

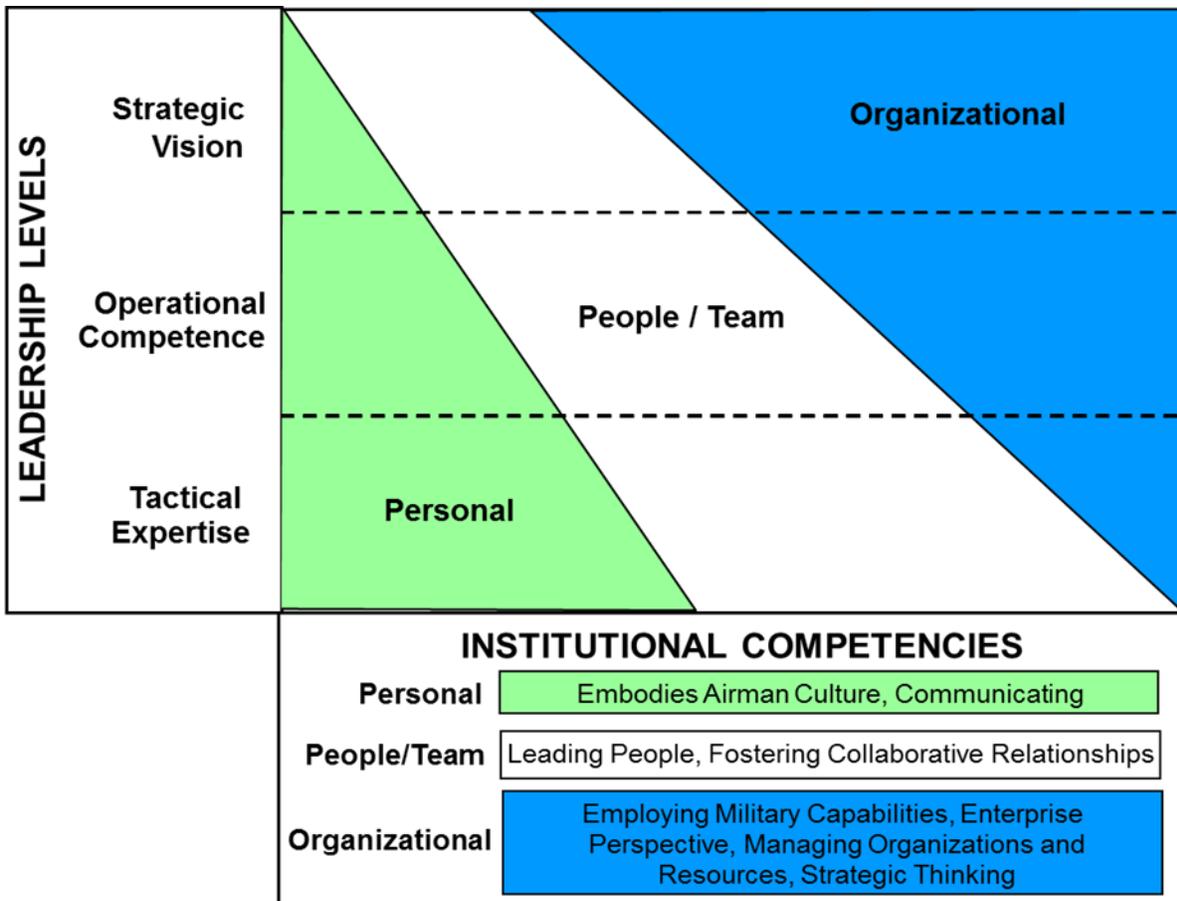


VOLUME 2 LEADERSHIP

LEVELS OF AIR FORCE LEADERSHIP

Last Updated: 8 August 2015

The Air Force operates in a dynamic global context across multiple domains requiring leadership skills at a variety of levels. The Air Force characterizes these leadership levels as the tactical expertise, operational competence, and strategic vision levels.¹ The leadership level at which an Airman operates determines the [institutional competencies](#) required to lead Airmen in mission accomplishment. As shown in the figure below, as Airmen progress from the tactical expertise to strategic vision leadership levels, emphasis on the use of institutional competencies shifts from personal to organizational, with a generally consistent focus on people/team competencies.



