What Makes A <u>Good</u> Leader: COMPASSION

This week is the final installment of our series on the key pillars of character required of <u>successful</u> leaders (nobility, humility, courage, compassion), as told by Lt Gen Steven Kwast, AETC/CC. In that we are *all* leaders in some form, at some time, and with some people—and because the development of these characteristics is a journey, rather than something with which we're born—this series of 5M2Ts has focused on each of these traits. Last up: **Compassion**.

Compassion is one of the most important qualities we can hone. It connects us to the basic human experience, enabling vicarious learning and enhancing understanding. When we put ourselves in others' shoes, we live their stories, their emotions, and their struggles from *their* unique point of view. Hence, compassion allows us to see the world through the eyes of others. This is critical; without empathic consciousness, we would interpret everything that happens around us, to us, and to other people from our own (limited) frame of reference. At the extreme, failure to be compassionate yields biased and irrational thinking, sexism/racism, and hatred…but these things all begin with a basic lack of understanding, or compassion. To quote Tom Wilkinson (playing Carmine Falcone, pictured) in *Batman Begins*: "You always fear what you don't understand."
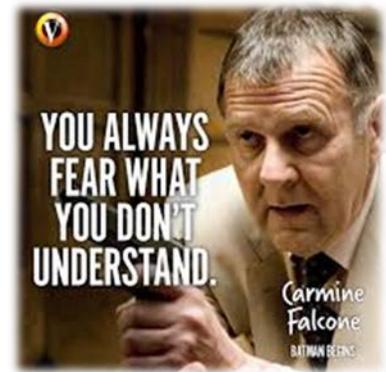
At the same time, we must be compassionate with ourselves, as well. Many of us are harder on ourselves than we are with others, creating unreasonably high expectations that set us up for feeling grief and shame when we inevitably fall short. Self-compassion begins with accepting that we are human, we *will* make mistakes, and we *will* fail from time to time—and that's okay! Perfection is an unneccessary standard that can only lead to chronic discontent. You can still keep the bar high, but know when you've reached the point of "enough." And once you've begun to practice compassion with yourself, you'll find it's easier to bestow upon others.

- **Empathize first, respond second.** When someone says or does something with which we disagree (especially in online forums) our first reaction—spurred on by the strong emotions that accompany their perceived transgression—is often to call them out, and not always in polite terms. Instead, take a moment to put yourself in their shoes, and try to *feel* what they do. If you can understand their perspective, perhaps you won't feel as strongly as before.

- **Reserve judgment.** Nobody's perfect; we all make mistakes. It's easy to judge others, but a lot more difficult to show compassion. More often than not, people know when they've screwed up; by showing them compassion and understanding, you can help them heal.

- **Broaden your horizons.** Everyone you meet has a different set of life experiences, which has bestowed them with their unique worldview. Take the time to get to know people who are different from you: learn their challenges, their triumphs, and what's truly important to them.