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GROWING TOGETHER:
PERSONAL REFLECTION AND UNDERSTANDING CAN FOSTER TEAM
DEVELOPMENT

by

RACHAEL LAYNE

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SYNTHESIS*
MASTER OF ARTS
CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

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Abstract: This paper describes my journey through the CCT program and how it impacted me as an individual, as an officer in the Air Force, as well as those with whom I interact on a regular basis. I explore the concepts of creative problem-solving, dialogue processes, reflective practices, and research and engagement and how they enabled me to be a better leader. These topics oscillate between introspective ideas and self-development to focusing on how a better understanding of one's self will allow for a better understanding of group and team dynamics. The final portion of the paper describes the culmination of the skills and practices gained through CCT in a curriculum designed to teach Air Force weather personnel CCT concepts through intentionally designed meteorological training.

* The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.

PART ONE

GROWING TOGETHER: HOW PERSONAL REFLECTION AND UNDERSTANDING CAN FOSTER TEAM DEVELOPMENT

RACHAEL LAYNE – UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON – CCT 694

INTRODUCTION

People tend to have emotional reactions to events or items where their expectations are not met. Whether reality falls below their expectations or highly exceeds them, the shock of reality nearly always elicits an emotional response. Think of a surprise party. Why do we work so hard to keep the honoree from finding out about the party? Because if they know that a party is coming, then their expectations will be met when they arrive and find a party. However, a person who is expecting a mundane evening at home will be shocked when the reality is that their evening is filled with friends, family, and a party. Whether or not that is a positive or negative emotion depends on the person.

Meeting the expectations of other people is the safest realm in which to function. It keeps all others happy and at ease, if not dull and mundane. Challenging the average expectation of how an organization, relationship, or event should function inherently incurs the risk of strong positive and/or negative reactions. This can often act as a deterrent, but I want to show how, through challenging the status-quo, an individual can foster an environment of personal insight and team growth.

I have worked with many teams in the past few years who are mines of unlocked potential. I have felt so burdened to see highly intelligent and motivated individuals fall by the wayside because they have never been given the opportunity for growth and development. Many leaders squash engagement and desire for growth in their teams by withholding trust and micromanaging their work. This has led me to a place where I know that I must develop as an individual and as a leader in order to develop my team.

BACKGROUND

Many of the decisions I have made during my adult life have been on a whim of sorts. Being a middle child in a family of eight, I can easily see the pros and cons of nearly any situation and be content in most situations. But rather than reason myself into a vicious cycle of weighing pros and cons, I realize that some decisions just have to be made with a spark of adventure and courage.

My first such decision was in choosing a college after high school. None of my older siblings had gone away to college – I would be the first in my immediate family to receive a Bachelor's degree besides my father. But instead of being sensible and going to a college in my home state of Washington, I wanted to break the cycle of parental dependence that I saw in so much of my generation. With this vision driving my choices, I quickly researched schools that offered a meteorology program with the most inexpensive out-of-state tuition. The winner was the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. This was the only university that I applied to and was, thankfully, accepted quite quickly.

Despite their wonderful emotional support, my parents were not in a position to fund an in-state degree, much less an out-of-state tuition bill. As my second life-shaping decision as an adult, I decided that I would join Air Force Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) in hopes of winning a scholarship to pay for my undergraduate schooling. By the grace of God, I joined the program right as the Air Force was funding immediate scholarships for meteorology majors and was awarded a full-ride scholarship my second semester in college. The only problem I faced now was that I had no idea how to be an officer in the Air Force; I had never met anyone in the military until I walked into the ROTC office for my initial interview.

As it turns out, a little hard work and dedication to studies goes a long way. I commissioned top of my ROTC class and graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor's in meteorology from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in the spring 2012. By August of the same year, I was on my way to my first duty assignment at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana. The next year flew by in scenes of moving into my first house, being sent to training, making wonderful

friends, working every hour of the night and day, and being generally overwhelmed and exhausted. The Operational Weather Squadrons where all new weather Lieutenants go are not for the faint of heart. The mission of these units is fast-paced and incredibly important, but the challenges of the work were often not matched by the prerequisite training courses and the shift workers rarely felt of concern to their leadership.

