The US Air Force Suicide Prevention Program and Our Airmen Today

How Transformational Leadership Can Create More Resilient Airmen

2ND LT RYAN MCKNIGHT, USAF

"The Air Force we need must have Airmen that are well trained, Airmen that are well led, Airmen that are agile, resilient Airmen who are the masters of their fate… the captains of their soul."

Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force
Kaleth O. Wright

In 1996, the US Air Force launched its Air Force Suicide Prevention Program (AFSSP) in Air Force Instruction (AFI) 90-505 after its leadership noted an increase in suicide rates in the Air Force and DOD. Since the AFSSP's inception 22 years ago, the USAF and its personnel have faced numerous challenges spanning from the end of the Cold War to the start of the War on Terrorism, budgetary constraints and sequestrations, technological innovations and espionage, and the lowest total force in the USAF's history. The ever-increasing mission sets, work-related stress, and outside stressors culminated in a breaking point for some Airmen. In 2018 alone, the Air Force suffered more than 100 total force suicides and 11 suicides in January 2019, prompting Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson to disseminate a total force memorandum advocating for a con-

tinued culture shift to one thriving in resiliency.[1] Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright led this charge for a well-trained, well-led, and most importantly, a resilient force defined by one's ability to overcome hardships and pain.[2] Similarly, the AFSSP focuses on educating, developing, and emboldening adaptive, confident, and resilient Airmen who not only solve problems but also become stronger men and women through their experiences.[3] The purpose of this article is to examine transformational leadership and its potential impact on squadron-level leadership and intertwined effects on unit morale, cohesion, resiliency, and most importantly, suicide prevention.

In 2016, Gen David L. Goldfein, USAF chief of staff (CSAF), highlighted his vision to "revitalize the squadron," the core building block of the Air Force. He pushed for clarity of purpose, purposeful leadership, rejuvenation of the esprit de corps, and set guidelines for verifiable mission success. Today, in the wake of America's longest war, Air Force leaders can aid in mission success by constructing an environment built by their example. The environment must foster mission effectiveness and hold Airmen accountable while at the same time, mentor, coach, and enable an open forum for these future leaders to become resilient, creative, and better wingmen. This environment fosters squadron unity while engendering camaraderie, unity, and fellowship.

In recent years, transformational leadership has come to the forefront as an example of motivational, influential, and servant leadership. For this article, I will define *transformational leadership* in the leaders who inspire and influence their followers to carry out a goal or task through shared values and morals, guided by the leader's vision, personalized relationship, authenticity, and self-example.[4] Transformational leaders reframe problems and encourage their followers to envision new, brighter futures in line with the followers', leader's, and the organization's values. In doing so, followers choose to participate actively and contribute to a team and unit that looks out for and supports their greater good.

Just like personalities, leaders use and may prefer varying leadership models and styles (transactional, laissez-faire, etc.) to motivate their Airmen to accomplish their wide-ranging missions. This article will first provide insight into recent suicide trends in the Air Force and how the AFSSP sets guidelines to reduce these numbers. It will then analyze squadron revitalization and transformational leadership's role in fostering comradery and morale, and removing the stigma associated with talking about stressors, mental health, and suicidal ideations. Finally, it will synthesize transformational leadership's impact on encouraging and promoting a "wingman-based" culture that inspires and encourages adaptive and resilient behavior. In doing so, one can hope it will reduce the number of suicides the Air Force faces each year.

