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Lorenz on Leadership

Part 3

Gen Stephen R. Lorenz, USAF



In 1987 I first wrote out my thoughts on leadership. The compilation included 13 principles that Air University published in the summer of 2005 as part 1 of what became the Lorenz on Leadership series.¹ Later, in the spring of 2008, Air University published part 2, which included an additional eight leadership principles.² Over the last few years, various experiences have highlighted yet another group that I present for your consideration.

When I first wrote down these principles, I certainly didn't intend to prescribe an approved way to think or lead. After all, none of these tenets is unique. I took them from other leaders who influenced me through

the years, hoping that readers would develop their own set of principles.

This Is a Family Business

Families are important—this goes without saying. When I say that this is a “family business,” realize that the term *family* encompasses more than just your immediate loved ones. In this case, it also includes our extended Air Force family. I can't tell you the countless times I've heard people thank their “brothers and sisters in the Air Force family.” Sometimes they do so at promotion or retirement ceremonies, but I've also

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heard the phrase at going-away parties and in daily conversations.

When we take time to reflect, we recognize that the bond we share with others in the Air Force is stronger than that for most coworkers in the business world. This is especially true when we factor in the ties we create after remote tours, overseas assignments, and long combat deployments. You see, the term *brothers and sisters in arms* is no accident. As we live, train, sweat, and bleed together, these bonds grow so strong that the only language we have to describe our feelings for each other is the language of family—the Air Force family.

Building a strong Air Force family means that all of us share a commitment to our fellow Airmen and treat them in ways that reflect our commitment. We should all live in a way that maximizes our ability to touch the lives of others. This means that we should have a healthy focus on others, not on ourselves. As motivational speaker Ken Blanchard once said, “Humility does not mean you think less of yourself. It means you think of yourself less.”³

Now, I would most certainly be remiss if I didn’t specifically mention our spouses. These are the men and women who keep us strong and help us through the tears—they are the foundation that enables each of us to serve in the world’s greatest air force. Our lives need balance, and our spouses help provide that stability. I like to use the analogy that such balance is similar to the spokes of a bicycle wheel. You see, a bicycle needs balanced spokes in order to provide a smooth ride. Our lives are no different. I think of the spokes as the different priorities in our lives. If one of the spokes—like the relationship with your spouse, the needs of your children, or your responsibilities at work—gets slighted, the wheel no longer rolls the way it should. It might even stop rolling altogether.

We must balance the spokes in our lives very deliberately and carefully. When we are balancing shortfalls and managing a limited amount of time, money, and manpower, our spouses are often shortchanged.

We can’t afford to let that happen—we must always make time to tell our spouses how much we appreciate them. It takes only a minute to let them know how much we care. Maintaining the friendship, trust, and energy in a relationship is a full-time job. It’s up to you to make it a fun job—for both you and your spouse.

Successful Teams Are Built on Trust

Although the Air Force family helps support and steer us through our service, trust is the foundation of our existence. This trust is a two-way street—both within our service and with the American public. When an Airman from security forces tells me that the base is secure, I know without a doubt that all is safe. Before flying, I always review the forms documenting maintenance actions on that aircraft. The aircraft maintainer’s signature at the bottom of the forms is all I need to see to have complete confidence in the safety of that airplane. I liken it to the cell phone commercial many of you have probably seen. Although there may be a single man or woman in front, he or she speaks with the voice of thousands standing behind. A successful team is one that works together, enabled and empowered by trust.

On our Air Force team, everyone’s ability to perform his or her function is what builds trust and makes the machine run so smoothly. Ultimately, we all share the same goal—the defense of our nation and its ideals. That’s the common denominator, regardless of rank, where trust and mutual respect are paramount. At every base, in every shop and office, Air Force leadership (officer, enlisted, and civilian) consistently sets the example. We are all role models and always on the job. Our Airmen live up to these expectations every day.

