

Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Lead-turning Leadership

"Successful implementation will depend upon strong leadership, a clear message and proactive education throughout the force. With a continued and sustained commitment to core values of leadership, professionalism and respect for all, I am convinced that the U.S. military can successfully accommodate and implement this change, as it has others in history."

*Defense Secretary
Dec. 18, 2010*

On 22 December 2010, President Barak Obama signed HR 2965, repealing Section 654 of Title 10 of the United States Code, known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell".¹ For most Americans, thoughts were on last minute preparations for the holidays. However, for the majority of the nearly 2.2 million men and women in the US Armed Forces, their thoughts shifted to figuring out what the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) would mean for them.

Back in my RF-4C days, one of the methods we used to defeat a Mig was to lead-turn him, unload (achieve zero-G), push the nose down, and accelerate in full afterburner. In our world, which included no offensive weapons on our jet, early acquisition of the target and making those initial moves were essential elements to success and survival in that air-to-air environment. The repeal of the Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) law provides leaders throughout the Air Force will similar opportunities for success. However, rather than making that lead turn away from the issue, we have the necessary tools to successfully embrace, engage head-on, and take positive measures implement the new policy.

Lead-turning the DADT Changes and Expectations

As it became apparent DADT would be repealed, the Air Force took a very proactive approach to "preparing the battlefield." For example, James A. Roy, Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, sent an e-mail to all Airmen on 10 December 2010, reminding them that "the Air Force Core Values guide us in all of our decisions as we rise to meet any challenge presented."² These enduring values anchor and bind Airmen together each and every day. Any compromise diminishes the character of our service." In essence, Chief Roy wanted to get the word out that the Air Force would support any decision regarding DADT, and that it was every Airman's duty to do so, no questions asked.

The foundation for these expectations are the Air Force Core Values. Integrity First deals with respect, for everyone, whether on or off duty.³ Service Before Self means Airmen must place the needs of the Air Force, and nation above personal needs--regardless of the challenges or risks. Excellence in All We Do refers to valuing each individual's contributions to the mission and recognizing the value of all Airmen. Men and women in the Air Force are expected to live by these core values, which drives attitudes and behaviors. CMSgt Roy ends his email with, "I know we can handle any challenge we are faced with."

His email was followed nine days later by an email from General Norton A. Schwartz, Chief of Staff of the Air Force.⁴ The repeal of DADT was just days away. General Schwartz told all Airmen that the Department of Defense would “proceed to implement the change in a responsible, deliberate, and careful manner.”

Clearly to the advantage of the Armed Forces, by allowing a degree of flexibility in implementation, Congressional language stipulates that repeal will occur “60 days after certification by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, and the President that the necessary policies and regulations have been prepared to implement repeal and that repeal is consistent with standards of military readiness, effectiveness, unit cohesion, recruiting and retention of the Armed Forces.” Obviously, this will take time to accomplish, and to date, no time-line has been established.

General Schwartz also reminded Airmen that everyone “should conduct themselves accordingly.” However, this raises the question, according to what? Many will assume that he is speaking of the Air Force Core Values.

General Schwartz went on to add that the Air Force will now begin to develop and provide education and training material “to help all Airmen understand what is expected in a post-repeal environment.” By that, he means that Airmen should not only understand the new policy, but also know how to behave. Seemingly, he expects the “standards of conduct” for all Airmen not to change, and that Airmen should treat everyone with dignity and respect. Clearly, his approach is professionally-based and centers on living by the Air Force Core Values. However, the repeal of DADT is more than just a simple policy change. It is a change that will fundamentally alter the fabric of the Air Force.

On 20 December 2010, Secretary of Defense Gates stated that the Defense Department will “move out carefully, deliberately and purposefully” to implement the repeal of DADT.⁵ On the surface, the statement makes sense, and suggests that DoD will take a slow and deliberate course. In the coming days, weeks, and months, staffs and senior leaders in DoD and the services will convene meetings, establish focus groups or IPTs, create policies, timelines, and author various educational materials. However, the “Department” will not be the ones implementing or even leading the change. This begs the question; who will implement the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell?

