

# Strategy Research Project

## Management-vs-Leadership: United States Air Force Officer Talent Development

by

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Class of 2018

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			Form Approved--OMB No. 0704-0188		
The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 01-04-2018		2. REPORT TYPE STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Management-vs-Leadership: United States Air Force Officer Talent Development			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) Lieutenant Colonel Michael O. Walters United States Air Force			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Professor John M. Tisson			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited. I understand this document will be included in a research database and available to the public. Author: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Word Count: 7224					
14. ABSTRACT The USAF needs to implement fundamental and systematic changes to how it builds, teaches, leads and develops its professional officer corps – starting with Company Grade Officers (CGOs). There needs to be a clear delineation between force management (institutional bureaucracy) and talent development (“commander business” – leading), and an understanding of who is responsible and accountable for these functions. By creating talent management programs focused on junior officers that include professional development, broadening, and mentoring, the USAF will improve its quality and quantity of officers. The same programs will also ensure these officers are more inculcated in the USAF mission, culture, and the profession of arms. This paper addresses the problems of talent management and retention from the perspective of deliberate officer professional development. It also explores why this is such a critical issue for senior leaders as stewards of the profession, and the challenges associated with implementing innovative ways to manage and grow the force’s talented officer corps. Most importantly, it will provide a pragmatic framework for USAF leaders to implement.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Human Capital, Leader Development, Training, Profession					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 30	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UU	b. ABSTRACT UU	c. THIS PAGE UU			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (w/ area code)

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(7224 words)

## Abstract

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## **Management-vs-Leadership: United States Air Force Officer Talent Development**

The only thing worse than training your employees and having them leave is not training them and having them stay.

—Henry Ford<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. Air Force's Strategic Master Plan (SMP), *A Call to the Future*, emphasizes how its strategic leaders will “pursue a strategically agile force to unlock the innovative potential resident within our Airmen.”<sup>2</sup> The United States Air Force (USAF) is equally, if not more reliant on quality personnel than on machines, so much so that without a diverse talent pool, mission success is impossible. Former Defense Secretary Ash Carter has reinforced this idea by inferring that success in the next war will be more about who has the talent edge.<sup>3</sup> This acknowledgement comes at a time when the national security environment is dramatically changing, requiring forces to have the best talent and therefore an ability to adapt to a diverse and complex threat environment.

A critical concern the U.S. military has grappled with since the 1980's is the decreasing trend of officer retention rates, specifically in the Company Grade Officer (CGO) ranks.<sup>4</sup> Reasons for this include an increase in operational tempo, increased industry competition for talented employees, generational (Millennials) differences in career aspirations, and discontent with limited career progression and promotion that are a result of an outdated personnel management system. So, while this problem of retention affects all services, it is particularly critical to the future of the USAF and reversing this trend in order to retain talent is a complex problem. While many promising force management programs have been implemented, they have failed to achieve the necessary results. They offer only half the solution by applying typical, out of touch managerial fixes to issues that require command and leadership insight of personnel at

the core level. These programs have addressed symptoms versus the root cause of the problem. The real problem lies in not having created nor sustained the service's ability to professionally develop its officer corps, specifically its CGOs.

The USAF, however, can act contrary to its core values of caring and respect when it involves developing its talent pool of young officers.<sup>5</sup> This deficit leads to an ill-informed and disillusioned officer corps, resulting in a loss of diversified talent. It is this officer corps that has been let down by its service by its failing to cultivate what exactly a profession is, its distinguishing characteristics, and the role these young officers play in that profession now and in the future. This lack of development in the profession of arms ultimately manifests itself in significant retention problems, resulting in a shortfall in talent, as well as in diversity in thought and force composition across all career fields. Equally important is the impact this problem has on how the USAF integrates operationally in both the joint and multi-national environment. Not having the strongest, most talented Airmen operating alongside their fellow Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and coalition partners is a problem of strategic proportions.

The USAF needs to implement fundamental and systematic changes to how it builds, teaches, leads and develops its professional officer corps – starting with CGOs. There needs to be a clear delineation between force management (institutional bureaucracy) and talent development (“commander business” – leading), and an understanding of who is responsible and accountable for these functions. By creating talent management programs focused on junior officers that include professional development, broadening, and mentoring, the USAF will improve its quality and quantity of officers. The same programs will also ensure these officers are more inculcated in the

USAF mission, culture, and the profession of arms. This paper addresses the problems of talent management and retention from the perspective of deliberate officer professional development. It also explores why this is such a critical issue for Senior Leaders (SLs) as stewards of the profession, and the challenges associated with implementing innovative ways to manage and grow the force's talented officer corps. Most importantly, it will provide a pragmatic framework for USAF leaders to implement.

