

Military Dissent and Junior Officers

Maj William Timothy O'Connell

In the article, "Dynamic Subordinancy," William J. Crockett, a well-known consultant in human resources and personnel management, points out that "most bosses want subordinates who will challenge their ideas, differ with their decisions, give them data, put forward new ideas for doing things. . . ."¹ This article surveys dissent from the military perspective. It examines historical examples of dissent in the profession of arms by junior officers. Next, to better prepare you for developing this art, it outlines some successful techniques junior officers have used to advocate their ideas.

Dissent by Junior Officers

The acceptance of junior officer dissent in the American military since the turn of the century is well documented. In his study of the American performance in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, Gen S. L. A. Marshall concluded that an after-action meeting must be conducted after each exercise. This review must have all members of the unit present, rank must be put aside, and differences of opinion must be settled by the weight of the evidence rather than the person's position. He felt that by increasing the flow of information such meetings kept the soldiers informed of their mission, showed them where they fit in the big picture, and enabled them to develop better judgment under high-pressure situations.²

Today some of the best units in the Air Force still encourage junior officers to participate in these open and free discussions. The Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) and Tactical Air Command (TAC) commanders steered the author of *Excellence in Tactical Fighter Squadrons* toward their best units during his research. There he found a common attitude that

we, as a squadron, are only as good as our weakest link, so everyone works to make the squadron better. It's this kind of attitude that

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allows a second lieutenant to critique his flight commander, a major, during a debrief. In the excellent squadrons, this lieutenant's critique is welcome.³

Precautions against stifling the courage to present innovation and contrary judgment exist at the highest levels in the Air Force. Maj Gen William J. Mall, former director of Personnel Plans, warns that we may be developing a "one-mistake career mentality among our junior officers and NCOs [that] robs our people of the opportunity to test themselves, make mistakes, and learn valuable trial-and-error lessons."⁴

Currently, some assert that the Air Force's strict discipline in following checklists and tech orders in a high-tech environment gives the impression that discipline means blind obedience. However, this is not a valid conclusion. Despite the increase in technology, the Air Force continues to resist turning its mission over to robots. This resistance is based on the need for a human who can make the necessary deviations when circumstances change. Lieutenant Colonel Gallardo clarified the relationship between discipline and such deviations when he wrote

What is needed (a trait for which Americans are famous) are trained, motivated people who can apply their experience in an orderly, prescribed manner and yet be able to deviate or apply a separate set of rules when the situation dictates. This professional, innovative spirit is also a form of discipline.⁵

This professional judgment is not limited to the cockpit. During a tour of duty as an Air Staff action officer, a captain received specific guidance on writing the arms control implication of Peacekeeper missile (MX) development. A conflict arose, however, when he realized that the guidance was not consistent with the terms of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) agreements. When he voiced his concern over following the guidance, his supervisor instructed him to write down his position. The captain's position paper was forwarded to the chief of staff and accepted contrary to the original guidance.⁶ In his case, the Air Force senior leadership permitted a member, regardless of rank, to present a professional challenge to instructions.

These examples underscore the importance of developing sound, assertive judgment in our peacetime junior officers so they succeed in combat. Once war begins, the leadership of America stands behind this principle. During the My Lai trial, Lt William L. Calley Jr., defended his actions as following orders as he understood them, but the court reaf-

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firmed the lessons from the Nuremberg Trials for American junior officers.⁷

From these examples three conclusions may be drawn. First, the military has encouraged dissent by junior officers when it improves effectiveness. Second, junior officers can enhance mission effectiveness when they appropriately challenge the status quo. And finally, junior officers are legally bound to present a challenge to instructions that violate the law. Thus, a junior officer must consider the development of professional and effective dissenting skills an important part of his or her development as a professional officer.

Techniques

As you have seen, professional and well-presented dissent by junior officers is encouraged and, in some situations, legally required. But, the terms *professional* and *well-presented* can be intangibles in your work environment. They must be broken down into supporting techniques. These techniques fall into two broad categories: establishing preconditions and delivery.

Establishing Preconditions

You should establish some preconditions for success before actively expressing dissenting opinions. Even though these preconditions do not guarantee that your ideas will be accepted, they will almost certainly gain more open-minded consideration of them.

Trust. Probably the most important preconditions you must establish is your boss's trust in you. Without trust, your comments might easily be categorized as an unqualified complaint or careerist maneuvering. Trust does not just happen, however. As a subordinate, you must create and nurture it. There are a number of ways to do this.

