

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF AIR FORCE MILLENNIAL  
OFFICER LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES

by

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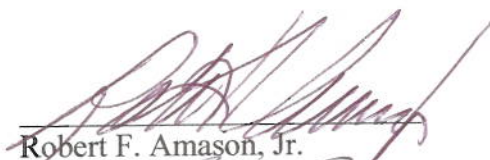
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF AIR FORCE MILLENNIAL  
OFFICER LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES

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## ABSTRACT

The United States Air Force (USAF) organization has a hierarchical leadership structure and multi-generation work force. The problem addressed in this study is the absence of USAF Millennial generation (born between 1982 and 2005) officer voices to inform USAF senior leaders about Millennials' formal and informal leadership development perspectives. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. During in-depth interviews six male and five female USAF Millennial officer respondents discussed their experiences of being led and learning to lead. Thematic analysis of interview responses and USAF doctrine revealed Millennial respondents supported sustaining the USAF Core Values, cultural heritage, and hierarchical leadership structure.

This perspective aligns with the Millennial civic generation type that values community and loyalty in relationships. Recommendations emerged for USAF senior leaders to meet Millennial officer leadership development needs, increasing retention, and enhancing recruitment strategies. Findings indicated minimizing hierarchical position power when developing USAF leaders will meet Millennial officer needs and increasing the importance of valuing generation diversity and Millennial generation cohort contributions will influence USAF Millennial officers to continue their USAF employment. Modifying USAF mentoring using a systems thinking approach will increase USAF Millennial officer interest to help USAF senior leaders plan for change. Leveraging USAF Millennial generation cohort characteristics that align with those of the G.I. Generation cohort (born between 1901 and 1924) provides USAF senior leaders with options to accommodate current and future USAF generation employees.

## DEDICATION

To my father who became my lead guardian angel in 1972. Thank you for watching over me and ensuring that in every situation I find a way to flourish and smile.

To my mother who is my best friend. You are the most awe-inspiring person I know. Because of you I continue to dream bigger and make the dreams reality. With your loving support I have fulfilled my promise: As a single parent both of your daughters are doctors!

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The United States Air Force (USAF) is an instrument of power available to the secretary of defense and president of the United States (Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS], 2011). With a mission to “*Fly, fight and win . . . in air, space and cyberspace*” (USAF, 2014b, para. 1), USAF leaders strive to attract, develop, and retain high quality personnel. Selected for authoritative command positions, officers facilitate a positive work environment, promote collaboration, appropriately distribute and use material resources, and ensure tasked personnel possess skills to accomplish the mission. Formal leadership development training programs, policies, and Air Force Instructions provide a foundation to help officers develop professional and interpersonal skills (Air University [AU], 2013a; Secretary of the Air Force [SECAF], 2011c; Welsh & Cody, 2014).

In 2014, USAF officers represented three generations: Baby Boomers (Boomers, born between 1943 and 1960), Generation X (GenX, born between 1961-1981), and Millennials (Generation Y, born between 1982 and approximately 2005) (Air Force Personnel Center [AFPC], 2014c; Howe & Strauss, 2007). Upon entering the USAF, an officer fills a managerial role regardless of the job. In filling leadership positions in the USAF hierarchy, officers must develop professional and interpersonal skills and expertise to facilitate success (SECAF, 2011c). Officers are responsible for displaying appropriate behaviors as specified in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ, 2010). Adhering to UCMJ (2010) and other directives implemented by commanders also apply to appropriate behaviors outside the workplace.

Authoritative guidance reflects one part of the leadership development equation. Another element concerns informal interaction. Open communication and understanding the needs of others can facilitate a positive work environment. Larsson et al. (2006) discovered military leaders who effectively balanced the “individual-human . . . [and] relational-social human capital concept of leader development” (p. S79) facilitated leadership development and individual growth. Specifically, employing this strategy can help to make generational differences advantageous rather than cause for concern (Gibson, Greenwood, & Murphy, 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Generational differences exist in many organizations and cultures (Lockwood, Cepero, & Williams, 2009; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Aware that USAF members represent multiple generations, USAF leaders facilitate assimilation and reinforcement of the USAF values and acceptable behaviors upon entry to the organization (Air Force Culture and Language Center [AFCLC], 2014; SECAF, 2011c, 2012c, 2013c). USAF members display acceptable behaviors, but generational differences could remain hidden resulting in some researchers proclaiming generational differences do not exist (Ferguson, 2014; M. Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008).

The problem addressed in this study was the absence of USAF Millennial generation (born between 1982-2005) officer voices to inform USAF senior leaders about Millennials’ formal and informal leadership development perspectives. If current approaches fail to meet Millennials’ leadership development needs, this population may elect not to pursue a USAF career or depart the service prior to retirement. If Millennials remain in the USAF and progress to senior management positions they could become

frustrated with current approaches and generate significant change. A similar event occurred when the G.I. Generation, who shares similar generation characteristics with Millennials, facilitated creation of the USAF in 1947 (USAF, 2014d).

Understanding how Millennial, or junior, military officers (i.e., lieutenants and captains) describe leadership development experiences will facilitate success during formal and informal interaction with senior leaders and facilitate task accomplishment (SECAF, 2011c, 2013a). Failure to incorporate Millennial contributions could lead to failure if GenX leaders reinforce current processes and suppress Millennials' creativity that could increase productivity (Miller, 1991; Rawlins, Indvik, & Johnson, 2008). By not focusing on Millennial needs, GenX leaders' behavior could encourage Millennials to separate from the AF and seek employment where solicitation of innovative ideas regardless of position occurs frequently (Amabile & Kramer, 2012; Howe & Strauss, 2007). Larsson et al. (2006) emphasized the complexity of the military culture and the difficulty some people may have learning how to succeed in this type of environment. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011) concluded employment of multiple generations within organizations creates positive situations as well as conflict.

To achieve military goals and objectives, current USAF senior leaders must seek and respond to Millennial officers' leadership development perspectives to strengthen organizational capability (SECAF, 2011c, 2012e). Seniority and experience enable USAF senior leaders to comprehend the mission, establish goals for mission accomplishment; and ensure Millennial officers comprehend the importance of these elements while developing as leaders (SECAF, 2012c, 2012d, 2013c). Comprehending how Millennial military officers describe leadership development facilities two-way

communication to meet the needs of Millennials entering the USAF or influence their decision to define USAF service as a career (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010).

USAF officers assimilate *core values* of the Service to perpetuate a common language within the multigenerational workforce and to ensure tasks delegated by the national command authorities (e.g., President and Secretary of Defense) are carried out by the military hierarchy (James, Welsh, & Cody, 2014; SECAF, 2012e; USAF, 2014c). Integrating the USAF core values provides a common perspective for new officers whose socialization, economic status, and other demographic characteristics vary. USAF core value assimilation by Millennial officers helps them develop as leaders by ensuring they provide a USAF corporate perspective when interacting with external agency personnel (Department of Defense [DoD], 2008; SECAF, 2011c, 2012c).

The USAF multigenerational workforce is comprised of more than 680,000 personnel serving on active duty, civilian personnel, and as members of the Air National Guard or Air Force Reserve (USAF, 2015). Based on unique roles and responsibilities, officer, enlisted, and civilian leadership development programs differ. The focus on leadership development programs helps members of each respective population to prepare for positions of increased responsibility, promotion, and job opportunities (SECAF, 2013a, 2013c; UCMJ, 2010; U.S. Office of Government Ethics, 2014).

Similar to many organizations, some individuals fill positions of increased scope and responsibility. In the USAF, officers (e.g., lieutenants, captains, majors, lieutenant colonels, colonels, and generals) fill commander and other leadership positions (SECAF, 2011c, 2013a). Commander responsibilities are similar to leaders employed outside the DoD. For example, responsibilities of the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) mirror



those of a chief executive officer (CEO) or organizational founder (Schein, 1993a, 1996b). Subordinate commanders (i.e., general officers or colonels) reporting to the CSAF align with directors in the external DoD workforce. Lower echelon commanders (i.e., military rank of colonel or below) fulfill obligations similar to counterparts working outside the USAF.

USAF officers attend leadership development courses on topics that include culture, organizational diversity, and historic USAF leadership styles and results (AFCLC, 2014; AU, 2014b, 2014c). Additional course or informal training helps commanders ensure subordinates receive formal and informal professional training, establish and maintain a positive work environment, and provide periodic feedback to facilitate personal and professional growth (Gildea, 2014; Leslie, 2014; Pawlyk, 2014b; SECAF, 2013a). Commanders must also ensure job performance documents contain substantiated comments to maintain productive employees' competitiveness for promotion and career progression (AFPC, 2014a; SECAF, 2014b). Other commander (i.e., non-DoD CEO, director or subordinate leader) responsibilities include establishing vision, goals, and objectives for mission accomplishment at the primary job location or when performing wartime duties (Air Expeditionary Center [AEC], 2014; SECAF, 2013a).

The list of commander responsibilities appears overwhelming and inconclusive when considering individual characteristics, situational differences, and sometimes unpredictable subordinate behavior (AU, 2014c). Developers of commander leadership development approaches often fail to appreciate and take into account the effects of generational perceptions. Of the more than 64,000 active duty line officers (i.e., all

officers except Air National Guard and AF Reserve officers as well as physicians, chaplains, and attorneys), approximately 3,600, or 5%, fill commander positions (AFPC, 2014c; AU, 2014b). All active duty line officers must follow direction provided by her or his respective AF leadership hierarchy that includes more than 130 Boomer, 3,400 GenX, and 135 Millennial commanders (AU, 2014b). Whether filling the legitimate power position of commander or viewed as a leader with referent or expert status commensurate with rank as a USAF officer, developing skills to comprehend generational characteristics is critical (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Larsson et al., 2006; Raven & French, 1958).

The USAF officer corps is comprised of three generations: Boomers, GenXers and Millennials who may not comprehend the needs of each generation (AFPC, 2014c; Howe & Strauss, 2007). Senior officers (e.g., Boomers and GenXers) with extensive experience review and approve policy decisions affecting subordinate personnel (AU, 2014d; SECAF, 2012e). If invited to attend mission planning meetings, the number of Millennial attendees consulted and their responses are limited by, or rarely solicited from, senior attendees. As Boomer generation officer retirements increase, GenX officers begin to fill positions of increased power.

Determining whether generational differences exist within the USAF and successfully meeting generational needs is essential when some researchers report generational similarities outweigh differences, regardless of generational cohort membership. Ballenstedt and Rosenberg (2008) discovered self-fulfilling prophecies of differences altered perceptions between Millennials and older employees. Deal (as cited in Ballenstedt & Rosenberg, 2008) stressed perceptions regarding respectful behavior

appears reliant on miscommunication instead of generational characteristics. Survey results also emphasized similar cross-generational values to include the importance of family (Deal, as cited in Ballenstedt & Rosenberg, 2008).

Opposing the theme of generational differences, M. Wong et al. (2008) emphasized the lack of evidence to support generational differences. Boomer, GenX, and Millennial cohort members who assimilate and use generation characteristics to adjust their behavior when interacting with members of different cohorts perpetuate the myth of generational differences (M. Wong et al., 2008). In their discussion of cross-generation survey results, M. Wong et al. (2008) suggested work place leaders' use of power is stronger for Boomers and GenXers than for Millennials. Differences are a reflection of age, experience, and career progression of Boomers and GenXers instead of generational cohort differences with Millennials (M. Wong et al., 2008).

Differing with the perspectives that generational differences do not exist (Ballenstedt & Rosenberg, 2008; Ferguson, 2014; M. Wong et al., 2008), L. Wong (2000) reported that despite all the officers studied had volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army, generational differences existed between the cohorts. Using quantitative data, attitudinal differences between Boomers and GenX when serving as junior officers emerged (L. Wong, 2000). Boomers focus on the importance of top-down guidance, work instead of work-life balance, and rank hierarchy (L. Wong, 2000). GenX officers reported a preference for self-reliance instead of authoritarian oversight, increased work-life balance, and respect resulting from performance instead of military rank (L. Wong, 2000). Respondents discussed the presence of generational differences and agreed on the

importance of the U.S. Army's organizational culture to help minimize differences (L. Wong, 2000).

Failure to understand the lived experiences of Millennial generation officers as they develop their leadership skills may misalign with current senior Air Force leaders' efforts to develop future leaders and ensure mission accomplishment (AU, 2014a; SECAF, 2011c, 2013a). Selected to fill GenX officer vacancies, USAF Millennial officers undergo different challenges than GenXers in their growth to adulthood. Similarly, Millennials' officer development as Air Force leaders includes different lived experiences than their predecessors. Understanding the lived experiences of Millennial generation officers as they develop their leadership skills will inform current senior Air Force leaders' efforts to assure continued USAF capabilities to accomplish its mission.

