

# **Why Leadership training is failing to make a difference, a method to fix it and factors affecting junior leadership for a future Air Force**

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## **Introduction**

You might commonly consider the feeling of empowerment upon completing leadership training, will immediately lead to you becoming a better leader, who can create a better workplace for you, your peers and subordinates. That motivation is often short-lived, diminished by the reality of returning to your workplace; which may not be receptive to change or your new-found motivations. I wish to examine the net loss of training benefit after a course is completed; by examining unit training structures, organisational limitations, along with broader societal and organisational factors that impact future leaders. I propose within this essay that the junior enlisted ranks, have the greatest tangible impact on the Air Force's aptitude to generate Air Power effects; ultimately that poor leadership skills are degrading that capability. If we examine, critique and improve upon the ways in which we develop leadership, we can become an Air Force that attracts, develops and retains Australia's most effective leaders, irrespective of rank level and job role.

## **The Workplace, Training Continuity and Resilience**

The RAAF commits a great deal of its time, energy and finances into leadership training and personnel development. We consider this emphasis creates some of the best leaders within the ADF, and indeed the nation. But we seldom stop and question whether the lessons and practices learnt on these courses are being supported and fostered by local units, to ensure the training is having a tangible benefit. An article in the October 2016 Harvard Business Review (HBR) by Beer, Finnström and Schrader, suggests that "for the most part, the learning doesn't lead to better organisational performance, because people soon revert to their old ways of doing things"<sup>1</sup>. Sending people on a course, with them returning to work and not exercising the skills learnt is a wasteful exercise and detracts from capability otherwise developed.

Demonstrating leadership in the workplace benefits the individual, the group and the organisation; so why is it regularly overlooked in lieu of the conduct of primary duties? Either through managerial oversight, training structures or cultural norms, the focus is lost on development as is the training benefit, despite the expectation to perform as a more effective leader for having attended training.

A focus on continuation training should be a by-product of effective management and a long-term capability sustainment plan. A workforce capable of remaining functional, without a number of its leader's present is ultimately testament to the planning and foresight of the senior leadership group. A company does not cease to function if a CEO goes on holiday, likewise, a RAAF unit should be able to function without the presence of any member within its ranks. This typically occurs; however, the preparedness varies with the individual placed into the leadership position, with and job-based competence is often the metric relied upon to achieve the gap-fill in capability. Units often 'find a way' to get the job done, typically through the group's proactive effort rather than unit preparedness and planning. This is more a product of Australian 'can-do' attitude than deliberate action and foresight. We should seek to develop those beneath us, so as our absence causes minimal operational disturbance. A focused and

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<sup>1</sup> Beer, M., Finnström, M., Lane, D., 2016, Why Leadership Training Fails-and What to Do About It, Harvard Business Review

considered approach to unit leadership development should be a centrepiece within a commander's intent and focus, for achieving high levels of functionality and capability whilst key members are removed.

The main focus of unit succession plans is typically on senior and middle management leadership groups, yet junior rank leadership development and succession is often overlooked, as they are not necessarily managerial or command positions. If effective mentoring, training and management plans are developed, our most junior leaders will become more effective individuals through greater levels of empowerment. They will be better equipped to lead peers and juniors in achieving tangible capability outcomes, thus generating more effective Air Power effects.

### **Factors for Commanders to help Facilitate Leadership within Units**

A 1950's study by Ohio State University identified that the only organisations able to change frontline supervisor attitudes, in the long term, were those that had senior leaders who "practiced and believed in the leadership style the program was designed to teach"<sup>1</sup>. This speaks volumes towards the perception subordinates hold; that those in command are exhibiting standards and behaviours beyond reproach. These values and attitudes are passively reflected in the workforce, without constant direction to act so. Comparably, this is reflected in human nature as the standards, behaviours of parents which carry on unto children, who are set boundaries and expectations on what is acceptable and expected of them.

In my research for this essay, I have found what I believe to be a very concise and constructive process, to honestly question and evaluate a unit's leadership development strategy, ensuring it is both effective and optimises training benefits otherwise wasted.

### Beer, Finnström and Schrader's Capability Development Strategy<sup>1</sup>

1. Is the leadership team aligned around a clear, inspiring strategy and set of values?
2. Has the team collected unvarnished employee feedback about barriers to effectiveness and performance – including senior managers' own behaviour?
3. Has the team redesigned its organisation, management system, and practices to address the problems revealed by that diagnosis?
4. Is HR offering consulting and coaching to help employees learn on the job so that they can practice the new attitudes and behaviours required of them?
5. Do corporate training programs properly support the change agenda, and will each unit's leadership and culture provide fertile ground for it?

