

AIR WAR COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

TRIPLE TRACK: A NEW PARADIGM FOR
DEVELOPING AIR FORCE OFFICERS

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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6 March 2017

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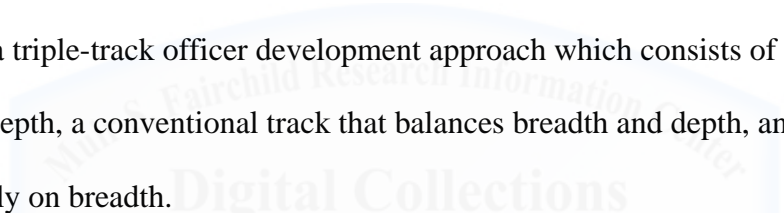


Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Tracy Hunter is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. She earned her commission in 1998 through the Reserve Officer Training Corps at the University of Illinois. Her diverse experience spans multiple career fields, including aircraft maintenance, command and control, engineering, modeling analysis, joint targeting, program management, manpower, and officer training. Over the course of her career, she was responsible for generating over 956 C-130 aircraft sorties, led interagency efforts, and coordinated 1,733 search and rescue missions. Additionally, she led a Joint Acquisition program and delivered 53 targeting packages of critical networks in support of combatant command operations. As the Commander of the 5th Manpower Requirements Squadron, she led development of 14 AF-wide standards, validating 46 thousand manpower billets. Prior to her current assignment, she commanded a training group at the AF Academy comprised of 10 squadrons consisting of 1,000 officer candidates.

Abstract

Officer development is critical to ensuring the United States Air Force will meet the growing demands of the future joint force. The current officer development structure is driven by the assignment process and promotion requirements. Although there are merits to the existing officer development structure, it lacks the development focus to adequately prepare the next generation of leaders to maintain AF mission alignment with the evolving needs of the COCOMs. The Air Force should consider alternative development approaches that focus on developing individuals with varied skills so they can come together as a holistic force. This paper describes a triple-track officer development approach which consists of a specialist track that focuses on depth, a conventional track that balances breadth and depth, and a universal track that focuses solely on breadth.



“Don’t begrudge the time you spend developing, coaching and helping your people to grow so they can carry on when you’re gone. It’s one of the best signs of good leadership.”

–Bernard Baruch¹

Introduction

Developing officers in the Air Force (AF) is becoming increasingly difficult, as the expectations of military leadership continue to evolve. In the future, the military will face a changing world order, with shifting threat environments that are characterized by contested norms and persistent disorder.² As a result, the AF will need to transform into a diverse, highly agile, and integrated component that can operate effectively across domains.³ More importantly, the AF needs to enable the best posture to stay aligned to the needs of the combatant commands (COCOMs). To meet the changing needs of the future joint force, the AF needs to proactively alter the development framework to foster officers with depth of experience as well as officers with breadth of experience to build balanced capabilities across the force. The framework proposed in this paper employs a triple-track approach which consists of a specialist track that focuses on depth, a conventional track that balances breadth and depth, and a universal track that focuses solely on breadth. Each track has a separate purpose that is complementary to the other tracks, and therefore needs to be coupled with distinct development approaches, promotion processes, and assignment requirements.

In August 2016, the readiness of the AF was questioned by the Government Accountability Office because the AF did not have a holistic mitigation plan to address capability gaps pertaining to the divestiture of the A-10 aircraft.⁴ This example is an indicator that the AF should evaluate whether its current “organize, train, and equip” structure is the most effective way to support the future joint force. Examining the AF capabilities through the

training lens, the next generation of AF officers need to be built with a solid foundation capable of resolving and communicating AF capabilities gaps in supporting COCOMs such as in the case of the A-10 aircraft divestiture, while at the same time lead the force through unpredictable and contested environments. They will require continuous development throughout their careers in order to possess the skills to effectively integrate capabilities across the joint force.⁵ The AF needs to alter the paradigm on how officers are developed by rebalancing the competing developmental requirements that currently constrain officer growth.