Suicide Trends in the Air Force

From 1990–2004, the active duty Air Force (ADAF) experienced 642 suicides (42.8 percent annual average) with 95 percent of deaths comprised of enlisted Airmen.[5] From 2012 until the third quarter of 2018, the ADAF experienced 387 suicides (55.3 percent annual average).[6] In 2011, researchers conducted a study of risk factors communicated by Airmen both verbally and in writing before and after suicides between 1996–2006.[7] They reviewed 237 case files from the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) death investigations, 98 of whom left suicide notes.[8] The AFOSI noted that the majority of those who left a note were enlisted personnel (85.7 percent, 84 members).[9] From the study, 13 known risk factors for suicide were identified: (1) agitation, (2) anger, (3) hopelessness, (4) loneliness, (5) loss of job satisfaction, (6) loss of status (rank), (7) missed friends, (8) perceived burdensomeness, (9) rejection, (10) revenge, (11) shame, (12) self-hate, and (13) thwarted belongingness (an inability to feel a sense of belonging).[10] Four of the most communicated risk factors were thwarted belongingness, a loss of job satisfaction (in the workplace), hopelessness (no hope for the future), and missed friends once had.[11] However, the problem of suicide in the Air Force not only entails the number of acts committed by Airmen but also encapsulates attempts of self-harm and ideations.

A secondary study by researchers comprised of a 2006 online survey of 52,780 active duty members to determine suicidal ideations and suicide attempts in the Air Force and related demographic risk factors.[12] The survey concluded that 3 percent of men, and 5.5 percent of women reported significant suicidal ideation the year before and 8.7 percent of those with suicidal ideations attempted suicide at least once.[13] Furthermore, the study found those most at risk include non-Christians, low-ranking military personnel, and Hispanic females; however, religious teachings and marriage have been found to mitigate those most at risk.[14] These groups pose a higher risk for suicide based upon a lack of religious beliefs related to suicide, empowerment or perceived power, and sociocultural values.[15] The dearth of reported data also affects the deployed population. Roughly 30 percent of deployed members return with enough psychological stressors meriting medical assistance, yet do not choose to receive it.[16] Repeated reviews of risk factors, embracing wingmanship, and community-level efforts by commanders and frontline supervisors can reduce these risks.[17] However, before explaining the impact of leadership in suicide prevention, one must first review the Air Force Suicide Prevention Plan.

Air Force Suicide Prevention Program

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Airmen experienced the proxy wars and subsequent fall of the Soviet Union but were soon embroiled in conflict in the Gulf War, Bosnian War, and the bombings of the Khobar Towers and the World Trade Centers. Today, Airmen enter the Air Force during the longest war in US history. As men and women died serving the country, suicide took its toll and became the second leading cause of death of Airmen, especially among enlisted males, with only a third of them receiving any form of mental health services during the early 1980s and 90s.[18] Air Force leadership identified the increased number of suicides, reaching almost 100 in 1989, and the high-profile suicide of Adm Jeremy M. Boorda led Gen Thomas S. Moorman Jr., then vice chief of staff, to push for the creation of the Air Force Suicide Prevention Integrated Product Team (IPT).[19]

The team, consisting of 75 members, identified three major problems: 1) Airmen's fear of losing their jobs from mental health issues, 2) the stigmatization of mental health-related issues by commanders, and 3) the perception that the Air Force no longer took care of their people.[20] Furthermore, they initiated a policy in following a subject interview related to an ongoing investigation, the first sergeant, commander, or supervisor must accompany the member and assess whether the member is at risk of suicide. These means proved to be effective in reducing the overall number of suicides within the Air Force: by 1999, the USAF had just under 20 suicides, and leadership looked to reduce the stigmatization toward mental health and create awareness for suicide prevention. Furthermore, since the AFSPP's inception and up until 2008, the number of Airmen receiving mental health care increased from 9.5 percent in 1998 to 13.3 percent in 2005, with 97 percent of those seeking treatment not experiencing negative impacts to their careers.[21] Moreover, studies found that since the AFSPP's creation, the number of suicides in the service has declined when leaders implement the AFSPP continuously and appropriately.[22]

Today, the AFSPP takes the lessons learned from the IPT and establishes levels of responsibility throughout the chain of command related to suicide prevention and conducts annual reviews to ensure compliance. Part of the annual review process includes the identification of risk factors related to legal, financial, and relationship stress, powerlessness, negative social interactions, being a burden on others, severe stress, and significant life transitions.[23] The AFSPP outlines the role of the squadron and unit commander to "promote an environment of healthy and adaptive behaviors, foster the wingman culture, and encourage responsible help-seeking and not tolerate any actions (hazing, belittling, humiliating, etc.) that prevents Airmen from responsibly seeking help or professional care."[24] Similarly,

frontline supervisors must also develop a trust-based relationship with their subordinates and provide them with the tools to identify distress signals and ways of seeking appropriate care. As a result, through their leadership and computer-based training, Airmen are expected to know the suicide risk factors and signs and provide guidance and support for their Airmen in times of need.[25] The AFSPP model places a tremendous responsibility on the Air Force leadership's role—specifically the squadron and unit commanders—to develop healthy, resilient, and adaptive cultures. As such, squadron leadership must next be examined.