¹ Terms for the leadership levels were approved by General John P. Jumper, CSAF (2001-2005).

Tactical Expertise



I think it's important that leadership opportunities be forced to as low a commissioned level as possible. That's a good time to start looking at a guy. For heaven's sake! What can you put in his ER besides the fact that the guy is a great stick, he does well on instruments, is a good gunner, and he talked to the Kiwanis club once a quarter downtown. What else can you put in there? How do you separate the wheat from the chaff? Get him in a leadership role!

**—General Hoyt S. Vandenberg
CSAF, 1948-1953**

Personal competencies are the primary focus at the tactical expertise level. Airmen are also gaining a general understanding of team leadership and an appreciation for organizational leadership. Airmen at this level master their core duty skills, develop experiences in applying those skills, and begin to acquire the knowledge and experience that will produce the qualities essential to effective leadership. Airmen at the tactical expertise level are the Air Force's technicians and specialists. They learn about themselves as leaders and how their leadership acumen can affect others through the use of ethical leadership. They are being assimilated into the Air Force culture and are adopting the core values of our Service. Airmen at this level are focused on honing followership abilities, motivating subordinates and influencing peers to accomplish the mission while developing a warrior ethos. They are learning about themselves and their impact on others in roles as both follower and leader in addition to developing their communication skills.

Tactical expertise in the Air Force encompasses chiefly the unit and sub-unit levels where individuals perform specific tasks that, in the aggregate, contribute to the execution of operations at the operational level. Tactical expertise includes activities such as flying an aircraft, guarding a perimeter, loading a pallet, setting up a firewall for a base, identifying a potentially hostile radar return, treating a broken arm, and many other forms of activity, accomplished by both military and civilian personnel.

Training and education at the tactical level include training in a primary skill and initial education in leadership. New Airmen should be educated in the common Service culture and should understand the core values that bond Airmen together. In addition, they should receive an understanding of, and gain expertise in, their unique specialty. This may be accomplished by the following tactical education and training activities:

- ★ Basic and primary developmental education and undergraduate academic degree programs.
- ★ Specialty training.

✦ Continuation training.

The following examples illustrate use of the above activities: Junior enlisted Airmen will complete basic training for indoctrination into Air Force culture, attend the relevant technical schools to obtain the occupational skills needed for their duties, and then receive orientation into their new organization at the local First Term Airman Center. As they gain experience and advance within their units, they will attend Airman Leadership School to enhance their ability to function as leaders within their organizations. Similarly, recently commissioned officers will obtain indoctrination to the Air Force through their commissioning sources, then receive the appropriate technical training. After several years of practical experience in their initial assignments, they will receive further leadership education through Squadron Officer School. Air Force civilian members may similarly attend these or comparable civilian education courses. Throughout this time, Airmen gain experience in their specific duties through daily performance, making them more competent and qualified to accomplish their assigned missions. Throughout these education and training events, individuals are assessed to monitor their progress. Mentoring by those senior to these Airmen and civilians is vital to their progress in the Air Force.

Effective commanders and supervisors find the proper balance of training, education, and leadership opportunities to develop the tactical competence of their Airmen. They should work closely with educators and trainers and follow the guiding principles of the personal institutional competencies when developing their Airmen at the tactical level.

Leaders should also ensure an inclusive environment among Airmen in this tactical level, to encourage their full participation and development. The diversity of perspectives and backgrounds at this level, if properly incorporated, strengthens the Air Force, and encourages talent at this level to pursue greater responsibilities and growth into the higher leadership levels.

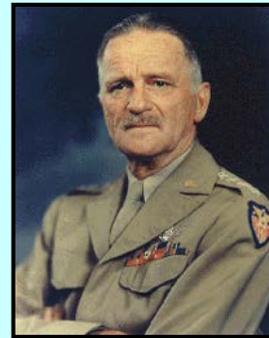
The leadership study, “Security Police Defense of Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa Air Bases, January 1968,” in [Appendix D](#) is provided to present tactical expertise in a concrete and demonstrable setting.

Operational Competence

The full-spectrum of institutional competencies is balanced across the operational competence leadership level. At this level, Airmen are able to understand the broader Air Force perspective and the integration of diverse people and their capabilities in the execution of operations. This level is where an Air Force member transitions from being a specialist to understanding Air Force operational capabilities. Based on a thorough understanding of themselves as leaders and followers and how they influence others, they apply an understanding of organizational and team dynamics. They continue to develop personal leadership skills, while developing their people/team competencies. The operational level includes continued broadening of experience.

