



By Dan Sanders

Five months into my Air Force operations officer tour, my boss and I reflected on how we were doing. I came to the conclusion that while we had made great strides in achieving his vision of unifying our team, and professionalizing the organization as a whole, we also stumbled hard along the way. We tried to implement change too quickly and the organization wasn't ready for that. As a result, we created more friction than necessary.

Luckily, at the time of that conversation, I happened to be reading [\*Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win\*](#), by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin. Their message was simple and powerful. "Leaders must own everything in their world. There is no one else to blame."

In the month or so since that conversation with my commander, I have spent a lot of time thinking about those early months in the squadron. Experience is a great teacher if we're willing to learn. Hopefully some of you won't have to stick your hand on the hot stove and you can learn from my mistakes.

### **You can only change an organization from within**

When I showed up to the new unit, I was struck by a few things. First, we had a very strong team. They were knowledgeable, eager, capable, and self-sufficient. The squadron is "selectively manned," meaning we hire vetted, hand-picked candidates after records reviews, interviews, and background checks. On the other hand, they didn't identify with being in the Air Force. We are a small military contingent in a much bigger Intelligence Community organization, and attitudes reflected that. Our company grade officers (CGOs) didn't follow many of the customs and courtesies I had learned over the last 14 years. They didn't stand up when a senior officer came in the room, they were all on a first name basis despite rank differences, and the climate was more Silicon Valley than Jack's Valley (where I did basic training as a cadet at the Air Force Academy).

After a month or so, I pulled all of the officers and my one senior NCO in and laid into them. "Things are going to change," I told them. "We are going to look and act like an Air Force squadron." As you would expect, some of the team rolled with the punches, some were self-righteous, and some were nearly defiant. In retrospect, I can see I took the wrong approach. After a couple of weeks, I rolled back some of my guidance. As I became more familiar with the organizational culture, I started to understand some of the good reasons for the differences between a "typical" squadron (from my perspective) and this one. As I spent time in the organization, I began to understand what made it tick and realized that I could stand on principle without being sanctimonious. You can't change an organization until you are part of it.

Several months later, haircuts are looking better, people take pride in their uniforms, and the team is formal when they need to be (which is only a small percentage of the time.) We've struck a balance that works for us, preserves good order and discipline expected of Airmen, but also harnesses the best of the Intelligence Community culture. The team is relaxed, innovative, and high performing. In matters of organizational culture, you have to be around long enough to understand why things are the way they are before you implement change. When you become an insider, you can break down barriers of suspicion. When you've demonstrated you care for and trust your subordinates, they will reciprocate. That makes change an easier pill to swallow. Even when they're ready, don't move too fast.

### **Don't rush to failure**

"Don't rush to failure" is a common adage in the U.S. Armed Forces. Yet, two-year command and operations officer tours impart a sense of urgency. When we come into these leadership roles, we want to leave an immediate impact. That impending permanent change of station or change of command feels imminent the minute we take the guidon. It's no surprise then that we are in a hurry to make a squadron in our own image.

For example, when the commander and I arrived at the squadron we recognized something we wanted to get after. The squadron was historically very flat, with every CGO acting as a proconsul overseeing his or her piece of the mission and occasionally checking in with the commander. Ironically, the operations officer didn't have much of a role in the operation of the squadron. We knew this was something we wanted to change. Within weeks of my arrival, the commander gave his intent to increase my role in the squadron. The CGO's reaction was predictable, "Why did we need another layer of bureaucracy?" They thought things worked in the past and saw no reason to deviate from a tried and true method. More importantly, any increased role for the ops officer encroached on their autonomy and daily ops battle rhythms.

Over time, I learned more about the mission and the commander and I hashed out our roles. Eventually, the unit came along. My job was to put up barriers to protect them from external interference, to build bridges where necessary, and to help them focus their considerable talents on achieving the boss's vision. That's it. However, in order to do my job (to help them with their job), I needed to be in the loop. We had to re-wicker some processes: there were fewer direct lines to the commander, but they saw him when they needed to. At first, they resisted this. In time, however, they saw the value of an operations officer engaged in operations.

So the lesson is this: where possible, show, don't tell. We needed to demonstrate the efficacy of the operations officer more than we needed to tell them about it. Furthermore, we could have taken a more indirect and incremental approach by retooling individual processes and explaining the rationale along the way. While it would have required more patience by the leadership team, I'm convinced the squadron would have responded positively and we could have avoided some of the change antibodies. Finally, change takes time; it's a cliché for a reason. You can't change things too quickly and you can't change everything at once.

In addition to the points above, the final point is that you have to be willing to own the success and failures of your organization. In fact, without such an attitude, and a spirit of reflection, you can't hope to be any better than you are right now.

### **Extreme ownership**

In those first months in the squadron, the commander and I made the best decisions we could, shaped by the information we had, and our past experiences, and we still got things wrong. We could have blamed others and external circumstances and it would have been human nature. Instead, we decided to own our mistakes. The point is not that you can always get things right; on the contrary, the point is you will certainly get things wrong. The

only way to move forward and maintain credibility in the process is to own your mistakes.

While we're not expected to be perfect as leaders, we are expected to learn from our mistakes. To improve the craft of leadership, we need to constantly examine ourselves. It starts with results and reflection. I started this article by referencing Willink and Babin's fantastic book, *Extreme Ownership*. Once again, their message is: if you're the leader, you're in charge. Thus, any failures are yours. The mistakes we'd made were ours to own. The problems we'd encountered were ours. That's not to say the transition could have been perfect, but it could have been better. I own that...now.

To reap the most rewards of extreme ownership you have to live it and demand it of all of your subordinate leaders. If you walk the walk, so will they. As Willink and Babin say, "there are no bad teams, only bad leaders." If you're team isn't performing, look in the mirror first. While it was easy for me to think we'd been dealt a bad hand and rationalize our rough time by pointing to external factors, the fact of the matter is, I contributed more turbulence than I prevented. It won't be the last time I get in the way of my team performing well, but I resolve to learn from the experience. The mistakes I make in the future will be different than the mistakes I made in the past.

## **Conclusion**

Though I continue to learn in this job, I thought it was worth reflecting on the turbulent first months of my leadership transition. Transition isn't easy; it's harder when you come at it from the outside. Once you're "in" the organization, it's far easier to affect change. Build trust, then change. It's also important to keep time in perspective. While time is short, any attempts to rush change can short-circuit the process and delay effective implementation. Lastly, you have to own your world as a leader. While it's easy to blame circumstances and people for your failures it's far less effective than owning those failures and dealing with them. The early days of organizational leadership will challenge you no matter what; my

hope is these lessons will put a little more light on a dim and difficult path.

*Dan Sanders is a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, the U.S. Air Force Weapons School, Air Command and Staff College, and the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies. He is currently serving as an operations officer in a National Reconnaissance Office squadron. His views do not represent the official position of the U.S. Air Force, the NRO, or the Department of Defense.*

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