Squadron-Level Revitalization

General Goldfein described the squadron as the beating heart of the Air Force, which upholds the USAF culture, trains and builds Airmen, and creates a lasting impact on the Airmen these leaders are fortunate to lead.[26] However, as the Air Force continues to ensure global vigilance, reach, and power, Airmen are tasked with more additional duties with less human resources. During an Air Force readiness hearing, Secretary Wilson indicated increased personnel ranging from maintainers to pilots, higher Airmen retention, and an enhanced squadron size to 386 squadrons by 2030 as paramount for USAF readiness.[27] As the Air Force works to achieve appropriate personnel levels for the increased mission set and readiness, senior leadership will rely on squadrons to carry out their missions and excel despite decreased personnel.

Since entering his position as CSAF, General Goldfein has relentlessly pursued squadron revitalization and empowerment, in line with the *National Defense Strategy*, to restore the readiness of forces following the government sequestration.[28] The components of revitalization include using the clarity of purpose to enhance purposeful leadership, esprit de corps, and establishing verifiable mission success. The figure demonstrates the interconnectedness between squadron vitality and mission effectiveness. Put simply, the clarity of purpose puts into perspective Airmen's daily operations and how they contribute to the Air Force's strategic vision and lethality. Purposeful leadership reinvigorates the leadership mindset of "taking care of our own," producing an environment of high morale, creativity, and cohesiveness. The esprit de corps engenders shared loyalty among team members and builds a shared sense of belongingness and a feeling that Airmen are completing meaningful and purposeful work.[29] Combining clarity of purpose, purposeful leadership, and esprit de corps creates a highly capable, mission-effective team that possesses the readiness and effectiveness to produce lethality in all domains and locations at any given moment. To discuss this in detail, one must look at how this model ties to currently effective squadrons.
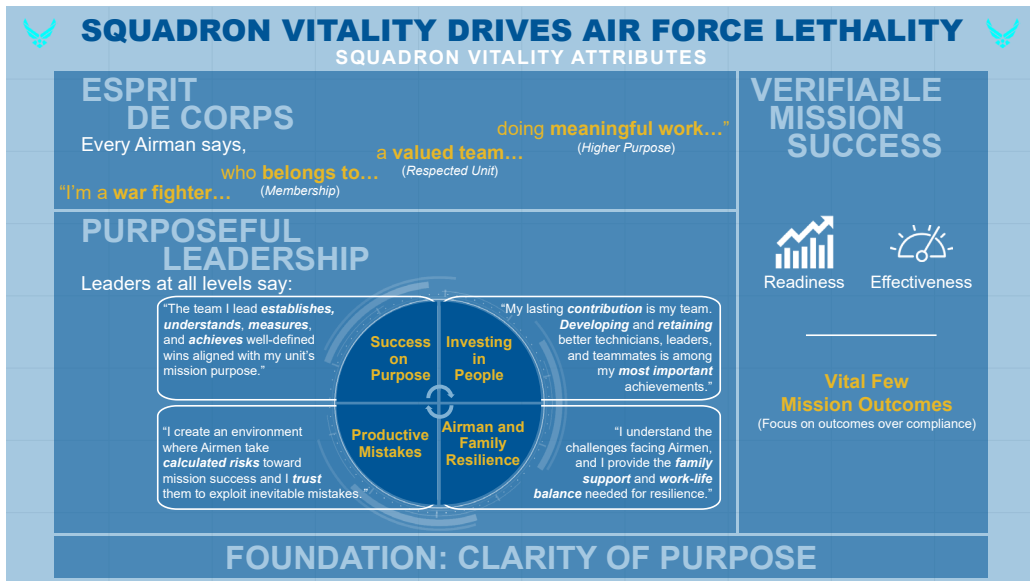
Figure. Squadron Revitalization Model