The problem is quantitative results from past studies indicate differences in generational response to similar stimuli (e.g., U.S. military officership) but a decided lack of lived experiences derived from in-depth interviews to explore leadership development for junior military officers remains (L. Wong, 2000). USAF Millennial generation officers may or may not experience assimilation into the culture of other generations (Larsson et al., 2006; L. Wong, 2000). The theoretical framework for this study incorporates selected themes from L. Wong's (2000, 2002, 2004, 2011) research regarding a generational cohort perspective of leadership development.

Without exploring lived experiences derived from in-depth interviews it may not be possible to draw conclusions about how USAF Millennial officers respond to the socio-cultural leadership setting they volunteer to join. Additionally, lack of awareness of whether generational differences exist and meeting generational leadership

development needs could result in low Millennial recruitment, employment, and retention. Researchers could use the thematic patterns discovered to examine other Department of Defense or external organizations comprised of more than one generational cohort. Timing of this study to explore lived experiences is ideal as the number of Millennials serving as USAF officers increases (AFPC, 2014c).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. Phenomenological methodology was ideal for in-depth exploration of how individuals develop meaning for their lived experiences (Sokolowski, 2000). In-depth interviews elicit respondents' description and interpretation of events as well as experiences affecting their behavior (Polkinghorne, 2005). Analysis and description of USAF documents provided a contextual framework for this phenomenological study; an approach Giorgi (1997) and Van Manen (1990) recommended. Synthesizing interview responses and contextual data informs an understanding of the phenomena experienced by USAF Millennial officers (Sokolowski, 2000).

### **Significance of the Study**

Leadership development literature focuses on lack of agreement on a definition of leadership and ideal leadership characteristics (Larsson et al., 2006). Prominent leadership styles and approaches within the USAF appear to reflect transactional, transforming, and systems thinking behaviors (Laszlo, Laszlo, & Dunsky, 2010; McFadden, Eakin, Beck-Frazier, & McGlone, 2005). Several USAF documents include descriptions of various leadership approaches available to help USAF leaders fulfill

professional responsibilities (SECAF, 2011c, , 2011d, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a). Self-reported data collected during this study informs USAF senior officers regarding Millennial generation leadership development experiences. By applying the study's results, USAF leaders could institutionalize the constant presence of generation cohort characteristics in formal and informal leadership development approaches for all USAF personnel.

Thematic patterns revealed during data analysis heighten awareness of current USAF officer generational differences and informs USAF leaders how to leverage generational cohort characteristics (Howe & Strauss, 2007). For example, Strauss and Howe (1991) posited how generational characteristics occur in cycles. Providing support for this theory, GenX cohort members reflect characteristics of the Lost generation (born 1883-1900, WWI) to include skepticism, pragmatism, and focus on self (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Similarly, Millennial cohort members reflect characteristics of the G.I. generation (born 1901-1924, WWII) to include hope for the future, ambition, and focus on civic duty (Howe & Strauss, 2007). USAF or academic leaders could use results of this phenomenological study to plan for effective recruitment, assimilation, and retention of future generation cohort members.

Results of qualitative phenomenological studies can be transferable to individuals experiencing the same phenomenon (Englander, 2012) and may contribute to multi-generational leadership development research. For example, as fewer United States citizens pursue military careers, themes from this phenomenological study may yield options to increase dialogue regarding leadership development from a generational perspective (Andert, 2011; Parker, 2011; Pew, 2011). Findings may assist USAF leaders

in modifying current leadership development perspectives to increase current generation cohort collaboration and consider options to assimilate Homeland (born 2005-2025) and future generations (Howe & Strauss, 2007). A review of the literature disclosed few studies highlighting U.S. military Millennial and GenX officer leadership development or research on developing future leaders (Callahan, 2007; Conwell, 2009; Drago, 2006; Gage, 2005; Joseph, 2011; Smith, 2012; L. Wong, 2011). USAF leaders could use insights of this study as a theme to open or enhance communication channels, build effective teams, and facilitate relationship building (Pena-Sanchez, 2008; Raines, 2003; Schein, 1983). Data analysis may help USAF leaders generate options for enhancing the quality of interpersonal interaction in the organization.

### **Nature of the Study**

Quantitative methods are inappropriate to explore lived experiences of USAF Millennial generation officers during their development as future leaders (Merriam, 2009). Ethnographic and grounded theory approaches could yield profound data, but researcher time constraints further impaired by the targeted population of USAF Millennial officers exceeding 23,000 employed at worldwide locations make such approaches unsuitable for this study (AFPC, 2014c; Merriam, 2009). Case study methodology is ideal for collecting data from multiple sources within bounded cultures like that found in the USAF officer corps (Yin, 2009). The phenomenological design selected for this study was ideal for exploring lived experiences and meaning attributed to the events by the respondents (Englander, 2012).

The sample for this study was comprised of USAF Millennial generation officers working at Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs, Colorado who volunteered to

participate in the study. Millennial participants responded to semi-structured interview questions. Analyzing USAF contextual documents yielded information about how doctrinal guidance affects leadership development perspectives (Merriam, 2009; Van Manen, 1990). Examples of records include Air Force directives, speeches, and demographic data to describe USAF characteristics.

### **Guiding Questions**

Findings from several studies inform the guiding questions for this study. Spear (2009) examined generation cohort effects on civilian leader development within the federal government. L. Wong (2000) and Smith (2012) studied Army officers' generational differences regarding leadership development and their lived experiences as leaders, respectively. Larsson et al. (2006) and Joseph (2011) explored stimuli affecting military leader development. Gage (2005) explored leadership perceptions of USAF Millennial officers. Building upon the themes discussed in these studies, the guiding questions for this study were:

GQ1. How do USAF Millennial officers describe their own leadership development?

GQ2. How do USAF Millennial officers create meaning from leadership development experiences?

GQ3. In what way do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform formal leadership development?

GQ4. In what ways do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform informal leadership development?



Expert panel review and pilot test participant responses resulted in modifications to the interview instrument to address the purpose and guiding questions of this study (Merriam, 2007). Semi-structured interview responses yielded data to resolve the first two guiding questions. To illustrate the importance of USAF Millennial officer perspectives and resolve the last two guiding questions, interview responses were systematically compared with USAF contextual framework descriptions arising from the literature review (Giorgi, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). Convergence of interview responses and USAF contextual documents alleviated the need to schedule additional interviews.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Employment of several theoretical disciplines suggested insights into the perceptions of leadership development across generational cohorts within the USAF. Triangulating elements from the disciplines enhances thematic interpretation and options for future studies. Generation theorists describe stimuli affecting cohort perceptions described by most members (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Leadership theorists acknowledge different styles employed by leaders who affect subordinate development (McFadden et al., 2005). Organizational culture theories provide a contextual framework to explore cultural effects on leadership development and related perceptions.

**Generation theory.** Generation theorists suggest cohort characteristics occur in cycles (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Strauss and Howe's (1991) generalized characteristics do not apply to all members of the generation cohort, but instead reflect generation characteristic trends and environmental stimuli (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Howe and Strauss (2002) explain that for Boomers and GenXers the Vietnam War and Challenger space shuttle explosion represent catastrophic events affecting the respective cohort.

Occurring during or after grade school attendance, Millennials experienced the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wars as defining events for their cohort-group (Howe & Strauss, 2002). Characteristics also help define generation cohort parameters (Strauss & Howe, 1991). For example, Millennials prefer an ambitious work ethic and GenXers prefer balance (Raines, 2003, p. 19). Millennials employ a civic perspective whereas GenX members prefer self-interest (Raines, 2003, p. 19).

Similar to individual behavior generational characteristics, the cohorts evolve through phases defined by Strauss and Howe (1991) as *secular* or *spiritual awakening*. Applied to this study, the GenX cohort of USAF officers is moving from a focus on privacy and intrinsic beliefs to affecting environmental and community change (Strauss & Howe, 1991). The Millennial generation is evolving from a secular view to a spiritual awakening focus. Exploring perceptions from a generational perspective may help USAF officers with identifying and integrating needs of different generation cohort members.

**Leadership theories and approaches.** Similar to characteristics of generational cohorts, leadership theories contain multiple elements. Early perspectives focused on traits and behaviors (McFadden et al., 2005). Transactional leadership evolved from use of power and the exchange between leaders and followers (Sarros & Santora, 2001). The focus is on reward for work performance, or a simple transaction with the leader in the power position. A leader's transactional, or top-down directive, style facilitates results in certain situations but is less effective or inappropriate in others. Researchers developed transformational leadership theories to include the follower's needs in the leader-follower relationship (Sarros & Santora, 2001). Communicating to discern follower needs, clarify leadership perspectives, and collaborate to catalyze change bolsters relationships and

work performance. By asking the appropriate questions, leaders can facilitate team building and collaborative efforts to define root causes of problems and solutions (Dunton, 2008). Similarly, employees empowered in transformational relationships show increased creativity and innovation that strengthens organizational viability (Denning, 2005).

Along with transactional and transforming leadership theories, systems thinking completes the approach used for this phenomenological study (Andreadis, 2009; Paucar-Caceres & Pagano, 2009). The systemic orientation replaces a fragmented focus on separate social, environmental, and financial dimensions with an integrated bottom line evaluation (Laszlo et al., 2010). Application of systems theories incorporates elements of current leadership approaches focusing on situational context, adaptation, and inclusion (Chen & Silverthorne, 2005; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Incorporating these and other approaches helps leaders focus on appreciating the importance of individual contributions while focusing on interrelationships of organization members, culture, and the environment (Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

Similar to other organizational directors, USAF leaders employ a preferred or variety of leadership styles (AU, 2014a; Hersey & Blanchard, 1981). For example, USAF leaders using a transactional approach to help new employees assimilate into the work environment by directing acceptable behaviors (Sarros & Santora, 2011). Transformational leaders in the USAF focus on employee needs and solicit feedback to facilitate two-way communication (Bennis, 1999; Pena-Sanchez, 2008). USAF leaders using a systemic leadership approach leverage benefits of transactional and transformational interaction (AU, 2014c). USAF systemic leaders encourage individual

achievement and encourage positive interrelationships to facilitate organizational growth, success, adaptability, and perseverance (Schwartz, 2012; SECAF, 2011c).

**Organizational culture.** Generation cohort characteristics and leadership theories provide two sides of a triangular theoretical framework. Organizational culture provides the third element by exploring “creation of an environment by the manipulation and control of multiple variables to create certain organizational outcomes, and . . . [the] role of a shared belief system in integrating the various components of the social system” (Schein, 1996a, p. 233). USAF organizational culture with particular organizational structures, values and mores affect the character of leadership development and perspectives of USAF Millennial officers (SECAF, 2011c, 2012c, 2012d).

According to Schein, the culture of an organization provides the foundation for acceptable behaviors in the workplace (Schein, 1993a). Key to creation or development of organizational culture is the leader. Vision, leadership skills, and expertise help facilitate a leader’s organizational stability, change, or sometimes failure (Schein, 1983). In an increasingly complex environment, leaders increasingly seek subordinate support and subordinates seek insight into topics that the leader is vaguely familiar with (Schein, 2009). Generation theory, leadership theories, and organizational culture concepts support the focus of this phenomenological study. Including descriptions of the USAF organizational culture provides the structural context from which to explore USAF Millennial officer leadership development perspectives.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

To establish a common language and perspective, terms from several sources define generation characteristics and USAF officer ranks and typical duty level (Howe &

Strauss, 2007; SECAF, 2013a). Definitions of terms used in the study clarify the generation–USAF officer alignment and explain demographic generational concepts. Additional USAF concepts affecting Air Force operations are in a glossary (see Appendix A) and a glossary of abbreviations (see Appendix B).

**Active duty.** “Full-time duty in the active military service of the United States, including active duty or full-time training duty in the Reserve Component” (DoD, 2014c, p. 2).

**Baby Boom (Boomer) Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 1943 and 1960; Idealist generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 482). USAF Boomers are typically general officers in midlife (ages 44-65), with institutional/strategic duties at the top of the hierarchy as commanders, leaders, and decision makers (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428).

**Cohort group.** “All persons born in a limited span of consecutive years” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 429).

**G.I. Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 1901 and 1924; Civic generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). USAF personnel are retired or deceased (SECAF, 2013c, p. 504).

**Generation.** “A cohort-group whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 429).

**Generation X (GenX).** Cohort-group members born between 1961 and 1981; Reactive generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). USAF GenXers are typically field grade officers (major, lieutenant colonel, or colonel) in rising adulthood or midlife

(ages 22-65), with managerial/operational duties as mid-hierarchy commanders, leaders, and policy designers (SECAF, 2013c, p. 504).

**Homeland Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 2005 and approximately 2025 (Howe & Strauss, 2007); Adaptive generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). Officers entering the USAF active duty service in approximately the year 2027.

**Millennial Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 1982 and ca. 2005; Civic generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). USAF Millennials are typically company grade officers (2nd lieutenant, 1st lieutenant, captain) in their youth or rising adulthood (ages 18-43), with technical/tactical duties as low hierarchy commanders and leaders focused on policy execution (SECAF, 2013c, p. 504).

