

Aerospace Leadership - Simply "Leading by Example"

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This paper forms the basis of the AA&S (Australia) campaign to establish better understanding of the critical role of leadership in managing our fleets. The campaign will progressively build on this overview.

Introduction

One definition of Intelligence is "Using past experience to solve new problems"^[1]. Yet in the aircraft sustainment environment, mistakes and misjudgements seemingly self-perpetuate as we continually make the same poor decisions, program after program, simply because we fail to learn from the past. We suffer budget overruns and unnecessary schedule slippages, failures or incidents take us by surprise, we belatedly realise that we need an upgrade program because our aircraft has suffered age degradation, we react to surprise issues rather than actively searching for the next potential surprise and heading it off at the pass. As one US military leader says: "Some people just don't get it!".

Failing is not always a bad thing and is what all humans do, but not learning from that failure experience and repeating it again and again not only makes little sense but frequently results in wasted taxpayer money, or worse, potential compromise of fleet safety. Ensuring that we heed our "lessons learned" is just one important aspect of sound leadership.

This paper forms the basis of the "Aerospace Leadership" campaign being run by *Aircraft Airworthiness and Sustainment (Australia)* which seeks to convey the need for effective leadership in the aerospace environment, and to encourage a mindset and culture more conducive to ongoing success, whether that success be measured in terms of aircraft safety, reduced downtime, or improved business; a success that is further influenced by the level of co-operative interaction within our own community and with our allies.

Technical capability by itself is not enough if an organisation's leaders cannot assure the actual delivery of our technical programs and all associated sustainment actions to our fleets. Put simply, there is a cost of not doing things right, and that cost is not always in dollars!

Real leaders "lead by example" and will unswervingly, determinedly and resolutely address important aspects such as:

- Learning from past programs;
- Constantly looking for the next problem, not just reacting as new ones emerge;
- Building and retaining knowledge and experience in the organisation;
- Industry co-operation and unselfish decisions for fleet benefit; and
- Meaningful, genuine and sincere communications;

The "Aerospace Leader" is not the organisation which sells the most aircraft or claims the highest profit or shareholder value. True leadership is about serving others, and the mission of AA&S (Australia) is best described in the following definition:

Definition of "Aerospace Leadership"

Aerospace Leadership is that attribute practiced by members of the aerospace community, at all levels, whose focus extends beyond just the fulfilment of their own department's or organisation's needs, to the overall needs of the fleets and those whose lives depend on their safety, availability and cost-effectiveness.

Demonstration of Aerospace Leadership is in "leading by example", and is manifested by applied responses to lessons learned, and also by unselfish co-operation within the aerospace community, in the understanding that such a focus, rather than compromising their organisation's success, will indeed enhance it, through swifter overall responses to fleet requirements, and earned respect from fleet owners, even competitor organisations, in recognition of that collaborative spirit.

Within the organisation, this leadership is executed through the mentoring and development of staff by the existing "greybeards", encouraging initiative and pro-active use of existing knowledge, experience and wisdom, with a long term view towards further knowledge and capability growth for the benefit of both the individuals and the organisation.

Leadership - Who is responsible?

Sound leadership behaviour must be embedded into the very culture of our organisations, to instil it as a way of life for everyone. Demonstration of leadership rests with the individual, whether the aircraft maintainer, the engineer, the logistician, the program manager, finance manager or research scientist - every single person, regardless of whether that person is in a supervisory position.

Nonetheless, whilst all employees share responsibility, most rely on some level of support and guidance from their own leaders, and ensuring that each and every individual will give his or her best requires more than access to the latest technology, desirable as that is. A common question asked at leadership training sessions is: "How can we make a difference when the leadership failings are from levels above us?". Whilst some changes are easier to influence than others, you can always "lead by example upwards", and though this won't always succeed, at least you have done the right thing and given it your best shot, rather than just accepting and complaining about the behaviours demonstrated by your seniors.

Those who are in a supervisory position should pause to reflect on how well they inspire, motivate and respect their people; to what extent they mentor and develop them for their, and their organisation's, future; whether they consider their leadership brings out the very best in their team members, and what confidence they have that they've done their best to keep them and their knowledge, capability and experience in the organisation to ensure that the ambitions of both are going to be met.

At all levels in the organisation, the best of your capabilities should be embedded into what you do every day, including giving your staff and customers that little bit more with no expectation of reward, though such actions are indeed conducive to the prospect of advantages to long term business.

Our aviation career occupies us for 40 hours per week (and often a few more!) whereas our "leadership" mindset is in itself a part of how we live our everyday lives.

"One of the secrets of life is that all that is really worth the doing is what we do for others" ^[2]

Learning, Heeding and Leading

"Lessons Learned" has been a popular catchphrase in recent years, but not surprisingly, one of many instances of words not typically followed by actions. Another of our favourite catchphrases is "moving forward", yet all too often we don't, as we keep repeating the same program behaviours.

A few years ago in a large aerospace organisation, a company-wide email was circulated advising staff that a new Lessons Learned Tool was being rolled out and henceforth, all staff were to use it. Examination of the tool showed it was sound enough, but what became glaringly obvious to the long-termers in the organisation was that the only lessons actually loaded into this new database were those from current projects, and all those from past projects, some with quite unique issues, had been omitted, such that knowledge had been lost. This is a prime example of our habitual emphasis on "the tool" and not so much on the knowledge contained within it; the theory versus the practice!

