

Too busy doing the mission to take care of your Airmen? Think again. . .

Commentary by Col. Noel Zamot
Commandant, USAF Test Pilot School

4/13/2011 - EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. -- Have you ever heard the discussion, "What is more important, your people or the mission?" We've been having this debate for years - for awhile, we even had a saying, "Mission First, People Always," which attempted to clarify the perceived conflict between taking care of our Airmen and accomplishing our mission.

In my time in the Air Force it has been my experience that such a discussion can be framed differently. I believe in this to such an extent that it has become part of my leadership philosophy. I did not invent this, but rather learned it from leaders I respect. It is simple and direct: To best accomplish the mission, take care of your people. What does this really mean?

Have you ever woken up, had your coffee, put your uniform on, looked in the mirror and said to yourself, "I'm going to do a lousy job at work today - and I can't wait!" If you're like the vast majority of the Airmen I have the privilege of working with, the answer is, "Not likely." Most of us come to work and WANT to do a good job. It is, after all, why we joined the Air Force. We want to serve, to do well, and to be part of something bigger. We thrive on challenges, live off teamwork, and are energized by success. There are the inevitable challenges, disappointments and stumbling blocks, but what keeps us going is the desire to do well - not necessarily for someONE else, but rather for someTHING else - our sense of duty, of pride, of service.

Have you ever asked yourself, what do you ask in return? You spend a lot of your personal energy and throw yourself into your job. What do you ask for in exchange? If you're like many, I suspect what you most appreciate is support - the support of your team, your family, and most crucial to me, of your leadership. We wake up every morning, wanting to do a good job, and in return, all we really ask for is support, top cover, encouragement, motivation, mentorship.

A quick war story should illustrate this well. In my last job one of our teams was responsible for developing and executing all the construction projects at our base. The work was enormous and the team was small, but we worked well with other agencies to develop a realistic, executable plan. I spent a lot of time showing the team how to work well and coordinate with organizations across the base and across the MAJCOM. In the end, I asked the team leader what he needed from me to get the job done. His response was priceless: "Sir, what I need now is your support and top cover. I know we can do the job - I need your help in allowing us to do it." What this team leader needed was resources, support, advocacy, and frankly, protection from line-of-sight, low-value-added "science projects" that did little to further the mission. I put on my best junkyard dog face and defended this group with zeal. We managed changes and additional workload carefully, communicated constantly, and kept leadership updated on progress. The results spoke for themselves: we executed more projects on the list than ever before, ran out of end-of-year funds before we ran out of projects, and were the number one base of our size in project execution in our MAJCOM. This was a huge lesson for me. Taking care of folks - by developing, guiding, and ultimately, protecting that team - led to fantastic mission results.

As I have grown up in the Air Force, I realize the single biggest impact I can make to the mission and my unit is to take care of my Airmen. You can ask any of your Airmen a simple question: "Do you want me to do your job for you? Or would you rather have me give you what you need to get your job done?" I suspect you won't have a lot of folks answering yes to the former, but most everyone will appreciate the latter. This is what taking care of your Airmen means to me. This doesn't mean being "BFFs", turning a blind eye to unprofessionalism or hooking up your Airmen at the expense of the mission. It means providing the guidance, resources, and many times the top cover to allow them to accomplish the mission. It means to mentor folks when they make mistakes, reward your Airmen when they excel, celebrate accomplishments in public and address improvements in private. It means to treat people with respect and dignity while keeping the bar high, and supporting your Airmen as they accomplish something they never thought was within their reach. It means, in the end, to ensure your Airmen are better when they leave the unit than when they came in. If you are able to deliberately develop your Airmen this way, the mission has a way of getting done, probably beyond your wildest expectations.

(Courtesy www.edwards.af.mil)

An example of positive leadership: Colonel Zamot's commentary from the Edwards AFB webpage with notes in red by Local 1406.

Too busy doing the mission to take care of your Airmen?
Think again. . .

Commentary by Col. Noel Zamot
Commandant, USAF Test Pilot School

4/13/2011 - EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. -- Have you ever heard the discussion, "What is more important, your people or the mission?" We've been having this debate for years - for awhile, we even had a saying, "Mission First, People Always," which attempted to clarify the perceived conflict between taking care of our Airmen and accomplishing our mission.

The Leader acknowledges the value of people and their importance to the mission.

