

FEATURE ARTICLES

Elevating Performance In Organizations

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In 2011, the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) published *Developing Leaders of Character at the United States Air Force Academy: A Conceptual Framework*. Today, the Leader of Character Framework serves as a guide for carrying out the USAFA mission to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the United States Air Force and Space Force in service to our Nation. The Leader of Character Framework consists of three main focus areas:

- Living Honorably
- Lifting Others
- Elevating Performance

This paper focuses on elevating performance, and seeks to enhance the work done in the original Leader of Character Framework document (CCLD, 2011). More specifically, this paper aims to provide greater specificity regarding what elevating performance means in the United States Air and Space Forces, how it can be measured, and how it can be achieved. Importantly, we argue that in order to best serve the needs of United States Air

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and Space Forces, elevating performance should be accomplished in a way that aligns values, processes, and incentives to produce a system of performance that reduces organizational weight and drag and thus, provides lift for organizational members and, ultimately, the organization itself. To do so, this paper is organized around the several important management theories as well as the Air Force's Major Performance Areas of accomplishing the mission, improving the unit, managing resources, and leading people as outlined in AFI 1-2, *Air Force Culture* (AFI 1-2, 2014). We incorporate both the military and academic perspectives in our exploration of this important topic.

The ability to elevate performance is critical for a leader of character because the Air Force and Space Force need individuals and organizations to perform at the highest levels in stressful, demanding situations. Our leaders need to understand how to create environments where people feel like they are contributing and making a difference. This frequently inspires commitment and encourages each individual to give their best and to work with others to ensure the organization is reaching its potential. Most importantly, leaders of character must realize that organizations are complex systems. With this understanding, they can ensure that the decisions they make take into account all the impacted areas of the organization. With a systems lens, leaders of character understand it's their responsibility to put systems in place to encourage and drive higher performance.

There are several constructs that serve as the foundation for how leaders of character elevate performance and which are taken from both the business world and the military. The first construct is flexible and adaptive leadership. Leaders of character function most effectively when they can adapt to new situations and people in order to maximize performance. Next, is moral performance and positive organizational ethics. Leaders of character need to focus on positive, proactive solutions, and not just on preventing misconduct or fixing problems when they arise. The importance of instilling an ethical culture is another area examined as a way to elevate performance. Researchers have identified several characteristics of ethical cultures that can enhance organizational performance and ensure leaders of character are functioning at high levels (Ardichvili et al, 2009). Finally, the recently adopted Major Performance Areas and Airmen leadership qualities that Air Force leaders have approved to serve as the standards for how we "measure, incentivize and reward the Airmen we need for the future" (Air Force.mil, 2 Feb 2021). These management/leadership constructs as well as the Airmen leadership qualities will be discussed to provide a framework for leaders of character that will help them be more effective in their endeavors to elevate performance.

Flexible and Adaptive Leadership

The idea of flexible and adaptive leadership, "involves changing behavior in appropriate ways as the situation changes" (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010, p. 81).

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Many popular leadership books and approaches are based on subjective judgements about aspects of leadership behavior. These resources may not provide a coherent theory to link guidelines and organizational processes that determine successful outcomes. This may leave readers with an overly simplistic view of leadership that is individualistic, one-directional, and

disciplines in this approach makes it very appropriate for a military academy.

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decontextualized (DeRue, 2011; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004). Instead, flexible and adaptive leadership embraces the complexity of the situation, and can amplify or dampen the effect of leadership behaviors on organizational performance. The approach considers efficiency, adaptation, innovation, and human relations as distinct yet interrelated determinants of performance and relies upon related areas of study such as behavioral science, organizational behavior, strategic management, systems, and change management theories (DeRue, 2011; Yukl & Gardner, 2020, Yukl & Lepsinger, 2004;). The reliance on multiple