**Silent Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 1925-1942; Adaptive generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). Elders and USAF retired officers (SECAF, 2013c, p. 504).

## **Scope**

The scope of this study included in-depth interviews with USAF Millennial officers. Analysis of participant interview responses informed how USAF Millennial officers describe and create meaning from leadership development experiences. Semi-structured interviews occurred at one location: Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Selection of an interview location facilitated collection of individual participant perceptions as the primary unit of analysis to measure (Englander, 2012).

## **Assumptions**

Considering the nature and scope of this phenomenological study, some assumptions underlie the method and design. Officers participating are members of the Millennial generation. Participants provided truthful answers to all questions. Participants were volunteers. Participants confirmed comprehension of the purpose of the study and responded appropriately. Selection of a central location on Peterson Air Force Base and a comfortable interview environment did not affect participant responses.

## **Limitations**

The study included data from documents and interviews. USAF or other restrictions did not prevent access to certain relevant documents needed to clarify the USAF situational context. Participants' levels of interest in the interview questions were similar and responses appeared to be candid. Unanticipated events (e.g., deployments and vacations) resulted in some potential participant non-availability for this study; however, attrition did not occur during the data collection period.

## **Delimitations**

Millennial cohort-group membership was the only individual demographic used to purposively select participants. The sample included only active duty line officers. The sample excludes members of the Boomer generation, enlisted and civilian personnel; officers performing Air Force Reserve or Air National Guard duties; and officers working as physicians, chaplains, and attorneys. Findings from future studies incorporating the excluded groups could provide USAF leaders with thematic patterns to consider when designing leadership development approaches.

## Summary

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. The USAF mission is to “*Fly, fight and win . . . in air, space and cyberspace*” (USAF, 2014b). Success results from several factors, including leadership development. Programs exist to develop USAF enlisted and civilian members for leadership positions, but by qualifying for and accepting a commission, younger officers automatically fill legitimate power positions (SECAF, 2013a). Hence, Millennials joining the USAF officer corps must assimilate guidance from USAF leaders and effectively lead individuals with extensive experience and growing seniority.

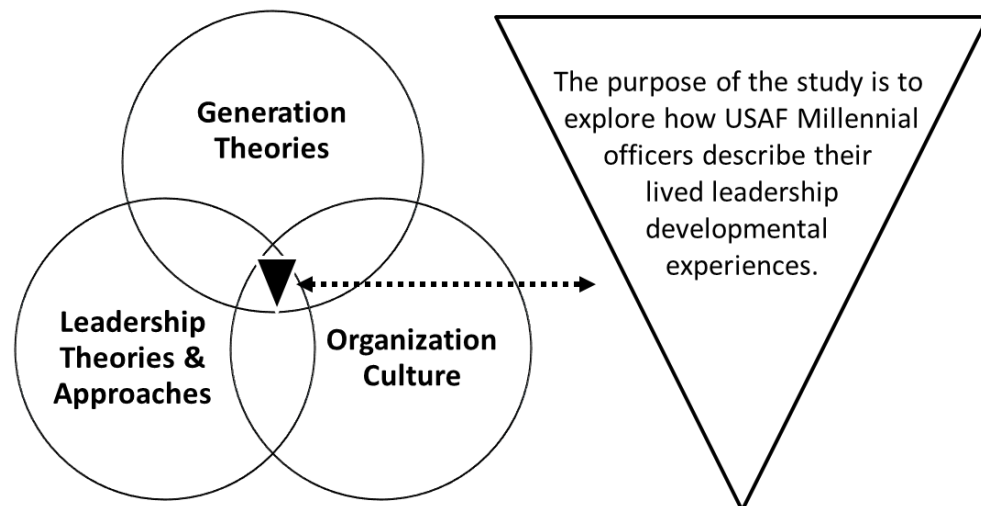
USAF leadership development philosophy mentions diversity appreciation within the USAF culture and leadership focus (SECAF, 2012c; USAF, 2014a). As Boomer officers retire, GenX and Millennial officers fill the vacancies. Guiding questions frame interview questions designed to explore lived experiences and perceptions of USAF Millennial officers during leadership development. Employing generation, leadership, and organizational culture theoretical frameworks facilitates systematic comparison of emergent themes and USAF contextual data for thematic pattern evaluation. The literature review in Chapter 2 includes a historic overview and current academic field perspectives as well as the introduction of the theoretical framework for data collection and analysis.



## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, USAF Millennial generation officers responded to interview questions reflecting three theoretical areas: generation theories, leadership theories and approaches, and organization culture. Von Bertalanffy (1972) conveyed the central theme of general systems theory, observing “[i]n order to understand an organized whole we must know both the parts and the relations between them” (p. 411). Not limited to a particular environment, event, population, or interpersonal relationship, organizational leaders and members can look within to enhance performance and success. From this perspective, certain research studies about generation theories, leadership theories, and organizational culture were relevant to parts of the system affecting USAF leaders (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Disciplines selected for the theoretical framework. Derived from theories of Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer (2004), Howe and Strauss (2007), Papworth, Milne, & Boak (2009), Paucar-Caceres (2009), Sarros and Santora (2001), Schein (1993a), and SECAF (2011c). Copyright 2014 by Katherine A. Strus. All rights reserved.

Aligned with the model in Figure 1, the literature review begins with a description of techniques used to select documents to develop the theoretical framework. The discussion of generation theories includes research supporting and refuting the existence of generational differences (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Strauss & Howe, 1991; M. Wong et al., 2008). Review of leadership theories and approaches describes prevalent leadership styles and techniques used by many USAF officers (Bennis, 1999; Sarros & Santora, 2001; SECAF, 2011c; Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Literature describing the leader's role in developing and sustaining an organizational culture's characteristics and functions provides the third theoretical element used for this study (Schein, 1983, 2009; Stevens et al., 2008).

Themes extracted from the initial literature review align with themes selected to describe the USAF culture. USAF leaders integrate the purpose and function of the organization's hierarchical structure into their leadership approach (SECAF, 2011c; The White House, 2010; UCMJ, 2010; USAF, 2015). Building upon this foundation, USAF leaders cultivate the organizational culture to provide a common vision for a multigenerational population serving in an uncertain global environment (Campbell, Hannah, & Matthews, 2010; Salanitri, 2013; USAF, 2014c). USAF hierarchical structure analysis of the literary synthesis also revealed a significant literature gap. The lack of phenomenological research to explore whether USAF generational differences exist, if leadership development meets the needs of the Millennial generation, and the lack of using USAF Millennial officers as a study population requires attention. Synthesizing literary elements of generations, leadership, and organizational culture theories provides

the model developed for this study to explore the lived experiences of USAF Millennial officers.

### **Literature Review Search Strategy**

Four themes selected to address the guiding questions include generation theories, leadership theories and approaches, organizational culture, and selected aspects of the USAF. The search to select literature for this study commenced prior to and during development of the guiding questions:

GQ1. How do USAF Millennial officers describe their own leadership development?

GQ2. How do USAF Millennial officers create meaning from leadership development experiences?

GQ3. In what way do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform formal leadership development?

GQ4. In what ways do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform informal leadership development?

The literature review commenced by inputting search terms specific to or synthesizing one or more themes. Millennials; multi-generation workforce; generation differences; generation similarities; GenX, Boomer, or Millennial officer; USAF Millennial officers; generation theory; and generation characteristics yielded several dissertations, theses, and articles included in the generation theories discussion. Search terms for leadership theories and approaches included transactional, transforming, leadership development, systems theory, hierarchy and leadership styles, military leadership, leading the multigenerational workforce, resolving generation conflict in the

workplace, military leadership development, leadership preferences and generation characteristics. Organizational structure and culture, sustaining organizations, leadership role and organizational culture, influence of subordinates to affect organizational change, and organizational sub-cultures comprise the search terms used for the organizational culture section. To explore the USAF culture search terms included AF Millennial officers, AF leadership development, AF culture, AF mission, AF leadership development programs, AF hierarchy, global events affecting AF leaders and leadership development, formal and informal leadership development strategies, and generation needs in AF leadership development approaches.

In-depth exploration of the themes for this study resulted in selecting literature published between 1958 and 2013. Exploration of EBSCOhost, Gale PowerSearch, ProQuest, Google Books, Bing, USAF, Department of Defense, and federal web sites resulted in selection of more than 50 academic, military, research and information journals to retrieve articles for this study. The reference list includes 12 founding theorists and 88 peer-reviewed journal articles, 67 government articles and guidance documents, 30 books, 16 papers, and 4 private organization research studies for 205 entries.

### **Generation Theory**

Generational characteristics are unique, but results of several research studies suggest generational cohorts appear to display similar characteristics or shared interests (Howe & Strauss, 2007). For example, Millennials possess a “*hero . . . archetype* [sharing] not only a similar age location in history, but also similar attitudes toward family, culture and values, risk, and civic engagement” (Howe & Strauss, 2007, p. 45).

Such tendencies are similar to characteristics of the G.I. generation members born 1901-1924 (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Members of the cohorts between the G.I. and Millennial generations—Silent, Boomer, and Generation X (GenX)—show similar patterns of individual and family behaviors, political views, and civic mindedness specific to their respective cohort (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Characteristics of generational cohorts selected for this study described by generation theorists appear in Table 1.

Table 1

*Generation Characteristics of Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials.*

Generation/ Characteristics	Boomer (Born 1943-1960)	Generation X (Born 1961-1981)	Millennial (Born 1982- ~2005)
Previous Generation Cycle with Similar Characteristics	Missionary (born 1860-1882)	Lost (born 1883-1900)	G.I. Generation (born 1901-1924)
Generational Type	Idealist/prophet	Reactive/nomad	Civic/hero
Generational Life Cycle	Spiritual Awakening to Secular	Spiritual Awakening to Secular	Secular to Spiritual Awakening
Outlook	Optimistic	Skeptical	Hopeful
Work Ethic	Driven	Balanced	Ambitious
View of Authority	Love/Hate	Unimpressed	Relaxed, Polite
Leadership By . . .	Consensus	Competence	Achievement
In Relationships	Seeks Personal Gratification	Is Reluctant to Commit	Values Loyalty
Perspective	Team	Self	Community

*Note.* Adapted with permission from (a) “The next 20 years: How customer and workforce attitudes will evolve” by N. Howe and W. Strauss (2007), *Harvard Business Review*, 85(7/8), pp. 41-52. Copyright 2007 by Harvard Business Publishing Corporation, all rights reserved and (b) *Connecting generations: The sourcebook for a new workplace* (pp. 19, 92-93) by Claire Raines (2003), Fairport, NY: Axzo Press. Copyright 2003 by Axzo Press.

Based on these predictable characteristics, seasoned generations should increase awareness of the Millennial/*hero* generational movement to understand the anticipated characteristics of the generation cohort entering the workforce. Identifying and leveraging generation characteristics will prevent historic mistakes resulting from

overlooking the effects of historical and cultural experience (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Rawlins, Indvik, & Johnson, 2008; L. Wong, 2000).

Although the sample for this transcendental phenomenological study was USAF Millennial officers, including the two preceding generation cycles comprising the USAF officer corps, e.g., Boomer and GenX, provide the cultural context of individuals likely responsible for developing USAF Millennial leaders (AU, 2014a, 2014c). The selected characteristics, e.g., work ethic, relationships, and views of authority, provide the framework from which USAF Millennial officers understand and create meaning of the leadership development experience (Englander, 2012).

**Generation cycles.** Various political, demographic, cultural, and historical factors and beliefs characterize four generation cycles described by Strauss and Howe (1991) as: Silent/adaptive, Boomer/idealist, GenX/reactive, and Millennial/civic. With a multitude of options available for exploring different generations, a primary focal point is members of a succeeding generation embody different peer personality characteristics and the peer personality aligns with a previous generation's characteristics (Strauss & Howe, 1991). For example, if the cycle follows its current pattern, the Millennial generation will produce similar outcomes and leaders reminiscent of the greatest generation: the G.I.s of WWII, born between 1901 and 1924 (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

Single, catastrophic events affect perceptions of generation cohort members (Howe & Strauss, 2002). The response to the event is essential to comprehend how members of following generations respond to their major event. For example, the G.I. generation experienced WWII, GenXers the Challenger space shuttle explosion, and Millennials the Columbine high school shooting and the 9/11 attack (Howe & Strauss,

2002; Strauss & Howe, 1991). From a reaction standpoint, GenXers promote the use of force to correct injustice, especially when most of the individuals who lost lives because the terrorist attacks or global war on terror occurred in GenXers' adulthood. Millennials raised in this environment are traditionally welcoming of increased security measures, leveraging various social media to expand their global network, and more involved than the recent generations with volunteering and community service. The respective preferences define the generational culture and affect other cultures the cohort members belong to (Conwell, 2009; Howe & Strauss, 2002).

