

### Individual Development Plan Article by Brian K. Schooley



## An IDP Exercise in Action – Honing an Existing Skill

During a meeting last summer with my supervisor, we discussed my Individual Development Plan (IDP). Most of my development goals were short-term and focused on making the best use of my remaining time with the Air Force. Although I'm not looking for any future assignments or promotions, it's still important to continue developing and learning. My overarching desire was to help set up our new organization for success and to help the director establish a strong organizational culture.

It was an interesting discussion, and as part of my IDP, my supervisor tasked me to do a self-analysis of my interpersonal skills. After doing so, I should work to further hone that skill, and then during my midterm performance feedback, provide examples of how I used this skill in the workplace. Finally, he asked me to *write* an article based on the experience.

To set the stage a little further, it's important to note I am my worst critic. It would be far easier for me to determine my shortcomings and examples of my failures than to identify a *greatest strength!* Interestingly enough, after much deliberation and soul searching, I realized sarcasm was probably my strong suit, but I was keenly aware that wasn't something I needed to further develop. I would need to dig deeper and look for more beneficial interpersonal skills. Considering my supervisor asked me to write an article based on this IDP experience, writing won out.

During an Air Force career that has spanned over 36 years, I've often stated if you can write and/or speak well, opportunities will find you. While these are key skills to develop, it's important to remember there needs to be substance to go along with the style. With that said, no amount of pride in how well (or marginally) I write can outweigh the need to improve. While I didn't attend any specific online courses as suggested by my supervisor, I did review several articles on effective writing, starting with *The Tongue and Quill*. A simple Google search of *Air Force Effective Writing* unearthed some other good sources.

I didn't confine myself to being a better bullet writer or improving my knowledge of the ins-and-outs of staff summary sheets. I also read some articles concerning creative writing. My goal was to stretch how I viewed my own style of writing—to strengthen all of the various styles and skills needed to meet whatever writing task was in front of me. As I read the articles and watched some videos, I was reminded of one of Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* —“*sharpen the saw*”. That's exactly what was happening as I approached this IDP exercise.

My position requires a great deal of writing, editing, wordsmithing, and other forms of either creating or assisting in formulating a wide variety of documents. As I worked on this IDP task, I realized how many different forms of writing I was touching in the organization. There were bullet background papers, program guidance letters, briefing slide bullets, award packages, official e-mails, a school guide, short staff biographies, and a host of other products. On the creative side, I provided twelve leadership articles for the *Supervisors and Employees Resource Center (SERC)* website.

The preceding laundry list isn't important—it's simply what I was asked to do as part of the tasking. What is important is what I relearned along the way. The entire exercise was interesting to me, because typically, we focus on what we don't do well. We spend a lot of time on identifying and improving our shortcomings. Not in this activity...it was designed to capitalize on something I was supposedly already doing well. I found myself going back to the fundamentals of effective writing and being more intentional with my approach. Instead of simply wordsmithing a product to make it sound or flow better, I was looking deeper into its purpose and how to best articulate our organization's position in a clear, meaningful way. It was about impact.

The exercise also reinforced the value of IDPs. They are living documents which can yield benefits if used intentionally and earnestly. Again, I'm not looking at getting promoted or moving to another position. There's much more in my rear-view mirror than there is open road ahead of me. That doesn't mean I should quit developing or looking for ways to improve my contributions to my organization and the larger Air Force. The IDP is an ideal way to articulate what we still want to do, and in concert with an actively engaged supervisor, take those ideals and put them into action.

While I still believe sarcasm is probably one of my stronger skills, it's better to work on something that will actually benefit my organization and me. Not only did this IDP exercise help hone an existing skill, it also satisfied my personal organizational skills needs. As an avid user of a personal planner, I am now able to put a check mark next to the *IDP – SERC Article* task in said planner. In doing so, a quick rush of endorphins are released, which provides further fuel to conquer the next task.