

Fighting Complacency by Building the Will to Prepare to Change

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Synopsis: Persistence as the world's most powerful air force combined with unprecedented budgetary growth places the U.S. Air Force in a daunting position. In the past two decades, our force structure has been reduced by over thirty percent while our budget has more than doubled. Congressional and Service leaders continue to debate the potential for a hollow force as budgetary concerns continue to mount. Overt, peer military threats have been negated while overall international stability has weakened. To remain extraordinary, we must change. Leading academic research concludes that lasting organizational change begins with a perceived necessity to do things differently (Kotter). Unfortunately, it also finds that successful groups are often blinded by their own achievements and fail to identify the requirement to innovate (Collins). This paper offers an opportunity to reflect on how we might successfully initiate change in flying training operations.

“The key is not the will to win...everybody has that. It is the will to prepare to win that is important.”

Bobby Knight

History, sports, and military life are filled with examples of the notion that while getting to the top is tough, staying there is harder still. The U.S. Air Force finds itself flying into a situation where the challenges to remain the dominant air and space force on the planet abound, and the winds of change are already evident here in the 12th Flying Training Wing. Congressional and Service leaders continue to debate the potential for a hollow force as budgetary concerns continue to mount and senior leaders search for solutions. Gloom and doom or an opportunity? Change is on the way. Are we prepared to make it an opportunity to improve how we operate?

Mental models on organizational change are a dime a dozen. In addition to the anecdotal reflections, there are rigorous academic studies with conclusions that hold up to comparison with reality. In research forming the basis for his book *Leading Change*, John Kotter studied 100 companies through a decade as they tried to remake themselves. From his observations, he developed an eight step model for leading change. This discussion focuses on his first step: Establish a Sense of Urgency. Kotter found that if the majority of the organization does not embrace the necessity for change, any efforts to change will fail more times than not. Furthermore, prolonged success can foster complacency that impedes innovation.

“The minute you think you’ve got it made, disaster is just around the corner.”

Joe Paterno

After writing the critically acclaimed *Good to Great*, Jim Collins was praised for identifying similarities in companies that were able to make success and change part of the fabric of their organization. Yet time is a cruel evaluator. Today only nine of his eleven “great” companies are

still in business, and only one of the nine has fared better than the Standard and Poor's 500 average. This prompted him to evaluate what happened. In his book *How the Mighty Fall*, he defined the decline of an organization in the following five stages:

- Stage 1: Hubris Born of Success
- Stage 2: Undisciplined Pursuit of More
- Stage 3: Denial of Risk and Peril
- Stage 4: Grasping for Salvation
- Stage 5: Capitulation to Irrelevance or Death

Collins hinted at trouble with complacency. "Great enterprises can become insulated by success; accumulated momentum can carry an enterprise forward for a while, even if its leaders make poor decisions or lose discipline. Stage 1 kicks in when people become arrogant, regarding success virtually as an entitlement, and they lose sight of the true underlying factors that created success in the first place." Interestingly, organizations can and have recovered from the above stages (e.g. IBM).

"Success is not permanent and failure is not fatal."

Mike Ditka

"Failure is not fatal, but failure to change might be."

