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AIR FORCE LEADERSHIP



1 September 1985

TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE AIR FORCE

All of us know that effective military organizations must be well trained, motivated, and have a sense of confidence that can only be forged through strong leadership. The United States Air Force has a rich legacy of pioneering airmen who provided a foundation of leadership that has made America's air arm second to none. When we look back at men like Hap Arnold, Tooey Spaatz, Jimmy Doolittle, and Billy Mitchell, we can see shared qualities of leadership that are essential to a strong Air Force.

All of our airpower pioneers and those that have followed know that an Air Force's real strength is its people. The mission is not done by machines; it is done by people. The best weapons are of little value without trained and motivated people to operate and support them. Those of us in leadership positions have a special responsibility to develop and support the high quality people who will lead the Air Force in the 21st century.

I challenge each of you to prepare yourself for leadership, and to take the time to teach those who will follow you. This pamphlet will help us meet this responsibility.

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Chief of Staff

1 September 1985

Military Personnel

AIR FORCE LEADERSHIP

This pamphlet provides a basic guide for the new and for the aspiring Air Force leader. It also presents a useful review for those already in leadership positions. A practical knowledge of leadership fundamentals is absolutely essential to effective leaders. The pamphlet first discusses the Air Force concept of leadership and some basic traits and principles. Second, it presents a situational approach to the leadership challenge, with comments on the key elements of any leadership problem: the mission, the people, the leader, and the environment. The final portion of the pamphlet addresses leadership preparation actions.

THE AIR FORCE LEADERSHIP CONCEPT

Leadership is the art of influencing and directing people to accomplish the mission. The basic concept the effective leader must keep in mind encompasses two fundamental elements:

- **The mission**
- **The people**

This is the Air Force concept of leadership, and all facets of Air Force leadership should support these two basic elements. They are embedded in the definition of leadership.

The mission. The primary task of a military organization is to perform its mission. This is paramount, and everything else must be subordinate to this objective. Thus, the leader's primary responsibility is to lead people to carry out the unit's mission successfully. Former Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis E. LeMay emphasized, "No matter how well you apply the art of leadership, no matter how strong your unit or how high the morale of your men, if your leadership is not directed completely toward the mission, your leadership has failed." Yet, a leader must never forget the importance of the unit's personnel.

The people. People perform the mission. They are the heart of the organization and without their support a unit will fail. A leader's responsibilities include the care and support of the unit's personnel. Successful leaders have continually ensured that the needs of the people in their unit are met promptly and properly.

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Clearly, the two “simple” parts of the leadership concept—mission and people—are actually two very complicated elements. Successful leaders who have effectively dealt with this complex concept have exhibited certain characteristics or traits.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS

Effective leaders have certain distinguishing characteristics which are the foundation for their approach to the leadership situation. The list of a leader’s desirable qualities is virtually endless. While many characteristics (such as truthfulness) are expected of all members of the military profession, there are six traits which are vital to Air Force leaders.

Integrity—a total commitment to the highest personal and professional standards. A leader must be honest and fair. Integrity means establishing a set of values and adhering to those values. Air Force Chief of Staff General Charles A. Gabriel said, “Integrity is the fundamental premise of military service in a free society. Without integrity, the moral pillars of our military strength—public trust and self-respect—are lost.”

Loyalty—a three-dimensional trait which includes faithfulness to superiors, peers, and subordinates. Leaders must first display an unquestionable sense of loyalty before they can expect members of their unit to be loyal. General George S. Patton, Jr. highlighted the importance of loyalty saying, “There is a great deal of talk about loyalty from the bottom to the top. Loyalty from the top down is even more necessary and much less prevalent.”

Commitment—complete devotion to duty. A leader must demonstrate total dedication to the United States, the Air Force, and the unit. Plato said, “Man was not born for himself alone, but for his country.” Dedicated service is the hallmark of the military leader.

Energy—an enthusiasm and drive to take the initiative. Throughout history successful leaders have demonstrated the importance of mental and physical energy. They approached assigned tasks aggressively. Their preparation included physical and mental conditioning which enabled them to look and act the part. Once a course of action was determined, they had the perseverance and stamina to stay on course until the job was completed.

Decisiveness—a willingness to act. A leader must have the self-confidence to make timely decisions. The leader must then effectively communicate the decisions to the unit. British Admiral Sir Roger Keyes emphasized that, “In all operations a moment arrives when brave decisions have to be made if an enterprise is to be carried through.” Of course, decisiveness includes the willingness to accept responsibility. Leaders are always accountable—when things go right and when things go wrong.

