

Leadership

Gen Bennie L. Davis

Tremendous management challenges face today's Air Force leadership—cutbacks in budget and manpower, the pressures of inflation, and the constant struggle to maintain deterrence with aging systems and equipment. We need complete dedication and efficiency from all our people to make the most of our limited resources—dedication and efficiency that can only be achieved through effective leadership.

The mission of Strategic Air Command (SAC) creates unique leadership challenges. Keeping the peace requires a constant state of alert—there is no substitute. Maintaining motivation and proficiency in this type of stressed environment is a demanding task. We have done remarkably well. We have been successful over the last three decades, and the men and women of SAC can be justifiably proud of what they have accomplished. Continued success will require continued dedication and sacrifice. It will also require innovative leadership from our next generation of commanders.

In terms of a personal approach to management, I try to abide by three guiding principles that have always served me well: motivate, delegate, and establish clear priorities.

Motivate

Today's young airmen and officers are highly motivated people ready to hit the street running; ready to make our Air Force even better than it is today. There isn't anything magic about this kind of motivation. It exists because our young people feel they are part of the Air Force community.

A sense of belonging generates its own sense of motivation. The military uniform symbolizes a profound commitment our people have made—a commitment that transcends personal gain and subjugates self-interest to community interest. We are not “hired,” we are “commissioned”; and the oath we take is far more than a contract of employment—it is a pledge to defend our country and its Constitution.

There is also a philosophical difference between the Air Force member and his civilian counterpart. We are not an industrial corporation; we are an instrument of national policy, a guarantor of national security. That's the basic “why” of motivation; every military member must be ready to respond instantly, always prepared and confident.

Statement by Gen Bennie L. Davis, commander in chief, Strategic Air Command, Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska, May 1984.

People Need Sense of Purpose

Working at the day-to-day business of maintaining peace, we sometimes lose sight of the big picture—the team picture. Group goals need to be easily understood and meaningful for our people to maintain sense of purpose. Lasting motivation grows from an understanding of the mission and the important contribution daily work makes.

We work hard to make sure all our people have good answers to such basic questions as: Why do we need to keep our forces on constant alert? Why do we need to station them at northern bases? What are we defending? Who knows I'm here? They need to know the nature of the threat and the rationale for deterrence. Making everyone's job meaningful builds better mission effectiveness.

Delegate

One of the primary benefits of fostering this sense of mission is that it gets people involved and gives them a sense of accomplishment. The more they identify with the mission, the easier it is to delegate responsibility with confidence that the mission will be carried out successfully. Delegating responsibility has the multiplier effect of further increasing sense of mission and sense of accomplishment.

That is why I have directed all my commanders to implement the “Buck Stop” program to the maximum extent possible. Buck Stop places the responsibility for accomplishing tasks at the proper level—allowing the larger, broader issues to be handled by our middle- and upper-level managers.

Except in nuclear matters, where guidance has to be precisely given and precisely followed, authority should be delegated as much as possible. I believe everybody benefits from this type of policy.

It gives every commander, at every level, more time to focus on the things that really require his attention. It usually means that the people who best understand the problem work the solution—and take the responsibility.

It gives subordinate commanders—from the numbered air force commanders right down to the maintenance crew chiefs—more job satisfaction; it allows them to make decisions on the problems they're closest to and trains them for future leadership positions.

Letting commanders at the unit level resolve base and wing problems pays big dividends. Some examples are: the suggestions for improved tactics we get from crew members;

better accounting for spare parts through the base-level Zero Overpricing Program; and our ability to work out the tough manpower problems when everyone gets involved. An effective leader must help others grow and develop—we can't expect people to learn to handle responsibility unless we give them the opportunity to experience it.

Establish Clear Priorities

A commander should establish priorities and stick with them until results are achieved. When I arrived at SAC, I established three general priority areas: people, readiness, and modernization. They have not changed; I do not expect them to change; and persistence has paid off.