Each and every Airman will be responsible. Leaders (officer and enlisted) and commanders at all levels of the Air Force will guide the service successfully through the changes that lie ahead. Therefore, now is the time to prepare. Neither underestimate a leader’s role or contribution to the impending cultural transition, nor the affect this change will have on everyone in the service.

Leading Change: Lessons Learned Through Failure

About ten years ago, while I was the Director of the Supply Division for Air Force Space Command, the Air Force was in the process of implementing the organizational changes directed by General John Jumper, Chief of Staff of the Air Force. For the Logistics Directorate, this meant combining Supply, Plans, and Transportation into a single division to better mirror the new Logistics Readiness Officer concept and Mission Support Group structure. For my military members, this would mean new responsibilities and challenges. Some would lose their positions as supervisors while others would be given additional responsibilities. Although the realignment meant change, there was little risk, either personally or financially for my active duty personnel. The same was not true for the civilians in my division.

Combining three divisions into one would mean a fundamental restructuring of the civilian leadership within the Logistics Directorate. For example, where we had three secretaries (one for each division), there would now only be one. The same was true for the civilian division deputies. Only one would remain as the deputy for the new division. To compound the concerns within the civilian workforce, each division was made up of several branches and sections. The impending change effected everyone, with the potential of having profound professional, financial, and even psychological consequences. If leadership was ever needed, it was then.

As the Chief of the Supply division, I failed to lead my division through these difficult times. Having a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator of ISTJ (Introverted-Sensing-Thinking-Judging), I took a very pragmatic approach to the change. Being a “good soldier” for over 26 years, my approach was to simply tell my people “deal with it” and “shut up and color.” There was nothing that anyone could do about the change. It had already been decided. Furthermore, we had a very responsive civilian personnel system that would give priority to anyone who was going to be displaced by the reorganization. This did little to address the concerns of each individual.

My approach was incorrect. It was not that simple. The impending change and uncertainties created tremendous pressures throughout the organization. As a result, morale plummeted. There was not a single military member or civilian that was not affected in some way. What I had failed to do was recognize my limitations. I was not self-aware. In addition, I failed to responsibly prepare myself, and my division for the impending change.

Hopefully, leaders and Airmen facing the current change in policy will not make the same mistakes I made. Whether you perceive the changes to be significant or insignificant, they will have profound personal and organizational consequences. By preparing yourself and your organization early, you can effectively lead your organization through the changes and create those intended success-driven consequences rather than reacting to a plethora of ugly unintended consequences. Leaders must lead in times of change, not sit back and assume that the Air Force will do it by the release of a policy letter or Air Force Instruction.

Everyone will have an opinion about the repeal of DADT, and this change will be fraught with unique challenges that are unlike any you may have experienced in the past. Furthermore, the changes that are coming as a result of DADT's repeal will have far reaching affects throughout the Air Force that will resonate in every organization. As the policies and directives regarding DADT's repeal emerge, it is important that leaders take a proactive approach and lead-turn these initiatives by preparing yourself as well as the organization. There are three ways you can immediately begin that preparation. First, understand your own strengths and weaknesses through self-awareness. Second, learn what you can about the DADT repeal and new policies. Third, learn how to implement change in your organization.

Preparing Yourself: Attitude and Self-Awareness

The greatest strength or weakness you have as a leader is your attitude, and it is the one element of leadership that you have full control over. In some respects, leadership is all about attitude. Therefore, you must ensure that your attitude remains positive and upbeat, regardless of the challenges or issues confronting you. Your people will mirror your attitude. It is also where they gain strength and confidence. The way you carry yourself and your attitude will shape the attitude of your organization. Do not, under any circumstances, underestimate the affect your attitude will have on successfully leading change.