At that time, I did not have the resiliency to make the best of the situation and decided that the Air Force was not the life for me and decided that I would separate after my four year contract was up. I began to look into online Master's programs in education and educational administration in order to set myself up for jobs outside of the Air Force. However, I did not have the educational or experience background that most of the accredited programs required. As I expanded my search, I came across the Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. This program appealed to me in the flexibility of allowing me to study educational concepts, while not pigeon-holing myself if I chose a career path outside of the field of education. Furthermore, I assumed that the concepts I learned in this program would help me tackle some of the challenges that I would have through the next three years of active duty Air Force service.

A PATTERN OF REFLECTION

As soon as I began my courses in the CCT program, I was shocked at how immediately the concepts applied to my daily life. It challenged me and molded me into a proactive leader and teammate. As I reflect on my journey through CCT, a pattern in my projects emerges. In my first class, Creative Thinking, I focused internally on my own problem solving processes and developed new ways of approaching conflict that arose in my work life. In my second class, Dialogue Processes, I focused on organizational change within the Air Force, applying the concepts I learned to those I had influence over. Each of my projects swing back and forth, like a pendulum, between an introspective assessment on how I approach life and processes and a focus on team-building and organizational dynamics. Some courses gave me the opportunity to complete both a personal and a group-focused project.

What this shows me is an inherent link between bettering one's self and bettering one's environment and teammates. To be perfectly honest, many of the projects I completed were born out of real life frustration with myself or with coworkers. But I found that gaining an understanding of myself and my tendencies gave me a hunger to understand those around me better and to help them do the same. For the next few pages, I will detail the intertwining nature of the scenarios that drove my projects and how each of these projects fostered life-long learning.

CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING AND TRIVIALITY

On my first day of active duty, I was 21 years old and ready to take on the Air Force just the way that ROTC had taught me. I had been warned from early on in my ROTC courses of “those Lieutenants” who kicked down the door on their first day and assumed that they were experts, only to fall on their face because they did not earn the respect or support of their troops. Being naturally reserved, this would not have been my method even if I had not been warned earlier. However, I saw the concept of “not being an expert” manifest in another way. I assumed that the answers that I was given by those who had been in the Air Force nearly as long as I had been alive were always right. How could they be in the Air Force that long and not know how to make things work? As it turned out, being in the Air Force for many years tends to separate leadership from their team who was on the operations floor making the mission happen.

As I was learning problem-solving concepts through Creative Thinking, it occurred to me that I was gaining the tools I needed to assess my situation and formulate a confident counter-solution. Coming from a highly technical undergraduate background, some of the activities that we completed, such as writing letters to from the perspective of historical figures or finding images in scribbles, seemed fairly trivial and elementary. But what these activities taught me was that just because something may seem trivial does not mean that it is not important. Due to life circumstances and my upbringing, I was often content when things were not perfect, because I rarely had the means to change them. Now, as an officer, I not only had the ability to address things that were trivially incorrect, but I also had the responsibility. As we worked our way through Gary Davis' *Creativity is Forever* and I clung particularly to chapters seven, “Creative Inspiration through Analogical Thinking” and eight “Brainstorming and Other Techniques of

Creative Thinking and Problem Solving.” The problem solving skills I learned from these chapters and the lecture on the Five Why’s established a confidence in me to address problems.

The problem that first caught my attention during this period involved our Flight Chief’s schedule-writing habits. He would schedule too many people for each shift and nixed monthly 3-day weekends that we had traditionally received as shift workers. The result was a severe decline in morale and a loss of trust between our Flight leadership and Airmen. More shifts with less work. It made no sense. But because of what I learned through Creative Thinking and reading Davis’ work, I was able to address the situation with the right people and present a convincing argument with a solution. Until then, it had been standard that the Flight was at the mercy of the leadership. Some people, our Flight Chief in particular, did not like being challenged, but most others saw it as a positive change. They were now able to be involved in making decisions that impacted their lives.

