

Values Based Leadership: A Platform for the Challenge-Opportunity Driving Tough Organizational Changes

Due to proposed long-term cuts in the United States Department of Defense (DOD) budget, the DOD prioritized improving efficiencies, reducing overhead, and eliminating redundancies within its many commands.¹ Accordingly, the Commander of Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC), the support command responsible for equipping the Air Force to keep it ready for war, assembled a small team to examine their options.

Lieutenant General Janet Wolfenbarger, Vice Commander of AFMC, led the team. “We proposed a new construct of organizing the command to align with the efficiency mandate that was emanating from our Secretary of Defense,” explained Wolfenbarger. Even so, Wolfenbarger anticipated opposition to the plan since it would require the elimination of seven AFMC centers—a move that would require support from the AFMC leadership, the Air Force, the DOD and Congress. Wolfenbarger knew she would need to draw on her lifetime of military leadership experience to accomplish her mission of successfully reorganizing AFMC.

A Career in the Military

The Air Force Academy—a military college for officer candidates for the U.S. Air Force—first admitted women in 1976 and Janet Wolfenbarger was a member of that year’s incoming class. “My interest in the military came from my father. He was an Air Force officer, so I lived my childhood as an Air Force ‘brat,’ moving around from base to base,” said Wolfenbarger. When her father told her that Congress had just passed a law opening up the service academies to women, she decided to apply. “The draw for me initially was the challenge to see if I could be accepted into that first class of women. It wasn’t really until I graduated and had an opportunity to work in the Air Force that I came to the firm conviction that I wanted an Air Force career,” she said.

When she set off for the Academy, Wolfenbarger knew she was starting her journey with a well-grounded upbringing. “My parents were wonderful role models. My father would stop and help people who had car trouble on the side of the road. He once had a secretary whose umbrella was broken and he offered to take it home and weld it so she didn’t have to buy a new one. My mother had no formal education beyond high school, yet she taught

¹ The United States Department of Defense defined a command as a unit or units, an organization, or an area under the command of one individual.

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herself anything she needed to know to pursue her interests in life, such as sewing, gardening, upholstery and even roofing. The example my parents set provided foundational character-building early in my life,” she said.

Wolfenbarger graduated in 1980—along with 96 other women (about 10% of the graduating class) with a degree in engineering sciences and a commission as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force. “Through my Academy experience, I learned that I am far more capable than I ever thought I could be. That knowledge brought with it a self-confidence, a sure confidence in myself that I have relied on ever since in both my military career as well as in my personal life,” said Wolfenbarger, who acknowledged that being a member of the first class of women was stressful. “There were some members of the Cadet Wing [the student body] who did not agree with the decision that Congress had made. In hindsight, I think for many of them, their fear was that allowing women into the student body would mean that the Academy standards would have to be lowered. I and the other women who were in that first class spent four years proving that women can not only survive but thrive in that very, very difficult environment without lowering standards,” said Wolfenbarger.

Nevertheless, at the time, first-year students at the academy often found the manner of training intimidating, as a berating, “in your face” style using loud, stern commands was the norm for upper-class instructors. “I decided early on that I was not going to behave in that manner when I became an upper-class instructor. I just wasn’t. I wanted to treat people the way I would like to be treated so I wanted to use a different method to train people to reach mission accomplishment,” said Wolfenbarger, who noted that throughout her career she learned which leadership attributes she wanted to emulate—and avoid—by observing others.

Over the next 20 years, Wolfenbarger was given assignments of increasing responsibility and influence largely within AFMC and its predecessor command, Air Force Systems Command. In 2000, she was put in charge of the management of a key weapon system—the B-2 bomber aircraft—and in 2002, the C-17 transport aircraft (see **Exhibit** for Wolfenbarger’s curriculum vitae). Wolfenbarger considered these experiences pivotal to her career as they gave her the opportunity to be held accountable for tens of billions of dollars in budget and lead several hundred staff. “Those two experiences prepared me for taking on a much larger commander responsibility,” she said.