Leading people through developing and inspiring others, taking care of people, and taking advantage of the diversity in the ranks of followers is vital to this level of leadership.² Also at this level, fostering collaborative relationships through building teams and coalitions, especially within a large organization, and negotiating with others, often external to the organization, becomes a necessary competence. Airmen operating at this level of leadership normally assume such responsibilities following intermediate developmental education. The focus of Air Force organization and employment is at the operational level. It is here where warfighting is executed and day-to-day command and control of Air Force operations are carried out. At this level, the tactical skills and expertise Airmen developed earlier are employed alongside new leadership opportunities to affect an entire theater or joint operations area. By now the Airman has developed a family of skills at both the personal and people/team level, grounded in the Airman's perspective and guided by ingrained core values.

(General Carl) Spaatz possessed a good measure of (a) necessary ingredient of a successful general—the ability to inspire trust in both superiors and subordinates. His chief lieutenant, Jimmy Doolittle, in an oral-history interview with Ronald R. Fogleman, then a major, stated, “I idolize General Spaatz. He is perhaps the only man that I have ever been closely associated with whom I have never known to make a bad decision.” This praise, coming from a man of enormous physical and moral courage and high intellect, speaks for itself.



**—Dr. Richard Davis, published in
Aerospace Power Journal, Winter 1997**

**General Carl Spaatz,
First CSAF, 1947-1948**

Education and training at the operational level allow Airmen to integrate expertise to produce operational effects for Air Force missions. At this level, education assumes a larger role in an Airman's development. Intermediate developmental education is intended to enhance professional competence. Operational-level education focuses on furthering expertise across related specialties and increasing leadership responsibilities. Operational-level training continues to build tactical skills and develops professional competence.

Operational education, training, and experience may consist of:

- ★ Intermediate developmental education.
- ★ Joint professional military education.
- ★ Professional continuing education programs.
- ★ Advanced academic degree programs.

² For additional information on diversity in the Air Force, see AAFP 36-70, [Diversity](#).

- ★ Education with industry.
- ★ Fellowships.
- ★ Specialty schools/advanced training.
- ★ Experience through career broadening assignments within the Air Force.
- ★ Training through assignments at the major command or combatant command level.



During an operation, decisions have usually to be made at once; there may be no time to review the situation or even to think it through.... If the mind is to emerge unscathed from this relentless struggle with the unforeseen, two qualities are indispensable: First, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light [commander's vision] which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead.

—Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*

The following examples describe elements of operational competence: Majors will be expected to perform duties as flight commanders or operations officers to gain skills at a higher level in the squadron and complete intermediate developmental education or a selected graduate-level degree program to further their learning as maturing professionals. Noncommissioned officers complete the basic enlisted professional military education requirements based on their time in service. Civilian personnel at this level fill positions with greater organizational and technical responsibilities. As with their military counterparts, they may be selected to attend an advanced academic degree program; Service schools, such as intermediate developmental education; or education with industry.

The leadership study, “General Creech and the Transformation of Tactical Air Command,” in [Appendix E](#) is provided to present operational competence in a concrete and demonstrable setting.

Strategic Vision

At this level, Airmen combine highly developed personal and people/team institutional competencies to apply broad organizational competencies. They develop a deep understanding of Air Force capabilities and how Airmen achieve synergistic results and desired effects with their operational capabilities. They also understand how the Air Force operates within joint, multinational, and interagency relationships. At this level,

an Airman's required competencies transition from the integration of people with missions to leading and directing exceptionally complex and multi-tiered organizations.

At this level of leadership, an Airman employs military capabilities, applying the operational and strategic arts with a thorough understanding of capabilities of units, the Air Force at large, and joint and coalition forces. The Airman with strategic vision has an enterprise perspective, with a comprehension of the structure and relationships in the overall enterprise with which he or she is involved. This perspective requires an awareness of the processes of our government and of the global, regional, and cultural issues surrounding a given mission. Strategic thinking is imperative at this level, emphasizing the need for a broad vision and adaptability to circumstances for which earlier leadership challenges in his or her career have prepared the Airman. Managing organizations and resources become more significant to exercising leadership at this level.



