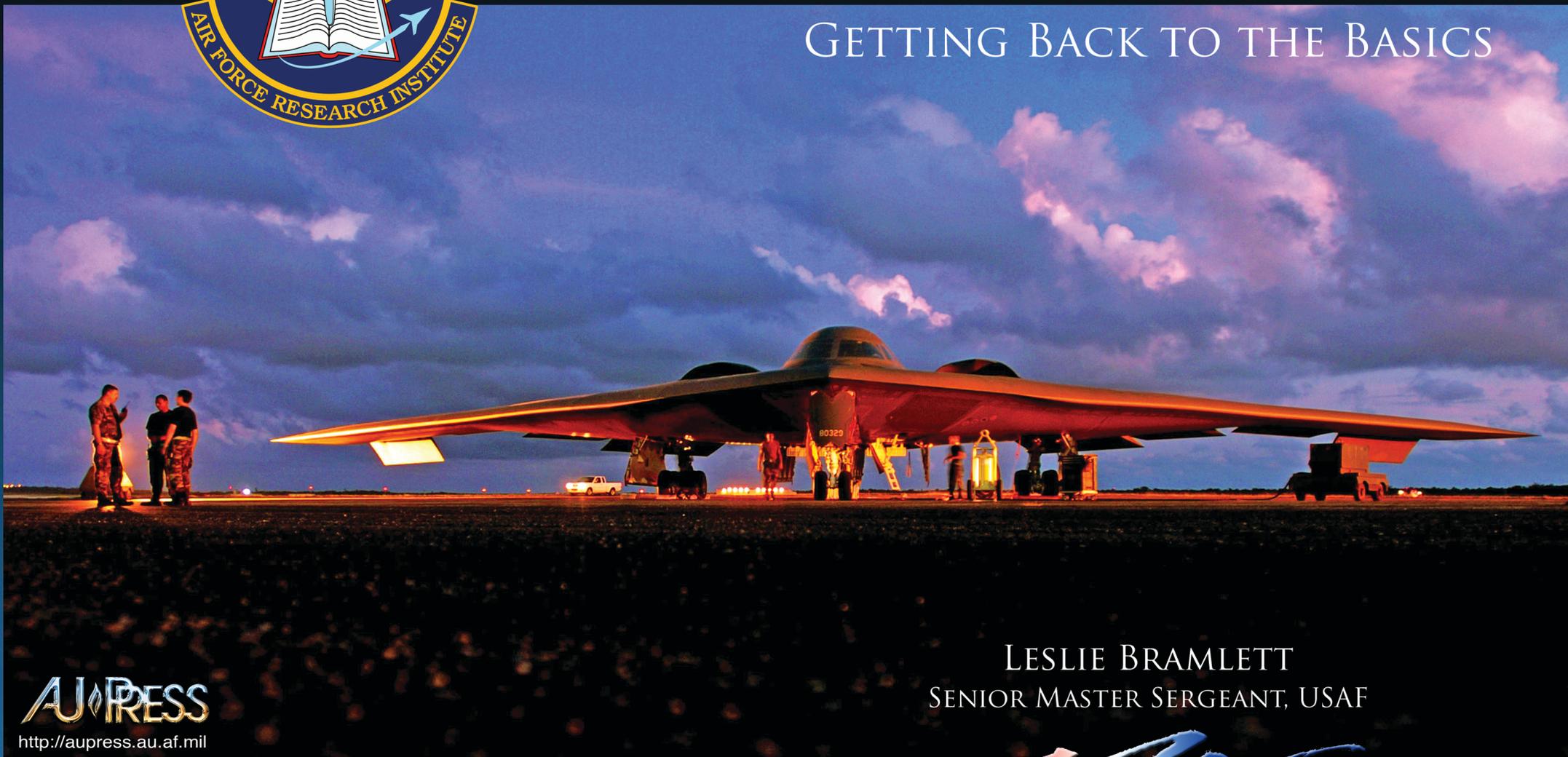




# LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

## GETTING BACK TO THE BASICS



LESLIE BRAMLETT  
SENIOR MASTER SERGEANT, USAF



**AUPRESS**

<http://aupress.au.af.mil>

ISBN 978-1-58566-191-6

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AIR UNIVERSITY  
AIR FORCE RESEARCH INSTITUTE



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AIR UNIVERSITY PRESS  
MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

FEBRUARY 2009



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### Muir S. Fairchild Research Information Center Cataloging Data

Bramlett, Leslie

Lights, camera, action: getting back to the basics / Bramlett, Leslie

p. ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-58566-191-6

1. Corporate culture—United States. 2. Basic training (Military education)—United States.  
3. United States—Air Force—Enlisted personnel—Attitudes. 4. United States—Air Force—  
Standards. 5. Leadership—Military aspects. I. Title.  
355.338—dc22

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AIR UNIVERSITY PRESS  
131 WEST SHUMACHER AVENUE  
MAXWELL AFB, AL 36112-5962  
[HTTP://AUPRESS.AU.AF.MIL](http://AUPRESS.AU.AF.MIL)

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my family, who has sacrificed so much. JaMarco, Jasmine, and Justis, most of what I have learned about leading younger people and dealing with their complexities and uniqueness has come from you. To my wife Tracy, you are truly the best part of “us.” Finally, I thank God for enabling me to both accomplish this work and serve in the United States Air Force.

