

The Elements of an Effective Squadron: An Air Force Organizational Study

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During the past two decades, the US Air Force has reduced squadron-level support functions, manpower, and appropriations to cut costs through consolidation at higher organizational levels. In 2016, Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) Gen David Goldfein identified “revitalizing the squadron” as his number one priority during his four-year tenure. According to the CSAF, the squadrons—and similar support entities—are the foundational organization in the service.¹ They provide the appropriate level of leader-to-Airman ratio, setting, and tactical focus to

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foster the most nourishing environment for personal and professional development, esprit de corps, and mission excellence.

Problem Statement

According to Air Force Instruction (AFI) 38-101, *Air Force Organization*, “squadrons are the basic building-block organizations in the Air Force, providing specific operational or support capability.”² Since the implementation of the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011, US defense spending was decreased and congressionally frozen for three years from 2013–2015.³ The frozen spending levels, which did not account for inflation, reduced the DOD’s purchasing power to an equivalent of the 2008 budget.⁴ Although the funding crisis impacted organizations throughout the DOD, many of the problems directly affected squadron-level operations. Reduced manning, increased Airmen stress, consolidated functions, and degraded training are some examples. Despite the foregoing challenges, many squadrons in the Air Force continue to receive “effective” and “highly effective” inspection ratings, and many Airmen claim to have come from “great squadrons.” The specific problem explored during this research was the identification of the elements of organizational effectiveness in squadrons that made them effective, even in resource-constrained times.

Purpose Statement

The objective of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of graduated squadron commanders to identify organizational conditions that lead to effective squadrons. Several benefits emerged from this research:

- This study provided empirical evidence of best practices for current and future commanders to consider for implementation.
- The results of this research can increase the quality of education in professional military institutions that teach command and/or leadership.
- The study identified problem areas Air Force senior leaders can focus at the squadron level as part of the ongoing effort to revitalize the squadron.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the exploratory study:

1. What conditions or activities impact squadron effectiveness?
2. What future research can positively impact squadron effectiveness?

Methodology

Method and Design

To obtain the depth of knowledge necessary for the research questions, a qualitative phenomenological research method and design were most appropriate. The

qualitative method allowed for the depth necessary to understand the frequencies that occurred in the research.⁵ The phenomenological design provided a framework for exploring the experiences of each graduated squadron commander.⁶

Population and Sampling

To obtain the specific sample of graduated squadron commanders and to ensure a diverse demographic that represents the USAF population, a purposeful sampling method was most appropriate for the research. Following approval from the USAF research oversight office (ROO), Air Command and Staff College and Air War College students and faculty with recent squadron-command experience received email invitations. Although the sample was recruited from one location, they all relocated from various career fields and major commands as depicted in Figure 1. The sample (n = 30) met qualitative research rigor requirements, which typically range from 6–30 participants.⁷ We found it important to maximize the sample to obtain the richest data for analysis in the study.

