New Approaches to Developing the Air Force’s Senior Leader Workforce

As Chief of Staff of the Air Force in 1998, General Michael E. Ryan observed a mismatch between the qualifications of Air Force general officers (GOs) and some of the jobs they needed to fill. Too few candidates had backgrounds appropriate for filling senior warfighting positions, and many GOs had backgrounds too specialized to be very useful at higher grades. To help improve the Air Force’s GO development approach, RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) conducted a study of GO positions and Senior Executive Service (SES) positions (which also utilize senior leaders) and the competencies required for each. This work resulted in new insights and methods for developing future Air Force senior leaders.

PAF Developed a Framework for Organizing Competency Requirements
Researchers found that most jobs have a primary occupational competency: prior experience gained in a specific operational or functional area (e.g., fighter pilot), or a “bin” containing a number of such areas that is critical to success in the position. Many positions also require a secondary occupational competency: prior experience in a second operational/functional area or bin. Primary and secondary occupational competencies can be considered “provider-level” skills—that is, the individual is expected to be able to manage the provision of services generated in the function. Additionally, all jobs require multiple areas of functional familiarity, which is defined as the ability to be an informed consumer of services generated by other functions. Finally, all jobs require an array of cross-functional competencies: leadership skills, management skills, and other competencies that are common across positions in many operational or functional areas.

The Air Force Can Improve Its Senior Leader Development in Key Areas
Major findings include the following:

• Most positions require a secondary competency, giving rise to the need for simultaneous multifunctionality: a person needs both primary and secondary competencies to enhance his or her success in a given position.
• Within the set of jobs sharing a common primary occupational competency, grade requirements often do not form a neat career progression pyramid. With expected promotion patterns, individuals cannot progress through grades or tiers within the same primary occupational competency. Accordingly, individuals must shift among primary occupational pyramids as they progress, giving rise to the need for serial multifunctionality.
• Recent cohorts of individuals selected for promotion to brigadier general approximately matched the ideal distribution of primary occupational competencies but exhibited the required multifunctionality to a very limited degree. To provide the needed competencies in the future, deliberate efforts must be made to expose competitive middle-grade officers to a broader range of operational and organizational experiences.
• While most positions have characteristics that make them suitable only for GO incumbents in some cases and SES incumbents in others, a sizable minority of positions can be filled “flexibly,” in other words, by either GO or SES incumbents. Utilizing this flexibility, career progression can be enhanced in both the GO and SES segments of the senior leader workforce.
• A decisions support system (DSS) can help to more systematically manage the assignments of GOs.

PAF’s Methods Are Useful Beyond the Air Force
While these findings are specific to the Air Force, the methods that were developed and used in this study are likely to be of interest to other organizations seeking to establish or enhance competency-based, requirements-driven leadership development programs. These methods include surveys of incumbents, linear programming models to optimize workforce configurations, statistical regression analysis to quantify the relative needs for senior leaders within Air Force organizations, and systematic software development practices to construct a prototype DSS.