# Leading Airmen

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*Editorial Abstract: In this leadoff article for our special leadership edition, General Link samples theoretical as well as pragmatic perspectives of leadership. He identifies mission accomplishment as the imperative for the military leader but also reflects on the "transformational leader," who is able to harmonize the desires of both leaders and subordinates into a common goal of accomplishing the mission.*

IN SEPTEMBER 1947, our Air Force began its journey as a separate service. Much of what airmen believe about leadership was born in our shared heritage with our Army brethren. After only 10 years of separate development, the differences in leadership approach between soldiers and airmen were already obvious, even to the untrained eye of a 17-year-old aircraft mechanic. In 1957, as a new Air Force one-striper, I enjoyed an opportunity to participate in a field exercise involving both Army and Air Force personnel. The young soldiers were accustomed to being told exactly what to do—then they did it. The young airmen wanted to know why they were there and what was the

point of the exercise. Understanding the nuances of that contrast was beyond me then. Today, I believe I was witnessing the difference between leadership resting primarily on power or authority and leadership acknowledging the value of the follower perspective.

A few years later, as an officer candidate in Class 63D (the last Air Force Officer Candidate School [OCS] class), a portion of our leadership course included viewing and then discussing the movie *Twelve O'Clock High*. The lesson objective rested in the analysis of two very different leadership styles practiced by successive commanders of a World War II bomber group. Col Keith Davenport was relieved of command when higher authorities became convinced that poor mission performance was a result of Davenport's "overidentification" with his subordinates. His replacement, Brig Gen Frank Savage, adopted a crushing discipline that led to improved mission performance and, eventually, to higher morale. I believe the lesson I took away that day was that in the profession of arms, the mission must come first.

Over the next 10 years or so, what I learned about leadership was purely through informal settings, more by circumstance than by design. It wasn't until I attended Air Command and Staff College that I had another formal training opportunity.

Even though this block of training was more in depth than my OCS experience, I honestly can't remember learning anything about "leading airmen." I do remember some fairly sophisticated discussions about "situational leadership" as presented by Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard. Their *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources* provides an excellent survey of the development of leadership theory.[1]

In fairness to the "educators," our professional military education would not be complete without such a survey of leadership theory. We learn that the twentieth century has been characterized by a shift in emphasis from the leader to the follower, from a focus on the needs of the organization to the needs of the individual. Unfortunately, such theory-based learning tends to overemphasize the characterizing tensions of the various examples, often at the expense of more practical application. Many of us are familiar with various diagrams illustrating the competing demands of a leader whose interests are balanced between production (the mission) on one hand and subordinates on the other. The leader who achieves the optimal balance of these competing interests is the "team" leader.[2]

In practice, I find this to be an unhelpful notion. After all, in our profession, the leader and the followers have no other legitimate basis of relationship than the mission. Emphasis on a "tension" between the mission and the people assumes the people in the organization aren't as interested in accomplishing the mission as is the leader. While this may be possible, it is not necessarily a useful premise. In my experience, leaders who see themselves in this dilemma often spend too much time emphasizing the needs of their people to the boss and the needs of the mission to their people, ultimately disappointing both.

Yet another "either/or" hypothesis presented in our leadership curriculum is the Theory X and Theory Y approach described by Douglas McGregor.[3] In this construct, Theory X leaders assume followers are either lazy or otherwise incapable of productive effort without close supervision. Theory Y leaders assume followers are bright, self-motivated, and mission oriented. Here again, we find the construct centered on the assumptions of the leader and described in generally polar terms. In practice, most leaders will find that any group of followers will present ranges of self-motivation and capability. The Theory X leader who relies primarily on his or her authority and close supervision will not likely evoke the best possible performance from the group. The Theory Y leader may create a similarly undesirable effect and wind up like Colonel Davenport—popular but ineffective and out of a job.

Rounding out the review of our leadership-training repertoire is a theory by James Mac-

Gregor Burns, one that I believe best applies to the profession of arms. In his 1978 work, *Leadership,* Burns describes "power wielders" as those whose leadership is designed to marshal resources to achieve ends or goals of their own.[4] He contrasts leadership of human beings as designed to engage followers in ways that motivate them to achieve goals mutually held. As much as any construct I've encountered to date, Burns touches on the situation of the military leader. On the one hand, the military leader is issued followers and provided the legal authority to coerce them to achieve goals. On the other hand, the followers of the modern military leader may not require coercion. Indeed, they may perform at much higher levels of productivity if they are engaged. After all, there is no reason to assume they are any less interested in mission performance than is the leader.

