

PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

Lens X: A Practical Approach to Taking Care of Your People

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ABSTRACT

Graduates of the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), as commissioned officers, are charged to “take care of their people.” While this leadership aphorism makes sense, this article describes what it means in practice. An interdisciplinary USAFA team explored the dynamics of leader development from multiple angles, resulting in a focus on two dimensions (or “lenses”) that help a leader understand what actions can be taken to help an employee achieve subjective well-being at work. The intent is to draw attention to the nature of the interaction with organizational members that foster engagement and need fulfillment. We do that by focusing a leader’s attention on needs, narratives, and micro-exchanges. Those interactions, behaviors, and micro-exchanges are the foundations of and the most tangible, changeable element of climate and culture. This practical lens equips any leader to seize every opportunity to foster fulfillment of the psychological needs for belonging, agency, and efficacy. This framework can be used by anyone but is particularly relevant to supervisors and USAFA cadets who will be entrusted to lead an all-volunteer military force.

Keywords: Leadership, Self-Determination Theory, Belonging, Engagement, Retention

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“Lt, Take care of your people,” said U.S. Central Command General “Stormin” Norman Schwarzkopf, Jr. to Lt Dave Levy in a hangar at an undisclosed location in the Middle East during Operation Desert Shield in the fall of 1990. At some point in their careers, it is probable that most people reading this article, especially military leaders, have been charged to “take care of your people.” This makes sense that is what leaders pledge to do along with accomplishing their missions—take care of their people. But what does it mean in practice? In this article, we share a leadership approach we are incorporating into a number of courses at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA), called Lens X. Lens X illuminates the DNA of what “taking care of your people” means. We hope this discussion will stimulate your thinking about the complex interactions between leaders and employees while being clear about the individual impact of well-being on mission accomplishment.

USAFA is charged by law to develop Leaders of Character that are immersed in the history, traditions, values, and beliefs necessary for the long-term readiness and success of the Air and Space Forces (DoDI 1322.22). And, most importantly, graduates must be equipped to “convey and sustain” that culture (DoDI 1322.22 para 3). As faculty, we understand and embrace this duty as integral to what we do. As researchers, we understand that the three levels of culture are composed of observable artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions and that “culture is constantly reenacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by our own behavior” (Schein, 2010, p. 3). So, to enable cadets who graduate from USAFA to immediately take on leadership responsibilities as a “core group of innovative leaders capable of thinking critically who will exert positive peer influence” (DoDI 1322.22, para 3), we aimed to create a tool to focus them on the most observable and changeable element of culture – their interactions as artifacts of climate (Schein, 2010).

To develop this tool, a USAFA team¹ explored the dynamics of leader development from multiple angles, including interdisciplinary literature from psychology, sociology, and management (e.g. Bandura, 1982, 2018; Berger & Luckman, 1966; Checkland, 1981/2000; Deci & Ryan, 1980; Lewin, 1946), our leadership journeys, and the Academy’s rigorous leadership development course of instruction. The result was a focus on two dimensions (or “lenses”) that help a leader understand what actions can be taken to help an employee achieve subjective well-being and need fulfillment at work. The dimensions spring from agreement with Deci and Ryan’s original work that “both person *and* situation variables affect behavior; similarly, both phenomenological *and* mechanistic variables affect behavior” (1980, p. 33). Also like Deci and Ryan, the intent is to draw attention to the *nature of the interaction* with organizational members that foster their engagement and need fulfillment. We do that by focusing a leader’s attention on needs, narratives, and micro-exchanges. This is important because each year approximately one thousand cadets graduate from the Academy. This translates to graduates potentially impacting hundreds of thousands of volunteer, military personnel, as well as civilians and contractors. Thus, we take the responsibility of contributing to the formation of leaders very seriously.

As a means of illustration and clarification, think for a moment about one of the best experiences you have had at work. How would you describe it? Ask yourself what made it such a positive experience for you?

Here is an example of a positive experience that will help us move forward with our discussion. Taylor took on a new role in the organization, one that had never existed before and one she knew she was not fully

¹ Contributing members represented the Dean of Faculty from Departments of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, Management, former USAFA colleagues, the Athletic Department and the Center for Character and Leadership Development.

prepared for. The role was highly visible and there was quite a bit of pressure to achieve success quickly. In the first few months, Taylor felt as if she was drowning in information and making decisions that could affect the success of the organization, as well as the people within the organization. She had more than a few long days and sleepless nights. Taylor worked very hard and succeeded, but she did not achieve success in a vacuum.