If an organisation/unit should answer 'NO' to any of the above points, then despite the best of intentions, there is a potential loss in time, effort and financial investment in training systems. This is due to a failing to put leadership training within the right bounds of context to see genuine, effective and lasting benefit from the courseware. The various leadership training

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<sup>1</sup> Beer, M., Finnström, M., Lane, D., 2016, Why Leadership Training Fails-and What to Do About It, Harvard Business Review

courses constructed should not be seen as a 'box-ticking exercise'. We should seriously consider how we honestly evaluate critique our unit structures, along with adjusting attitudes to foster a proactive approach to developing our young leaders, who will take the RAAF forward into a more agile and capable future.

Each of these questions suggested in the HBR article, is designed for leaders and managers to genuinely ask tough questions of themselves as leaders and also of the effectiveness of the organisation they oversee. Many organisations typically don't receive genuine and raw feedback directly to senior management, typically for fear of judgment or retribution. The senior leadership team may be strong and inspiring in its aims and values; but if the right structures aren't in place to support a training regimen, then there lies a deficiency in support to the 'coal face' workers. These individuals, despite being inspired, have the risk of being functionally under supported in performing their roles. Without providing genuine support beyond command aims and objectives, a slow erosion of confidence in superiors can occur within the subordinate structures as their intent is good, but lacking substance.

### **Organisational Training to Junior Leaders**

A flaw in the previous leadership training system was the lack of training available to members, prior to promotion. I'm hopeful that the new promotional courseware rectifies this and training is delivered to members prior to promotion, like is done within the Army. Routinely there are personnel who act as leaders, without holding the rank commensurate with the responsibility, mostly due to the nature of work. Without adequately preparing people for the positions of leadership, a capability deficit can be anticipated in the projection of Air Power.

#### Course Availability

Rank-based entry requirements to training or leadership events has been a blockade-like factor for junior leadership development. This is particularly damaging for mustering with slow promotion rates, due to the systemic backlog in rank progression against time served. If we remove rank-based barriers to training activities, instead allowing members with a predetermined number of years in seniority to attend; then the training can benefit individuals without waiting until promotion. This would aid in them in being more effective leaders, generating a greater capability benefit, sooner rather than later.

#### Individual Disheartenment

There are many proactive individuals who seek responsibility, who feel they have the capacity to lead within their unit and create a more effective workspace. Yet too often, through organisational limitations and failed training structures they are left disheartened, with their aspirations are left unacknowledged. These are people who can bring about substantial cultural change, as they see the problems and often have viable solutions to rectify them as young leaders. Left alone, these individuals discharge for another organisation, that will afford them opportunity and challenges based on their skills, potential and motivations. The absence of these individuals, through disheartenment through a lack of development is a major loss to capability and is not often realised until it is too late.

#### Affording opportunity and trust

When we look at how we develop individuals, we must change the culture of trust and allow people to take on leadership roles and to essentially 'have a go'. When facilitating individuals in taking ownership of a task beyond their current skill level, they usually seek information and resources to succeed. Nobody really goes out of their way to fail, least of all when they have trust invested in them from their superiors. It seems like such a simple thing to do, yet so many

of us want to see a job be done properly, first time. We should seek to afford time to thrust leadership and management opportunities upon people, so that they can learn new skill sets; making good of the training invested in them, to add to capability for positive future outcomes. The next section of this essay navigates through examining methods of assessing the training provided, along with how necessary work-place facilitation is.

### **Contextualised and Targeted Leadership Training**

Whether through formal means such as residential Promotion or CAMPUS courses, or through less formal means; such as AMG REACH or Leadership Exchange, all have similar targeted outcomes in terms of leadership generation. Although delivery is varied, they are typically generic in nature. In evaluating the structures and context of training perhaps we are not being specific enough in examining the outcomes we are really after for capability generation.

A 2014 article featured in McKinsey Quarterly (a business publication) by Gurdjian, Halbeisen and Lane; examines why the training itself fails and suggests ways to further examine it. The article describes how organisations can avoid “the most common mistakes in leadership development and increase the odds of success by matching specific leadership skills and traits to the context at hand; embedding leadership development in real work; fearlessly investigating the mind-sets that underpin behaviour; and monitoring the impact so as to make improvements over time”<sup>2</sup>. Within the article they identify four areas of common mistakes, in which organisations can refine and enhance their leadership training structures.