Burns goes on to describe "transforming leadership" as a practice in which one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality.[5] Transforming leaders create environments in which leader and follower purposes become fused. Contrast this with his description of transactional leadership, in which leaders and followers retain separate purposes. The transactional leader may provide something of value to the followers in exchange for the support or labor of the followers. The purposes of leader and followers remain separate and distinct.

So far, we have focused—as has most of the business literature—on half of the leader/follower relationship: the leader. Robert E. Kelley reminds us that "followership" may be as important as "leadership." Writing in the *Harvard Business Review,* Kelley points out that leader and follower are both roles thrust upon people who may or may not be prepared to carry them out. He also points out that most managers play both roles, sometimes simultaneously. Kelley notes further that our preoccupation with leadership (resulting from the recognition, glamour, and attention focused on leaders) leaves us little time for serious attention to followership.[6]

Kelley categorizes followers as "effective followers," "yes people," "alienated followers," or "sheep," depending upon whether they are active or passive and whether they are independent, critical thinkers or dependent, uncritical thinkers.[7] In this context, the value of "effective followers" is obvious. Perhaps more importantly, his categories help us understand that followers have responsibilities just as important as the responsibilities we assume of leaders.

## What Does All This Have to Do with *Leading Airmen?*

Consider for a moment that the vast majority of our Air Force members are performing simultaneous roles of leader and follower. Consider also that we now have more than 50 years of experience leading and following in the particular circumstances of the Air Force. Have we not now developed a leadership heritage unique to the Air Force? Should we not try to identify the model behaviors of successful Air Force leaders and followers? Should we not hold these behaviors up as examples in our education and training environments?

While the Air Force is composed of a broad variety of related disciplines, most of them relate to a central tenet of Air Force operations: centralized control and decentralized execution. At their most elemental level, centralized control and decentralized execution require leader vision and subordinate initiative. The Gulf War, the first in which theater airpower was brought under the command of a single airman, illustrates the concept. Over each 24-hour period, the command intent of a single leader was carried out across a broad battle space by 300 to 500 flight leads and mission commanders acting and reacting against thinking adversaries.

On the various flight lines supporting the effort, similar leader/follower behaviors were observable as fuel, supplies, munitions, and aircraft were marshaled into a coherent effect. Spanning several continents, a network

of aircraft under the centralized control of Air Mobility Command distributed the awesome capabilities of the US military to decentralized locations. Air Force Space Command networked a variety of capabilities to provide improved warning to decentralized locations around the theater. Air Combat Command marshaled resources from around the globe to support the effort in the Gulf.

Aerospace power grows out of the contributions of many airmen, often doing different things in separate locations and using innovation and initiative to support a single vision. It is what we do.

## Our Emerging Leader/ Follower Heritage

Our original identity as a service and the central component of our contribution today rest on our operational flying forces. Within these forces, one can find many useful clues to Air Force leader/follower behaviors. As one learns to fly, the leader (instructor pilot) and the follower (student) carry out very specific responsibilities, gradually shifting responsibility for their combined task from the leader to the follower until the student finally solos. The new pilot learns to lead himself or herself, exploring the boundaries of this new, three-dimensional freedom.

In some operational environments, the new pilot next learns followership as a wingman. These responsibilities include maintaining an appropriate position relative to the lead aircraft and, importantly, covering the leader's blind spots and calling out "bogeys" for the flight. Both the leader and the wingman share responsibility for mission success while performing separate and distinct roles. After demonstrating prowess on the wing, the pilot will progress to flight-lead status. As a flight lead, the pilot will first lead one wingman and then an additional two-ship as a flight of four. Throughout this progression, the pilot will be graded on his or her ability to plan, think ahead of the flight, and operate the flight in consideration of the capabilities of the wingmen. Eventually, the experienced pilot will learn to share his or her planning tasks with other flight members, involving their diverse experiences and backgrounds in sculpting the best plan to accomplish his or her vision.

In other operational environments, the new pilot will be assigned as a copilot, a member of a larger aircrew. In this environment, he or she will learn to command an aircraft in which the contributions of other crew members are fundamental to mission success. Once again, the pattern of shared planning and diverse operational duties organized around a single vision will manifest itself.

In our missile forces, success depends on the development of highly disciplined patterns of behavior in which centralized control is "decentrally" executed with profound precision. The patterns of mutual trust and reliance between leaders and followers found in the flying forces are replicated here.

Our space forces, involved in development, buildup, launch, and satellite-control activities, operate in an environment demanding perfection in both the leaders and the followers. Every space launch is an example of centralized control and decentralized execution—especially when one considers the myriad of related activities that must come together to assure success. In addition to the launch itself, there are telemetry, range safety, control handoffs, and on-orbit factors—all orchestrated to achieve a single mission. Throughout our expeditionary aerospace forces, we can find examples of centralized control and decentralized execution—leaders communicating vision, trusting followers with initiative, and getting important jobs done and missions accomplished across the globe.