The primary challenge in developing officers is balancing breadth and depth of experience. Foremost, the AF increasingly needs officers who can think broadly and operate in the joint, coalition, and interagency environments across multiple domains. One of the top three priorities of the Chief of Staff of the AF (CSAF) is to change Airmen development and training to enable the AF to effectively lead in a joint capacity.⁶ The AF cannot afford to develop only a select few officers, but needs to establish a process to increase the development opportunities to a wider range of officers. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there is a conflicting priority for officers to maintain depth of experience. Over the years, the AF has traded depth for breadth, which has hindered the AF's ability to intensely focus on anticipating and averting capability gaps. The AF needs officers who are experts in their field, in order to advance their career field beyond the limits of the current operations. The AF requires an updated development structure that encourages a mixture of both breadth and depth, by establishing multiple developmental tracks, allowing officers to focus on breadth, depth, or a limited balance of both.

Background

Historical officer development evolution

Officer development evolved over time to meet the changing needs of the AF. In 1999, the voluntary assignment process was replaced with a select-and-assign system where officers were developed with a stove-piped approach within each career field.⁷ Then in 2002, the AF implemented a new development process that was intended to not only develop officers with occupational skill sets, but also to develop enduring competencies.⁸ These competencies were meant to be a common thread spanning all career fields. Figure 1 is a slide briefed at Corona in 2002 to differentiate occupational skills from enduring competencies.⁹



<i>Necessary Skills and Notional Enduring Competencies</i>	
<u>Sample Necessary Skills by Occupation</u>	<u>Notional Enduring Competencies</u>
<u>Fighter Pilot/WSO</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Airpower Employment•Space•Pol-Mil•Plans and Programs•Acquisition Management	<u>Personal Leadership</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Using Sound Judgment•Adapting•Inspiring Trust•Leading Courageously•Driving for Stakeholder Success
<u>Airlift Pilot/Navigator</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Airpower Employment•Financial Management•Plans and Programs•Acquisition Management	<u>Leading People/Teams</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Inspiring & Empowering•Influencing & Negotiating•Attracting, Developing & Retaining Talent•Fostering Teamwork & Collaboration•Building Relationships•Fostering Effective Communication
<u>Acquisition Management</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Contracting•Airpower Employment•Plans and Programs	<u>Leading the Institution</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Demonstrating Vision•Shaping Strategy•Aligning the Organization•Driving Transformation•Thinking/Working Across Boundaries•Driving Execution•Improving Processes•Systems Integration
<u>Space/Missile</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Airpower Employment•Plans and Programs•Acquisition Management	
<i>Integrity - Service - Excellence</i>	

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Figure 1. Corona briefing slide, 2002.¹⁰

As a result, career field development teams (DTs) were established to refocus efforts toward deliberately developing officers with these enduring competencies.¹¹ Although this construct opened the aperture to develop officers with broader skill sets, DTs have found

themselves trying to balance conflicting needs of the corporate AF, career field, and the individual officers, ultimately placing the development needs of the officers subordinate to the other requirements.¹² Additionally, career broadening has been equated to the development of core competencies. Although a broadening assignment can help foster the development of these competencies, there is no direct correlation.

Current officer development

The current officer development system is not broken, but it is also not structured to maximize the skills and capabilities of the officer corps to best support the joint force. The first obstacle in effective officer development is that all officers are developed through the lens of the individual career fields until they are selected for promotion to Colonel, when they become centrally managed by the Colonel Management Office. There is wide variation in how the different career fields manage their officers, with high levels of grooming in some career fields and little to none in others. Some DTs believe their goal is to fulfill the demands of the AF, while other DTs prioritize the desires of the career field first.¹³ The career fields are also generally still very stove piped, limiting integration across career fields. The CSAF recently emphasized the need to develop skills in operational art earlier in an Airman's career.¹⁴ The AF is currently considering multiple alternatives to provide an avenue to facilitate this changing focus.¹⁵ In the future, it will be critical to maintain the current DT structure to ensure career field stability. Additional advantages would be gained, however, if the AF established a complementary Combined Development Team (CDT) that would manage a small subset of officers who have demonstrated an ability to adapt quickly to new environments.

