

## MILITARY

# Transparency and Trust

Kaleth O. Wright, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force

**Interviewed By:** CMSgt Sadie Chambers, USAF

**Note:** This interview was conducted in two parts. The first part was prior to the National Character & Leadership Symposium at the United States Air Force Academy in Feb 2019. The second part was conducted right after the Symposium concluded.

**Chambers:** Thank you for agreeing to this interview. You mention the importance of putting on your mask first when it comes to resiliency and striking the right balance. Is there a personal leadership story where that comes from?

**Wright:** It really doesn't come from one story, but my years of experience as a leader and as a person really, in trying to maintain some type of balance. I refer to it as harmony. When I first became a front line supervisor in the mid-90s, and started taking care of other people, I realized that at some point along the journey that I spent a lot of time taking care of everybody else and not a lot of time taking care of me. I went to a class one time where they mentioned putting on your mask first, as a metaphor and it just stuck with me.

I never really paid much attention to it, but it really hit home after my first year in this job where I got a little tired and broken down from all of the travel and the engagements. I did a lot of speaking my first year and I realized I in the midst of all that I wasn't getting to the gym and I wasn't eating right. I wasn't meditating. I wasn't doing the things that I needed to do to take care me. So, I just think it's extremely important.

Most of us, certainly when we get into leadership positions, tend to think of it as being selfish when someone says you need to take care of you. But, I think it is actually selfless because if you don't take care of yourself, then you can't take care of the folks that you are responsible for. You can't be the best husband or the best wife, or

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**Chief Master Sergeant Kaleth O. Wright** is the 18th Chief Master Sergeant of the United States Air Force. In that capacity, he serves as the senior enlisted member in the Air Force and is responsible for providing guidance and direction for the 410,000 member enlisted force. Chief Wright entered the Air Force in 1989 and has served in numerous positions such as professional military education instructor, dental assistant, flight chief, superintendent, and command chief on multiple occasions. He earned his Bachelor's Degree in Business Management, his Master's Degree in Business Administration, and has numerous other certifications at the executive level.

the best supervisor, or the best wingman if you have unresolved physical, mental, and spiritual matters. It has become a key focus area for me and I like to talk about it when I am talking leadership because there are a lot of different leadership philosophies, a lot of different tips and characteristics, but if you don't take care of you, you aren't in a position to take care of others.

**Chambers:** As a religious affairs Airmen by trade, I love a resiliency tie. With that idea of leadership in mind, how well does the Air Force set leaders up for success?

**Wright:** I would say that we do a good job with setting leaders up for success. However, I always think we can do better in preparing leaders for challenges. I think where we need to get a little bit better is anticipating the challenges of tomorrow. What we dealt with when I was a young Airmen and NCO, and even Chief, is different from what young leaders, Command Chiefs, Squadron Superintendents, First Sergeants, Flight Chiefs, and Wing Commanders will experience. It is different. The environment has changed. We have less people, less squadrons, more missions, more

can get that into the courses within a matter of a month or two.

Leadership development is a combination of education, training, and experience. I would say we do a pretty good job of educating our senior leaders though PME and some of the other leadership development opportunities. I'll speak specifically for our enlisted senior NCOs, we probably still have more work to do in being more deliberate about the developmental opportunities and experiences that they get en route to becoming a First Sergeant or a Command Chief. So, I would give us a B+ as there is always room to grow.

**Chambers:** In previous talks, you have addressed the "Airman of the Future," and the characteristics that they will need. They need to be well trained, well led, agile, and resilient Airmen. Can you expand on the hybrid concept of what an agile Airman looks like and how that will influence how they will be led?