LISTENING TO FACILITATE DIALOGUE

Now that my unit was afforded the opportunity to participate in some decision-making, we needed to develop as a team in order to make effective suggestions. At this same time, I was also enrolled in Dialogue Processes. I do not think of myself as much of a talker and am often described as reserved or quiet. As an officer, I often feel the pressure to be more of a “Type-A” personality, directing conversations and exuding energy. Through Otto Scharmer’s coaching circle outlined in *Theory U*, I came to value the skill of listening and made it a point to coach people without them really knowing it. People in the military tend to shut down when something feels formal or forced, so I let the dialogue unfold naturally using the coaching techniques that I practiced with my classmates.

From personal life challenges to frustrations with the Flight Chief’s schedules, I had the chance to know and work with my team on a level that many officers rarely experience. I cherish those conversations and that team to this day. It was remarkable to see how a little positive communication and individual reinforcement changed the temperament of the team. We went from the typical military banter and ribbing to genuine expressions of appreciation. This level of

effective communication moved us into being taken more seriously when presenting leadership with ideas and solutions to preexisting problems.

In addition to fostering positive communication habits with my own team, I also had the opportunity to develop a professional development seminar for all the officers in my unit. Two days of activities came to a close and I had the opportunity to facilitate a discussion of what it means to be an officer and how different types of people bring various strengths to a team. It was a special moment to see officers who had been active duty for 1 year to those who had been active duty for 15 years be vulnerable and open about their weaknesses and to reaffirm each other in their capabilities as officers. It is not something that happens in a military setting often and I admire each of them for their courage in approaching dialogue and I am grateful for having the understanding of the stages of dialogue in order to facilitate it.

INTENTIONALITY AND PERSONALITY TYPES

After a year and a half I left the Operational Weather Squadron and left for an airfield support Weather Flight at Osan Airbase in the Republic of Korea. This job was far more fulfilling than the previous one and I began to reconsider my decision to separate after four years in the Air Force. However, I was still going to continue with the CCT degree program and enrolled in Reflective Practices. This particular course allowed me to both understand myself at a deeper level and to understand how I was different from those I worked with.

Much of my focus in this class revolved around Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In this book, he defines integrity as the ability to "make and keep promises to yourself." This really struck me because, as I reflected on my actions, I realized that I was terrible at keeping promises to myself. Keeping promises to others was no problem, but I prioritized promises to myself at a much lower level. They were not "real" promises. So, I identified small habits that I wanted to pick up to get myself used to intentionally keeping promises to myself. The first habit that I adopted was making my bed. I started the day by saying, "future you is as important as current you, take care of yourself by making your bed now so you do not have to later." It was remarkable how being faithful in these small tasks gave me more ambition to accomplish larger tasks for myself and for others. Last year, a 2014

commencement speech given to graduates of the University of Texas by Navy SEAL Admiral William McRaven went viral on social media. He stated that you should always make your bed in the morning because a taste of accomplishment will make you eager for more throughout your day. This was incredibly reaffirming to hear. It was like I had discovered a secret that was valued by social media users on my own, with the guidance of the Reflective Practices course.

Throughout the Reflective Practices course, many conversations regarding personality types and their ability to participate in reflection naturally made consider the role of personality type in group dynamics. This was particularly interesting as my new boss and I had a difficult time communicating in an effective and uplifting manner. I constantly felt like he was second guessing me and nit-picking my work, while still expecting me to be an independent leader for my team. It was frustrating and put a strain on our working relationship. In a spin-off in my quest to keep promises to myself, I delved into researching how various personality types communicate and prioritize actions. The Air Force uses a personality test called the Four Lenses (Shiple Communication), which boils all personalities into a combination of Orange (fun-seeking), Green (researcher, process improver), Blue (seeks harmonious relationships), and Gold (values structure and order). Reflecting on the way my behaved and the way that I am, I determined that my boss was an Orange-Green, while I was a Blue-Gold. I immediately understood that he did not nit-pick my work because it was wrong or he disapproved, but because he was always seeking process development. And the ways that he gave this feedback may have seemed harsh because he did not have the interpersonal sensitivity of a Blue to communicate it in an encouraging way. That simple practice of reflection brought about a huge change in our ability to work together and I still consider him a close mentor to this day.

