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An organization’s senior leadership can create, embed, and transmit an organization’s culture. What leaders consistently pay attention to, reward, control, and react to emotionally provides an overarching cultural framework and can signal leaders’ priorities for the organization. Inconsistent or nonsalient goals from leaders can cause confusion among subordinates and foster the emergence of an abundant set of subcultures within an organization, some of which may undermine organizational priorities. To help the Air Force ensure that the emphasis and content of messages its top senior leaders aim at its personnel reinforce stated cultural goals, RAND researchers conducted this analysis of cultural themes within these communications.

The cultural goals of the Air Force leadership included:

1. define the organization’s purpose and identity for its members
2. promote the Air Force’s core values
3. create a shared identity across the Air Force
4. reinforce a sense of value, recognition, and belonging among all Air Force personnel
5. care for the well-being of Airmen.

Air Force publications, such as former Secretary of the Air Force Michael Wynne’s Air Force Goal Card, expressed these in various forms. RAND assessed the level of consistency of senior leadership messages with these goals, using the set of messages addressed to Air Force personnel by Gen T. Michael Moseley (CSAF, September 2005–August 2008), the Honorable Michael W. Wynne (SECAF, November 2005–June 2008), and CMSgt Rodney J. McKinley (CMSAF, June 2006–present). We used a standard content analysis methodology to analyze the following messages dating from September 2005 to March 2008: “Letter to Airmen” (either from the SECAF or jointly from the SECAF and CSAF), “CSAF’s Scope,” “CSAF’s Vector,” or “The Enlisted Perspective” (from CMSAF).

This analysis was not an exhaustive review of all Air Force communications. Rather, the analysis focused on messages aimed at Air Force personnel and from the three top leaders in the Air Force because these three leaders are the principal role models within the organization. These messages are, of course, not the only means these leaders have to shape organizational culture; other means include rituals, symbols, socialization at entry, rules and regulations, and rewards and punishments.

The mode and frequency of distribution of messages differed for each senior leader, but all the messages were made available to USAF personnel on the official Air Force Web site, Air Force Link (see pp. 6–9). The CSAF sent messages directly by email to all USAF personnel.

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while messages from the SECAF alone, the joint SECAF/CMSAF messages, and the CMSAF messages were emailed to USAF commanders with the intention that they would be forwarded to or discussed with unit members at each commander’s discretion. The SECAF released messages nearly every month, but messages from the other two leaders were somewhat sporadic.

Themes coded in the analysis were developed from leadership priorities identified in the larger Air Force culture study and from the content of the messages themselves. This analysis used the following codes:

- Air Force History and Heritage
- Air Force Mission Today
- Air Force Path to the Future
- Core Values
- Behaviors Exhibiting Core Values
- Violations of Core Values/Rules
- Airman
- Warrior/Warfighter/Warrior Ethos
- Wingman Concept/Behaviors
- Recognizing the Role of Subgroups
- Individual Well-Being and Readiness
- Families (see pp. 14–15).

Appendix A describes these codes in detail.

Our analysis of the substantive themes in these messages revealed that the senior leadership was successful in clearly defining the Air Force’s purpose. The messages drew from historical Air Force examples to define the organization’s identity and, in particular, identified heroes who were pilots in World War II or Vietnam (see pp. 16–17). Over 80 percent of each author’s messages discussed the Air Force current mission, and at least half mentioned the senior leaders’ vision for the future direction of the Air Force (see pp. 18–19).

The Air Force senior leaders regularly emphasized the Air Force core values throughout their messages (see pp. 20–21). Two of the three values, Integrity First and Excellence in All We Do, were commonly mentioned, clearly defined, and illustrated through concrete examples of behaviors demonstrating such values. While Service Before Self was commonly mentioned, it was not defined beyond the general concept of personal “sacrifice,” and rarely were examples provided to convey the senior leaders’ understanding of what this value means.

In 1989, Carl Builder noted that Air Force military personnel lacked a shared, overarching organizational identity. Members tended to identify themselves primarily with their weapon system (e.g., as an F-15 pilot) rather than as a member of the organization as a whole. In the senior leader communications we analyzed, consistent promotion of the common identity Airman was evident (see pp. 22–23). One ambiguity in the term’s definition was detected: At times, the term included civilians; at others, civilians were treated as a separate group. Other potentially unifying terms, such as warrior, wingman, and warfighter, were also used, although less frequently than Airman (see p. 22). The concept of a wingman, which aims to encourage members to monitor and support the well-being of one another, was discussed through exam-
The roles of different career fields were unequally emphasized through historical examples, where pilots were habitually cited but other occupations were not (see p. 24). The value of the current contributions of various Air Force subgroups, however, was recognized through concrete examples of the roles of different components, minorities, and career fields within the Air Force. The senior leadership frequently praised all Airmen, thanking everyone for contributing a unique and integral part of the Air Force (see p. 25).

Top senior leaders took unique approaches to emphasizing the importance of caring for Airmen’s well-being and readiness (see pp. 26–27). The SECAF focused on enhancing individual well-being opportunities (counseling, education, financial guidance, etc.). The CSAF concentrated on ensuring safety for Airmen through operational readiness. The CMSAF focused on the link between compliance with rules and regulations and Airmen readiness. Although the senior leadership touched on different aspects of caring for the individual Airmen, caring for Airmen’s families was not similarly emphasized (see p. 28).

To promote the senior leadership’s ability to endorse more fully the range of cultural goals they identified, we offer several recommendations for future messages:

- Promote examples of recent heroism (1990–present) (see pp. 29–30).
- Identify the historical roles of predecessors of growing aspects of the Air Force mission, such as space and cyberspace (see pp. 29–30).
- Explicitly link today’s mission to past Air Force missions to demonstrate continuity with Air Force heritage (see pp. 29–30).
- Elaborate on the meaning of the Air Force core value Service Before Self through examples, as has been done for Integrity First and Excellence in All We Do (see p. 31).
- Agree on and clarify whether the term Airmen includes civilians (see p. 32).
- Emphasize Wingman Day and the concept of being a wingman by releasing a message from the CSAF on the goals and importance of Wingman Day (see pp. 32).
- Devote a message to family well-being and recognition of the sacrifices of families (see p. 34).
- Distribute all messages at consistent intervals and through multiple sources directly to all Air Force personnel (see pp. 35).