Exploring effects of military and civilian subculture on organizational commitment revealed that ethics appear to generate the most significant correlation with organizational commitment (Conwell, 2009). There was no significant correlation among generational cohorts and organizational commitment to dispute characteristics discussed in organization theory (Conwell, 2009). Limitations of geography, time, and other variables affected data collection and analysis. Despite practical challenges, results reflected a common theme among generations whereby ethical, equitable treatment remains a common thread organizational leaders must focus on to increase cross-generational retention and employee satisfaction (Conwell, 2009). Several areas require further study to include examination of employee and employer perspectives of development of a common language within the organization.

Noting a lack of agreement on the term *leadership*, Larsson et al. (2006) asserted scientific validation of leadership development approaches continues and includes exploration of generation cycles. Larsson et al. (2006) applied a cross-cultural analysis to ascertain "what factors or processes are involved in leader development for junior

military officers, from their own perspective, and in the natural context of their career and life expectations” (p. S70). Thematic analysis revealed significant importance of social interaction. Key contributing elements were the individual’s development of a professional identity, self-confidence, and behavioral flexibility to adapt to a variety of situations. Larsson et al.’s (2006) analysis and results reflected insecurity for many respondents within the new environment, especially based on the legitimate authority power hierarchy. Over time, their insecurity subsided (e.g., able to comprehend and display accepted behaviors) to become more proactive in the environment.

Feedback and socialization are key factors for successful organizational assimilation to include praise and promotion. Participation in humanitarian or combat situations resulted in increased self-confidence and feeling of connection with the organization as a direct-contributing member (Larsson et al., 2006). The key for the theory is a relationship between inner and external development. Nurturing confidence and identity within the individual is of equal importance to learning, performing, and adapting behaviors to meet cultural norms. Larsson et al.’s (2006) conclusions stressing the importance of self-confidence and relationship building align with guiding questions for this study. These themes also provide a framework to ask additional interview questions to help participants when describing events and their interpretation (Giorgi, 1997).

To delve further into the commonalities or differences between generation cycles, a closer look at GenXers and preferred leadership training and development approaches informs about retention, job satisfaction, professional identity, confidence, and flexibility in adopting behaviors effective in various environments. According to Spear (2009),



future leaders will require skills to adapt to a variety of situations, serve as inspirational role models, share a vision, nurture development, empower followers, encourage collaboration, and focus on team building. Spear revealed GenX respondents' preferences for multidisciplinary education and training (e.g., traditional classroom setting or online), collaboration, access to leaders and feedback from leaders, comprehension of their role in the big picture, people issues, leveraging diversity, and communication.

The underlying theme for the GenX respondents appeared to be the quality of relationship building, leader expectations, and level of motivation, and whether these characteristics aligned with those of different generation members (De Long, 2010; Spear, 2009). Recurring common generational perspectives provided by Conwell (2009), Larsson et al. (2006), and Spear (2009) suggests researchers should continue to explore generational leadership development and generation cohort characteristics in various workplace settings. Descriptions provided by individuals participating in this study inform about USAF Millennial employee perspectives and help fill the literature gap.

**Generational characteristics.** Some researchers have disputed the presence of generational differences (Fogarty, 2008; Jovic, Wallace, & Lemaire, 2006; Read, 2007), but findings from several studies support the existence of generation cohort characteristics (Bell, 2008; Gibson et al., 2009). Howe and Strauss (2007) and Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons (2010) conveyed that characteristics reflect trend behaviors and perspectives of the generation, but some generation cohort members may not display the characteristics, and some characteristics may overlap. For example, Millennial cohort members focus on civic improvements and social relations, and display a positive

outlook; some GenX cohort members display similar characteristics (Howe & Strauss, 1994; Strauss & Howe, 1991). A definitive explanation for generation cohort characteristic overlap does not exist, but exploration of the characteristics suggests why the overlap may occur (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

***Boomer characteristics.*** Members of the Boomer generation cohort optimistically seek consensus, team activities, relationships with personal importance, and driven by optimism (Raines, 2003). Boomers portray an idealistic generation type and welcome change (Gibson et al., 2009). Although not selected for the study sample, Boomers appear to affect perspectives and behaviors of succeeding cohorts (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

***Generation X characteristics.*** Characterized by a reactive generation type, members of the GenX cohort comprehend economic and other societal problems (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Similar to their Boomer parents, the GenX cohort focuses on changing the external environment to ensure survival and work-life balance (Gibson et al., 2009). Stability, skepticism of authority, independence, and professional competence also appear as reactive characteristics to the current environment (Gibson et al., 2009; Howe & Strauss, 2002). The demographic change from traditional family life to a cohort reflecting divorced parents is another potential effect on GenX cohort characteristics (Lockwood et al., 2009). GenXers' focus on developing individual skills, entrepreneurship, devotion to lifelong learning, and earning respect of others also support the shift to a secular life cycle. GenX characteristics and societal effects appear to affect Millennial perspectives and behaviors (Strauss & Howe, 1991).

***Millennial characteristics.*** Eight Millennial characteristics have evolved to help define the generational cohort: parenting, entitlement, meaning, limitless expectations, the need for speed, social networking, and collaboration (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). Understanding these elements as seen through Millennial eyes will help leaders communicate and collaborate effectively with younger generations who seek to build confidence as they welcome challenges and change (Pew, 2010). The characteristics developed by Lancaster and Stillman (2010) align with research from other authors shown in Table 1. The Millennial cohort displays a civic generation type whereby a shift from GenX individualism to cooperation, consensus, character, and civic duties is taking place. This focus away from individualism to focusing on children facilitates a positive future for Millennials based on values, selflessness, nurturing, and intellectual prowess (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Support for this change appears in media, schools, movie theaters, and other areas to shape the external stimuli children experience whether they are at or away from home (Howe & Strauss, 2000, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010).

**Multigenerational workforce.** Review of characteristics in Table 2, reflected by the Boomer, GenX, and Millennial cohorts, shows similarities and differences. For example, Strauss and Howe (1991) discussed how significant world events affect characteristics of a generation type (e.g., Idealist, Reactive, or Civic). The characteristics provide opportunities for leaders and followers, members of a multigenerational workforce, and research focusing on a multigenerational workforce continues to support unique cohort characteristics described in generation theory (Bell, 2008; Pena-Sanchez, 2008). According to Schultz (2010), results suggested leaders employ transforming leadership styles to adapt to multigenerational workforce needs. Similarly, leaders could

facilitate trust and workforce cohesion by nurturing generational differences while focusing on organizational goals (Schultz, 2010).

As the youngest generation entering the workforce, Millennials generate new challenges for current organizational members (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011; Shah, 2011). Claps (2010) suggested open communication and transforming leadership style would help leaders focus on Millennial needs, values, and expectations. The interaction would help ensure the Millennial is aware of the importance of adjusting to the new structure and the leader's expectations resulting in meeting individual and organization goals (Claps, 2010). Research suggests considering follower needs and expectations to develop effective training programs is essential for multigenerational organization stability and growth. According to Bannon, Ford, and Meltzer (2011), comprehending Millennial needs and expectations could improve performance and retention. Leaders can also use this insight to provide opportunities for Millennials to share technological insight and greater exposure to diversity than previous generations (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011).

Including generational cohort focus during discussions and surveys helps leaders replace perceptions with generational experiences (Bell, 2008). Henry and Gibson-Howell (2011) discovered generational differences between Millennial and non-Millennial students who support current generation theory perspectives (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Initial results appeared to suggest Millennials shunned community service, but further analysis revealed Millennial preference for community service when not required as part of the academic curriculum (Henry & Gibson-Howell, 2011).

Leaders who employ tactics to discover generational preferences discover Millennial preferences but also how the information benefits the organization. For example, comprehending Millennial needs for basic needs such as health care, retirement benefits, and opportunities for growth can encourage leaders to re-evaluate company policies (Rawlins, Indvik, & Johnson, 2008). In addition, leveraging Millennial civic generation type characteristics to catalyze change within an established structure, leaders could collaborate with Millennials regarding recommended changes (Hershatler, 2010). Exploration of issues that evolve in a multigenerational organization suggests identification of characteristics helps leaders develop approaches to blend generation needs with organization goals (Hershatler, 2010).

Generation theorists describe aspects of generation cycles and characteristics (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Researchers report generational differences exist in the workplace and suggest approaches to maintain generation characteristics while building relationships (Rawlins, Indvik, & Johnson, 2008; Schultz, 2010). These generational findings are critical for inclusion within this phenomenological study. As the number of USAF Millennial officers increases, knowledge about their generational cycle, preceding generation cycles, and the previous civic generation with whom they share characteristics (i.e., G.I. Generation) helps shape anticipated parameters the respondents could address when describing their lived leadership development experiences (Englander, 2012; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Increased awareness of generation characteristics promotes bracketing of pre-conceived expectations of USAF Millennial officer behaviors and helps minimize researcher bias (Giorgi, 1997; Rubin, 2008).

## **Leadership Theories and Approaches**

Leadership theorists suggest leaders should consider multiple variables when developing a preferred leadership style. Some variables include follower cognitive abilities, effective cross-cultural communication, and generational differences (Glickman, 2011; Mackenzie & Wallace, 2011; Peschl, 2007). These and other factors affecting the evolution of leadership approaches resulted in selecting transactional, transforming, and systemic leadership theories for this study.

**Transactional leadership.** Early leadership theorists focused on observations and results (McFadden et al., 2005). For example, leaders possessing certain characteristics and displayed certain behaviors appeared to fill leadership roles. Based on inconsistency of success outcomes for leaders who possessed these traits and abilities, other leadership theories evolved (McFadden et al., 2005). Raven and French (1958) suggested the importance of power and position as factors affecting leadership success. Legitimate, coercive, reward, expert, and referent power categories focused on leader-follower interaction instead of leader characteristics (McFadden et al., 2005). The importance of social interaction and outcomes resulted in a focus on the leader follower relationship starting with transactional leadership (Sarros & Santora, 2001).

Transactional leadership theorists view supervision as a social exchange whereby the leader holds the power and the follower completes assigned responsibilities (Sarros & Santora, 2001). Followers receive rewards for task completion and face potential negative results for not completing the task. The social exchange approach reflects a traditional hierarchical structure or top-down direction (Raven & French, 1958). The approach bolsters or truncates the leader's ability to achieve organizational success. New

employees often require transactional interaction to learn new skills and organization processes (Martin, 2007). Followers initially lacking the cognitive skill or motivation to complete tasks without direction would benefit from a leader employing a compliance assurance approach (Peschl, 2007; Zhu, Sosik, Riggio, & Baiyin, 2012). The level of trust improves when leaders consistently follow a merit-based reward system (Sarros & Santora, 2001).

Disadvantages of the transactional leadership approach include stifling creativity if the follower is a creative thinker (Martin, 2007). Follower disenfranchisement often occurs when leadership interaction is top-down without regard for follower inputs or needs (McFadden et al., 2005). Followers could rebel against the individual selected to fill the leader position and leverage referent power (i.e., strong relationships between followers and the individual they would prefer to follow) until the leader departs (Raven & French, 1958). As new USAF members, or those deploying to work in a contentious environment like Afghanistan, Millennial officers often work for leaders who employ a transactional leadership style to enhance skill proficiency (SECAF, 2011c). When filling a leadership role, USAF Millennial officers could assimilate and use a transactional leadership style. Anticipating the possibility of USAF Millennial officers' exposure to or use of the transactional leadership style, interview questions can elicit what meaning, if any, participants attribute to the phenomenon of transactional leadership style (Giorgi, 1997).

**Transformational leadership.** The potentially negative and positive outcomes of leaders employing a transactional leadership approach resulted in creation of a new theory whereby followers contributed more in the leader-follower exchange (McFadden

et al., 2005). Transformational leaders often fill the legitimate power position of authority and focus on collaboration, teamwork, and motivation to catalyze change (Amernic, Craig, & Tourish, 2007). The leader provides the medium in which followers can create, excel, and enrich the success of the organization. During the process, the leader-follower relationship strengthens, resulting in stability as well as opportunity for innovation and change within the organization (Denning, 2008; Dunton, 2005).

Leaders employing a transformational approach often learn new skills to accommodate diverse followers. Amernic et al. (2007) discussed how transformational leaders must prepare to fill multiple roles. For example, saintly qualities reflect the leader's positive outlook and concern for others to ensure positive outcomes. Similarly, leveraging expert power, the leader fills the role of pedagogue or mentor to nurture followers (Amernic et al., 2007). The resulting mutually beneficial leader-follower relationship also generates high levels of morale and productivity because followers feel treated like equal partners in the relationship instead of a means to a transactional end (Dunton, 2008). As the level of trust increases, leaders and followers can collaborate on developing program initiatives or quickly resolving problems (Faure, 2006). To facilitate collaboration, leaders should focus on developing and honing effective communication skills.

Communication is essential for transforming leadership but conflict arises if the leader and follower disagree with the communication channel selected to respond (e.g., prefer face-to-face interaction and e-mail received) (Pena-Sanchez, 2008). Open communication can help the leader and follower comprehend communication channel preferences and agree on a solution acceptable to both. Resolution of communication



issues is a tactic used by transformational and other leaders: appreciative inquiry.

