A Model of Air Force Squadron Vitality

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Articulating the Challenge

During his Senate confirmation hearing in June 2016 to become Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen David L. Goldfein not only assured senators that he would fully support then-Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James's priorities of taking care of people, balancing readiness and modernization, and making every dollar count, he also articulated the overarching effort to link those goals together.

"Foundational to these priorities," he said, "will be to revitalize the most critical organizational level in the Air Force—Squadrons."[1]

Squadron revitalization was long overdue. For a moment in time, the downsizing of the US military following the end of the Cold War was both a rational and politically popular response to what seemed like the end of great-power competition in world affairs. Within a few years, however, the so-called peace dividend collided with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and then began the longest sustained operations tempo in Air Force history. Forces surged, and missions were accomplished, but the unrelenting grind against nonpeer adversaries took a toll on the basic building blocks of the Air Force: the squadrons and Airmen who are responsible for all they achieve. Just as Russia returned to its bellicose ways, and China rose to the level of determined rival, squadron vitality—the key to readiness and lethality—had become dangerously low.

Shortly after taking command, General Goldfein ordered an exhaustive review of Air Force policies to single out shortfalls and find solutions. "It will be a journey," he said in announcing the effort. But toward what? There would undoubtedly be a few easy wins and simple tweaks along the way, but easy fixes would not be enough to address the underlying problems. That's where we came in. Our team was fortunate to be assigned the task of finding system-level problems and recommend fixes. The first job for our team of experienced Air Force leaders and organizational experts would be to identify the attributes of squadron vitality. With that model clearly defined, we could make specific recommendations to achieve fundamental solutions for squadrons and squadron-like organizations.

We had a lot of help. We began by crunching the numbers in the metadata already gathered by the Air Force from earlier surveys and other sources. These data were used to create a targeted online survey answered by almost 15,000 Airmen from across the force. Then the team made field visits to speak with almost 4,000 Airmen at all 10 major commands and 25 bases around the world, hosting large and small focus groups and sitting for one-on-one interviews. We also launched a crowdsourcing website, gathering 966 ideas, 29,000 votes, and 180,000 views. All stages of the process included officers, enlisted and Air National Guard members, reservists, and civilians. Families, too, were tapped for their input. Along the way, the information we gathered, aided by social science, coalesced into a definition of squadron vitality. After more than a year of research, our team was able to distill squadron vitality down to three essential attributes resting on one foundation.

First, achieving success requires clarity of purpose above all else. Clarity of purpose is foundational to all other aspirations and is clearly reflected in the three other essential attributes of squadron vitality. By listening to Airmen in the field and consulting with organizational experts on team effectiveness,[2] we confirmed the importance of clarity of purpose and the three critical attributes made possible with it: verifiable mission success, purposeful leadership, and esprit de corps. These are the keys to vibrant, effective, and innovative squadrons.

Squadron Vitality Defined

By unpacking clarity of purpose and the three vitality attributes that rest on it, we can address systemic factors to find systemic solutions. Without an overarching

construct for squadron vitality, we would have been limited to simply recording and responding to the many ideas and opinions conveyed in interviews, group sessions, and surveys. This four-part vitality model (as depicted in the figure) applies to any Air Force unit or team, not just squadrons. Its aim here, though, is to help sharpen the Air Force's focus on the goal of revitalizing squadrons as the foundation for restoring readiness and increasing the lethality of the Air Force.

- **Clarity of purpose** is the foundation of the other three attributes and underpins their distinct roles in maintaining squadron vitality. This means knowing and conveying the "why" behind, say, a task, a role, or the squadron itself. Clarity of purpose guides all other decisions, large and small.
- **Verifiable mission success** is the first attribute. Determining a squadron's few vital mission outcomes requires squadron leaders to possess a thorough understanding of purpose beyond mere compliance with Air Force Instructions, and sometimes instead of it.
- **Purposeful leadership** is the second attribute. It means not only that the squadron understands its purpose, but that each supervisor achieves several critical purposes as a leader.
- **Esprit de corps** among a squadron's Airmen is the third attribute. Across time and across cultures, it is a common denominator among successful warfighting forces.