Expertise. Master the job. Treat it with a sense of urgency. Become an expert and a point of reference on all aspects of the job. Then become familiar with others' jobs, especially those that affect your job, the boss, and the unit.

Image. Look and act the part of a trusted agent. Dress to project this role. Demonstrate that you realize you represent more than yourself by subjugating your personal preference to the unit standards. The person who follows only the "letter of the law" or who stretches the length of a break is sending a message to the unit, "I want to belong but not enough to sacrifice." The person who stays well within the intent of the rules is saying, "I am in 100 percent. You can count on me." If you are the boss, whose dissent would you trust as being in the best interest of the unit?

Also, ensure that your mannerisms project a professional image. Act like the mature, responsible person who comes up with productive, innovative ideas. Use clear word choice and purposeful nonverbal communication. Remember, part of selling your idea is to sell yourself.⁸

Association. The boss's perception of your associations impacts his or her receptiveness to your ideas. Your ideas

typically start from the comments of your associates, or at least you get feedback from them on your idea. If your associates support the unit and have made helpful contributions to the unit's mission, your boss will probably be more receptive. On the other hand, if you associate with people with hidden agendas and self-interests or who lack a professional drive, the boss might suspect your dissent.

Goals. Your goals communicate a lot about you. If your goals are short-term or self-centered, the boss's trust in your inputs will carry far less weight than if they are long-term and team-oriented. Establish and communicate your goals early. You can communicate your goals via Air Force Form 90, Officer Career Objective Statement, or by simply giving your boss a written outline of them.

Loyalty. Keep the boss informed. Don't complain to others about his or her shortcomings or about problems in the unit. And never put him or her into an embarrassing situation.⁹ If you don't have the guts to deal with the problems, don't go around the boss. If you catch your boss's errors, back him or her up like you would any other team member and never imply you scored points with your discovery.¹⁰

Dealing with your feedback. Your behavior sets an example for those up as well as down the chain of command. If you cannot deal in a mature manner with challenges directed toward your ideas, those above you are less likely to listen and act on your challenge.

Determine Importance. There are many issues that compel a junior officer to present a dissenting view, but it is the wise officer who can set priorities on these issues. In setting priorities, determine the relevance of the issue to the "big picture." Fighting an issue when it is very minor to the unit mission wastes time and patience. If you're not sure of the importance of an issue, check around or even ask your boss.

In determining priorities you need also to estimate how much of your energy it will take to present your case effectively. It is a mark of courage to throw yourself on the sword for a noble cause, but wasting time on every issue is an abuse of an Air Force resource—your time and your superior's.

Differentiate between Wrong and Different. Just because your idea is right does not mean another is wrong. To borrow from Dr. Rae Andre's idea, you may find that NORWAY applies.¹¹ That is, No One Right WAY. The existing way may also be right, in which case your dissent would be insubordinate resistance rather than courageous devotion. If confronted with this situation, follow the lead and set your idea aside for the future should circumstances change.

Know the Dissent Channel. There are a number of established and widely used channels for dissent in the Air Force. Become familiar with them so you can use the one most appropriate for your situation. Some programs to look at are the Suggestion Program's AF Form 1000, the MIP program, hazard and safety report, various base councils, and after-action reports. Also, look at Air Force Handbook (AFH) 37-137, *The Tongue and Quill*, for Air Force written and oral formats for advocating.

Timing. The saying “don’t change horses in midstream” is vital to the discussion of military dissent. Before the plan is executed, dissent might be acceptable. But once the execution phase begins, changing the plan can cause more problems than it will solve. Therefore, it is your duty at the lieutenant and captain level to salute sharply and support the plan, unless, of course, it is unethical or illegal. Likewise, it is your responsibility to be proactive and make your inputs during the decision phase.

Know the Law. Naturally, you cannot determine if your instructions are illegal if you don’t know the law. Unfortunately, you will not have the luxury of time to look up the law when you receive the typical illegal order. Now is the time to study the *Uniform Code of Military Justice* (UCMJ), laws of armed conflict, the *Code of Conduct*, regulations, and the national and international laws that impact your performance as an officer.