The second barrier to effective officer development is that the current High Performing Officer (HPO) model drives the development process for all officers, because it has become the

gold standard as the promotion path to general officer.¹⁶ As a result, all officers are conditioned to checking blocks to mirror the progression of HPOs in order to be competitive for promotion. This often results in officers moving through assignments too quickly, ultimately minimizing the value of true officer development.¹⁷ If HPOs are selected for their demonstrated ability to develop at a faster rate than their peers, it would be ineffective to have this same development plan for all officers.

A third inhibitor is that officer development is often an afterthought. Experiences and development opportunities are driven by rigid assignment cycles and promotion timelines. Officers are expected to develop on a specified timeline and are never truly assessed on their competency for the expected level of performance. DTs are conflicted by functional and corporate needs, so their focus is on taking care of a select few HPOs, while providing impersonalized vectors for remaining officers.¹⁸ Outside of HPOs, senior officers who happen to have a valuable depth of experience in their career field or who have a broad skill set spanning multiple career fields are not necessarily a product of a deliberate development process. Establishing a process to facilitate development can mitigate this concern.

The fourth obstacle is that commanders are not central to the process, even though they are in the best position to assess the officer's developmental needs. If a commander expresses that the officer needs more time to develop in a specific area, it could be detrimental to the officer's career, even if the commander believes the officer has great potential. This is likely a byproduct of the timeline for promotion driven by the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA), an amendment to title 10, US Code.¹⁹ If additional development paths were available, the commander would have a more significant role in providing development recommendations.

What the AF values

Officers will strive to achieve what the AF demonstrates it values through its promotion system.²⁰ Each career field progression path has a single pyramid with one goal at the top. HPOs become the standard model because they are typically promoted below the promotion zone (BPZ). It is rare for AF Generals not to be BPZ, which is inconsistent with the other services.²¹ The skill sets require to be a general officer and strategic thinker are different than the skills demonstrated at the operational level. Many times the AF gets the development process right, but other times the HPO fails because they weren't given the time needed to mature and there are no good off ramps for HPOs. There is a need to decouple BPZ as the primary discriminator for promotion to General Officer and reframe the system to allow "on-time" officers to be competitive through demonstrated capability.²² Providing Field Grade Officers (FGOs) an on-ramp to a faster and more in-depth development path would enable this to happen.

Retention

Retention is a key component to consider when evaluating developmental process changes. The AF has a long history of competing with the private sector for the talent of our workforce. Younger generations do not feel strongly committed to their employer, especially when there are viable job alternatives in other companies.²³ The issue, however, is not retention of personnel across the board. In fact, in 2014, the AF had to involuntarily separate 1,030 officers even after force shaping initiatives.²⁴ The actual problem lies in retaining the best qualified officers as well as officers who serve in the critically manned career fields.²⁵ The AF invests significant time and money to train pilots only to later force them to broaden, driving many to separate, which causes shortages.²⁶ Meanwhile, the AF will stove pipe other officers

with significant leadership experience at a much lower training cost and avoid placing them in significant senior leadership roles because they lack breadth of experience. As a business model, this is not a good investment strategy.

Many officers also desire to have more flexibility in the system. In January 2017, a student at Squadron Officers School (SOS) conducted an informal poll about issues the AF should address. Fourteen of the nineteen responders expressed the desire for a dual track system. One officer had previously brought up this issue at SOS and “all the instructors rolled their eyes...they hated it...no instructor was open to hearing about it.”²⁷ Although this is a small sample set, it is a recent indicator of desires that have been expressed for years. A recent study by an Air War College student recommended the AF allow for more individual input, strengthen the commander’s role, and promote to capabilities in order to retain the best talent.²⁸

