

EXECUTES OPERATIONS IN AN INTEGRATED,
ACCOUNTABLE, AND AGILE MANNER

How We Integrate

Michael Fantini, Maj General (USAF), Director AFWIC

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Do you mind sharing a little bit about your leadership experiences as the Director of the Air Force Warfighter Integration Capability (AFWIC)?

Fantini: In order to be able to integrate, you have to have an organization that is comfortable working like that. So, many people, just by their personality, are not comfortable in that space. Due to the mission of AFWIC, I lived that every day. Generally, folks like to get their tasks, accomplish their tasks, and then move on. We have not really incentivized our system to engender the fact that it is a good thing that other people know what you are doing so that they can leverage it to create more synergy.

AFWIC is the result of the frustration of the leadership of our Air Force, in that they were not able to influence the direction of the Air Force until only the last minute. For example, where you put your money is where you put your emphasis. You fund what you have as a priority. So, if you are the leadership of the Air Force and you don't have the ability to shift and move funds, then you are going to be frustrated. That is a result of the static nature that we have found ourselves in where we were comfortable with our core functions, and with a bottom up approach and the leadership wasn't able to do that in an optimized manner. The reality is that we should be doing more engagement

Maj. Gen. Michael A. Fantini is the Acting Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategy, Integration and Requirements, Headquarters U.S. Air Force, the Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia. General Fantini graduated from Catholic University of America and was commissioned through the ROTC program at Howard University. Following graduation, he served in a variety of operational assignments as an F-16 pilot, instructor pilot and weapons officer. He has commanded a fighter squadron, the 332nd Expeditionary Operations Group in Balad, Iraq, the 82nd Training Wing, Sheppard AFB, Texas, and the 451st Air Expeditionary Wing, Kandahar, Afghanistan. In his previous assignment, General Fantini was the Director, Air Force Warfighting Integration Capability, Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategy, Integration, and Requirements, Headquarters U.S. Air Force, Arlington, Virginia. As AFWIC Director, he identified and prioritized ways and means to guide resourcing priorities, thus improving Air Force lethality and enhancing the Joint and Coalition fight. General Fantini is a command pilot with more than 3,200 hours in the MQ-9, F-16, T-37 and T-38.

across various portfolios and that we should recognize that some portfolios might be more important than others. It all comes down to being effective in combat.

The challenges I saw as the director of AFWIC started with survival of AFWIC itself. AFWIC started as an experiment. I picked it up at AFWIC 1.0, which was really Initial Operating Capability (IOC) Plus, and I have been able to take it to AFWIC 2.0. It will now be further instantiated by General Hinote into AFWIC 2.1. We created an organization that needed to demonstrate its value. In the beginning, we weren't demonstrating value as an organization because people were questioning why we existed. They would ask, "What was wrong with the old way of doing business?" What we had to do was identify and demonstrate our value. A lot of that value is tied to the ability to create decision level engagement for senior leaders. People may ask, "How do you tie platforms together? What is the answer there?" The reality is that stuff is interesting and important, but unless the senior leaders of the Air Force are buying into how we are trying to take on enterprise problems and they are buying into changing the direction of this massive bureaucracy, then a 2-star general is not going to be able to do that. It's about things like teeing up decisions, influencing the acquisition community, and influencing the resourcing and programming community. We are doing that by having a known threat, a strategic document that we are applying toward that threat (the National Defense Strategy and the Air Force Strategy in support of that), developing concepts of operations that then establish requirements that we then go out and acquire. That is a tall order. It is not going to happen with a home run. Rather, we are making a bunch of base hits.

My leadership challenges were to be able to enable my people to unleash their talents with the authority given to me as the director of AFWIC. I'm not the

smartest guy in the room or have the best ideas, but we absolutely have that in the organization. It goes to one of the things you may have heard before in my pitch. I firmly believe Captains and Staff Sergeants have the answers. Younger folks that are more connected to the mission at the tactical level, they know what needs to be done. They generally know how to do it, and they have the ideas to change to do it better. We have to create an environment where we enable them to do just that. That was, and is, my leadership philosophy coming into AFWIC and at the time, we were just 27% manned. We are now manned at just shy of 80%. That is like a normal staff, so there are no excuses now. But the beautiful thing about that was it allowed us to be able to reach out and get some of the people we wanted and move them around to take advantage of their talents. That is how I attacked my leadership philosophy by enabling others to help do the hard work. We got comments from the Chief of Staff like, I have been coming to CORONAs for years, and this has been the best discussion at a CORONA.¹ That is a great testament to what we are doing. So, we are trying to take the process of just doing the work and we are trying to help them (our Air Force leadership) to make more thoughtful decisions and establishing what that will look like in the future. Does that answer your question?

Lindsay: It does. It has to be an interesting proposition because you are not only trying to demonstrate value, you are also trying to build up and establish the organization through personnel and processes. How did you approach that?

Fantini: I sat back and thought, "What are we really trying to get done?" It really boiled down to four things. The first was design. What does the future Air

¹ CORONA is an annual conference for senior Air Force leadership to get together to discuss strategy and policy.