Aligned with transformational leadership, appreciative inquiry helps the leader set aside biases to focus on follower comments (Marquardt, 2007). Leaders should ask additional questions to examine the source of the problem and achieve a collaborative solution (Dunton, 2008). The dialogue demonstrates concern of the leader to the follower, and the leader gains insight to follower perspectives and needs (Mintzberg, 1999). This exchange focuses on the importance of inclusion in the workplace and steppingstone to systemic forms of leadership (Bennis, 1999).

USAF Millennial officers often fill supervisory roles (SECAF, 2011c).

Subordinates are members of the same or different generations (AU, 2014c). Whether filling a supervisory role USAF Millennial officers could assimilate and use a transformational leadership style to facilitate increased worker productivity and morale. Anticipating the possibility of USAF Millennial officers' exposure to or use of the transformational leadership style, interview questions can elicit whether participants attribute meaning, and the nature of that meaning, to the phenomenon of that style (Giorgi, 1997).

**Systems thinking and leadership.** Systems theorists emphasize the importance of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Banathy (1997) described

human activity systems . . . as purposeful creations . . . manifested in sets of activities (relationships) carried out by people who select and organize to attain a purpose . . . These activities often involve various natural and designed physical

systems and/or abstractions of the way we think . . . and range from families and small groups . . . to nations . . . [to] the global system of humanity (p. 7).

The systemic, or systems, thinking approach for this study includes aspects of adaptive and situational leadership theories (Banathy, 1997; Hersey & Blanchard, 1981, Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Transactional and transformational leadership theorists discuss the leader's directive or two-way communication preference, consideration of follower needs, and other aspects of the leader-follower relationship (Sarros & Santora, 2001). Similarly, situational and adaptive leadership theorists discuss the importance of the leader-follower relationship, environmental context, social interaction, and the leader's adaptation skills (Heifetz et al., 2004; Papworth, Milne, & Boak, 2008; Sosik, Potosky, & Jung, 2002). The "web of relationships" (Banathy, 1997, p. 5) annotated in situational and adaptive leadership theories support inclusion within the systems thinking discussion (Laszlo et al., 2010; Reed, 2006).

Hersey and Blanchard's (1981) situational leadership (SL) model focuses on relationship behaviors, task behaviors, and follower readiness for increased responsibilities. Using Hersey and Blanchard's (1981) approach, leaders plot task and relationship behaviors to determine the preferred leadership style (Papworth, Milne, & Boak, 2009). For example, leaders scoring high on task and low on relationship prefer a transactional approach whereas leaders who score high on relationship and low on task prefer a laissez-faire leadership style (Papworth et al., 2009). After identifying the SL style leaders can evaluate the level of follower readiness (Hersey & Blanchard, 1981). Readiness in the SL model addresses follower abilities, motivation, competence, and

commitment (Papworth et al., 2009). According to the SL model, employing the appropriate leadership style and level of follower readiness facilitates success.

Chen and Silverthorne (2005) and Papworth et al. (2009) tested the SL model in different cultural environments. Some supporters of the SL model discovered dependent on the leader's relationship score but was not a predictor of job performance (Chen & Silverthorne, 2005). Similarly, exclusion of various factors such as personality and concise definition of readiness resulted in partial support for the SL model (Papworth et al., 2009). SL model data analysis revealed limitations, but the general approach of the model provides support for an adaptive leadership style (Papworth et al., 2009).

Incorporating the SL model theme of matching leadership style and follower readiness for change, adaptive theories also address the need for increased leader self-awareness and selflessness. Sosik, Potosky, and Jung (2002) discussed how self-monitoring and managing individual behavior alleviates perceptual incongruence between leaders and followers. Seeking feedback, collaborative goal setting, and adapting leadership style to align with follower needs strengthens relationships and productivity (Sosik et al., 2002). Yukl and Mahsud (2010) also supported the position of adapting leadership style to environmental changes. The ability of leaders to identify and flexibly respond to situation changes facilitates success. Conversely, inflexibility or unwillingness to adapt can result in leader and organization failure (Miller, 1991).

Leader competence is essential for effectively identifying, reacting to, or anticipating change (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Key areas to consider are political climate, stakeholder expectations, internal and external relationships, and strategic level planning. Other elements in this systemic approach include the ability to solve cognitively

complex problems, emotional and social intelligence, and continuous learning (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Leaders who endeavor to seek new ideas increase opportunities for adaptation (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Conversations encourage leaders to ensure their needs are met (Heifetz et al., 2009). Oftentimes leaders placing significant emphasis on followers lack the wherewithal to meet personal or organization leadership requirements. Instead of maintaining the status quo, adaptive leaders often encourage change and at a pace commensurate with follower or organizational ability to adapt. Similarly, adaptive leaders display confidence in their abilities by seeking advice (Heifetz & Laurie, 2003).

This paradigm shift of traditional leaders possessing all the answers and providing direction, to inclusive discussion to develop answers, yields several benefits. Actions differentiate position-based leadership and adaptive “leadership . . . as an activity rather than a formal position or personal characteristic, and it may or may not be accompanied by authority” (Heifetz et al., 2004, p. 23). The type of appreciative or humble inquiry facilitates trust and candid responses (Lambrechts, Bouwen, Grieten, Huybrechts, & Schein, 2011). The interaction enables the follower to provide feedback in a non-attribution environment and at a time when the individual prefers to discuss. An additional benefit is the ability of adaptive leaders to identify group dynamics and facilitate team building.

Leaders, followers, situational context, cognitive abilities, and flexibility are components of systemic leadership for this study. Grounded in other academic disciplines such as biology, systems theory focuses on the importance of multiple internal and external system relationships and stimuli (Paucar-Carceres, 2009). From a social constructivist perspective, interdependence between individuals and the environment

results in perceptions based on lived experiences, attributions, and perceptions (Paucar-Carceres, 2009).

By employing a systems thinking approach, leaders can create or modify knowledge systems and affects organizational growth. Paucar-Caceres and Pagano (2009) discovered similarities between elements of systemic and knowledge management approaches. Appreciating the need to remove disorganized or constricted thinking, systemic thinkers incorporate multiple variables that increase knowledge, creativity, and awareness of second- and third-order effects stemming from an action (Ramani Gopal & Joy, 2011).

The systems thinking approach to effectively manage knowledge growth remains a necessity as proliferation of communication options and available information increases (Schein, 1993b). Similarly, leaders who effectively adapt to unstable environments can help extract applicable information and generate collaborative solutions (Sloan, 2011). Employing reactionary and anticipatory behaviors in various situations helps leaders effectively address needs of leaders, followers, and external stakeholders thereby contributing to organizational success (Savage & Sales, 2008).

Multiple stimuli affecting leader perspectives appear daunting, but systems theories also provide tools for leader success. Lazlo, Lazlo, and Dunsky (2010) suggested focusing on an environmental, social, and financial resource framework. Compartmentalizing the system to accomplish organizational goals and objectives also helps leaders focus on the importance of integrated parts to include internal processes, followers' learning preferences, and customer needs (Andreadis, 2009). Leaders can use the systems thinking approach to compare potential preferences and biases with reality as

defined by organizational members and stakeholders (Reed, 2006). Focusing on the importance of systemic elements to include leader perspectives, leaders can build strong communities by providing vision, goals, and objectives that address follower, customer, and organizational needs (Bennis & Mische, 1996; Senge, Lichtenstein, Kaeufer, Bradbury, & Carroll, 2007). During the phenomenological interviews, USAF Millennial officers could discuss interactions with leaders who employ a systems thinking approach. Participants could also discuss personal use of the systemic leadership style and rationale for their decision and effects on their leadership development.

Leaders and teams employing transactional, transformational, or systems thinking leadership approaches facilitate success. From an organizational perspective, each selected leadership style yields results and are often found in organizations. Along with selection of appropriate leadership style and consideration of multigenerational characteristics, leaders should consider other factors to facilitate organizational success. For example, the validity afforded by the employees to the organization could facilitate or thwart a leader's ability to affect change. Understanding implicit and explicit cultural norms for any group of people is essential for successful leadership.

USAF Millennial officers' success as leaders requires awareness of multigenerational characteristics and effective leadership skills (Rawlins, Indvik, & Johnson, 2008). Upon entry as the newest members of the USAF organizational structure, Millennial officers automatically fill a leadership role (SECAF, 2011c). Whether filling a supervisory role or not, USAF Millennial officers must develop skills to collaborate effectively with peers and members of different generations. Descriptions provided by USAF Millennial officers regarding multi-generation interaction and

exposure to various leadership styles inform about how the study participants create meaning while experiencing the leadership development phenomenon.

### **Organizational Culture**

Members of organizational cultures reflect accepted patterns of assumptions and approved behaviors that have developed over time (Schein, 1983). Aligned with theories of social exchange and constructivist themes, an organization's culture evolves because of shared ideas, beliefs, values, and shared organizational existence (Schein, 1983). To understand organizational culture, researchers study various elements, including demographics, geographic environment, and organizational membership (Schein, 1996, 2009; Stevens et al., 2008). Aspects of culture important in this study are the leader's role in developing culture, the importance of communication, and effects of sub-cultures on AF personnel.

**Leader role in organization culture.** According to Schein, *humble inquiry* occurs by knowing oneself, the effects of one's actions on followers, and how to behave to establish trust with one's followers (Lambrechts et al., 2011). Leaders who incorporate these behaviors facilitate followers' elaborating on an issue instead of selectively discussing certain elements of the problem or concern. Leaders can affect positive change by admitting personal limitations, withholding judgment, and endeavoring to understand issues through the eyes of followers (Schein, 1983). The leader should consider multiple factors as the linchpin for the organization's stability, growth, and adjustments to accommodate environmental changes. External factors include global or local community politics, economic conditions, and security (Schein,

1983). Internal factors a leader should consider include population demographics, resource availability, and follower preference for leadership styles (Schein, 1983).

To build an organization culture, effective leaders should adopt a helping approach (Schein, 1990; 2009) because of the importance of cultural development during communication with followers. Collaborating to discuss follower needs provides leaders with opportunities to share organizational cultural norms and beliefs (Schein, 1988). Organization leaders fill the role of providing training and resources to ensure followers receive training to complete assigned tasks (Schein, 1983). Creating a learning organization requires deliberate planning, commitment to developing a learning environment, and collaboration (Senge et al., 2007). The approach is not a panacea but instead supports awareness and incorporation of systemic elements to facilitate success of followers and the organization (Lambrechts et al., 2011). A potential benefit to a helping approach is providing opportunities for leaders to challenge their potential biases to learn from followers and modify the organization's culture (Lambrechts et al., 2011). Another benefit is leaders' continuous evaluation of communication skills to ensure effective message sharing, analysis of messages received, and modifying a preferred communication channel to accommodate follower needs and preferences (Pena-Sanchez, 2008; Schein, 2009). New USAF Millennial officers must learn about the USAF culture and their role to sustain or modify cultural norms through interpersonal communication (Schein, 1993a). USAF Millennial officers' responses inform how they experience the AF leadership phenomenon while developing leadership skills.

**Communication and organization culture.** Several variables affect effective communication including leader approach and follower willingness to interact



(Lambrechts et al., 2011). One option to help alleviate conflict between new and experienced organizational members is effective communication. According to Schein (1993) “[d]ialogue . . . is the root of *all* effective group action” (p. 42). Several factors can promote or derail effective dialogue with and between groups. Peer group pressure, career field cultures (e.g., engineers, accountants), generations, organization status, and a culture of political correctness can deter communication in contrast to providing honest, constructive feedback (Schein, 1990, 1996, 2009).

The ability of leaders to encourage training, policies and an environment designed to promote positive but critical communication will directly affect the ability of groups to engage in dialogue and successfully complete the mission (Schein, 2009). Fortunately, several techniques are available to assist leaders and followers to evaluate personal communication abilities and actively listen to others (Andreadis, 2009). Leaders selecting the sometimes difficult but worthwhile communication process (e.g., leader prefers face-to-face discussion but adjusts to support subordinates’ email preference) could help facilitate organizational stability when employees depart and new replacements arrive, provide balance among different cultural attributes, and blend individual and organization values (Stevens et al., 2008).

Leaders set the stage for cultural development based on their vision, mission, and expectations (Schein, 1983). Similar to group development, developing a culture includes times of consensus and conflict stimulated by internal and external organizational characteristics (Schein, 1988, 1996). Using the paradigm leaders should modify their approach to preserve stability or encourage creativity and innovation to support risk-taking behavior for organizational growth (Schein, 1983). Collaboration

using effective communication techniques helps ensure leaders address multiple perspectives to include sub-cultures within the organization. Similar to learning a new leader role in the culture, USAF Millennial officers may also need to develop new communication techniques to support cultural norms. USAF Millennial officer interview responses describe preferred communication channels and any modifications during leadership development.