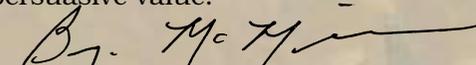




## FOREWORD

The quality and character of our enlisted corps have led to its recognition as the bedrock of our Air Force. The source of this reputation can be traced to our professional and experienced noncommissioned officers (NCO). This group of experienced NCOs recognizes that the Air Force has some discrete discipline problems among the enlisted Airmen which have caused degradation in mission support and adherence to standards. SMSgt Leslie Bramlett, one of our brightest minds, identifies weaknesses at the most fundamental level: failure to maintain the attitudes and behaviors learned in basic training. Furthermore, he asserts that basic military training (BMT) teaches the proper lessons—leadership, traditions, and discipline. Airmen leave BMT transformed. Then these men and women enter the “real” Air Force and find a culture which does not reinforce these lessons. The workplace encourages contrary behavior. Individualism is rewarded, and personal interests far too often outweigh organizational goals.

SMSgt Bramlett has a simple solution (and we know simple solutions are sometimes the hardest to implement). He argues for a return to basics, and in this short exposition he constructs a case for reinvigorating them. His argument applies to everyone in the Air Force, and the fact that it comes from the enlisted force should have great persuasive value.

  
BRYCE McMILLON

Chief Master Sergeant, USAF  
Command Chief, Air University





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SMSgt Leslie Bramlett has served in the United States Air Force since 1991. His various assignments as an aerospace medical service technician and recruiter have taken him to Illinois, Missouri, California, and Texas. In 2008 he deployed to Joint Task Force-Bravo in Honduras in support of US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) operations. There he was the operations noncommissioned officer in charge, platoon sergeant, and backup first sergeant. He served as squadron superintendent for the 30th Medical Operations Squadron, Vandenberg AFB, CA, before beginning his current assignment as squadron superintendent, 59th Surgical Inpatient Squadron, Lackland AFB, TX, in February 2009. Sergeant Bramlett has earned a bachelor of science degree from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale in workforce education and development, and he holds two Community College of the Air Force degrees in allied health sciences and human resources. Currently, Sergeant Bramlett is pursuing a master of science degree in management. He is married to Tracy Bramlett, and they have one son, JaMarco, and two daughters, Jasmine and Justis.



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# LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

## GETTING BACK TO THE BASICS

*The traditions among all the armed services are much older than any government, more conservative than any department of government and surer to build on a foundation that they are certain of.*

—Brig Gen Billy Mitchell



According to CMSgt Cari Kent, 30th Space Wing command chief, it is at basic training that Airmen learn everything they need to succeed in the Air Force.<sup>1</sup> In recent incidents, Airmen have exhibited unacceptable actions. These range from transporting cruise missiles loaded with warheads from Minot to Barksdale AFB in 2007 and erroneously shipping nuclear-missile fuses to Taiwan in 2006, to other lesser-known infractions in the Air Force. Certainly, the remedy to such attitudes and behaviors could not be simply applying lessons learned at basic training. Or could the application of the basics taught to initial trainees have changed the course of some of these events? What do Airmen experience at basic training that leads the chief to this conclusion?

Air Force enlisted basic military training (BMT) is an eight-and-a-half-week, objectives-based experience aimed at transforming civilians into Airmen. Moreover, the knowledge and skills gained there impact every domain of



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trainees' thoughts, emotions, and deeds. Over four million men and women have been changed from apathy to integrity, self-interest to service before self, and mediocrity to excellence.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, everything in BMT is aimed at executing and producing action. In short, the drill instructors taught *the basics*.

The basics, the heart of mission success, are a few foundational, time-tested principles—leadership, tradition, and discipline. They make us strong and are the mortar that ensures the soundness of the Air Force structure. Clearly, we cannot fly planes, launch missiles, or develop Airmen without executing the basics. Failing to teach and reinforce them facilitates and encourages a mind-set of individuality and personal interest over team and organization, potentially compromising our mission to fly, fight, and win.

While the intensity in most Air Force workplaces is often less stressful than BMT, *action* should still be the expectation. Attitudes and behaviors of today's Airmen must reflect professionalism and result in exemplary actions. A loss of focus on the basics is at the root of recent major infractions and, if left unchecked, threatens greater compromises to the sacred trust the American people place in the military.