Unfortunately, in our Air Force today, we can find less attractive examples of leadership and followership as well. We can find leaders who rely exclusively on their legal authority to command respect and obedience among subordinates. They get the job done—barely, and often at the expense of their subordinates. And we can find followers who are alienated, followers who are "yes people," and others who are merely sheep.

In spite of reports or rumors to the contrary, I believe the majority of airmen operate at the higher end of the leader and follower behaviors we have been discussing. The extraordinary performance of our Air Force in meeting a variety of tough challenges over the past 10 to 15 years attests to the quality and dedication of leaders and followers. By focusing more deliberately on the leader/follower behavior we would like to encourage, I believe we can do even better.

In summary, every airman is a follower; most are leaders. The nature of Air Force operations—combined with the highly educated, trained, and disciplined force—begins to characterize preferred leader and follower behaviors. The pace and tenor of day-to-day operations involving airmen performing as both leaders and followers and united in a concept of service above self further characterize these preferred behaviors.

## What to Do

Why would we not hold up the transforming leader—the leader who works very hard to understand his or her mission and then labors to produce an uplifting vision worth communicating to followers—as the ideal Air Force leader? And why would we not hold up the effective follower—active in pursuit of or improving the leader's vision, thinking independently and critically, and sharing responsibility for mission success—as the ideal Air Force follower? And why would we not point out that almost every Air Force member is performing simultaneously as leader and follower?

Nothing here should suggest that we would ignore fundamental tenets of military service. Our "in extremis" mission requires an ultimate loyalty up and down the chain of command. I would argue that these fundamentals of military service should define the floor of acceptable leader/follower behavior, as opposed to the "preferred" or even the "norm." If we permit our military framework to rest on tyrant leaders and sheep followers, we will ignore our most noble responsibilities and opportunities, both as leaders and as followers.

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A more valuable approach would be to identify the desired, or preferred, behaviors of Air Force leaders and followers. Then, our educators and trainers could develop more focused, even inspiring, examples of the kinds of behaviors we would like to encourage.

Some will point out that not every airman will be capable of these behaviors. While that may be true, I would suggest that such a purposeful approach to defining preferred Air Force leader/follower behaviors will produce more of these desired practices than are otherwise achieved. Many of our officers find their way to best practices in Air Force leadership and followership on their own. Others would benefit from clearer directions.

Finally, I would like to suggest a sense of urgency in this endeavor. Our Air Force is facing fundamental challenges, not in making itself more relevant but in meeting expectations built on superior performance. Recently, 40-some years after my first leader/follower observation, I visited our deployed airmen in Joint Task Force Southwest Asia. Once again, I was reminded of the extraordinarily bright, intelligent, and motivated airmen who elect to serve in our Air Force. I observed how today's airmen face new leadership challenges. Air expeditionary operations routinely pull our people out of one leader/follower relationship and set them down in another, albeit temporary but no less critical. The wide range of practices and expectations with regard to Air Force leader-

ship and followership complicates achieving the best results in these circumstances. Over the next few years, our Air Force is likely to transform itself more than it has since Orville and Wilbur began tinkering in their bicycle shop. Developing the very best leaders and followers is a must.

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Our sister services have inherited solid leadership constructs that rest on a legacy of service characterized by their unique operations. In the Army, one can argue that the center of gravity, the touchstone, revolves around a concept of "troop leadership." For the Navy, it's "survival at sea," emphasizing the captain's authority and the disciplined response of the crew. After more than five decades of developing and perfecting our unique aerospace capabilities, it is time our Air Force found, identified, and taught our best practices for "Leading Airmen."

As our chief of staff has noted, "America needs and deserves the best airmen we can create. Our Air Force needs and deserves the best leaders we can develop."[8] □

**Notes**

1. See Paul Hersey, *The Situational Leader* (Escondido, Calif.: Center for Leadership Studies, 1984), 50; and Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993), 473–92.
2. Hersey and Blanchard, 110. As the authors note, Robert R. Blake and Jane S. Mouton developed some of these leadership concepts.
3. Ibid., 59; and Douglas McGregor, *The Professional Manager*, ed. Caroline McGregor and Warren G. Bennis (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), 79.
4. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), 18–21.
5. Ibid., 4 and 106.
6. Robert E. Kelley, "In Praise of Followers," *Harvard Business Review*, no. 6 (November–December 1988): 142–48.
7. Ibid., 145.
8. Gen Michael E. Ryan, Commander's Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) 01-02, "Developing Aerospace Leaders," 22 March 2001.

*The real leader displays his quality in his triumphs over adversity, however great it may be.*

—George C. Marshall