Basis for change

The concept of a multiple track system is not new. Kane argued that the military lost the ability to focus because officers who specialize are penalized compared to their peers.²⁹ The end result is that the military trades off depth for breadth, weakening the expertise of our force. Vandergriff and Wilson also challenge the flawed assumption that all officers should have broad experiences.³⁰ A very few percentage of officers will ever become a general, yet we train everyone as if they should strive to attain that goal. Although many have studied this issue and agree that a one-size fits all model is not the most effective system to meet future needs, there is little agreement on how to solve the issue.³¹ One study recommended keeping the DOPMA “up or out” policy, but recommended extending the “30-years-of-service” cap to take full advantage of the personnel investments.³² Others believe that the “up or out” system is a waste of great talent and should be replaced with “perform or out”.³³ Another study by RAND corporation

developed four separate demonstration projects as alternatives to the “up or out” system, but Congress never approved the test cases.³⁴ In 2009, a human capital model was proposed for the Army, emphasizing the need to distribute talent by developing generalist, specialists, and those who fell between the two.³⁵ This model provided a conceptual basis for the framework proposed in this paper.

The value of technical competencies vary across career fields, as evidence by the prerequisites to be a commander. For instance, in order to apply to be a squadron commander in aircraft maintenance, the non-core officer needs to have currency within the 5 years prior.³⁶ Aircraft maintenance values depth of experience to ensure their officers can lead large amounts of personnel and to ensure the safety of aircraft, but that limits their officers the ability to broaden and utilize those leadership skills in a larger capacity. In January 2017, an AF General was asked whether a maintenance officer would be a good fit to serve as the TRANSCOM/CC. He responded that logistics experts were not well suited to lead a COCOM. His opinion was that the AF does not currently facilitate a way to provide logistics officers with the breadth they need to lead a COCOM, but if the AF did, logistics officers could be viable candidates.³⁷

Proposed Triple Track Development Process

When developing potential alternatives to officer development, it is absolutely critical to prioritize mission accomplishment above all else. Retention tools that degrade mission readiness and performance should not be employed. The AF is in need of an officer development process that provides a structured approach in leveraging and developing the talents of individual officers to be part of a collective leadership team. The triple-track approach requires a change in mindset, because it is designed to develop officers with distinct goals and should not be used as a discriminator for promotion.

Triple-track overview

The purpose of the proposed construct is to balance depth and breadth of experience across the AF officer corps, while providing enough predictability in the system to plan for both corporate and career field needs of the future. It also provides additional incentives to retain the best officers. The concept is to establish three separate development tracks within each career field: Specialist, Conventional, and Universal. The purpose of the specialist track is to establish career field stability and groom officers to advance their career field in innovative ways. The goal of the conventional track is to develop a wide range of officers balanced with career field depth and breadth. The universal track's objective is to deliberately develop a limited set of officers in a wide range of skill sets in order to drive better integration across career fields, interagency, and joint in multiple domains. Figure 2 is a notional comparison of the relative ratio of depth and breadth developmental goals for officers across the three tracks.



Figure 2. Notional comparison of knowledge and experience goals for each track.

Each track would have established guidelines to encourage consistency, but should have enough flexibility to consider individual preferences and commander inputs, within the confines of mission needs.

The triple track model should have a core set of standards, but it needs to have flexible on and off ramps, allowing officers to transition across tracks without penalty. The conventional track would be the default development track for officers, while the specialist and universal tracks should be voluntary. Leadership skills and enduring competencies should be developed in all officers regardless of career field or track. Squadron command and promotion opportunities need to exist along all three tracks. Ultimately, the final process needs to be simple and executable.³⁸ The proposal below is a framework for the overall concept, intended to serve as a starting point for further discussions about factors not considered in this paper. A summary chart is included the appendix.

Track #1 - Specialist

The purpose of the specialist track is to develop a core set of officers in each career field that maintain career field proficiency in order to create competent functional senior leaders. The goal is to provide the AF stability and growth within each field. Officers in this track should be deliberately developed in order to gain in-depth career field knowledge and experience to advance the field across all operating domains. Each career field DT would establish the number of specialists needed for each grade. Prior to completing the initial assignment (not including training), the officer would indicate on their ADP their desire to move to the specialist track. The commander would assess the officer's potential to become a career field specialist and would make recommendations for track transition and assignment on the officer's ADP. The commander would also provide a prioritization based on the number of candidates in that career field. Career field DTs would make the final selection. Specialists should be given priority for career-field specific positions and job placements would be very deliberate to facilitate growth in their field. Specialists would still be expected to meet all of the military requirements of the

positions they are assigned to include deployments, temporary duties, and physical fitness tests. The specialist track is ideally suited for lateral entries.

