

A new Approach to Policy: Creating a Culture of “Can”

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ABSTRACT

Creating a culture that enables innovation begins with removing barriers written in policy. In 2018, the SECAF published a series of guidance letters directing the reduction of policy and removing processes to non-directive guides. The Air Education and Training Command has undergone significant changes as a result of this directive. In this paper, we explore best-practices and lessons-learned that we discovered by reducing directive U.S. Air Force technical training guidance from 524 pages to 29 pages through a collaborative development process. Change management processes used both top-down and bottom-up leadership to create what-to-do guidance that lets commanders be commanders and NCOs be NCOs. We migrated the how-to-do information into a knowledge portal that is agile and adaptable to mission needs of our subordinate units. Finally, we explore some examples of innovation that occurred once the restrictions of policy were lifted.

Keywords: change management, policy, innovation, leadership, governance

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SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE POLICY REDUCTION DIRECTION

The Air Force has too many directive publications. They are often outdated and inconsistent, breeding cynicism when Airmen feel they cannot possibly follow every written rule. They are sometimes too rigid, slowing adaption and discouraging new ideas. The result is distraction and inefficiency - when we specify the trivial, we lose focus on the important (Wilson, 2017).

Vision

The commander of Second Air Force, Maj Gen Timothy Leahy, often spoke of the need to bring the Air Force back to its heritage of being the innovative branch, unfettered by tradition, rules, and regulations that existed for the sake of standardization. “We need to let commanders be commanders and let NCOs be NCOs” (T. Leahy, personal communication, 2017). To illustrate his point, he was quick to recount the story of Lt Col Paul “Pappy” Gunn, who in WWII installed eight .50-caliber machine guns in the nose of a B-25 and used it to destroy shipping in the Pacific theatre (Joiner, 2018). “It apparently hadn’t occurred to him to ask permission of anyone to install an armament load that was nothing like the original one, or to bother about what anyone else thought about cutting the airplane all apart to make new installations” (Kenny, 1959). This romantic vision of a place and time where a field commander could deviate from expectations to execute a mission inspired all who heard it. Before long this vision became infectious and served as the marching orders for those under his command.

Creating a Sense of Urgency

The Air Force was given just 24 months to review, revise, and reduce the total number of directive publications (Wilson, 2017). This meant we had to hit the ground running. The commander of Second Air Force immediately took inspiration from the Secretary of the Air Force and set the same goal for reducing technical training policy (Leahy 2017, personal communication). The accelerated timeline for developing a new set of policies, centered on a new philosophy, created a sense of urgency (Kotter, 2008). Our culture of cautious, deliberate, and slow change had led us to being dependent on carefully crafted written guidance that was difficult to change in meaningful ways. Furthermore, this book-wise ethos perpetuated a culture of caution in which leaders refrained from taking action (Semukanya, 2010). Although not yet a crisis, the potential for inaction loomed large as commanders would refer to policy to query whether a planned action was permitted, leading to a form of organizational self-censorship. We needed to develop a new type of policy before the next crisis occurred. This sense of urgency justified the accelerated timelines.

REDUCING THE DIRECTIVE POLICY

After reducing regulations in the early 1990s, the Air Force has experienced ever expanding regulatory guidance over the past three decades. The cumulative impact of countless well-intentioned policy additions was to impose a speed limit on leadership; we were consigned to conducting *innovation at the*

speed of government. The first step in developing leaner, more agile policy was to carefully excise portions of instructions that described processes. This surgery was not done with a scalpel but a chainsaw. Our goal was to develop policy that identified what to do, not how to do it. We found that the vast majority of guidance in our instructions told users how to do their jobs. The Air Force was using directive policy in place of training materials, job aids, user manuals, and other non-directive teaching tools. Our tasking was to streamline the duties and responsibilities and eliminate the procedures.

Building teams of committed “doers”

The first step in reducing the directive policy was to assemble teams of experts. One thing our leadership insisted on was to bring in the people that will work under the instructions they were developing. Rather than ask commanders and senior leaders what they think should be in the policy, we asked the workers who are closer to the process. The doers at the lowest levels understand the problems they face on a day-to-day basis, where they need policy, and where they don't.