**Wright:** Absolutely. Right now, we have the majority of our Airmen trained in a stovepipe...in operations, medical, maintenance, support career fields, what have you. It is not purposeful for someone to have two Air

Force Specialty Codes (AFSCs). If someone does have two AFSCs, it's generally because they retrained from one to the next. It's not very often that we purposefully say, we are going to train you as a defender and as a pavement specialist so that you can defend the airfield, but if it

gets damaged, you can also repair it. We do it a little bit within stovepipes. For example, in maintenance you can think of a crew chief who can do a number of different things. However, mostly we stay within our stovepipes, unless we need to rebalance the force or because of personnel needs. I think the future of conflict will require us to think differently about how we train, what we need, and our ability to rapidly take

*You can't be the best husband or the best wife, or the best supervisor, or the best wingman if you have unresolved physical, mental, and spiritual matters.*

deployments, and so forth. I think as long as we can keep pace...and what I really like that we've done is that we've loosened some of the reigns on some of our Professional Military Education (PME) Programs. Before, it was really difficult to update curriculum and it was really difficult to add something. If the world changed, and we said let's get it into all of the PME courses, it would take us about 18 months. Now, we

damage, assess it, repair it, and keep pressing with whatever mission we might be doing.

Now, there is a lot of ad hoc stuff that occurs. Sometimes we will send a religious affairs Airmen to Afghanistan or Iraq and they get there and work in the chapel and they find out that we also need them to drive a vehicle outside the wire to get this team to where they need to go. Most of our Airmen just adapt. We give them some pretty good training before they deploy, and most of us just figure it out whatever job we are given. But, I don't think that is necessarily the right way to do it. I don't propose that every Airman have dual AFSCs and are trained and have some type of hybrid background. But, I think we should be really smart about it and think where does this work, what percentage of Airmen would it work with, and what else we could be doing with medics, defenders, engineers, etc.? I think it is something that we really need to explore as we go forward. I think the nature of conflict as we move toward more peer competition, it will look a lot different than what we have seen in the past and we need to be prepared.

**Chambers:** Changing gears a little bit, what do leaders need to know about the enlisted force?

**Wright:** Our enlisted Airmen are incredibly proud, dedicated, talented, and resilient. I know I always talk about resilience, but what I sometimes fail to highlight is the amount of enlisted Airmen that meet the challenges and move through the tough times and overcome. I've recently been talking about my heroes—a list of Airmen that I have come into contact with and I stay in contact with who are battling things like cancer and Lou Gehrig's Disease (ALS) or have been injured in the Area of Responsibility (AOR) and they keep their heads held high. They just get after it. I think our enlisted Airmen are incredible. They are good teammates and wingmen. That's why I fight so hard because I think we owe it to them for the sacrifices that they make as part of an all-volunteer force.

They decide to come in and serve our country and represent our United States Air Force. So, we owe it to them to make sure they are properly trained, that they have the equipment that they need, their families are taken care of, and that they have the resources available to them. Because when the tough times come, and they always do, we want to make sure that the leadership, their fellow Airmen, and their families are prepared.

I'm not sure what your experience has been with this, but we don't talk a lot about the social pillar of comprehensive Airmen fitness and how important it is to have a group around you that support you. That has been incredible for me. Of all the things that have kept me moving in the right direction, it is because I have had good friends and family and people who have cared about me and were invested in my success around me when things went awry. When you get to more senior positions, and I have never felt that way, I understand why people say it gets lonely at the top because your peer group shrinks. I've developed relationships over the years that I still maintain and I value those relationships. Time is precious and you only live once so I try to take advantage of any opportunities I get. This past weekend I hung out with a bunch of my friends.

**Chambers:** How do you develop trust among those that you lead and that you follow?

**Wright:** I develop trust among Airmen and the folks that I lead by being transparent. I try to be as transparent as possible, whether it is good news or bad news. I try to be as open and honest with them as I can. It takes time to develop trust like in any relationship. I would say that is what really helps me to build and maintain trust in my teammates. I'm open...I'm honest...I'm transparent. I'll let you know what I am thinking. I'll let you know if I like what you are doing or if I don't like it. That seems to help. I would encourage any leader, when it comes to building trust to be open, transparent, and honest with folks and listen. Squint with your

ears. I can't express how important that is. It's not just listening, but hearing what people are saying.

**Chambers:** What are you passionate about?

**Wright:** I am passionate about helping people. Helping people discover their dreams and then helping put them on the path to achieve their dreams. I love to see people being successful. I love it when I meet a young first-term Airman who says, I want to be a doctor or I want to be a pilot or I will be a Chief, and I get to help put them on the path to success by recommending people they can talk to, books they can read or things they can do. How long have you been in the Air Force?