### Background

“What concerns me most – and what I am tracking most closely – is retention. Our retention rates are alarmingly low...it is clear our success depends on being able to retain good people to operate and support our high-tech machines.”<sup>6</sup> This quote comes from the Acting Secretary of the USAF in 1998. It demonstrates just how long the retention issue has plagued the USAF. Now, as it did then, maintaining a ready force of talented Airmen is priority one for USAF SLs. Most recently, the Secretary of the Air Force (SECAF) pointed out that her and other SLs' most immediate need was to focus on the service's requirement for growing and developing enough field-grade officers to meet mission demands. “At 92 percent, the Air Force is currently undermanned in Line of the Air Force field-grade officers, with non-rated field-grade officers manned at 74 percent.”<sup>7</sup> This problem did not develop overnight. The USAF experienced high retention levels for almost a decade that ultimately resulted in the service being over end strength in 2014.<sup>8</sup> This led the USAF to involuntarily separate 1,031 Officers and 5,099 Enlisted members during the 2014 fiscal year.<sup>9</sup> This flawed, short-sighted force management decision hollowed the force. What the USAF, and arguably the other services face now, are the results of that reduction in force along with other critical factors. A continued high operational tempo has stressed the force to its limit.

Additionally, Congress passed the *Budget Control Act* in 2011, which cut \$487 billion from projected defense spending spread across the next ten years. Along with episodic sequestration and continuing resolutions, these decisions have gutted the services of resources and their ability to reconstitute the force. Combine these factors with a thriving civilian labor market, it is not difficult to explain at least part of the cause of falling retention in the USAF.

The cyclical trend has occurred for decades, wherein the USAF attempts to manage its force end strength numbers through various methods, but not achieving the desired results for years. “During testimony to the House Armed Services Committee in November [2013], Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, [then] Air Force Chief of Staff, said long-term impacts of sequestration could force the service to cut about 25,000 Airmen.”<sup>10</sup> In December of 2013, USAF leaders announced force management programs designed to reduce the force by thousands over a period of five years to counter the effects of sequestration.<sup>11</sup> One of the programs, specifically targeted for the officer corps, was Force Shaping Boards, which considered officers for separation that had more than three but less than six years of commissioned service.<sup>12</sup> Other programs included Voluntary Separation Pay, as an incentive for the officers meeting the Force Shaping Boards to separate, along with the USAF implementing Temporary Early Retirement Authority to reduce manning in over-manned career fields for officers with more than 15 but less than 20 years of service.<sup>13</sup> What the USAF finds itself in now is the ultimate storm across multiple fronts. “Doing more with less” is becoming less of a viable option. With the USAF at its lowest end strength since its inception, it has to ensure it not only has the people to do the job, but the highest level of talent. “Recruiting, training, and

retaining people with the necessary mix of skills are major challenges for the USAF's personnel community. Many career fields have been under strength for several years."<sup>14</sup> These challenges are partially a result of having gouged the force of both its emerging talent as well as its experienced, sage Airmen across several critical career fields, leaving the USAF at a tipping point.

To blame the USAF officer retention crisis purely on a failure of programmatic force management policies and budget resourcing decisions is shortsighted, and ultimately leads to repetitive fixes for the same problem when it re-emerges, as it has over decades. The question that begs to be answered is why are the Airmen the USAF chooses to retain leaving the force? With such an alarming concern for the health of the junior officer corps, very few SLs ask the question to the individuals concerned. Those who *have* asked received feedback, like the 1997 CSAF Survey which highlighted several aspects of USAF organizational climate that were perceived negatively, particularly leadership, unit flexibility, recognition, and general organizational climate.<sup>15</sup> These highlighted issues fall under the purview of the profession of arms versus the bureaucracy of the institution. As such, they are "commanders' business," not problems that can be addressed by force management programs, monetary incentives or early retirement offerings. It points to a shortfall in professional officer development. That said, if the USAF were not faced with manning and retention crises, the argument for the need to overhaul officer professional development would fall on deaf ears.

The USAF has heavily invested in its force management issue throughout the years to achieve balance. It has spent millions of dollars and thousands of man hours researching how best to achieve desired retention rates and manage human capital.