The impact was so strong that I have started having those who I supervise take a brief test that is a spin-off of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. In our initial feedback, I share my personality type with them so that they understand how I communicate and we can address potential conflicts before they arise. This practice has served to create a more understanding and thoughtful team of individuals, because they not only consider how they interact with me, but how the personality types of their troops will affect those relationships.

DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT AND TEAM BUILDING

After a year at Osan Airbase, the Air Force saw it fit to move me up the road 50 miles to US Army Garrison Yongsan where I would be leading a team of forecasters as they provided weather support for the top US and Korean Generals in the Republic of Korea (ROK). This position gave me the opportunity to work with all of the branches of the US military, all of the branches of the ROK military, and representatives of other militaries all over the world. Despite the increased frustration of working with inter-departmental and inter-cultural teams, the job satisfaction of working in these teams was higher than any I had experienced in the past. The genuine appreciation that was developed between all members of the teams was inspiring.

Remembering the value that I found in taking the time to understand what made my last boss tick, I took the opportunity in my Research and Engagement project to understand the core values held by various cultures and how these can be capitalized upon to build a high-performing team. I also explored the leadership dynamics that are needed to ensure that the strengths of the individuals were realized and put to use.

Start With Why by Simon Sinek and *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies* by Robert J. House, et al. strongly guided my research in this project. What I found in both of these texts was that despite seemingly vast differences between cultures (cultures here can be defined by age group, geographic region, gender, etc.), the basic human need for community and inclusion will drive people to a cause and to a team. The question from there is, how do we manage cultural differences and convince people that our team is worthwhile? My research showed that effective leaders of diverse teams distinguish themselves by creating shared experiences in order to create a team identity.

After coming to this conclusion, a reflection of my time working under General Vincent Brooks at US Army Garrison Yongsan, I was astounded by how cleverly he embraced these concepts and managed to lead a force of half a million people from over seven countries. Just before I left, he established a requirement that all of his top US and ROK staff would learn how to introduce themselves and their counterpart in both English and Korean. While seemingly trivial (remember what I learned in Creative Thinking?), this one requirement created shared

experiences and a team identity rooted in mutual respect. There was a noticeable increase in the warmth with which the senior staff would greet each other before each briefing. It was the most simple and clever act of leadership that I have seen.

RELEVANCE

Stepping back to my strong emotions towards seemingly trivial tasks that I experienced in Creative Thinking and throughout all CCT courses, I was challenged by professors to explain why it was so important for me to focus my attention only on research that would be applicable to my abilities as a leader or to a larger group. What I discovered was that I have developed a passion for relevance. Through further reflection, I was able to narrow down why relevance is so important to me.

As a weather officer, my biggest battle is fighting my career field's slow slip into irrelevance. Technology has made it so that individuals can get weather forecasts on their phone, anywhere in the world, in just moments. Furthermore, there has been a lot of poor career field management, training programs, and policy established that prevent our forecasters from being able to exploit the weather to their fullest capabilities and make themselves that much more valuable to the aviators who we support. In this career field, relevance is life or death.

I do not have control over most of these factors that are contributing to our decline as a career field. But what I do have control over is how my 17-person team does business and supports our airfield and aviators. The first step in re-establishing our team as a valued members of the units at large is by establishing training standards and programs that will not only develop my team members into good weather forecasters, but will also teach them how to apply CCT concepts to their daily activities in order to give needed and useful support in novel ways.

In the final swing of the pendulum back to organizational change, the remainder of this paper details the need and the intent of the curriculum that I have built as my CCT synthesis project.

PART TWO

TRAINING FOR RELEVANCE

THE SITUATION

In my four assignments with the Air Force, I have only been impressed by a handful of my Airmen's ability to be able to think critically and creatively. Many of them are stuck in a vicious cycle of recurring daily checklists, smothering career field policy, and micro-managing bosses. The thought of making a decision on their own is overwhelming and the result is often poor decisions because they have never been taught how to appropriately assess a situation and then come up with common sense guidance when written guidance does not exist.

