

Use of a Mentor to Enhance Professionalism in the Air Force

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The Question

Why not a mentor? No, not a sponsor program that we all subliminally suspect is operating. No, not a new revision of a “Golden Ladder,” “Green Square,” or “Blue Sky” program that could be an administrative nightmare for guiding officer effectiveness reports toward high-level endorsements. Such programs tend to reward merely the selected few and alienate the many. A mentor program could develop as a new approach to combating the junior officers’ growing perception of senior officer indifference and erosion of professionalism. This concept would simply and straightforwardly involve senior officers in providing genuine personal guidance for junior officers.

This paper does not advocate a sponsor program. A sponsor by my definition is a patron who promotes and shapes the careers of favored protégés. A mentor, on the other hand, must be an individual whose exemplary behavior, personal style, and specific attributes would be attractive to and emulated by others—particularly subordinates. A senior officer must provide the junior officers with a role model—perhaps several models—to copy. A mentor, as this proposal suggests, must share experiences, values, and outlooks for the future, and induce mentees willingly and voluntarily to seek advice and counsel.¹

Senior officers must consider a whole new personal relationship outside the official, regulation-bound framework within which we operate today. An evident, sincere personal concern for subordinates is a giant asset which has not been effectively integrated into senior leadership styles in recent

years. Senior officers must actively seek opportunities to develop subordinates in the ways of “officership.”

Many times during a career, an Air Force officer will hear friends remark that they fail to understand why they missed promotion. It occurs more times than many in the armed services care to admit. Certainly, this problem is occurring so frequently that we might question what supervisors are doing to assist subordinates toward an opportune career path.

There seems to be a perception of lessening professional concern by the senior officers in developing the junior officer corps. A recent Air Force-wide personnel survey pointed out a significant portion of the responding officers claimed their supervisors never, or at best seldom, gave them any feedback on their job performance; aided them in goals setting; or provided any type of recognition.² Why is there such a lack of personal and professional concern? Does the present-day environment compound this lack of leadership response?³ What can senior officers do to demonstrate genuine concern for the professional development of junior officers?

The Professional Environment

We all know there have been external pressures on Congress to keep defense spending down.⁴ This setting has had a severe internal consequence. A changing internal organizational environment was first identified by Charles Moskos, an evolution from professionalism to occupationalism. These pressures are being driven internally deeper where superiors must deal with the decreasing financial rewards and resources. The supervisors are expected to accomplish the same tasks at their historically expected high performance levels. All grades, officer and enlisted, must deal with this decreasing resource problem in accomplishing their jobs. The officer is challenged in supervising the enlisted force whose personal financial reward is shrinking proportionally, even more rapidly. The financial pressure does not stop on the job. At home the officer’s increasing family needs must be met with a decreasingly valued dollar. The externally generated pressures impact on the officer and his perception of the profession.

The military environment may have a “generation gap” problem much like that found throughout most of our society.⁵ Morris Janowitz and Charles Moskos, in a recent article on the all-volunteer force, point out that the demographic shift of officer recruitment sources (more minorities and females from different geographic areas) has the effect of

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generating a junior officer's definition of military professionalism that differs significantly from that of senior officers. The authors also point out that this is an internal political reality and sense that, through the difference in value systems, turmoil and professional uncertainty may pervade the officer corps.⁶

A significant internal pressure disrupter for the Air Force has been the highly competitive officer effectiveness reporting system with its peer-conflict and force-rating methods. For several years senior officers had to openly choose and rank-order subordinates. The harsh realities of a "Satisfactory 3" rating rather than a "Top Block 1" ranking were more than many officers' ego could accept. The perceived reduction in promotional potential caused many junior officers to reconsider earlier professional decisions and exit at the first opportunity. The alarming loss of young rated officers focused attention on the subject and may have caused the return to a less volatile system. The internal strife caused by the former system scarred the sense of community in such a way that the officer corps ills may be slow to heal.

Personal discussions and the review of several periodical articles seem to indicate a growing storm over the lack of concern senior officers demonstrate in their managerial or leadership styles. Subordinates are expressing their "perceived" erosion of benefits issue as evidence of that lessening senior officer professional concern. In all good conscience, the Air Force seems to be trying to combat these internal pressures with management techniques like management by objectives (MBO) and job enrichment (JE). However, the personnel surveys still indicate a growing loss of the personal, one-on-one contact and rapport of supervisors with subordinates—a declining professional involvement with one another.⁷

We must face facts! The growing situation which has been creating increased junior officer losses is finally here! It is signaling a need for increased professional involvement and appropriate role models. Senior leaders must provide guidance to the junior officer in dealing with his work environment, developing his officership skills, and achieving success in the military profession.⁸ The place to *start* this skill building is with our junior officers—we must sincerely show interest and lead them along the path of professionalism.