#### 1. Overlooking Context

Within the RAAF, we have people in various job roles and it makes sense that the unique nature of each field should require targeted training. It may be beneficial to include a particular focus in some form, of the leadership styles required by different job roles. The suggestion is that when an organisation “cuts through through the noise to identify a small number of leadership capabilities essential for success in business - such as high-quality decision making or stronger coaching skills- it achieves far better outcomes”.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, the leader may be within a small group, facilitating problem solving and process improvement; contrasting with another that who may lead a larger body of personnel in performing various simple tasks, requiring more direction and coordination skills. These differences are not necessarily rank based by any means and are more dependent the job-role and environment.

#### 2. Decoupling Reflection from Real Work

The article goes further in examining the means by which training is delivered, suggesting that “adults typically retain around 10% of what they hear in classroom lectures, versus nearly two-thirds when they learn by doing”<sup>2</sup>. Obviously, a balance between the two is ideal and to seek integration of all training in workplace-like environments is ideal. “The ability to push new training participants to reflect, while also giving them real work experiences to applying new approaches and hone their skills, is a valuable combination”<sup>2</sup>. Local units should be seeking to make good of opportunities for individuals to exercise and review leadership skills, to do so both achieves tasks and develops our future leaders.

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<sup>2</sup> Gurdjian, P., Halbeisen, T., Lane, K., 2014, Why leadership-development programs fail’, McKinsey and Company

### 3. Understanding Mindsets

A key component of understanding mindsets and developing better leaders, is that “organisations are reluctant to address the root causes of why leaders act the way they do”<sup>2</sup>. It’s obviously an uncomfortable process for all parties involved; the trainee, the trainers, commanders and managers. Without asking difficult questions and evaluating the triggers of people’s responses in are the way they behave, we fail to identify faults and to make the individual better for their own benefit and groups. Of particular mention, was an exercise on the AMG Reach course I attended, that facilitated both self and peer assessment of my behaviours and attitudes. Although confronting, it is an empowering application of this philosophy mentioned within the article.

### 4. Failure to measure results

This is perhaps the hardest factor for an organisation such as the RAAF, which does not focus on metrics such as profit, however there should be a means by which we can quantify the benefit of the training provided. Typically, it ends with a post-course evaluation form and we don’t question anything beyond the end of course. This creates a real risk of complacency for trainers to “deliver a syllabus that is more pleasing than challenging to participants”<sup>2</sup>. Each workplaces output is measured differently, so rather than looking for figures or values to quote, perhaps seek periodic feedback from subordinates, peers and managers after a period of time. This is one way to measure behavioural change and to correlate the change with the standard of training received. A CEO mentioned in the article, commissioned a “360 degree-feedback exercise and published the results (good and bad) for all to see on the company intranet along with a personal commitment to improve”<sup>2</sup>. This being a very extreme example by a senior leader, can be replicated in-part through a the PPR process, whereby behavioural change can be subjectively measured and reported. By continually monitoring for improvement, or lack thereof, organisations are able to “monitor the impact so as to make improvements over time”<sup>2</sup> to training curriculum.

### **Educational and Societal Changes**

Due to Australian government policy, societal and cultural changes within Australia, the educational apparent retention rate, of individuals completing years 7/8 to 12, has increased “from 24% in 1967, to a peak of 77% in 1992”<sup>3</sup> and been steadily above 72% until 2002. More recent data<sup>4</sup> further supports this, with the same apparent retention rate increasing from 78% to 84.5% in the last 10 years. Interpreting this information tells us what we might historically be aware of, where seeing out the full tenure of secondary education is almost a societal norm.

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<sup>2</sup> Gurdjian, P., Halbeisen, T., Lane, K., 2014, Why leadership-development programs fail’, McKinsey and Company

<sup>3</sup> Lamb, S., Walstab, A., Teese, R., Vickers, M., Rumberger, R., 2004, Staying on at school: Improving student retention in Australia, Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, The University of Melbourne, Page 3.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), Copyright 2016, Apparent Retention Dataset

Figure 1: Apparent retention rates (Year 7/8 to Year 12), Australia: 1967–2002

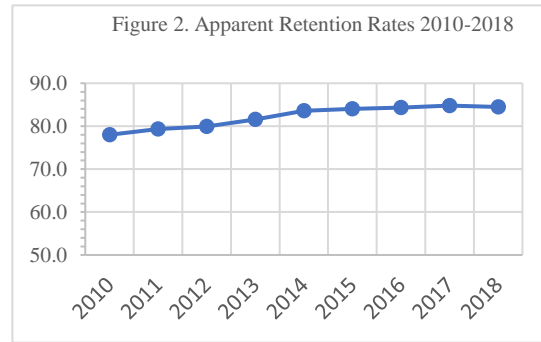
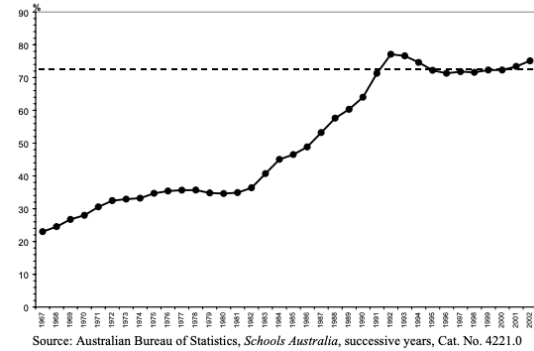