Air and Space Force leaders must be able to change their leadership styles based on the situation in order to ensure elevated performance in their organizations. Leaders also move from one job to another on a frequent basis for deliberate, systemic force development and they must be able to adjust their leadership approach to their new surroundings if they hope to be successful. The military also needs leaders who can respond well in a crisis and continue to think clearly even when chaos abounds. Changes in course or strategy are also a hallmark of adaptive leadership and critical to the success of any military organization. Conditions are constantly changing and leaders must be prepared to react appropriately to those changes and keep the organization on track for success (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

The adaptive leadership literature gives several suggestions for leaders that can help them become or remain adaptive in their approach to leading their organizations. First, they need to maintain situational awareness, learn how to diagnose situations, and apply appropriate leadership behaviors based on the type of circumstances they are facing (Yukl & Lepsinger,

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2004, Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). This will become more automatic with experience, but it is something that graduates should be prepared for based on the training and education that they receive at USAFA.

Next, leaders must increase their flexibility by learning how to be comfortable using different leadership styles in different situations. This can happen by getting feedback from multiple sources, role playing, coaching, learning how to use a wide range of relevant behaviors, identifying effective behaviors for the objectives and situations, and behavior modeling as important ways for leaders to improve their flexibility (Yukl & Gardner, 2020, Yukl & Mahsud, 2010;). These are all strategies that can be used on a regular basis at USAFA, and can be very effective in creating leaders who are adaptable and able to elevate the performance of their organizations. However, it is incumbent upon the individual leader and the organization to offer challenging and diverse development opportunities, to seek accurate, relevant feedback, and to gain as much insight and experience as possible (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

The final suggestion on how to implement adaptive leadership is to delegate responsibility to lower levels (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). When subordinates are empowered to make decisions and do so effectively, the performance of the organization can improve. This also frees the leader up to focus on strategic issues and the direction of the organization. Leaders of character

who have the ability to delegate responsibility to talented subordinates who understand the mission of the organization can be effective in improving organizational performance.

There are other aspects of adaptive and flexible leadership, which due to space constraints, cannot be covered in this paper. However, these strategies listed above can help leaders of character to adapt their organizational systems and elevate the performance of their organizations.

Moral Performance/Positive Organizational Ethics

The concepts of positive organizational ethics and moral performance are management principles that are beneficial to leaders of character as they attempt to elevate the performance of their organizations. Positive organizational ethics takes the leader's thinking beyond mere survival and into the consideration of what it takes for individuals and the organizations to which they belong to thrive (Davis et al, 2019; Sekerka et al, 2014). Instead of focusing on problems and how to fix them, leaders look for innovative ways to implement new and more effective methods of operating. The organizations that do this most effectively tend to be characterized by, "appreciation, collaboration, virtuousness, vitality and meaningfulness, abundance and well-being [as] indicators of success" (Sekerka et al, 2014, p. 438).

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An organization's focus becomes more positive as they seek to create environments where ethical behavior is the norm as opposed to traditional organizations that attempt only to remove or punish unethical action. It is incumbent upon the leader to ensure they are promoting the moral development of all the organization's members. An organization that is focused on positive organizational ethics and encouraging members to perform morally in all their actions frequently sees increases in performance because the trust between organizational members and stakeholders is high (Sekerka et al, 2014).

Leaders of character can implement ethical codes or provide greater focus on the Air Force core values in their organization as a way of being proactive in establishing positive organizational ethics. Including employees' voices in decisions about how to handle ethical dilemmas is another way to ensure collaboration and virtuousness in organizations. Approaching ethical dilemmas as a team problem is a way to get everyone engaged in ensuring organizational ethics. Finally, a strategic focus by the leader of character on where the organization is headed ensures that the leader does not focus solely on compliance. By looking at the long-term prospects of the organization, the leader focuses their attention on how to operate appropriately in the future instead of retroactively attempting to correct prior bad behavior.