But, as has been demonstrated, throwing money at the problem is not always the answer. A prime example of this is how the service has attempted to stem the tide of what it calls its pilot shortage crisis. The pilot shortage for fiscal year 2017 closed at 1,812 and was most severe in fighter pilot inventory where the deficit was 1,300.<sup>16</sup> By 2020 the projected shortfall is expected to surge to over 2,000 pilots. The AF has not met retention goals for the past four years and has been trending downward since 2010. Since 2015, retention has dropped to 35%, with 1,363 pilots leaving the force.<sup>17</sup> The only policy to mitigate the shortage is the aviation bonus, which is not achieving the 65% “take rate” by pilots; rates were 55% in FY15, 48% in FY16, and 44% in FY17. In June, a retention bonus of \$455,000 was offered to fighter pilots for an extension of 13 years – 5 of 200 eligible accepted, while a total of 122 fighter pilots accepted any form of retention bonus at all in FY17.<sup>18</sup> This crisis demonstrates that the retention problem is not something the USAF can continue to just throw money at in the hopes it will go away.

The USAF has also produced a considerable amount of doctrine focused on management of the force. The LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, located at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, develops and revises all USAF basic and operational-level doctrine, as well as operational-level joint doctrine. The LeMay Center’s task is to develop and communicate to the force how the USAF organizes and employs, and how it operates utilizing best practices and principles. Additionally, it is doctrine that shapes strategy and informs SLs’ judgment on the principles of leading the force. USAF basic doctrine consists of three volumes, Volume 1 “Basic Doctrine,” Volume 2 “Leadership” and Volume 3 “Command.” The LeMay Center quotes its

namesake General Curtis LeMay to articulate just what doctrine is: “At the very heart of warfare lies doctrine. It represents the central beliefs for waging war in order to achieve victory. Doctrine is of the mind, a network of faith and knowledge reinforced by experience which lays the pattern for the utilization of men, equipment, and tactics. It is the building material for strategy. It is fundamental to sound judgment.”<sup>19</sup>

However, while codified doctrinally, there is arguably a gap between that doctrine, prioritization, and pragmatic execution of how best to develop talent. The USAF has recently attempted to fill this gap with its Profession of Arms Center of Excellence (PACE), located at Randolph AFB, Texas. In 2015, then CSAF General Mark Welsh directed the activation of PACE, and tasked it with the responsibility of being the service champion for infusing USAF core values within the profession of arms.<sup>20</sup> Much like the U.S. Army’s Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE), PACE’s challenge is to take doctrine, SL vision and strategy and bridge the gap between these monolithic documents to accessible and pragmatic ideas or a culture that Airmen can internalize.<sup>21</sup> While the concept of PACE is sound, and has merit, what it espouses has fallen on deaf ears, as it has lacked the SL support and identification as a top priority in the development of USAF officers. The Army’s CAPE on the other hand has sustained SL support and is identified as a key priority by General Milley, U.S. Army Chief of Staff. That said, the USAF could learn from its sister service and apply best practices and lessons learned if SLs determined that leadership and professional development were indeed an emerging crisis situation, much like that of its pilot shortage.

The USAF faces an evolving, complex environment of near-peer threats, and ongoing conflicts against a number of Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) across the globe. New domains like cyber and space continue to evolve where the USAF must be able to hold the “knowledge and skill high ground.” This requires an ever-increasing stock of officers with enhanced ability to rapidly adapt and learn new concepts and skills, while at the same time cultivating an understanding of officership as a profession. As an evolving, knowledge-based force of the future, the USAF must be smarter, more flexible and intellectually agile than its adversaries. It must be able to manage wicked problems, advise and inform strategic decision makers and think critically. Our expectations of the future force are growing. The USAF’s ability to deliberately develop Airmen leaders must as well. The stark reality is that the competitive environment in which the USAF operates for talent is evolving and will place a high demand on quality workers with the aptitude and willingness to lead others. The USAF will compete for talent in this environment and must be able to identify and provide the right incentives, tailored training, and personalized, deliberate leadership development to retain talent.

### The Problem

The USAF has consistently struggled in the area of deliberate professional development of its officer corps. The doctrine exists, as does the established USAF center for excellence, but it has failed to gain traction or notoriety. This failure could well be due to *professional development of leaders* being a subject so ethereal, versus the tangible nature of training to a concrete skill that can be measured. So, while the USAF may very well train the best pilots, missileers, logisticians, and maintainers, the development of an officer in the profession of arms is much more than learning a trade or skill. Managing talent and developing professionals is a complex process based on a

number of critical internal and external factors. These factors include the organization of the USAF, existing paradigms on how best to sustain the force, SLs' biases, and external influences such as alternative employment in the corporate civilian sector. And, while the USAF and its SLs proclaim "people are paramount" and mission success hinges upon talented Airmen, there is a dichotomy in the service. An organizational culture exists in the force where machines and technology often serve as the focal point for research and development, versus the growth and progress of the human element. This is clearly evident in the lack of emphasis and prioritization given by the USAF and its SLs on leadership development, the concept of the profession and the military as a profession. In a service dominated by man-machine interface, the importance of deliberate professional development (vice skill set training) has waned. These agents constantly interact with one another, making predictability almost an impossibility.