**Organization sub-cultures.** Culture is an integral part of every organization (Schein, 1996). Lack of attention to culture continues to derail leaders from achieving objectives and continuous growth of the organization (Schein, 2009). Schein (1996) examined executive, engineering (systems and technology experts), and operational cultures within an organization and revealed distinct perspectives and opportunities for leaders to promote collaboration and success. Members of the executive and engineer cultures view people as means to an end whereas operators (i.e., collaborative team responsible for the production process) believe in the value of keeping focused on the people (Schein, 1996). Operators focus on contingency planning and realize the importance of their work with respect to individual tasks and organizational impacts. By their position, training, and education, executives and engineers focus on metrics, accurate performance measures, costs/benefits, and other information to quantify performance (Schein, 1996). Despite differences between the executive and engineer perspectives regarding problem-solving for the organization, the greater barrier to overcome is creating an inclusive culture focused on a common language, proactive and critical listening, and comprehension of the importance of cultural affiliation on various behaviors of individuals and groups (Schein, 1996).

Schein's (1996) executives, engineers, and operational subcultures reflect some of the differing generational perspectives (Strauss & Howe, 1991) and preferred leadership styles and values (Raines, 2003). Boomer and GenX generation members often fill executive positions. Their preferred leadership style aligns with the scope of their responsibilities and generational characteristics (Raines, 2003; Schein, 1996). Boomer, GenX, and Millennial generation members who are technical experts could fill engineering positions. Employing abstract thinking to minimize human involvement in processes may differ from generation characteristics supporting collaboration and civic mindedness (Schein, 1996; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Boomers, GenX, and Millennials could perform operator tasks (e.g., vehicle maintenance, process purchase orders, etc.) or support core functions of the organization (Schein, 1996). Operators must collaborate to complete the task and may create conflict for a GenX cohort member who leverages a generational characteristic of self (Raines, 2003; Schein, 1996). USAF Millennial officer leadership development descriptions inform whether they experience these types of events and meaning created from them.

### **United States Air Force**

The United States Air Force (USAF) is an organization whose mission is to "*Fly fight, and win . . . in air, space, and cyberspace*" (USAF, 2014b). Descriptions of the USAF organizational culture include a strict hierarchy with a generalized mission as depicted by displayed behaviors in various forms of media (Drago, 2006). Like many organizations, the USAF encompasses a diverse demographic population (AFPC, 2014c). This section provides a brief overview of the USAF organizational structure, culture, and need for leadership development.

**USAF organizational structure.** For the Air Force as one “element of American power” (The White House, 2010, p. 11), a hierarchical structure is required to facilitate and expedite communication within the USAF and among its mission partners. As shown in Figure 2, compartmentalized roles and responsibilities remains a USAF structural characteristic. Based on requirements for civilian and military leadership within the Department of Defense (DoD, 2008), many functions align under the authority of the Secretary of the Air Force and others under the USAF Chief of Staff. Several functions appear to overlap, but SECAF staff personnel focus more on policy development and implementation whereas CSAF office personnel operationalize strategy to accomplish goals and objectives (JCS, 2013; SECAF, 2011c, 2012e; USAF, 2015). Civilian and military leadership are essential and are representative of the USAF Population. Military and civilian leaders implement presidential directives to provide support for global DoD leaders charged with achieving specified goals and objectives (DoD, 2008; JCS, 2011; SECAF, 2012e).

At the USAF Headquarters-level alignments and missions vary as shown in Figure 2, but clear leadership channels are present to facilitate communication. For example, changes to USAF mission, vision, goals, and objectives flow from leadership to the more than 680,000 USAF employees (USAF, 2014b). Organizational leaders publish supplemental or new guidance specific to the organization for subordinate population implementation. Although this structured role-based communication flow could stymie information flow, employing a systems model, or “web of relationships” (Banathy, 1997, p. 5), within the USAF hierarchy continues to yield dividends. For example, Figure 2 depicts USAF hierarchical components, e.g., Headquarters AF Space Command,

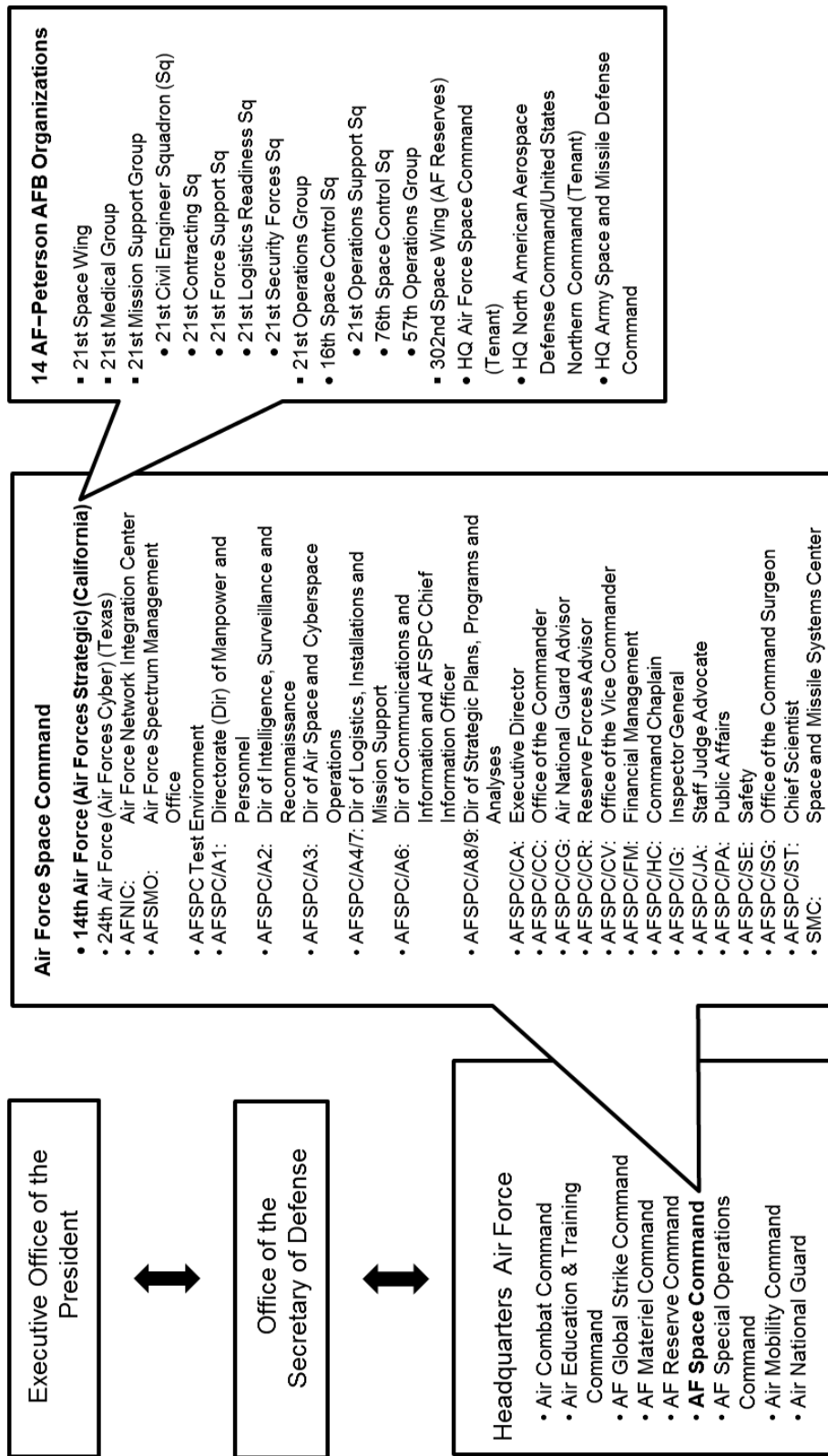


Figure 2. The Peterson Air Force Base organization structure (selected units). Participants in the sample population are assigned to units at Peterson AFB. Their leaders are respectively responsible to the Commander, 14th Air Force; Commander, Air Force Space Command; the Secretary of the Air Force, the Air Force Chief of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the President. Adapted from “About the Department of Defense” by U.S. Department of Defense (2014a) at <http://www.defense.gov/about/#history>. “Units—Peterson Air Force Base” by U.S. Air Force (2014d) at <http://www.peterson.af.mil/units/index.asp>. Approved for public use and unlimited distribution (see Appendix E).

and 14th Air Force. Communicating strictly through one component, then forwarding the message to a different component adds coordination layers and delays information routing. Leaders employing a systems model employ direct use of hierarchical communication channels for specific messages as well as contacting experts assigned to other compartments to build collaborative networks (SECAF, 2011c, 2012e).

Changes to *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (The White House, 2010), the *National Defense Strategy* (DoD, 2008), and the *National Military Strategy* (JCS, 2011) result in USAF leaders modifying mission requirements. *The Uniform Code of Military Justice* (UCMJ, 2010) describes appropriate behaviors for military personnel, leadership responsibilities and other obligations based on military service as well as commensurate punishment for behavior violations. Leaders' implementation of UCMJ may appear strictly authoritarian but UCMJ enforcement provides the backbone for good-order-and-discipline within the USAF and other U.S. Sister Services (e.g., U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Navy) and provides a common language to help leaders facilitate goals and mission accomplishment regardless of the environment.

Diversity and mentoring have gained increased attention in the corporate world as well as within the USAF culture (Donley, 2011a; James, 2014; SECAF, 2012c, 2013a; Stevens et al., 2008; USAF, 2014a). Resulting from the creation of a new Diversity office, the frequency of diversity messages continues to increase on various USAF websites, military newspapers, and updates to or creation of new guidance (Donley, 2011a; Raatz, 2014). SECAF published the following diversity definition:

The Air Force broadly defines diversity as a composite of individual characteristics, experiences, and abilities consistent with the Air Force Core Values and the Air Force Mission. Air Force Diversity includes but is not limited to: personal life experiences, geographic background, socioeconomic background, cultural knowledge, educational background, work background, language abilities, physical abilities, philosophical/spiritual perspectives, age, race, ethnicity and gender (SECAF, 2012c, p. 4).

The definition appears to describe the concept of inclusion (Stevens et al., 2008) with following comments authorizing leaders to tailor their approach to facilitate mission accomplishment. With the potential of communication difficulty derived from generational characteristics, the SECAF diversity concept creates additional concerns and opportunities for USAF active duty Millennial line officers. Specifically, Millennials who ask senior USAF officers to clarify how diversity guidance creates meaning for them could result in unexpected responses to leader inquiries (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Hence, the leader could interpret resistance while the Millennial officer is reacting in line with generational characteristics (Raines, 2003). For example, during a USAF Boomer or GenX officer discussion about implementing diversity approaches in the unit, a USAF Millennial officer may ask how it is possible to measure a definition that could include every demographic characteristic available. The USAF Millennial officer is genuinely curious about how the change applies to them (Drago, 2006; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010; Pew, 2010). The USAF Boomer or GenX officer could feel challenged by a subordinate or recognize this exchange as a potential informal leadership development opportunity.

USAF senior leaders distribute diversity and mentoring guidance from a top-down leadership perspective (SECAF, 2012c, 2013a). The USAF structure and culture places implementation responsibility on military commanders and civilian leaders (SECAF, 2011c, 2013a). Specific to mentoring, the purpose is for leaders to mentor followers on various skills facilitating professional development, career progression, and preparation for promotion opportunities (SECAF, 2013a, 2013c). This formal professional development approach aligns with the USAF core values (USAF, 2014c).

**USAF culture.** Implementation of the USAF core values of *Service before Self, Integrity, and Excellence in All We Do* (James & Welsh, 2014; USAF, 2014c), occurred during the mid-1990s. Together they provide a common cultural thread or language from which each USAF member builds individual or shared goals, vision, and help shape the future of the USAF culture. Similar to USAF leaders employing various leadership behaviors to facilitate mission accomplishment based on situational factors, each USAF member engages in different activities to enhance personal skills to support USAF Core Value expected behaviors (James et al., 2014). Of particular interest is exploring how USAF Millennial describe officer leadership development and USAF core values perspectives. Comprehending how USAF Millennial officers integrate the USAF Core Values cultural characteristic when developing leadership skills inform whether Millennial generation members create meaning of the phenomenon. Interview responses inform whether USAF Millennial officers' descriptions align with generation characteristics (Raines, 2003).

The Secretary of the Air Force and Air Force Chief of Staff continue to reinforce the importance of the USAF core values (Fore, 2012; Gettle, 2012; James et al., 2014).



For example, Congressional testimony, vision statements, and formal presentations detail the importance of USAF personnel performing duties in overseas locations, technology enhancements, and strategies to defeat current and potential enemies (Donley & Schwartz, 2012; Donley & Welsh, 2013; James & Spencer, 2014; James & Welsh, 2014; Schwartz, 2011; SECAF, 2012b). Presenters did not mention the USAF core values, but comments imply that individual efforts to maintain integrity and excel at assigned tasks result in strengthening internal and external cultural ties (Donley, 2010; Schwartz, 2012). Cultural characteristics of the USAF continue to evolve (SECAF, 2011c, 2012d). Within the USAF, leaders review USAF policies and directives to clarify values, beliefs, and acceptable behaviors (SECAF, 2011b, 2012c, 2012d). The process involves ensuring USAF policies reflect DoD doctrine changes to enhance collaboration and cooperation (DEOMI, 2011; DoD, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; EO, 1998). Some policy modifications occur to reinforce the USAF cultural identity based on the USAF mission (USAF, 2014b).