Ethical Culture

The Air Force places a high priority on its core values of integrity, service, and excellence—discussing them regularly in its accession programs, in periodic senior leader correspondence, and encouraging them in its normative behaviors. In order to increase the impact leaders of character make on their organizations, it is critical to look at the importance of installing or

maintaining an ethical culture in a unit in an effort to elevate performance. This recommendation is consistent with the management literature. Jondle, Ardichvill, & Mitchell (2014) state, “by focusing on the five characteristics of an ethical business culture, organizations have specific directions to take in building and sustaining their organizational culture based on ethical principles and metrics to measure progress” (p. 37).

Before getting into more detail, it is important to understand the definition of an ethical culture and its main characteristics. *Organizational ethics* are defined as the principles and values that drive decisions (Bowen, 2015). Trevino and Weaver (2003) have defined an *ethical culture* as one where ethical conduct is stimulated, and unethical conduct is prevented or discouraged. It is a subset of organizational culture that looks at both the formal and informal systems in an organization that can promote ethical or unethical behavior (Trevino et al, 1998).

For the leader of character, it is important to realize that an ethical culture must be more than just a compliance mechanism. While compliance with rules and regulations is important, an ethical culture should be more focused on doing the right thing, for the right reasons, and not just to stay out of trouble. This echoes the previous discussion of positive organizational ethics and moral performance. An ethical culture creates an environment where employees are expected to discern right from wrong and to go beyond that to determine the ethical decision even when all courses of action seem correct (Ardichvili et al, 2009). Organizations with ethical cultures have shared values, practices and expectations. The leaders in these organizations behave in an ethical manner on a consistent basis and encourage others to do the same (Ardichvili et al, 2009).

Ethical cultures are not only in alignment with the concepts of living honorably and lifting others (the other characteristics of a leader of character), but they have also been shown to lead, either directly or indirectly, to increased organizational performance (Hijal-Moghrabi et al, 2017; Kim & Thapa, 2018). Numerous researchers have looked at the link between ethical culture and organizational performance. Goebel & Weissenberger (2017) found an indirect relationship between ethical climate and organizational performance. Their findings were that ethical climate increases mutual trust in organizations, which then drives increases in performance. Huhtala et al. (2011; Kaptein (2010) and Trevino et al (1998)) all found that ethical culture stimulates positive behavior and well-being of employees. Riivari & Lamsa (2014) found a relationship between ethical culture and organizational innovation to include behavioral, strategic and process innovativeness. Interestingly, innovation is one of the Air Force's key Airmen Leadership Qualities that will be discussed later. Kim & Thapa (2018) discovered that ethical leadership through corporate social responsibility activities leads to higher levels of operational and commercial performance. Finally, Hijal-Moghrabi et al (2017) found that the ethical environment explains 28% of the variance in organizational performance in their study. This means that, in this study over one quarter of the difference in performance in an organization can be attributed to the ethical environment. Therefore, there is evidence that ethical culture and ethical behavior have a positive direct and indirect impact on the performance of organizations. The leader of character, who desires to elevate performance, will be well served to create a system where an ethical culture flourishes.

Characteristics

Ardichvili and colleagues conducted a quantitative study to determine the characteristics of ethical

business cultures (2009). As they interviewed 67 business executives and academics, they discerned five clusters of characteristics affiliated with ethical cultures. These five categories are mission-value driven, stakeholder balance, leadership effectiveness, long-term perspective, and process integrity (2009).

The first characteristic of an ethical culture is a strategic focus on the mission and values of the organization. This focus is imperative in order for the organization to be successful (Ardichvili et al, 2009). There needs to be complete alignment between the mission and values so everyone in the organization knows where it is headed so all members are pulling in the same direction. Research has shown that commitment to and a clear focus on, the mission by organizational members was a key foundation of an ethical organizational culture (Craft, 2018). It is important for leaders to provide a clear understanding of the mission and values of the organization so that members know how to apply their skills and abilities to the greatest effect. For leaders of character in the Air Force and Space Force, the defense of the nation needs to be the overriding focus of all members. Ensuring that all members of an organization are behaving ethically is critical to ensure the trust granted to the Armed Forces by the American people is earned and deserved.