A year before COVID-19 sent everyone to their home offices, we determined this team would do the bulk of their work at a distance. However, the key to getting the team members to work together was to offer opportunity for them to meet face-to-face. We did this early and often at the beginning to establish a cohesive team by building personal and professional relationships (M. Watkins, 2013). We hosted a week-long professional development workshop which doubled as a teambuilding event for our doers. We noticed quickly after the event that our communications in teleconferences and other electronic formats were now rich with commentary and collaboration was the norm.

Publishing interim guidance memorandums

Commands issue guidance memorandums when there isn't time to process and distribute a new or revised guidance publication. These interim guidance documents expire after one year or when superseded by a permanent publication (U.S. Air Force, 2015). We decided to publish guidance memorandums because of the short timelines established for the completion of the review and republication of directive guidance.

The first team met on 10-11 January 2018 to complete a clean-sheet review of the instruction directing faculty and staff development. This guidance memorandum consisted of a short introduction and a list of roles and responsibilities for key positions from the command headquarters down to the individual instructor. The what-to-do information was clearly stated for each position. For example, commanders will establish, fund, and maintain equitable professional development programs for all personnel (U.S. Air Force, 2018). Omitted from this guidance memorandum was how-to information, the processes and procedures for doing each job. For example, how to document forms and how to prioritize training were left up to the commanders.

We repeated this clean-sheet review process for instructions covering training development, military training, training administration, and training evaluation over the next 5 months. Each team started with a list of proposed roles and responsibilities and refined the language over the next 2 days. We edited the final product after the team departed, and all changes were coordinated with team members by email.

The commander held high expectations for the teams' performance. However, perfection was not one of those expectations. Teams were briefed on the outset that what they were developing would change and evolve over time, but perhaps we could usher in an era of simpler policy, at least for a while. The Air Force published all five guidance memorandums on 20 Aug 2018 and started the 12-month clock until their replacement.

CREATING NON-DIRECTIVE PROCESS GUIDES

Because we eliminated processes from official policy, we needed to provide users in the headquarters staff and the training wings and groups with job aids in the form of online process guides. These process guides are not intended to be mandatory. Instead, they are used like *continuity books*. They are non-directive *how-to* guides and examples designed to educate, identify best practices, and ensure individuals new to jobs have adequate information to perform functions associated with the duties and responsibilities of the position. In addition to providing process guides, we wanted an easy way for 2 AF staff and wings/groups to share innovative, better processes they may have developed. Users can share more efficient or effective ways of doing jobs—a successful outcome.

Creating a knowledge portal in milWiki

Now, where should we develop/house these job aids/process guides? We needed a platform that was collaborative. After careful consideration, we chose the wiki format to foster collaboration, publicize business practices, share best practices, and facilitate rapid development in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment. Employees can obtain, use, tweak, and share new tips, techniques, and procedures to more effectively and efficiently conduct and manage training.

The milSuite is a collection of online applications focused on improving the methods of secure collaboration for the United States Department of Defense. These capabilities include milWiki, a living military encyclopedia editable by the experts who know their subjects best; milBook, a social media site that hosts files; and milTube, a site that hosts video files. We used milWiki to create a wiki-based portal to be our knowledge management site organized by tabs for different roles in the training arena. The milWiki links to sample documents and video training vignettes to provide a full-spectrum of job aids and resources.

Gathering source material

Our next challenge was how to collate our resources. We had the material from several faculty development courses as well as copies of the old policies. The plan was to use these together as a launching point to get process guides out to Second Air Force staff and the wings and groups quickly. These initial guides would be revised as new; more efficient or effective processes were developed across the technical training enterprise.

Developing initial process guides/Sharing responsibility with users

We developed several process guides within the milWiki tabs shown in Figure 1. The beauty of using milWiki is each subject page has its own talk tab for commentary. This allowed individuals to discuss processes and make suggestions. Critics of the wiki format often point out that anyone can edit pages in a wiki. However, in milWiki, no one can edit anonymously. The system also sends a notification to followers of the page whenever an edit is made. Our team reviews each change to ensure validity and accuracy. The vast majority of the edits have improved processes. If there was problem with an edit, which almost never happened, we discussed it with the person that made the change. Ultimately, we could return the milWiki process guide back to its previous state by using an undo function.