Selflessness—sacrificing personal requirements for a greater cause. Leaders must think of performing the mission and caring for the welfare of the men and women in the organization. Air Force leaders cannot place their own comfort or convenience before the mission or the people. Willingness to sacrifice is intrinsic to military service. Selflessness also includes the courage to face and overcome difficulties. While courage is often thought of as an unselfish willingness to confront physical dangers, equally important—and more likely to be tested on a daily basis—is

the moral courage a leader needs to make difficult decisions. General Douglas MacArthur said, “No nation can safely trust its martial honor to leaders who do not maintain the universal code which distinguishes those things that are right and those things that are wrong.” It requires courage and strength of character to confront a tough situation head-on rather than avoiding it by passing the buck to someone else.

These traits are essential to effective leadership. Developing these characteristics will improve a leader’s ability to employ the principles of leadership.

LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

Leadership principles are rules or guides that have been tested and proven over the years by successful leaders. The most important of these principles are discussed below:

Know your job. People will follow a competent person who has the knowledge needed to complete the mission successfully. The Air Force leader should have a broad view of the unit’s mission, and must make sure all members of the unit understand how their jobs relate to mission accomplishment.

Between World War I and World War II, the United States Army Air Corps was fortunate to have men like General Henry Arnold and General Carl Spaatz. These men learned their jobs and knew how they could enhance the Air Corps mission. Their preparation and vision paid substantial dividends when they were charged with building a force to fight and win the air battles of World War II.

Just as important as their own competence, leaders ensure assigned people know their responsibilities. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell D. Taylor stated, “One expects a military leader to demonstrate in his daily performance a thorough knowledge of his own job and further an ability to train his subordinates in their duties and thereafter to supervise and evaluate their work.”

Know yourself. Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses is important to successful leadership. You, the leader, must recognize your personal capabilities and limitations. Former Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Robert D. Gaylor put it this way: “Sure, everyone wants to be an effective leader, whether it be in the Air Force or in the community. You can and will be if you identify your strengths, capitalize on them, and consciously strive to reduce and minimize the times you apply your style inappropriately.”

Set the example. You must set the standard for the unit. People will emulate your standards of personal conduct and appearance. They will observe your negative characteristics as well as your positive ones. The arrogant or domineering person commands no respect, only resentment. The supervisor who violates basic standards of morality invariably ends up in a compromising situation. A leader who drinks excessively or who abuses controlled drugs sends a dangerous message: I cannot control myself; how can I control you? Lack of self-discipline in a leader destroys the unit’s cohesion and, ultimately impairs its ability to perform the mission.

Self-discipline also pertains to physical fitness. People who are in good physical condition are better prepared for any assigned mission. Setting the example includes supporting a unit physical fitness program and enforcement of Air Force weight standards. Therefore, military leaders must be positive examples of professional conduct, appearance, and physical conditioning.

Essentially, people do not expect their leader to be a saint. But they do want leadership from a person who recognizes the importance of example. As General George S. Patton, Jr. once remarked, "You are always on parade."

Care for people. General of the Army George C. Marshall believed, "A decent regard for the rights and feelings of others is essential to leadership." Take care of the people. Find out what their requirements are and be sensitive to human needs. Are the people housed adequately; are they well fed; are they paid promptly; are there personal problems with which they need help? When people are worried about these conditions, they cannot focus their full attention on their job, and the mission will suffer. If people believe they are cared for as well as circumstances will permit, the leader is in a position to earn their confidence, respect, and loyalty.

Communicate. Information should flow continuously throughout the organization. Former Air Force Chief of Staff General Thomas D. White believed, "Information is the essential link between wise leadership and purposeful action." Communication is a two-way process. An informed leader is able to evaluate realistically the unit's progress toward mission accomplishment. Successful leaders listen to what their people have to say, and are always looking for the good ideas which can flow up the chain. It is also key to emphasize the importance of feedback. The worker who is well informed concerning the quality of the work and its importance within the job will be more effective and highly motivated. It is the leader's job to keep all channels open. The more senior a leader becomes, the more listening skills will be required.

Educate. People should be properly trained to do their jobs. Professional military education, professional development education, technical training schools, and on-the-job training are formal means by which Air Force personnel are trained. Informal training, practice, and personal experience at the unit level are crucial reinforcements to formal training. General of the Army Douglas MacArthur observed, "In no other profession are the penalties for employing untrained personnel so appalling or so irrevocable as in the military."