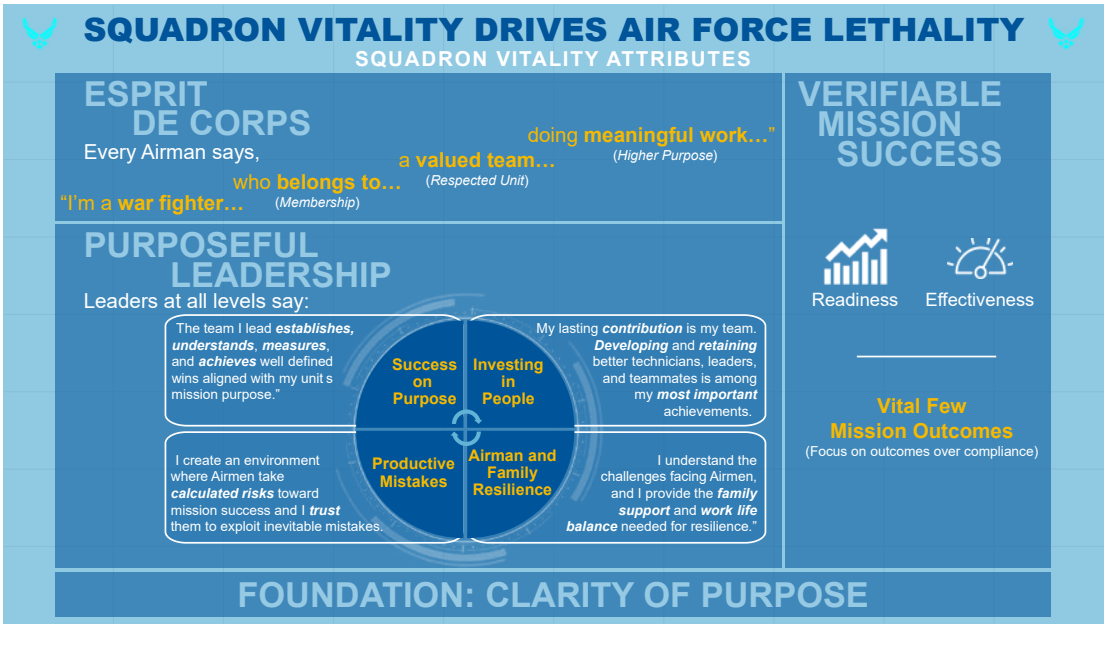

Figure. Squadron vitality attributes

"Squadron Vitality Drives Air Force Lethality"

Clarity of purpose: the foundation. In life, work, or war, people get their meaning from seeing how they fit into a higher purpose. For that to happen, first a higher purpose must exist. Second, it must be known. The Air Force has abundant higher purpose to offer its Airmen. Unfortunately, Airmen don't always know it.

We encountered many mixed signals during our time in the field. While many Airmen said that their mission needs to be much clearer, some countered that their mission was plenty clear: "We have lots of measures," one leader asserted. Therein lies the problem; nobody griped about an insufficient number of metrics; the complaints were about insufficient clarity of purpose. This is the simplest, hardest, and most important question for leaders to ask. It's the existential, strategic question, "Why do we, as an Air Force, exist?" Or, at a lower level, "Why do we, as a squadron, exist?" Put differently, the question is not, "What are we here to do?" The real question is, "What are we here to achieve?" It's about the few, important outcomes, not the many, many tasks along the way.

Carl von Clausewitz famously asserted that the talent of the strategist is to identify the decisive point and to concentrate everything on it, removing forces from secondary fronts and ignoring lesser objectives. Such agile, purpose-focused leadership is known as "mission command," among military theorists.[3] When that decisive point is unclear, it is impossible for Airmen to distinguish lesser objectives from the central one. In these cases, with blurred or fragmented purpose, bureaucratic demands fill the vacuum. Then, mission command—which depends on clear purpose[4]—gives way to *compliance command*, a term we coined for when success is defined as following the rules to stay out of trouble.

Mission command derives from the operational environment. In mission command, the commander's intent "should convey absolute clarity of purpose by focusing on the essentials and leaving out everything else. The task should not be specified in too much detail."[5] Mission command wins wars in-theater, but any organization, operational or otherwise, becomes more innovative, agile, and effective when its purpose drives analysis, decisions, and action.[6]

One Airman nicely summarized the distinction between compliance command and mission command when he suggested, "We have to get away from a compliance-based approach to an effects-based approach."

When Airmen's concerns weren't directly about clarity of purpose, they expressed misgivings about the second-order effects of unclear or absent purpose, such as checking boxes with computer-based training of questionable value in order to stay in compliance. When a squadron's few, major outcomes aren't clear, it lacks the overarching basis to decide what tasks to take on, how to prioritize, and how to tailor all sorts of rules and resources. The centrality of purpose-driven work extends to efforts at all levels—squadron leadership, training classes, morale events, family support, and so forth. The idea, "Begin with the end in mind," is a cliché for a reason: it is a foundational truth.

