

INSIGHTS

Space Force Culture

Chang Suh, United States Space Force

April Brittain, United States Space Force

ABSTRACT

The word culture is a verb meaning to grow something. Only in the past few centuries has it been used as a noun. This tendency has caused confusion about what it is we are actually growing. As the United States Space Force enters its 4th year as a military service, it behooves space professionals and stakeholders to consider the etymology of important words like culture and Guardian. Given the mission priorities of the USSF, the key is for Guardians to focus on growing, influencing, and culturing one another.

Keywords: Space Force, Culture, Leadership

This article is a call to action for Guardians of the United States Space Force (USSF) to help cultivate and grow the USSF culture. One of the more effective ways to influence our culture is by enriching the human experience of being a Guardian. Therefore, how Guardians interact and engage with one another is a valuable (and limited) opportunity.

Often culture feels like something that “happens” to us, rather than something we are empowered to influence. It does not help that there are so many definitions of the word “culture,” and that it is dynamic and multi-faceted. To help us actively participate in influencing the USSF culture around us, this article explores the nature of culture itself, and what the current USSF culture might reveal about who Guardians are, what we do, why we do it, and how we might do better? If Guardians answer this call to action, their participation will surely increase others’ sense of psychological safety, belonging, and significance. What signs of progress might we see indicating we are on the right track? A decrease in risk aversity, an increase in mission command, and deeper human connection—a more agile and team-centric ecosystem—all of which could help move the needle on recruitment, retention, and performance.

CONTACT Chang Suh  cs270@yahoo.com

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However, these are merely conjectures based on assumptions and mental models. As the statistician, George Box once observed: “All models are wrong, [but] some are useful.” So, let us start by exploring some key assumptions.

The late Dr. Edgar Schein, a renowned professor who taught at the MIT Sloan School of Business, defined culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions.” These basic assumptions are unseen (or invisible), not collectively defined across an organization, and, therefore, may be taken for granted. Assuming there is some truth to this idea, it behooves us to take inventory of key assumptions we might share as a community of Guardians and look for meaningful patterns. If, in fact, patterns of how we make assumptions reveal something about our culture, it could potentially inform our decision-making and bias for action. Sun Tzu famously said, “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.” Gaining insight into the patterns of our assumptions might reveal something deeper about ourselves and our shared identity as Guardians.

The desired culture for Space Force is a culture that supports what winning looks like that day. This is an assumption, and it means that if the Russians parachute men in unmarked uniforms into Crimea, then winning might look a little different than if the Chinese send a fleet of balloons over the continental United States. Whoever makes such an assumption, by definition, accepts the statement as true, or as certain to happen, at times without proof. In other words, an assumption is often an inherent belief. Some assumptions are explicit, while others are implicit or even tacit. So, it does not come as a surprise that some assumptions are not even questioned—they are accepted without deep critical analysis or sense of doubt. It is also no surprise that a person might lack the vocabulary to articulate said assumption, since they might not even be aware of having it. Whether a person is aware, or unaware of having a

certain assumption, it still influences the person’s behavior to some extent, since it is encoded in their “individual operating system.”

There are purportedly over 134 definitions of the word culture. For the purpose of this article, we are prepared to assume that they might all be valid, depending on context. What is more germane than the definition(s) of culture is its etymology. The word culture comes from the Latin *colere*, which means “to grow, tend or care for” and also came to mean “to till” as in “tilling the ground.” In fact, centuries ago, the word was used almost exclusively as a verb rather than a noun or adjective, as we do today (as in “he seems very cultured”). It is curious and notable that the root of the word guardian comes from the old French for gardener, or keeper—not the 21st century Martha Stewart gardener, but the ancient gardener whose job was to keep the wolves at bay and the fig trees prospering. The etymology of the word guardian aligns with the Space Force Guardian’s dual function, which is implied in the USSF mission statement: “Secure our nation’s interests in, from, and to space.” The Chief of Space Operations (CSO), USSF, General B. Chance Saltzman, states in his Commander’s Note #16 that “securing our Nation’s interests means protecting the security and prosperity the Nation derives from space.”¹ This dual function implies a dual identity of the Guardian as a Sentinel-Steward. Interestingly, the Delta 7 Detachment 5 patch portrays the Greek demigod Bootes, who is portrayed in mythology wielding a sickle in one hand and a spear (or a shepherd’s crook) in the other. The sickle is an agricultural tool and represents prosperity and the harvesting of crops (hence Bootes is also known as the Ploughman). The spear, on the other hand, is a weapon that represents the sentinel duties of the Guardian. One might argue that the Sentinel-Steward, like Bootes, is a star keeper who wields the tools necessary for protecting both the security and prosperity we derive from space.