Figure 1. milWiki Tabs

FURTHER DISTILLING DIRECTIVE GUIDANCE MEMORANDUMS INTO A SINGLE INSTRUCTION

The development teams completed the original effort to reduce and consolidate directive guidance by publishing guidance memorandums. The advantage of the guidance memorandums is the immediacy of their implementation; the disadvantage is their temporary nature. These policy instruments expire in 12 months (U.S. Air Force, 2015). With the clock ticking, we had little time to catch our breath before starting the process to rewrite the guidance memorandums into more permanent instructions.

Leveraging technology to improve collaboration among team members across the U.S.

Creating an entirely new directive publication in 12 months would be a challenge under the best of circumstances. Doing this with a team of contributors spread across the country with separate chains of command, missions, and concepts of operations seemed to many as a challenge doomed to fail. We were told there was too much coordination required to complete this task in 1 year.

The key to success was not using technology. The technology only assisted a team of people that had already met and formed relationships. By starting with a team that had invested social capital in the success of this project, we helped remove barriers to success (Holton & Swanson, 2009; M. Watkins, 2013). Part of this social capital was formed when we gathered the teams to produce the guidance memorandums, but far more social investment was made when we held a week-long professional development workshop for the offices that were largely supporting this project. This workshop was not focused on policy development, but rather on other topics pertinent to work centers that apply policy to evaluate programs. However, the unintended consequence of meeting face-to-face in a training workshop included improved networking in the trusted relationships that developed (Lin, 2001).

Once we made the investment in social capital, the process of leveraging technology went smoothly. We used two tools, teleconferences for synchronous communications and a wiki for asynchronous communications. These tools were integrated into our *battle rhythm* (M. Watkins, 2013). Team members

discussed the latest changes and obtained updates and clarification on the many details of the project during the teleconferences, but the heavy lifting was done on the wiki. The draft of the compiled instruction was posted to a milWiki page. We assigned a portion of the instruction to be reviewed each week and directed the teams to provide original comments to the talk tab of the wiki page. Then, we required the groups return to the talk tab to review and comment on each other's comments as seen in Figure 2. This asynchronous communication media allowed recommended changes to the draft instruction to be vetted by the community of users before becoming policy. More often than not, the other members of the community would accept, reject, or develop acceptable language without our inputs. We would review the discussion on the talk tab and make the recommended changes to the draft policy.



Figure 2, Policy Developers Wiki

We had to exercise our authority to adjudicate on relatively few comments (approximately 1 in 15) when the community could not come to consensus.

This community approach to developing policy provided buy-in to the final instruction. The final product was a set of policies that they had developed and would operate under. This process was a radical departure from the traditional method in which policy is dictated from headquarters, and the users get one or two small opportunities to request variations. One consistent sentiment from the team members who participated in this approach was not to return to the previous process for developing policy. The community saw and appreciated a transparent, participative, bottom-up approach to developing policy.

Receiving delegated authority to certify and approve published instructions for AETC

Even though Second Air Force's mission is basic military and technical training for the Air Force (and this was a basic military and technical training instruction), there were/are some technical training units outside of Second Air Force but within our Major Command, Air Education and Training Command. They were included in each step of the policy rewrite process. To cover all basic military and technical

training in the Air Force, our policy needed to be published as an Air Education and Training Command-level directive document. Therefore, in order for the new consolidated policy to be approved at the Second Air Force level, we needed to garner a delegation letter from Air Education and Training Command which we did.

Publishing the new Air Education and Training Command Instruction

Now that we had the delegation letter, we were able to push the policy through official coordination, certify, and approve the document.

FUTURE OF POLICY AND GUIDES

The goal of creating policy is to fulfil an agenda. To achieve these goals, policy developers must balance the agenda put forth by the institution's leadership with their understanding of the needs of the population (Halpin et al., 2018). This balanced approach requires that policy developers be subject-matter experts as well as being committed to goals established by leaders. We achieved this through a process of collaborative co-design that enabled policy developers to get stakeholder buy-in from the outset. In the process, we changed the culture that is intertwined with our instructions and business rules.