The Operational Spirit Every Day

Purpose-driven organizations and effort are not uncommon in operational and deployed environments. Military mission planning always begins with a clear understanding of intent and purpose. When intended results are clear and matter, good things tend to happen: Airmen have little problem connecting to purpose and sensing their membership in a valued team doing meaningful work—the prerequisites for esprit de corps. Decisions get smarter as the focus becomes "What will accomplish our mission?" instead of "Am I going to get dinged?"

The irony here is difficult to ignore. It should not be surprising that a global organization like the Air Force may sometimes have difficulty communicating its goals to constituent units far removed from headquarters. It should be very surprising, however, that those faraway units are usually the ones that get it right. In operational environments, objectives are clear, and a high operations tempo is accepted and often embraced. Higher purpose drives Airmen on and feeds esprit de corps. But in nonoperational environments, Airmen resent long hours because the higher cause isn't always evident. In effect, "We are working 12-hour days . . . why?"

An operational team, working toward the same clear, important purpose, has quite a leg up in the morale and cohesion department over their counterparts at home. Why do operational environments bear these advantages? Is it just high stakes and adrenaline? Probably not. Many Airmen reported home-station leaders and squadrons that successfully created vitality, and a clear, shared, important purpose was an essential part of their success.

Consider this: any Airman—not just an operator—who overcomes great obstacles to serve a noble purpose is the courageous Airman the Air Force requires. On the other hand, any person whose sole intent is to follow the rules, even when they serve no clear purpose, becomes just another "bureaucrat." Many of us would like to be up front, in the thick of it all, yet most of us wield keyboards or wrenches, not control sticks or M4 carbines. But if we are connected to our clear and elevating purpose, then we get to make a difference and be part of something vital.

One month into his current tenure, General Goldfein asserted, "Squadrons are the engines of innovation and esprit de corps. Squadrons possess the greatest potential for operational agility."[7] That is true, and clarity of purpose is the enabler. Airmen linked to purpose will capably surf the ever-shifting sea of warfare and geopolitics. Airmen linked solely to procedures and checklists will fare less well; they will be stuck with outdated turn-by-turn directions in a fast-morphing world.

Increasing clarity of purpose will increase innovation, agility, and many other cultural strengths. True empowerment becomes possible when purpose is sharply defined. It enables us to tailor and align authorities with purpose-linked responsibilities. It helps us distinguish time-wasting micromanagement from life-saving checklists. It is how we can know when detailed guidance is central to success or when it wastes time and hinders the mission.

As General Goldfein said, "Secretary Wilson and I told the Inspector General: 'If you go out and inspect an organization, and that commander has made a prudent, reasonable decision to change course, and that decision has actually increased the lethality and the readiness of that unit to accomplish their mission, then we're not

going to ding them. We're going to celebrate it.'"[8] When we understand the purpose of our effort, then "agility," "innovation," and "empowerment" are not just buzzwords, they are tools.

Verifiable Mission Success

Squadrons exist to achieve their few, uniquely vital mission outcomes. Either enabled by others or by enabling others, each squadron's vital mission outcomes result in the lethality we bring to the Joint fight. Verifiable mission success reflects clarity of purpose at the unit level.

Vital mission outcomes are the essence of a mission command culture. All units are responsible for *doing* many of the same things, like training requirements, meeting physical fitness standards, and generally staying in compliance with rules and regulations. Each individual unit, however, exists to *achieve* a few very specific mission outcomes. They are what matter, and all squadron *activities* ought to aim toward achieving those few mission outcomes. For example, security force squadrons exist to protect life and property. Airlift squadrons exist to transport people and things, on time, intact, and at optimum capacity. Munitions squadrons exist to ensure that all weapons are accounted for, secured, and ready to use.

Unfortunately, it is often easier to measure mundane tasks like completing computer-based training than it is to measure the success of a relatively complex mission outcome. When mission and goals are not measured, but failure is, then success can only be defined as not failing: a surefire way to engender micromanagement and other risk-avoidant habits that fester in compliance command. Variations on scorekeeping, from unit inspections to leaders' performance reports, often put more weight on compliance with the mundane than on success with the mission. This is exactly backward.

