

Inspiring Innovation in the USAF
A Company Grade Officers' Perspectives

Joshua Bower

Michael Gaspar

Adam Hillier

Daniel Hixon

Antoine Munfakh

Stephen Redmond

Skyler Smith

Ellen Williams

Squadron Officer School Class 14A
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Introduction

In January 2013, Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) General Mark Welsh released an updated vision for the Air Force: “The World’s Greatest Air Force -- Powered by Airmen, Fueled by Innovation.” In September 2013, General Welsh spoke at an Air Force Association Air and Space conference in National Harbor, Maryland with a similar message to airmen, “If it doesn’t make common sense, if it doesn’t make the mission better, if it doesn’t take better care of our people, then just don’t do it and tell your boss you’re done.” There is no question that United States Air Force (USAF) leadership needs a focused vector of innovative thought at all levels, but how do words meet action? The problem is the Air Force has a risk-averse organizational culture, the system lacks space and incentives for innovative thought, and executes within a vertical organizational structure.¹ This paper provides a Company Grade Officer’s (CGO) perspective on issues limiting innovation and how the USAF can leverage human capital to maximize innovation while overcoming shrinking resources.

Scope

The USAF currently operates and maintains two programs that reference innovative thinking: Air Force Smart Operations for the 21st Century (AFSO21) and the Innovative Development through Employee Awareness (IDEA) program. AFSO21 aims towards continuous process improvement by maximizing value and minimizing waste. By nature, an AFSO21 initiative is reactive and must prove a certain amount of failure or waste to warrant an AFSO21

¹ Jitinder Kohli, “Open Sources, Open Minds Can Bring Government Innovation,” *Center for American Progress*, 2011, http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/01/pdf/atw_kohli_innovation.pdf (accessed 12 November 2013), 2.

assessment.² The IDEA program provides a monetary incentive to promote process improvement and/or operating efficiency through ideas submitted by military or civilian employee³.

AFSO21 and the IDEA program are proven successful programs that create innovative ideas but have not created the culture change that is needed to answer the call USAF leadership call to innovation. Major John Hart from Squadron Officer College defines innovation as “...the application of critical thinking to fundamentally enhance or improve a strategy, process or product”. This paper will address solutions that contribute to a culture change towards appraising, rewarding, and fostering critical thinking at all levels.

Three Reasons for Innovation

The Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG) of 2012 released Presidential strategic guidance for resource allocation and mission focus towards building a joint force in 2020. The USAF 2013 Posture Statement details USAF resource and mission intent for 2013-2014 and emphasizes expected effects of sequestration, which cut around \$10 billion in FY13.⁴ With this guidance in mind, the Air Force needs to prioritize a culture of innovative thought for three reasons:

1. The USAF wants to prepare for a 2020 joint force, then we need 21st century or 5th generation processes (reference figure 1).⁵
2. It is impossible to “do more with less” by spending money on problems at current budget levels. The Department of Defense (DoD) budget is estimated to be reduced by

² AFSO21 Homepage, Air Combat Command, <http://www.acc.af.mil/afso21.asp>. (accessed 11 Nov 2013).

³ AFI38-401, *The Air Force IDEA Program*, 27 November 2007.

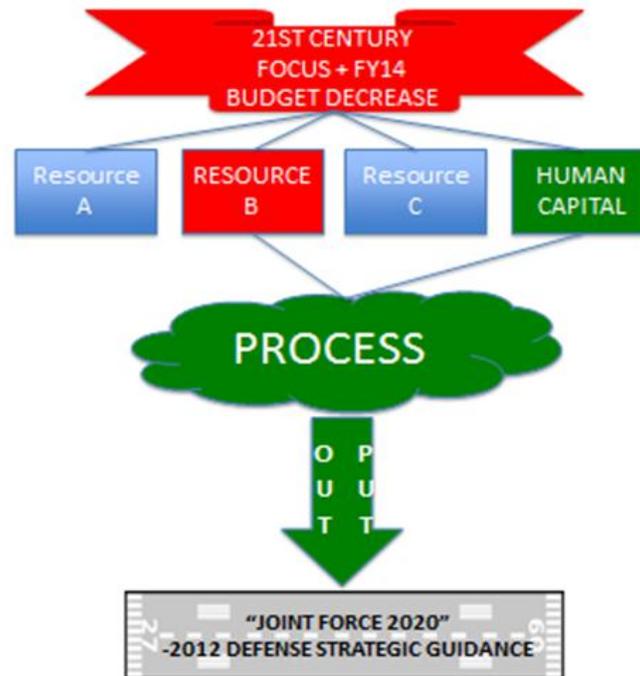
⁴ Department of the Air Force, USAF Posture Statement 2013, Presentation to the Committee on Armed Services (Washington, DC: United States House of Representatives, April 2013), 3.

