

Air Force Acquisition Takes the Leadership Challenge

Program Leverages Key Assessments from CPP, Inc., to Generate Self-Awareness and Build Organization-wide Leadership Ability



CASE STUDY AT A GLANCE

ORGANIZATIONAL OVERVIEW

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.

CHALLENGE

Employees were being promoted to management positions based primarily on technical ability, rather than on leadership skill. In the past this has been a significant contributor to overall poor management, in turn leading to high turnover, lack of improvement, and lack of innovation.

SOLUTION

Over the past three years, the group has participated in TSM Corporation's Acquisition Leadership Challenge Program (ALCP), a two-and-a-half-day program featuring three key assessments published by CPP, Inc.: the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® (MBTI®) assessment, the *Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior* (FIRO-B®) assessment, and the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI). The two-part seminar gives individuals a comprehensive look at how they and others operate and provides practical tools to leverage this awareness to improve leadership. ALCP I targets employees new to supervision and leadership challenges; ALCP II addresses skills employees need when they first lead larger organizations.

RESULTS

Overall, Air Force Acquisition has seen marked improvement in productivity and organizational cohesiveness, due in large part to the insights gained from the ALCP training surrounding assessments published by CPP.

LEADERSHIP "CHALLENGED"

The Technocrat Mentality

Blaize 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"). He oversees the unit that plans, manages, and analyzes 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 for specific projects and programs and disassembled many times before the job is completed, and members must regularly reorient themselves.

A chemical engineer by trade, Durante understands the technician's perspective—as the majority of his group come from an engineering background—that understanding is 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.

"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.

GOAL: AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE INNOVATION THRIVES AND SUCCESS IS WITHIN REACH OF ALL

In 2006, 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.”

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

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.

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 CPP, Inc.: 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

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 CPP assessments and creating personalized action plans that participants can easily and promptly implement.

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for Acquisition Integration

“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.”

INSTRUMENTS FROM CPP—AT THE CORE OF THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

The three instruments from CPP, Inc., at the core of the ALCP—the MBTI®, FIRO-B®, and TKI assessments—were 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.

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.

PROGRAM BENEFITS

Team Building

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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Knowing It's OK to Ask for Help

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.

Results-Oriented Behavior and Motivation

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

Bridging the Generation Gap

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

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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.

Overall Response

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.

RESULTS

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 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.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

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.”

About CPP, Inc.

Since its founding in 1956, CPP, Inc., has been a leading publisher and provider of innovative products and services for individual and organizational development. CPP has been supplying reliable training solutions to businesses of all sizes, including the Fortune 500, for more than 50 years. The company’s hundreds of unique offerings have been used by millions of individuals in more than 100 countries, in more than 20 languages, to help people and organizations grow and develop by improving performance and increasing understanding. Among CPP’s world-renowned brands are the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® (MBTI®), *Strong Interest Inventory*®, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI), *FIRO-B*®, *CPI 260*®, and *California Psychological Inventory*™ (CPI™) assessments.

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