For leaders to lead in the right direction, and for teammates to rally around the right things, they all must be able to articulate the small handful of mission outcomes a squadron is established to produce, and then keep score of those few outcomes. This is essential. Verifiably successful mission outcomes are not only the ultimate indicators of a squadron's vitality, they are the building blocks of Air Force's lethality.

Purposeful Leadership

Good squadron leaders lead their teams to achieve the *team's* purpose, but those leaders also understand their own purpose as leaders more broadly. That purpose includes strengthening the individuals and the teams they lead. This is a longer-term investment that includes creating an environment that rewards calculated risks and reaps benefits even from mistakes, and building the resilience of Airmen, their families, and support networks.

Purposeful leadership is the backbone of institutional culture and unit ethos. That ethos is then passed along with every change of command and spread throughout the force as team members rotate to new units. It is clarity of purpose manifested in unit leadership.

Purposeful leadership is an ongoing responsibility and requires regular attention to four focus areas.

Success on Purpose. Purposeful leaders can say with confidence: "*The team I lead defines, understands, measures, and achieves well-defined wins.*" These savvy leaders ask: "Why does my team exist? What purpose are we meant to achieve? How will we recognize success?" Then they make sure that their Airmen know the answers.

This process provides focus, but also the meaning all Airmen want as context for their work. Leaders should always be able to articulate how day-to-day tasks—even the mundane ones—lead to the achievement of the unit's unique vital mission outcomes.

Likewise, good leaders establish goals for improving how the unit delivers verifiable mission success. They launch timebound unit initiatives, each with their own clear purpose that clearly contributes to delivery on the unit's purpose. Success on these efforts are wins for the squadron, ratcheting up its capabilities and capacity.

The knowability—and measurability—of achieving such "success on purpose" is essential. Otherwise, achieving success too easily defaults to compliance and error avoidance. As one recent study on squadron effectiveness found, "Airmen who understood the unit's mission and their specific contribution to the overall wing mission were more motivated to accomplish goals."[9] In fact, both experience and research have shown that opportunities for meaningful work is a key factor in work satisfaction. But leaders must continually communicate to team members how they fit into that purpose. It does not happen automatically.[10]

Time Invested in People. "*My lasting contribution is my team. Developing and retaining better technicians, leaders, and teammates are among my most important achievements.*" Purposeful leaders' time invested in their people is time invested in the future—a future that those leaders will not directly share. It's the pay-it-forward philosophy of leaders who aim to enable tomorrow's results while achieving today's.

It's a balancing game: achieving today's success while enabling future success. That latter success requires mentoring and coaching; it requires asking and listening; and it requires genuine demonstration of interest in Airmen as professionals and as individuals.

Productive Mistakes. "*I create an environment where Airmen take calculated risks toward mission success, and I trust them to exploit inevitable mistakes.*" History is filled with declarations of the importance of allowing for and learning from errors. The trick is creating an environment that induces people to do it—not just telling them to. Purposeful leaders create that environment. Leaders place confidence in their subordinates, and subordinates in turn understand that the boss will protect them when they make decisions in good faith—especially hard ones.[11]

Good leaders know that everybody makes mistakes and they don't shy away from taking appropriate and calculated risks. Perhaps the strongest statement a leader can make to his or her Airmen is to own up to mistakes and turn them into teachable moments so that a mistake by one person—even the boss—can lead to learning by all. Leaders make an impression on their people when they protect subordinates who make honest mistakes. No leader should have to choose between protecting their people and protecting their career.

Airmen and Family Resilience. "*I understand the challenges facing Airmen, and I provide the family support and work-life balance needed for resilience.*" Good leaders care about their team members' families[12] and support networks, and they do so for more than simple reasons of humanity. The unique challenges of military life also mean leaders must support Airmen's families for two practical reasons.

The first reason is about resilience: Airmen who deploy or are otherwise gone for a long time have to wonder, "Is my family really okay?" As General Goldfein recently said, families "exhibit a very special kind of courage when they endure the long hours, separations, and hardships that have become a part of an Air Force at war."[13] If their families are okay, then those Airmen can focus on their tasks at hand. The burden of being away from home, especially in dangerous environments, is made lighter by knowing that the Air Force has their backs.

The second reason is about retention. The Air Force recruits individuals but retains families. As one observer commented years ago, "If there is a tug-of-war between the military and the family, it is the family who usually wins."[14] However, a family connected to the importance of the mission is more likely to want to retain that connection. For leaders in the Air Force, a commitment to those things that enhance Airman and family resilience is not just an act of compassion, it is a leadership responsibility.