⁵ Congressional Research Service, *In Brief: Assessing the January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG)*. (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 2013), 2.

\$487 billion over 10 years.⁶ If monetary value for resources, programs, and processes decrease, one can also assess that combat capability will also decrease (reference figure 1). The part of this system leadership can affect regardless of resources is the Airmen, or human capital, where innovation will circumvent this logical reduction in combat capability (reference figure 1).

3. Words alone are not enough to generate a culture of motivated Airmen who want to innovate. In the military failure is associated with questioning of ability. Innovative thinking is synonymous with risk tasking.⁷ Current incentives vector operations in a proven, safe method even if more efficient practices are identified.⁸

Figure 1: Leveraging Human Capital⁹



⁶ Congressional Research Service, *In Brief: Assessing the January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (DSG)*, 1.

⁷ Kohli Jitinder. "Open Sources, Open Minds Can Bring Government Innovation." 2

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Stephen Redmond, *Leveraging Human Capital*, Microsoft Powerpoint, November 2013.

Solution 1: The Human Resource Management Solution

Each service branch in the DoD has its own “flavor” of managing its people, but Tim Kane describes it best when he says “the military’s problem is the deeply anti-entrepreneurial structure...from officer evaluations to promotions to job assignments, all branches of the military operate more like a government bureaucracy with a unionized workforce than a cutting-edge meritocracy.”¹⁰ Further, Yingling’s bold criticism of the Iraq insurgency blames a failure of Generalship, specifically suggesting it is “unreasonable to expect that an officer who spends 25 years conforming to institutional expectations will emerge as an innovator in his late forties.”¹¹

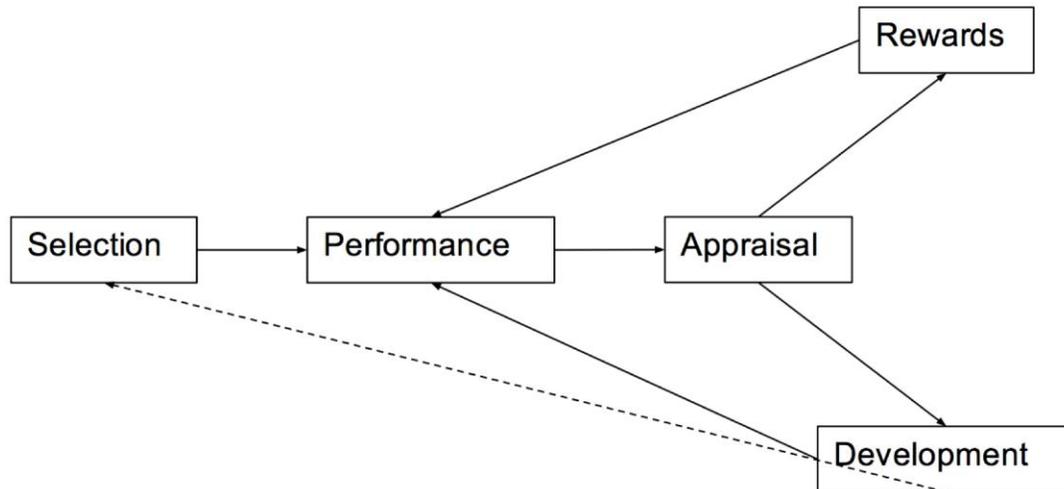
Resource Based Views (RBV) has become the leading framework in Human Resource Management and describes that for organizations to achieve sustained competitive advantage they must make physical capital, human capital, and organizational capital valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (reference figure 2).¹² Innovators are the rare, valuable and inimitable assets the USAF must keep to prepare us for 2020 and beyond. Through Strategic Human Resource Management practices the USAF force can select future and current innovators with a new appraisal process and then reward members through open market job selection **(figure 2)**.