USAF culture provides the foundation for Airmen (i.e., USAF military and civilian members) when performing duties with members of the federal government (DoD, 2011, 2014a; JCS, 2013; USA, 2013). For example, Airmen can promote transparency within the DoD by effectively discussing the USAF mission and leadership perspectives (Executive, 2009). Lived experiences of USAF members selected to collaborate with federal government personnel are shared through formal or informal development approaches (AU, 2014a; Callahan, 2007). Sharing of ideas and perspectives support USAF cultural norms or catalyze change (Hanrahan, 2011; Micewski, 2003).

Reinforcement of USAF cultural perspectives also help Airmen effectively interact with members of foreign nations (AFCLC, 2014). USAF obligations to support initiatives in Afghanistan (ISAF, 2014), Iraq (USF-I, 2014), and the Republic of Korea (USFK, 2014) facilitated initiatives to explain the importance of foreign nation cultures and responsibilities of representing the USAF culture (AFCLC, 2014). The possibility of Airmen directed to perform duties in several foreign countries continues to increase (AEC, 2014). This new USAF cultural norm combined with global uncertainty heightens the importance of leadership development (AEC, 2014; Remer, 2007).

**USAF and leadership development concerns.** Changes to USAF membership composition, available resources, and global uncertainty could affect USAF leadership development approaches. For example, USAF members refer to policies or formal relationship networks for leadership development guidance to complete tasks directed by the President of the United States or his designated representatives (AU, 2014a; SECAF, 2011c, 2013a; The White House, 2010). USAF members use informal relationship networks and USAF Internet sites to develop leadership skills (Callahan, 2007). To mitigate effects of uncertainty and facilitate task accomplishment, USAF leaders should focus on bolstering the skills of and relationships with USAF members (AU, 2014c; James, 2014; SECAF, 2011c, 2012c, 2012d).

Leadership theorists discuss the importance of interpersonal interaction and communication to develop successful employees (Heifetz, 2003). Hargis' (2005) results suggest that leaders using an approach that values followers and facilitates positive relationships also creates effective communication within the organization. Similarly, Rathgeber's (2009) phenomenological themes suggest the importance of cultural ties,

relationships, and transforming dialogue to increased follower performance. USAF leaders who prefer these interactive approaches, are sometimes restricted from employing the skills. For example, USAF directives mandate that when filling the role of commander, the USAF officer should use a transactional style when administering punishment (SECAF, 2013a; UCMJ, 2010) or directing personnel to fulfill combat-related tasks (DoD, 2011). Upon completion of these and similar tasks, USAF officers could employ various leadership skills to strengthen relationships with their demographically diverse subordinates and leaders (SECAF, 2012c).

The USAF demographic characteristics continue to change (AFPC, 2014c). Boomer officers responsible for approving or enforcing policies are retiring and replaced by members from the GenX cohort (AFPC, 2014c; Howe & Strauss, 2007). Lived experience descriptions shared by USAF Millennial officers illuminate whether the officers' generational characteristics align with or take priority over USAF cultural norms. Howe and Strauss (1994, 2007) suggested that technological advances provide a more extensive knowledge base for Millennial cohort members. GenX and Boomer leaders who take advantage of Millennial characteristics (e.g., use of technology and preference for comprehending importance of a task to them) improve organizational communication and productivity (Lowe, Levitt, & Wilson, 2008; North, 2011). Pasieka (2009) suggested that leaders who nurture Millennial relationship-building, a sense of purpose, and appreciation of individuals' organizational contributions also increase the number of job applicants and employee retention.

The USAF organizational structure and design results in placement of Millennial cohort members in leadership positions AFPC (2014a). Complications arise as USAF

Millennial officers are entering the USAF culture and accept responsibility for leading subordinate GenX employees with several years of USAF experience (SECAF, 2011c). Hence, USAF GenX leaders (i.e., superiors or subordinates) have an increased responsibility to mentor the USAF Millennial officer who is also responsible for learning a new job during cultural assimilation (SECAF, 2011c, 2013a). Focusing on the USAF core values helps alleviate generational differences by collaboratively focusing on common goals developed by leaders to support the USAF mission (USAF, 2014b, 2014c).

Successful collaborative efforts evolve from leader reinforcement of USAF core values, but external stimuli often exacerbate problems resulting in the leader's ability to provide opportunities to enhance staff member skills. For example, increased restrictions on monetary resources continue to affect leadership development options to include the inability for junior staff members to attend training classes or leadership conferences (Donley, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Williams, 2011). USAF Boomer and GenX leaders assimilating these changes could create additional stress on themselves, the leader, and the organization (Miller, 1991).

Expanded reliance on technology increases options to collaborate globally and minimize the loss of human resources (Carbajal, 2011; James & Welsh, 2014; Schwartz, 2012). According to generation characteristics, USAF Millennial officers are likely to be more adept at technology-based collaborative forms of asynchronous communication, despite the critical need for synchronous face-to-face communication for mission accomplishment, either physically or by video conference. Unfortunately, fewer USAF leaders are available to serve as mentors, reducing opportunities for face-to-face

communication, collaboration and leadership development. In this study, leadership development interview questions are designed to elicit descriptions from USAF Millennial officers regarding communication techniques and estimated number of opportunities to receive mentoring.

To achieve a balanced budget allocated by Congress, selected USAF members volunteer to separate from the USAF while others are ordered to depart (AF/A1-PA, 2011; Garamone, 2012). This scenario affects USAF Millennial leaders responsible to motivate subordinate GenX and Millennial employees to excel while facing the possibility of forced removal from the USAF (AFPC, 2014b, 2014d; Fanning, Welsh, & Cody, 2013; Gildea, 2013). The result is uncontrollable and unpredictable structural changes that affect USAF Millennial recruitment, retention, and leadership development. USAF members continue to perform duties in foreign countries and often in austere, contingency environments (Campbell, Hannah, & Matthews, 2010). Entering active duty service several years prior to USAF Millennial officers, USAF GenX members have a greater likelihood of working in overseas locations, interacting with members of foreign cultures, and directly or indirectly supporting combat operations (AEC, 2014). Hence, USAF GenX efforts to develop USAF Millennial leaders is essential to ensure Millennials have skills to lead successfully in any environment (McCausland, 2008; Salmoni, Hart, McPherson, & Winn, 2010). The approach could benefit USAF GenX and Millennial officers, but situational events often inhibit interaction. For example, increased number of USAF Millennial officers working in deployed locations, GenX officer retirements, and reductions of USAF personnel limit shared experiences to help develop USAF Millennial officers as leaders. Descriptions of lived experiences and

attributed meaning by USAF Millennial officers inform about concerns regarding their leadership development experience.

Changes to the global landscape affect USAF GenX and USAF Millennial leadership development approaches. For example, USAF GenX leaders should remove mental barriers derived from experiences that are ineffective in new combat zones (Eisen, 2009). USAF Millennial leaders must overcome their generational preference for technological communication, such as media presentations of peer group combatants (Henderson, 2008), to appreciate and assimilate USAF senior leader-supported cultural norms encouraging face-to-face interaction (Raines, 2003; SECAF, 2013a; USAF, 2014c). Compromise to include USAF Millennial officer focus on their generation civic-minded characteristic and USAF senior leaders employing technology-based communication techniques, enhances leadership skill development for current and future USAF leaders (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck, & Pennings, 1971; Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Leading change in foreign cultures, accommodating host nation allies' preferences, directing personnel to transition between hazardous duty locations, and synthesizing generation characteristics of USAF and foreign allies limit or provide opportunities for leaders to develop skills in USAF Millennial officers. Similar to generational characteristics and individual communication channel preferences, unpredictable worldwide events also affect USAF leader decisions and development approaches. Relationships forged between USAF and foreign nation military allies have facilitated some Middle East stability and opportunities for foreign natives, such as access to education, clean water, and school re-opening (ISAF, 2014; McKenzie &

Packard, 2011; USF-I, 2014). However, continued volatile global conflicts and emergencies require new strategies to re-introduce stability on several continents.

President Obama's 2011 declaration of a Pacific pivot to focus on the potential threats in the Pacific theater and minimize DoD resources supporting Middle East initiatives (Pearlman, 2011), Middle East allies are assuming greater security and military responsibilities for their respective nations (ISAF, 2014; USF-I, 2014). Corresponding with the continuing USAF and DoD withdrawal that started in 2011, articles regarding the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) publications appeared (Erdbrink, 2012; Tharoor, 2012). The transfer of military resources (e.g., personnel and equipment) to support Pacific military strategies and actions from NAM members affect leadership development perspectives and decisions regarding USAF military strategy (SECAF, 2012e).

Comprised of 120 member and 17 observer nations, NAM members' focus is to resist United States dominance (Das Kundu, 2012). Established in 1961, NAM members' ability to affect change increased with the 16th Annual NAM Summit induction of Iran's President Ahmadinejad as the NAM chair (2012-2015) and attendance by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (Das Kundu, 2012). NAM member nations include Afghanistan, Bahamas, Cuba, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Venezuela; observer nations include Brazil, China, and Mexico (Permanent, 2012).

Although the Pacific pivot guidance remains constant, increased turmoil in the Middle East that includes participation from several NAM nationalists catalyzed global strategy reconsideration (Matishak, 2014; O'Hanlon, 2014). The Russian annexation of Crimea and challenges to Ukrainian sovereignty resulted in USAF European leaders

recommending against troop reductions (Burke & Sumida, 2014; Cole, 2014; Meyer & Pismennaya, 2014). Similarly, the creation of the Islamic State (IS), declaration of a caliphate, unconventional warfare tactics, proliferation of conventional weapons, mass executions to create fear, and expeditious territory control took the world by surprise (Aisch et al., 2014).

Unlike other terrorist organizations, IS funding, and its weapons arsenal and fighter recruitment continue to increase as the well-organized members effectively employ technology and social networking strategies to convey their message (Aisch et al., 2014; Gaouette & Lerman, 2014; Hubbard & Schmidt, 2014; Rose, 2014). The swift actions of the non-state actor resulted in increased USAF military participation in Iraq as well as Syria, Afghanistan, and surrounding nations (Sicard, 2014; Tritten, 2014a, 2014b). Developments in 2014 including the truce between IS and the Nusra Front (an Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria) to combat Syrian rebels, the United States, and other supporters, could result in new strategies requiring increased USAF involvement (FoxNews, 2014; Reichmann, 2014). The resultant Middle East instability and USAF involvement motivated rival leaders from Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other nations to open collaborative dialogue to alleviate the IS threat (Arango, 2014; Chandrasekaran, 2014; Cockburn, 2014). The complex and fluctuating Middle East situation could result in USAF senior leaders creating new strategies employing conventional and unconventional tactics and systems thinking approaches to warfare.

Non-terrorist events and disasters also resulted in rival nation cooperation and DoD strategy reconsideration influencing USAF leadership development concerns.



Current and future USAF strategic planning and leadership development initiatives must include terrorist, biological, weather, and other events occurring in the complex global environment. The Ebola epidemic started in Guinea and quickly spread to Liberia, Sierra Leone, and other nations (Gomez, 2014; Starr, 2014). Leaders from traditional rivals Israel and Palestine set aside differences to develop strategies to prevent or contain an outbreak (Israelis and Palestinians, 2014). To support Presidential initiatives and support the global allies and adversaries, Congress approved funds for the DoD to train teams to help contain the outbreak and build quarantine and treatment facilities (Shane, 2014; Stewart, 2014). Climate change also resulted in DoD leaders discussing concerns and strategies. Global warming continues to raise ocean levels that threaten coastal military installations with flooding (Tilghman, 2014). Lack of rain could result in an increase of wildfires, food shortages, and desert-like conditions hindering effective use of military weapons and technology (Carroll, 2014).

USAF Millennial leaders face an increasing scope of responsibility and number of foreign cultures to explore (AEC, 2014; Campbell et al., 2010). Concerns include USAF demographics, reduced human and monetary resources, and an unpredictable global environment. Focusing on the stability of the USAF organizational structure and strength of the USAF culture, USAF Millennial generation members can collaborate effectively when developing successful leadership approaches.

**USAF contextual documents.** Several USAF contextual documents were reviewed to provide insight into the USAF environment experienced by USAF Millennial officers. Such documents are also relevant because USAF Millennial officers use the guidance to create meaning for lived leadership development perspectives and assimilate

or enhance one's personal leadership skills. Transcribed speeches presented by current and previous Secretaries of the Air Force and Air Force Chiefs of Staff, governing directives communicated through Air Force doctrine and instructions, and articles about USAF senior leaders' policies contain processes and requirements to which USAF Millennial officers must adhere.