Discussed here are the behaviors and attitudes (culture) of Airmen in light of recent Air Force incidents, external and internal forces that shape the current environment, and a proposed plan to place more emphasis



on *action*. Just to be clear, in many ways, we get it right when it comes to ensuring a culture that leads to precise execution. Clearly, our past successes contribute to our current mind-set of superiority. However, the nature of what we do in air and space makes even a 95 percent solution a mediocre achievement. We must employ the basics 100 percent of the time to ensure we keep getting it right because the moment we stop, a mission will fail. The resulting “thud” is loud, and the consequences are immeasurable.

### WHERE ARE WE?

On 29 August 2007, a nuclear-armed B-52 flew across the United States. The subsequent effect of that incident is appropriately described by Col David S. Johnson, USAF, retired, who wrote, “Understandably, obligatory and indiscriminate finger-pointing directed at everyone from the aircraft commander to the wing commander, to the highest levels of Air Force leadership ensued. . . . At least three commanders were relieved and numerous other USAF members received disciplinary action.”<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this incident, along with misshipped fuses to Taiwan and an attitude towards unmanned aerial vehicles that Defense Secretary Robert Gates described as being “stuck in old ways of doing business,” led to the very public resignations of both the Air Force secretary and chief of staff.<sup>4</sup> The ripple effect of those resignations was wide and far-reaching and set off a round of



external and internal reviews. As recently as 26 September 2008, the Air Force announced administrative actions against 15 officers, ranging in rank from colonel to lieutenant general.<sup>5</sup>

How and why did this happen? Does the Air Force have a culture problem? Conversations about recent incidents are peppered with concerns about Air Force culture. To help answer these questions, I asked 10 chief master sergeants individually whether the Air Force has a culture problem.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, the chiefs all responded with a unanimous and resounding no. CMSgt Brye McMillon, command chief at Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, further indicates that he is certain these incidents resulted from a temporary loss of focus. The chief went on to note that while the Air Force has sound core values and a good foundation, its culture has been somewhat affected by external and internal factors.<sup>7</sup> While military culture is believed to be far superior to that found in a civilian corporation, it is not infallible.

A quick look at Air Force history reveals periods of past cultural challenges. Former chief master sergeants of the Air Force (CMSAF) Paul Airey, Donald Harlow, Robert Gaylor, and Thomas Barnes spoke about the challenges the service faced in the book *The Enlisted Perspective: Conversations with the CMSAF*. According to the chiefs, during the 1950s through the 1970s, the infusion of personnel via the draft and other congressional decisions sparked



multiple discipline issues.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, the Air Force righted the ship, not by lowering standards but by establishing and enforcing them.

The United States Air Force is the best air and space force in the world, consistently delivering distinct capabilities, but some wonder about the nature of Air Force culture when they observe the behaviors and attitudes of Airmen today. Customs, courtesies, and discipline seem to be lacking. From examples of failure to render respect for superiors to not following simple orders, enlisted leaders are noticing lapses in professionalism. Inevitably, the cumulative effect of these issues can impact both in-garrison operations and expeditionary mission effectiveness. So how did the Air Force enlisted corps slip into this condition?

### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

*There was a man who had a crack in the wall of his home, so he hired a painter to come cover the crack, but two weeks later the crack reappeared. So he sent out for another painter, and that painter filled the crack and painted over it but, once again, it appeared. Finally, he found a wise painter who said, sir, you'll never fix the crack until you fix the foundation.*

—First Lady Laura Bush  
address, Alpha Kappa Alpha  
National Convention  
15 July 2004



Billy Mitchell, one of the Air Force's founding fathers, had it right when he asserted that traditions are a solid foundation to build on.<sup>9</sup> However, it appears Air Force members have gotten away from the foundational things they learned—the basics. Subordinates who say “yes ma'am” and “thank you” are now the exception instead of the rule. Finding a group of Airmen who consistently observe and execute traditions, customs, and courtesies can be as rare as finding a four-leaf clover. Once training is over and they are in the “real” Air Force, they forget the basics. Former chief master sergeant of the Air Force David J. Campanale writes about foundations and the basics in his article “Concepts in Leadership.” He believes that “disciplined leaders do basic things extremely well—like saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ and ‘yes ma'am’ and ‘no sir.’ They wake up on time, are punctual, and usually are the first ones to arrive and the last to leave. They ask for help when they need it, return the favor tenfold, and offer assistance as a matter of practice. They stand when someone enters the room and offer their hand in friendship to all. They respect all people regardless of who they are, where they come from, and what they look like.”<sup>10</sup> While Chief Campanale credits his mother with introducing him to these concepts, countless other enlisted men and women were introduced to these basic courtesies of Air Force culture at BMT.



Unfortunately, it appears that some Airmen have pivoted away from the basics, and four internal and external factors played a key role in this shift: (1) decreased emphasis and reinforcement on traditions, customs, and courtesies, (2) unintended impact of technology and change, (3) force shaping and outsourcing, and (4) emphasis on civilian management styles and strategies. A more thorough examination of each is listed below.