¹⁰ Tim Kane, “Why Our Best Officers Are Leaving,” *The Atlantic*, Jan 2011.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/01/why-our-best-officers-are-leaving/308346/3/>

¹¹ Paul Yingling, A Failure in Generalship. *Armed Forces Journal*, May 2007,
<http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/05/2635198>

¹² Cathrine Truss, Dave Mankin, and Claire Kelliher, *Strategic Human Resource Management* (Oxford University Press 2012), 104-107

Figure 2. The Human Resource Cycle



Source: Devanna, Fombrun and Tichy, 1984, p.41.

Appraisal

A valid and transparent appraisal process is necessary to properly identify those that are performing in the areas USAF leaders desire (to include innovation) and those who are not.¹³ A new evaluation system will enable leaders to decide on important values and encourage risk taking. Goal-setting, alignment of organizational and individual goals (to include innovation), self-assessment, 360° reviews, ranking against peers, competency, teamwork, and development planning should all be considered in evaluation systems¹⁴ and they should reflect the strategy and structures of the organization.¹⁵ Currently, only those who gain a stratification are ranked against peers and the areas judged are up to the rater. Having only a small portion recognized

¹³ Devanna, Fombrun, and Tichy, 1984, 47

¹⁴ Evan M. Berman, James S. Bowman, Jonathan P. West, and Montgomery R. Van War, Appraisal: A Process in Search of a Technique. *Human Resource Management in Public Service*, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010) 395. Bersin (2007) describes desired attributes of an evaluation system.

¹⁵ Devanna, Fombrun and Tichy, 1984, 36-37

(stratified) falls directly in conflict with many human resource theories.¹⁶ In the up-or-out system the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980 (DOPMA) creates, officers do what they perceive it takes to get promoted. Since particular areas, like goal-setting and innovation, are not specifically and quantitatively judged members are often times left checking boxes, to include holding the right jobs in a particular order, going to Professional Military Education (PME) on time, earning Distinguished Graduate at the schools, and working towards advanced degrees.

Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) of 1980 was designed to advance the talent and weed out the weak; however, due to the up-or-out promotion system based entirely on seniority, percent allowed to promote, and key assignment landmarks, the DOPMA promotion opportunity forces all officers to have similar experiences and paths before they advance to Squadron Command and high ranks.¹⁷ As RAND recommended over two decades ago, DOPMA cannot meet its stated objectives¹⁸ and the USAF should advocate for more flexibility to manage its personnel. If legislative change is unavailable it is even more imperative to leverage human capital through appraisal and reward measures.

The lack of performance as a discriminator and inflation in the current enlisted evaluation system has been acknowledge by Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Cody and is currently being overhauled.¹⁹ The officer evaluation system, AF Form 707 (OPR), should also be

¹⁶ Truss, Mankin and Kelliher, 2012, 142-149. Theories included are social exchange theory; ability, motivation and opportunity (AMO) theory; job performance theory; and human capital theory.

¹⁷ Bernard D. Rostker *et al.* "The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980: A Retrospective Assessment" (RAND Corporation, 1992), www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R4246.html. 12

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 70

¹⁹ Losey, Stephen. "Cody: EPR overhaul will fix 'inflated system'." *AirForceTimes*, September 18, 2013. <http://www.airforcetimes.com/article/20130918/NEWS/309180031/Cody-EPR-overhaul-will-fix-inflated-system-> (accessed November 10, 2013).

overhauled with a goal-setting system and quantified traits to include leadership, innovation, teamwork, and other decided values in a system that insures scarcity.