People

Our first priority is to recruit and retain people in SAC who are professional, skilled, motivated, and well trained. This requires quality-of-life programs that will make our skilled people want to stay in the Air Force and in SAC. In 1981 SAC shifted its funding priorities to accelerate dormitory improvements. We cut the time for our dormitory upgrade program in half (from 10 years to 5), even though some other support facility improvements had to be deferred to a later date. This is only one example of establishing and sticking to priorities. We have made real progress in improved living and working conditions; Morale, Welfare, and Recreation programs; and permanent change of station policies—and we have done all of this without sacrificing the readiness of our existing forces. More needs to be done in the people area, but the payoff thus far has been well worth the effort.

Readiness

The second priority is to maintain and improve the readiness and combat capability of our existing forces. We must continue our modernization efforts, but new technology does not deter until it is deployed. Until, and even after, new systems like the B-1B and Peacekeeper are on board, we will have to get the most out of what we have now. That includes making sure our systems are well maintained; that appropriate modifications are made; and that we have adequate stocks of spare parts and appropriate munitions. We have made progress in all these areas by consistently keeping them high on our priority list.

Force Modernization

The third priority is force modernization—improved command, control, and communications (C³), the B-1B, the Peacekeeper, and follow-on systems. Again, consistent priorities are paying off. Some C³ improvements are under way, and the B-1B and Peacekeeper are finally approaching initial operational capability.

At SAC, we have two very useful management tools for establishing and following through on our priorities. Their

value derives from the fact that they incorporate inputs from around the command, and they are thoroughly coordinated so that everyone involved has a meaningful impact on the planning and programming process. These management tools are:

- The commander in chief of Strategic Air Command's Annual Posture Statement—the command's mid- to long-range plan, and the basis for congressional testimony.
- The Program Evaluation Group—the organization that prepares our annual submission to the Air Force Program Objective Memorandum.

Character, the Personal Touch

Beyond these three principles—motivate, delegate, and establish priorities—leadership entails a personal touch that must be personally developed. While in many ways it could be labeled an intangible, the concept of leadership certainly evokes other words—like character.

When I use the word character, I am referring to those qualities that embody who we are and what we stand for. One of my former football coaches at West Point, Vince Lombardi, expressed the importance of character this way: "Character, not education, is man's greatest need and man's greatest safeguard; for character is higher than intellect. The real difference between men is their character and in their energy, in the strong will and the skilled purpose." This takes on a special meaning for those of us who have chosen a military career; it equates to self-discipline, integrity, loyalty, selflessness, and a willingness to accept responsibility and to be held accountable for our actions.

As a minimum, any commander has to measure up to the standards he expects from others. For a yardstick, think about the kind of person you would want to follow:

- First and foremost, someone who respects people, our country, and himself.
- Someone who builds a sense of self-worth by relating job to mission and task to career.
- Someone whose expectation of reward is based upon a solid foundation of service rendered; who looks upon work as an opportunity to be seized, not endured.
- Someone who remembers that success lies within self . . . in one's own intellect, courage, and determination; who turns hard-learned lessons into tools for future struggles.
- Someone who hoards days as a miser hoards dollars; who makes every hour pay dividends.
- Finally, someone who plays the game of life tenaciously, and endeavors to grow in strength, knowledge, and professionalism.

A good leader molds individual people into a cohesive team with a common purpose. Because they know and support that purpose, they are proud to give their best. He leads them by gaining their respect and confidence through a clear

and sincere concern for their welfare. He has an “open door” policy—not only to the position of his office, but to himself as a person. He understands that people want and deserve to know how they stand with superiors. They expect pats on the back for good jobs and accept “boots” in the fanny for shoddy ones.

If some of these points sound like a “blast from the glory gun,” it is because leadership involves truly fundamental questions—who we are, and what we are about. Many well-qualified people never realize their full potential because

they don’t take a principled stand on those questions. They never want to make a decision because they never want to make a mistake. But some risk-taking and sacrifices are an integral part of leadership—so are mistakes. You can’t lead from a cocoon.

The rewards of a meaningful career in the military surely outweigh the potential risks and sacrifice. I believe a career in the military is the most important calling in the free world today; our goal is nothing less than the protection of peace and freedom.