Transformational Leadership and the Squadron

A recent study reviewed key attributes exhibited by effective squadron commanders. The researchers interviewed 30 squadron commanders who recently graduated Air Command and Staff College and discovered transparency had the most substantial impact upon communication, leadership, performance improvement, and change management.[30] Additionally, these commanders experienced added success through regular and consistent communication, being viewed as approachable, building trust-based relationships, and effectively using awards and social activities to increase the morale and internal cohesiveness within the unit.[31] They also built a culture of respect and reviewed climate surveys to have a pulse on their organization.[32]

All these actions created purposeful leadership focused on subordinate success, upheld a culture where Airmen felt a sense of belonging and unity and created a leadership model and esprit de corps in line with General Goldfein's tenets. Purposeful leadership must look at how leaders influence and motivate their people to succeed, form healthy, adaptative skills, and foster camaraderie in the unit.

Transformational leadership requires leaders to build personal relationships with their followers while continually developing and training them to prepare these next-generation leaders for the challenges of war. Transformational leadership consists of four main attributes: individual consideration (IC), intellectual stimulation (IS), inspirational motivation (IM), and idealized influence (II), each

dependent upon the followers and situation.[33] Leaders who exhibit idealized in-fluence display characteristics of servant leadership, place their followers before themselves, and set the example for their peers and subordinates; so much so, these followers want to follow their lead.[34] Inspirational motivation advances the ideology of the esprit de corps by pushing their Airmen to achieve what they thought impossible through optimism, motivation, and attitude.[35] Intellectual stimulation challenges followers to question the status quo and traditional meth-ods and find new innovative ways for solving complex and dynamic tasks.[36] Fi-nally, through individual consideration, leaders build relationships with their fol-lowers not solely as leaders, but as teachers, coaches, mentors, and counselors. These leaders provide the tools to create a well-rounded and resilient follower who continually pursues personal growth.[37]

Transformational leadership has been proven to assist coping—how one re-sponds to and interacts with a perceived stressor—among Air Force officers as well. Coping can further be broken down into problem-focused and emotion-focused coping.[38] Problem-focused coping occurs when one assumes control over the situation and works to change that stressor, whereas emotion-focused coping addresses the stress-based emotions. Air Force leaders today face a wide range of stressors that require different approaches for effective coping. A study of 338 USAF active duty captains found that those who exhibited transformational lead-ership through inspirational motivation aided rather than disengaged from problem-focused coping.[39] Additionally, problem-focused coping helped leaders positively reframe emotion-focused problems.[40] Thus, leaders who effectively practice transformational leadership are more likely to appropriately handle stressful situations, ensure they continue to support their people rather than dis-engage from the situation, and continue to build morale within in the unit.[41] By staying engaged, leaders can set an example for their people while using their self-example to show resiliency. In short, the most effective means of educating Airmen is leading and teaching through example.

Discussion

To establish a more lethal force, General Goldfein laid out his priorities, which directly correlate to suicide prevention. As mentioned previously, a majority of suicides stem from thwarted belongingness, a loss of job satisfaction, hopeless-ness, and missed friends. General Goldfein made a remark at the USAFA in which he described his first experience at the basic military training graduation. At graduation, he looked into these Airmen's eyes and saw unlimited hope. How-ever, this led to a separate question, "How do so many of these incredible Airmen, who start with hope, transition on our watch to hopeless?"[42] He continues, "and

yet we are losing too many [Airmen] on our watch… leadership is a gift that's given to us by those we're privileged to lead."[43] This gift requires commanders to take the words *adaptive*, *resilient*, and *healthy* and transform them into an everyday lifestyle that is tangible and felt by all members of the community. To create this environment, it requires transformational leadership that inspires and influences Airmen to work as a team; furthermore, it creates a culture where Airmen can go to leadership with their problems and challenges and receive the mentorship and coaching that will make them stronger and more capable.