A big step towards correction would be implementing scarcity into the one-to-five rating scale currently used. The rating system as seen on the Air Force Form 910 (EPR) demands an assessment of averages, which is a quantifiable requirement; however, raters do not have the supervisorial means to compare their subordinate's performance to that of her/his peers AF wide. And this prevents raters from making any type of quantifiable measurement. With this type of inflation, it is not only impossible to reward innovation, but it is impossible to reward anything at all.

Two options to ensure scarcity are limiting the points per unit or to publish the raters average to allow comparison, similar to the Navy system.²⁰ Just as the EPR overhaul is planning for an inflation solution through scarcity, so should the OPR during its overhaul. Innovation must be one of the graded traits in both evaluations if leadership wants to incentivize innovation.

First, we recommend aligning both the EPR and OPR under a similar flexible model. Currently, the EPR limits flexibility by defining specific categories of evaluation focus, which are further limited by a specified required number of bullets. The OPR, on the other hand, allows for more flexibility of focus that allows the rater to cover variety of performance factors. In contrast to the OPR, the EPR requires the Airman to conform to a prescribed image, which may or may not reflect the needs of the Air Force at any given time. Fitting into the box is inherently contradictory to the concept of innovation.

Aligning both the enlisted and officer evaluation toward a system that allows for more flexibility in evaluation focus is not necessarily sufficient to encourage a more innovative force.

²⁰ David Blair, "Integrity First the Logos: Realistic Expectations & Telling the Truth on Performance Reports." (Unpublished master, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2011), 5

To this end, we are proposing an individually developed goal-based evaluation plan. The current system is inherently reactive in nature. At the end of the rating period, Airmen ask what they have done over the last year. A better approach would be to consider what they will do in the upcoming year. In this context, Airmen would be given the opportunity to establish what they will work towards during the rating period. Some Airmen will naturally revert to the status quo of primary and additional duties, training requirements, teamwork and followership, among other things. Those Airmen will prosper under this system as long as they are also focusing on the excellence that is expected of all Airmen. The advantage of this system is that it also allows the innovators to break free from the status quo to innovate. By asking an innovative Airman what he/she wants to do, the system will open a great door to opportunity and encourage a culture that is capable of stepping outside of the status quo.

The key to this system is high quality mentorship of supervisors at the beginning of the rating cycle. Such mentorship will align the individual's goals with those of the Air Force. This mentorship will have to be focused on the goals that are developed to ensure that they are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and tangible (SMART).²¹ Not only this, but supervisors will also have to be sure that their subordinates are considering the specific milestones that are necessary to realize job proficiency such as those that are associated with job qualification standards (JQSs) or Career Field Education and Training Plans (CFETPs). This evaluation program is not meant to underemphasize the importance of these types of requirements. Even the most innovative Airman will have to figuratively check those boxes while pursuing other goals that are less standard. The rater's mentorship will be the key to aligning both the individual's and the Air Force's needs.

²¹ Top Achievement, "Creating S.M.A.R.T. Goals." <http://www.topachievement.com> (accessed November 12, 2013).

In addition to the initial establishment of the goals, raters will also be required to revisit the determined goals at midterm. The intent of this midterm feedback is not only designed to provide the subordinate with the necessary feedback to align her/his performance with the rater's expectations, but to provide them both with an opportunity to review goals and determine if any shifting might be required. This might include the removal of goals, editing of goals, or adding of new goals. Upon completion of the mid-term feedback, the Airman would be prepared to continue to pursue those goals through the end of the rating period, at which time the rater would complete the evaluation.