The number of factors involved in effectively developing human capital and retaining talent are manifold. Competing demands, fiscal constraints, ongoing conflict that is battering the force and morale make the problem set complex. It can be described as a system; more specifically a Complex Adaptive System (CAS). Mitchell Waldrop in his work *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos*, best captures this type of problem as being on the edge of chaos, "where the components of a system never quite lock into place, and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence...where systems are spontaneous and alive."<sup>22</sup> The USAF as an organization, with its contending demands, mission primacies, exemplifies being on the edge of chaos, as Waldrop describes. A system on the edge of chaos, according to Waldrop, creates feedback, positive and negative, causing the system to adapt and self-

organize. This CAS is a network of agents acting in parallel. But, as Waldrop points out, "...each agent finds itself in an environment produced by its interactions with other agents in the system, constantly acting and reacting...and because of that, nothing in the environment is fixed."<sup>23</sup> Describing the talent management issue as such partly explains why this problem is so difficult to solve. The talent management problem can best be described as a "wicked problem," as manifested by the fact that the USAF has yet to determine what "right" looks like. But, the USAF has arguably been attempting to fix this wicked problem using binary thinking (yes/no; black/white; start/finish) versus directional thinking (lighter grey/darker grey, an experiment, an opportunity to learn, smart-ish, safer, right-ish, wrong-ish, finished-ish).<sup>24</sup> As the problem has persisted, evolved and grown, the USAF has been mired in its own paradigm thinking with how best to solve the problem versus being innovative in its solution sets. In Daniel Priestley's academic article, *Binary Thinking Versus Directional Thinking*, he asserts that in a binary world, the world, and its problems, are linear, and that things occur in an orderly, sequential fashion.<sup>25</sup> Coincidentally, order, sequential and standardized all characterize the bureaucratic share of the service, and how it approaches problem solving in an efficient manner. Priestley goes on to say, "The largest and most powerful part of your brain loves the idea that this is how the world works. It craves the clarity of a world that unfolds in a straight line. It's happy if there's a plan and it takes comfort that if we stick to it, everything will be ok."<sup>26</sup> Success and effective problem solving, especially when dealing with a wicked problem associated with a CAS, involves multiple networks operating in parallel, while having the courage to lead and implement a paradigm shift to promote innovative solutions.

United States Air Force officers are not deliberately developed in the profession of arms during the most formative years of their careers. They train to be the masters of their trades, then follow a very narrowly defined, “one-size fits all” career path. From that point until reaching the rank of Colonel, development is largely managed through functional officers at the USAF Personnel Center (AFPC), an institutional bureaucratic field operating agency of Headquarters, USAF, Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower and Personnel. The AFPC promotes efficiency as its principle methodology, assuming every officer’s goal is to be a General Officer, and therefore manages career progression accordingly, historically with little input from the member or their commander, and with little consideration for their talents. This assumption on behalf of AFPC blinds it to the fact that there even is a problem requiring critical thought.<sup>27</sup> This bureaucratic system is a key force driving the talent management problem. Don Snider in his work, *The U.S. Army as a Profession*, refers to the tension between bureaucracy and the profession; the notion of the elusive nature of bureaucracy, and its potential to “...come to predominate over profession.”<sup>28</sup> Snider states that “...success in professional practice stems from effective and ethical application of the expertise – the patient is cured, the case is won, the conflict is deterred or, if not, settled on terms favorable to the U.S. Thus, efficiency ranks behind effectiveness as a measure of success for professions.”<sup>29</sup> And, while efficiency has its place in the institution, and in many ways is unavoidable, “it can be a cause for considerable tensions, both for the individual professional and for the institution as a whole.”<sup>30</sup>

The USAF’s strategic document for human capital and talent management gives insight into what USAF SLs see as the roadmap for personnel development. A review of

the Human Capital Annex (HCA) to the USAF SMP also gives insight to the antiquated system the USAF bureaucracy uses to manage its talent. The HCA outlines a flexible system to leverage the variety of talent in the USAF. However, it highlights a theory-practice mismatch: “The detailed, personal management of the small subset of Airmen who possess those ever-shifting skills, special experiences, and high potential will enable the strategic agility the USAF of the future demands.”<sup>31</sup> This assertion that only a “small subset of Airmen,” also known as High-Potential Officers (HPOs), possess the talent and ability to be future leaders is ignoring the importance of identifying and nurturing the talent of all Airmen. This imperfect lens is indicative of an outdated system prone to mismanagement of human capital and talent.