The specialist promotion process would need to be carefully thought out before implementation. If “promote to position” or the web-based talent management program is implemented, the officer will have to compete for vacancies, including cross-track transitions.³⁹ In this case, each career field would need to establish and manage the number of specialists positions at each rank. Although feasible, the process would be much more complex to manage.

Ideally, this track would utilize optional promotions, but if Congress does not provide relief from the DOPMA “up or out” system, promotion boards could be restructured to better accommodate the different focuses of each track. Specialist track promotion allocations would need to be established for each career field, allowing specialists to compete against other specialists in their career field first. If they do not make the cut line, their records could then compete against the officers in the conventional track. This is similar to the Management Level Review Board process for Definitely Promote allocations, where aggregate records are scored first before competing in the carry over round. It is important to note that officers in the specialist track will have more depth and less breadth than their peers in the conventional track. Comparing records across tracks for promotion to Major should not have considerable differences, but promotion to Lieutenant Colonel would likely have a much further divide, potentially putting specialists at a disadvantage, if the specialist “allocation” rates are low.

Track #2 – Conventional

The purpose of the conventional track is to provide a backbone core of officers who are functionally competent, yet versatile in roles across the force. It would be the default track for officers (except lateral entry) and would closely mirror the current process for officer

development with increased flexibility and broadening opportunities. The development would be driven through a balanced combination of officer input, commander recommendations, and DT reviews. In order to provide officers in this track more development opportunities, it would be advantageous for the DTs to provide more detailed development recommendations and for supervisors to provide more career feedback to the individual.⁴⁰

To improve the retention and motivation for officers in this track, the AF should consider additional human resource initiatives to encourage growth and retention. Kane describes a story of an AF Academy graduate who was at the top of his class in aeronautical engineering, who was later denied the opportunity for an engineering job because he was too critical in his career field. The member ultimately left the service.⁴¹ Critical manning shortages cannot be ignored, but more flexible options could be provided to members without degrading the mission. For example, two officers of equal rank in the same career field should be afforded the opportunity to swap their assignments. Also, the AF should encourage more broadening opportunities that result in a Permanent Change of Assignment instead of a Permanent Change of Station. This would not only give the officer a broader experience which falls in line with CSAF's goals, but it would also provide more stability for the officer, potentially increasing retention, with an added cost savings to the AF. Finally, when an officer submits separation paperwork, they should be provided an opportunity to be considered for crossflow retraining into critically manned career fields as well as Guard and Reserve Total Force opportunities.

Track #3 - Universal

The purpose of the universal track is to deliberately develop officers with a wide range of skill sets with the goal of driving innovation across career fields, governmental agencies, joint services, and coalitions. In order to effectively develop the officers in the universal track, the AF

should establish a CDT that has representation across a variety of career fields with significant COCOM experience. Officers can transfer to this track once they have demonstrated the potential to adapt quickly to new learning environments and the ability to strategically interconnect concepts. The commander can nominate the individual, with the officer's concurrence, through the ADP. Each career field DT will prioritize their nominees for consideration by the CDT. The CDT will approve transfer to the universal track and manage the officer's development by intentionally directing officers into positions that are beyond their comfort zone, in order to drive continuous and rapid growth.

The critical component to this track is the ability to off ramp without penalty for three main reasons. First, the fast pace development can potentially cause the officer to burn out. Second, some officers perform exceptionally well as a CGO, but then perform average as a FGO, indicating the officer may be more suited for tactical and operational roles rather than strategic positions. Mechanisms need to be in place to ensure the officer continues to progress, without falling behind. Third, a member may decide they do not want to be on the universal track for personal reasons. By allowing the officer to voluntarily transition to the conventional track without prejudice, the officer can slow down their development path, regenerate, or find a better work/life balance. Otherwise, the member may separate and it may deter other officers from volunteering for the universal track.

