

Reflections on command.

Author:

Minkin, Steven

Pub Date:

12/22/2006

Publication:

Name: Air & Space Power Journal **Publisher:** U.S. Air Force **Audience:** Trade **Format:** Magazine/Journal

Subject: Military and naval science; Science and technology **Copyright:** COPYRIGHT 2006 U.S. Air Force

Issue:

Date: Winter, 2006 **Source Volume:** 20 **Source Issue:** 4

Full Text:

Editor's Note: PIREP is aviation shorthand for pilot report. It's a means for one pilot to pass on current, potentially useful information to other pilots. In the same fashion, we use this department to let readers know about air and space power items of interest.

ARTICLE DRAWS on the author's experience gained from commanding three different comptroller squadrons in the Air Force--two in US Central Command Air Forces' area of responsibility and one in the continental United States. It describes the key events and activities a commander will face and need to prepare for during the first few months of leadership. By no means exhaustive, the suggestions address some of the more significant matters commanders will confront in their tours. By following this advice and thus laying a good foundation in the early months, leaders will dramatically improve their chances for success.

Month One: Taking Charge and Setting the Course (before the Change of Command)

As an incoming commander, you must have some overlap with your predecessor. Any outgoing commander who does not put together a transition plan does you and your future unit a disservice. You need to determine the appropriate amount of time to spend with the person you replace in order to grasp important issues, remembering that too little time will leave holes in your knowledge and that too much leads to awkwardness from having both of you in the office. As the new leader, you will be excited and ready to get started; nevertheless, you must wait until after the change of command before directing or tasking the squadron.

Brig Gen Joseph Reheiser advises asking the departing commander three questions: What are you most proud of in the unit? What did you not do well that you could have improved upon? What things did you not get around to? These questions will offer insight into the unit's strengths, identify areas for quick improvement, and suggest new initiatives to take early in your command.

The Change-of-Command Ceremony

Your big day--the time when you take the reins of your new unit--is important because it introduces everyone to the person taking over. Additionally, the ceremony gives you an opportunity to make a good first impression on your squadron, fellow commanders, and senior leaders. The time you spend getting to know folks at the reception will prove more influential than your remarks from the podium, which should be short and gracious--save your vision and plans for commander's call.

Your First Day in the Big Chair

Congratulations! You are now a commander. Almost every book on command rightly teaches that you should not make changes immediately after coming on board. You don't yet have enough knowledge of how your unit works to make changes to improve the efficiency of your team. It takes about a month to understand the link between your squadron and the wing.

The First Month's To-Do List

You'll need to tackle a number of items right away. Actually, you might consider addressing some of them before you take over. At the least, they will stimulate your thinking about what you need to do initially.

Review the Wing's Current Policy Letters. It is imperative to know your boss's position on key issues so you don't change something that lies beyond your authority.

Get on Your Boss's Schedule. Do so as soon as possible after the change of command. Think about what you want to ask beforehand (e.g., regarding his or her expectations, philosophy, and agenda for the wing/group and your squadron). Be bold enough to find out items in your unit that please your boss and those you can improve. Make sure you have this conversation before you change anything in order to stay in line with your boss's expectations.

Put Your Leadership Philosophy, Standards of Performance, and Expectations in Writing. Defining your leadership style after assuming command is too late. Although your approach and style will change over time as you learn and grow, you should have established a foundation before you take command. By writing down your leadership philosophy and expectations, you will consistently tell the same facts to new personnel as they arrive in your unit. I incorporated these matters into a slide show that I used at my first commander's call and with new arrivals throughout my command tenure. Doing so ensured that every person in the unit received the same rules of the road and understood my approach and vision for the squadron.

Learn about Mandatory Meetings. You may want to attend all meetings the first time to determine which ones require your presence as opposed to your representative's. Remember that you may not have the same interests as the previous commander and therefore may want to attend meetings your predecessor did not.

Learn Working Hours. Find out whether your people work shifts as well as their normal duty hours.

