

U.S. Air Force Acquisition Integration

case study | aerospace and defense

Building organization-wide leadership ability and generating self-awareness

Blaise J. Durante, a member of the Senior Executive Service and decorated retired Air Force colonel, is U.S. Air Force Deputy Assistant Secretary for Acquisition Integration (“Air Force Acquisition”). A chemical engineer by trade, Durante understands the technician’s perspective and that’s essential. However, with a master’s degree in management and supervision he also understands that “hard” skills don’t always translate to leadership ability.

Engineers, he contends, tend not to make successful leaders—unless they’ve had some kind of outside training. What’s the best way to train technical managers to be successful leaders? “They don’t understand leadership,” says Durante. “And why should they? They don’t teach it in engineering school. So they tend to think of it in technical terms and overlook its interpersonal aspects.” The computer, Durante asserts, is stunting users’ personal skills—a problem he believes is even more pronounced among engineers. Government offices, according to Durante, lose about a third of their employees to poor management, creating a lamentable budgetary drain.

Nevertheless, individuals continue to be promoted to management positions based on technical rather than interpersonal skills. A Stifling Bureaucrat Mentality Most of the government, he adds, has a budget-vs.-output mentality, fixating on activity metrics rather than meaningful results. In an environment that stresses rules over innovation, Durante believes that very few visionaries rise to the leadership ranks, resulting in static thinking across the organization.

Business Challenges

- Employees being promoted to management positions based on technical ability instead of leadership skill
- High management turnover
- Lack of innovation in management

Company Profile

The U.S. Air Force Acquisition Integration group plans, manages, and analyzes the Air Force’s research and development and acquisition investment budgets, including the development of weapon system acquisition policy and the acquisition of all materials necessary to build, for example, an airplane—which may require thousands of people and take years. Teams are assembled and disassembled many times before the completion of a specific project or program, so members must regularly reorient themselves.

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So Durante began working with Richard Hassan of TSM Corporation in Washington, DC, to develop a leadership training program to enhance the cohesiveness and productivity of Air Force Acquisition personnel by equipping them with the leadership and interpersonal skills they need to boost performance to a new level.

Durante wanted to develop leaders of vision who were willing to reach beyond their comfort level and deliver innovative solutions. He believed this could be accomplished by creating an environment that would allow a diverse staff to openly exchange innovative ideas. This would require the program to establish a common language—or way of thinking—that would serve as an umbrella for the varied cultures, generations, and personalities encompassed by the organization.

With the ALCP, Durante and Hassan looked to implement a program that accommodated all learning styles and centered on the individual. In particular, they wanted to ensure that training enabled participants to discover themselves, and then gave them a plan for improvement based on that framework, rather than forcing them to be something they are not.

Solution

Uncovering basic self-knowledge to serve as a starting point for implementing real change became the focus of phase 1 of the program. The process centered around three assessments published by The Myers-Briggs Company: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®), the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation– Behavior™ (FIRO-B®), and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) assessments. These tools, according to Hassan, are the foundation of the ALCP because they enable participants to understand who they are and how they operate, and to gain an appreciation and feel for ways their colleagues may think and operate differently.

Phase 2 concentrates on improving three areas:

- Applying the knowledge to handle conflict
- Applying knowledge to handle change
- Applying knowledge to deal with decision making and fundamental, “big picture” problems

Solution

- Use the MBTI, FIRO-B and TKI assessments with TSM Corporation's Acquisition Leadership Challenge Program (ALCP)
- Deliver a two-part seminar to offer a comprehensive look at individual operation and practical tools to improve leadership
- Target employees new to supervision and leadership challenges
- Address the specific skills needed to lead larger organizations

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Phase 3 ties it all together with a look at how each individual, with a new-found self-awareness and armed with some new practical skills, can become more effective in the enterprise of the organization—in other words, become a leader of vision who is willing to reach beyond his or her comfort level and deliver innovative solutions. Phase 3 involves, among other things, taking and integrating the information gleaned from The Myers-Briggs Company assessments and creating personalized action plans that participants can easily and promptly implement.

“You’ve got to know yourself,” says Durante. “You’ve got to know where both your strengths and weaknesses are, and then surround yourself with people who can complement and supplement them.”

The three instruments at the core of the ALCP—the MBTI, FIRO-B, and TKI assessments—are designed to increase self-awareness by shedding light on personality, relationship, and conflict resolution orientation, respectively.

The first major step in the program is for each participant to take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator assessment, the world’s most widely used personality instrument. The assessment is based on Swiss psychologist Carl Jung’s “personality type” theory, which asserts that we are all born with a fundamental personality type that, while not controlling behavior, shapes and influences the way we understand the world, process information, and socialize.