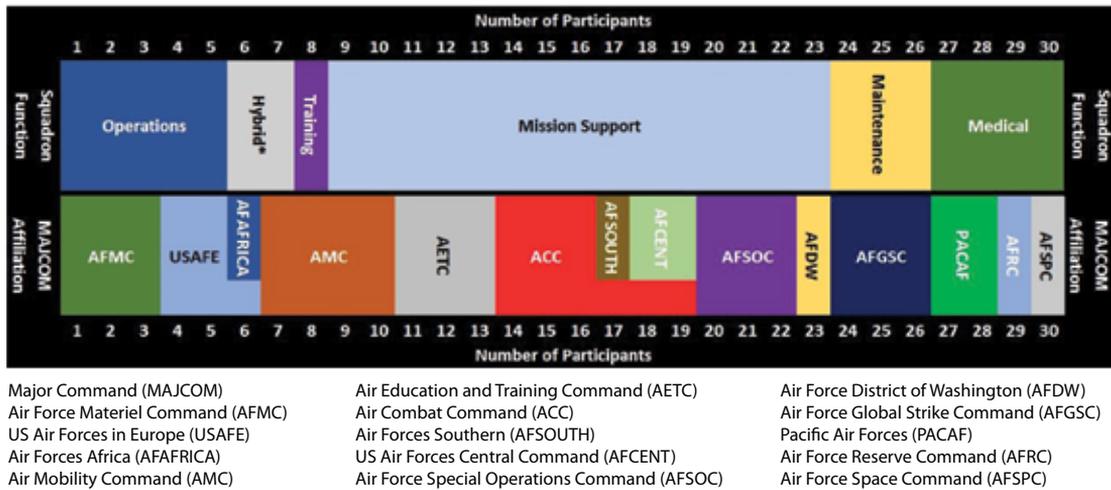


Figure 1. Sample demographics**

* Hybrid squadrons are those with cross-functional mission areas (as in air base squadrons, air advisory squadrons, and so forth).

** Function and MAJCOM numbers do not align. Participant number one was not an operations commander in AFMC. The figure only reflects frequencies (as in five operations commanders and three AFMC commanders).

Reliability and Validity

We ensured the reliability, or the consistency of the data, by using an interview protocol that was vetted through the Air University and USAF ROO offices. The protocol served as a checklist for consistent interview questioning and data collection. Participants were then questioned in a 30-minute to 1-hour interview when they responded to items on the interview protocol. To guarantee reliable data, each participant

received a copy of their interview record to review for accuracy with any errors corrected before data analysis.

Results

During the interview, participants were asked to rate their personal perception of the effectiveness of each theme area in their unit (see table 1). This self-reporting mechanism was not used for statistical analysis but instead served as a basis for placing qualitative comments into categorical bins. For example, participant one might have rated leadership a “five” and stated, “Having a strong relationship with my first sergeant and operations officer made it much easier to lead the unit.” Participant two might have rated leadership a “two” and stated, “My operations officer was the only other officer in my unit and was not very good. We could have done so much more if the situation was different.” In both cases, these items were coded as “leadership team strength impacted quality” (see table 2), and the nature of that impact was described in the discussion section of the article.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on participant self-reported effectiveness

<i>Theme</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Leadership	30	2	5	4.2	0.85
Training	30	3	5	3.97	0.8
Customer service	30	3	5	4.47	0.68
Performance improvement	30	3	5	4.1	0.68
Change management	30	2	5	4.17	0.74
Communication	30	3	5	4.1	0.8
Employee Relations	30	3	5	4.27	0.58

Node Frequencies

The node frequencies in table 2 reflect the number of interviews when participants felt that these items were of the most importance to their units' effectiveness. It is important to note here that when given an open-ended question, several items were so consistent that they appeared during 10 or more interviews. These key nodes served as the strongest findings in the study and are described in more detail in the discussion. Other minor nodes emerged within the various themes. Only the top three (based on frequency) scored nodes were included in this study; however, there were many more nodes in each theme and several other interesting benchmarks that were noted later in the discussion section.

Table 2. Coded themes, nodes, and frequencies (f)

Theme	Nodes	f
Leadership	• Leadership team strength impacted quality	17*
	• Focus on strategic tasks vs. fighting fires	8
	• Airmen need to understand their role in the big picture	8
Training	• Leaders focused on training	17
	• Use realistic training	10
	• Needed assigned unit training	8
	• Resources directly impacted quality	8
Customer service	• Focused on the customer	15
	• Resources directly impacted quality	8
	• Interunit relationships matter	8
Performance management	• Awards program directly impacted performance	16
	• Set high standards	9
	• Effectively manage talent	8
Change management	• Communicated regularly	15
	• Transparency creates trust	11
	• Airmen need to understand their role in the big picture	9
Communication	• Leadership by walking around	17
	• Open-door policy was effective	11
	• Unit size mattered	10
Employee relations	• Policy to outline respect	10
	• Social events regularly	7
	• UCA as a tool for improving relations	7

* Key nodes are those that comprise 1/3 of the sample.