**Chambers:** Almost 19 years.

**Wright:** I also love when I meet a 19-year Senior Master Sergeant who says, "I don't know what I want to do. I haven't figured out what I want to do or be when I grow up." It is just as rewarding to meet someone like that and to be able to sit down and help them hone in on what they are passionate about, what they are good at, and this is what I love doing. Any opportunity I get to help people, in general, and certainly to help people realize and achieve their goals, that is what I am passionate about. I love teaching, mentoring, and coaching.

**Chambers:** How has your character been shaped by your Air Force experience?

**Wright:** In a good way. When I first came in the Air Force, I lacked a lot. I was undisciplined. I didn't like coming to work. I liked fighting. I didn't take my job seriously. I wasn't a good teammate or wingman. I was selfish. I had no idea what I wanted out of life. I was just kind of surviving. Being in the Air Force and being around positive people and having good mentors has really shaped me into the man that I am today. Not just as the Chief, and not just as a leader, but as

the man that I am today. More respectful of everyone. Having more of a positive attitude. I used to have such a terrible attitude. I complained about everything. It didn't matter what it was, I had an issue with it. So, the Air Force has really helped shape me into the man that I am today. I now have a very positive perspective on life, the Air Force, and people in general.

**Chambers:** When did that show up for you?

**Wright:** When I was either an A1C or a Senior Airman, I joined the Base Honor Guard. I had been told to join. I did tons of funerals. At the time, it was a way to get off work and earn some extra money because we got per diem for traveling. That was until I got to present my first flag to the next of kin. I kneeled down and said the canned statement, "On behalf of the President of the United States and a grateful nation..." and I had no idea who the family was. But, I made eye contact with the lady and she started crying. I always say, it was summertime in North Carolina, there was pollen, and my eyeballs started sweating. But at that moment, something just clicked and I thought to myself that I needed to get my act together. I needed to take my Air Force career more seriously. That started the transition. By no means was I perfect, but it was mostly upward.

I really appreciate people who have a background like mine because, success to me is more like a squiggly line. People think you climb the ladder to success and it is an upward trajectory, but on the way I made mistakes and I still had a lot of growing to do. One of the things I decided, when I was a Senior Airman was that I was going to be a Chief. That decision, even when I met a barrier (that was mostly self-inflicted), kept me focused. When I was a Technical Sergeant, I got fired from a job and got a bad Enlisted Performance Report (EPR). It hurt, and I was down for a few days, but it didn't take me long to reroute myself. To tell myself, that I had somewhere I need to be and to get after it. Even when I

had success or won an award, I never thought that I had arrived. I still told myself that I needed to stay focused.

**Chambers:** What does it mean for you to have the 12 Outstanding Airmen<sup>1</sup> here for the National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS) at the Air Force Academy?

**Wright:** I think it is amazing. I have the privilege of chairing the board that selects them and then I get to host them a few months later at my house and get to spend some time with them. I've been involved with this program in some fashion for the last 10 years or so. I know the caliber of Airmen we select to represent our Air Force as the 12 Outstanding Airmen. It is a blessing. They come together and within the first hour, they become like best friends. It's great to see them celebrate each other's success. I always say, "iron sharpens iron," so, it's always good when people like that come together. Any opportunity that I get to see them, spend time with them, and pick their brains about how life is going, what is next for them, how they are feeling, and what they have seen, is a great opportunity. One of the other things that I like about this program is that many of their predecessors (previous 12 Outstanding Airmen) have gone on to become Command Chiefs, MAJCOM Command Chiefs, Career Field Managers, and other very successful positions. Some of them have also gone on and got a commission. I think it is just a testament that we are selecting the right folks to represent our Air Force.

**Chambers:** It really struck me when you were talking at the last Air Force Association Convention about one of your favorite songs being Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come." With that in mind, what changes are coming?