During evaluation, the rater will review how well the Airman accomplished her/his goals, but the rater will need a better means to express the performance than the current system offers. The current bullet writing method represents a unique barrier that is problematic for this goal-based system and ultimately for documenting efforts to innovate. The biggest problem is that the current system relies on the action, result, impact method of writing to be effective. Air Force raters are taught to capture action, result, impact, and the impact must incorporate a positive quantitative figure expressing such things as money saved or percentages improved. Innovation requires risk-taking and sometimes ends in failure. The action, result, impact method may work well when the product of innovation is success, but it is not conducive to expressing excellence despite an outcome of limited or no impact. If we are unable to provide positive performance reports in these cases of innovative risk-taking, Airmen may be discouraged from taking the risk in the first place. And if they do take the risk and fail, raters may be inclined not to document a great effort and quality attempt at innovation because they are unable to document a qualitative impact. We want to be in a position where we can document an Airman's risk even in those situations where the outcome is less than favorable.

In order to further encourage the ability to evaluate performance including excellence in the face of failure, the system must allow for a better means to communicate than currently offered. The current method of bullet writing prioritizes brevity while sacrificing the ability to be direct and clear. As David Blair has argued, the evaluation process requires the application of linguistic encoding, and this necessitates a tremendous amount of interpretation and avoids the opportunity to provide a meaningful assessment.²² This is not to suggest that brevity is a bad thing, in fact, brevity should be a goal of any good evaluation system as it corresponds well with being direct, clear, and concise. The encoding that Blair mentions arises out of the action, result, impact format that is limited to one line and a total of 99 characters (including possible spaces). Such limits may be conducive to listing quantifiable success impacts, but it is not conducive to assessing other positive outcomes.²³

Under the goal-based evaluation system, the raters will address performance in relation to each of the specific goals in a direct and clear fashion. During the entire rating period, the rater should take notes on her/his subordinate's efforts in pursuit of the defined goals, noting the five W's (who, what, where, when, why, and how). This will be the basis for a direct, clear, and concise description of subordinate's performance towards a specific goal. Again, the evaluation should be brief, but a quality assessment cannot be limited to one line. This allows for the flexibility to note both what went well and what did not. Additionally, it is in this context we can reward the risks incurred by our innovators even when they fail. Our innovators will be enabled to take those risks knowing that they are unlikely to receive negative feedback because the action did not produce any quantitative impact or no feedback at all.

²² David Blair, "Integrity First the Logos: Realistic Expectations & Telling the Truth on Performance Reports." (Unpublished master, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2008), 3-4.

²²

²³ Ibid

In addition to the feedback focused on the specific goals, the rater will also provide analysis of performance of all the goals as a whole. Again brevity will be valued in this section and the bullet format will be prohibited, but there will be no prescribed word count requirement. The remarks section will be subdivided to include a focus on the individual's strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations. Arguably, the weaknesses and recommendations sections will be the most important components of the evaluation. Weaknesses and recommendations are essential to any quality performance evaluation as they provide the subordinate with a foundation of focus areas for the following year's performance report. Ideally, the subordinate will develop, with the guidance and mentorship of their supervisor, the next set of goals based on this valuable feedback in order to realize improvement. This type of assessment will also provide promotion boards with an identifiable record of personal and professional growth, motivation, self-direction, and innovation among other leadership qualities valued by the Air Force.

Finally, the evaluation will close out with inputs from the additional rater. The biggest change will be a movement from the current practice of saving the best bullets for their section as this proposed evaluation program moves away from the heavy emphasis on the action, result, impact concept. Instead the reviewer can provide inputs that reflect information that typically associated with the current concept of the push-line. This will allow the reviewer to include supplementary information such as stratifications, awards won, future duty assignments and development, and specific areas of excellence.

A revised Air Force evaluation system can be a great format to promote and encourage the further development of innovation in the Air Force. Among the many barriers to innovation that the evaluation system can overcome includes a culture that rewards the status quo, a culture that discourages risk-taking, and lacks rewards for innovation. This is done through introducing

scarcity to desired traits on a one-to-five rating system, allowing for flexibility in determining the focus of the evaluation, and moving the system towards a goal-based approach. The goal-based concept also provides opportunity for risk-taking, which is essential to the process of innovation. The problem with risk-taking is that it sometimes ends in failure. Recognizing this and eliminating the current systems heavy focus on evaluation through action, result, impact provides greater opportunities to acknowledge great effort despite failure. Finally, the system ultimately rewards innovation by increasing the ability for raters to document both excellence and innovation, which will be prized by a culture promoting both those concepts and promoting individuals that possess those qualities.