Node Relationships

In qualitative research, understanding the relationship of nodes is as important, if not more important, than the frequency. Figure 2 depicts the horizontal dendrogram that reflects the organization of themes based on phrase similarity in the interviews. This means that the conversations regarding the grouped areas were qualitatively similar regarding content.

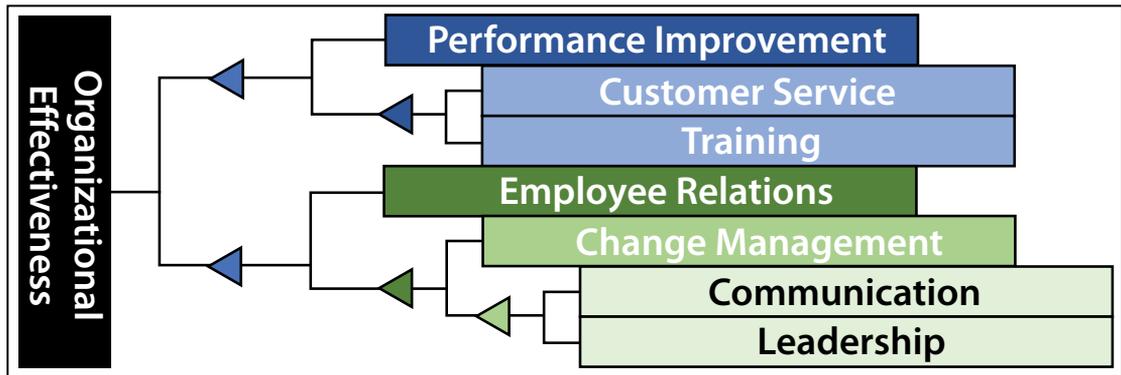


Figure 2. Horizontal dendrogram of nodes clustered by content similarity

We conducted a cluster analysis on nodes that appeared across multiple themes. Eight nodes had multiple connecting themes, and all themes had 2–5 connecting nodes. From an investment perspective, the results in Figure 3 identified areas that commanders can focus on that will impact multiple elements of organizational effectiveness. Transparency was the most impactful node, reaching customer service, communication, leadership, performance improvement, and, most significantly, change management. One finding, completely out of a commander’s control, is that unit size will moderately impact employee relations and leadership, while it strongly impacts communication.

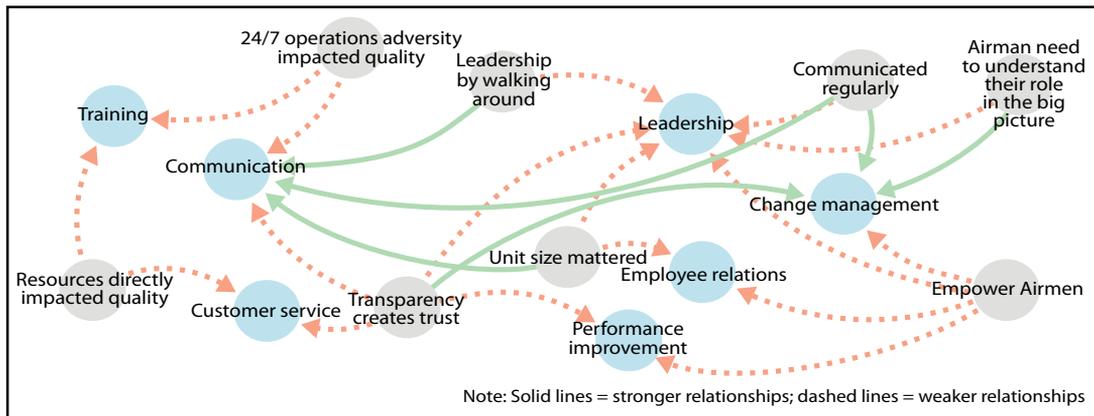


Figure 3. Cluster diagram depicting nodes with impact on multiple themes

Discussion

Leadership

Leadership team strength impact quality. Commanders reported that the cohesiveness of their leadership team was the most significant factor in their leadership effectiveness—good or bad. While the command team varied based on unit size and function, the references consisted of a mix of commander, first sergeant, operations officer, superintendent, and flight commanders. Smaller units also consider the senior noncommissioned officer (SNCO) part of the leadership team, while larger units generally did not. Effective teams had trained and proactive leaders who mentored junior members (or tier groups) and kept the commander from micromanaging. Creating that culture required the commander to be receptive to feedback, ensure open lines of communication with her or his team, and empower the team to act in their respective roles. Commanders with weaker teams noted that their staff was typically underexperienced, or there was an unusual rank structure. For example, some commanders had vacant chief master sergeant positions and/or had operations officers who were lieutenants—a rank that generally lacks the required experience for effectively leading a squadron-level unit.