Esprit de Corps

Esprit de corps is *a feeling of pride, fellowship, and loyalty shared by the members of a group*. It's an attractive concept, and verifiable mission outcomes and purposeful leadership certainly create fertile ground for it. Unbundling *esprit de corps* into its component parts, however, helps to create an actionable framework. Consider these three elements: membership, respected unit, and higher purpose. At a summary level, we believe that each Airman should be able to say, "*I'm a warfighter who belongs to a valued team doing meaningful work!*"

Membership. "*I'm a war fighter who **belongs** to a valued team doing meaningful work.*" The need for belonging and camaraderie is considered a fundamental human motivation,[15] as recognized by the Air Force's drive for inclusiveness. It is a truism that warriors fight as much for their brothers and sisters in arms as they do for a cause.[16] If that is so, then a sense of belonging, of having fellow Airmen one would fight for, is important to esprit de corps.

A sense of membership is profoundly affected by how well leaders can make team members' similarities—such as shared mission and values—more salient than their natural differences.

Respected Group. "*I'm a war fighter who belongs to a **valued team** doing meaningful work.*" Squadrons and their flights are teams. Part of one's personal pride comes from pride in the team to which one belongs. In fact, two things happen when one's team is highly respected:[17] team members' identification with the team goes up and so does their own self-esteem.

If a squadron has an impressive history, then its members should understand that they have a reputation to uphold. If a squadron doesn't have much heritage,

then they have a reputation to create. Either way, it will be the team's continuous high performance that invites respect and helps Airmen feel part of a valued team.

Higher Purpose. "*I'm a war fighter who belongs to a valued team doing* ***meaningful work***." Experience and research tell us that high-performing teams have much in common, including team goals that are both clear and elevating.[18] Such goals also have a unifying effect, reinforcing membership in an important unit. When members do not share a goal(s), they are members of a team only in the sense that Sam's Club members or private health club members are teams. They may go to the same place, but there is no common connection to purpose.

Opportunities for meaningful work—work linked to a higher purpose—is a key factor in work satisfaction. However, leaders must continually communicate to team members how they fit into that purpose.[19]

Esprit de corps is another way of saying, "It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog." Good leaders of any kind or size of squadron know their team members want to make a difference, to be part of something greater than themselves. The more Airmen understand "the wins" for their team and how their role achieves them, the more meaningful their work becomes. This virtuous cycle is mutually reinforcing and exactly the kind of squadron attribute that leaders should work hard to foster. Whether it's the security forces defender securing a base, the maintenance technician ensuring equipment is ready and safe, or the fighter pilot who joins the fight, every Airman has a specific role in contributing to the joint fight. Every Airman is a war fighter, and the combined esprit de corps of the thousands of war fighters who make up the Air Force is nothing if not a strategic asset.

Conclusion

Squadron vitality drives Air Force lethality. That is why the Air Force must focus on revitalizing squadrons. With clarity of purpose as the foundation, the key attributes of squadron vitality—verifiable mission outcomes, purposeful leadership, and esprit de corps has shown that two things happen when one's team is highly esteemed: it provides the framework to start doing things differently, and it enables our squadron culture to overcome internal obstacles to its own success.

The issues facing the Air Force are nothing new. Risk aversion, undermanning, and compliance command are common to militaries around the world.[20] Most proposed solutions to these problems and others like them are strictly tactical, aiming to solve one problem at a time without addressing the larger problems inherent in the culture. But changing culture is hard.

That's why the solutions we offered at the conclusion of our study were systemic in nature. We asked questions like: Why is unit purpose so unclear despite thousands of pages of mission-related instructions? Why is noncandid feedback on officer performance reports and enlisted performance reports the norm among otherwise honest and candid people? Why is there so much reliance on ineffective computer-based training? Understanding the patterns that *create* these problems is more helpful than developing one-time, one-off solutions.

Some of our recommendations are already being implemented. General Goldfein, Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson, and Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright recently authorized the Squadron Revitalization Implementation Plan to put many of our study's findings into practice. That's right, our efforts have already outgrown this essay and are starting to bear fruit.

Air Education and Training Command is building the tools and curriculum to support wing commanders in the creation of wing-led flight commander courses. Those courses will help squadron leaders engage with civic leaders, school boards, chambers of commerce, and other institutions that are part of the communities where they live and work. Meanwhile, Air University is developing a new squadron leadership course that stresses the virtues of purposeful leadership. And Secretary Wilson last year announced a two-year project to reduce Air Force instructions and review directive publications that include more than 130,000 compliance items at the wing level. These are all steps in the right direction.