Another characteristic of an ethical culture is stakeholder balance. Considering all of the organization's stakeholders ensures that all people and groups impacted by the leader of character's organization are heard and considered (Ardichvili et al, 2009). Among key organizational leaders, employees, and other stakeholders, organizational values can provide the opportunity for continuous communication, conversation, and interaction based on the ethical foundations and connections of the organization (Auster & Freeman, 2013). Members of

the organization are an important group of stakeholders and the leader needs to ensure they are given a voice, and are appreciated for the abilities and values they bring to the unit. In a military organization, stockholders (or those who earn profits from the organization's performance) are not present. Instead, the American people, who have their way of life defended by the military, are the main external stakeholders and their concerns must be paramount.

Leadership effectiveness is another characteristic of an ethical culture. In terms of ethical cultures, leaders are effective when they are solid role models who practice what they preach and hold others accountable for their actions (Ardichvili et al, 2009). A leader of character who lives honorably and follows through on their commitments can inspire confidence in their

and other broadening opportunities. Highly performing organizations also are found to stress the importance of continuous and developmental education and training in ethical behavior, especially in scenarios related to the normal operations of the organization (Craft, 2010). Personal development strengthens physical, mental, social, and spiritual resiliency in an effort to build well rounded Airmen and Guardians. Leaders of character need to ensure their subordinates are given every opportunity to improve and succeed in order to practice the construct of lifting others and to elevate the performance of the organization.

Being able to take a long-term perspective is another critical aspect of developing an ethical culture (Ardichvili et al, 2009). Many ethical lapses result directly from short-term thinking (i.e., Volkswagen, Enron, HealthSouth, etc.). When organizational leaders focus on short-term challenges and gains, they can easily stumble into unethical decisions that solve the immediate problem, but cause significant unintended consequences. The leader of character needs to consider the long-term impact(s) of their decisions. Choosing the harder right path is usually the most effective way to maintain one's integrity and to ensure long-term success. Once again, the mission and vision are more important than any short-term, improperly earned success. A longer-horizon perspective allows the leader to see better, what will help the organization succeed over many years. This can be a challenge in a military organization where leadership turnover is frequent. It is easy for a leader to look for short-term successes to make themselves look good without considering the unintended consequences of their actions. The leader of character will take the long-term impact(s) of their decisions into consideration even if they will not be around to see them come to fruition (Heyler et al, 2016).

Choosing the harder right path is usually the most effective way to maintain one's integrity and to ensure long-term success.

subordinates and lay the groundwork for ethical behavior throughout the organization. Another key aspect of effective leadership is being open to feedback and not shooting the messenger when ethical issues arise, but determining the facts and taking appropriate action (Heyler et al, 2016). When a system is in place that allows for open dialogue and the timely communication of negative information, the organization can improve performance.

In addition, leaders must support the professional and personal development of their subordinates. Professional development includes formal mentoring, professional military education, academic programs,

Process integrity is the final characteristic of an ethical culture and it relates very closely to the importance of understanding organizations as complex systems (Ardichvili et al, 2009). Appraisal and promotion systems need to be linked closely to the desired behaviors of organization members. For instance, it does not make sense to reward individuals solely for personal success when the organization desires effective teamwork and collaboration. Fairness and equity are also critical to an ethical culture. Members need to be able to trust that the organization will treat them equitably. Perceptions of organizational fairness can help to enhance the overall legitimacy of an organization's ethical system or framework and can be important in maintaining or increasing ethical compliance throughout the organization (Tyler et al., 2008). Finally, transparency in decision-making serves an ethical culture well. Members of the organization need to understand how and why decisions are being made in order to fully commit to what the organization is doing (Ardichvili et al, 2009).

Air Force Major Performance Areas

Performance can be defined in many ways. The Air Force provides guidance on what performance is defined. Under this guidance, performance is assessed through regulatory guidance from *AFI 1-2, Air Force Culture*, and supporting publications detailing *Major Performance Areas*, and Airmen leadership qualities Air Force leaders have approved as the standards for how we “measure, incentivize and reward the Airmen we need for the future” (Air Force.mil, 2 Feb 2021). *AFI 1-2, Air Force Culture*, establishes four areas of performance that are critical to the success of organizations.