Focus on strategic tasks versus fighting fires. Commanders who focused on strategic tasks, or those high-level tasks where only they could make the decision, were more effective than those who struggled with the foregoing. Focusing on strategic tasks was a mutually beneficial approach: (1) it allowed the commander to maximize the use of her or his limited time, and (2) it empowered lower-level leaders to lead people and manage resources under their authority.

Airmen need to understand their role in the big picture. Airmen who understood the unit's mission and their specific contribution to the overall wing mission were more motivated to accomplish goals. These findings are congruent with recent messages to Air Force leaders urging that the millennial generation of Airmen—comprising most Airmen in ranks Airman basic through technical sergeant and second lieutenant through young majors—work better when they have consistent feedback and understand “why” they are performing tasks.⁸ Support squadrons found this approach most useful since their Airmen are often disconnected from the direct operations of the wing. Commanders suggested sending Airmen to their customer units for orientations, familiarization flights, and other similar integration practices. The Airman Comprehensive Assessment (ACA) also provided an excellent forum for integrating this practice into the culture of a unit.

Training

Leaders focus on training. Commanders felt strongly about the importance training had on unit success. While fiscal resources and time often limited their ability to do what they wanted, commanders who focused energy on unit training often felt it was worth the investment. Medical and support units preferred establishing training down-days while operations, maintenance, and hybrid units most benefited from quality assurance programs. In either case, the commander's engagement

was critical to the success of the programs. Commanders spoke often of the importance of proactively and aggressively requesting training money and manpower from their leaders.

Use realistic training. Commanders agreed that the benefit of computer-based training paled in comparison to realistic training. Focusing on obtaining realistic training, such as exercises, practical courses (that is, jump school and physical security school), and on-the-job training paid much higher dividends, especially when taking over a unit with a defunct training program. Commanders who were limited in resources would substitute courses with local subject-matter experts who could provide training. Additionally, some commanders would establish on-base mock deployment sites, such as alternate duty locations, for expeditionary training.

Assigned unit training managers (UTM) matter. We saw that in many cases, commanders either benefited from having an assigned 3S2X1 UTM or wished they had one. Some small units had UTMs while other larger units did not. After investigating several points of contact at the wing and MAJCOM level, we learned that the requirements for who gets a UTM and who does not were not well known. The Air Force Manpower Agency provided a copy of the manpower standard that identified how units with 110 or more authorizations may have an assigned UTM.⁹ The foregoing reinforced the “unit size mattered” theme.

Customer Service

Focus on the customer. Units that excelled in customer service emphasized the customer from their vision statement to their active feedback solicitation. Geographically-separated units, varying operations tempos, and diverse customer requirements often made it increasingly difficult to have rigid procedures for providing support. Since much of customer service is personality dependent, successful commanders often discussed their focus on personality and flexible approach to delivering value to their customers. Some practices noted were:

- Treating someone on the phone the same as if they were in person
- Positioning top-performing Airmen in roles that directly interact with the customer
- Fully staffing customer-interfacing elements
- Establishing outreach programs to educate Airmen and customers on each other's roles
- Creating a client-based approach where the customer was part of the solution

Resources directly impact quality. Commanders—especially those in support functions—identified the need to prioritize services due to limited resources. It was unrealistic to expect to fulfill the needs of all customers, so instead some of them developed priority lists where units closer to the “tip of the spear” were first served. The priority lists created some unrest, however, being transparent about the process and priorities tempered complaints. Current or future commanders should expect that they will likely be in a resource-constrained unit and need to accept similar

risk. Regardless of the type of risk accepted, being transparent with the customer will help maintain constructive relationships.