In my time in the Air Force it has been my experience that such a discussion can be framed differently. I believe in this to such an extent that it has become part of my leadership philosophy. I did not invent this, but rather learned it from leaders I respect. It is simple and direct: To best accomplish the mission, take care of your people. What does this really mean?

The Leader recognizes the need to take care of his people.

Have you ever woken up, had your coffee, put your uniform on, looked in the mirror and said to yourself, "I'm going to do a lousy job at work today - and I can't wait!" If you're like the vast majority of the Airmen I have the privilege of working with, the answer is, "Not likely." Most of us come to work and WANT to do a good job. It is, after all, why we joined the Air Force. We want to serve, to do well, and to be part of something bigger. We thrive on challenges, live off teamwork, and are energized by success. There are the inevitable challenges, disappointments and stumbling blocks, but what keeps us going is the desire to do well - not necessarily for someONE else, but rather for someTHING else - our sense of duty, of pride, of service.

The Leader acknowledges the dedication of his people and appeals to their highest sense of values.

Have you ever asked yourself, what do you ask in return? You spend a lot of your personal energy and throw yourself into your job. What do you ask for in exchange? If you're like many, I suspect what you most appreciate is support - the support of your team, your family, and most crucial to me, of your leadership. We wake up every morning, wanting to do a good job, and in return, all we really ask for is support, top cover, encouragement, motivation, mentorship.

The Leader recognizes his role in supporting, encouraging and protecting his people.

A quick war story should illustrate this well. In my last job one of our teams was responsible for developing and executing all the construction projects at our base. The work was enormous and the team was small, but we worked well with other agencies to develop a realistic, executable plan. I spent a lot of time showing the team how to work well and coordinate with organizations across the base and across the MAJCOM. In the end, I asked the team leader what he needed from me to get the job done. His response was priceless: "Sir, what I need now is your support and top cover. I know we can do the job - I need your help in allowing us to do it." What this team leader needed was resources, support, advocacy, and frankly, protection from line-of-sight, low-value-added "science projects" that did little to further the mission. I put on my best junkyard dog face and defended this group with zeal. We managed changes and additional workload carefully, communicated constantly, and kept leadership updated on progress. The results spoke for themselves: we executed more projects on the list than ever before, ran out of end-of-year funds before we ran out of projects, and were the number one base of our size in project execution in our MAJCOM. This was a huge lesson for me. Taking care of folks - by developing, guiding, and ultimately, protecting that team - led to fantastic mission results.

The Leader uses a story to illustrate the effectiveness of positive leadership and the loyalty and respect that was earned by recognizing and developing talent. By taking care of people and developing a trust in the leadership, the Leader encourages the team to exceed expectations.

As I have grown up in the Air Force, I realize the single biggest impact I can make to the mission and my unit is to take care of my Airmen. You can ask any of your Airmen a simple question: "Do you want me to do your job for you? Or would you rather have me give you what you need to get your job done?" I suspect you won't have a lot of folks answering yes to the former, but most everyone will appreciate the latter. This is what taking care of your Airmen means to me. This doesn't mean being "BFFs", turning a blind eye to unprofessionalism or hooking up your Airmen at the expense of the mission. It means providing the guidance, resources, and many times the top cover to allow them to accomplish the mission. It means to mentor folks when they make mistakes, reward your Airmen when they excel, celebrate accomplishments in public and address improvements in private. It means to treat people with respect and dignity while keeping the bar high, and supporting your Airmen as they accomplish something they never thought was within their reach. It means, in the end, to ensure your Airmen are better when they leave the unit than when they came in. If you are able to deliberately develop your Airmen this way, the mission has a way of getting done, probably beyond your wildest expectations.

The Leader knows that by providing support and encouragement, people will reap their own reward in a job well done. The positive leader privately mentors people when they make mistakes, and celebrates the accomplishments of others. Above all Leaders afford everyone respect and dignity. A wise Leader brings out the best in people.

The civilian workforce needs this kind of leadership at all levels of supervision. Bargaining unit employees respond to the same motivation Col Zamot referred to in his commentary and deserve the same kind of support from their supervisors. I am not referring to lip service or manipulative trickery. Bargaining unit employees want supervisors who will back them up, are sincere, and know how to bring out the best in people.

*Jim Dietzel
Steward, local 1406*