They are:

- Executing the mission
- Leading people

- Managing resources
- Improving the unit (p. 2-4)

It is important to note that these broad performance areas apply to both individuals and organizations. The alignment of the categories in policy and assessment is driven by systems thinking. According to scholars, “Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed over the past [65] years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively” (Senge, 2013, p. 7). In terms of the systems approach, elevating performance is considered in terms of both individual performance and organizational performance, although organizational performance is the primary focus of this paper.

To improve how to develop leaders, it is important to measure what is valued (Air Force.mil, 2 Feb 2021). However, is easier said than done. For leaders to truly elevate performance, metrics should be utilized as a departure point for dialogue between leaders and their subordinates as to whether or not organizations are performing in the desired manner. In other words, is the organization rewarding and incentivizing the values, behaviors, and performance it desires?

Executing the Mission

The Air Force has identified three Airmen leadership qualities related to executing the mission. These are job proficiency, initiative, and adaptability. Job proficiency requires leaders to demonstrate knowledge and professional skill in assigned duties and to achieve positive results and impact in support of the mission (AFI 1-2, 2014). Leaders of character must know their jobs and be good at those jobs in order to elevate performance in their organizations. In terms of initiative, leaders must be able to assess situations and take independent or directed action to complete a

task or mission that affects the organization (AFI 1-2, 2014). Leaders of character cannot be timid. They must be proactive and look for solutions to problems before they negatively affect the organization rather than waiting for problems to arise. Finally, leaders must be adaptable. They need to adjust to changing conditions to include plans, information, processes, requirements, and obstacles in accomplishing the mission (AFI 1-2, 2014). Change is one of the few constants we see in organizations, particularly the Air Force and Space Force. As such, leaders of character need to be prepared to adjust their efforts, approach, and organizational systems in order to maintain high levels of performance and strive for continuous improvement. This harkens back to the earlier discussion of flexible and adaptable leadership.

AFI 1-2, Air Force Culture, lists three areas of focus for executing the mission: primary mission execution, air expeditionary force readiness, and mission assurance. Leaders should aim to create a system of processes, norms, goals, performance measures, and a culture that naturally produces positive outcomes over the long term in these areas. The specifics regarding what the above looks like will vary from organization to organization, but could include things like regular readiness reporting, self-inspection programs, and senior leadership meetings to ensure the organization is united in its approach.

As proposed above, the metrics should begin a dialogue between organizational members to determine if the organization is producing the desired outcomes. To effectively accomplish that, measures should be both outcome measures that evaluate past efforts, and forward-looking that elevate future performance (Kaplan, Norton & Rugelsjoen, 2010). This article purposely stops short of prescribing assessments and encourages leaders of character to facilitate meaningful

dialogue on what works for the organization and, if it is being attained.

Leading People

Three Airmen leadership qualities affiliated with the major performance area of leading people. These are inclusion and teamwork, emotional intelligence, and communication. Inclusion and teamwork encompass the ideas of collaborating effectively with others to achieve an inclusive climate in pursuit of a common goal or to complete a task or mission (AFI 1-2, 2014). It is critical for organizational performance that members of the organization feel included and part of the team. It is also important to recognize the different skills and abilities that each member brings to the fight and to allow them to utilize those abilities for the good of the organization. We see close ties here to the Leader of Character Framework concept of Lifting Others.

Emotional intelligence means exercising self-awareness, managing one's own emotions effectively, demonstrating an understanding of others' emotions, and appropriately managing relationships (AFI 1-2, 2014). Human capital is our most important resource, and it is incumbent upon the leader of character to ensure that members of the organization are performing to their highest potential by ensuring due consideration to each member of the unit. Leaders of character must also ensure they are caring for the needs of the individual members of their organizations to ensure continued high levels of performance.