Moving forward we need to continue these best practices, understanding user needs, and applying agile approaches to policy development (Kimbell & Bailey, 2017). This begins by establishing the charter defining the mission, ideology, and relationships of the team members. In this way, the charter firmly sets the foundation for the development process from a conceptual basis (Halpin et al., 2018). Once the agenda is set, the real work can begin by subject-matter experts executing the vision of leadership.

CONTINUED PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

This accelerated approach to reducing and republishing directive policy and non-directive guidance ran against many longstanding paradigms. Including that policy must come from the top down and that official guidance takes years to publish or change. We proved that guidance can be developed collaboratively and quickly. We also showed how non-directive guidance could be developed and maintained in a living document that improves over time.

Users deliberately review process guides

The process guide portal now contains several hundred pages of procedural guidance, best practices, links to sample documents, and videos explaining the *how-to* and sometimes the *why* to perform some of the many tasks and processes. The wiki format of the process guides provides an agile platform for maintaining and distributing current information. The fact that users must use the live system to connect to procedural guidance means all users instantly have access to current information whenever the guides are updated.

However, just because they are easy to update, doesn't mean that they will be updated. Therefore, we established a plan to review each process guide in the series to maintain their accuracy, currency, and usability. Although it will take year or more to review all the guides, it is still a much quicker process than reviewing, revising, and republishing a manual or regulation. In fact, the deliberate review process has already started. With over 200 topic areas to maintain current, this process is ongoing; once all areas have been updated the process starts over. The field benefits from receiving updated information as soon as each new process is posted.

An essential part of our process review plan is assigning guides for review by the field and our team. This deliberate review causes users to examine the processes for accuracy and effectiveness. The *Talk* tab behind each page of the Wiki provides users with a discussion forum to propose revised processes and explore how those revisions would affect others in their communities. Often, the collaboration between different groups of users will result in a new way of doing business that wasn't a part of either the original or revised processes.

Success stories: how reducing policy fostered innovation and agility

One of the first successes we saw was the adoption of student-centered methodologies and approaches (Hoidn & Klemenčič, 2020). This approach was discussed before we changed policy. However, many of those interested in trying it questioned “how can we do this under our current instructions.” Without policy hindering instructional methodology, organizations were free to try innovative approaches.

Another area that saw change early on was in the area of faculty development. Regulations had standardized faculty development courses across all training bases for the previous 14 years. All bases taught the same subjects in the same format. Once faculty development organizations were deregulated in what they had to teach, they not only adopted new strategies and tools, but developed new courses to meet emerging and local needs.

Finally, no one could have planned for the exigencies that came along with COVID-19. Training organizations had to quickly respond to challenges including teleworking staff, students without ability to travel, quarantine restrictions for students that had to travel, and many other issues unique to individual organizations. When asked, the representatives of the training groups responsible for policy agreed that the streamlined policy enabled leaders to respond to the pandemic.

Air Education and Training Command leaders charged training wing commanders to move out rapidly to keep students and staff safe, and continue providing quality training. The rate of change was unprecedented, as commanders were asked “what can we do *now* to make changes *today*?”

What was amazing to me is that the questions that would have been asked were this to happen 2 years ago, did not cross the minds of the commanders who were focused on the above. There was no concern or hindrance to action as no guidance stood in their way. They knew what to do, and were empowered with the ability to do it. (K. Johnson, personal communication, May 1, 2020)

The policy changes of the last year empowered commanders to rapidly adapt to changing environments without asking for permission or for waivers to policy. Nobody said “Wait you cannot do that!” Quite the opposite, leaders asked “What do you need to succeed?” As a result of this shift in organizational culture (R. Watkins & Leigh, 2010), squadrons are now confident that rapid change is not only possible, but encouraged.

Since the pandemic, the pace of innovation is unprecedented. In-residence courses at several locations are using distance learning technology to increase social distance. Students attend live classes while staying in their dormitory. This not only reduced contact, but shown unexpected benefits in learning outcomes. Classes that students once traveled to attend are now taught using synchronous online instruction. This move made many courses accessible to new audiences that would not have attended before. Not long after social distancing guidance was recommended one of our training managers noted “we’ve innovated more in the last 40 days than we did in the last 40 years. We’ve experienced the benefits of this new freedom in the classroom and we’re never going back.” (R. Crawford, personal communication, March 28, 2020)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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