Developing and consistently displaying a positive attitude takes work, and it requires a basic degree understanding of self-awareness and emotional intelligence. You may have a pretty good idea of your leadership style, but without feedback it is only your perception--which may not reflect reality. As you prepare to deal with the changes that will some come from the repeal of DADT, you may want to find a personality assessment instrument that will help you understand your character traits. You may also want to seek candid feedback. This will help to either confirm or disprove your perceptions. However, feedback can be brutal. Begin with your boss. Follow this up with friends or peers. Finally, ask your Chief Master Sergeant and senior NCO leadership. Attitude is important in this regard as well. You will want to let everyone know that you are seeking feedback as a means to help you lead the changes that are coming. There will be two consequences of this initiative. First, you will learn a little more about your leadership style. Second, you will begin to achieve buy-in and support. Leaders within your organization will see that you are serious about making yourself a better leader and that you are concerned about your organization. However, the feedback you receive will be of little use unless you listen and have the moral courage to make any necessary changes. Daniel Goleman, author of *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence*, explains how seeking honest feedback followed by personal candid self-evaluation leads to greater self-awareness, and that doing so matters deeply. In fact, he shows that "old dogs can learn new tricks."⁶

Understand the Issue: Research the Issue

Many of you were not on active duty when DADT was enacted. You have lived within this specific rule-set throughout your career. However, don't take this "experience" for granted. Unless it specifically impacted your life in some way, it probably went largely unnoticed. Therefore, understanding what DADT was, what it meant, and what it means now that it has been repealed is imperative. Begin to learn as much as you can about DADT, while at the same time learning all that you can about the changes that lie ahead. This will require deliberate research and considerable effort on your part. If you are a commander, I would recommend that you start with a visit to your JAG's office. Read all that you can about the law and read as much as you can about the developing policies and initiatives. The Department of Defense has even created a DADT web site: http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2010/0610_gatesdadt/. Conducting in-depth research will help you answer some very tough questions and will provide you context for discussion. Furthermore, it will help you develop a plan for implementing this change throughout your organization.

Preparing your Organization

When I was teaching the "Practice of Command" in support of the Air Command and Staff College, one of the course's questions was; what comes first, the mission or the people? As an ISTJ, the answer was easy for me--the mission. However, you cannot achieve the mission without people. The real answer lies somewhere between the two. It is not a balance, but a symbiotic relationship between shifting priorities of people and mission. You can't achieve the mission without people, and without people, you don't have a mission. The mission that lies ahead is the successful transition to an Air Force that allows openly gay persons to serve. The success of that mission is people dependent, and will depend on your ability to lead them through this change. Do not take this responsibility lightly. Goleman points out that your people will rely on you for emotional guidance, which will help them make sense of and give meaning to change. Therefore, you must become intimately familiar with the history of DADT, the new law, as well as the guidance, policy, and education/training initiatives that will follow.

One book that will help you develop your plan is John P. Kotter's, *Leading Change*. While on the Air War College faculty and Chairman of the Leadership & Ethics Department, this book was regularly used in our leadership curriculum. In addition, it was on the CSAF's Reading List, and a favorite of many senior Air Force leaders. Kotter outlines an Eight-Stage Process for leading change, with the 4th stage being "communicating the change vision,"⁷ which in actuality should be the first stage.

Do not underestimate the value of communication. Don't bury your head in the sand, which is basically what I did while attempting to implement organizational change. After you have researched the facts and have given the issue some serious thought, gather your senior leaders together and start discussing an implementation plan. Then, have meetings on a regular basis, and when the time is right, bring your entire organization together to discuss the plan and a way ahead. You might even consider having a "town hall" meeting where people can voice their concerns. Granted, this is risky and will

require a degree of courage on your part. Leadership and command isn't easy, it's not supposed to be.