Reward

In order to enhance the culture of innovation, reward must be incorporated to motivate personnel to continue to pursue organizational goals. The AF productivity Excellence Award, The AF Exceptional Innovator Award, and the Chief of Staff Team Excellence Award are all examples of award programs the AF uses. However, with only ten nominees for the Productivity Award and seven for the Exceptional Innovator Award in 2011, it is evident the current awards are not being utilized²⁴. The lack of participation identifies the need to create a more robust reward system.

Awards in the Air Force are obtained at different levels, some remaining at the Group level, and some going as high as the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Implementing a quarterly and annual innovation award, recognizing distinct specialties, would help commanders emphasize the need for innovation within all specialties and all levels of the AF.

²⁴ *AF officials name productivity, innovator award winners.*

²⁴ <http://www.afpc.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123307887>

The quarterly award should be divided up between distinct specialties, with similar areas of responsibility competing against each other. The categories should be split between ranks, with an Airman, Non-Commissioned Officer, Senior Non-Commissioned Officer, Company Grade Officer category. The quarterly award will be compared at the Wing level, and once reaching this level will be graded without distinction of specialty. The level of the award would demonstrate the importance of innovation at all levels, ranks, and careers.

The annual award would still be divided between specialties and ranks; however, the overall winner, negating specialty, would be recognized at the AF level. The key difference would be the scope of the innovation. Whereas a quarterly award may be small in scope due to the short duration, the annual award should have a more robust impact.

Currently the awards are written in bullet format; however, innovation is difficult to capture in bullet format. For this reason, innovation awards should consist of a paragraph format detailing the who, what, where, when, and how the innovation was managed because how the innovation was started and fostered is just as important as the result. The final paragraph would detail the impact the innovation had or will have upon the Air Force or the Unit. Enabling those innovations which are currently in work be submitted reinforces the idea that innovation takes time, effort, and energy. Although the award may not have a final impact, all innovation is worth recognition.

Selection Reward

The military successfully recruits talent out of a market-oriented system. Particularly, the Air Force Academy continues to recruit top students out of high school and has produced 35

Rhodes Scholars, 9 Marshall Scholars, 13 Harry S. Truman Scholars, 115 John F. Kennedy School of Government Scholars, and 31 Gerahart Scholars.²⁵

Selection not only includes initial recruitment and hiring, it also includes the internal movement of people across positions or what Pynes calls the internal recruitment that specifically requires strategic planning.²⁶ Despite successful competitive recruitment, it is difficult for the USAF leadership to strategically plan and reward innovators due to the legalistic bureaucracy (DOPMA). However, a new appraisal system capable of differentiating officers on values, like innovation, would allow an open market assignment process to reward members, especially innovators, through assignment application and selection.

Giving the right people more responsibility in a job they want is one of the few rewards the USAF can offer and they should test a program similar to the Army's "Green Pages." This pilot program (**Figure 3**) allows officers to input skills, background, and experiences into a database.²⁷ Likewise, those in search of filling positions input desired skillsets. Multiple iterations of the program have been accomplished with positive feedback. 19 iterations were accomplished from August 2010 to August 2012 and on average officers were 34 percent more likely to receive their top assignment.²⁸