When Taylor reflected on that period of her life, several elements besides hard work stood out as critical to her ultimate success. The first was that on the start day of her new role, her manager said, “This is what we have to accomplish here.” The manager explained the goal, and it was a big one. And then the manager said, “You’ll figure this out, that’s why we selected you. But know that whatever resources you need, come to me and we’ll get them for you.” And that’s exactly what happened. Her manager’s offer was not a blank check. What unfolded was far more valuable; her manager’s mentorship and support through feedback, brainstorming, planning, and just knowing that he had her back bolstered her personal confidence and belief in her ability to do her job. Taylor recounted that some of the most fleeting interactions were the most impactful, such as a warm “Hey Taylor, how’s it going?” as they passed in the hall. Through it all, her manager’s stated intentions were followed up by actions.

In our workshops, classes, and our own personal experiences, we observed what research on the topic of self-determination theory has long shown—innate psychological needs must be fulfilled in sufficient quantities in order for a person to experience subjective well-being. The original work with self-determination theory posited the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1980). For our purposes here, we suggest the needs be modified slightly to agency, efficacy, and belonging. While Deci & Ryan focus broadly on the needs of individuals, we use more current terminology within an organizational context. As an exam-

ple, belonging captures current organizational focus, particularly when it comes to diversity and inclusion, in a way that “relatedness” does not. For use in the organizational context, the needs component is broadened to include a focus on individual needs fulfilled through actions and interactions within the organization, where individual needs and organizational goals are obtained concurrently. For example, belonging (Leary & Baumeister, 1995) can be fostered by your new coworkers wrapping you into the group, treating you as a full member from day one. Agency (Bandura, 2018) is evident when you experience the freedom to accomplish your work as you wish when you are encouraged and trusted to employ your talents, skills, and make appropriate decisions as you navigate the system around you. Finally, efficacy (Bandura, 1982) is having the belief that you can achieve desired outcomes, successfully meeting challenges along the way.

Belonging, agency, and efficacy are seen as needs that must be met in sufficient quantities in order for individuals to experience well-being and to thrive. Thus, every interaction you have as a manager or leader is an opportunity for you to help fulfill those needs for your employees. Every interaction is an opportunity to take care of your people. As you do this, and if your experience is like ours, you too likely will increase your need fulfillment as a leader, increasing your own sense of belonging, agency, and efficacy. An ideal work experience can be seen as one where everyone’s psychological needs are met on an ongoing basis.

Let us revisit our earlier example. Taylor experienced a strong sense of belonging—even though she was new, and in a recently established role, she never doubted that she was seen as a valuable member; at first by the manager, and then through relationships she developed with other team members with the manager setting the example. Second, although Taylor had a steep learning curve, she knew that she could get the resources she needed, which included not only

tangible things like software but also the support and guidance to successfully navigate her way through the organization's systems in order to do the work. Here, Taylor experienced agency. While Taylor worked and sometimes did not always succeed on the first try, the environment created and maintained by her manager enabled her to learn from her actions, apply those learnings, and ultimately succeed. Taylor eventually internalized the knowledge that she could reach the goals set for her, even on days where nothing seemed to go well. Here, Taylor experienced efficacy. How did the "one of the best work experiences" you recalled align with this?

Now recall the most negative work experience you have had. What made it such a negative experience for you? You might know where this is going. Our guess based on having this conversation with many people is that the negative experiences are negative because they fail to foster fulfillment in one or more of the same three areas: belonging, agency, and/or efficacy. Often, these negative examples are the antithesis of need fulfillment. Hostile work environments that destroy any hope of belonging. Extreme micro-managing that provides little to no agency. Or being given tasks that are either insultingly easy to accomplish or far too difficult, destroying the experience of efficacy.

Let us look at another example where fostering belonging, agency, and efficacy is not as straightforward as Taylor's experience. Dean was a superstar employee working in an organization known for its very positive organizational culture. After three years, he quit. When asked why, he said he never felt like he belonged. His colleagues were shocked. His manager said Dean's leaving felt like a dagger to his heart. When digging deeper to better understand why Dean wanted to leave, the manager came to understand that Dean's family experienced significant challenges as Dean was growing up. He also struggled, feeling like an outsider, in his previous organization. Dean had narratives that

greatly impacted how he perceived the work cultures where he was an employee. We all have narratives that arise from the messages we absorb from the environment around us, which influence our sense of need fulfillment. Narratives matter, and they impact how we perceive and experience agency, efficacy, and belonging.