The trust that we share with the American public is a different story. It is constantly under scrutiny—and for good reason. Members of the American public



“trust” us with their sons and daughters—and billions of dollars of their hard-earned money. That trust is built upon a foundation of accountability. To be accountable is to be subject to the consequences of our choices. Whether we choose to do the right thing—to act with integrity, service, and excellence—or not, we have to be prepared to accept the consequences.

We are accountable for the choices we make in our personal lives. The vast majority of choices that get people in trouble involve alcohol, sex, drugs, and/or money. Each year, some of us make wrong choices in these areas and are held accountable. If you know Airmen who are headed down a wrong path, help them before they make a bad choice.

We are also accountable for the choices we make as military professionals. We must adhere to the standards we learned from our first days in uniform. When Airmen cut corners by failing to follow tech order guidance or by violating a flying directive, we must hold them accountable. We must police each other because if we don't, small lapses will lead to bigger ones, and the entire Air Force family will eventually suffer. Overlooking a lapse is the same as condoning it.

When you assume responsibility for others as a supervisor or commander, it is important to realize that you've taken a big leap in accountability. Simply put, you are accountable for the choices your people make. That is why you must lead by example. Your people need to see that you set high standards and live according to those standards. You must also enforce standards within your unit. You should correct deficiencies at the lowest level before they grow into something bigger. Remember this: units with high standards have high morale. It's been that way throughout military history.

Feedback Fuels Change

Trust and accountability rely on feedback. We all have blind spots—areas where we think things are better than they are. To correct these, we need to be aware of them.

This means that we need to encourage dissenting opinions and negative feedback. We should ask open-ended questions. What are we missing? How can we do this better? What's the downside? What will other people say?

When our people answer, we must welcome their inputs, even when those inputs don't cast our leadership in the best light. In the end, our time as leaders will be judged by the quality of our decisions and the accomplishments of our people. The personal price we pay in the short term for creating candor in our organizations is well worth the long-term professional and institutional benefits of hearing the best ideas and eradicating our blind spots.

In order to encourage our people to voice their alternative ideas and criticisms, we have to be confident enough in our people to listen to negative feedback and dissenting opinions, find the best way forward, and then lead in a positive direction. We all like the “warm fuzzies” we get when people agree with our ideas and give us positive feedback. We naturally dislike the “cold pricklies” that come when people disagree with us and point out our shortcomings. As leaders, we have to be mature enough to deal with criticism without punishing the source—the best leaders encourage frank feedback, especially when it is negative.

As followers, we must work at creating candor as well. The leader must set the tone for open communication, but it is important that those of us who voice dissenting opinions or give negative feedback do so in a way that will have the most effect. We can't expect our leaders to be superhuman—this means we should speak in a way that doesn't turn them off immediately.

We should also remember that the leader is ultimately responsible for the direction of the organization. If he or she decides to do something that you disagree with, voice your opinion—but be ready to accept the leader's decision. As long as the boss's decision isn't illegal or immoral, you should carry it out as though the idea were your own. That's the mark of a professional Airman.

All Visions Require Resourcing

As leaders, we must be prepared to face many kinds of potential challenges, both anticipated and unexpected. While working on the challenge, as a leader, you will be faced with balancing a limited amount of time, money, and manpower. In order to allocate these critical resources optimally, leaders must develop visions for their organizations.

To realize a vision, several things need to happen. First, you must align the vision with one of our core service functions. The closer to the core, the easier it will be to gain support and, eventually, resourcing. Next, take the vision and develop a strategy. Depending on your vision, the strategy may involve acquisition, implementation, execution, modification, or one of many other elements. Let your strategy start at the 40 percent solution, but then let it evolve to 80 percent and eventually to 98 percent. Realize that the process is continual and that you will never get to 100 percent.

With the strategy in place, you can start socializing the vision. Socialization will also help your vision progress and grow roots through increased organizational support and understanding. The support will help you champion the concept for resourcing. After all, your vision must have resourcing in order to come true. Those resources will go to winners, not to losers, so invest the time and energy to be a winner.