The USAF talent management system is entrenched in the belief that HPOs must be identified and groomed early for SL positions. Contending that high-performing officers equate to HPOs is not always the case; in fact, quite the contrary.<sup>32</sup> The risk of this assertion is that once identified as an HPO, that officer’s talent will be managed through unique developmental and broadening opportunities while other talent goes undeveloped. This becomes a perpetual cycle resulting in large numbers of officers feeling undervalued and eventually leaving for a more rewarding position outside the service. The danger in this mismanagement of talent is manifold. Officers enter the force with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and abilities. Some bloom early, while others hit their stride later in their careers. Another reality for consideration is evident from developmental psychology: people change their minds, re-prioritizing their goals based on new interests. For these reasons, the USAF’s methods of identifying and investing the time and resources to develop talent are unhealthy for the future force.

Officers join the force with the expectation of not just learning a skill or trade but becoming a member of a profession.<sup>33</sup> However, this human capital is raw, inexperienced, and lacks judgment. Much like the U.S. Army cannot expect a brand-new second lieutenant to effectively lead a platoon his first day on the job, or a pilot to employ their aircraft the first day in pilot training, the service cannot expect junior officers to fully embrace the profession of arms. It cannot suppose a young CGO understands that they are a part of a “trusted, disciplined and relatively autonomous vocation whose members provide a vital service to society, provide this service by developing and applying expert knowledge, earn the trust of society through ethical, effective, and efficient practice, and establish and uphold the discipline and standards of their art and science.”<sup>34</sup> This requires deliberate development on the part of the USAF and its SLs. The system of personnel management has not prioritized this, and the bureaucracy has exceeded its mandate and purview of management, spilling over into development of leaders, a responsibility for leaders as “commander business” and is now a product of biases within an outdated paradigm. Part of this can be attributed to the reductions in force that have led to commanders not having the time or resources to develop young junior officers. Commanders have been forced to load-shed and delegate the development of junior officers to focus on more objective, measurable mission critical items. The USAF must identify this as a critical enabler of the problem and prioritize a solution to enable commanders to lead in developing future leaders.

Today, the USAF must attract a new generation of officers, with new and different demands and expectations regarding their personal and professional lives.<sup>35</sup> And, when the talent management system did not adapt and evolve to these indicators

the retention issue reached a tipping point, as the junior part of the force signaled its dissatisfaction by opting out at increasingly growing rates.<sup>36</sup> Growing opportunities in the civilian labor force provided the supply for officers' demand, highlighting to the USAF an increased threat of military talent drain.<sup>37</sup> The USAF will continue to compete for talent in this competitive environment until it adapts and provides the right incentives to attract and retain talent. Coincident with the challenge of competing demand, the USAF faces an evolving threat environment of near-peer adversaries, non-state actors, and trans-national terrorism. This requires an officer corps with enhanced ability to adapt and learn new concepts and skills. The USAF's expectations of the future force are growing, but its ability to deliberately develop the right mix of talent is not. As a profession that answers to its elected government officials, civilian leaders demand USAF SLs develop its talent. The force must evolve and modernize, not only with machines and technology, but transform how it perceives, manages and develops human capital.<sup>38</sup> The USAF HCA attempts to guide what the future force will look like. However, it fails to accurately address talent development. The HCA comes to false conclusions with how Airmen view service in the force, and what inspires them to serve. It asserts, "Service as an Airman is both an honor and a privilege...requires significant sacrifice which is rewarded by the trust which the American public affords our Service."<sup>39</sup> While this is undoubtedly true, can young officers be expected to internalize this without the USAF instilling this culture of thought? It goes on to state, "The demands of service require Airmen to be motivated, resilient, adaptable, and capable of meeting the unique challenges inherent in the profession of arms."<sup>40</sup> This begs the question; where in a junior officer's career does this happen deliberately? Additionally, this message is not

prioritized by USAF SLs and publicly addressed as a critically focus area. Once again, the USAF makes a dangerous assumption that it has communicated the message and intent effectively, and that it has nurtured young Airmen to meet these lofty goals.

