

Themes to Observe—Questions for Analysis and Discussion

The movie *October Sky* provides an excellent opportunity to observe and study how people actually apply some of the skills of leadership and team development that we've been talking about in Wood Badge. Pay particular attention to John Hickam and to his son Homer. They are both leaders, and the movie depicts some of their flaws as well as their strengths. Your challenge is to analyze what you observe. The questions below may help guide your thinking.

1. Consider people's visions, missions, and values and how they evolved and changed through the movie. The townspeople? Homer? The Rocket Boys? John Hickam Sr.? Who or what influenced the evolution of their visions? Missions? Values?
2. What are the dreams and aspirations of characters in the movie? What role do dreams play in people's lives? For those of us engaged in the study of leadership, what is the significance of people's dreams?
3. During the story the Rocket Boys move through various stages of team development. Identify scenes that portray the various stages.
 - Orientation ■ Resolution
 - Dissatisfaction ■ Production
4. How many characteristics of high-performing teams do the Rocket Boys exhibit?
 - P Purpose and Values
 - E Empowerment
 - R Relationships and Communication
 - F Flexibility
 - O Optimal Productivity
 - R Recognition and Appreciation
 - M Morale
5. What styles of situational leadership do you observe in Homer? In John Hickam Sr.?
 - Directing ■ Supporting
 - Coaching ■ Delegating
6. Consider the roles that careful listening and effective communication play in the story. Cite examples where these skills had a significant impact on the story.
7. Watch Miss Riley, the teacher, carefully. What impact does she have on Homer?
8. Consider the conflict between the father and son. Does it get resolved? If so, how?
9. Cite examples of people giving and receiving feedback. Is it accepted, or ignored? There are plenty of examples, including some from Homer's mother, one of which comes at a critical moment in the story.
10. Finally, as you watch this film, think about the leadership positions you have at home, those in Scouting as well as those beyond it. Reflect on all the things that have been discussed during this course thus far. Begin to connect the things you observe in the movie to the content of this course and to your leadership responsibilities at home.

Sometimes by observing traits in others, it is easier to improve traits in ourselves.

About the Movie

October Sky is an incredible, triumphant, true story about four boys in a poverty-stricken corner of Appalachia who are determined to build their own rocket and help get America back into the “space race.” It is told through the eyes of their leader, young Homer Hickam, who sees a speck of light in the sky (*Sputnik I*) and begins to dream. The movie tells of Homer’s efforts to build a team, enlist the support of others, acquire resources, and overcome challenges—all in pursuit of his vision.

It is 1957: Elvis Presley is the rage and the Soviets have stunned America with the successful launch of the *Sputnik* satellite. In Coalwood, West Virginia, like communities all across the country, townsfolk gather to watch a satellite race across the sky. Some are frightened, others disgusted. Most are unsure of what it is or what it means.

Life in Coalwood is about coal. All boys grow up to be coal miners and Homer Hickam has no reason to think he’ll be any different. Even the public school furnishes no other vision beyond the town’s coal mine. Too small to earn a football scholarship, Homer has no way out of his predetermined life—until that little Soviet satellite flies through the October sky and changes everything. As Homer watches the satellite that evening, he has a life-changing experience and his world heads in a new direction—up. “I’m gonna build a rocket—like *Sputnik*,” he says the next morning.

Though his father is superintendent of the mine and has no greater wish than to see his sons follow in his footsteps, Homer embarks on a mission to build and launch his own homemade rockets with the help of a loyal band of friends. Though their frequent mistakes nearly defeat them, the boys’ successes eventually inspire the whole town to believe that miracles can happen, even in Coalwood.

Each boy brings to the task his own personality, skills, and flaws. Homer isn’t a math whiz, but Quentin is. He isn’t a scavenger, either, but Odell knows about that. Roy Lee is the Elvis of them all—he can seduce what he needs from just about anyone. Homer brings hope and passion to the team. Like most good leaders, he brings “fire” to the project and forces the boys to keep at it, at times even when they’re not willing—he makes them willing.

One of the first people to encourage the boys is their teacher, Miss Riley. Everywhere Homer turns there are extraordinary obstacles. What he wants to do with rockets isn’t being done; model rocketry doesn’t exist yet. To Miss Riley the fact that Homer even aspires to do these things is pretty amazing. She helps the boys see the power of dreams, belief, and determination. “Sometimes you really can’t listen to what anybody else says, you just got to listen inside,” she tells Homer.

People respond to this film because it touches so many common feelings and dreams that we all share. Most of us have dreams we would like to see fulfilled. Can they be? This film says yes!

Homer sums it up: “I’ve come to believe that I’ve got it in me to be somebody in this world!”