Wolfenbarger liked to say that she “grew up in the command” and because of her resulting deep familiarity with Air Force acquisitions, it was clear to her that there were things that could be done differently; one of them was the opportunity to standardize processes within a new organizational structure. “As I was running the B-2 and the C-17 programs, I was surprised that the system graded me—judged me—on how well I was able to achieve cost, schedule, and technical requirements since many of those things were driven by factors outside of my control,” she said. Indeed, often, technical requirements were adjusted by the operators that would own the weapon systems or the budget was adjusted by Congress after a project was underway. “It drove an inability to execute on a plan. It would have been within my control to have followed a standard process that had the highest probability of success, despite those things that I couldn’t control. And yet nobody questioned me on the processes that I used,” said Wolfenbarger. It was that realization that led her to believe that AFMC needed to develop standard processes and practices, based on an understanding of what implementation approaches worked best.

Reorganizing AFMC

One of ten major commands in the Air Force, AFMC, headquartered at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, accounted for 17% of Air Force personnel (85,000 people), and managed 40% of the Air Force budget (\$55 to \$60 billion annually; the largest command by funding) and 11% of the Department of Defense (DOD) budget.¹ Civilians made up more than 75% of AFMC's workforce, which allowed the command to best manage the long life cycles of weapon system programs since active duty staff typically served shorter terms.²

In 2011, the DOD called for the military to reduce projected spending by approximately \$487 billion by 2022. To help achieve the reduction target, the Secretary of Defense directed all military services to reduce civilian manpower to fiscal year² 2010 levels and in November, the Air Force announced it would be eliminating 9,000 civilian jobs. The largest reduction would come from a single initiative: the AFMC reorganization proposed by Wolfenbarger's team.

The Plan

Wolfenbarger's team proposed eliminating seven of the 12 centers which comprised AFMC. "Those of us who grew up in this business knew this was going to be a better structure," she explained:

The 12-center construct, which had been in place since the command was formed two decades ago, was geographically centered. AFMC executed four primary missions, so that meant that every center had some part of that mission set. Nobody had all of a mission set and some centers were doing more than one mission. The commanders at each center drew a circle around what they were told to do, and they executed those missions to the best of their ability. But that construct resulted in an inability to share best practices and lessons learned across centers, because each commander wanted to do things their own way. We were unable, in that structure, to work on mission accomplishment in a geo-agnostic way.

The plan called for the remaining five centers to be aligned by mission rather than geography. Each center commander would be assigned a single mission. "For the first time we could standardize processes and practices across all the locations a mission was executing at," said Wolfenbarger. The reorganization would reduce overhead by eliminating more than one thousand staff positions at the center level—over \$100 million annually. "That was the reason we proposed it as part of the drawdown in defense dollars," she said.

Selling the Plan

In September 2011, Wolfenbarger was transferred to the Pentagon in Washington, DC to serve as Military Deputy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition. "When I got sent to the Pentagon, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force asked me to go engage with the Hill,³ to interact with Congress to get approval of this huge, historic reorganization," said Wolfenbarger.

She was constrained, though, by a non-disclosure agreement that she and her team had been asked to sign; the Secretary of Defense did not want those working to address the budget crisis to release plans before they had

² The United States government fiscal year began October 1 and ended on September 30.

³ 'Hill' was an abbreviation for Capitol Hill which itself was a figure of speech that referred to the United States Congress.

been fully vetted. As a result, Wolfenbarger led an extensive vetting process inside the DOD, but only after winning internal approval was she given special dispensation from the Secretary of Defense to discuss the proposal with Congress. “But from Congress’ perspective, that meant I was proposing a done deal and they had not had a voice in creating it. We were not transparent in what we were contemplating, and that was a huge issue for them,” said Wolfenbarger. As a result, members of Congress expressed their frustration to her and senior leadership in the Air Force and the DOD.

Even without the communication challenge, it was a difficult sell; It took Wolfenbarger from 2011 until early 2012 to get the plan approved by Congress. “I was amazed at how very, very opposed many of those folks were. There was great consternation and pushback because from Congress’s perspective, in going from 12 centers to five, there were going to be winners and losers,” said Wolfenbarger, who took great pains to note that although the centers were located on bases, she was not proposing eliminating bases. “We were only adjusting the structure, the framework in which we operated,” she said. Still, she recounted the time when a member of the House of Representatives walked over to the Senate where she was meeting. “He proceeded to berate me. He told me that he had drafted ‘cease and desist’ language. He planned to legislate away our opportunity to re-organize. That’s how contentious it had gotten,” said Wolfenbarger. Indeed, she learned that some former AFMC leaders were trying to undermine her efforts. “One of the most vocal contingents in opposition to the restructure was several retired senior leaders who had served in the Command under the former structure. Some of these senior leaders provided ‘ammunition’ to the elected officials we needed to win over to be allowed to proceed,” said Wolfenbarger.