The relatively new talent management team of the USAF and AFPC is rooted in an outdated, bureaucratic paradigm of how the force has managed this problem for decades. And, while it is a change, it is not innovative, nor does it address the root cause of retention, but merely the symptoms. The organizational change is indicative of biases held by the USAF and its SLs that AFPC should manage talent, and lacks the creative thinking that would point to the need for personal leader imperative to face this problem. Complex problems require critical thought and innovative solutions, but most importantly courageous leadership on behalf of USAF SLs. It requires courage to take risk after scanning the environment, listening to divergent thought, and empowering their teams to be innovative. This courage extends to the same SLs supporting and delegating talent management to subordinate commanders and courage on behalf of the wing, group and squadron commanders to assume that role and identify with it.

The human dimension of the profession of arms is the most critical aspect of developing talent in junior officers. It is a necessity that as junior officers they are built, taught, led and developed into the profession and culture. The USAF and its SLs cannot assume that young officers, especially in a service so significantly oriented towards things versus people, and training versus development, are able to internalize what it means to be an Airman. The USAF assumes young officers somehow naturally adopt what it means to be an Airman. Quite the contrary, these officers must be inculcated into the profession if the USAF expects them to identify with their role. The USAF sends

its officers to Lackland AFB for over six months to learn how to become defenders in the security forces. It brings its young officers to Sheppard AFB for almost eight months to learn how to be the best maintenance officers in the world. And, undergraduate pilot trainees go to one of four flying training bases for a year to learn the basic skills to fly, followed by upwards of six to ten months for more advanced training in their particular airframe. In a sobering comparison, the USAF sends its CGOs to Squadron Officer School (SOS) for a five-week course at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama as a “re-blueing” to learn the profession of arms and leadership skill sets. And, while SOS fills the Professional Military Education box at the CGO level, it does little to build a junior officer’s understanding of the profession they have committed to, what is expected of them as officers and leaders, and how it will eventually be their responsibility to build future leaders. If the USAF’s goal is to have a future force capable of deterring and defeating our adversaries, officer professional development must be deliberate and a communicated priority at the SECAF and CSAF levels. Part of this growth must include ensuring officers are motivated, challenged, and empowered, while being vested in the USAF culture.<sup>41</sup> The USAF must take action now, from doctrine expansion and pragmatic implementation, to SL priority messaging, to practice in order to create a culture where officers identify as Airmen, are purposely indoctrinated into the culture, and feel valued for their individual talents and worth to the organization.

### Solution

The USAF must actively develop a more robust leadership doctrine that can be operationalized, understood and applied throughout the force by commanders for the development of future leaders. It must be tangible, measurable, and linked to pragmatic practice. Equally important, it must be prioritized by leaders at all levels up to the CSAF

and the SECAF. Humanizing the problem of talent management is imperative if the USAF SLs want to be proactive in solving its retention problem. Pulling talent management from the bureaucracy to the profession is a paradigm shift that is necessary. Officers must be motivated to stay, and that motivation must begin as soon as they enter the force. To do this, people need to feel valued for their inherent skills and talents, be challenged by their commanders and empowered to learn, make mistakes and grow. Because no two Airmen are alike, this cannot happen remotely. This development cannot happen via a functional officer at AFPC, thousands of miles away through email or by an automated system, who only knows the officer he or she is dealing with by a personnel file. Professional development and nurturing talent happens through leadership and direct, deliberate engagement. That said, why would the USAF sustain a system that sees and manages each Airman the same?

USAF talent management teams, as well as internal and external think tanks have identified and recommended several programs to help retention within the officer corps. And, while these programs show significant merit, they only provide one half of the solution. Before the USAF commits to a massive overhaul of the organizational structure of the force, or commit hundreds of millions of dollars to these programs, it must focus on getting CGOs to the point in their career where they can actually take advantage of these programs. Additionally, close attention must be paid to what the motivating factors are for the new generation of officers. Can USAF SLs assume that more money, shorter hours, a nice office with a comfortable chair or a parking spot is what motivates an officer to stay? It begs the question, what does motivate?

A lack of deliberate, professional development of the officer corps, starting at its most junior levels, leads to disillusioned, disenfranchised, and jaded officers that ultimately leave the force. In addition to incorporating revolutionary and innovative personnel programs, the USAF must establish a grass roots, codified talent management program, initially focused on coaching, mentoring, building and leading junior officers. This primary focus on CGOs will enable SLs to target the major arterial bleed where it involves retention of talented personnel. It will also provide the largest return on investment in that it hones in the target group that will have both mid and long-term effects on the force of the future.