Know Where You Want to Take Your Unit. Before you started commanding, you probably had an idea of what you wanted to accomplish. Assemble your senior staff, and share your vision with them before presenting it to the entire squadron. This approach allows your senior team to offer feedback that can hone your vision. More importantly, they will begin to understand and accept your vision and serve as advocates to the rest of the squadron.

When you tell your people you want to take them in a certain direction, let them know why. After all, human nature prefers the status quo. They have a right to know why your vision of the promised land is better than their current surroundings. Your troops need to understand that the temporary discomfort of leaving familiar environs will bring

greater rewards. This principle applies to the military, the Boy Scouts, a religious organization, or even a nonprofit group. Use it wisely, and it will reap huge dividends.

Things to Learn

During your first month of command, you should become familiar with several areas. The following will bring you up to speed in no time.

Awards and Decorations Program. It is vital that you understand how the awards and decorations program works at your base. Learning the unwritten rules governing what decorations correspond to the different levels of performance and rank will save you time and prevent your having to redo packages. In addition to medals, determine which awards are available for your personnel, both quarterly and monthly. Take time to write nomination packages for your folks who deserve recognition and awards for doing work that makes you look good. No commander is too busy to assemble award packages--that is part of the job! Furthermore, recipients should not have to write their own package, an uncomfortable task for modest people. Besides, it's your responsibility--not theirs. Take time to sit down with the president of the quarterly awards board to review winning packages from the past few quarters. Looking for elements such as writing style, action words, and so forth will give you valuable insight into preparing a successful package for your squadron.

Establish a firm, recurring suspense date for monthly and quarterly awards packages, and clearly define the routing process. Tell your personnel not to wait until three days prior to this date to write the packages. Your supervisors can write a quarterly package with two and a half months of work completed. If anything spectacular happens during the last two weeks of the quarter, you can add a line easily enough. Write the nominations early so you can present the best product to the board.

Know Your Way around Base. If you don't know where you are going, how can you lead people to where they need to go? Your troops should not think that their commander is lost.

Quickly Grasp the Strengths and Weaknesses of Your Personnel. Leadership is an art. If you don't know which people in your squadron need hands-on leadership and which are self-motivated, you are doomed to fail. Applying the same approach to everyone can stifle both creativity and mission accomplishment. Many years ago, a dear friend of mine told me that "there are two types of people in this world: movers and shakers and people who are moved and shaken." Categorize your personnel, and lead them accordingly.

Learn the Organizational Climate. You can become familiar with the organizational climate by walking around, listening, and reading body language. Walking around lets your people know that the boss wants to visit personnel in the trenches, where they carry out the mission. Listening and observing also give you a good feel for organizational matters.

If you have never learned how to read nonverbal communication, consult a book on the subject. You can learn more about your folks through their body language than from their words. Take time to discover resources available to help make your job easier. Numerous support agencies will help you, most of which will send representatives to your office to present their services.

You Survived the First Month

Congratulations on your first month as a new commander! During the second month, you will become more comfortable with procedures and begin the journey of implementing and fulfilling your vision.

Month Two: Implement the Vision (Moving Where You Want to Go)

Now that you have your feet planted firmly on the ground, focus on where you want to lead the squadron. At this point, you should begin implementing your vision. If you have done things correctly so far, you should have shared your vision with the squadron during the first staff meeting, commander's call, and every other opportunity you have had to share it with your troops. Don't underestimate the power of the people in the trenches for fulfilling your vision. All too often staff meetings involve just senior leadership, and the folks doing the work hear the boss's vision only at formal events. All of us have sat through commander's calls and formal functions thinking, "When do I get out of here?" Is that the place to share your vision with your troops and expect them to retain it? Continually speak to your vision, and ensure that your senior staff does the same.

Do not schedule a commander's call or staff meeting on a Friday afternoon if you plan to speak on topics you expect your folks to remember. When they return to work on Monday, they will have forgotten everything you said. Choose the day and time of your vision-sharing meetings wisely to make sure your troops will listen and retain what you say.

Block time in your schedule to share your vision with each section in your squadron. All members must understand the vision so they know where your plans will take them. Sharing your vision only with supervisors keeps the troops--the people who perform the mission--in the dark, prohibiting them from seeing the big picture.

