an effective team relationship going forward.

Christopher Vaughn

You know, for a team. You know, I work with teams, all the time, you know, both with my colleagues in the programmatic side developing aircraft, but even the crew knows those that fly on Air Force One. I mean, we're a team as well. You know, it's not the same personnel every single flight.

But, I mean, we all know each other, but it's essentially a team, but in the context of your question, I think, you know, an initial meeting with the new team. I think it's important to create momentum and an atmosphere of shared power as early as possible. My personal technique is to over communicate, just because I want to create a sense of belonging, create a psychologically safe work environment so that you know every voice in the room can be heard and know what we're trying to achieve; I also think it's important not to get caught up in groupthink; not getting trapped into agreements, I think that can seduce a false sense of agreement. So, a lot of times I like to invite dissent and the conversation, you know, have someone play devil's advocate just to try to uncover some things that we may not be thinking of and just invite creativity and innovation in the process.

But overall fundamentally want to understand the task, the objectives, and, you know, be outcome focused so that your attention is not channelized on one certain area, but just to realize what you're ultimately trying to achieve.

9But something else I don't often find in books, but I think is important is to introduce humor, you know, to that team dynamic because I think that can alleviate stress and it lightens the mood.

And it just creates an atmosphere where people to really want to be together. So those are kind of my thoughts on creating a team to where it can hopefully be cooperative and effective.

Paul Obidinski

That's great. I mean, I think within your response you incorporated a lot of our content from the program. And so I think it demonstrates how some of those concepts are have really been used by yourself and your role in real time. So, I appreciate that sharing that

Okay

You know one of one of the, I guess programmatic elements of your job indicated some work in employee relations. Can you talk a little bit about what you've overseeing from an employee relations standpoint, and just talk about that experience a bit?

Christopher Vaughn

Right, so obviously within the framework of the Air Force.

You know, we don't deal with some of the things as a typical you know company would, in terms of benefits and pay and stuff like that. I mean, even though administratively, those things are all taken care of. But in terms of what I oversee I don't deal with those components, but I would say I deal with a lot of HR manager type functions as a senior leader in my organization. My job is to obviously to make sure the mission is executed, but also to ensure their professional development, you know, the folks within my team is still achieve. So, you know, a lot of that looks like performance reviews, you know, making sure the recognition impacts are intact. Because a lot of those things within the Air Force tied to promotion opportunities. So just creating an atmosphere where those things are transparent where there's a lot of feedback and where the subordinates know what their expectations are. And as a leader, you know, making sure they understand where they fall within those expectations so you know when it comes to that final performance review, you know, there's no surprises you know they know where they stand all along the way.

But aside from that, just general morale quality type things, especially with our line of work. We're busy quite a bit. So just ensuring that folks have time to, you know, focus on the task at hand, but also they have an escape to be able to take care of themselves.

Paul Obidinski

That's, again, another great and all-encompassing answer.

I definitely appreciate that perspective. Another thing, obviously, which we covered a lot in MPS program or in you kind of alluded to it, even in your last answer are when employee conflict situations when there are conflicts amongst employees that can be a very challenging thing for a manager or leader to deal with and in any industry and I would suspect certainly in the Air Force. Can you give me an example of perhaps a conflict situation which you've seen in the workplace and if you had occasion to work through that yourself. what steps did you hear through to address and employment conflict situation?

Christopher Vaughn

So, I mean conflict is inevitable. You know, I think that's just part of human nature. So, you know I deal with conflict, all the time, but I think something that comes to mind is nepotism, that's something that I've seen you know within the workplace and obviously the implications of that can impact productivity, employee withdrawal and impact overall team effectiveness. So just in terms of the steps that I went through...to get through that I think encompasses my ability to use soft skills, just to communicate and listen actively just to see what's going on, not necessarily focusing on a symptoms, but what are the root causes of what's driving those behaviors of the conflict not making assumptions not making things personal.

Later you always want to remain professional. And overall, just be intentional to find a place of agreement so that there's no winners or losers in that process. But also, I think, is important to paint the picture if those behaviors were to continue. You know what the impacts could ultimately be for the team.

Paul Obidinski

So yeah, my personal perspective, it's always important for a leader to get a sense of the individual differences in personality of the team from the outset, I think.

Based upon what you're saying, would you concur with that or any other thoughts on what you should do to get to know the team from the outside in terms of their differences?

Christopher Vaughn

So can you repeat that again?