If the USAF's goal is to have a future force capable of deterring and defeating our potential adversaries, the human element is an imperative in the equation. That human element will be the talented, best and brightest American society has to offer. But, equally important is a human element that is motivated, challenged, empowered and vested in the USAF culture as a profession of arms, not just a job. The USAF not only needs talent, but talent that is "all in" and has internalized not only what they do but why they do it on a personal and professional level. SLs and commanders at all levels must realize that they can have the smartest, most creative Airmen in the world, but if they do not feel like they are a part of the culture, if they do not feel valued for their individual talents and their worth to the team, if they are not being developed or invested in...they will walk. To solve the professional development problem, the USAF should delegate the authority for talent management and officer development to commanders at the Major Command (MAJCOM), Wing (WG) level and below, to include groups and squadrons. The set of proposals for talent management and officer development are a

framework for USAF SLs to consider. These five proposals are largely anchored in the idea of restoring “commander business” in the rightful hands of those commanders, and enabling the profession versus the bureaucracy.

### Recommendations and Way Forward

These proposals (five in all) are by and large anchored in delegating responsibility and authority to the MAJCOM and WG Command levels, and restoring “commander business” in the rightful hands of those commanders, and in turn the profession versus the bureaucracy. The first recommendation is the establishment of Talent Management Teams. These teams will be codified at the MAJCOM level and tracked jointly by the MAJCOM A-1 (Manpower-Personnel-Services) and A-9 (Innovation, Analyses and Leadership Development) Directors. The teams themselves will be executed at the WG level, chaired by the WG/CC and/or Vice Commander (CV) and manned by the Mission Support Squadron CC of each respective base, along with SQ/CC selected CGO action officers (AOs) from all career fields represented on that base. The purpose of these teams is to identify trends, concerns, career needs and aspirations, and creative ideas for talent use and broadening. The serves as the WG/CC’s talent management think tank, and is empowered by the WG/CC to implement diversity in thought and action in order to best represent their fellow CGOs.<sup>42</sup> The AOs will meet on a weekly basis, followed by monthly meetings with the WG/CC and/or CV.

The second recommendation is the development of a Flight Commander (Flt/CC) course. With the premise that it is imperative to empower and challenge officers and stimulate critical thought, professional maturity and creative solutions, it is of fundamental importance the most subordinate officer leaders in the command chain

play a role in changing how the USAF manages talent. The purpose of the Flt/CC course is to teach senior CGOs that are currently Flt/CCs or will be soon, what their role is in building, teaching, leading and developing future leaders. They will also learn how to manage talent at the flight level with regard to expectations of mentoring, formal counseling, formal and informal leadership traits and characteristics, and how to build on and develop flight member's talents. Flt/CCs will learn the do's and don'ts of HPO identification, as well as understanding the relationship between building, developing and evaluating. The course itself will be built and authorized at the MAJCOM level, approved by the MAJCOM CC and tracked by the A-9 Director. It will also be executed at the MAJCOM level, bringing Flt/CCs to the MAJCOM HQs for a three-day course to be chaired by the MAJCOM A-3 (Operations, Plans and Requirements) and A-9, with a Capstone briefing by the MAJCOM CC or CV. The three-day course will include key leader engagements (KLEs) with SQ, Group (Grp), WG, and Numbered Air Force (NAF) CCs, as well as guest speakers from industry leads and human resource, talent management experts. Additionally, behavioral scientists and guest speakers from the USAF Profession of Arms Center of Excellence (PACE) will brief the course attendees. The course will be held bi-annually and will emphasize the role Flt/CCs play in developing young CGOs. This will reinforce the expectation that Flt/CCs are to be challenged and empowered to lead, and responsible for developing the officers they in turn will evaluate via Officer Performance Reports (OPRs). This will have the dual effect of not only developing the young CGO, but the Flt/CC as well as he or she takes on more responsibility and authority with less oversight and direction. This small change has the potential to have a great effect.<sup>43</sup>

The third recommendation is standing up Talent Management Boards at the wing level. Because of the impact and necessity to ensure standardization, the board purpose and criteria will be codified at the HQ, Air Force level with the AF-A1. This will ensure consistency of effort and results throughout the force. The board will be executed at the wing level and reviewed by NAF CCs and MAJCOM CCs for their respective wings. The boards are two-fold; there is a “pre-board” that is chaired by the Operations Group Commander (OG/CC) and attended by other Grp/CCs and all SQ/CC’s within each Wing. The “pre-board” is followed by the primary board, that is chaired by the WG/CC and attended by all Grp/CCs. The purpose of the board is to identify talent criteria, concurrence on what attributes determine HPOs, review officers on the HPO list as derived from Flt/CC inputs and SQ/CC and Grp/CC determination at the “pre-board,” and discuss measures to enhance performance and talent of the officer corps as a whole. Additionally, the WG/CC will review the Talent Management Team’s feedback, as well as review and allocate career broadening and progression opportunities. The emphasis will be strongly in favor of a focus on mass talent review and development versus reverting to only a select few. The meetings will be held quarterly, with due out reports to NAF and MAJCOM CCs, as well as MAJCOM A-1 and A-9 Directors.