The final Airmen leadership quality is communication. Articulating information in a clear and timely manner, both verbally and non-verbally, through active listening and messaging, tailored to the appropriate audience, is a key to success as a leader of character (AFI 1-2, 2014). Leaders must develop a two-way vertical and lateral communication system, which is

agile enough to respond to changes in the environment in a timely manner. In order to develop understanding, intent, and trust, leaders must transmit goals, priorities, values, and expectations, while encouraging feedback.

Air Force Culture lists five areas of focus for leading people: communication, discipline, training, development, and quality of life engagement. Effective communication is critical to success in organizations and should be conducted regularly between all members of the organization. Leaders must also put systems in place to ensure discipline, training, and development in their organizations. The Air Force has a robust training and development plan that includes on the job training, formal training, and professional military education. Discipline issues in the Air and Space Forces are handled in accordance with the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). A final aspect of leading effectively is the development of a growth mindset and a desire for life-long learning (Yeager et al, 2019). Leaders of character must encourage their people to pursue these ideas and always be looking for ways to improve.

Managing Resources

Managing resources is the next major performance area. The two Airmen leadership qualities associated with this area are stewardship and accountability. A good steward of resources demonstrates responsible management of assigned resources, which may include time, equipment, people, funds, and/or facilities. Accountability means that the leader takes responsibility for the actions and behaviors of self and/or team, and demonstrates reliability and transparency (AFI 1-2, 2014).

AFI 1-2 lists six areas of focus for managing resources. These are manpower, funds, equipment, facilities and environment, guidance, and Airmen's time. Leaders

in the Air and Space Forces must devote time and effort to effectively managing resources if they want to be successful. A long-term perspective is necessary to ensure resources are managed and available when needed for mission accomplishment. Managing resources is also closely tied to the idea of process integrity mentioned earlier in this paper. Leaders must ensure solid processes are in place to acquire, manage and replace resources in their organizations. Finally, we see connections between resource management and stakeholder balance. Taxpayers are critical stakeholders and they provide the funding for resources necessary to organizational success. Leaders of character must be good stewards of resources in order to meet stakeholder requirements.

Improving the Unit

The final two Airmen leadership qualities fall under the final major performance area of improving the unit. These are decision-making and innovation. The good decision maker makes well-informed, effective and timely decisions that weigh constraints, risks, and benefits. Innovation allows the leader to think creatively about different ways to solve problems, implement improvements, and demonstrate calculated risk-taking (AFI 1-2, 2014). As noted earlier, connections have been shown between ethical culture and innovation (Riivari & Lamsa, 2014). This is another indicator of the importance of building or maintaining an ethical culture in Air Force and Space Force organizations. As we have mentioned, leaders of character are encouraged to build/maintain ethical culture in their organizations.

AFI 1-2, Air Force Culture, lists four areas of focus for improving the unit: strategic alignment, process operations, the Commander's Inspection Program, and data-driven decisions. Continuous improvement is a critical item for the leader of character to instill.

Ensuring alignment within the unit, having a dynamic self-inspection program, and relying on data to inform decisions are all ways that a leader can ensure their organization is on the path to improvement. It is critical to create a system that allows for these initiatives and encourages organization members to focus on implementing them effectively.

By focusing their efforts on the major performance areas and Airmen leadership qualities, as well as taking the time to understand and learn about the management principles described here, the leader of character will be well on their way to elevating the performance of their organization. In this paper, we have looked at the management principles of flexible/adaptive leadership, moral performance/positive organizational ethics, and ethical culture as ideas that can be utilized by a leader of character to elevate the performance of their organization. These concepts in conjunction with the Air Force major performance areas of executing the mission, leading people, managing resources, and improving the unit can be used as a starting point for performance improvement in organizations. Leaders of character are encouraged to learn about these principles and to use them to their benefit. There are numerous other ways that the leader of character can elevate the performance of their organization. While we cannot provide an exhaustive list of all these ideas, we have tried to highlight a few that we see as critically important as examples for your use. It is important to remember that the leader of character needs to be a life-long learner who is always searching for new and innovative ways to elevate the performance of their organization.

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