The leader and/or supervisor in our focus here is also aware that the supervisee sees the world through his or her narratives, where the narratives, or stories an individual holds about their world, are filters through which they see the world, and these narratives impact their thoughts and behaviors (Gergen & Gergen, 1997). The leader or supervisor does not know the status of a supervisee's needs or narratives. In fact, the supervisee may not even be aware of a narrative that has come to the fore and impacts how they respond to an interaction or exchange (Zahavi, 2007). Yet, micro-exchanges, as well as any interaction between two people, can impact the narratives within the self (Hermans, 1999). An interaction can trigger reactions in the recipient that have little or nothing to do with the intent of the person who launches the exchange (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Lens X suggests that micro-exchanges can serve as mini-experiments within a critical reflective process (Gray, 2007) the intention of positively impacting the relationship, the recipient of the micro-exchange and the transformation processes within the organization. However, as in any experiment, a mini-experiment requires reflection and analysis on the part of the leader as an important step in the process to realize knowledge that can inform future micro-exchanges (Ploderer et al., 2014). Narratives of interest here take three forms: societal, organizational, and individual. From the example above, we can infer that Dean internalized a narrative from his and his family's experiences that made it difficult for him to experience belonging and organizational and individual narratives that validated his societal experience in spite of cultures that promote belonging for most members.

Since our narratives are largely about individual perceptions and may drive how we experience need fulfillment, managers must tend the garden of agency, efficacy, and belonging for each of their employees. Imagine you are in a meeting with an employee and you ask him if he is familiar with a decision-making tool that you feel could be helpful to him for a project he is working on. He tells you he is not familiar with it. You might be tempted to say something like, “Really? You’ve been here two years and never heard of it?” potentially negatively impacting the fulfillment of one or more of his psychological needs. At this moment, you have a great opportunity to help him experience a deeper sense of belonging, agency, and/or efficacy or do the exact opposite. So what might you do instead? You smile and say something like, “I think you’ll love it, let me show you,” as you grab a marker and draw on the whiteboard, explaining the tool and how to use it. This is one example. Multiply it a thousand-fold and you open up the possibility of incredibly positive personal and organizational impacts.

How do you tend the garden of belonging, agency, and efficacy for each employee? Our answer is micro-exchanges—the small interactions we have with others almost continuously. Micro-exchanges can range from a simple question such as “How’d that meeting go that you were concerned about?” to more complex and iterative interactions such as conversations. The emphasis on micro-exchanges in this article centers on the intersection of the individual and the organization and stems from a nuanced understanding of human needs and organizational dynamics. From this perspective, micro-exchanges are viewed as micro-interventions that have the potential to positively impact individual well-being and performance, as well as the organization’s. In essence micro exchanges are interactions between two people where one person, the leader is aware that the supervisee has needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017) and for Belonging, Agency, and Efficacy (Bandura, 1982, 2006;

Baumeister & Leary, 2017) within the context of his or her work within the organization.

It is important to recognize that none of us are perfect and we likely engage in inadvertent negative micro-exchanges. Leaders should “know and appeal to a short list of widely shared values such as honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion. In other words, don’t assume too little—or too much—commonality with the viewpoints of others” (Gentile, 2010, p. 24). Further, leaders should be forthright about the values they are bringing into decisions and expect value conflicts in order to calmly and competently navigate them (Gentile, 2010). If our intentions are good and we start with positive, widely held values our employees will likely give us a bit of leeway. Intentionality is key, as we select and engage in micro-exchanges in order to have a positive impact on the person’s perceptions of belonging, agency, and efficacy. Intentionality also recognizes that while we will never know what another person’s lived experiences have been or legacies they bring with them, we know that their narratives are not our narratives and we do our best to avoid assumptions while we try to help them fulfill their needs of belonging, agency, and efficacy through the micro-exchanges. It is also helpful to remember how our own psychological needs might affect our exchanges. In what ways do our own needs for belonging, agency, and efficacy interact or compete with others? In some cases, you may need to temporarily subordinate your own needs for agency or efficacy, for example, in order to more authentically engage with others and achieve a future state that is better for all parties involved.

Below is a model that elucidates this approach (Lens X Figure 1). We call this model Lens X for a reason. We use “X” because psychological needs and narratives commonly intersect. In a visual representation, these “lenses” form an “X.” Even more important is that we refer to the model as a lens. A lens is something we look through, a way of seeing the world. The intersecting lenses of needs and narratives narrow a leader’s

Figure 1
Lens X Model²



attention to action research “experiments” to increase a member’s engagement. When you look at your relationships through Lens X, you see needs that you as a leader or a manager can help an employee potentially fulfill through positive micro-exchanges that recognize the unique narratives of each individual. In so doing, you are in a position to make every interaction an opportunity to take care of your people.

Now that we have explored an approach to “taking care of your people” how has your conceptualization of “taking care of your people” shifted? To what extent are your micro-exchanges positive? Negative? What commitment are you willing to make to engage in more positive micro-exchanges from this point forward? How will you tend the garden of belonging, agency, and efficacy for those you interact with? Every interaction is an opportunity to take care of your people. Make yours count.

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² Image design by Rinata Bauzhanova. Image previously published in, “Needs, Narratives and Micro-Exchanges in Organizations: A Values-Based Approach to Organization Development and Change” in the *Organization Development Journal*.

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