In life, and especially in the Air Force, priorities and personnel are always changing. Over time, your vision will need to adapt to the realities of change. It will require even greater persistence and objectivity. Giving your vision roots and aligning it with core functions will create something that can be handed off and sustained through change. The best ideas, sustained by hard work, can be carried forward by any leader.

You may also find yourself joining an organization and accepting other people's vision. In this situation, evaluate their vision against current realities and resourcing pri-

orities. If they've done their homework, the project will be easy to move forward. If they haven't, assess the vision to determine if it should move ahead or if its time has passed.

Objective Leaders Are Effective Leaders

In essence, a leader develops a vision to help guide decision making. Most decisions are made without much thought—almost instinctively, based on years of experience. Some, however, involve time and thought, and they can affect other people. The process of making these decisions is an art—it defines who we are as leaders.

Saying this isn't a stretch. As leaders, we do things in order to create a desired effect. Making the “best” decision hits at the core of creating that effect; in turn, it is an essential aspect of being an effective leader. Now, these aren't decisions that involve “right versus wrong”—or lying, cheating, or stealing—we must never compromise our integrity. In fact, most of these decisions involve “right versus right,” and the decision may be different today than it was yesterday. This is what can make them so challenging. Let's take a moment to look at the elements involved in making the “best” decision.

First and foremost, effective decisions require objectivity. The old adage “the more objective you are, the more effective you are” has never been more accurate or applicable than it is today. It can be tempting to view decisions as if you're looking through a small straw. Effective leaders must step back and gain a much broader view; they must open their aperture. I've always advocated looking at issues and decisions from the viewpoint of your boss's boss. This approach helps to open the aperture and maintain objectivity.

In order to gain the broad, objective view, leaders must work to gather a complete picture of the situation. Some call this situational awareness; others call it a 360-degree view of the issue. In either



case, that awareness involves considering all of the variables that weigh into the decision, the competing interests involved in the decision, and the potential consequences of the decision. The potential consequences must include possible second- and third-order consequences. Tough calls like these can involve individuals, organizations, and issues beyond those we might initially consider. Weigh the consequences against unit missions and organizational goals. Investigate how the decision will move things forward in the near, mid, and long term. This will provide the context for the decision and, although it involves a lot of work, will result in the broadest view of the entire process.

Lastly, tough decisions can be very emotional. Don't let emotion play into the decision-making process. Emotion serves only to cloud the issue; it can potentially result in a decision that produces near-term happiness but fades quickly into mid- and long-term unintended challenges. Leaders must look at decisions from the outside, unattached to the emotional influence from within. They must rise above such distractions in order to maintain their objectivity and keep their organizations headed in the "best" direction.

Train Wrecks—How Can We Prepare for an Impending Crisis?

Unfortunately, it is the unanticipated crisis that often derails organizations headed in a good direction. I like to call those unanticipated challenges "train whistles in the distance." In reality, it's pretty easy to know when trains are coming down the tracks. They are big, make lots of noise, and are typically accompanied by warning lights and bells. Trains usually run on a schedule, making it even easier to know when to step to the side or hop on board.

We rarely get the same notification from an impending crisis in the workplace. More often, it appears, seemingly from out of thin air, and immediately consumes more

time than we have to give. Through frustrated, tired eyes we wonder where the crisis came from in the first place. Even though we vow never to let it happen again, deep down we know that it's only a matter of time before the next one hits our organization by surprise.

Such an outlook helped create an entire school of thought called "crisis management." We have crisis action teams and emergency response checklists—we even build entire plans describing how to deal effectively with the train that we never saw coming. These effects can be hard to absorb and typically leave "casualties" behind. Wouldn't it be better to prepare for specific contingencies and not rely on generic crisis-response checklists? Wouldn't it be better for the organization if a leader knew about the train long before it arrived?