A Message

Professor Charles Moskos drew attention to the changing demographic nature of the officer corps (more minority and female) which will have a significant impact on the professionalism of young officers.⁹ It is more important than ever that the senior officers recognize the need to become personally interested in developing their successors. This outreach must be both sincere and an openly apparent effort. The senior officer must be fully aware of the professional bond that should exist between him and his subordinates. This relationship should probably center on two themes: first, a personal basis for the junior officer that may be guided toward the

most satisfying professional paths; second, a mentor-mentee pattern wherein the senior officer illustrates by means of his own career experiences that the military is less an occupation than a special trust or duty undertaken in the national interest—and that it will involve personal sacrifice.

The Air Force Manpower and Personnel Center for years has provided a superb career development package to the field.¹⁰ Numerous major commands likewise have instituted supplemental career development programs for the bases to activate. These efforts should be applauded. However, they are only administrative procedures. They need the human commitment to breathe life into them. The key to success in these programs appears to be a dual approach including personal involvement by senior officers and role model identification by the junior officers. In reality, implementation has been far short of the program's vision.

The mentor proposal is gathering increasing endorsement in the civilian community. A recent *Business Horizons* article reported the views of top corporate executives. It pointed out that seasoned business leaders felt that knowing the rules of their chosen profession was the most important element in upward mobility.¹¹ It is this same key concept, knowing the rules, that a mentor relationship can achieve. Mentors should teach the rules and proper attitudes for a professional officer career force. This concept is not taught to college students—not even in graduate schools—it is learned on the job.¹² The mentor can enhance and accelerate this learning experience.¹³ By following the suggested themes, the mentor can help establish and develop a young officer's professional reputation—both in his career field and throughout the service.

Special roles the mentor can fulfill are acting as an advisor, providing professional guidance and seasoned advice, and thus, facilitating upward mobility for the most promising officers.¹⁴

Who Can Be a Mentor?

A mentor must be a visibly successful senior officer, wise in the workings of Air Force career progression. He must be in a personally nonthreatening portion of the command structure, and, most certainly, not in the evaluation trail of the young officer. Optimally, he should be at least two grades above the mentee. At the typical Air Force bases, there are several people who would qualify for this mentor role. For instance, the assistant director of operations, the deputy base commander or the vice wing commander are all likely candidates for the role. Most importantly, the individual must have a willing personality and a visible, genuine interest in the junior officer. Each mentor should be able to advise three or four potentially career-oriented officers at a time.¹⁵

When Is a Mentor Relationship Established?

A mentor relationship can be established at any time in a person's career. It should occur at the start of a junior offi-

cer's career, but it could also be used to reduce midcareer stress.¹⁶ A mutual need or motivation creates the mentor relationship. Since we are concerned with enhancing the professional growth of the officer corps, it most appropriately should begin at the three- or four-year-service junior officer career point. The senior officer can begin an informal search for junior officers who demonstrate potential on their job and have a favorable attitude toward a possible Air Force career. Most certainly, the relationship should be initiated before the three- to four-year point when junior officers tend to begin their career decision process. The relationship could be maintained throughout all grades, supporting each of the significant career decision points; for example, selection for a regular commission. This would seem to be the most critical path for an individual's career planning, professional growth, and personal development.

A word of caution to senior officers needs to be emphasized at this point. There is a fundamental difference between fostering the professional development of a junior officer and the nurturing of his careerism. Professional development includes personal acceptance of a high standard of values and a proper code of ethics. Professionalism requires that an officer place the good of the service before self. Careerism, on the other hand, is to benefit one's self at the expense of the service. Careerism's focus is on advancing one's self by whatever set of values necessary to advance in grade. Senior officers should give these definitions serious consideration before establishing a mentor-mentee relationship.¹⁷

In support of this recommendation for early identification, a current survey of top executives by an international management consulting firm found that the younger the executive was identified, the more likely he would accept a mentor, and, more important, the closer he would grow professionally with his company. Also, those who had mentors were more likely to act as mentors themselves and help future young executives grow professionally within the firm. In surveying today's young executives, the researchers found a strong indication that these executives were more aggressively seeking out mentors from whose experience they could benefit.¹⁸

No Administrative Quagmire

To be successful, the mentor-mentee relationship should not be burdened with any formal administrative procedures, boards, or formal selection processes.¹⁹ In one company which does foster young executives, the system is very informal; the chief executive officer explained that there was no systematic method of selecting candidates for their professional development program. He said, "I try to ask as I go around who the 'comers' are and kind of watch them for a while, we get a feel if they have potential."²⁰

The relationship should be established by mutual agreement—mentor and mentee. The first step should be taken by the mentor, since he needs to demonstrate his interest and concern. A social setting of mutual choice that would permit

informal one-on-one discussions, and a meeting, after duty hours, should be provided the desired relaxed atmosphere.

Discussion Roadmap

The mentor must first prepare himself for the discussions that are to take place. Primarily, he needs to review his own career and map out what has happened in his own career trail. Before he counsels a young officer, the mentor must have firmly established in his own mind the reasons for his success and the direction in which he is professionally headed.²¹

During the introductory phase, the mentor needs to explain the trends in the Air Force and its implications for the junior officer's professional future, and to encourage him to read and to study his professional environment.²² The mentor must take a mental inventory of the young officer's assignments and experiences to date. Then he must openly make an assessment of the officer's performances and potential for future growth. At the very least the mentor should explain his open accessibility and active personal interest.