Delivery

When delivery of dissent is discussed, such words as *tact* and *professional* come to mind. The problem once again is that these are very general concepts. The following provides more specific techniques:

Control Your Emotions. Do not try to plead your case or demand action. Remain calm despite adversity, use emotional terms judiciously, anticipate rebuttals, and if possible, pick a comfortable time and place to present your position. You want your dissent to receive mature, unemotional consideration. If you present your challenge on an adult level (rather than the demanding-parent or pleading-child levels), your ideas have a better chance of receiving this desired consideration.¹²

Recognize Idiosyncrasies. Even the most professional environment has personal idiosyncrasies and organizational sacred cows. This isn’t to say that you must stifle your dissent because of them, especially if they are the subject of your dissent. However, you must be sensitive to things like pride of authorship, unwritten rules, and personality conflicts. Concentrate your energy on one issue at a time by not drawing unnecessary opposition into the dialogue.

Use the Chain of Command. Work your dissent within the chain—always. As a junior officer, you do not have the credentials to go outside the chain. Furthermore, in the military, the chain of command is the most effective means of solving a problem, even when it *is* the problem. Work with your immediate boss first. If that does not solve the problem, discuss with your boss any intention you have of going higher.

One other point before we move on. There is an increase in the number of senior officers who like to get out and talk to their people. Despite the convenience of these visits, continue to observe the chain of command in routing your dissent. You may use such an opportunity to speed up the process, but first coordinate your comments with your immediate supervisor.

Written Dissent. A written statement is often the best way to present your disagreement with the status quo. Written dissent has many advantages. Typically, a reader is less defensive than a listener. Also, the reader can pick the time and place to read your dissent. This puts him or her at ease by preventing an unnecessary confrontation. Written dissent is also private. The reader can read it free of pressure to react immediately and is free to reconsider an initial negative reaction before rendering a final judgment. Furthermore, when you write your dissent you will usually present your most complete and organized thoughts.

The Air Force has a number of written instruments for presenting your dissent. *The Tongue and Quill* presents such instruments as the formal letter, talking paper, position paper, and bullet background paper. You will find both explanations and examples of each in that handbook.¹³

Support. Support your challenge. Find facts, quotes, models, or historical examples to support your ideas. Ensure that they are accurate, concrete, and credible. Then present them in support of a logical conclusion. Your ultimate goal is for the audience to adopt your idea as theirs.¹⁴ Support will help you lead them there.

Provide a Solution. Whenever you challenge the status quo, present a solution.¹⁵ The world is full of problems and messengers; the problem solver is the rarity. In a few cases, you might find that your superiors fault the status quo but support it because there is nothing better. Thus, your solution can be more important than your explanation of the problem. They need your innovative problem solving as well as your communication skills.¹⁶

Be Prepared for Rejection. If your challenge is rejected, you have two choices: continue your battle another way or quit. You can continue the battle by taking your dissent through other channels, changing your approach or audience, or developing a better solution. Quitting can be done by either following or getting out of the way. Before the assault on Inchon, Rear Admiral Doyle presented alternative ideas to Gen Douglas MacArthur. When the general was unmoved, the admiral gave his total commitment to the attack.¹⁷ Both the dissent and the obedience were professionalism in action. Likewise, had Lieutenant Calley challenged the order he thought he received and had his challenge failed, it would have been his duty to disobey the illegal orders and step aside when ordered to do so.

Closing Comments

On the surface, the concept of dissent in the military seems contrary to the profession’s fundamental principles of discipline and obedience. But history has shown that dissent, when properly timed and presented, can complement discipline in accomplishing the mission. Furthermore, there are examples within the Air Force of support for innovative junior officers who challenge the status quo.

Like any other part of military leadership or followership, dissent is an art. The techniques you learn are only the skills.

To develop the art properly, you must practice with daring the skills that best fit your personality and the situation. This requires both courage and bravery. It takes moral courage to risk a comfortable niche in the unit by advocating an unpopular idea. As one American officer wrote, "The bars, leaves, birds, and stars that mark an officer are not just to be worn, at times they must also be bet."¹⁸ Due to the courage of many before you, the Air Force has stayed in the forefront of war-fighting ability. Additionally, it takes physical bravery to comply with what Sir John Hackett called our profession's "unlimited liability clause"¹⁹ or to risk your life following the very order you unsuccessfully challenged. Ultimately, your dissent will complement your professional discipline only when your underlying motivation is a selfless desire to do what is right for your country and not what is right for your ego or career.

Notes

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