During this month, you should know the squadron's leaders, both formally and informally--they are now your targets! You have the responsibility of training them and honing their leadership skills. All too often we fail to give our midlevel noncommissioned officers (NCO) adequate leadership training. When they become senior NCOs, we wonder why they still work as technicians. The answer is simple: we have not provided them adequate opportunities to lead. People develop leadership skills over time. As the squadron commander, you are the developer.

Activities to Make Leaders

As a new commander, you can develop the squadron's leaders in a number of ways.

Without a vision, your squadron will fail. During a conversation I had with a captain who led a unit at a deployed location, I asked her how things were going and if the troops had a good handle on what to accomplish. The captain replied, "Not yet. I can't get my folks to think long term; they do stuff with a 90-day mind-set. They won't solve problems and fix processes." I asked her if she ever took time to figure out where she wanted the unit to be at the end of her tour. She said she didn't have time to do that because she stayed too busy running around. The organization went in circles because the leader lacked a vision. If the captain had taken time to establish one and tell her troops where they were heading, many of the problems would have disappeared. Without a vision, a squadron will stumble. Develop a Leadership Plan. What do you want to teach your folks to help them grow? Make a list of those items, and

turn each of them into a lesson plan. Topics should include goal setting, time management, verbal communication, effective bullet writing, and public speaking.

Give Your Students Homework. Reinforce the skills you teach, and create opportunities for the troops to practice these skills by assigning homework. Providing your students time to brief the squadron or to prepare award packages under your mentoring eye will help them build confidence in their new abilities.

Conduct Progress Reviews. Periodically evaluate projects with your developing leaders. Don't criticize them; rather, make sure they are going in the right direction. Remember that the intent of these projects is to help your developing leaders learn new skills, a process that entails making mistakes and missteps. Be patient, and always be supportive.

Schedule Time with Your Students. Set aside time to talk with your people about their progress. Discussing what they did right or wrong is a vital step in leadership development. It gives them lessons learned to add to their leadership tool kits.

Have a Leadership Breakfast Club. Meet with your developing leaders for breakfast at least once every three weeks. Discuss the leadership tools you want them to emphasize, and turn them loose to learn them. Limit this group to your rising leadership stars. Discuss the leadership topic from the last meeting, including the successes and pitfalls they uncovered, so everyone can learn from each other. I cannot overemphasize the importance of this meeting: the development of new leaders occurs here.

Teach Great Leadership Curricula. I relied heavily upon the writings of Dr. John Maxwell, especially his book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*--an incredible foundational work for developing leadership talent. We purchased the curriculum on video, and I personally facilitated the course over seven weeks to my senior leadership. I then offered the course to the rest of the squadron. Attendance was mandatory for senior leadership but voluntary for everyone else. I was amazed by the number of people who wanted to develop their leadership skills--over 90 percent of my Airmen participated.

After you complete the first course, let one of your up-and-coming leaders facilitate the course to the next group in your squadron. Doing so will provide an additional leadership-development opportunity for this person.

Why Do I Need a Bunch of Leaders?

Perhaps you've wondered, "Why do I need a bunch of leaders around me? I'm in charge!" Here's why: without leaders in your organization, no one else will understand or be able to implement your vision. Your leadership team serves as the fuel that runs the engine to fulfill your vision. People who lean on the cliché "It's lonely at the top" have done a miserable job of grooming fellow leaders in their units.

Personnel Issues

As a commander, you must make a favorable impression on new arrivals. Establish a process early on so that you don't have to worry about it in the future. Meet the new folks assigned to your unit. Their first impression will last a long time. You can do several other things to make them feel right at home.

Write Personal Welcome Letters. Place letters on the new arrivals' desks so they see them when they sit down to work on the first day. If they do not work directly for you, make sure their flight chief writes one.

Have Their Desks Ready. Furnish supplies, working computers, and any other items they need to do their jobs. They shouldn't have to go begging for supplies on their first day. A special welcome team took care of this for me.

Walk Them Around. Personally show the new people different sections of the squadron. It is well worth the time spent. If the new troops work in a flight, have the flight chief do the walk-around.