As the relationship develops and is maintained, the senior officer may become aware of the need to educate and further equip himself to counsel the junior officer. The mentor may discover that his values are not similar with those of the young officer. There are several books and articles available for bridging this "generation gap" phenomenon.²³

A cornerstone theme during this phase of the counseling should be the encouragement of junior officers to develop a well-rounded, whole-man approach to his career. Professional growth must rest on a spiritual basis, a strength upon which he can draw during times of stress and anxiety, and a guarantee of integrity in personal dealings.²⁴ The officer must be encouraged continuously to challenge himself intellectually and to develop personal growth capabilities through self-education—both on and off duty. These individual pursuits will serve him well in achieving promotion and in developing his capability to adapt to a changing environment. The on-duty effort should entail studying applicable directives and programs and/or taking advantage of formal school training opportunities. The Air Force Institute of Technology or an individual off-duty educational objective should be attempted as opportunity permits. The young officer may need encouragement to "create his own opportunity" by examining his work schedule for openings to pursue such objectives.

Much has been written about the unique pressures placed on military families. The frequent moves, family separations, and exposure to harm all add to the normal family pressures. With rising inflation and declining value of the federal employee's pay, the young officer must be encouraged to handle financial affairs thoughtfully. He must learn to balance his income with expenditures, save money, and make wise investments. Doing so will ease much of the burden and stress caused by some of the unusual aspects of the military profession and provide for the future. The officer's attention can then be directed to his professional growth.

Personal appearance in the military, just as in civilian life, is paramount. People make many of their evaluations from the image an officer presents. Professionally, an officer is responsible for maintaining his physique and health through a lifelong diet and exercise routine. Additionally, this objective should enable him physically to endure the stress of increasingly responsible tasks in later life or career. Most senior managers in the military place significant emphasis on the member's physical image and personal appearance; it would be wise to follow the intent and spirit of these guiding directives for a military career-oriented individual.

Professional military education should be a paramount goal of every ambitious junior officer. The mentor needs to point out the benefits these schools provide, how they will broaden his horizons, and the opportunities he will have to meet and build rapport with peers. These advantages enable the young officer to cultivate future career opportunities. Additionally, professional military education will better equip an individual to deal with a wide variety of assignments as his career progresses.²⁵

Most of these counseling objectives are supported by a number of studies. One such reference is an article entitled, "What Makes A Successful Chief Executive" by Herbert T. Mines in *Supervisory Management*. He proposed the following guidelines:

1. A singleness of purpose, ultimate goal clearly identified.
2. A consistent record of high achievement.
3. A willingness to devote enormous time and energy to obtain the goals.
4. A happy, stable home life: wives as career-supportive.²⁶

The development and personal guidance phase is extremely important at the early part of the mentor relationship. It is here that the mentor provides the all-important assistance of setting realistic career targets and helps to point the mentee towards the planning and developing of the necessary action plans to accomplish these personal goals.²⁷

We should now turn our attention to the maintenance effort of the mentor relationship. This stage is dependent upon an understanding of the young officer's objectives, a time-phased plan of action that is couched in a sort of mutual understanding. It need not be in writing, but if you feel the need for something in written form, Air Force Regulation 36-23, *Officer Career Development*, provides a superb career roadmap which could be modified on a personalized basis. The regulation does relieve the mentor of much of his administrative work and affords the junior officer a clearly presented set of future objectives.²⁸ The junior officer should be encouraged to review his plan at least annually. This review will enable him to evaluate the progress made, look for needed increased emphasis, and take advantage of any newly created opportunities.

Any viable management information system requires a feedback loop. The mentor relationship is no different, except that it involves tremendously long leadtimes. To

accomplish the objectives of this proposal, the mentor-mentee personal contact relationship should continue as long as possible. In the military it will most probably terminate within a couple of years, usually with the reassignment of one of the participants. But, the role of mentor need not cease. The senior officer has the responsibility to maintain continual contact with his mentee through letters or by telephone. This relationship must be maintained as long as it is mutually desired.

A Charge to Senior Officers

The Air Force must reverse the trend of high junior officer losses. If allowed to continue, it could have a disastrous effect on the Air Force and its contribution to our national security. Senior Air Force management can directly affect this trend by demonstrating concern for junior officers through personal contact and individual discussions. It may require more personal contact with a junior officer than you may now want, expect, or have experienced. There are a number of new and budding mentor programs in the civilian sector which can attract our junior officers. This fact alone is compelling evidence that professionalism and proper career growth through the mentor technique have made significant contributions to employee morale, motivation, and loyalty.

Actions now may eliminate frustrations and complaints of junior officers, especially those not yet committed, motivated, or challenged. Your efforts must be to rebuild some of our lost comradery.

There is an old adage that is especially applicable here, "Try it—you'll like it."

In any case, remember that the efforts you make from this point in time as a mentor may establish an avenue that transforms a young officer from mentee to colleague.

Notes

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