### **Decreased Emphasis on Traditions, Customs, and Courtesies**

Does the Air Force continuously place emphasis on military traditions, customs, and courtesies? The behaviors and attitudes taught and experienced in BMT seem to lack the necessary reinforcement in work centers, units, and wings. It appears that traditions and customs have been shelved for more “pressing” peacetime tasks. As one chief who was interviewed put it, “Something as basic as reveille in the morning, retreat at the end of the duty day, and taps in the evening is now a rarity to see.”<sup>11</sup> The chief believes these things are sensory reminders to Air Force personnel about who they are, why they do what they do, and the sacrifices that have been made in the past. Others noted that there are fewer ceremonies now, and the expectation for Airmen to attend them is far less than in the past. Ceremonialism and drill, with their intense dependence on preparatory and execution commands, sow seeds



that bear fruit when applied to the Air Force mission as well as to ritual.

During the interviews, the chiefs also mentioned issues regarding discipline and courtesies. Notably, while none of the chiefs mentioned primary job-knowledge deficiency as an area of concern, they were noticing a growing trend toward a lack of professionalism. Examples include

- Failing to render proper respect (e.g., saluting, standing, and using appropriate terms of address)
- Lack of attention to detail
- Uniform infractions
- Failing to follow orders
- Readiness infractions (e.g., not attending training and slow responses to recalls)
- Leaders and supervisors failing to take responsibility and ensure accountability

### **Unintended Impact of Technology and Change**

Technology and change are very important to the Air Force. Lt Col James Smith, author of “Air Force Culture and Cohesion,” submits that the Air Force “worships at the altar of technology” and that this undermines unit cohesion.<sup>12</sup> He is not alone in this standpoint. Maj William Thomas, in his article on Air Force culture in January 2004,



also holds that the Air Force's emphasis on technology affects its overall culture.<sup>13</sup> Lt Col Donald Baucom, author of "The Professional Soldier and the Warrior Spirit," asserts that the military leans towards technology, and leaders who focus only on it are having an impact on the basics of military service.<sup>14</sup> Leadership by e-mail is one example. It has pushed leaders and managers away from the basics of eye-to-eye interaction and knowing their people.

Clearly, the Air Force has done a great job of staying on the cutting edge of technology and innovation. But as a couple of the interviewed chiefs pointed out, continuous change and innovation have unintended consequences. While change is important to any organization and organism, too many changes at one time can cause Airmen to lose focus on the basics. Consequently, the Air Force has a growing number of Airmen who are well trained in their technical skill but who fail to consistently practice the basics of professionalism.

### **Influence of Force Shaping and Outsourcing**

One of the earliest forms of outsourcing dates back to the Wright brothers, who had a contract with the Army to provide flight training when it could not meet that need internally.<sup>15</sup> The benefits can be great. For instance, the influx of civilians and contractors into Air Force workplaces ensures sta-

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bility, interrupts military “group think,” and allows senior leaders to focus active-duty assets on war-fighting and related support missions. Also, theoretically, employing contractors should reduce the overall defense budget by reducing the number of active-duty personnel available to take advantage of retirement. In the last 10 years, the Air Force reduced the number of civilians by 10,000. Now, civilians make up fewer than 50 percent of the total Air Force workforce. During the same time frame, the number of active-duty personnel was reduced by 40,000.<sup>16</sup> There is not a single office, Air Force or Department of Defense, that accurately tracks the number of contractors working for the military.<sup>17</sup> Has the Air Force gained more than it has lost with force shaping and outsourcing?

More and more, active-duty personnel are partnered with civilian instead of active-duty coworkers, and it comes with a price. Caught in the middle of this transition are the brand new Airman and lieutenant, who have yet to fully learn the Air Force culture. What type of perspective will he or she gain? Col William Palmby identified the disadvantages of outsourcing in his book *Outsourcing the Air Force Mission: A Strategy for Success*.<sup>18</sup> They include

- Managing combat versus noncombat roles of the workforce
- Security concerns for contract personnel
- Control over military forces



- Budget issues
- Reduced flexibility of workforce utilization
- Reduced innovation
- Retention of military personnel

In the Air Force the unit is important. It reinforces culture based upon military traditions and customs. A mixed workplace (civilian, contractor, and active duty) can impact professionalism and unit pride, especially when the unit consists predominantly of civilians and contractors, with only a few junior noncommissioned officers (NCO) or Airmen. While I was working on this project, a visit to the dining facility yielded an example of the impact. I joined a senior Airman for lunch. After brief introductions, I noticed the Airman was not wearing an occupational badge. Later, a staff sergeant sat at the same table. Both of the members were in the same career field, yet neither person was wearing his occupational badge. The NCO explained that he was the only enlisted member working with a group of civilians and that there was not much pride in his unit. Certainly the civilians were very competent at their job, but what is less certain is whether they facilitated the military culture and professionalism this junior NCO needed. Judging by his uniform, lack of pride in his career field, deflated motivation (he shouldered most additional duties), and shaggy hair, it was apparent the unit failed to provide what was needed. How many more Airmen



have these same experiences? Additionally, managing a mixed workforce can also present challenges for NCOs and new supervisors.