1 Saltzman, B.C., C-Note #16, 6 September 2023.

Having established the root of the word culture—and noted its curious relation to the root of the word guardian—we turn to another concept popularized by Dr. Schein. Namely, the idea that assumptions are the building blocks of an organization’s culture, influencing its values and manifesting themselves in human behavior (what he calls artifacts; Schein, 1992). So, let us begin with the artifacts, which are visible and often tangible. Just picture in your mind an archeologist at a dig site. While digging, she might first come across some spoons, forks, and pottery. As she studies the artifacts, she begins to understand how the people lived from the images portrayed on the pottery or the dwelling walls. The archeologist might deduct some of their values from the behavior portrayed (e.g., did they value the community and family?). A deeper study might reveal the assumptions behind these values, such as human beings can hunt together. In this way, Dr. Schein explores in his writings the relationship between assumptions, values, and human behavior. In light of this, we might ask ourselves what influences our USSF assumptions? No need to overthink this one. Part of what drives our assumption is perception (i.e., how we see the world). Our worldview is often informed by our lived experience. Which begs the question: if perception influences our assumptions, then what influences our perceptions? According to the writer Anais Nin, “We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.” In other words, our identity powerfully influences how we choose to perceive the world around us. If the world is a system of interpretations, our identity has a say in how we interpret what we experience.

In February 2023, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Eric Smith, was interviewed about why the U.S. Marine Corps was not struggling, like its sister services, to meet recruitment goals. His answer: “Your bonus [as a marine] is that you get to call yourself a Marine.... That’s your bonus.” In other words, the world’s wealthiest individuals cannot purchase that identity, since it is priceless. And the Marine’s identity influences her/his perception, assumption, values, and behavior.

After all, how difficult is it to walk into a room and spot the Marine? Of course, part of what gives them away is the cultural artifact embodied in dress and appearance. One might say it is also how they behave...their commanding posture.

Assuming that the Guardian’s identity is that of Sentinel-Steward, how might that distinguish them in a crowded room? What traits might be the “undeniable tells” of a Guardian in a room? Down the road, one of those distinguishing characteristics could be the Guardian’s exercise of mission command. Every warfighter associates mission command with centralized control, and decentralized execution, in alignment with Commander’s intent. So why might the Guardian’s exercise of mission command be any different from that of a soldier, airman, or seaman? In the Chief of Space Operations’ Planning Guidance, General John “Jay” Raymond states: “...I direct a default command style of ‘command by negation’ where subordinate echelons are expected to default to action except where a higher echelon has specifically reserved authority.” In an interview with Colonel Chris “Trigger” Fernengel, who helped write the CSO’s Planning Guidance, he observes that mission command for a Guardian means that we do not default to “mother may I—instead we assume greenlight” unless told something specifically is red light (Personal Communication).² In one of his earliest interviews as CSO given in November 2022, General Saltzman emphasizes the importance of mission command. He also foot-stomps the importance of mission command in his Commander’s Note #7, urging USSF leaders to empower the lower echelons to fail forward to learn from mistakes.³ And there is more. In the Guardian Spirit Handbook 1-1, published in April 2023, General Saltzman stresses that the USSF values are “our North Star,” serving as a guide for fulfilling the mission: “We rely on an inner moral compass, Character,

2 Personal Communication. Interview by author with Colonel Christopher Fernengel, Commander of Delta 3, 28 July 2022

3 Saltzman, B.C., C-Note #7, 24 Feb 2023, Barriers to Mission Command.pdf (spaceforce.mil)

and Connection with fellow Guardians as we pursue the mission of the Space Force with Commitment and Courage.”⁴ Said another way, Guardians fulfill their commitments with great courage, and in close consultation with their character. And they do so in a manner that builds connection, rather than decrements it. Our interpretation of mission command is distinctively intertwined with our USSF values.

Another leitmotif (or refrain) we often hear from General Saltzman is the importance of focusing, not only on the challenges, but also the opportunities that lie before us in any given situation. While a risk-averse leader might urge a singular focus on the threat, both General Raymond and General Saltzman have repeatedly emphasized the outsized importance of focusing not only just on the challenges that lay ahead but also the opportunities. This idea aligns with the dual function of the Sentinel-Steward, whose dual priorities are security (threat) and prosperity (opportunities). In an increasingly competitive and contested domain in the context of Great Power Competition, there is a grey zone where prosperity is under sustained duress, just below the threshold of open hostilities. So, the business of culturing or gardening has an unrelenting cadence for the Guardian whose job is to guardian (be the Sentinel-Steward) 24/7.