Force look like? The next was to integrate - to be able to integrate across the proverbial stovepipes. It is also the ability to develop -to execute capability development for relevant capabilities. Finally, there is impact. The Chief of Staff was not satisfied that AFWIC was not impacting the programming decisions of the Program Objective Memorandum (POM)². Nominally, you could say that AFWIC doesn't have the authority to do that. It lies elsewhere. But, the Chief gave us that implied task. Our ability to realize a future concept is directly related to our ability to impact the resourcing of that potential concept. If you can't do that, it goes into what we had previously been suffering with as an Air Force. A lack of a coherent strategy because we ended up reacting to paying bills, and not focusing on what bills we should pay from a priority perspective that enables our game plan to get at the National Defense Strategy and the Air Force Strategy, to execute our game plan. That is very much what I felt as an organization we had to demonstrate - that we were value added and that we could produce product. Ultimately, that product is defined in helping align the money in order to resource the vision of the leadership. That is the gift that keeps on giving. There is no end. It is constant. As an example, I am not the A8³. I am a 2-star and the A8 is a 3-star. But we have a lot of good teaming with the A8. They know they don't have all the answers and wanted to be aligned with future concepts. We support that by having a good relationship there. It is all about

2 A Program Objective Memorandum (POM) is a recommendation from the Services and Defense Agencies to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) concerning how they plan to allocate resources (funding) for a program(s) to meet the Service Program Guidance (SPG) and Defense Planning Guidance (DPG); <http://acqnotes.com/acqnote/acquisitions/program-objective-memorandum-pom>).

3 The A staff in the Air Force that is a designated headquarters staff structure. The A8 is responsible for Force Structure, Resources, and Assessment.

the relationships across organizations that make us successful.

Lindsay: That is a key component to leadership, in general, is the ability to have those critical relationships. That is a key to developing synergy. In your 2020 National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS) presentation, you talked about incentivizing this type of approach⁴. You mentioned that we are very good at rewarding for tactical performance. If we want to incentivize the idea of cutting across stovepipes, how can we do that? What were you able to do as the director of AFWIC?

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Fantini: It is leadership from the get go. Leadership sets the expectation that I want you, and I expect you, to know your peers or other entities that are working various problems and issues. We shouldn't do it from an insular perspective, but do it from a transparent perspective. If you are in the Air Force, you need to know your counterparts in the other services. You need to know your counterparts in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). You need to know your counterparts in the Joint Staff. All of these folks are stakeholders in some form or fashion.

4 NCLS is the National Character and Leadership Symposium that takes place every February at the United States Air Force Academy. The Symposium is the flagship event on character and leadership: <https://www.usafa.edu/character/national-character-leadership-symposium-ncls/>

Understanding how that system works is immensely important. If you look at my personal career, you will notice that I have a lot of time in the Pentagon. Many people say, “I don’t ever want to go to the Pentagon.” But, the reality is, this is where the decisions are made. Wing Commands, Numbered Air Forces, and Major Commands; all of that information comes up to the Pentagon, and decisions are made here. Understanding those external and internal stakeholders and decisions makers who influence how things get done, is extremely important. General Goldfein has really engendered in his time as the Chief of Staff, the fact that it is a Joint fight. You need to know your Joint counterparts. You need to engage them and you need to gain advocacy because we are stronger together than we are apart. It is a similar mindset when you are working things on the different staffs. It is that element of transparency and communication which are some of the traits that will keep AFWIC successful. General Hinote has been confirmed for his next star to be the A5⁵. That is a very specific and reasoned decision to spread that AFWIC experiment across a larger swath with more rank. I think that is going to be an interesting thing to watch as we go to AFWIC 2.1.

Lindsay: So, the perspective of AFWIC gets pushed out and up even more with that move. That perspective is important. So, you have talked about relationships and knowing your counterparts. That is great advice for junior leaders. Any other advice for young leaders as to how to think about the future and think about how they can prepare themselves?

Fantini: That’s a great question. The best advice I can give is that whatever job you are doing, do the best that you can at it. Too many times, I see people who are more worried about what comes next as opposed to accomplishing the task. You need to trust your

leadership that they are going to make those decisions on what comes next. You want to be the person that gets turned to in the organization. Whether it is a squadron or a group, you want your leaders to go, “Hey _____, I need you to do this.” That you become the person that the leadership turns to. That is the measure of merit. Cream will rise to the top. Now, I’m not saying you should just arbitrarily live in the moment of the task. You should also have a broader perspective of where you want to go, in general. But, in terms of new leaders, just be the best that you can at doing your job. Then, you are going to get more piled on you because you have demonstrated that you can handle it and you will have the trust of your leadership. There is no magic recipe. Do the best that you can. Ultimately, you will be the person in the driver’s seat because you will progress really well.

On a different note, I have 25 and 26 year Colonels who are lamenting that they are getting out as a Colonel. I think that is the wrong perspective. You should celebrate that. If you are a 20 or 22 year Lieutenant Colonel, you should be proud of that. In fact, we as an institution, should engender that. If you are a Colonel in the Marine Corps, you are expected to serve until 30. We should do the same thing. We should set an expectation in the Air Force, from a cultural perspective, that service is a good thing. There is this element of fulfillment. I am fulfilled as an Air Force officer because I enjoy coming to work every day and I feel worthy. There is worthy work to be done for the institution. Notice, I didn’t say because I am a 2-star. That goes under the interesting but immaterial category. Creating a culture and a mindset like that where you truly don’t care who gets the credit, you really just care that you are advancing the institution. That, in my mind, is some of how the culture of the Air Force has changed at least in my 33 plus years. That is different than the old model of the fear and

⁵ The A5 is responsible for Strategic Plans and Policy.

intimidation will continue until the morale improves. The leadership model has significantly changed to one of support and setting the bar high for expectations and then, helping and enabling folks to achieve it. That is a significant change in leadership over my time in the service.

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