Interunit relationships matter. Find a way to get to “yes” was a mentality that facilitated cooperative interaction between units. Commanders found that in very rare cases “no” was the only answer to a problem. Successful units actively sought alternative means of satisfying the customer’s needs. In some cases, “we can’t do that, but we can do this” was the most effective approach to providing services in a way that still met the customer’s requirements. Direct interunit conversations between commanders and operations officers improved effectiveness, especially in situations when a service was shared between two or more units (that is, airfield construction requires cooperation and input from civil engineering, contracting, and operations support squadrons).

Performance Improvement

Awards program directly impacts performance. Formal and informal recognition activities formed the foundation of performance improvement in the units of most interviewed commanders. Positively affecting people’s attitudes through deserved awards and decorations instilled unit pride, motivated Airmen, and reinforced desired behaviors. Commanders described various states of awards programs upon arrival to the unit. Some programs were well established and required little work, while others were nonexistent or grossly neglected and required a lot of the commander’s time to get going. Establishing “murder boards” as forums where different groups reviewed packages to vet and improve quality improved the success rate of performance awards. Presenting awards and decorations to those who deserved it was just as important as not “handing out” the same to those who were not deserving. It was important to set high standards and reward those who met or exceeded them.

Set high standards. Several commanders identified the establishment of high standards as a pivotal performance improvement decision. Even those who came to command units that were not performing well found that once they set and enforced higher standards, the unit adapted, and improved morale and performance followed. In some cases, commanders were directed by higher-level commanders to set higher standards, a decision they regretted not making on their own.

Effectively manage talent. Putting people in places where they could succeed was the best approach to talent management. To do so, commanders had to know the strengths and weaknesses of their Airmen. In several cases, commanders met with each Airman in their units to discuss their potential in the unit. Unfortunately, many of these commanders also had to remove Airmen who did not adequately perform their duties. Those who did not fire underperformers, when perhaps they should have, expressed regretting that decision well after their command ended. Commanders of selectively-manned units found that they had little trouble with managing talent and performance issues since they could screen their new hires before assignments were issued.

Change Management

Communicate regularly. Frequent communication positively impacted the change management, communication, and leadership themes in various ways. From a change management perspective, regular communication on the upcoming change—why the change is happening, what impact the change will have, and what conditions will exist after the change—was an effective way to help manage the change process. Commanders found that communicating regularly helped to control the “rumor mill”; however, it was important to convey with each update that things are in flux, and the plan today might not be the plan tomorrow. Balancing how much to share and when to share it was a common struggle. In some cases, information sharing was heavily restricted by higher-level authorities; an often unfavorable practice that would create transparency issues between the commander and the unit.

Transparency creates trust. During an organizational change, Airmen want to know what is happening, even if the news was negative. Commanders found that when they were transparent with their Airmen, even when it was negative information, they received less resistance during the change process. These findings are congruent with recent research that demonstrated how transparent communication instilled trust, improved employee perception of the leader and enhanced the reputation of the organization.¹⁰ Transparent communication was found to be so significant that it impacted five of the seven themes (see fig. 3).

Airmen need to understand their role in the big picture. We addressed this node in the *leadership* theme; however, the context of how it impacted change management was slightly different. During discussions, commanders emphasized how important it was for them to explain to their Airmen the role they played during and following the change. In many cases, commanders assigned a portion of the change process to their lower-level leaders for implementation. For example, during the release of the recent enlisted evaluation system overhaul, commanders delegated to their top three the role of educators for the unit. While all leaders were educated on the program, the top three translated the program changes to their junior enlisted and explained how the changes would benefit them, as well as some of the challenges they would bring during implementation.

Similarly, during unit restructuring, some commanders had their flight commanders and/or Top Three create Post-it notes with all their functions and aligned them on a board where they fit best to create the new organization's structure. This collaborative effort created a sense of ownership in the new unit, gained the support of the leadership team, and made it easier to translate a common message to the unit regarding the change. It was also easier for supervisors to explain their Airmen's logical place in the unit and how they connected to the other sections.

