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DOCUMENTED
BRIEFING

The Role of Deployments in Competency Development

Experience from Prince Sultan
Air Base and Eskan Village in
Saudi Arabia

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SUMMARY

The U.S. Air Force (USAF) Developing Aerospace Leaders (DAL) initiative, according to the DAL charter, was designed "to examine and recommend actions necessary to prepare the USAF Total Force for leadership into the 21st century." DAL staff members have examined deliberate goals and means to develop and broaden current and future officers. The DAL approach features "occupational" and "universal" competencies and a range of potential developmental activities.

RESEARCH QUESTION

DAL staff members raised questions pertaining to the nature and extent of airmen development occurring within the Training, Exercise, and Deployment (TED) arena. Specifically, they asked whether officers learn enough during contingency deployments to merit an examination of how to track that learning. The research summarized here responds to that query and, in doing so, sheds light on the learning of enlisted personnel vis-à-vis the learning of officers.

METHODS

We opted to focus on learning experiences specifically at Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB)/Eskan Village rather than assess the development of officers at various contingency deployments. We surveyed officers and enlisted personnel in the continental United States (CONUS) who had returned from a PSAB/Eskan deployment within the preceding 12 months. Respondents selected from a list of settings all those settings in which they learned a specific competency or skill. They then indicated the single "best" learning environment for the skill or competency in question. Settings included initial training, on-the-job training (OJT)/normal duty assignments, schoolhouse, professional military education (PME), exercises, deployments to PSAB/Eskan, other operational deployments, and settings outside the Air Force. The survey addressed 46 competencies (referred to as "characteristics" in the survey) and skills, including the 41 universal competencies identified by DAL staff. Competencies spanned eight categories: special aerospace skills/duties, leadership, operations, organization, strategy, technology, perspective, and character.

Some 225 enlisted personnel and 22 officers contributed data. We looked for differences in the pattern of responses between the two groups and analyzed their responses separately when we found significant differences. We used the responses to assess the utility of a PSAB/Eskan deployment relative to other learning environments and to identify the competencies and skills for which a PSAB/Eskan deployment was a highly regarded learning environment. Specifically, we compared the frequencies of "best" responses across each learning environment, using PSAB/Eskan deployment as a baseline. We also examined the total number of responses for each setting. These two types of analyses enabled us to identify cases in which PSAB/Eskan deployment was highly regarded as the "best" learning environment, as well as cases in which it was frequently selected as a place to learn, though not necessarily the "best" one.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The "best" learning environment responses of officers and enlisted personnel were analyzed together when their perceptions of learning environments did not differ significantly, which was the case for 26 of the 46 competencies and skills listed in the survey. Our analysis revealed that PSAB/Eskan deployment was selected most frequently, and *uniquely* most frequently, as the setting in which respondents "best" learned three competencies and skills—Expeditionary operations, Alliance and coalition interoperability, and Air Operations Center (AOC) organization and operations. In other words, for those three items, the percentage of recent deployment returnees selecting PSAB/Eskan deployment as the "best" setting for learning each specific competency was statistically significantly greater than the percentage selecting any other setting as "best." PSAB/Eskan deployment tied with one or more settings as "best" for learning seven other competencies and skills (that is, it was significantly greater than some settings and significantly lower than none for learning certain competencies) (see pages 16-17).

The response patterns for officers and enlisted personnel differed for 20 of the 46 competencies and skills, but in none of those cases could we determine whether officers most frequently regarded PSAB/Eskan deployment as their "best" learning environment (see pages 25-26). Enlisted personnel, however, identified PSAB/Eskan deployment most frequently, and *uniquely* most

frequently, as the "best" setting for learning two more competencies: Joint battlespace and Joint overarching operational concepts and key enablers. Further, PSAB/Eskan deployment tied for "best" setting with one or more other settings for learning six other competencies (see page 23).

These results indicate that PSAB/Eskan deployment was most frequently identified as the "best" for learning more than one-third of the competencies and skills listed on the survey. Many of those items were from the "operations," "organization," and "strategy" categories of DAL's list of "universal competencies."

Moreover, respondents also widely regarded PSAB/Eskan deployment as a common setting for learning several additional skills. For each of the 46 competencies and skills, we calculated the frequency percentage and rank order of PSAB/Eskan deployment relative to other learning environments. Although we did not analyze the statistical significance of these values, this process highlighted additional competencies and skills for which PSAB/Eskan deployment was commonly regarded as a place to learn, even though it was *not* among the most frequently selected "best" places to learn. For ten additional competencies and skills, PSAB/Eskan deployment's rank order indicated it fared well in comparison with other settings. Most of these additional items were from the leadership, technology, perspective, and operations categories of DAL's list of universal competencies (see pages 29-32).

In summary, recent returnees frequently identified PSAB/Eskan deployment as a place to learn the majority of the competencies and skills included in the survey, and in many cases viewed it as the "best" place to learn them.

These results suggest that *if* the Air Force elects to track officers' or enlisted members' development of universal competencies, then it seems important to track their development during contingency deployments such as PSAB/Eskan. At a minimum, our findings seem to warrant assigning an integrated process team to consider the feasibility of such an endeavor (see pages 33-34).