The fourth recommendation involves building on an existing course in the USAF. The recommendation is to enhance the existing 5-day SQ/CC Course currently provided for all incoming SQ/CCs. The enhancement is focused on mentoring, the SQ/CC’s role and its importance. The course itself will remain codified at the MAJCOM level with the A-9, but approved by the MAJCOM CC. It will be executed at the MAJCOM HQs bi-

annually and run by the MAJCOM A-9 with MAJCOM CC oversight and attendance. Key Leader Engagement will include SLs from all MAJCOM Directorates, PACE, behavioral scientists, and Capstone briefings from the MAJCOM CC. The focus will be on the importance of mentoring and the role of the SQ/CC. Specifically, the SQ/CC will learn the importance of how to discuss gameplan/career options with CGOs, expectation management and timeline for progression/promotion. KLE will include discussion of distilling and articulating what as a professional force the USAF values as a culture, as well as what it measures and evaluates. The role of mentor and mentee will be discussed, and PACE will provide a “re-blue” day where SQ/CCs are immersed in the core concepts of the profession of arms to provide them time to reflect and internalize. The SQ/CC course is a critical linkage in the recommendations as the SQ/CCs serve as the embedding and reinforcing agents to the much larger talent management program and its objectives.

The last recommendation is the development and execution of a SL information operation (IO) campaign for the talent management initiative. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) owns this but delegates it to his MAJCOM CCs for implementation. The message is executed at Commander Calls, base visits, via social media and weaved into formal and informal meetings with the staff. The purpose of this IO campaign is to communicate SL focus and imperative on the initiative. It reflects buy-in by the subordinate MAJCOM CCs, and serves as an embedding and reinforcing tool to carry and sustain the talent management programs. From a macro-level, it facilitates organizational change and emphasizes the importance of the objective. Incorporation

and buy-in at all levels discussed above is necessary to ensure the talent management program initiatives have the best chance for success.

### Challenges and Counterarguments

Resistance to this idea may very well come from our organizational culture, pointing to the maxims “Mission First and Service Before Self,” and that appealing to the individual and their preferences is a detriment to the institution and its mission.

Opponents will say that while the USAF would like to promote everyone and meet everyone’s career goals, it is simply not feasible. However, those arguments miss the point. Service Before Self does not mean Service Only, No Self. And, closer scrutiny of the issue would show that a more innovative approach to talent management would actually serve the USAF better in the long term. The ask is not for every officer getting what they want. The push is for a renewed, codified focus on building, teaching and developing officers. This is about informing, mentoring and coaching in conjunction with a more open talent management system; informing the officer of the tenets of the profession, expectations, the environment, and commanders learning who their junior officers are in way of their career aspirations, strengths and weaknesses. In turn, the USAF is more informed of their pool of talent and how best to not only develop them, but how to vector and retain them and their individual talents.

Critics, to include SLs charged with making strategic decisions will charge “why change what’s not broken.” These leaders may espouse that the system worked well for them, why should it not for others? And, while leaders are known to promote younger versions of themselves, this bias is dangerous in that it will serve as a barrier to innovative and necessary changes. SLs must be aware of these biases and assumptions, and the lenses they see the force through.

## Summary and Conclusions

The USAF has long been guilty of poorly managing its talent and focusing much of its development emphasis on the few versus the many. The USAF has failed to adequately develop officers early in their careers. SLs have not asked the right questions to get at the root cause of the problem. The USAF has not taught the right lessons or built the right professional foundation for Airmen to feel a part of the profession of arms. The result has been overlooking and under developing a large portion of talent that ultimately leaves the profession because they felt undervalued, underutilized, unchallenged and disenfranchised. With an all-volunteer force, the USAF has in the past had a vast pool of eligible candidates from which to choose. But, as it moves into its twenty-third consecutive year of combat operations and high operational tempo and budget constraints, coincident with competing opportunities in the job market, that pool of talent and access to it may be in crisis. As the USAF continues to grapple with retention problems, a red flag should be waving, warning current and future SLs to scan the environment, apply critical thought to this wicked problem, and lead the organization in innovative change. If the future force is predicated upon talented people, then discussions must occur now to affect that future. While the future is uncertain, and the probability of unknown second and third order effects is indisputable, these are the strategic decisions that SLs must have the courage and forethought to make, and make now.

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