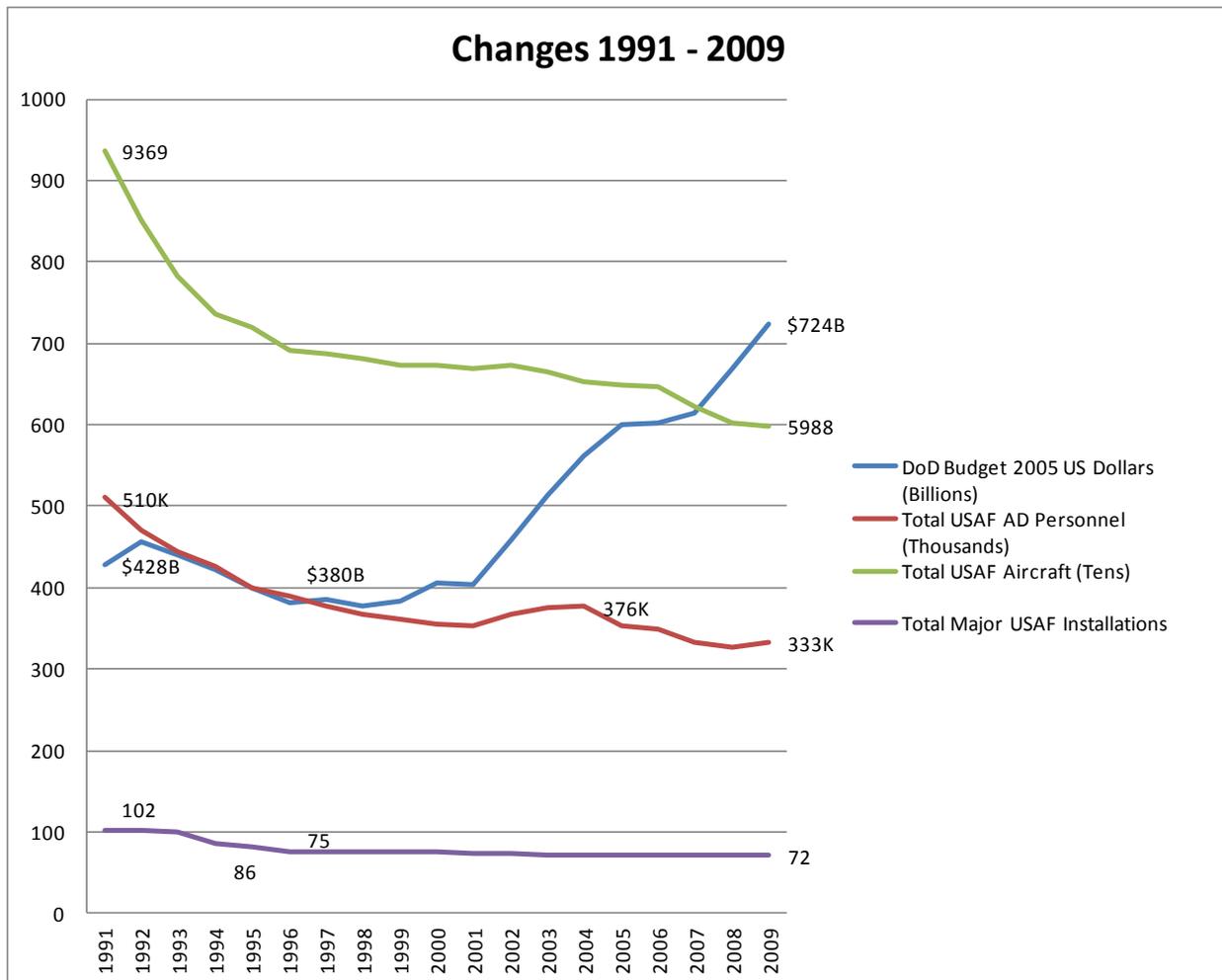
John Wooden

How does all the above academic discussion apply to this organization? For decades, the 12th Flying Training Wing has been the foundry that built the aviators who built the air dominance our Air Force has become. With such success, it is easy to wonder, "What threat could possibly exist that could challenge such a successful organization?" To answer this question, one might ask, "What has happened that foreshadows potential trouble?"

After the first Gulf War, sizeable force changes began across the Department of Defense. Reference the chart below. Reductions in personnel, in numbers of installations, and in combat power were the trend of the 1990s. In fact, these reductions continue to this day. Since 1991, active duty air force personnel manning is down 35 percent (total force is down about 30 percent). Total U.S. Air Force aircraft numbers are down 36 percent, and Base Realignment and Closure has reduced the number of major bases by 29 percent.

1991-2009 Percent Increase/Decrease

Metric	Change
Total Active Duty Manning	-35%
Total Aircraft	-36%
Total Major USAF Bases	-29%
Total DoD Budget	69%



Yet, notice Department of Defense spending. No doubt continuous combat operations since 2001 are a contributing factor. But look at the overall trends. In 2005 US Dollars, spending decreased more than 10 percent following the Gulf War draw down in 1991. However over the next 17 years, spending is up 69 percent over the 1992 Gulf War peak. Bottom line, combat power and personnel are down about 35 percent and spending is up 69 percent.

Department of Defense spending has grown in part due to the Global War on Terrorism and Continuing Resolution monies being distributed above and beyond the original budget passed by Congress. However, there are few better leading indicators of looming fiscal demise than increased spending during infrastructure and personnel cutbacks designed to reduce costs. To the average Airman, the above is both disturbing and hard to fathom. Temporary Duty budgets are down double digit percents, flying hours have been cut double digit percents and unit manning is already below requirements. Yet the global economy continues to flounder, tax revenue continues to decline, and federal budgets are seeing year-to-year reductions. The threat is here. It is now. Indeed, something has to give.