Additional considerations

The triple track approach offers a number of benefits to the AF. It provides more development options for dual military families which could increase the likelihood of retention of both members. An advantage to this approach is that it does not require a major change to the existing system and processes. It maintains a core development process that officers can

understand because of its similarity to the existing system. It also has the flexibility to increase or decrease the track sizes by career field as needed during changes in force size. Figure 3 provides a notional breakdown of track allocation by career field.

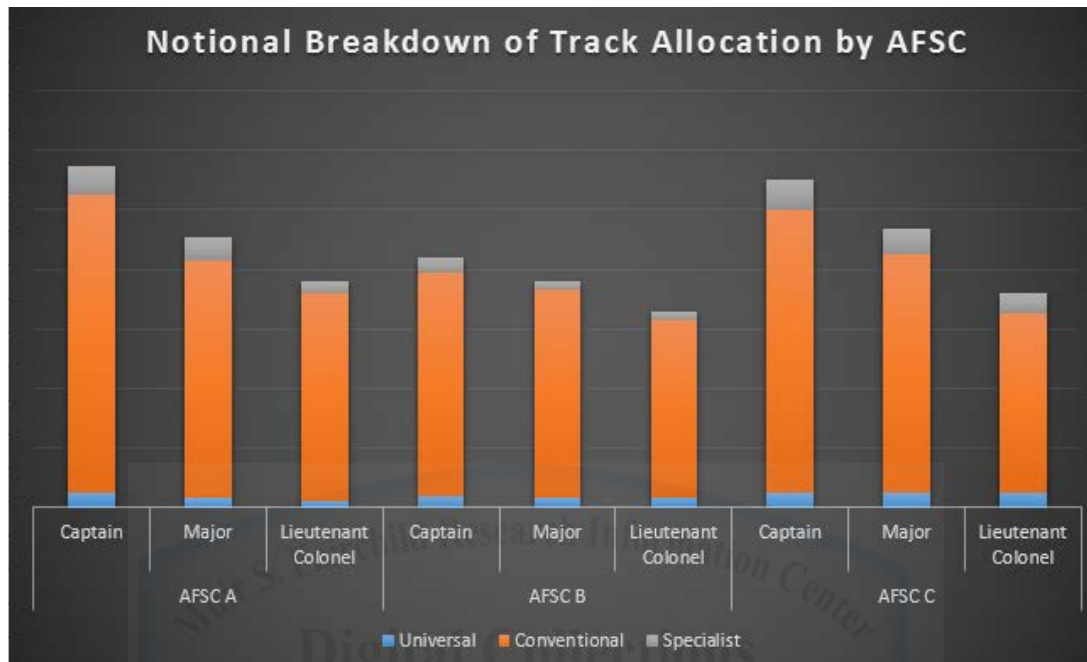


Figure 3. Notional breakdown of track allocation by career field.

Since the AF is projected to increase to 350,000 personnel over the next few years, now would be an ideal time to explore this alternative approach.⁴² Most importantly, the triple track system would provide the intangible benefit of transparency and expectation. Many officers would be willing to limit their opportunity for promotion to general officer, if they are given the opportunity to stay focused in a career in which they have been well trained and enjoy. Also, transparency of the universal track would provide officers the ability to weigh the costs and benefits of the rigorous demands of that development track. Currently, a lot of officers distrust the HPO model because it is an unstandardized process, which is typically driven by BPZ selection. Allowing on-ramps to the universal track at the FGO-level would aid in determining our best performing FGOs.

As the military faces asymmetric threats and the rising cost of technology, leaders will need to be more innovative in order to drive creative solutions. Marrapodi explained that in order to develop creativity, there needs to be a solid foundation of knowledge in the domain that needs innovation, a knowledge of other domains, and techniques that can enhance/inhibit creativity.⁴³ Applying this theory across the senior officers in the AF, there is a need to have officers with in-depth knowledge of their individual career field collaborate with officers who have a breadth of experience to develop creative solutions for the future. The triple-track model provides the structure to allow this collaboration.