Communication

Leadership by walking around. The majority of commanders agreed that walking around the unit was one of the most productive ways to be an effective leader. Walking around the unit familiarizes the commander with the people, hot issues, and unit climate.¹¹ Walking around, unlike electronic communication, provides connectedness and clarity; a clarity that is sometimes critical to a message. It

opens lines of communication and lets Airmen know that their commander values them enough to spend direct time with them.¹²

Open-door policy is effective. Although the implementation of open-door policies varied among the interviewed commanders, the idea that it created an avenue for Airmen to freely approach their commander and improved communication remained constant. Some commanders maintained a completely open door, while others stated, “my door is open unless it’s not.” The latter implied that when the door is closed, Airmen can make an appointment to be seen as soon as possible.

Unit size matters. The most impactful element—and outside of the commander’s control—mentioned during the interviews was how the size of the unit impacted various themes (see fig. 3). Of those themes, communication was the most impacted by unit size. As units grew larger, commanders experienced more complexity when it came to communicating with their Airmen. Increased levels of supervision, distributed work environments, varying shifts, and access to communication mediums all presented challenges. Security forces, aircraft maintenance, and operations support commanders experienced significant challenges in these areas. Commanders wishing to communicate in these environments often held multiple commander’s calls, came to work after standard hours to see various shifts, and made it a point to travel to various work sites—even when geographically separated. Some commanders emphasized the importance of overcoming generation barriers and capitalizing on social media as a medium for communicating with the unit. The organization’s social media groups and feeds also created a medium where unit members could collaborate and improve intraunit relations.

Employee Relations

Policy to outline respect. Respect in the workplace improves retention, productivity, and team building, thus leading to a more effective organization.¹³ Commanders must set the tone and be clear on their policies that outline workplace respect. Clearly communicating, demonstrating, promoting, and enforcing such policies fuels a transformational process that results in improved employee relations and a more positive organizational climate.

Several medical and support squadron commanders described a culture where individual opinions were respected, and everyone’s contributions were valued. In these cultures, there was no prestige or relevance in rank or titles. Instead, pride generated from how well each member of the team did their part in accomplishing the mission. Airmen of all ranks were welcome to voice ideas and contribute to organization objectives.

Regular social events. Research has proven that social activities build camaraderie and community within workplaces, as long as those activities reflect the values of the organization.¹⁴ The research participants echoed those findings through their many stories about establishing squadron sports teams, attending dining events, and creating a family-inclusive culture. One of the greatest hurdles to codify such a culture was dissolving some of the social clicks that prevented inter-work-center interaction. Identifying those clicks required immersion in the unit and one-on-one conversations with the Airmen.

Unit climate assessment as a tool for improvement. Several commanders found value in using the unit's past climate assessments to gauge the evolution of the organization's climate upon taking command. The surveys, now called Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute's Organizational Climate Survey, provided commanders with anonymous quantitative and qualitative data points for highlighting the climate of the unit during a multiyear period. They also allow commanders to gauge their current assessment with past assessments to identify any upward or downward trending during their command.

Assumptions and Limitations

Two major assumptions underlaid the research:

1. The confidentiality promised to participants created enough trust between them and the research team to provide honest, information-rich feedback.
2. The qualitative reasoning behind their explanation of key themes and nodes were transferable to other squadron-level command scenarios.