Our recommendations recognize that it is our own bureaucracy and culture that we must employ to achieve long-term cultural change. For example, our performance reports must truly reflect the performance we value, such as achieving mission outcomes and building strong, competent teams and Airmen. All of our institutional influencers must point in the same, correct direction. This direction must be determined by fundamental principles like those we derived from our research and thousands of interviews.

Everyone can help. Senior leaders: insist upon clarity of purpose at the strategic level and then architect a reimagined Air Force that naturally encourages the attributes of squadron vitality. Unit leaders, both officers and enlisted: employ the squadron vitality model, and take the opportunity to remake your units, empower your people, and focus on your few, vital mission outcomes like never before. Young Airmen, officers and enlisted: seize the opportunity to use the concepts put forth here to send your ideas up the chain, demand purposeful leadership, question the box-checking of compliance command, and use your technical expertise to help senior leaders drill down to what really matters. The same goes for Air Force civilians: if you don't see the value in the mountains of paperwork that cross your desk, then ask, "Why?"

Air Force family members, it's you we fight for, and it's you we worry about when we're gone. Engage with your loved one's unit. Try to understand their mission and what it means to maintain the lethality that keeps the Air Force ahead of its adversaries. The vital Key Spouse Program and Community Action Board / Integrated Delivery System, along with its many programs to deal with issues like domestic violence and sexual assault prevention, have been targeted for their own revitalization as part of the Squadron Revitalization Implementation Plan. Take advantage of them.

Our comprehensive review of the challenges faced by Airmen and their families provides a basis for squadron revitalization. This is the first step in a long-term effort that will require constant reevaluation to determine what's working and what's not. We're not kidding ourselves—changing culture doesn't happen overnight. But with clarity of purpose lighting the way and the attributes of squadron vitality pro-

viding a framework for change, we know we can hone our edge and make our Air Force more lethal than ever. ✪

Notes

1. United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Advance Questions for General David L. Goldfein, USAF Nominee for the Position of Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force*, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., 2016, 7, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/download/goldfein_apqs_06-16-16.

2. A detailed description of our project methodology (pages 3–5 and Appendix pages A1–A10), as well as our Findings (pages 15–41 and Appendix pages A11–A54), can be found in Stephen L. Davis, et al., *Improving Air Force Squadrons—Recommendations for Vitality: Report to the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, 2018), https://www.milsuite.mil/revitalize or https://www.facebook.com/200999403407041/posts/1031450507028589/.

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4. Stephen Bungay, "The Road to Mission Command: The Genesis of a Command Philosophy," *British Army Review* 137 (Summer 2005): 22–29.

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6. *Whole Goals* is one term for this approach to strategic direction. See William Casey et al., "Are We Driving Strategic Results or Metric Mania? Evaluating Performance in the Public Sector," *International Public Management Review* 9, no. 2 (2008): 90–105, http://journals.sfu.ca/ipmr/index.php/ipmr/article/view/57.

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10. Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), *Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement: Revitalizing a Changing Workforce* (Alexandria, VA: SHRM, 2016), https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/2016-Employee-Job-Satisfaction-and-Engagement-Report.pdf.

11. Milan Vego, "Mission Command and Zero Area Tolerance Cannot Coexist," *Proceedings Magazine* 144, no. 7 (July 2018), https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2018-07/mission-command-and-zero-error-tolerance-cannot-coexist.

12. For simplicity, we'll say "families" here but we are including that meaningful and close support network that most people have in one form or another.

13. Gen David L. Goldfein, *CSAF Airman to Airman—Revitalizing the Squadron*, Air Force Television Pentagon, 5 August 2016, video, 2:16, https://www.dvidshub.net/video/478527/csaf-airman-airman-revitalizing-squadron.

14. Edna J. Hunter, ed., *Families Under the Flag: A Review of Military Family Literature* (Westport, CT: ABC Clio/Praeger, 1982), 3.

15. For example, as in David C. McClelland's well-known "Three Needs Theory," McClelland, *Human Motivation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

16. Army War College's Leonard Wong and associates show that American war fighters do fight for higher causes and for each other. Leonard Wong, et al., *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War*, *Strategic Studies Institute* report (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=179.

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20. Shamir, *Transforming Command.*

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