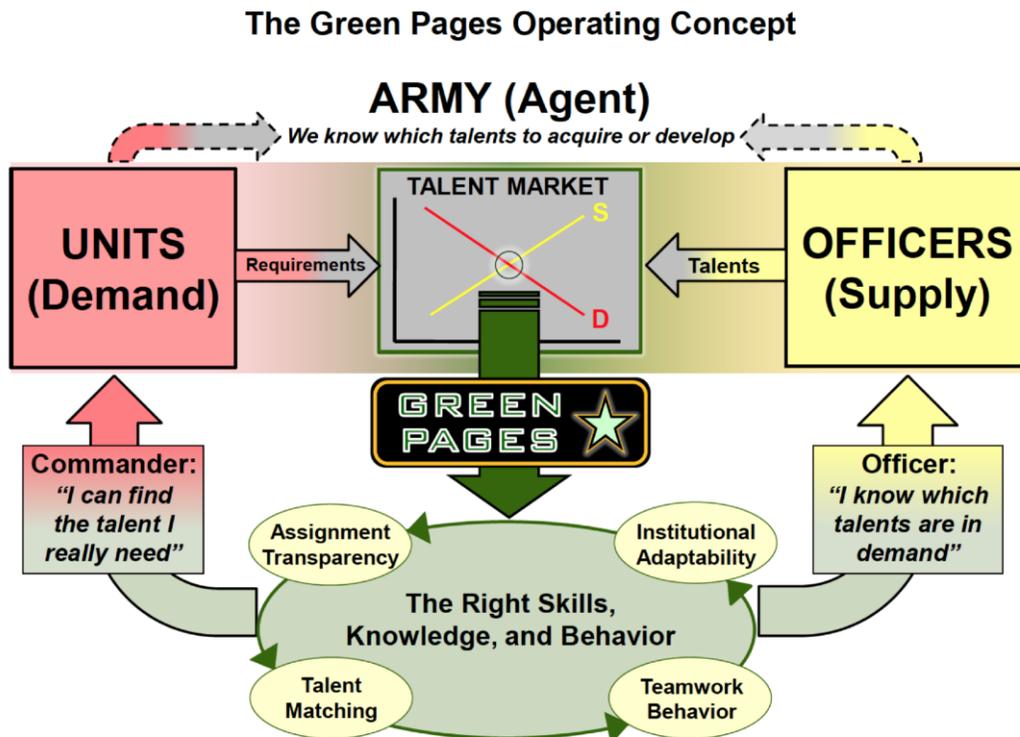
²⁵ USAFA. *US Air Force Academy Accomplishments*, <http://www.usafa.org/Heritage/Accomplishments>

²⁶ Mary Devanna, Charles Fombrun, and Noel Tichy, *Strategic human resource management*. (New York: Wiley, 1984. 1 Edition). 43, 65

²⁷ Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA), *Army Green Pages Proof-of-Concept Pilot Report: Using Regulated Market Mechanisms to Manage Officer Talent*, 2012, 7

²⁸ *Ibid*, 32

Figure 3: Army Green Pages



Source: Colarusso, Michael J., Casey Wardynski, and David S. Lyle

A survey of Columbia MBAs with ten years experience said pay was not among the top three rewards that motivated them; rather it was the opportunity to learn new skills and the most important was responsibility.²⁹ An assignment process geared more toward a free market system will give control to the players that can truly pick the best innovators for the job. This will foster members to expand their skillsets instead of every member conforming to the overwhelming burden of filling the current boxes and rewarding them with desired assignments.

Solution 2: Think Tank

Innovation requires not only individuals with critical thinking skills, but also the space to innovate and the correct incentives to do so. The vertical structure utilized by the USAF ensures delivery of air, space, and cyberspace power. This emphasis on delivery is absolutely necessary

²⁹ Devanna, Fombrun and Tichy, 1984, 48

in the business of war and national security. However, it does lend itself to innovation. Quite the contrary, vertical structures quell innovation. The delicate balance the USAF must find is how to continually deliver on its core mission while innovating for the challenges and the threats of the 21st century.

Innovation requires a space to innovate. It further demands individuals with critical thinking skills and the incentive to do so. The best place to implement these traits inside the broader construct of the USAF is to create new think tank. This think tank, chaired by a one or two star general and invested with the legitimacy of a direct reporting unit with easy access to senior leadership, creates a space for innovation and by its selective application process absorbs the human talent required for innovation. Coupled with a new evaluation and reward system to incentivize innovative traits, this think tank and its potential for innovation rounds out the incentive package.