Hindenburg looked back to Hannibal's Battle of Cannae, and made his disposition to fight the Russians at Tannenberg. Napoleon studied the campaigns of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan, the Mongol. The navies draw their inspiration from the Battle at Actium in the time of the Romans, and the sea fight of Trafalgar. In the development of airpower, one has to look ahead and not backward, and figure out what is going to happen, not too much what has happened. That is why the older services have been psychologically unfit to develop this new arm to the fullest extent practicable with the methods and means at hand.

—Brigadier General Billy Mitchell

The level of strategic vision includes challenges to gain breadth of experience and leadership perspective (e.g., educational opportunities; training focused on the institutional Air Force; joint, intergovernmental, business, and international views). Senior developmental education strengthens an Airman's grasp of the complexities required to operate at this level of leadership. Strategic vision focuses on the effects an Airman can have across a major command, a theater, the Air Force, or even other Services or the Department of Defense. A commander of Air Force forces dual-hatted as a joint force air component commander, the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, or a Senior Executive Service civilian responsible for Service personnel policies operate at this level. Senior leaders need strategic comprehension and competence, as well as broad perspectives and the ability to effectively lead in an expeditionary environment. At the strategic level of leadership, Airmen receive further opportunities to expand their

breadth of experience and have the greatest ability to impact and support the Air Force's role in military operations.³

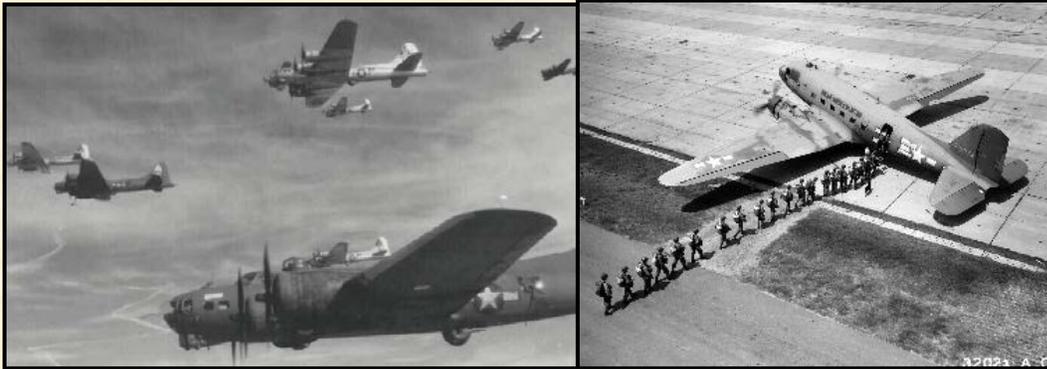
Education, training, and experience at the strategic vision level help an Airman develop the skills to form accurate frames of reference, make sound decisions, uncover underlying connections to deal with more challenging issues, and engage in creative, innovative thinking that recognizes new solutions and new options. At this level, education assumes a predominant role in an Airman's development. Education emphasizes understanding of broad concepts and offers insights into complex issues not commonly available in operational environments. It focuses on the institutional Air Force and joint, interagency, business, and international views. Exercises and wargames provide opportunities to validate training and education. Development at the strategic level is commonly presented through:

- ★ Senior developmental education.
- ★ Operational assignments.
- ★ Exercises and wargames.
- ★ Self-development.
- ★ Mentoring.

At the strategic vision level, assignment to senior command (for officers) or staff (for all Airmen) duties in both Service and joint or coalition organizations round out the skills of the Airman through experiential growth. Senior developmental education programs, such as Air War College or the Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy, improve breadth of professional development.

The leadership study, "Strategic Noncommissioned Officer Leadership and Establishing a Strategic Vision for the Enlisted Force," in [Appendix F](#) is provided to present strategic vision in a concrete and demonstrable setting.

³ Policy guidance on force development through the leadership levels can be found in AFI 36-2640, [Executing Total Force Development](#), and AFI 36-2618, *The Enlisted Force Structure*.



The greatest lesson of this war has been the extent to which air, land, and sea operations can and must be coordinated by joint planning and unified command.

—General Henry H. “Hap” Arnold