But Homer isn’t the only leader in the story. As superintendent of the mine, Homer’s dad, John Hickam, is a pretty impressive fellow and a central figure in town. He loves the mine. He once worked seven years without a day off. He fights for his men and rescues them from disaster. The mine is the whole reason for the town. There was no Coalwood before they found coal there and then built the town around the mine. The mine is John’s life, and he would love for Homer and his brother to grow up to be mine supervisors, just like him. When John takes Homer down in the mine for his son’s first day on the job, his voice glows with poetry: “I know the mine like I know a man. I was born for this.”

John Hickam isn’t a bad man and he sincerely loves his son, but rockets don’t fit into his view of life. He doesn’t understand much about rockets, thinks they’re silly, and believes Homer is wasting his energy. He throws one of Homer’s rockets in the trash. The essence of this classic conflict between father and son is that they each have the same passion in them, but for different things. The conflict tends to strengthen Homer’s resolve to reach for the stars. The strong emotional anger between Homer and his dad is equal to the mutual love and respect they secretly have for each other, deep down inside. The conflict builds throughout the movie, though the dramatic outcome is never in doubt.

To better understand and appreciate coal-mine work, director Johnston takes us underground with the miners, where coal dust coats the lungs and frequent cave-ins threaten to end lives. The miners live in a world of constant claustrophobic darkness, helping us to better appreciate Homer's desire to soar free of restrictions into the bright sky and, he believes, a better future than Coalwood.

October Sky isn't so much about escaping one's background or overcoming a conflict with one's father, nor is it about being a teenager trying to figure out who you are and how you fit into the world. It is about finding one's own voice and skills and passion—and realizing one's own potential.

About the “Real” Rocket Boys and Others in the Story

All of the Rocket Boys went on to graduate from college, something not likely in pre-*Sputnik* West Virginia. Roy Lee worked his way through college, became a banker, and traveled the world. After serving in the Air Force and graduating from college, Odell went into insurance and farming. Quentin became an engineer and now lives in Amarillo, Texas. Homer became a NASA manager at Marshall Space Flight Center, Werner von Braun's old headquarters.

Homer's brother, Jim Hickam, became a high school teacher and head football coach in Roanoke, Virginia. Elsie Hickam went after her dream and moved to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

Miss Riley ranked first in the high school graduating class in Coalwood in 1955 and first in her class at Concord College in 1959. She returned to Coalwood and taught for 10 years before her death in 1969. “As a teacher, Miss Riley impressed and inspired her students . . . The greatest tribute that we can give is to emulate the principles by which she lived: a deep faith in God, the courage to face difficulties, a sincere concern for others, the unselfish quality to give of herself, a respect for knowledge, and the desire for excellence.”—The Big Creek High School yearbook, 1970

Homer's father stayed in the mines until he retired at age 65, and continued as a mine consultant for several years after that. In 1989 he died of suffocation caused by “black lung” disease from his many years in the mines.

About the Author

Homer Hadley Hickam Jr. was born on February 19, 1943, in Coalwood, West Virginia. He graduated from Big Creek High School in 1960 and from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech) in 1964 with a B.S. in industrial engineering. A U.S. Army veteran, Hickam served in Vietnam from 1967 to 1968 for which he was awarded the Army Commendation and Bronze Star medals. He served six years on active duty and left the service with the rank of captain. For 10 years he was employed as an engineer for the U.S. Army Missile Command. He began employment with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) at Marshall Space Flight Center in 1981 as an aerospace engineer.

During his long NASA career, Mr. Hickam worked in propulsion, spacecraft design, and crew training. His specialties included training astronauts on science payloads and extravehicular activities (EVA). He trained crews for many Spacelab and space shuttle missions, including the Hubble Space Telescope deployment mission and the first two Hubble repair missions, to name just a few. He retired in February 1998.

Mr. Hickam published his first book, a military history bestseller called *Torpedo Junction*, in 1989. His second book, *Rocket Boys*, was published by Delacorte in 1998. The paperback version of the book was No. 1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list for three weeks and stayed on the list for 16 weeks. It has been translated into eight languages and also has been released as an audio and an electronic book.

Rocket Boys was selected by *The New York Times* as one of its Great Books of 1998 and also was nominated by the National Book Critics Circle as Best Biography for that year. Since *Rocket Boys*, Mr. Hickam published *Back to the Moon* in 1999 and *The Coalwood Way* in 2000. He plans to write at least one more book about Coalwood.

Homer Hickam is married to Linda Terry Hickam, a jewelry designer, photographer, and his first editor and critic. They have four cats and live in Huntsville, Alabama—“Rocket City,” USA.