Paul Obidinski

So, team members can have individual differences, personality traits and that sort of thing. What efforts do you think a leader should undertake or what can they do for the outset to get a sense of what those are so that the team could benefit and be more effectively managed?

Christopher Vaughn

Well, I think it's always important to listen to, you know, those different perspectives.

Even if it doesn't always align with what the objective of the team is I think it's always important to let people know that their voices are important.

But if it gets to a place of conflict, you know, you ultimately have to do what's best for the team. So, you know, even if you don't go a particular direction, you at least know close the loop, hopefully to let them know why you don't go a particular direction so that they're not left out or or discouraged. But, you know, to continue bringing their, their thought processes forward. So, my thing is always to invite other perspectives, even if I don't agree with it. Always listen.

Paul Obidinski

I think that's important.

We have a question from one of our participants, it's how did the MPS degree prepare you for meeting everyday workforce challenges?

Christopher Vaughn

So I think I kind of alluded to it before, just in terms of my false sense of what I thought leadership and tail just in terms of it being a two dimensional because of the, the military is a very hierarchical format. So you have your general or your command or your senior leader.

And then of course you have your followers. But, you know, from the program. I learned about that third dimension.

Of the process and influential properties. So, I think understanding it in that context, allow me to go in and not necessarily focus on one person as a leader with all those people within the organization can create an atmosphere of leadership. So, the program helped me look at it more. So not necessarily from the leader perspective, but more so as a process.

Paul Obidinski

So there certainly a number of additional questions we can ask you. We talked a little bit about conflicts of interest in conflict mitigation.

Certainly in any company, and I'm sure the Air Force is no exception. There are rules established around the Code of Conduct and other related policies. What could you say about the importance for anyone to know their code of conduct and what steps should they show in a perfect world for following their code of conduct in their day to day work life?

Christopher Vaughn

Sure. So I think, you know, as you alluded to the Air Force certainly where the military has a code of conduct. But you know, it's the tone setter, you know, the moral guy for the organization.

I think it establishes the framework for the organization to show their responsibility to establish an ethical climate.

But, you know, it also clarifies the values and beliefs. You know, it just sets the culture and those behavioral expectations of the organization, but you know, as a leader or not even as a leader, just a member of the organization. I think you should be consciously aware of what that code of conduct is and just consistent to adhering to it.

And I think the more that it's a part of you. It becomes subconscious and it'll show up in your behaviors and the members of the organization.

Paul Obidinski

Okay, very good. I, myself in my prior career get to put together some codes of conduct. And again, I think having that baseline out there and having a leader, set the tone at the top and really live the code is really a key takeaway from having that code of conduct that place.

Yeah, general question. We've probably already discussed this in part, but whether in terms of yourself or for other leaders you work under, what do you think are some of the best motivational tactics a leader can use...you mentioned humor earlier. But what other things can be leader do to keep employees motivated?

Christopher Vaughn

I think...First, I mean you have to be authentic. So I think authenticity resonates with your people. So, connect with your people engage insight you know into what their purpose is. And I think the more intimate, you are in your relationship...that can reveal what their motivations are.

I recall a commander that I had in years past. I mean, very nice guy, but he would always go around and you know compliment. And hey, good job you did this well.

But it almost fell on deaf ears after a while because it wasn't tied to a specific behavior.

And so I think in terms of motivation. You want to have those affirmations. You want to connect those to a specific behaviors. So, a good job on this presentation or this this briefing, or whatever the case may be, but you know actually connecting things to a specific behavior, which I think can motivate your people but obviously work is the priority, It gives you a better understanding of how to motivate them in terms of growth or stability. I use myself for an example. So, prior to, you know, going into school I was on this growth trajectory for leadership opportunities and to grow as a leader within my organization.

But within you know I wanted to get into school and just delve into other areas that were important to me. So that growth trajectory wasn't as important, because I knew there would be things locked onto my plate for me to execute that objective. So, I wanted more of that stability where I knew what my schedule was

I was able to focus on school and other things that allow me to be successful and work as well. But now obviously people in the light chain. So, you don't want to stunt the growth. And, you know, one particular box, but just by knowing and understanding your people and what their motivators are I think allows you as a leader to put the right resources into place to hopefully connect to. What motivates them.

Paul Obidinski

Great. Another great answer. And I think, again, a good takeaway is getting to know the people which probably across the board from a leadership perspective is really key to effective leadership.

Another question I had here, but I think you've already kind of spoken to a little bit is, is there anything you feel just really better equipped to do tying it back now to the MPS program?