Needless to say that the best lessons are those that we ourselves learn from our own experiences. Nonetheless, passing our lessons on for the benefit of others, including via these databases, is a good move - an even better one is actually reviewing this database as a lead-up activity to a new program!

The secret of course is not only to learn from past experience but also to be constantly searching for the next problem and addressing it early. Problems found reactively tend to come as surprises, sometimes requiring swift responses and often with no available budget. Yet pro-active searching for problems is rarely seen as necessary, the apparent belief being that if it can't be seen then it doesn't exist! Thus, contingency funding is rarely allocated for "non-existent" problems. Then all too often, the need arises to reactively "throw money" at a problem to make it go away and to restore fleet availability, a result which is ultimately yet another blow to intended budget cutbacks, and intentions to reduce expenditure through initiatives and efficiencies. This failure to learn is not indicative of examples which would be set by effective leadership.

We have to be continually looking beneath the surface for tell-tale signs of emerging issues, and also for situations providing the potential for problems to arise.

Retaining our People

Our people are the best test of our leadership quality. Real leadership comes from within us, and our people will see straight through any insincerity. Claims on company posters in the tearoom that "aerospace leadership" is an attribute of the organisation are not sufficient to reconcile any identified shortcomings in leadership performance - it takes more than just words! In fact, tearoom chatter can be a valuable source of workforce feedback on the "climate" within the organisation. If you treat your people in a half-hearted manner, they will give you a half-hearted job! Paying someone's salary simply earns their loyalty; it takes human effort to earn their respect.

Current workforce trends do indeed see people changing jobs more frequently for various reasons such as "lifestyle choices", but many people would like to feel sufficiently settled and secure to be able to remain and grow in the same organisation for an extended period of time. From the company's perspective, any efforts to acquire new business are utterly worthless without a workforce capable of executing the programs won. Whilst the existing workforce can be supplemented as required with new recruits, there must be sufficient core knowledge to mentor new arrivals and to pass on the culture of the organisation.

With our fleets typically staying in service for the bulk of a person's working career, it is of enormous importance to have at least some percentage of the workforce who saw the aircraft enter service to be around in its twilight years where in-depth knowledge can help solve the sustainability issues that become more challenging as the fleet ages. Aircraft are a complex integration of systems and some problems require more than the information contained in the maintenance manuals. Furthermore, the manufacturer cannot be expected to know how the aircraft will age and what problems may emerge after thirty years of operational service, assuming the manufacturer is still around at that time.

There is also of course a need for new blood to enter the organisation bringing new ideas and knowledge of new techniques and technologies, and the hope is that a proportion of the newcomers will settle in to become the new generation of "greybeards".

Those sustainability issues which linger annoyingly in the background will undoubtedly adopt a higher profile if left for long enough. Reactive responses to what have already been long-term warnings can end up being costly. All too often our people have been warning of the impending need to respond to these, only to be frustrated when neglect of the issue results in unnecessary cost and long working hours for them to repair or replace what didn't need to fail in the first place. Yet this happens time and time again and people feel undervalued when their advice is not heeded; little wonder perhaps that people move on!

If morale is low, there is a leadership problem; if there is a high level of workplace stress, there is a leadership problem; if people are leaving the Company at a high rate, there is a leadership problem.....and so on.

Working Together

Success in fleet sustainment is very much a product of how we work together, both within the organisation and as a greater community. This working relationship must be based on trust, respect, and genuine regard for success of the industry as a whole. This applies to every one of us and organisations can enjoy outstanding success whilst still being a considerate and respected element of the community.

The AA&S (Australia) link with the US military, FAA, defense industry, NASA, together with science and academia has spanned over ten years, during which time the expansive knowledge within the US greybeard sustainment community has been shared unselfishly with us through the Conference and through ongoing relationships developed as a result of it. Pleasingly, the US community has also come to us for help. Indeed, numerous long-term friendships have formed between allies and many in our aerospace community have benefitted.

One prominent aspect of the US sustainment community is the noticeably close working relationship between government and industry. In the military case this is most likely due to the length of time that Defense and industry have been jointly involved with fleet support, compared with here in Australia. Nonetheless, developing this closer relationship is an example we would do well to follow. Of course these working relationships exist here too, but at a lower maturity level.

"Providing innovative solutions to our customers going forward with cost avoidance and seamless transitions to win-win solutions....." is hardly a meaningful and inspiring response to a military which has long been asking our industry to be more pro-active and show more initiative in solving military fleet problems. Effective communication requires an actual connection between two parties; "speaking with" rather than "talking at". The good news is that anyone out there with genuine leadership skills, including sincere and meaningful communications, and sees their customers as true partners rather than "money targets" has enormous opportunities available.

The Leadership Campaign

We have a sustainment record in Australia of which we can be justifiably proud - and we can do it much better! This campaign will strive to make a difference by reminding us of the importance of being people, of working with other people, and of augmenting our process driven environment which too often overshadows the real art of working logically and with others, to ensure that our highly technical programs work safely and successfully for all.

"True leadership is about serving others" [3]

References:

^[1] Inputs: Quotation from Queensland University of Technology lecturer, Lisa, 1995. Others contributors: Cassell's English Dictionary 1897; Universal Reference Library, International Press, 1961; Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases, Longmans, 1939; Pears Encyclopaedia, sixty first edition.

^[2] Lewis Carroll, 1832-1898.

^[3]"The Ten Laws of Leadership", Bill Newman, BNC Publications, 1993