The Air Force has continued to look for ways to improve the AFSSP since its inception to achieve the objective of zero total force suicides through a continuous commitment to its people and providing the necessary training, awareness, and environment that promotes, rather than stigmatizes, mental health treatment. Airmen today look to their leadership to lead, coach, and build them into stronger men and women who can handle the stressors inside and outside of work.

Today, Squadron Officer School captains learn the four behaviors of transformational leadership (IC, IM, IS, and II) and receive a general awareness of how they lead and implement these behaviors.[44] However, to instill these behaviors, the leadership must work to foster an environment that is conducive for the practice and internalization of these core tenets. By promoting these behaviors, Air Force leadership will invest not only in its people but also in the Air Force's long-term health as an organization.

The American people trust the Air Force's leaders to protect their sons and daughters, bring them home safe, and after their time in service concluded, have them leave the service better than when they entered. However, active duty and veteran suicides subvert this trust and expectation. A 1993 study found that almost half of the suicides during the year could have been prevented had the members received mental health treatment.[45] Despite the programs in place and resources available to Airmen today, the stigma of mental health treatment, fear of repercussions, and perception of losing their security clearances still exists today.

Through constant communication, trust-based personalized relationships, and transparency, leaders today can put into perspective the role of mental health for the Air Force's Airmen. Airmen are encouraged to seek mental health treatment, changing the perception that it might be potentially detrimental to their careers. Furthermore, mental health treatment can improve performance and growth.[46] As commanders who exhibit qualities of transformational leadership continue to influence and inspire their people, these ideas will trickle down to the lowest levels of the squadron. Furthermore, during times of stress and difficulties, how a commander responds—whether positively or negatively—will also carry over into what Airmen view as acceptable coping measures.

Following a transformational leadership style and using it for a positive reinterpretation of problems can mitigate the stigma associated with seeking mental health. Over time, the culture will shift, and Airmen will look to their wingmen and leadership for mentorship and coaching to solve the more personal and difficult questions they face daily, whether financial or marital. This shift, in turn, builds an environment where Airmen and supervisors look out for one another and create a community. As Airmen seek refuge in one another, they will gain more friends rather than lose them, feel more satisfied rather than dissatisfied, and look toward the future with optimism. They look toward the future because their leaders know them as a person, influence them to become the best version of themselves, know the actions behind their leadership's decisions, and know they have the support network to overcome any obstacle in their way. This environment makes Airmen resilient, creating survivors rather than statistics. ✪

Notes

1. Heather Wilson, "Suicide Prevention Memorandum" (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2019), https://www.ang.af.mil/.

2. Air Force TV, "Taking Care of Airmen from the Ground Up," *YouTube* video, 30:57, 19 September 2018, https://www.youtube.com/.

3. Department of the Air Force, *Suicide Prevention Program*, Air Force Instruction (AFI) 90-505 (Washington, DC: Air Force Departmental Publishing Office, 23 August 2016).

4. Fil J. Arenas, Jennifer Tucker, and Daniel A. Connelly, "Transforming Future Air Force Leaders of Tomorrow: A Path to Authentic Transformational Leadership," *Air & Space Power Journal* (*ASPJ*) 31, no. 6 (Fall 2017): 18–33, http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/ASPJ/; and Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnett, and Gordon J. Curphy, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience*, 9th ed. (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2019).

5. Grover K. Yamane and Jenny L. Butler, "Suicide Burden in the U.S. Air Force: 1990–2004," *Military Medicine* 174, no. 10 (October 2009): 1019–1023, https://academic.oup.com/.

6. Defense Suicide Prevention Office, "DOD Quarterly Suicide Reports," 2013–2018, https://www.dspo.mil/.

7. Daniel W. Cox et al., "Suicide in the United States Air Force: Risk Factors Communicated Before and at Death," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 133, no. 3 (June 2011): 398–405, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/.