While personality differences can cause discord, they can also be used to bridge gaps. The MBTI assessment identifies individuals’ personality preferences, helping people discover those inborn preferences and tendencies that exist at their core. This can provide a common language that gives a diverse group of people a framework for understanding themselves and one another.

Additionally, participants are given the FIRO-B assessment, which helps people understand how their need for inclusion, control, and affection can shape their interactions with others at work and in their personal life.

Results

- Helped employees and leaders acknowledge blind spots and integrate asking for help into strategic plans
- Helped individuals overcome bureaucratic hurdles and increase innovation in problem solving
- Increased insight into employee motivation, resulting in better ways to engage and compensate employees
- Employee survey gives average rating of 4.9 out of 5 of “value-added” training

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Finally, participants take the TKI assessment, which sheds light on the different ways that people handle conflict, and how the five “modes,” or styles—competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating—affect interpersonal and group dynamics, enabling participants to select the most appropriate style for a given situation. According to Hassan, this set of tools was selected because, taken together, they provide a full, compelling view of the individual that addresses the major facets of work and personal life.

Results

According to Durante, knowledge of personality type, as well as relationship preferences and conflict modes, has begun to permeate the organization. The ALCP has given Air Force Acquisition personnel a framework for universal communication and informed team building. Under Durante’s direction, the group seeks teams that are culturally diverse and multigenerational and that embrace a mix of personality types. Everyone recognizes that having diverse teams ensures diversity of thought, which often leads to innovation. Additionally, the assessment process has enabled the organization to overcome a hurdle common to bureaucratic settings—lack of accountability.

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The language of personality type established by the MBTI assessment provides a common basis of understanding that makes it easier for people to “cry out” when they needed help. Durante notes that the self-awareness gained through the MBTI, FIRO-B, and TKI assessments serves a preventative function, enabling managers to create action plans that take their blind spots into account. In essence, this has enabled them to anticipate their challenges and integrate the “help” into their plans from the start.

The assessments also give participants insight into their behaviors, enabling them to take an objective look at themselves. This perspective, says Durante, helps participants pursue the course of action that will produce the intended result. Additionally, the understanding of personality type has enabled the organization to implement a more targeted, intelligent method for applying rewards that takes

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into account what will truly motivate each employee, rather than assuming that the same things motivate everyone.

The ALCP has also addressed the substantial generational differences in the group's employee base, which comprises Traditionals, Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Gen Xers. Each generation, according to Durante, has its own set of challenges and notions about how things should operate.

The program helps the group address the multigenerational workforce, using personality type to bridge differences and address varying motivating factors associated with each group. Teams composed of different personality types help members from different generations meaningfully connect. This has freed up lines of intergenerational communication, opening a floodgate of ideas and facilitating innovation.

Response to the training has been overwhelmingly positive, with an unprecedented average rating of 4.9 on a 5-point scale for "value-added" from the more than 2,000 participants. Numerous participants reported that the revelations stemming from the training helped them identify and correct mistakes, particularly in dealing with coworkers.

For example, one employee confessed at the end of a session to having spent months figuring out how to fire an employee. Through the course of the training, however, he realized that he was misreading the person's behavior and that problems he thought were critical were actually nonexistent. Additionally, a lieutenant colonel said that the program made him a better officer, father, and husband. And one manager realized that she wasn't quite as strong in some areas as she had initially assumed, and now hires subordinates whose strengths complement her in areas where she is challenged.

A consistent theme coming from participants is the feeling that this was the first real feedback and understanding of themselves they had experienced in their career.

After three years of moving more than 2,000 employees through the program, Durante has observed significant improvement on an organization-wide basis in terms of efficiency and results. "We're starting to see evidence of an increase in organization-wide cohesiveness and productivity, and a lot less red flags. We're

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also seeing fewer complaints from managers that they lack manpower, which is noteworthy in light of the fact that they are actually working with smaller staffs.”

Durante also refers to a significant change in overall attitude marked by a “can-do” mentality. Results, he says, are particularly noticeable now that the younger generation of managers is beginning to assume leadership roles.

Durante and Hassan continue to refine and enhance the ALCP and plan on continuing the program indefinitely. For Air Force Acquisition, this is a long-term investment—one that Durante foresees will have a widely felt strategic impact within five to ten years. He also sees the program playing a tremendous role in upcoming changes.

“This organization is shortly going to have to deal with a new bureaucratic framework that will completely restructure management,” said Durante. “The ALCP and its core CPP assessments will continue to help us find new ways to overcome bureaucratic hurdles and get people to think and work in ways that improve the ability of the Air Force to defend our country.”



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