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LIFE | LEARNING | LEADERSHIP

The Other Great Power Competition

"If you desire to be a leader then remember that your higher calling is to serve others, find your value in contributing their successes."

My favorite basketball player of all time is the recently deceased Kobe Bryant. I've always been a fan of the tenacity, work ethic and drive that he possessed. His legacy will live on forever through those attributes as they defined the "Mamba Mentality" that he coined and made so popular. However, his earlier successes weren't always attributed to that mentality. In fact, many coined him as selfish as his growing feud with fellow teammate, at the time, Shaquille O'Neal was consistently defined as the reason the Lakers weren't able to continue their early 2000's championship runs. The crux of the situation was that two players, were in a very public power struggle as to who was the true Alpha of the team.



This struggle occurs in our Air Force every day...but not in the way that many would think. You see, we have created a culture of competition that has grown almost to an unhealthy level. **Not because competition isn't good...competition is great!** Competition is what makes our service the best in the world. Competition in our engineering, technology, cyber and space capabilities, avionics, training, and innovative processes has made our Air Force one of, if not the most feared and respected organizations this world has ever seen. We should all pat ourselves on the back.

But while we're doing so, let's also take an honest look in the mirror and realize that we've also created a level of competition that's not so...favorable. Just like in the aforementioned story of the Lakers' woes, our Air Force has inadvertently created something similar. Like the Lakers, **we have created competition where it should never exist...within the team.** Our organizational culture has our performance metrics, our over-emphasis on leadership as a measuring stick to a successful career, and our lack of emphasis on key performance skills skewing our services employment of its Core Values. We are not broken by any means, but right now Integrity First, Service Before Self and Excellence in All We Do...aren't enough. It's time for a tweak.

Our performance metrics don't focus enough on the primary duties of our Airmen. Our doctrine, reports and faux metrics say we do...but we don't. Looking at the words on the EPR, it clearly states that task knowledge, proficiency, initiative, and motivation are crucial. Those are literally the first performance-based metrics highlighted in bold for TSgt's and below. Mission accomplishment and resource utilization are the same for SNCOs but let's be honest...those things are overshadowed consistently. The reason why they're overshadowed...well, we'll get to that in a second. Hold that thought...

We over-emphasize leadership. That's not to say that leadership isn't important. In fact, I will tell you that leadership...true leadership, is the MOST important. It's so important, so crucial, so downright imperative for an organization that I wholeheartedly believe...that most people CAN'T do it! **Leadership is organic.** Let's not confuse positions of leadership with actual leadership. True leadership is organic, meaning that the environment in which a group of people reside will naturally determine who the leader really is. Take a basketball team for example. If we lined up all 12 players with the coaches, managers and GMs and provided you a report of all of the performance metrics that each player has accomplished, you STILL wouldn't be able to pick out the leader...unless you looked at their jersey. Nowadays, many sports designate their leader with a "C" on their uniform denoting that they've been recognized as a Captain...or leader, for their team. That designation isn't based solely off of anything that you can read on a scouting report but based solely off of the fact that the team chose that player to lead them. **We've misidentified what leadership really is and watered it down so much that we have told ourselves that anybody...excuse me...that EVERY body, can do it.**

We have failed to emphasize some of the most important aspects of what make our Air Force so great; the individual strengths of our Airmen when combined together to accomplish a singular goal. Those individual strengths are important though; so important that we use terms like talent management and innovation when we talk about them. The issue is that we're too rigid in our definition of success. Our culture equates ranks, positions and titles as definitive measures of how much "potential" an Airmen has. We don't recognize their actual strengths and contributions enough to compensate for the oversaturation of our own escalating hierarchy of what we value. Simply put,

we've put position over talent...title over contribution...role over importance. Our emphasis on all the things many Airmen will never achieve has created a cyclone of competition that will be as unpredictable and uncontrollable as a real twister if we don't change now. At the end of the day, **Airmen don't leave the Air Force because of the Air Force; Airmen leave the Air Force because of Airmen.**

When did Service Before Self become not enough? When did putting one's heart, soul, passion, and talents into doing this very moving thing called the Profession of Arms become secondary to everything else? **We recruit some of the best and brightest to bring their talents to our service, and then we penalize them for not developing the talents they never had or will ever have.** We have Airmen that are bringing excellence in all they do every day, but we've misdiagnosed what it is. We don't challenge them to be creative, step outside of the norm and think...enough. **We have put our Airmen in a box that's not there.** We can't recruit cyber, space and intel Airmen fast enough. Our future conflicts will be fought with keystrokes, digital 1s and 0s, and high-speed Internet and our Airmen are ready. But we're holding them back from greatness. Listen, we'll always lose some talent to the civilian world because to some, money talks. But it is disheartening when I see the fire grow dim on some of the brightest, most eager, willing, and capable technicians because we wanted to turn them into something they were never suited to be.