### **Civilian Management Styles and Corporate Strategies**

The Air Force leaders' quest for professional development leads them to explore ways to study and employ civilian management philosophies or corporate strategies in the Air Force organization. One chief who was interviewed indicated that the current culture is the result of the years of Total Quality Management. He pointed to the fact that the junior enlisted and officers who were groomed in that culture are now stepping into leadership roles. As a result, a number of Airmen are well versed in the latest civilian leadership philosophies, self-help programs, and civilian corporate strategies.<sup>19</sup> While this is not bad in and of itself, it is imperative that leaders recognize the strengths and limitations of applying them to an organization built upon the profession of arms, whose bookends are scholarship and discipline. Some civilian strategies have led to an increased emphasis on what this author calls the "like me" and "come on get happy" styles of leadership.

Tim Sanders, in his book *The Likeability Factor*, supports the "like me" leadership style.<sup>20</sup> He asserts that likeable people bring out the best in others, get recognized, and outperform others. Upon closer examination



of his key factors, it is easy to see there is a problem with the aim of his premise. Self-promotion is the foundation of his premise. It breeds a mentality that says “as long as people (supervisors and subordinates) like me, I must be doing well!” Too many supervisors and leaders have adopted and espoused this philosophy, and it is in direct contrast with the core value of service before self. Being liked is not an area of evaluation on the officer or enlisted performance reports. And while likeability can be one tool used to accomplish the mission, it is not the end goal. Mission success is the end goal.

Larry Bossidy, Ram Charan, and Charles Burck, authors of *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*, indicate that “many jobs are filled with the wrong people because the leaders who promote them are comfortable with them.”<sup>21</sup> They point out that “there are innumerable cases of the wrong person being kept in the wrong job, simply because the person’s leader does not have the fortitude to take decisive action, confront the person, and make a change. Such failures do considerable damage to a business; indeed, if the nonperformer is high enough in the organization, he or she can be particularly destructive.”<sup>22</sup> Clearly, these successful businessmen recognize the challenges leaders face when they must choose between organizational excellence and personal preference, but they also assert that the business (in the Air Force’s case—mission) must come before “likes.”



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Closely related to the “like me” is the “come on get happy” style of leadership. This leadership style actually results from efforts to ensure positive unit morale. Morale is very important to the health of a unit; however, morale and happiness are two very different things. The Air Force ensures Airmen’s personal and professional needs are met through things like housing, pay, leave, health care, services, initiatives, policies, and programs on the premise that Airmen whose needs are met are mission ready and mission focused. However, the definition and picture of morale have mutated over the years. As one chief said, “It’s [become] more about cookie sales than the mission.”<sup>23</sup> Many have found that it is possible for leaders to offer a number of morale-building events and still find that people are not happy because happiness can be a moving target. Therefore, morale, as with likeability, must be used as a tool to accomplish the mission because happiness is a personal choice based upon personal priorities and perspectives.

This tug-of-war between unit morale and personal happiness is nothing new. Former chief master sergeant of the Air Force Arthur “Bud” Andrews, whose key phrase was “getting back to basics,” puts it this way in the book *Generations of Chevrons*:

Andrews believed that by the time he took the top enlisted job, many of the most vexing problems in terms of pay, benefits, recruitment, and retention had been addressed. He believed that the time had come to focus



on other issues, saying it was time for Air Force people to “think we instead of me, me, me.” . . . “Now,” Andrews asserted, “let’s talk about how we’re supposed to dress, how we’re supposed to act and react toward subordinates and superiors, and how we’re supposed to do our jobs.” In focusing on “the basics,” Andrews sometimes found himself having to take some unpopular positions. He challenged noncommissioned officers to “take care of their people and to accomplish the mission,” and he reminded them that the mission came first. “That is the price of commitment,” concluded Andrews. He also told noncommissioned officers to look to themselves if they were dissatisfied with their jobs. Was it a problem with the system or with them?<sup>24</sup>

Civilian leadership strategies, self-help programs, and management philosophies are important for professional development. But as Dr. Mike Thirtle states, leaders and supervisors have used these as the main course instead of the dessert.<sup>25</sup> These philosophies can at times lead away from the basic things that make a military organization successful and facilitate occupationalism over institutionalism and the acceptance of alibis over execution.