She decided to re-think Congress’s role in the reorganization. “When you’re planning a significant change, you’ve got to understand who all the stakeholders are. Until we started the dialog, I don’t think we thought of Congress as being a key stakeholder. We felt we needed to inform them and be transparent, but we didn’t feel we needed to give them a voice,” said Wolfenbarger. During the process, though, she came to understand that some members of Congress were concerned that the plan, when executed in their state or district, would affect their constituents. “They felt personal ownership and responsibility over that,” said Wolfenbarger.

She offered Congress the opportunity to have input. As a result, the senators’ and representatives’ staffers gave her several pages of changes that they wanted to see in the plan. That night, she put in a call to her former boss and then-current AFMC commander. “I told him I really felt the way forward was to find some common ground, to find some compromise that allowed their voices to be heard,” said Wolfenbarger. “I told him I was opening up the aperture a little bit for them to have a voice in this process,” she said. “He was not happy about having to change the plan, but it began to turn when I gave them a voice. By including their input in the final plan, they could now feel a sense of ownership of that plan.” Wolfenbarger emphasized that no strategic changes were made to the plan, though. “All of the changes we incorporated from the Hill were tactical in nature. Everything the Hill asked to be changed was in the implementation details. I didn’t believe any of those changes were necessary to ensure success of the plan and, in fact, I wouldn’t have done any of them, had I been given my druthers. But I realized it was important to get *their* equities in that document. That was a huge lesson for me,” said Wolfenbarger.

Setting Command Priorities

In February 2012 President Obama nominated Wolfenbarger to serve as commander of AFMC and be promoted to four-star general—the first woman to hold the rank in the Air Force. In June, RAND Corporation, a nonprofit global policy think tank, published an independent analysis and assessment of the reorganization plan, which validated the savings generated by eliminating the center level authorizations and recommended AFMC develop and use metrics to track its performance against goals to allow the command to better identify and analyze causes of inefficiencies that could result from the reorganization.³ That same month, after Wolfenbarger’s nomination was confirmed by the U.S. Senate, she assumed command of AFMC.

At the four-star level in the United States Air Force, Generals typically served three-year assignments, so Wolfenbarger knew she had that long to accomplish her mission of successfully reorganizing the command. On her very first day, she gathered her subordinate commanders to brief them on her approach. “I brought them all in and I looked each one of them in the eye and I said, ‘We grew up together in our Air Force. We have the opportunity on our watch to do something we have always thought was the right thing to do. Let’s do it. Let’s make sure that we really leverage this time to build and cement the reorganization foundation,’” recalled Wolfenbarger.

First, though, transition ceremonies were planned for the seven centers slated for closure. Wolfenbarger’s staff informed her that her busy schedule would not allow her to attend all of the ceremonies. “And I said, ‘Well, we’re changing the schedule. I’ve got to personally go out and speak to the workforce at every one of those locations.’ I told them, as a leader, I needed to be there, to face this workforce and explain to them, from my personal background and my professional career, why I knew closing their center was the right thing to do,” said Wolfenbarger. Every one of the centers being disbanded had a unique unit flag that was furled and cased during the transition ceremony. “Those were tough,” said Wolfenbarger. It was an emotional event for a lot of the workforce and for me—a brand new commander and I was furling flags,” she said.

Command Priorities

During her first six months, General Wolfenbarger worked to create a strategic plan designed to guide her command and serve as a communication tool to share her leadership plans. “I needed a strategic plan to lay out the guideposts for us as a command and it needed to be easily readable and digestible; it needed to communicate to the intended audience; it needed to be enduring, so it needed to be written at a fairly high level; and it needed to be measurable,” she said, though she had some misgivings. “For most of my career I haven’t been a big fan of strategic plans because of how many of them have been done in the past. They can be large and unwieldy. Often it takes a long time to get all the stakeholders to buy in, and often they aren’t very usable so they get shelved,” said Wolfenbarger.