Our culture must change with the times. We are hell-bent on keeping up with the technological curve yet so slow to keep up with our interpersonal ones. I don't pretend to have the perfect solution, but I will do my best to be a part of it. Many will argue stratifications, our forced distribution models on the enlisted side and zone-based promotions on the officer side contribute to the great power competition and I would agree...but only contribute to, not responsible for. Our most senior leaders are certainly aware and have made those programs a top priority and I trust they'll come up with a plan that benefits the force as a whole. In the meantime, units must not wait on doctrine and big Air Force to solve their local woes. They must break norms, traverse antiquated thinking and plow through policy that's limiting the operational effectiveness of their units because our Airmen are expecting us to.

Let's re-visit the paragraph above about the thing that's overshadowing our ability to support the doctrine that's in black & white and embrace our Airmen's true strengths. To me, it's simple...it's called EGO; maybe not our individual ego but definitely our institutional and organizational one. **It is hard to change norms because it means that we have to admit that we were wrong.** We have to look ourselves in the mirror and admit that maybe there's a better way. Instead we hit the easy button and do it the way we've always done it. We all know the best promotion system is the one I got promoted in...the best training program is the one I was trained in...and the best way to do it is the way that's already been defined for me. Assimilation happens so fast that the thing you hated for years becomes the thing you defend the most. We must get off of our own shoulders, stop patting ourselves on the back and continue to get after it each and every day.

The other great power competition demonstrates is the one our Airmen are forced to participate in because our egos have told us that this is the way it should be done...even its only because it's the only way you know for it to be done. Our Airmen deserve a culture that allows them to adhere to the core values that have made us the greatest Air Force that has ever existed. Let us not dilute the impact and responsibility each of us have to get the best out of our Airmen; accentuating their strengths, while developing their weaknesses and re-focusing that competition into the fight that really matters.

ABI SCOTT

Abi Scott is a senior enlisted leader in the United States Air Force. He has led numerous professional organizations at the national level. He currently oversees 180 people composed of US Military and Civilian personnel at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam.





Throughout my years of service, I have had the opportunity to come in contact with a multitude of enlisted leaders with various approaches to being a productive Enlisted member. I have been challenged to know my job first, research Airmen of the past, and break down the job requirements of the rank above me. There are resources like AFI 36-2618, First Sergeants, and Career Field Education and Training Plans for us to spend hours attempting to understand. If I had to sum up what it takes to be a prominent member of the Enlisted Force, I would say look no further than CATM. **While we all know wearing the uniform is more complex than solely weapon qualification skills, CATM (Compliance, Advisement, Training, Mentorship) provides the groundwork for Enlisted service.**

Compliance. I once told an Airman to be comfortable with being the bad guy. This is an easily misconstrued concept. Holding the line sets the groundwork for Airmen to know they can trust you in all situations, good or bad. When your Airmen know what they can expect from you such as a day-off for solid work or a Letter of Counseling for tardiness, they feel comfort in not having to guess if you will be hot or cold on a daily basis. **Manipulation as a form of compliance only exasperates our Airmen.** Whether it is AFI-driven or direction given from Officers above us, carrying out orders is a top priority. If these orders are not morally, ethically or legally sound, obviously compliance is not required. What I have seen most Airmen struggle with, is complying with AFIs that do not fit their particular mindset. Whether Airman Basic or Chief, we must find balance in the world of our military. **Do not confuse compliance with the lack of a backbone.** Disregarding your leader's voice because you feel that you have a better idea will not inspire troops to follow you in the future. Impressionable Airmen may not agree with their supervisor's direction; however, they have the patience and understanding to find balance amidst execution.