Each of the four key factors has true merit, but they come at a cost. John Hillen, writing about military culture reform, expressed it best when he quoted the historian T. R. Ferenbach. Ferenbach said of the Doolittle reforms of 1945, “The changes did not appear to have detrimental effects on the US military forces because the troops looked good. Their appearance made



generals smile. What they lacked could not be seen, not until the guns sounded.”<sup>26</sup> Can the Air Force gamble that the small cracks in “the basics” of military culture will not lead to bigger problems? Gen Norton Schwartz, Air Force chief of staff, believes an internal look is necessary. This internal look is important, he says, because the Air Force must “restore our stature as professionals and uncompromising joint warfighters.”<sup>27</sup> An internal look will provide the roadmap for future changes.

### WHERE DO WE GO?

The definition of the basics will come predominately from the interviews and surveys of 10 chief master sergeants. While this is not a statistically significant number, their views have been formed over 20-plus years of service, are based upon their experiences with multiple organizations on the US continent as well as overseas, and are shaped by interactions with senior leaders and thousands of Airmen. The results are listed below:<sup>28</sup>

- Ten of 10 chiefs felt that the Air Force neither had developed a culture problem nor had lost its military identity. However, most thought that the Air Force’s focus had shifted.
- Seven of 10 said “back to basics” is a type of culture. The remaining three indicated it is both a leadership style and culture.
- Ten of 10 believed it was important to go “back to basics.”



When asked why it is important to get “back to basics,” the chiefs listed the following reasons:

- “Going back to the foundation puts us on the same playing field. [It allows us to] learn the fundamentals and then build upon them.”
- “We have to go to a culture of senior noncommissioned officers who will call the baby ugly.” “We have a generation of noncommissioned officers who have not been held to the standard.”
- “If we don’t get back to basics, one day we will fly something somewhere and won’t be able to recover it.”
- “Yes, we need to get back to the basics because we’ve got to get the job done.”
- “The basics lay down what we want everyone to know, and they need to come from leadership.”
- “We shouldn’t have to go back to the basics. Where did we lose them? We need to push a strategy of lifelong learning. Moral courage is harder than physical courage. PME [professional military education] is too spread out.”
- “If we don’t, we will lose our threat [deterrence] and service independence. The nuke incident serves as a reminder of what can happen if we don’t.”

- “It’s time to get a common ground. When I make a correction based upon the standard, it should be important to everyone and not viewed as ‘just the chief nit-picking.’”
- “Our Airmen need it.”

When asked what the “back to basics” will look like in action (leadership style) or environment (culture), they listed the following:

- Leadership style (actions)
  - o “Getting back to knowing Airmen on a personal and professional level.”
  - o “Being firm but fair, friendly but not a friend.”
  - o “Giving definitive information to Airmen while they are young. You won’t have too many issues when they’re older.”
  - o “More aggressive on correction rather than being afraid to confront.”
  - o “The lost art of [butt] chewing. Make the hard calls.”
  - o “We will have a good continuum of learning, steeped in history. Every aspect should point back to ‘remember when.’”
  - o “Have interpersonal skills. Likeability will only get you so far. When people detect no follow-through, engage-



ment, follow-up, or discipline, you lose them on likeability.”

- Culture (environment)

- o “Units do activities together, fewer DUIs [driving under the influence], professionalism increases, attitudes change, fitness levels improve, improved integrity in the performance evaluation system, and cohesion among the people.”
- o “Back to AFRs [Air Force regulations] instead of AFIs [Air Force instructions], guidance is given, disciplining Airmen, and one service uniform.”
- o “A career-long strategy to learning. Back to basics is really a look forward.”
- o “Subordinates will stand for superiors as a matter of respect, render courtesies, discipline, no confusion on what needs to be done, and not keeping everybody in the Air Force.”
- o “Saluting and respect for the flag are common. Reveille, retreat, and taps are signaled. They are reminders of what we do and the cost that is paid. There should be no base that starts the duty day or finishes without them.”
- o “There will be a culture of accountability.”





- o “A culture where everything connects back to the basics.”

Based upon the inputs of the chiefs, getting “back to basics” means getting back to leading and developing Airmen, tradition, and discipline.

### **Leading and Developing Airmen**

Developing Airmen is the Air Force’s first core competency and is identified as the ultimate source of our combat capabilities. As *Air Force Basic Doctrine* states, “The value of strategy, technology, and organization is diminished without professional Airmen to leverage their attributes.”<sup>29</sup> Enlisted leaders must be prepared to employ every tool and skill along the leadership spectrum and then follow up to ensure execution and accountability.

Because each tier of the enlisted structure has a different yet interdependent responsibility, it is important for each Airman to know and act upon the *why*, *what*, and *how* at the appropriate rank levels. Therefore, senior NCOs should need to know only *why* a doctrine, directive, policy, or tradition is important. They should, in turn, be able to determine *what* must be done, especially by their NCOs. Also, senior NCOs retain responsibility and accountability for all work performed by their NCOs and Airmen. Additionally, while it is also important that NCOs know *why* initiatives and tasks are important, they are predominately responsible for getting done *what*



needs to be done and training their Airmen on *how* to get it done. NCOs are accountable for their people, processes, and programs. Once trained on *how* to get things done, Airmen should be empowered to accomplish their duty-related tasks.