I'm sure that you have heard the old adage "communicate, communicate, communicate". Heed those words. However, as the leader, you will decide what that message is and how to communicate it. Once you start, be consistent, be positive, be persistent, and above all, take whatever steps you can to make sure that your message is understood. You should also be aware that your environment will change, and there will be a degree of uncertainty as you proceed. Keep your eyes and ears open and make appropriate course corrections along the way. Leading change is not done on a straight line.

Potential Resources

Its up to you to take the first step in understanding yourself better, understanding the DADT issues, and developing an change plan for your organization. The resources available to you are limitless. However, following are a few sources to get you started. These are recommended by the author and do not imply endorsement or approval of the United States Air Force.

Self-Awareness and emotional Intelligence

- Free Online Myers-Briggs-type Personality Assessment; (<http://sminds.com/mbti/>)
- BusinessBalls.com, Emotional Intelligence (EQ); (<http://www.businessballs.com/eq.htm>)
- Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, *Guidelines for Best Practice* [Emotional Intelligence] ; (<http://www.eiconsortium.org/reports/guidelines.html>)

Current Events/Issues

- The Early Bird; (<http://ebird.osd.mil/>)
- Defense News Early Bird Brief (free daily subscription email); (<http://www.defensenews.com/>)
- Air Force Magazine Online (free daily subscription email); (airforce-magazine.com)

Understanding DADT

- The Library of Congress Bill Text, 111th Congress (2009-2010), H.R.2965.EAH; (<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c111:H.R.2965.EAH>)
- H.R. 2965 In The House of Representatives; (<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-111hr2965eah/pdf/BILLS-111hr2965eah.pdf>)
- Text of H.R. 2965: Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010; (<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h111-2965>)
- Service Members Legal Defense Network (<http://www.sldn.org/>)

U.S. Department of Defense Don't Ask, Don't Tell
(http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2010/0610_gatesdadt/)

Leading Change and Leadership

- MindTools; Kotter's 8-Step Change Model;
(http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_82.htm)
- Overview of John Kotter's *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*;
(<http://cssp.us/pdf/LeadingChange-J%20Kotter.pdf>)
- Harvard Business Review; *Leading Change* by John Kotter;
(http://www.high-reliability.org/Documents/Articles/Why_transformation_fails.pdf)
- Air War College Strategic Leadership Studies; (<http://leadership.au.af.mil/>)
- FM 6-22, Army Leadership;
(<http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/repository/materials/fm6-22.pdf>)

Conclusion

Change is inevitable and no stranger to leaders in the United States Air Force. However, change is more than drawing new lines on an organizational chart or following new orders. Change involves people, something not every leader recognizes. Fundamentally, the successful implementation of change throughout the Air Force can only be achieved by addressing the needs and concerns of people.

Successful implementation of DADT's repeal will present significant leadership and cultural challenges. The success and responsibility of implementing policy changes will rest on the shoulders of each service's senior leaders, commanders, and NCOs. It must be an "all-in" endeavor or it will fail. Therefore, leaders at all levels must begin now to prepare their own battlefields. You must take immediate action to prepare yourself and your organization for the challenges that lie ahead. Accept, understand, embrace, take responsibility and lead the change.

¹ Parrish, Karen. American Forces Press Service, President Signs 'Don't Ask' Repeal Act Into Law, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=62213>, 22 December 2010.

² Roy, James A. Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force, *Enlisted Perspective - Core Values*, email dated Fri 12/10/2010, 1:55 PM.

³ *United States Air Force Core Values*, pamphlet, 1 January 1997.

⁴ General Schwartz, Norton A., Chief of Staff of the Air Force, *Repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"*, email dated Sun 12/19/2010, 10:02 PM.

⁵ Parrish, Karen. American Forces Press Service, *DOD 'Carefully' Plans 'Don't Ask' Repeal Implementation*, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=62180>, 20 December 2010.

⁶ Goleman, Daniel, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee. *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass, 2004.

⁷ Kotter, John P. *Leading Change*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass, 1996.