Nevertheless, a strategic plan seemed like the best way to articulate and share her priorities, of which there were five: 1) Expertly execute our warfighter support mission (set and meet expectations); 2) Standardize and continually improve processes (achieve the “art of the possible”); 3) Demonstrate cost effectiveness across all mission areas; 4) Recruit, develop, and retain a high performing workforce (while caring for our Airmen and their families); and, 5) Plan for ready and responsive Agile Combat Support that meets the highest priority warfighter needs. Wolfenbarger carefully crafted her priorities so that her entire workforce could see themselves in one or more of

them and align their efforts toward achieving them. Though Wolfenbarger explained that executing the command's mission was tantamount, she purposely resisted ranking her command priorities—except to note that “I resonate with the saying: People first; mission always! In the military, we have got to accomplish our mission. But you do that not on the backs of your people, but by gaining their desire to give their all to whatever that mission accomplishment is. That’s the kind of leader I wanted to be,” said Wolfenbarger.

The commander priorities were given supporting goals which were further broken down into subordinate objectives and 95 associated metrics. In writing the metrics, General Wolfenbarger ensured that they were relevant and useful to her command and not written to please external stakeholders.

Evaluating Results

Wolfenbarger declared the achievement of initial operating capability for the reorganization in October 2012. In the two years following—October 2012 through September 2014—AFMC streamlined overhead, reduced duplication and standardized processes and noted that the reorganization had already resulted in significant cost savings or cost avoidances—over \$6 billion. Indeed, General Mark A. Welsh III, Chief of Staff of the Air Force deemed it so successful that he referred to AFMC as the “cost-consciousness of the Air Force.”⁴

Beyond cost effectiveness, Wolfenbarger noted that the process improvements had a significant mission effectiveness impact as well. “It *was* working (operating 12 centers); that’s why there was never a burning reason to change, other than [budgetary]. But, it wasn’t working as well as it could. For example, we were unable to consistently produce aircraft out of those depots. We are now,” she said. The restructure was so successful that Wolfenbarger had begun referring to the reorganization as the “reinvention” of the command “The word ‘reinvention’ better portrays the powerful advances demonstrated in both cost effective and mission effective operations across all of the mission sets executed by the command,” she said.

Wolfenbarger did encounter resistance, however, during the reinvention of the command. “It drove many changes to long-standing cultures, which resulted in uncertainty and lack of buy-in from many in the workforce,” she explained. “Because the Command is largely civilian with most of the turnover occurring in the uniformed force, we needed to overcome the delaying tactic by many to just wait out the current leadership chain until a turnover would occur.” In addition, one downside to the new structure was that some personnel were reporting to superiors who were physically located in a different geographic location. Wolfenbarger acknowledged that some personnel had difficulty adjusting to this “difficult situation.”

Report to Congress

Due to the restructuring of the command, Congress required a quarterly review of AFMC’s metrics to ensure that Wolfenbarger was maintaining efficient operations. In January 2014, General Wolfenbarger presented her metrics to the Congressional Defense Committees. In her report, General Wolfenbarger provided dashboard snapshots (as of December 2013) for each of the five commander priorities, and their associated goals, objectives and metrics.⁵ The dashboard snapshots were the same ones General Wolfenbarger used to manage her command. Wolfenbarger explained: “We ought to be able to withstand this scrutiny. This is an integrity issue. I don’t feel constrained to change my approach just because our elected officials want to see details. I have a responsibility to be transparent.”

After the first full year of operating under the new construct, the same Congressman, who before the reorganization had berated Wolfenbarger, approached her again. “He made it a point to attend a session that we were having on the Hill with folks that were interested in feedback, and he publicly said, ‘You know, I was your worst critic.’ I said, ‘Yes, sir, I know.’ And he said, ‘And I want to publicly acknowledge that I was wrong,’” recalled Wolfenbarger.

Retirement and Reflections on a Career

Mission accomplished, General Wolfenbarger retired in June, 2015. She was married to another career military officer, Colonel Craig “Wolf” Wolfenbarger, who retired from the U.S. Air Force in 2006, and they had one daughter who was also planning a career in the military. “My daughter, would probably say that I didn’t have a personal life; it was all a professional life, which she was quite proud of,” said Wolfenbarger. “During my career, I approached my duties from the perspective that just because I am not at my office doesn’t mean I’m not in the military. That’s how we’re trained—to have that belief system and to abide by it all the time, not just when we’re working,” she said.