Any change to the officer development process will have second and third order effects to other processes and programs. The triple track proposal should be critically evaluated through the lens of promotions, assignments, culture, retention, and recruiting before implementation.⁴⁴ Also, it would be advantageous to test the process out against a select population to understand the issues associated with the program.⁴⁵

Issues and Concerns

Why do we need technical officers?

Many military members believe that officers do not need to be technical because they think that function is the role of the enlisted force and civilians. As a counterargument, the specialist track is not intended to make the officer a technical expert. It is a development approach that provides the officer the opportunity to develop their leadership skills within the focus of a single career field, in order for the officer to understand the pitfalls and shortcomings unique to that field. As the AF shifted toward the interchangeable senior leadership model, it lost the ability to view the bigger picture through the lens of the individual career fields.⁴⁶ Driving meaningful changes in a mission set requires both competency and authority.

Deliberately developing a specialist in a field to lead at the functional level can have huge impacts to the mission. The intent is not to promote all officers who are developed through the technical track; the intent is to promote the best officers within that track. The most effective AF model combines the individual capabilities to come together as a holistic force, rather than combining a bunch of a holistic officers.

Do we have the manpower to support three development tracks?

Some personnel hesitate to adjust the current system to accommodate additional tracks because of manpower concerns. An informal analysis conducted by the Force Support assignment team at the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC) determined it would not be feasible to maintain a “technical” track of non-commanding officers based on the number of squadron commanders required for the Force Support career field.⁴⁷ This would be true in a number of career fields such as Aircraft Maintenance, Security Forces, and Contracting where all officers are expected to command and often command multiple times. The intent of the triple-track model is to develop all officers, including those in the specialist track, to be competitive for squadron command. The development process needs to be structured so that leadership, promotion, and progression are not just encouraged, but expected. In order to make the triple-track process work, it is imperative that these officers remain command eligible. For rated personnel, an additional layer of complexity would impact the ability to effectively implement the system. Specific considerations include the number of pilot coded positions, gates requirements, and pilot shortages. A significant advantage of the triple-track system is the flexibility to adjust numbers from year to year without completely abandoning the program.

Recommendations

In order for the AF to grow a more proficient and capable officer corps, it needs to align its processes to cultivate what it values. The current development system is driven by promotions and assignments, but the future should focus on maximizing the potential of the officers. The triple-track approach to developing officers is designed to capitalize on the strengths that each individual brings to the force. A CDT should be established to guide the development of the officers on the universal track. This team should be comprised of senior officers that not only represent a cross section of career fields, but more importantly, that possess joint force and COCOM operational experience. A thorough review of the triple-track proposal should be conducted to evaluate the problems and issues associated with implementation. After adjustments to the system have been made, the process should be employed on a smaller scale for a trail period.

Officer evaluations and promotions would also need to be reviewed and adjusted in order to reflect the new developmental goals. If the concept of tiered stratifications is used, the author recommends evaluation in three separate areas that would complement the development track: career field competency, leadership, and breadth of experience.⁴⁸ Officers in the specialist track should be expected to perform well in the areas of career field competency and leadership. Officers in the universal track should excel in the areas of breadth of experience and leadership. The conventional track officers should have balanced skill sets in all three areas.

In line with the CSAF's vision that the squadron commanders needs to be the "supported" commanders, AFPC assignment teams should be reaching out to the commanders to discuss viable options and recommendations for the officers assigned to their command. As a result, the commanders can better assess the officers in their command and submit useful

recommendations for their development. In the current system, the commander has to reach out to the assignment teams, often with varied results. If the AF values officer development, it needs to make this a priority and provide the commanders with the tools they need to understand the development options. Finally, the greatest challenge to implementing any new officer development process is having the ability to change the cultural mindset. Commanders need to be engaged early in the process in order to effectively enable the new process to take hold, leading culture change in the AF.