Table 1. Apparent Retention Rates 2010-2018

Fact	Calendar year	State/territory	School sector	Sex	Year range	ndigenous statu	Retention rate
Apparent retention rates	2010	Australia	All	All	Year 7/8 - Year 12	All	78.0
Apparent retention rates	2011	Australia	All	All	Year 7/8 - Year 12	All	79.3
Apparent retention rates	2012	Australia	All	All	Year 7/8 - Year 12	All	79.9
Apparent retention rates	2013	Australia	All	All	Year 7/8 - Year 12	All	81.6
Apparent retention rates	2014	Australia	All	All	Year 7/8 - Year 12	All	83.6
Apparent retention rates	2015	Australia	All	All	Year 7/8 - Year 12	All	84.0
Apparent retention rates	2016	Australia	All	All	Year 7/8 - Year 12	All	84.3
Apparent retention rates	2017	Australia	All	All	Year 7/8 - Year 12	All	84.8
Apparent retention rates	2018	Australia	All	All	Year 7/8 - Year 12	All	84.5

Source: ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, Years 2010-2018).

This shift in educational focus in Australia has a net benefit for the individuals presenting to the ADF for recruitment. The vast majority of personnel in the current workforce are of a higher level of education than ever before, who bring advanced levels of critical thinking and understanding. Should the RAAF wish to make the most of this educational benefit, it should afford training and responsibility to the members who seek it, as the cultural stereotypes of associating rank with a degree of education no longer applies, many enlisted personnel are year 12 or some now tertiary qualified. Many of these enlisted personnel seek development and responsibility, to take control where they can, to affect change for the better. As we can see in the statistics, this trend will likely continue and future personnel will come to expect opportunities to develop themselves either within or outside the RAAF.

The figures above indicate that the RAAF and ADF, through generational and technological changes, are able to recruit people with higher levels of education and of varied skill sets in a modernising world. The rapidly changing landscape of society is one that should demand careful and constant attention, as the social expectations of individuals will adjust over time. The attitude of many young people entering the Australian workforce, is one that demands opportunity and conditions where they are afforded potential for growth. Basically, if they don't like what they have in front of them, they will just go elsewhere until they do. If an organisation is entrenched in viewing and training its people the same as generations gone by, there is an increased risk of people not remaining longer than necessary. Without questioning our structures and cultural attitudes, I consider the RAAF to be at significant risk of losing some extremely valuable people, who are ill afforded leadership responsibilities and opportunities. Individuals typically feel obliged to re-invest their time and efforts, if an organisation affords them every chance to become their best. In an organisation as small as the RAAF, we can ill-afford to ignore the needs and aspirations to feel invested in. Society is changing and should we ignore the changing dynamics, we will fall behind and lose opportunities to retain our most valuable assets, our people.

## **Conclusion**

Should the Royal Australian Air Force seek to become the most effective, proficient and skilful organisation in the world, we must reevaluate the way we are able to identify, train and raise our junior leaders, irrespective as to whether they are Officers or Airmen. By the wider organisation and local units critically examining the barriers to transformational change, there will be honest conversation about where we are and where we are going as a leadership development organisation. As individuals and as an organisation, we should aspire to create a workplace that is safe, efficient and effective; to develop people who are technically skilful, with strong leadership and personal attributes. We face the prospect of losing some of our best to external organisations, that will readily do what we could not. If it is truthfully considered that our people are our most valuable asset then we should seek to get the most out of them and seek to further invest in them, as the return on investment to the organisation in terms of capability and retention is one we cannot afford to lose.

## **Recommendations:**

1. Remove limitations from training opportunities that are at CPL or above, to include position availability to LAC's with a certain period of rank seniority.
2. Leadership training curriculum to identify common leadership methods that are relevant to job roles, not necessarily rank-based.
3. Unit commanders to have considered reviews of their leadership development structures, to ensure they are both effective, relevant and integral to achieve continual improvement.

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Word Count: 3182