In retirement, Wolfenbarger knew she would continue to embrace the military’s values as her own—just as she had always done. “We have three core values in our institution: integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. And as I think back on my career, I believe every stressful situation that I encountered, I could address and ultimately succeed at by falling back on those three core values,” she said. Wolfenbarger even had what she called a “recipe” for her success:

It starts with doing the very best you can at whatever job you are assigned to do, and bringing a positive attitude with you to work every day. It includes understanding that, in the Air Force, it’s all about teamwork. So not only do you have to be good at your piece of a mission, you have to also be a good team mate, because in my experience, at least in the military, nothing gets done in a solo fashion. Doing your part of the mission to the best of your ability, having pride in what you do—being positive as you go about doing your work every day and being a good teammate are the ingredients in my recipe for success.

On February 5, 2015, Wolfenbarger was inducted into the Order of the Sword, an honor conferred by the non-commissioned officers of AFMC. At the event, Wolfenbarger said she felt that it was the highest honor and recognition one could receive in the Air Force. “I was recognized for servant leadership by my enlisted troops when they inducted me. I was very humbled by the words that were spoken and the honor that was afforded me by hundreds of people, many of whom I didn’t know on an individual basis but who made the effort to be in attendance,” she said. “That was perhaps the moment when I felt most fulfilled as a leader,” said Wolfenbarger.

Exhibit: General Wolfenbarger Curriculum Vitae (abridged)

EDUCATION

1980 Bachelor of Science, engineering sciences, U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, CO.

1985 Master of Science, aeronautics and astronautics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA.

1994 Master of Science, national resource strategy, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, D.C.

ASSIGNMENTS

1980-1981, technical intelligence analyst, Armament Division, Eglin AFB, FL.

1981-1983, communication systems development officer, Electronic Security Command, Kelly AFB, TX.

1984-1987, Chief, Strategic Offense Weapons Branch, 1987-1988, executive officer, Headquarters Air Force Systems Command, Andrews AFB, MD.

1988-1993, Chief, Plans and Strategies Division; Chief, Air Vehicle Analysis and Integration Team; and Chief, F-22 Subsystems Team, F-22 System Program Office, Aeronautical Systems Center, Wright-Patterson AFB, OH.

1994-1997, Lead F-22 Program Element Monitor, Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, the Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

1997-2000, Chief, B-2 Air Vehicle Team, 2000-2002, B-2 System Program Director, B-2 SPO, ASC, Wright-Patterson AFB, OH.

2002-2005, Commander, C-17 Systems Group, Mobility Systems Wing, ASC, Wright-Patterson AFB, OH.

2005-2006, Director, Air Force Acquisition Center of Excellence, Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, the Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

2007-2008, Director, Intelligence and Requirements Directorate, and 2006-2007, Special Assistant for Command Transformation to the Commander, and 2008-2009 Director, Intelligence and Requirements Directorate, and 2009-2011, Vice Commander, Headquarters Air Force Materiel Command, Wright-Patterson AFB, OH.

2011-2012, Military Deputy, Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, the Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

2012-2015, Commander, Air Force Materiel Command, Wright-Patterson AFB, OH.

MAJOR AWARDS AND DECORATIONS

Distinguished Service Medal with oak leaf cluster, Legion of Merit with oak leaf cluster, Meritorious Service Medal with three oak leaf clusters, Air Force Commendation Medal, Air Force Achievement Medal, Air Force Organizational Excellence Award with eight oak leaf clusters, National Defense Service Medal with bronze star, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal.

Source: United States Air Force. Abridged by case writer.

Endnotes

¹ Air Force Materiel Command brochure, <http://www.afmc.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-101013-049.pdf>, accessed August 6, 2015.

² Air Force Materiel Command brochure, <http://www.afmc.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-101013-049.pdf>, accessed August 6, 2015.

³ United States Air Force, afg_021216_015, Report to Congressional Committees, Air Force Materiel Command Fiscal Year, 2014 Quarterly Metrics, January 2014.

⁴ General Janet C. General Wolfenbarger, Harvard Kennedy School Harris Lecture Forum Event, November 6, 2014.

⁵ United States Air Force, afg_021216_015, Report to Congressional Committees, Air Force Materiel Command Fiscal Year, 2014 Quarterly Metrics, January 2014.