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# What business leaders can learn from F-16 pilots

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Michelle Curran caught my attention straight away. ‘Mace’, as she is affectionately known, flies as lead solo F-16 pilot for the U.S. Air Force’s prestigious Air Demonstration Squadron. What’s so special about Mace? Well, the fact that she pulls 9Gs in her F-16 jet when most ordinary people, as you’ll see in the video that inspired this article, stop functioning at 7Gs. ‘*And what exactly does that have to do with leadership?*’ I hear you ask. Everything actually.

When I came across Destin Sandlin’s vlog of his flight in an F-16 jet, in which he interviews Curran, I was struck by her humble responses to his awestruck questions about pulling 9Gs. (I have time-clipped the 5-minute interview for you [here](#). Do watch until the end, there’s a beautiful reflection by Sandlin!)

As Sandlin learns during his flight: “*The limitation of the F-16 jet is the pilot inside*”. Isn’t that fascinating? The performance capability of the F-16 today is capped by the abilities and boundaries of the human body.

As I let that sink in, it dawned on me that the same holds true for organizations: the maximum collective performance of an organization is also capped by the

abilities of its leader. A leader’s values, beliefs, mindsets and leadership skills determine what an organization can (or cannot) achieve.

I know it is a radical and controversial statement. I can’t take credit for the revolutionary thinking, however. Organizational researchers such as [Richard Barrett](#) and [Frederic Laloux](#) have done a lot of research on the topic. They concluded that an organization cannot evolve beyond the level of consciousness of its leader (shown on the image below). This also means that the [culture](#) that manifests in an organization will have all the characteristics of the level of consciousness in which its leader operates most frequently.

# Seven Levels of Leadership



But back to Mace. What can business leaders learn from her in this interview that would benefit the performance of their organizations? Two things:

### 1. Humble confidence

Obviously, to do what she does, Mace has to be at the top of her game. Yet when Sandlin comments on her super-human abilities, she shrugs and answers matter-of-factly: ‘We train for it’. And you can see she means it. There’s no

false modesty in her answer. At the same time, you also sense a deep confidence in her own skills. A confidence that is not measured against, or at the expense of anyone else’s abilities. In this case, Destin Sandlin’s.

*Confidence without arrogance, humbleness without self-doubt - if we want to be truly great leaders, that’s what we should aspire to.*

## 2. Make ordinary people believe they can do extraordinary things

When Sandlin gushes over Mace's ability to pull 9Gs, she calmly responds by saying "Hey, you pulled 7.2Gs yourself today". Isn't that a beautiful thing to do? She clearly had no need to have her ego stroked, and instead gracefully returned the praise. Humble confidence, as Mace shows, empowers others.

Truly confident leaders don't chase the "I'm-such-a-great-guy" spotlight. They don't need their employees' praise or confirmation. Their sense of confidence is centered and deeply held within. It is built on years of working on themselves (Mace would call it 'training') and they understand that leadership is a lifelong journey of learning and evolving their own consciousness.

The point is this: confidence and humbleness can easily co-exist in us all. One requires that we embrace our strengths, the other that we are aware of our weaknesses and limitations.

Confidence without arrogance, humbleness without self-doubt and the courage to embrace both – if we want to be truly great leaders, that's what we should aspire to.



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### SABINE CLAPPAERT

People and Transformation

[Sabine.Clappaert@fticonsulting.com](mailto:Sabine.Clappaert@fticonsulting.com)