Every leader, both officer and enlisted, must be committed to developing Airmen—not just on their technical skills but on professionalism. It has to start at the top. Too many gung ho NCOs and Airmen have returned from PME on fire, only to have their fire doused by leaders who do not cheer and reinforce their renewed commitment to professionalism. Instilling professionalism is most successful when it is vertical (top-down) and horizontal. Clearly, the Air Force will not be successful without professional Airmen. Noticeably new in the circulating draft of AFI 36-2618, *Enlisted Force Structure*, is the line, “We are Airmen first!”<sup>30</sup> This strikes at the very heart of the subcultures that exist within various career fields and sobers Air Force members to the shared culture of airmanship.

### **Tradition**

It is important to identify and reintroduce traditions into the Air Force. Many Airmen view traditions as archaic or unnecessary without realizing the impact they have on morale and esprit de corps. According to Maj Mark Boatner, author of *Military Customs and Traditions*, “the veteran soldier does not



need to be ‘sold’ on the importance of tradition and customs, but he occasionally reexamines.” He further cautions that “before we condemn a custom, we owe it to our predecessors the courtesy of realizing that the custom once made sense. We must be sure our refusal to accept the custom is not based on poor judgment or ignorance.”<sup>31</sup> Ceremonialism, customs, discipline, and courtesies are inherent to Air Force culture and forge foundations (basics) that are paramount in service during both war and peace. When they go by the wayside, mission effectiveness is in serious jeopardy.

### Discipline

Discipline is the bedrock of everything the Air Force does in peacetime and war. While discipline can carry a negative connotation, at the heart of discipline is action. Discipline is both a “thinking” and a “doing” thing. CMSgt Bob Vásquez, USAF, retired, author of *Heirpower: Eight Basic Habits of Exceptionally Powerful Lieutenants*, observes that “we think of discipline as punishment, and it can certainly be that if you so choose. But the root word of discipline is disciple—one who embraces and assists in spreading the teachings of another.”<sup>32</sup> All Airmen must be committed to discipline, both in their own performance and in the performance of others they lead and influence. Discipline requires action, and action is synonymous with execution. Execution, according to



Bossidy, Charan, and Burck, is the discipline of getting things done.<sup>33</sup>

Discipline in BMT involves giving and receiving orders (information), executing (action), and evaluating (follow-up). The same principle that holds true in BMT is true for operations in units across the Air Force. Applying these basic elements of discipline will ensure execution. Air Force doctrine is sound, and its core values are solid—what is needed is the expectation of execution. Coupling execution with the action plan below will improve Air Force culture and ensure enduring mission success.

To get back to the culture of execution, the Air Force has to

- Clearly communicate what it wants to “look like” and monitor the number of concurrently implemented enterprise-wide changes.
- Implement a gatekeeper program to identify priority changes and deconflict rollout schedules.
- Push to convert AFIs to AFRs.
- Identify which duties can be totally civilianized and group them in units. Ensure all Airmen and junior NCOs are assigned to predominately active-duty units.
- Establish a requirement for annual PME centered on rank-specific responsibilities, traditions, customs, and courtesies. Link completion to the evaluation system.



- Establish an E-7 promotion board. This will ensure the Air Force promotes “the best and vested” to senior NCO, rather than just “the brightest,” and minimize the occupationalism mind-set among senior NCOs.
- Revive ceremonies and drills, with the expectation that everyone participates (open ranks, dining-ins, reveille, retreats, etc.). Crystallize the traditions, customs, and courtesies of military culture.
- Aggressively market the importance of execution and accountability.
- Clearly identify and stratify bottom performers at the unit level based upon attitudes and performance. Hold supervisors accountable for producing and executing a performance improvement plan. Stop accepting alibis for poor performance. Move them up, or move them out.
- Hold subordinate supervisors accountable for employing the full spectrum of leadership—from being in charge to being involved, from intervention to delegation. Expect results.

The views of contemporary senior enlisted leaders presented here substantiate the soundness of CMSgt Kent’s assertion that BMT offers Airmen the indispensable keys to succeed in the Air Force. BMT’s foundational precepts form the “basics” and provide a solid foundation to build upon. Going “back

to basics” is simply dusting off leadership skills (the full spectrum of tools), tradition, and discipline. CMSAF Rodney McKinley colloquially calls the basics “blocking and tackling.” He further defines it this way:

At BMT and technical training they learn the basics, or blocking and tackling . . . how to properly wear our uniform, military bearing, standards and discipline, customs and courtesies, military justice, following technical data and Air Force Instructions, being followers, being good Wingmen and many more important details and attributes. . . .