So, how does a leader get the schedule for inbound trains? In many cases, just getting out of the office and talking to members of an organization can help a leader identify potential issues and areas of risk. By the same token, if you are a member of an organization and know of an upcoming challenge, it is your responsibility to research and report it.

Candor and objectivity alone will probably help catch 90 percent of the issues before they affect an organization. In order to reach 100 percent, a leader must work hard to avoid complacency. When things get "quiet" within an organization, it doesn't necessarily mean that everything is being handled successfully. In fact, the hair on the back of every leader's neck should start to stand up when things get quiet. After all, it probably means that the leader isn't involved enough in the daily operation of the unit and that the first two elements, candor and objectivity, are being overlooked. This is the time to be even more aggressive about candor, information flow, and objectivity.

Leaders who work hard to enable candor, remain objective, and discourage complacency have a unique opportunity to steer their organizations in the best direction

when challenges or crises loom. As they identify the inbound trains, leaders can decide whether to maneuver clear or hop on board. You see, each inbound train is an opportunity. It is a chance to fight for new resources—money and/or manpower—and to unify the team toward a common objective. Leaders should anticipate inbound trains as a means of improving their organizations.

So then, what is the best way for a leader to guide people through change? There are certainly many methods to do so, and each one depends on the type of change expected. In all cases, however, the principles that underlie the preparation for change are the same. Preparation builds confidence, helps a leader's organization be less fearful of approaching uncertainty, and ensures

ture levels of responsibility, it can be difficult to catch up on education adequately. Never pass up the opportunity to further your education.

Whereas education helps us prepare for uncertainty, training programs are designed to prepare for certainty. After all, it's those things we expect that fill our syllabi and lesson books. We train for them over and over until recognizing and reacting to them become second nature. This is one reason that we use checklists so much in the Air Force. They help lead us accurately through challenging times.

Through experience, our collective list of "certainty" grows. It shapes the evolution of our training programs. You see, when we react to a challenge, we create a certain re-

Preparation builds confidence, helps a leader's organization be less fearful of approaching uncertainty, and ensures that the organization is much more effective once change arrives.

that the organization is much more effective once change arrives.

This is where education and training come into play. We educate in order to prepare for uncertainty. Education helps us understand why the change is necessary. It also helps us objectively assess the environment and rationale necessitating the change. With objectivity, we can unemotionally assess the benefits and drawbacks of the different potential courses of action. Education is a never-ending self-improvement process. The different levels occur at specific spots in our careers—opening doors and creating opportunities. Because the Air Force lines up education programs with fu-

sult. Positive results reinforce the action—and make us more confident. Although the favorable result "trains" us to use the same response next time, it typically doesn't teach us to handle anything other than exactly the same challenge. When we make mistakes or experience poor results, we truly have an opportunity to learn. Even though it may not be as much fun to investigate our failures, we are more apt to assess the challenge critically and develop other, more successful, potential courses of action.

As a leader, you must ensure that your people have the education necessary to prepare for uncertainty and the training to guide them through certainty. As an indi-



vidual, you must aggressively pursue these opportunities to further develop yourself as well. Such preparation will instill the confidence necessary to embrace change.

In the End, People Are Still People

Although leadership will always be about the people we lead, technology has changed the way we do our jobs. Beyond the most noticeable and tangible aspects, like e-mail, PowerPoint, and cell phones, technology has transformed the workplace in three main areas: collaboration, automation, and personal accessibility. Collaboration includes our ability to network, collect, and share information. Getting the right information to the right people when they need it isn't always as easy as it sounds. After all, accurate information is a key element in making objective decisions, and objectivity is what keeps our organizations headed in the best direction. Today's challenge, however, is managing the sheer volume of available information. Technological advancements will only make this challenge greater in years to come.