Conclusion

The current AF officer development system has its merits, but it lacks the development focus to adequately prepare the next generation of leaders to maintain AF mission alignment with the evolving needs of the COCOMs. The AF needs to deliberately develop officers to be innovative and that can lead the force through future challenges. The AF needs an officer corps that is balanced with the right amount of breadth and depth of experience and it cannot afford to sacrifice one for the other. A triple-track approach will allow the AF to select its best officers to lead each career field into a new dimension while at the same time developing officers who can integrating elements across multiple domains. This new paradigm will encourage a focus on officer development instead of officer promotion which should encourage retention of the AF's highest qualified officers.

Appendix

Summary of Triple Track Proposal

TRACK	AF GOAL	EARLIEST ENTRY POINT	LATEST ENTRY	"OPT IN" PROCESS	PROMOTION	ASSIGNMENTS	Eligibility for Crossflow	COMAND OPPORTUNITIES	BROADENING OPPORTUNITIES	"OFF RAMP" PROCESS	DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING FOCUS	RETENTION
Specialist (DEPTH)	Develop a limited set of career field specialists in order to advance the career field across multiple domains	After initial assignment	Yes	Voluntary. Officer requests the Specialist track. Commander concur/consent and prioritizes all candidates by career field. Career field DT will make final selection. If promote to position is used, the officer will have to compete for vacancies. Each career field will establish the number of specialists required at each rank.	Complete only against other specialists officers in career field. Promotion Consideration is Optional. In a "promote to position" system, it is based on "Specialist" position vacancies	Officers in this track are given priority for career-field specific positions. Job placement dependent upon individual development needs. If Web-Based Talent Management System is used, positions are coded as "Specialist" requirements for each career field.	No	Yes, primarily in functional career field	Plans, but must be tied specifically to enhancing career field knowledge - Encourage broadening with service enlarges and industry	Officers in the specialist track requests to "cross-track" back to Conventional track. Commander concur/consent. DT will approve/reject. Commanders may, at any time, recommend the officer be moved back to the Conventional track if the officer is not gaining the depth required to become a functional expert, but is still a competitive officer.	Career Field Specific & Leadership Training (Career Field Specific DT will oversee development)	Provides increased stability in officer career progression, allows officer to focus on being an expert in their field
Conventional (Balanced DEPTH & BREADTH)	Develop a wide range of officers balanced with career field depth and broadening	Commissioning	No	Default development track. Officers in the Specialist or Universal track can request to "cross-track" back into the Conventional track without penalty.	Traditional Promotion Board	Predictable intervals (3-4 years). provide more flexibility to accommodate personal requests (one-for-one swaps in current grade & career field); allow members to sacrifice upward momentum for stability as long as they are performing at their current grade; (example: broaden in a second career field to facilitate a PCS)	Yes, if criteria in AFI 38-2026 are met	Yes	Yes, driven by individual desires, commander inputs and AF needs	N/A	Career Field Specific, Leadership and Broadening (Career Field DTs will oversee)	Most versatile track - officers can easily transition to Specialist track or Universal track
Universal (BREADTH)	Deliberately develop officers with a wide range of skill sets GOAL: drive integration across career fields, multiple learning intergenerates, cross-domain, joint	After demonstrating the potential to quickly adapt to multiple learning environments.	No	Voluntary. Officers can request the Universal track. Commander will nominate and Senior Rater will nominate all candidates across all career fields. Combined DT will approve/reject.	Traditional Promotion Board	Tailored to the individual to grow and evaluate performance. PCSs encouraged	Yes, if eligible in AFI 38-2026 are met	Yes, in multiple career fields, based on experience	Highly desirable across multiple career fields. joint, interagency (driven by Combined DT recommendations)	Officers may request to return to the Conventional track without penalty . Commander may, at any time, recommend the officer be moved back to the Conventional track in order to allow the officer more time to develop, as needed.	Broadening Leadership (Combined DT will oversee development)	This track is focused on providing a wide range of opportunities to sharpen the skill sets of the officers who are quick to learn and adapt to new environments. Universal track officers MUST be given an off-ramp without prejudice to encourage retention.

Notes

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