Anything you are more confident in your current role by virtue of having gone through our particular program and I probably spoken to a little bit already but any other thoughts along those lines?

Christopher Vaughn

So, I mean, I just circle back to why I began in the first place, which was in terms of connecting what brought me to the program, which was know why should someone be led by me.

You know, I consider myself imperfect, but also consider myself brave in the sense that I'm able to lean into those uncomfortable spaces, but ultimately I want to be, you know, of service. So, I think that's where the program brought out of me, just in terms of understanding that leadership dynamic, you know, it's not all about the leader.

And not all about the follower, but just that process in between and understanding know how they all connect together is something I truly learned from the program.

But also think it allowed me to be a continuous learner. I understand that leadership is a journey, you know, to be experienced, not necessarily a destination.

Ultimately, just, you know, just embracing the process and continuing to, you know, to learn

Now say that after I completed the program, you know, I wanted to basically put a lot of what I learned to use. So I enrolled in Georgetown right after the commencement ceremony and I got into consulting, you know, organizational consulting and change leadership.

And this was my introduction into the OD, you know, consulting piece. So, both internally and externally. You know, it taught how you can go into a system.

Just learn what's effective what's ineffective and basically take some of the concepts I've learned you know through my own leadership experiences as well as through the psychology of leadership and just kind of integrate that you know to be of service to the clients. So, you know, all around. It's just been a learning opportunity but if anything is just made me more curious and want to continue to learn about leadership

Paul Obidinski

Great... another great response. I really appreciate that. We don't have a set time we marked about 30 minutes but it's there. Any other advice you give to our current students about just your thoughts for maybe those not quite sure what they want to do... any advice you'd give after having been through the program as to what they could think about moving forward?

Christopher Vaughn

I mean, I think the, I mean, obviously, learning about leadership. A lot of times can make you outward focus, but what I really got from the program is it made me reflect from within.

You know, so that question that I've received in terms of the, why should someone be led by me. I mean, it really makes you look within.

To understand how you project out, you know, just in terms of leadership. But you know what a student can do with that. I mean, that's a individual journey that they'll have to take but you know ultimately

I can't imagine someone coming into this type of program just for self- serving reasons i think you know ultimately is to be a vessel of service to others and to even if not being an effective leader themselves just continuing to learn to how to become a better leader and taking those skill sets, you know, into their organizations and, you know, helping others to become better leaders as well.

Paul Obidinski

I will open it up to any participants out there who have any other questions that you would like to ask Chris. If so, if you want to send a message in through the chat box. We can take any additional questions.

Okay, we're not we're not giving any additional questions at the moment. And I do want to remind you, Chris and as well as all our participants and we are recording the session today. So, we will also be available for any students who were unable to join today and will make the interview available on our website and some questions may arise from students who view it after the fact.

We will certainly make our best efforts to get answers the questions, but that's all I had. And really appreciate your time. I know time is very valuable for you in your role. So I really appreciate you taking the time today, any final thoughts?

Christopher Vaughn

No, I mean, this has been great as you stated again I thank you for putting this together. I think it's important to know just sort of bridge from the alumni to those going through the program.

And if not now, you know, anytime in the future if there's any way I can be of assistance to yourself or any students. It will certainly open to that. But now I'm grateful to see

Penn State reaching out to people that have gone through to hopefully help people know going through the program to be successful. So thank you.

Paul Obidinski

Okay. Well, great. Really appreciate it again. And you're probably hearing from us again and within connection with some alumni who may want to have some additional questions for you so appreciate the time

Christopher Vaughn

That's good.

Paul Obidinski

One more question from chat. Chris, do you have a course or courses that you thought were most from the program that you felt were most impactful.

Christopher Vaughn

Goodness.

I think probably the capstone because it encapsulated all the courses. It really made me go back and look at all my notes to truly learn what I understood throughout that journey.

You know, going through the program, but probably the capstone because it really made you tie everything together in a practical sense with immediate application.

But no, there was something I got out of all the classes. And I think there's a lot of overlap, just in terms of leadership concepts and fundamental research type things. So, in terms of what I got the most out of probably the capstone because it was the one course I had that term, and that allowed me to really hone in on what I gathered over that last year and a half.

Paul Obidinski

Okay, great. I think that's what we do with the capstone as that final culminating experience. So, I certainly appreciate that.

All right, doesn't look like we have any additional questions. So again, I thank you for your time. Chris and very much appreciate it and we'll, we'll continue to be in touch.

Christopher Vaughn

My pleasure. Thank you so much.

Paul Obidinski

Okay, take care.