Equip. It is also your responsibility to ensure the unit is equipped properly. Just as an aircrew should never be expected to engage in combat without a well-armed aircraft, people should not be sent ill-equipped to the office, shop, or flightline. Your leadership responsibilities include identifying needs, securing funds, and then obtaining the necessary weapons, tools, and equipment.

Motivate. Your greatest challenge is motivating subordinates to achieve the high standards set for them. Motivation is the moving force behind successful leadership. In fact, the ability to generate enthusiasm about the mission may be the single most important factor in leadership. Recognition of the efforts people put forth is one positive way in which motivation toward

mission accomplishment pays dividends. The leader who publicly applauds the efforts of unit personnel builds a cohesive organization which will accomplish the mission.

Motivating people depends on understanding their needs and working to align these needs with unit requirements. Most people will work for an organization which they know cares about them, and one in whose mission they believe. Remember, the most powerful form of lasting motivation is self-motivation. One of your goals as a leader should be to provide an environment that fosters and rewards self-motivation.

Accept your responsibility. General Curtis E. LeMay was once asked to provide a one-word definition of leadership. After some thought, General LeMay replied, “If I had to come up with one word to define leadership, I would say responsibility.” As a leader you are responsible for performing the unit’s mission. If you fail, you are accountable for the consequences. Any unwillingness to accept responsibility for failure destroys your credibility as a leader and breaks the bond of respect and loyalty. Accountability also includes the requirement for discipline within a unit. A leader should reward a job well done and punish those who fail to meet their responsibilities or established standards. The former is easy, even enjoyable; the latter is much more difficult, but equally necessary. George Washington observed, “Discipline is the soul of an Army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all.”

Develop teamwork. As a leader you must mold a collection of individual performers into a cohesive team which works together to accomplish the mission. The unit’s mission will suffer if each person in your organization is “doing his own thing” in isolation. As the leader, you should know how the various functions within the unit fit together and how they must work in harmony. You should create and maintain an atmosphere of teamwork and cooperation to meet mission demands. Teamwork comes when people are willing to put the unit’s mission before all else.

THE LEADERSHIP SITUATION

Leadership has been defined as the art of influencing and directing people to accomplish the mission. Management is the manner in which resources are used to achieve objectives. Military leaders should also be aware of their responsibilities as Air Force managers. British Field Marshall Lord Slim made a clear distinction:

There is a difference between leadership and management. The leader and the men who follow him represent one of the oldest, most natural, and most effective of all human relationships. The manager and those he manages are a later product with neither so romantic, nor so inspiring a history. Leadership is of the spirit, compounded of personality and vision—its practice is an art. Management is of the mind, more a matter of accurate calculation, statistics, methods, timetables, and routine—its practice is a science. Managers are necessary; leaders are essential.

In essence, you lead people and you manage things. The Air Force needs people who can do both. The requirement is for the proper division of attention between the two, with the proportion

dependent on the situation. Each leadership situation should be approached by paying careful attention to the four primary factors: the mission, the people, the leader, and the environment.

The Mission

Most missions involve many tasks that must be completed if the unit is to fulfill its responsibilities. The leader must define the mission and set priorities for its various components. In many instances the mission has been defined by higher headquarters. Yet, the leader should translate the higher direction into goals with which people will relate. When possible, the leader should involve unit personnel in setting these goals to ensure their support. Individual involvement is very important when total effort is needed from everyone. The goals must be challenging but attainable. Goals that are unrealistic frustrate even the most dedicated people.

Set reasonable and acceptable standards of job performance to make sure that goals are met. These standards must be consistent with the mission, and defined clearly for every individual. Recognize those who meet or exceed standards, prescribe additional training for those who cannot, and take corrective action for those who will not. When standards are not met, you must determine the reason and move quickly to correct the situation through training or, if appropriate, administrative or disciplinary action. Get the facts, then act.

The People

Be sensitive to people. People perform the mission. Understanding people helps determine the appropriate leadership action to take in a given situation. You cannot be totally successful at getting the most out of people without first knowing the capabilities of those you are leading. Capability has two principal elements: training and experience.

Training. You should assess the level of the unit's training. If the people are not trained, do what it takes to get them the necessary training. People joined the Air Force to be part of a team with an important mission. They cannot do it without proper training. Medal of Honor recipient Sergeant John L. Levitow credited his heroic action under fire to the training he had received from the Air Force.