By automation, I'm talking about technology's impact on the tasks we do each and every day. Historically, automation has been one of the enablers for doing "more with less." Our most expensive asset is our people. Technology gives us the ability to leverage certain efficiencies by replacing manpower with technology. Maintaining the balance of technology and manpower will only continue to be a daily leadership challenge.

Lastly, accessibility applies to our ability to contact anyone, anywhere, anytime through voice and data communication. There are two key aspects of accessibility: how leaders make themselves available to others and how you, as a leader, take advantage of the availability of others. It is important that commanders, while making themselves available at all hours of the day, don't foster an environment in which subordi-

nates are afraid to get decisions from anywhere but the top. At the same time, leaders must guard against exploiting the availability of others, especially subordinates. Such exploitation will reinforce an impression that decisions can come only from the top.

Accessibility has also changed how we make ourselves available to others. Many commanders like to say that they have an "open door policy." Don't fool yourself into thinking that issues will always walk through the open door. Leaders still need to escape the electronic accessibility, namely e-mail, and seek human interaction. New Airmen in the squadron aren't going to raise a concern by walking into a commander's office, but they might if the commander is able to interact in their work environment. Leading by walking around will always be a principle of good leadership.

Each of us has reacted differently to the impact that technology has had on the workplace. In terms of dealing with technology, I like to think that there are three kinds of people: pessimists, optimists, and realists. The technology pessimists resist any change brought about by improved technologies. Technology optimists jump at the earliest opportunity to implement any technological advancement. Technology realists, who represent the lion's share of us all, accept that change is necessary and work to integrate improvements, but they don't continually search for and implement emerging technology.

Our organizations need all three technology types in order to run smoothly. It is incumbent upon each of us to understand what kind of technologist we—and those with whom we work—are. This is simply another medium in which one size won't fit all. Leaders must adapt their style, depending on whom they deal with and the nature of the task to be performed. The pessimist might not "hear" the things communicated electronically. By the same token, resist the temptation to always communicate electronically with the optimist. Instead, push

for the personal touch and realize that your approach must be different for each person.

In essence, leadership is the challenge of inspiring the people in an organization on a goal-oriented journey. Technology enables that journey, and we, as leaders, must successfully manage both the benefits and detriments of that evolution. Ultimately, leaders are still responsible for themselves, their people, and the results of their units. Through leadership, they can make a difference, both in the lives of their people and in the unit's mission.

It's Your Turn

In the end, a leader's true mission is to achieve a desired effect. As a result, I always approach each new assignment or responsibility with two main goals: to leave

the campground better than I found it and to make a positive difference in people's lives. Working toward these goals—in concert with the Air Force's core values—helps us all to be servant-leaders, focusing on others rather than ourselves while accomplishing the mission. ★

Notes

1. Maj Gen Stephen R. Lorenz, "Lorenz on Leadership," *Air and Space Power Journal* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 5–9.
2. Lt Gen Stephen R. Lorenz, "Lorenz on Leadership: Part 2," *Air and Space Power Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 9–13.
3. Quoted in Gregory K. Morris, *In Pursuit of Leadership* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2006), 206.



Gen Stephen R. Lorenz, USAF

General Lorenz (USFA; MPA, University of Northern Colorado) is commander of Air Education and Training Command (AETC), Randolph AFB, Texas. He is responsible for the recruiting, training, and education of Air Force personnel. The general attended undergraduate pilot training at Craig AFB, Alabama. Prior to assuming command of AETC, he served as commander of Air University. He has also commanded an air-refueling squadron, a geographically separated operations group, an air-refueling wing that won the 1994 Riverside Trophy for Best Wing in Fifteenth Air Force, and an air-mobility wing that won the 1995 Armstrong Trophy for Best Wing in Twenty-first Air Force. Additionally, he served as the commandant of cadets at the US Air Force Academy and as deputy assistant secretary for budget, Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Financial Management and Comptroller, Headquarters US Air Force, Washington, DC. A command pilot with 3,500 hours in 10 aircraft, General Lorenz is a graduate of Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, Air War College, and the National War College.