



“What’s more important, the mission or the people?”

I spent the last 24 years of my professional career expertly learning how to navigate my way delicately through answering this question, yet never actually giving a real answer. Whether during professional development events, mentorship sessions, or job interviews, as long as I arrived at a conclusion to the tune of “Mission First, People Always,” my answer was generally accepted by whomever was asking the question. It wasn’t until two years ago, while commanding the largest Joint Squadron in the Joint Special Operations Command, that my answer significantly changed: “People First, Mission Limitless.”

So, what exactly does this mean? Ultimately, this signifies a shift in thinking to where service (mission) is understood as the byproduct of the relationships formed and cultivated across the organization. It means treating not only servicemembers, civilians and contractors (to the extent legally possible) as part of the team, but also including their significant others into the framework. I deliberately use “significant others” in lieu of other terms. Here’s why: while not everyone has a spouse, everyone does have someone significant in their lives. Leaders at every level should get to know who these key individuals are and bring them into the fold as critical players on the team.

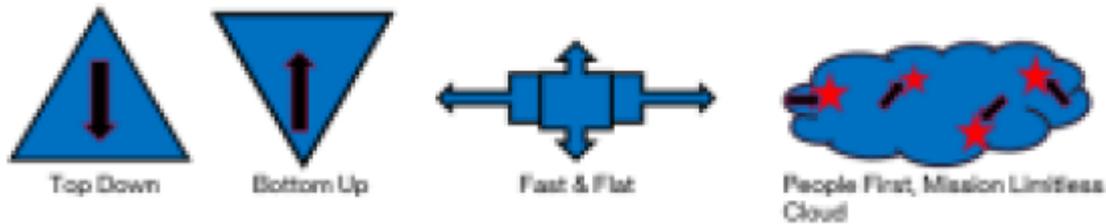
These additional human sensors will serve in the background to help strengthen the fabric of physical, spiritual, and emotional resiliency which is directly tied to improving overall organizational performance. When you put people first, it requires leading with character, compassion, empathy, and grace. Additionally, it requires placing the same level of genuine interest into personal deep-dives as we do mission deep-dives. Knowing the values that shape us as individuals and the corresponding vulnerabilities that make us allows us to be better teammates and better leaders. The organization is in a better position when the team knows the strengths and weaknesses of each teammate and individuals are empowered to see a need and meet a need at the appropriate level, with unconditional empathy.

Unconditional empathy requires everyone to give the piece of themselves that the team needs, not the piece easiest to give. We often speak of stepping into the shoes of others. However, we cannot effectively do this until we first remove our own shoes. When we invest in the lives of our teammates and truly get to know them multiple layers deep, we find out what motivates them, and we advance a positive culture, promote a spirit of innovation, foster disciplined creativity, accelerate change, and experience an environment where ideas compete and mistakes are viewed as the precursors to learning.

In this construct, the organization grows and adapts together to ensure we prevent making the same mistake twice. With this in mind, a leader can feel confident providing feedback/advice such as “just bloom where you are planted,” knowing that they have provided the fertile soil, necessary developmental nourishment, encouraged growth, directed resources, and demonstrated a proven means for one to flourish. To simply tell someone to just bloom where you are planted without having these preconditions met, is mediocre advice at best.

The “People First, Mission Limitless” organization requires a change and a new mental model to illustrate how the organization will function. Below are some example diagrams of organizational approaches many are familiar with. However, and for the sake of this

argument, I will focus solely on the “People First, Mission Limitless” cloud concept.



Within the “People First Cloud,” the leader, along with every member of the organization, has freedom of movement across the entire organization. Equally, individuals are empowered at each level to rapidly solve problems and create innovative solutions at the closest point to the issue at hand. Authority and ownership are granted at each echelon and the expectation is the individual closest to the problem has the competence, capacity, and capability (C3) to solve the problem (red star). That individual will execute a decision and, once the problem is addressed, communicate the reasons for the decision they made, if necessary. This model involves everyone across the organization and is not predicated on the leader needing to be involved in every decision made across the organization. Additionally, the “People First, Mission Limitless” approach further emphasizes accountability and responsibility at the individual level as core tenets. It readily showcases the value each person brings to the team, providing opportunity for recognition, reward, and reinforcement of ethical standards.

Within the cloud, there is no room for hate, division, toxicity, inequality, or injustice of any kind. Kindness, respect, trust and dignity are the driving forces that make the model successful. Additionally, teammates must show appreciation for one another while simultaneously ensuring everyone on the team has an opportunity to contribute and add their unique value and insights. In the “People First Cloud,” our best intentions must be converted into our best decisions that, in turn, drive purposeful action. This process allows

us to illuminate and appreciate the value in every single team member in order to change outcomes for the betterment of all. When the people come first, the relevant missions become clear, and the opportunities for progress become limitless.

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