Experience. Levels of experience vary widely. A leader should learn each individual's experience and ability to perform in various situations. Do not base your evaluation of an individual's experience solely on rank. While rank may be a good overall experience indicator, the person may have never done a particular job or been in a particular environment before—and there are those who learn faster than others. Knowing the experience or knowledge level of the unit's personnel is an important aspect of the style chosen by the leader.

The Leader

Successful military leaders adapt their leadership style to meet the mission demands, and use an approach which capitalizes on their strengths. For example, if you are able to communicate effectively with people on an individual basis but are uncomfortable when speaking to large groups, then use personal conferences as much as possible. If you write well, take advantage of

this skill by writing letters of appreciation or using other forms of correspondence. If you are a good athlete, organize and participate in unit sporting activities.

In addition to capitalizing on your strengths and minimizing your weaknesses, your style of leadership must correspond to the people's job knowledge. When they lack sufficient knowledge to do the job at hand, you must spend much of your time directing their efforts to accomplish the mission.

On the other hand, if people have some training or experience, you are not required to direct their every action and should not do so. Still, you must motivate them to complete the task. Work with them, but keep your eye on the objective.

Occasionally, you may discover that people are only moderately motivated to do a job they are capable of completing. In such circumstances, let them participate in planning the task. Motivate them by maintaining a job-related working relationship. Their capabilities will do the rest.

When the people have extensive experience and are enthusiastic about the task, you should provide them greater freedom to complete it the way they choose. You, as the leader, are still ultimately responsible for the mission, so stay informed of the group's progress.

There is no one perfect leadership style. Rather, the most effective style is the one which the leader tailors to the mission, the people, and the environment, which is discussed next.

The Environment

Leaders should carefully consider the environment in which they work. Leadership methods which worked in one situation with one group may not work with the same group in a different environment. Consider the squadron that is permanently based in the United States but deploys overseas for an extended period of temporary duty. Billeting or food service difficulties, equipment or parts shortages, family separation problems, inclement weather, etc., may occur. Any of these problems create an entirely new environment with which the unit's leader must cope. As a leader, you must alter your leadership behavior, as necessary, to accommodate changes in the environment of the given mission. Be sensitive to your surroundings.

LEADERSHIP PREPARATION

Now that we have explained some of the basics of Air Force leadership, here is how you can best prepare yourself to lead:

Think about leadership. What would you do in a given situation, and why? If you were placed in charge of your work unit tomorrow, how would you act? Remember the traits and principles of Air Force leadership.

Observe leaders in action. How does your boss handle a given situation? Why did a particular action succeed or fail? How does your wing commander, squadron commander, first sergeant, or supervisor lead?

Study leadership and the profession of arms. The military has a long tradition of leadership. Read about the successful leaders in our history and how they led. Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote, “The study of history lies at the foundation of all sound military conclusions and practice.” Detailed professional knowledge is essential to developing perspective and in preparing to meet the challenges of the future.

Practice leadership. Look for opportunities to exercise leadership. It can be as simple as taking the initiative and leading one person to complete a task. Learn from your efforts, seek feedback, and evaluate your efforts. Always lead by positive example.

The United States was fortunate that between the world wars several members of its military services prepared themselves to be leaders. Their preparation resulted in strong leadership during some of the most crucial years in our history. The Air Force has inherited a legacy of strong, dynamic leadership from the early air pioneers. Today’s leaders must continue this tradition of excellence.

SUMMARY

Leadership is the art of influencing and directing people to accomplish a mission. The Air Force’s concept of leadership has two elements—the mission and the people who must perform it. Several basic traits are common to successful leaders. Effective leaders are also aware of the principles of leadership.

Every leadership situation has four key factors: the mission, the people, the leader, and the environment. Careful consideration of these factors enables the leader to select the proper approach to each situation. There is no single leadership style which is appropriate in every situation; therefore, effective leaders learn to use the correct approach as dictated by the circumstances.

The Air Force depends on positive, effective leaders at all levels to perform the mission. Leadership is not the private domain or responsibility of senior officers or noncommissioned officers. It is a responsibility for which every Air Force person must prepare.

General Curtis E. LeMay’s words continue to serve us well, “... I’m firmly convinced that leaders are not born; they’re educated, trained, and made, as in every other profession.” To ensure a strong, ready Air Force we must always remain dedicated to this process.

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE

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1 Attachment
Recommended Reading List

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

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