So, what might Guardians do to help foster a culture aligned with its mission? It is the opinion of these authors that the USSF culture is a CODR: our Culture grows Organically, Deliberately, and Relationally. For instance, we see its organic growth in the Space Force Gaming League, which grew out of the Air Force Gaming League. Without formal authority or abundance of funding, the Space Force Gaming League grew in two years to comprise 1,500 members, which is more than 10% of the total military and civilian Guardian population today. The culture also grows deliberately as shown in the uniform, song, and Guardian Spirit Handbook

⁴ Department of the Air Force, E-publishing website, sph1-1.pdf (af.mil)

1-1.⁵ Finally, our culture grows relationally—meaning it is influenced by how USSF relates to the outside world. If Steve Carell makes fun of the Space Force on Netflix, it can negatively influence how the world perceives the USSF mission and even how Guardians view themselves. Perhaps this is why NASA’s outreach teams invest so heavily in their relationship with Hollywood. In fact, one of the CIA’s most memorable in-reach events purportedly involved having the actor Daniel Craig drive into Langley in an Aston Martin, while the loudspeakers blared the James Bond theme song for the throng of Agency employees cheering in the Langley parking lot. Imagine how those employees might have felt.

One way that Guardians might help *colere* (grow) the culture of Space Force is what we consider the Stop-Drop-Roll technique for cultural leadership: Notice-Influence-Maximize the culture. First, notice the culture around you where you are. And do so while suspending judgment, which will take practice since it is human nature to interpret (and judge) what one perceives. What helps to suspend judgement is to take a posture of curiosity. For instance, if you see Guardians organizing Nerd Nights at the base, one might be tempted to judge them harshly by saying that Guardians belong to a profession of arms and playing games jeopardizes lives. Resist that temptation and instead try to be curious so that you might see not only the threat (challenge) but the opportunities. What you might see is resilient human networks forming deep connections. You might even see people playing games of strategy that enhance neuroplasticity and dexterity.

As you deeply notice the culture around you, you might better perceive opportunities to influence the culture in a way that more optimally aligns with the mission. For instance, a leader might offer to join the 1,500 Guardians in one of their eSports activities or cheer them on as the team competes against other mili-

⁵ Department of the Air Force, E-publishing website, sph1-1.pdf (af.mil)

tary services. If one were to do so, they might notice that the Guardians are speaking with one another through microphones as they operate the keyboards. They are calling each other by their game names (not unlike Call Signs) and having conversations that support mental health. They are bonding in a psychologically safe space, and even connecting with one another after the game for meals and outdoor sports. If Guardians happen to be playing the ancient Chinese board game of Go during a Nerd Night, one might argue that the skills gained could even help Guardians better understand China's strategic culture and, thereby help, USSF in the Great Power Competition. Another example of how you might Notice-Influence-Maximize the culture around you is with the dozens of Guardians who practice jiu-jitsu with one another. On any given morning, walk into the Pentagon gym and you will see Guardians grappling with each other. These Guardians are connecting through martial arts while honing a skill that requires heightened attention to speed, distance, and angles—incidentally skills germane to space warfare. They are also developing a warfighter ethos that comes from having a relationship with fear, pain, and loss. Imagine the opportunities for a leader to notice these grapplers and influence this sub-culture? These are just a few examples of how the USSF can leverage the evolving culture to further the mission.

Every Guardian can help grow the USSF culture. In fact, the best way to influence our culture might be through how we interact with one another. However one defines it, Space Force's culture is intimately tied to the human experience of being a Guardian. Each of us can pause to notice the culture around us (while

suspending judgement) and take a posture of curiosity to see how we might influence the culture to better align our shared identity, mission, and purpose. Harvard Business School reminds us that culture impacts every facet of a business and recommends a few pertinent best practices: role modeling, being attentive to how employees speak to one another, evaluating norms that influence how work-life balance looks, the permissibility of making mistakes—and finally—how each employee feels about their work and organizational environment. By taking close inventory, often, of the behavior we demonstrate as Guardians, the rationale behind the decisions we make, and the accountability we hold one another to, a flourishing human ecosystem and value proposition we call the Guardian experiences emerge.

What will all of the above ultimately take? Courage, Character, Connection, and Commitment. It is the way. Semper Supra!⁶

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⁶ This is the official motto of the USSF. It derives from Latin meaning Always Above.