Points to Ponder

Do you see a threat to your mission? Would you put the U.S. Air Force anywhere in Jim Collin's five stages of organizational decline? If so, where would you put your organization? What can you do about it?

"If what you did yesterday seems big, you haven't done anything today."

Lou Holtz

To overcome the challenges ahead, we must overcome our own success. We are without a doubt the most combat experienced Air Force in the world. The intensity has varied, but for more than two decades we have flown combat missions every day. We have not experienced defeat. We are indeed very lethal. Does this mean we have no room for improvement?

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it" is the slogan of the complacent, the arrogant or the scared. It's an excuse for inaction, a call to non-arms."

Colin Powell

Perhaps no environment is more conducive to complacency than the training environment. We operate within a large, rule-driven bureaucracy that has been conducting, with few exceptions, the same training for multiple decades. We train students and student instructors with syllabi created by a MAJCOM staff. Therefore any quick changes are largely viewed as beyond our control. Often it seems easier to avoid change, even major change for the better, and "stay the course" rather than "fight" the bureaucracy.

When it comes to talent, the 12th Flying Training Wing has a lion's share. We have talented and vastly experienced maintainers. Additionally, our fourteen Ops squadrons are comprised of a rather unique collection of aviation specialists. Most are previous instructors already in their second decade of service with vast experience in both the Combat and Mobility Air Force. Almost all are veterans of nearly two decades of combat operations.

Yet with all this skill, we still fall victim to a self-attribution bias, often crediting success to our excellence and blaming failure on the bureaucratic system limiting our progress. Formal training environments can amplify this bias. You have heard it, and you have probably said it. "We can't do that because the syllabus prevents it." "I can't believe we are still doing this." "If we could just get the AETC supplement changed, we could do that." There is something lurking; some professional desire to be better. Hidden in those frustrations is the proof that we have not yet arrived. There is work to be done. There are better ways.

"Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."

John Wooden

Think of the 12th Flying Training Wing like the Olympic Training Center of flying. Training at this level often takes new ideas and seeing situations in a unique way. When interviewed prior to the Olympics this year, one of Jamaica's former track coaches, Dennis Johnson put it this way. *"Have you seen the runner accelerating past the field toward the end of the race? Well that's not really what you are seeing. You are seeing the rest of the field tiring first [sic]."* Johnson's

observations led the Jamaicans to train to the idea of faster-longer rather than simply faster. The results of that minor change are fairly self evident in the last two Olympics. Jamaican track and field won gold medals in men's 100m and 100m relay as well as the women's 100m races. Punctuating their success, they won 8 of the 12 medals in the individual men's and women's 100m and 200m competitions.

Simply put, we can find better ways, and we can innovate. We have pilots trained at some of the finest civilian companies in the world (e.g. United Airlines, Southwest Airlines, FedEx, UPS, among others). We have instructors who have flown exchanges in other countries. There are certainly witnesses to other and perhaps more modern ways of doing business. For example, most airlines conduct all of their training in a simulator and are confident enough to let their highly experienced students fly their first flight with paying customers. Rather than discounting this as an inferior way of training that a business can get away with, shouldn't we give it considerable thought?

Points to Ponder

When you've looked around and thought, "There must be a better way of doing this," what limited you from improving? Who can remove that limit? What have you seen in your experience that we are not teaching our instructors so they can teach their students? Where is the next innovation in instructor training? Why haven't we realized it? How do commanders harness the expertise hiding within their people? Do your people feel empowered to bring you the next innovation?

Summary

"Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower."

Steve Jobs

A fiscal storm is approaching that will test the ability of the U.S. Air Force in ways the current force has never seen. Between a shrinking fleet, reduced manpower, smaller budgets, and rising competitors, it will be ever challenging to remain the most dominant air and space force on the planet. Change will happen. Embracing the current and coming situation as an opportunity is essential at every level of the organization, and it is the first step on the road to success. While there are certainly a number of factors that can inhibit change here at the 12th Flying Training Wing, there are definitely things we can do better, and we have the Olympic coaches right here in a pool of talented instructors. In the big scheme of things, the 12th Flying Training Wing budget is minor. We will likely not recapitalize millions of dollars each year, but changes will still happen in the name of fiscal tightening. During these times, the most important improvements we make will probably involve how we train our students. If we make wise changes, they could have lasting effects for decades. To borrow from the famous BASF commercial, we don't make the aviators fighting out nations wars. We make them better.

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