As leaders, it is our responsibility to ensure those basics our Airmen learned are reinforced every day. We do that by not only living our Core Values, but exemplifying them in everything we do. We must hold our Airmen accountable. Leadership is not a popularity contest. It is difficult. Leaders get commitment from others by being totally committed themselves, by building an environment that encourages creativity, and by operating with honesty and fairness.<sup>34</sup>

We are the best air and space force in the world. Action and execution must be the expectation for, and beating heart in, every Airman. Williamson Murray once wrote that “the greatest danger for the United States in the coming century is that the American military will possess self-satisfied, intellectually stagnant cultures that believe they possess the technological lodestone.”<sup>35</sup> The Air Force cannot afford intellectual Airmen who are devoid of the professionalism required to execute their duties. Continued success in



the future is dependent upon executing the basics of leadership, tradition, and discipline.

### Notes

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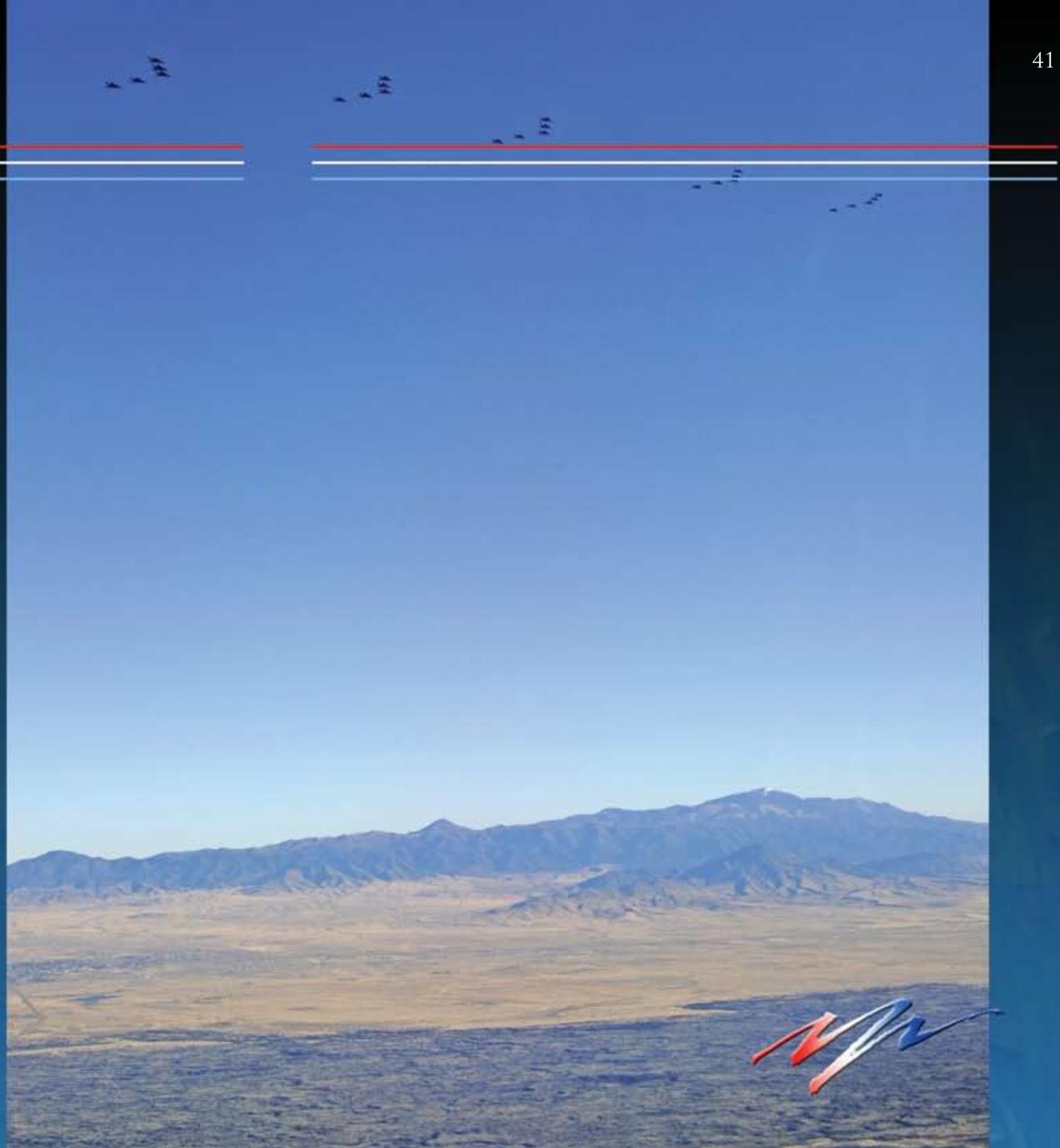
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