Month Three: Keep the Ship on Course (Staying on Track to Reach the Finish Line)

You should be in a groove by now and have a feel for what works well in your organization and what needs attention. Concentrate on developing a key leadership skill: good time management. Take time to plan and prepare the tasks and jobs you want to accomplish. Don't carry them around in your head; you won't remember them all, and you will do things out of priority. Remember the time constraints: usually you have two years to implement your vision. Completing low-priority jobs first wastes your most valuable resource--time.

At the beginning of this month, you will know what you want to accomplish on your tour. Make a list of everything you want to do--no matter how important or trivial--and then prioritize the items. For example, assign each one a number, and rank each as A, B, or C priority, with "A" items the most important. Then numerically rank each task, ranking all the A's against each other, all the B's against each other, and so forth. Thus the most important task is A1, and the least important is C-18, for example. After prioritizing, assign each task a starting month, and don't skip priorities. For instance, work on the A projects in the next two months, B projects three to five months hence, and C projects six to eight months away. Integrate new items into the plan as they arise. This system may seem cumbersome, but I guarantee that you won't be able to sleep at night until you implement it. This level of organization keeps you focused and on track.

If you have not taken a course in time management, do so. I recommend the Franklin Covey Day Planner. The planner itself is a great tool, but take the class on how to use it.

Thinking Outside the Box

As a commander you have the privilege of establishing new ideas and processes. Organizational inertia perpetuates the "always did it that way" mentality. Gather all the ideas on how to improve your unit, and implement them--after all, you lead the parade.

How do you facilitate the realization of these good ideas? I instituted a monthly meeting called "Redrawing the Box." I facilitated the meeting, attended by a representative from each section of the squadron. We discussed creative ways to solve a problem or improve a squadron process. Limiting attendance to those junior in rank, preferably Airmen, allowed them to speak candidly and share their ideas with me--an arrangement that provided great insight into areas needing improvement. These suggestions often just needed a push from me to get under way. The young troops never stopped amazing me with their incredible ideas.

I also encouraged the free flow of ideas by meeting with each group in my squadron--officers, civilians, NCOs, and Airmen--for lunch once a quarter. Prepare for the meeting. Don't show up without some thought-provoking questions to start conversation. Your people will give you some terrific ideas on how to improve your unit. This is also a wonderful time to continue sharing your vision and plans for the unit in a friendly environment.

Finally, I created an "Einstein Award" to encourage good ideas. Each month I sent squadron members a problem needing a solution (e.g., what we could use as our quarterly awards gift or how we could improve our reputation on base), and they dropped their suggestions in any of the Einstein boxes located around the squadron. I didn't have a specified format or answer sheet because I wanted to make it easy to respond and encourage participation. At the end of the month, I picked the best response, announced the winner at our weekly squadron meeting, and presented him or her a traveling trophy--a bobble-head Einstein doll on a platform that displayed the names of all past winners. It looked silly, but it worked. In fact, the winners took pride in decorating Einstein during the month they kept the trophy on their desks. Best of all, I not only received suggestions for the question I asked but also got solutions for other issues in the squadron.

Full Speed Ahead!

A good plan and a strategy to stay focused are critical to your success as a commander. Make sure you have both in place early to get the most out of your short tour.

Month Four: Keeping Morale Up (Be the Cheerleader)

Maintaining morale poses a big challenge to any commander. Oftentimes, issues involving morale depend upon the unit's location--deployed or stateside.

Deployed Issues

Deployed personnel go through several stages. Each may have an effect on morale.

Wonder. Newly arrived personnel are faced with figuring out what they need to do and how to do their jobs. Everyone can remember his or her first month in a new unit. Morale is not a problem at this point. Unit members arrive in the country ready to hit the ground running. Just ensure that they feel welcomed.

Gung Ho. The old team has left, and the folks now assigned to your unit know how to perform their jobs well. The troops are extremely motivated, ready to make their mark, and get the job done. Morale is easy to maintain. Don't become complacent, however. You can keep morale high by encouraging activities, get-togethers, sporting events, and so forth. Most importantly, take time to recognize your troops when they do things right!