Two limitations impacted this study:

1. Resources in time and travel money impacted the ability to survey/interview various units to couple the Airmen's perspective with the commanders' input.
2. The interviews provided an extensive amount of information which required us to constrain this article to only the top nodes in each theme with only the most common explanations for each node.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study identified several research opportunities to explore farther the problem of squadron organizational effectiveness:

1. Although the goal of this study was to identify key nodes across multiple career fields that lead to effective organizations, future research should focus on functional-specific practices for success. Large organizations, like the Air Force, have an overall organizational culture, but they also have various sub-cultures where occupational shared values and norms impact the organization's culture and effectiveness (that is, fighter squadrons having a bar).¹⁵ These more specific commander challenges could then be incorporated into the respective MAJCOM squadron commander and Air University Commanders' Professional Development School courses.
2. The Air Force Inspector General's office manages the Inspector General Evaluation Management System (IGEMS), which collects data on four major graded areas: management of resources, leading people, improving the unit, and executing the mission.¹⁶ A mixed-methods study examining the quantitative and qualitative data points from IGEMS would provide significant insight into squadron effectiveness. Quantitative data points derived from converting the

rating system (that is, satisfactory, effective, highly effective) into a Likert-type scale would reveal immediately useful information regarding command and functional effectiveness. A deeper qualitative investigation into the inspector and unit member comments would highlight specific details that led to the ranking system.

3. As indicated in the study's analysis of phrase similarity depicted in Figure 2, an intriguing connection surfaced between the themes of customer service and training. A review of the raw data led to the suggestion that perhaps the quality, stability, and frequency of training indirectly affect the predictability of positive interactions with customers. In short, the level of prioritization and organization of a squadron's training program may have enough impact on customer interaction to allow commanders more control over the quality of those interactions than they may realize. More research is required to unpack the possible linkages here, but the proposed relationship of these two themes to performance improvement highlights this question as an important one for commanders.
4. The cohesion strength of the leadership teams in each unit directly impacted the unit's effectiveness. How do we improve the strength of not just the commander, but the entire team? Are the senior squadron positions so important that they deserve some more development? Commanders and first sergeants attend formal courses; however, operations officers learn the job on the job. Additionally, not all squadrons are large enough to be authorized a diamond-wearing first sergeant and instead appoint an additional-duty first sergeant who typically does not have the formal education. Does a unit's size directly relate to the importance of having a trained first sergeant as the senior enlisted leader? Why not authorize additional duty first sergeants to attend the distance learning first sergeant course to afford them more training and credibility?

Conclusion

The specific problem explored during this research was the identification of the elements of USAF squadron organizational effectiveness. Our qualitative phenomenological approach, using 30 graduated squadron commanders as a sample, provided a tremendous amount of data that we analyzed to address our research questions. While the research recommendations were proposed, we offer the following conditions or activities that make squadrons effective:

1. During our research, we explored seven areas of organizational effectiveness: (1) leadership, (2) training, (3) customer service, (4) performance improvement, (5) change management, (6) communication, and (7) employee relations. The empirical results of this research can serve as a guide for incoming squadron commanders. Reviewing the key nodes identified in this study and knowing how they impacted unit effectiveness in other squadrons can help commanders be better prepared to step into their new role (see table 2). Additionally, understanding how the nodes related to each other and the other themes of organization effectiveness can help time- and resource-constrained

commanders focus those resources on the key nodes that impact multiple areas of the unit (see fig. 3). Commanders that focus on positively impacting the key nodes identified in this study will improve their chances of having an effective squadron over those who do not.

2. The dendrogram in Figure 2 visually depicted the centrality of the role of communication in leadership, in that communication is the basis of both relationships and command. Years ago, British journalist, philosopher, and writer G. K. Chesterton pointed out that one of the reasons that the topic of education is misunderstood is because people see it, not as a method or medium, but as a discrete academic subject such as physics or history. In the same way, leaders can misunderstand communication's centrality by seeing it as "another element" of leadership rather than *the medium* of leadership. Leadership is not a purely mental event, but it is a lived event that must occur in relationships and only with communication—or it has never actually taken place. A review of the raw data suggests that, just as communication is the mechanism through which leadership occurs, it is also the basis upon which change management succeeds and employee relations thrive. The bottom line is that it would be a mistake for commanders to assume that the quality of communication in a unit—and from themselves—is merely another "leadership element" to be handled as time allows and de-emphasizes in the face of competing demands and when facing a crisis. The solution would be to accept that *communication IS leadership*. While communication can be consciously improved before a crisis, it is a most powerful predictor of the outcome of that crisis. ✪

Notes

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