I see this as a career field epidemic. Individuals of equivalent rank in other career fields are trusted with many troops and projects to supervise and they develop the ability and confidence to tackle problems. However, the weather career field requires some of the highest entrance test scores of any career field in the Air Force. This is not an issue of intelligence, but an issue of culture. My forecasters are incredibly intelligent and they know that they have been reduced to nothing more weather model translators by Air Force policy. Thus, they completely disengage from their work, knowing that their potential is being wasted.

My intent is to give my team the opportunity to flex their potential as trainers and as CCT practitioners. However, with maxed out schedules, I designed this curriculum to flow into a standard weather training program, teaching CCT concepts through implicit practice.

PHASE ONE – TRAIN THE TRAINER

Note: Appendix 1 shows a sample of this seminar. To view the full slideshow, please visit <https://goo.gl/mcpS4y>

At this point, my forecasters are qualified to train new personnel as soon as they are duty position qualified themselves. They are not taught how to be effective trainers and, thus, training becomes largely personality-driven rather than standardized for all personnel. Additionally, the only resemblance of a curriculum that they are given to guide new personnel through their duty qualification is a task checklist. How they manage and pace that checklist is, again, personality driven. This leaves a lot of room for the reinforcement of incorrect habits and facilitates a very passive training environment.

Think about scenarios where you have been given a task with vague instructions, if any instructions at all. What emotions did you experience? Bitterness and disengagement are the first two that come to mind for me. These are the same emotions that my trainers are experiencing as they are asked to train others for the first time. In order to combat this lack of preparedness, the first phase of the training curriculum is a seminar where the trainers are equipped with an understanding of the training curriculum and the background behind the methods that are used.

This serves to give the trainers the background information that they need in order to be engaged and effective trainers. The seminar will include more of an explicit explanation of the CCT concepts that are being taught through the training curriculum.

First, leaning on the concepts of Dialogue Processes, I will guide my trainers through the ability to establish an environment where questions and talking through thought processes is encouraged. As one of my primary intents is to make sure that my forecasters develop strong problem-solving processes, I need those who are in training to be able to feel comfortable talking through their thought processes so that their trainers can identify and missteps of logic or areas for improvement. They will essentially take on the role of dialogue coach when they are working with their trainee in problem-based learning sets.

After the trainers have established a positive trainer-trainee relationship, they will next need to be able to assess the trainee's knowledge gap. Has this person been through similar training before? Or are they straight out of the Initial Skills Course with no operational experience?

Initially, this can be assessed through a short conversation about past history. However, as training progresses, the knowledge gap will need to be continuously reassessed. Here, I will introduce Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of Flow. As our trainers push trainees to a state of Flow, they will be more engaged and learn the concepts more effectively.

As mentioned earlier, many of the modules will have an opportunity for problem-based learning. In order to make sure that my trainers are engaged in the problem-based learning process, I need them to understand the importance of letting their trainee go through process of developing an answer, whether it is right or wrong. The process, not the answer, is what is significant.

Next, I will cover concepts of basic problem-solving. I will be using the OODA-Loop process, which is essentially *the* Air Force-endorsed problem-solving process (Polvarosa, C.). It stands for Observe, Orient, Decide, Act. Though all of my trainers will probably roll their eyes at hearing about the now cliché OODA-Loop, I need for them to have a problem-solving tool in their back pocket so that they can guide their trainees through the same steps of logic. As this is an already-known process, I will simply need for them to understand the importance of the application.

Once the trainers move through problem-based learning sets, they will be encouraged to guide their trainee through a quick reflection of why they came up with the answer they did and if there were perhaps other or better answers. This will help the trainee internalize the practice of learning from each forecast and real life problem that they solve. It will foster a process of continuous improvement.

Finally, I will reiterate that the trainees need to understand that they will be given enough self-sufficiency to be dangerous. Flight leadership will not micromanage daily operations and expect that all certified personnel can manage a reasonable shift load on their own. I will explain that while we have Air Force and Flight standards, the style with which these standards are met are details that forecasters can own and be creative with.