In the Groove. You should have smooth sailing at the halfway point of the tour. At this time in the rotation, the team members' jobs have become old hat, so sustaining good morale is critical. Because the troops realize they still have some time to go before leaving the country, their morale can fall quickly. To prevent this from happening, you need to be fully engaged: keep your folks on target and in a positive frame of mind during this important phase of the tour.

Ready to Go. At this point, troops adopt the "I am out of here" mentality. Interestingly, during this phase morale has risen again since members know they will soon leave. If you did your job well during the previous stage, you will have it easy now. That is, if you have kept their morale up, your personnel will enter this stage fired up and still performing well. If you did not, then your troops have their minds on going home--not on doing the job at hand.

Knowing when you must press hard on morale issues will certainly help you prepare to head off any problems before they surface. Do not forget that during personnel changeovers, you will have part of your squadron in the "Wonder" phase and part in "Ready to Go." Lead accordingly!

Stateside Issues

Handling morale in a stateside squadron differs from doing so in a deployed unit. In stateside squadrons, personnel leave at the end of the day and start family time. You have little contact with them after they depart at the end of the day or leave the base for the weekend.

How do you keep morale high in this challenging environment? First, promote an active booster club for the squadron. Let your booster-club president know that he or she plays a vital role in sustaining morale by planning appealing events. If your president lacks good leadership skills, teach them quickly. The club's success or failure will affect the unit's morale.

Second, make sure that the booster club has a yearly plan. Require your president to create an annual calendar and review it. Look for gaps in the schedule, paying particular attention to scheduling an event shortly after busy times in your squadron's workload to provide members time to slow down and unwind.

Third, send an invitation to families for squadron events. Those that cater to children will attract more people. We invited families to commander's calls and awards ceremonies to enhance squadron morale and provided child care during those functions. Obviously, this is a great way to involve your troops' spouses.

Finally, the most effective technique I employed at my last squadron entailed holding events called "Celebrating Success" instead of the traditional commander's calls. We opened these events to families and hosted them during duty hours, late afternoon, or evening. By presenting awards and decorations earned over the past quarter during Celebrating Success, we provided time to reflect on the squadron's accomplishments. Because your troops will do incredible things, you need to recognize them in public so they hear how well they are performing. I tied the booster club into the event by having its members provide refreshments, thus creating a party environment and enticing troops to stick around after the awards to visit and relax. During this time, I also shared my vision with everyone in attendance and charted the course for next quarter. By having the families hear this, they could support their spouses as they worked hard to fulfill the vision. If you share your vision only once in a while, you will not bring it to fruition. You must continually restate it and share it with your people.

Using commander's call to recognize, reward, and celebrate achievements is far more beneficial than showing tons of briefing slides that no one remembers. We cover the mandatory items at other squadron functions.

Morale Sets the Speed

The morale of your unit not only determines how well it performs but also affects your ability to lead it in pursuit of the vision you established. Celebrate the success of your folks often and publicly; take swift and appropriate action on matters that impair morale. Applying these two principles will help make your command tour a successful one.

Conclusion

Commanding an Air Force squadron is one of the greatest jobs you will ever have. It is a challenging but rewarding experience. Remember that you establish the course your squadron will follow, you determine the atmosphere of the unit with your words and attitude, and you create the air of optimism that will motivate and drive your personnel to new levels of professional and personal achievement. Led correctly, your squadron will affect your group, wing, base, and possibly your command or the entire Air Force. By investing time in developing your people, you can mold the Air Force's leaders of tomorrow.

There is no magic formula or model that will teach you everything you need to know to be a successful leader. Don't worry; the Air Force has chosen you to command for a reason. I hope that the information in this article will prove beneficial to you during your command experience. Take your squadron to new heights. Keep learning, and keep leading.

MAJ STEVEN MINKIN, USAF *

* Major Minkin is an instructor at the Defense Financial Management and Comptroller School at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. The author wishes to thank the Air Force for giving him the opportunity to command its fine men and women.

Gale Copyright:

Copyright 2006 Gale, Cengage Learning. All rights reserved.