**Wright:** That's a good set up. We will continue to

<sup>1</sup> The Outstanding Airmen of the Year (OAY) Award honors the 12 top Enlisted Service members of the U.S. Air Force. For more information on the OAY, please visit [www.afa.org](http://www.afa.org).

work on the things that we have been talking about such as bereavement leave, joint custody, indefinite enlistments, etc. But the big change that I would like to see over the next couple of years is to revamp our performance management system, or what we know as our Enlisted Evaluation System. That is made up of feedback and our performance reports (or EPRs). We are in the process of making some marginal changes with the form like removing some boxes and moving some items around. But I really would like to revamp the entire thing to get us into a system that really drives performance so when we talk about feedback or an EPR, people really get excited about the prospect of sitting down with their supervisor and having ongoing and regular coaching and feedback. So, I am excited about that. It's a long term project, but I'm hoping we can get moving on that soon. It doesn't have to be completed on my watch, but we need to do the appropriate research and analysis to make sure that we consider all our Airmen and the potential impact. I have a pretty good idea of what I want it to look like, so I am pretty excited about it.

**Chambers:** Any closing thoughts?

**Wright:** I want to say that I am excited to be here. Thank you for letting me be a part of this experience. It's an honor for me to be here.

## Part Two - Post NCLS

**Chambers:** After experiencing NCLS, what are your takeaways, challenges, or highlights?

**Wright:** My takeaway is that I wish I would have attended these all throughout my career. I thought it was a wonderful lineup of great speakers, an opportunity to network and talk with cadets, and see first-hand the enlisted contribution to USAFA. It was overall a great experience. I was telling someone that I would love to attend every year for my own personal

and professional development. The highlight for me was Dr. Brené Brown. I really enjoyed her presentation about vulnerability and courageous leadership. I also kind of envy her speaking style. This (NCLS) is a great opportunity and not widely known about for a lot of folks.

**Chambers:** What message do you have for the enlisted Airmen serving at USAFA and how important they are in educating, training, and inspiring men and women to become leaders of character motivated to lead the United States Air Force and our nation?

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**Wright:** I have the same message for them that I have for defenders at every base we have in the United States Air Force. You are the first impression for any person that comes onto an installation. So, for the enlisted folks that work here, you are the very first impression for future officers. You need to be on your game, be sharp, and represent all of us well. It was so nice to see so many sharp enlisted Airmen...Academy Military Trainers (AMTs), the 10th Air Base Wing, and others throughout the base supporting USAFA. Stay sharp...stay focused...make sure our cadets know that when they are commissioned, they will have a corps of enlisted Airmen that will be there to support them.

**Chambers:** You were able to see the 12 Outstanding Airmen panel, how do you think they did and do you think the Outstanding Airmen of the Year platform to

influence future leaders is something that we should continue doing here at USAFA?

**Wright:** I think they did great. Everyone got a chance to express themselves and they were very genuine in their answers. I really do think that panel and that platform is something that we should continue doing at NCLS. It is good for them to get a chance to see the best of the best.

**Chambers:** I have one last question for you. You referenced that leaders are learners, so what books, videos, or podcasts are listening to, watching, or reading. Are there any that you keep going back to?

**Wright:** I go back to *The Alchemist*<sup>2</sup> often. *Helping People Win at Work*<sup>3</sup>, is one I go back to often because it is helping shape my thoughts about our new performance management system. Another one that I go back to often is *The Go-Giver*<sup>4</sup>, because

it just talks about the importance of adding value to other people. My go-to podcast is called *Tribe of Mentors*, which is a compilation of successful people talking about how they became successful with their daily habits. Those are my go-to sources.

**Chambers:** Any final thoughts?

**Wright:** I want to say thank you to USAFA and the team for taking care of us. Every time I come out here, it is a great experience. I love interacting with USAFA and the cadets and am looking forward to my next trip.

<sup>2</sup> Coelho, P. (2014). *The Alchemist*. HarperOne.

<sup>3</sup> Blanchard, K., & Ridge, G. (2009). *Helping People Win at Work: A Business Philosophy Called "Don't Mark My Paper, Help Me Get an A"*. FT Press.

<sup>4</sup> Burg, B., & Mann, J. (2015). *The Go-Giver: A Little Story About a Powerful Business Idea*. Portfolio.