8. Cox et al., "Suicide in the United States Air Force," 398–405.

9. Cox et al., "Suicide in the United States Air Force," 398–405.

10. Cox et al., "Suicide in the United States Air Force," 398–405.

11. Cox et al., "Suicide in the United States Air Force," 398–405.

12. Jeffery D. Snarr, Richard E. Heyman, and Amy M. Smith Slep, "Recent Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts in a Large-Scale Survey of the U.S. Air Force: Prevalences and Demographic Risk Factors," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 40, no. 6 (December 2010): 544–52, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/.

13. Snarr, Heyman, and Slep, "Recent Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts," 544–52.

14. Snarr, Heyman, and Slep, "Recent Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts," 544–52.

15. Snarr, Heyman, and Slep, "Recent Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts," 544–52.

16. Gene M. Alarcon et al., "Leadership and Coping among Air Force Officers," *Military Psychology* 24, no. 1 (2012): 29–47, https://www.tandfonline.com/.

17. Jeffery D. Snarr, Richard E. Heyman, and Amy M. Smith Slep, "Recent Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts in a Large-Scale Survey of the U.S. Air Force: Prevalences and Demographic Risk Factors," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior 40, no. 6, 12 September 2011*, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/.

18. Department of the Air Force, *The Air Force Suicide Prevention Program: A Description of Program Initiative and Outcomes (Air Force Pamphlet 44-160)* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 2001), https://dmna.ny.gov/.

19. Department of the Air Force, *Air Force Suicide Prevention Program.*

20. Department of the Air Force, *Air Force Suicide Prevention Program.*

21. Kerry L. Knox et al., "The US Air Force Suicide Prevention Program: Implications for Public Health Policy," *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 12 (December 2010): 2457–63, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/.

22. Knox et al., "US Air Force Suicide Prevention Program."

23. AFI 90-505, *Suicide Prevention Program.*

24. AFI 90-505, *Suicide Prevention Program.*

25. AFI 90-505, *Suicide Prevention Program.*

26. USAF, "The Beating Heart of the Air Force… Squadrons!," *YouTube* video, 2:17, 9 August 2016, https://www.youtube.com/.

27. Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-Span), "*Air Force Readiness,*" 2019 National Cable Satellite Corporation, https://www.c-span.org/.

28. C-Span, "*General Goldfein on Air Force Operations*," 2019 National Cable Satellite Corporation, https://www.c-span.org/.

29. Stephen L. Davis and William W. Casey, "A Model of Air Force Squadron Vitality," *ASPJ* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 4–15, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/aspj/.

30. Jason M. Newcomer and Daniel A. Connelly, "The Elements of an Effective Squadron: An Air Force Organizational Study," *ASPJ* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 65–79, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/ASPJ/.

31. Newcomer and Connelly, "Elements of an Effective Squadron," 65–79.

32. Newcomer and Connelly, "Elements of an Effective Squadron," 65–79.

33. Arenas, Tucker, and Connelly, "Transforming Future Air Force Leaders," 18–33.

34. Arenas, Tucker, and Connelly, "Transforming Future Air Force Leaders," 18–33.

35. Arenas, Tucker, and Connelly, "Transforming Future Air Force Leaders," 18–33.

36. Arenas, Tucker, and Connelly, "Transforming Future Air Force Leaders," 18–33.

37. Arenas, Tucker, and Connelly, "Transforming Future Air Force Leaders," 18–33.

38. Alarcon et al., "Leadership and Coping among Air Force Officers," 29–47.

39. Alarcon et al., "Leadership and Coping among Air Force Officers," 29–47.

40. Alarcon et al., "Leadership and Coping among Air Force Officers," 29–47.

41. Alarcon et al., "Leadership and Coping among Air Force Officers," 29–47.

42. USAFA, "Servant Leadership," *YouTube* video, 1:02:39, 25 February 2019, https://www.youtube.com/.

43. USAFA, "Servant Leadership."

44. Arenas, Tucker, and Connelly, "Transforming Future Air Force Leaders," 18–33.
45. Department of the Air Force, *Air Force Suicide Prevention Program.*
46. Department of the Air Force, *Air Force Suicide Prevention Program.*