Advisement. Airmen should be advising their leaders at every level. **An Airmen stocking supplies in a warehouse or pulling security detail on the flightline is the subject matter expert for their leadership, who may have not done said job in a decade.** While their supervisor has probably completed the task in some capacity before, practices change over time as we continue to develop the World's premier Air and Space Forces. When Airmen appropriately express feedback or concerns, leaders should listen up. Appropriately is the most important concept—time and place is pivotal. The key to Airmen understanding advisement is simply that. Leaders should listen, but they have no obligation to take action. The common misconception that we "shotgun parts and people" can be lost in translation until we understand the roles that our leaders play. This makes two-way communication an extremely important aspect of advisement. **Leaders, mission and time-permitting, should be sharing the ins and outs of what works and does not.** This only educates troops to advise better in the future, as they will have their sights more in tune to what works, does not work and why.

Training. From Career Development Courses to Professional Military Education, training is at the root of the Armed Forces, not just the Enlisted Corps. While we all join the military with a sense of how-to, we go through a period of reinventing common practices. **Our ability to grasp these tasks leads those appointed above us with insight on how we will develop as an Airman.** Trainees that have previously have- or have not folded their clothes for years will learn the Basic Military Training standard, which will be where the mark is set. This transpires into our technical fields, where Airmen may have earned degrees or certifications prior to joining the military. Upon entering your Air Force Specialty Code, the training that we receive takes precedence over our previous experience. It is not to discount what you currently know, it is preparing you for the next level. Similarly, we expect our Commanders and Chiefs to lead us the military way, not the way a civilian corporation is run. The reason our methods seem different is simply our mission. We cannot lead our organization the same way someone may run a department store or even a civilian police department. **We are training future leaders to kill bad guys and break their things.** Other organizations do not face these same pressures; although, they certainly have challenges of their own. For example, the police department is tasked with enforcing compliance in the neighborhoods they patrol, which can be seen as similar to us in foreign territory. The major difference being the police are not at war with those the interact with and sometimes we are.

Mentorship. The Air Force has laid out its intent for the development of Airmen at every level; however, we struggle as a whole, to see the importance of the Whole Airman Concept and instead choose to criticize why we should be top ambassadors for the Air Force. **If Airmanship was solely built on wrench-turning, Chiefs would turn wrenches.** Pushing fast promotions is not mentorship; however, mastering every rank you receive matters much. We learned long ago that assigning mentors is not the best practice, but there has to be a better balance for our incoming generations. The mentor chooses the mentee and their intentions need to be pure. This is where our senior leaders need to take a serious look at developing their soon-to-be replacements. This is also where junior members need to be intentional in seeking out guidance. Mentorship is much bigger than your supervisor or Flight Chief. Venture out through other resources, such as Professional Development Organizations, to find what you are looking for. Ask the tough questions and remain engaged. True mentorship is a life-long commitment on both ends that requires tough conversations on accountability, self-reflection and goal setting.

Obviously, our primary duties are the most important part of being a productive member of the Armed Forces; however, it is not the only part to being productive. Failing to understand the AFIs that lay out the requirements of each rank is one of our main issues. If an Airman is good at fixing complex aircraft deficiencies or rehabbing individuals through physical therapy, is that enough to promote them to the next rank? Or is it important for them to also understand how to communicate effectively with peers, train and document the development of others and advise Senior Leaders on personnel-affecting issues? Simply put, if you are the best technician and nothing else, your supervisory chain may need you to just be a technician and not promote you. **People are promoted based on their ability to conduct themselves at the next rank, not wait until they get there to attempt progression.** Most Chiefs are not auditing travel vouchers, but rest assured, they still Comply, Advise, Mentor and Train.

JAHROD CYRUS SR.

Jahrod Cyrus Sr. is an Active Duty Air Force member currently serving as Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge of Financial Operations in South Carolina. He is currently responsible for ensuring military and travel pay inquiries are completed in a timely and accurate manner.



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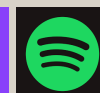
In this episode, Joe sits down with Caleb Vaden, an Air Force Senior Enlisted Leader currently serving as the Superintendent of the 28th Mission Support Group at Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota. During their discussion, they chatted about what it takes to be a “legendary leader,” how rumors and gossip can kill trust within an organization, and much, much more.

Caleb’s Book Recommendations:

Extreme Ownership – Jocko Willink and Leif Babin | <https://amzn.to/2Y9pal7>

Caleb’s Podcast: Real Talk with Caleb | <https://tinyurl.com/y8lxtfrs>

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Episode 82
QUESTIONS

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In this episode the entire Llama crew answers questions posed by our listeners. If you have any questions you would like answered please send them our way. We had a great time and hope you do to, enjoy!

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