From here, the session will move into a brief walk-through of the curriculum, allowing for any questions or issues to be addressed prior to the trainers using it with the trainees. Once this portion is complete, the trainers will be expected to have both the tools and the materials to develop our new Airmen into excellent forecasters and CCT practitioners.

This also provides the primary evaluation forum. This is where more experienced weather forecasters will be able to look at the curriculum and provide critique and ideas for improvement. They will also be prompted to provide feedback as they walk their trainees through the curriculum and come up with new ideas or find the need for additional information or guidance.

PHASE TWO – TRAINING CURRICULUM

Note: Appendix 2 shows a sample of this curriculum. To view the full curriculum, please visit <https://goo.gl/dejnMJ>

The on-the-job training curriculum will be broken into 16 modules covering specific topics. These modules will be paced out based on the trainer's assessment of the trainee's knowledge gap, with the general guidance that forecasters who have had operational experience will complete one module per day and those who have no operational experience will complete one module per week.

The curriculum will begin with an introduction where the trainee has the opportunity to talk about their prior forecasting experience, giving the trainer the ability to assess the knowledge gap and to establish the rapport required to move into dialogue throughout the training process. Each subsequent module will be pre-built with over-arching Guidance and intent, Resources that the trainer and trainee can reference, specific Tasks to accomplish, and two to five Scenarios that present the trainee with real-life scenarios that I have seen or been told about during this assignment.

The Guidance is in place to set the scene and prime both the trainer and the trainee for the tasks they will be accomplishing in the given module. This will serve to present Sinek's "Why" this

particular module is important. It is very easy to forget the role of weather in the strategic mission of the Air Force and the Guidance block will refocus the training each time a new module is completed.

Lists of Resources are given so that the trainee will have a future list of guiding documents and online resources. Each list of Resources applies specifically to the Tasks and Scenarios presented in the module. The trainee will have the opportunity to get used to looking to written guidance when answering a question that they do not have an immediate answer for.

Tasks will relate directly to the Topic of the module and will serve to satisfy both Air Force weather training requirements and to guide the training process through the various activities that the trainee will need to be proficient in prior to certification.

Aside from creating a standardized training process, Scenarios are what I see as the most crucial part of this curriculum. Because all training is on-the-job training, it made the most sense to employ problem-based learning and the case method used by Harvard Business School. Each Scenario is based on real life problems that I have seen during this assignment. The Scenarios are designed to guide the trainee through the process of researching written guidance for problems that have written guidance and to help them leverage related guidance and experience to solve problems that are not covered in specific guidance.

Additionally, the last module before the trainee progresses to perform all duties primarily on their own guide the forecaster through some CCT concepts in a more explicit manner. The Topic of this module is Shift Management because these are the skills that will separate a manager from a standard worker. The Tasks require the forecasters to learn how to guide customers to the appropriate products for them, how to ask “why?” in order to understand how to support new mission sets, and how to proactively accomplish research to improve products and processes.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

This curriculum has been designed in the hopes that the concepts that have been applied will foster the growth and engagement of my team as both forecasters and CCT practitioners – even if they do not know it. It breaks my heart to see such intelligent, capable individuals feel so insignificant simply because they have never been given the chance to develop their problem-solving skills. Maybe someday I will be in a position to effect change throughout the career field, but in the meantime I am looking forward to seeing what a team of empowered weather forecasters looks like. I would be willing to bet that they will find creative ways to remain relevant long after their peers in other locations.

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Appendix 1 – Train the Trainer



Trainer's Course

3 OSS/OSW



Problem-Based Learning

Forecasters will be faced with problems that must be solved every day

Problem-based learning gives trainees the opportunity to face realistic problems while still having the safety net of a trainer

How to facilitate

- Present them with the scenario, but let them think through the process
- When they present an answer, talk about why it's right or wrong
- Talk about other possible solutions, personal experiences





OODA Loop / Active Research

Observe, Orient, Decide, Act

Cliché, but the principle helps in stressful situations



Standards vs. Style

AFMANs, AFIs, SOPs, and Local Policy will define the standard to which we operate

Air Force core value: Excellence in all we do

The style with which forecasters complete given tasks is up to them, as long as it upholds the established standards

