

# CLEARINGHOUSE FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

## Improving Communications and Trust between Leadership and Junior Enlisted: Rapid Literature Review

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## Introduction

The technical assistance team at the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State conducted a rapid literature review to identify evidence-based and evidence-informed strategies and techniques to improve communications and trust between junior enlisted (i.e., E-1 through E-5) and leadership, primarily at the squadron level. Research (Gillespie & Mann, 2004; Goodwin, Blacksmith, & Coats, 2018; Newcomer & Connelly, 2018) indicates that the best way to improve communications and trust is to include subordinate leaders (i.e., E-6 through E-8 and O-1 through O-4) in the planning and decision-making stages, as well as in other aspects of daily operations throughout the squadron. Newcomer and Connelly (2018) found that leaders of effective squadrons mentored junior leaders, ensured that Airmen knew their role in the overall organization and avoided micromanaging. While it is not always feasible for subordinates to have the ‘why’ explained to them, doing it when possible builds trust and allows them to trust leadership when the ‘why’ cannot be explained.

## Methodology

Dinh et al. (2014) conducted a review of 752 leadership research articles published from 2000 to 2012. They identified 38 established leadership theories in nine categories and 25 emerging leadership theories in seven categories (Dinh et al., 2014). There is not one leadership theory that should be utilized as a model for military leadership but rather an understanding of leadership theories and applying as the situation dictates. For this rapid literature review we used various search engines (e.g., Google Scholar, ProQuest, PsycINFO, ABI/INFORM). Search topics included ‘improving communication and team building among military leadership and junior enlisted’, ‘military leadership and trust’, ‘team building military’, ‘military leadership communication’ and various combinations of these. We only included peer reviewed articles from the year 2000 and beyond that included a team building, leadership and trust, communication, and military component to them.

## Air Force Leadership

It is important to note that while many civilians may group all military branches together, each branch has its own unique ‘personality’ and culture that should not be ignored. Mastroianni (2005) highlights that many discussions surround the difference between military and civilian culture, however there is also a difference in the cultures of the services. Mastroianni (2005) argues that different sub-groups (e.g., combat arms in the Army, fighter pilots in the Air Force) within each branch of the military affect the culture and leadership of that service. It is common knowledge to those in the military community that typically, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force is a fighter pilot

and the Chief of Staff of the Army is a combat arms officer (i.e., infantry, armor, artillery). This shapes the culture and leadership of the services. Mastroianni (2005) states:

Information flow in the cockpit is highly sensor- and technology-dependent, highly structured and highly controllable. It is very adaptive for pilots to be very good at shutting out sources of distraction in moments of crisis. The immediate, ultimate, and unquestionable authority of the aircraft commander in the cockpit is a bedrock element of Air Force leadership culture. (p. 48)

While this is just one statement, it does raise the question of how formative military experiences shape future leadership. You could argue that each of the services chief of staff may 'see' a problem differently and have varying solutions to that problem. This is because of the training and experiences they have had along the way. In the same token, training and experiences have the same influence on leadership. This is an area of research that should be further explored.

## Organizational Study

Newcomer and Connelly (2018) conducted a study to determine squadron effectiveness by surveying graduated squadron commanders. They noted that "cohesiveness of their leadership team was the most significant factor in their leadership effectiveness-good or bad" (p. 71). The findings on leadership from their study outlined characteristics of effective squadrons as:

- Trained and proactive leaders who mentored junior members
- Leaders who did not micromanage
- Commanders who focused on strategic tasks
- Airmen who understood their role in the big picture (understood "why")

Of note, Newcomer and Connelly (2018) stated that larger units generally did not consider senior noncommissioned officers (NCO) as part of the leadership team (p. 71).

## Shared Leadership

Gillespie and Mann (2004) conducted a study on leadership and trust. They determined that consultative leadership had the strongest association with trust and mention that consultative leadership "provides an opportunity for followers to voice their opinions, needs and concerns, and have greater influence and control over their work environment" (Gillespie & Mann, 2004, p. 592). In consultative leadership, the leader gathers input from others before making a decision but ultimately makes the final decision. Gillespie and Mann (2004) also mention that consultative leadership helps to

reduce risk and uncertainty among team members.

Goodwin, Blacksmith, and Coats (2018) state that teams are the core of US military. They compiled 60 years of team research and highlighted the contributions this research has made. They note key contributions in the areas of team effectiveness and performance, team processes and emergent states, team leadership, team staffing and composition, and team training. Five themes that emerged from their research include: (1) a team can be more effective than the sum of individual team members; (2) team cognitive processes play a significant role in team performance; (3) team processes and performance are cyclical, dynamic, and episodic; (4) multiteam systems (MTS) matter; and (5) contextually rich environments enable teams to learn more effectively (Goodwin et al., 2018, p. 329). Goodwin et al. (2018) define MTS as “two or more teams that work collectively and interdependently to accomplish hierarchical, collective goals” (p. 324).

Godwin et al. (2018) noted that “team leadership is often more than an individual role; it can be shared and distributed across members within the team” (p. 327). Shared leadership or consultative leadership has emerged as a theme for building trust and effective teams (Gillespie & Mann, 2004; Goodwin et al., 2018; Newcomer & Connelly, 2018). Being able to empower subordinate leaders to the lowest level becomes important when increasing communications and trust. Considering Mastroianni’s (2005) suggestion of the influence that military sub-groups have on the culture and leadership styles of each branch, one could suggest that Air Force leaders may not be as adept to delegating or empowering junior leaders based on their ‘cockpit’ culture. Again, that is just one study. However, revisiting Newcomer and Connelly’s (2018) research, senior NCOs are not always included as part of the leadership team.

Again, the commander has final say and decision-making authority and responsibility and may not have time to include others in the planning process. What the research suggests is that when possible include subordinate leaders in the planning and decision-making process. This potentially will strengthen trust and understanding as well as make it easier for subordinates to accept orders blindly when necessary.

## Summary

A number of other articles on servant leadership, complex leadership, and other topics were reviewed in the process of this rapid literature review and we did not include those in this review because they did not add additional information to the common theme discussed. However, a list of all articles we reviewed are available upon request. The research indicates one of the best ways to improve trust and communications within the organization is to involve more people in the planning and decision-making process, as well as in other aspects of daily operations. Ingram (2016) tells us that leadership can be taught. Also, delegating tasks and leadership responsibilities should be used when possible. Therefore, teaching leaders to better utilize subordinate leaders is

important in improving communications and trust throughout the organization.

## Suggested Citation

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness. (2018). *Rapid literature review: Improving Communications and Trust between Leadership and Junior Enlisted*. University Park, PA: Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness.

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