Innovative space covers two critical aspects. First is the physical space, the location. Innovative ideas occur at the intersection of at first seemingly disparate thoughts. Diversity of career field is simply not enough. Diversity of thought is the very breeding ground of innovation. As educator and lecturer Sir Ken Robinson says in his 2006 TED talk, innovation, or creativity, happens “at the interaction of different disciplinary ways of seeing things.” The best location for a new think tank—an innovation center—is in proximity to “Knowledge Nexus.” Such a place provides abundant opportunity to interact with people in a wide array of fields: academia, the fine arts, science and research, private enterprise, and even agriculture. This list is not all-inclusive but demonstrates a belief that innovation for the USAF might lie outside its traditional lines of thought

Innovative space stretches well beyond physical location. It reaches into the structure of the USAF. The think tank embodies a space in which the structure may safely move from the vertical-command model, necessary for the efficient and standardized delivery of air, space and cyberspace power, to a more horizontal-collaborative model. Inside the think tank rank age, or time in service give way to the validity of one's ideas and innovations. Private industry is not the only setting that proves the merits of the horizontal structure. Such relationships already exist inside the USAF. In the Office of Special Investigations and in the crew concept utilized in the operational force, it is the best idea to save life, limb, mission, or aircraft that matters, not the most senior member.

Perhaps the most distinguishing factor of the think tank is its application process. While the USAF does have innovative organizations such as the Weapons School or the Strategic Air and Space Studies School, these organizations are limited in applicant pool. These organizations ignore the innovative potential in the enlisted corps. Furthermore, the timing at which they occur in an officer's career and the application process limit the wide range of innovative thought.

The new think tank opens membership to the entire force, E-1 through O-6. Applications go directly to the chairing officer and ask the applicant to answer one question: what have you innovated or invented in the past year? Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon.com asks this very question to all his job candidates.³⁰ The question does not seek to find the biggest innovation; it drives at finding individuals with critical thinking skills and an innovative way of looking at situations. Unable and not created with any additional material compensation in mind or available, this think tank self-screens candidates that place higher value on compensation rather than innovative thinking and ownership of a project.

³⁰ Forbes, *The world's most innovative companies*, <http://www.forbes.com/innovative-companies/list/>. Amazon ranked #7 most innovative company, Forbes, 165

A new think tank at the highest levels of the USAF with a more horizontal manner of operating and encouraging the association of disparate thoughts still lacks a critical component: it ignores the innovative people still inside the traditional USAF. To address this, the think tank must serve as the both the initiator of thought in the lower levels and the advocate of their thoughts. Using the networks already used by Airmen socially, the think tank can post its projects for input from throughout the force. In addition, Airmen can post their ideas for input from their peers and the think tank. Given its position in the broader structure, the think tank can advance the causes and ideas of Airmen that have strategic implications or warrant senior leader action. In this way, the think tank serves as model for innovation in the entire USAF and as conduit for innovation from the force.

Conclusion

The USAF must better leverage its human capital in the face of budget cuts in the upcoming years. Revamping the USAF evaluation system will not only ensure that the right leader gets the right leadership position, but the right Airman goes to the right job. Rewarding airmen that innovate with more fulfilling jobs show that USAF leadership embraces innovation. Changing the evaluation system will improve the culture of innovation, but it is only part of the solution. To maximize the innovation potential from the revamped evaluation system, the USAF should make a separate group that evaluates and/or brain storms innovative ideas. The think tank brings together a varied background of individuals who will approach innovation from different perspectives, maximizing the efficiency of innovative solutions. It gives an opportunity for aspiring thinkers to suggest changes and follow through on those changes to improve the USAF. The creation of the think tank will emphasize to the USAF leadership and airmen, that the USAF values innovation. The USAF has the ability to improve innovation if these courses of action are

followed. Leadership at all levels need to emphasize that innovation is a requirement for the USAF. As General Welsh said, “Innovation is who we are, folks. We can’t back away from this. We can’t shy away from it. We have to engage our partners in industry on this. It’s important that we communicate about it and our Airmen need to be thinking about it at every level of our Air Force.”³¹

³¹ General Mark A Welsh III, “Air Force Update” (speech, Washington, DC, September 18, 2012), AF.mil, <http://www.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-120928-037.pdf>. 6.

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