Selected documents approved by USAF leaders focused on leadership development, diversity of a multi-generational workforce, and organizational culture. Review of the selected document began by using the study's theoretical framework underpinnings consisting of generation theory, leadership theories and approaches, and USAF organizational culture. Themes and attributes of contextual documents provide an overview of the USAF organizational culture USAF Millennial officers experience upon USAF entry and during employment. Reviewing leadership directives also supports preparation for systematic comparison with USAF Millennial officer interview responses. Themes and associated attributes of USAF employees are as follows:

- USAF Contextual Documents Theme 1: USAF Core Values—The Tie That Binds All Airmen.
  - Attribute 1: Integrity
  - Attribute 2: Excellence in all we do
  - Attribute 3: Service before self
- USAF Contextual Documents Theme 2: USAF Culture--Who We Are.
  - Attribute 1: Heritage
  - Attribute 2: Take care of people and they will take care of the mission
  - Attribute 3: Diversity

- Attribute 4: Complex, unstable global environment
- USAF contextual documents theme 3: USAF leadership development.
  - Attribute 1: Continuous learning--Formal leadership development
  - Attribute 2: Mentoring--Formal and informal
  - Attribute 3: Interpersonal relationships and networking
  - Attribute 4: Transactional leadership
  - Attribute 5: Transforming leadership
  - Attribute 6: Systems thinking approach

To demonstrate the thematic consistency of USAF senior leader and published guidance documents, multiple quoted descriptions of each attribute and the source of each statement follows. Sources are presented chronologically then alphabetically.

**USAF contextual documents theme 1: USAF core values—The tie that binds all airmen.** USAF employees, termed *Airmen*, work in a hierarchical organizational structure needed to accomplish complex, collaborative missions. Recognizing that USAF employees possess diverse skills, backgrounds, perspectives, and characteristics, something is needed to effectively assimilate all employees. According to former SECAF Donley (2010), “[USAF] standards are captured in our core values: integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. These enduring values serve as our anchor and their adoption by one and all binds us together.” All Airmen must adopt and implement the USAF core values to facilitate individual, team, and organizational success.

***Attribute 1: Integrity.*** The concept of integrity includes several facets described in USAF guidance and by USAF senior leaders. Character, unwavering morals and

values, and stability in diverse situations are some characteristics of USAF leaders embodying integrity. Examples are:

- SECAF (2011c, p. 11): “Integrity is the adherence to a strong moral code and consistency in one’s actions and values. A person of integrity acts with conviction, demonstrating appropriate self-control without acting rashly . . . honesty is the foundation of that trust.”
- SECAF (2012d, p 14): “As a member of the Air Force, you must practice the highest standards of conduct and integrity . . . Your code of ethics must be such that your behavior and motives do not create even the appearance of impropriety.”
- James et al. (2014): “We must have the strength of character to do . . . the right things at the right times . . . Being a wingman does not mean protecting those who lack integrity or fail to uphold the core values; it means not tolerating them.”
- Welsh (2014a): “When we have failures of character, failures to meet the core values, there's leadership involved somewhere along the line. Those leaders should be accountable . . . Every one of them. And we need a continuous dialogue or this gets stale.”

***Attribute 2: Excellence in all we do.*** Excellence encompasses personal and professional behaviors to ensure USAF mission success. Continuous learning, improving professional skills, and appropriately representing the USAF in all situations are behaviors of Airmen embodying excellence. Examples are:

- Donley (2010): “How we serve matters, for our teammates, for our joint and coalition partners, and for the ultimate success of our assigned missions. To

paraphrase Lord Nelson: America expects that every Airman will do his or her duty.”

- SECAF (2011c, p. 13): “On a personal level, Airmen seek out and complete developmental education; work to stay in their best physical, mental, and moral shape; and continue to enhance their professional competencies.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 4): “Excellence In All We Do directs us to develop a sustained passion for the continuous improvement and innovation that will propel the Air Force into a long-term, upward vector of accomplishment and performance.”
- SECAF (2013a, p. 13): “Education enhances performance in each phase of professional growth and builds on the foundation of leadership abilities shown during the earlier stages of an Airman’s career . . . [and] take on increased responsibilities appropriate to their grade.”
- Welsh (2014c): “[T]he Air Force reflects America's spirit. This bold, indomitable to always reach higher, to always see over the next ridgeline, look into the next decade, the idea there's always something worth dying for.”

***Attribute 3: Service before self.*** To serve something greater than oneself is a hallmark of employees working in the service organization called the USAF. Behavioral characteristics include taking care of the work and personal families, placing service goals before personal goals, and daily adhering to the oath to defend the Constitution of the United States. Examples are:

- Donley (2010): “Why do we serve? We serve because we have something very special to defend, something supremely worthy of our service; not just in defense of American lives, but an American way of life, a life worth living.”

- SECAF (2011c, p. ii): “Service Before Self is the essence of our commitment to the nation. Leaders who serve selflessly inspire support from everyone in their command and promote a spirit that binds organizations into an effective warfighting team.”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 13): “Airmen . . . must be loyal to their leaders, fellow Airmen, and the Air Force institution they serve. This includes demonstrated allegiance to the Constitution and loyalty to the military chain of command and to the President and Secretary of Defense.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 14): “Public service is a public trust, requiring employees to place loyalty to the Constitution, the laws, and ethical principles above private gain.”
- Welsh (2014a): “These core values are who we are . . . If there are people in our Air Force who don’t think they stand for the same thing, if these don’t represent their values, then they need to find another profession.”

**USAF contextual documents theme 2: USAF culture--who we are.** The USAF Core Values provides employees with a foundational concept to help synthesize efforts for individual excellence and organization success. USAF leaders also convey the importance of the organization’s heritage, taking care of people, a healthy work-life balance, diversity, and thriving in a complex, unstable environment. These selected USAF cultural elements are directly related to leadership development as explored in this study.

***Attribute 1: Heritage.*** The USAF continues to evolve. Similar to the USAF Core Values, senior leaders and Airmen acknowledge the importance of the Service’s heritage

and foundational elements. Reflecting on the past often facilitates course corrections to avoid similar mistakes as well as generate new strategies to facilitate future success.

Examples:

- Donley (2010): “You will step into history . . . as links in an unbroken chain of service, among generation after generation of Americans . . . Others will come after you . . . as the founder's put it, “to preserve the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity.”“
- SECAF (2011c, p. 16): “Airmen share a long history of service, honor, and sacrifice forged in times of peace and war. From the earliest days of airpower . . . Airmen have built an extraordinary heritage . . . We embrace change and, through transformation and innovation, we ensure a viable . . . future.”
- SECAF (2012c, p. 8): “The chain of command provides the command, control and communication necessary to accomplish the mission. Each “link” in the chain is a level of responsibility and authority extending from the President . . . through each commander at every level.”
- James and Welsh (2014, pp. 17-18): “[Our] core missions have endured since President Truman originally assigned airpower roles and missions to the Air Force in 1947 . . . the Air Force is the only Service that provides an integrated capability on a worldwide scale . . . we cannot fail.”
- Welsh (2014a):  
Over the years, the last 70 years or so, the Air Force has had a lot of different guiding concepts that we’ve walked through. We’ve actually gone from strategic bombardment at the end of World War II in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, to

nuclear deterrence after the Korean War and as we built up Strategic Air Command and the world's greatest strategic force. We kind of drifted into Air Land Battle in the '70s and '80s . . . Counterterrorism to support the counterinsurgency operations . . . After that we put out a vision on Global Vigilance, Reach and Power. The idea was to make sure our Airmen understood that our core mission hadn't changed since 1947.

- Welsh (2014a): “We’ve got room for pride in our Air Force. It’s okay to be proud of your tribe, the people you grew up with, the mission set you came in with, who you love. We can still be Airmen first and be proud of who we are . . . It’s all about pride. If people think we’re taking it away, we’ll lose them. That’s why they stay.”
- Welsh (2014c): “The country wasn't formed on a common religion or a common political ideology or a common race or a common language, it was formed a common idea...the greatest thing a nation can give its people is freedom.”
- Welsh (2014c): “I tell you about the tradition of our unit, here's our heritage . . . That’s where the profession of arms is built and we have to figure out how we help institutionalize this and remind everyone how critical it is.”

***Attribute 2: Take care of people and they will take care of the mission.*** USAF senior leaders continue to emphasize the importance of taking care of their most valuable asset: Airmen and their families. Several programs have been implemented to ensure support is provided for Airmen, for families when his or her spouse is deployed, and ensuring a support network is available if the requirements of USAF service become problematic. Examples are:



- Donley (2010): “When Franklin mused about public service, he neglected to mention that Military service is even more difficult. It involves personal and family hardships, deep commitment to mission and risk to life and limb.”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 56): “People first--attends to the physical, mental, ethical, and spiritual well-being of fellow Airmen and their families . . . integrates wellness into mission accomplishment . . . Establishes work-life balance through time management and setting clear expectations and priorities.”
- Schwartz (2012): “Leading and pursuing this effort on behalf of the Nation are dedicated, operationally-tested service members, supported by their remarkable family members.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 16): “You must be a good Wingman for your fellow Airmen and other co-workers.”
- James and Welsh (2014, p. 15): “As a result, the Air Force will preserve our core services programs (fitness, childcare, and food services) and warfighter and family support programs.”
- James et al. (2014): “Taking care of Airmen and their families is an Air Force priority because it is on their shoulders that we prevail in today's fights, prevent and deter others, and prepare for the challenges of tomorrow.”
- Welsh (2014a): “We’ve got to worry about our people. Right now . . . So after focusing on that mission, we need to focus on the people who do it . . . [and keep] developing and celebrating our Airmen.”

***Attribute 3: Diversity.*** USAF senior leaders continue to emphasize the importance of valuing unique perspectives, socio-economic backgrounds, and other

characteristics of employees comprising the USAF population. Guidance continues to evolve as more information is discovered about how to leverage diversity to facilitate USAF mission success including generational differences. Examples are:

- Donley (2010):

Just like the generations before us, our nation faces adversity in a number of forms . . . [I am] impressed by the spirit of our Airmen, young and old. Their clarity of purpose and ethic of service could not be more evident . . . We serve because it's our responsibility to pass safely along to the next generation the heritage and the opportunities, and yes even the military capabilities, that were passed from the previous generation to us; and because, in the world we live in, no one will do this for us.

- SECAF (2011c, p. 56): “Diversity . . . Leverages differences in individual characteristics, experiences, and abilities. Leverages diversity for mission accomplishment and fosters an inclusive environment.”
- SECAF (2012c, p. 4): “Diversity encompasses . . . Demographic diversity . . . Cognitive/behavioral diversity...Organizational/structural . . . Global diversity.”
- SECAF (2013a, p. 3): “Mentoring promotes a climate of inclusion that can help foster and develop the diverse strengths, perspectives, and capabilities of all Airmen . . . Air Force capabilities and warfighting competencies are enhanced by diversity among its personnel.”
- James et al. (2014, p. 16):  
The nation’s demographics are rapidly changing, and the makeup of our Air Force must reflect and relate to the population it serves. To leverage the strengths of

diversity throughout our Air Force, our leaders must develop and retain talented individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences, and create inclusive environments where all Airmen feel valued and able to contribute to the mission.

- James and Welsh (2014, p. 16): “The Air Force must develop an accessions strategy that taps new markets of diverse, high performing youth . . . [and] must continue targeted development of existing talent . . . to view operational problems and opportunities through a diversity lens.”
- Welsh (2014c, p. 12): “[W]e have to unlock ourselves . . . and listen to . . . the brilliant young people we have coming into our Air Force . . . I'm getting old now, and . . . things don't grab my attention like they used to but every now and then . . . I see somebody and I'm inspired.”

***Attribute 4: Complex, unstable global environment.*** USAF senior leaders continue to emphasize the importance of taking care of their most valuable asset: Airmen and their families. Several programs have been implemented to ensure support is provided for Airmen, for families when his or her spouse is deployed, and ensuring a support network is available if the requirements of USAF service become problematic. Examples are:

- Donley (2010): “Military service is different from other forms of public service. We serve 24-hours a day . . . 365 days [annually] . . . when deterrence fails, we are asked . . . to overcome fear and danger, to serve in locations and on timelines about which we have little say.”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 9): “In today’s time-compressed, dynamic, and dangerous operational environment, an Airman does not have the luxury of examining each

issue at leisure . . . [Airmen] must . . . be better prepared in all situations . . . to perform with excellence and to encourage others to do the same.”

- Schwartz (2012): “In addition to strengthening interoperability with selected key global partners, the U.S. military will . . . increase Joint interdependence . . . [to] enable a smaller and leaner . . . flexible . . . and ready force, that can withstand and adapt to evolutions in the strategic, operational, economic, and technological spheres.”
- SECAF (2012c, p. 22): “Global Diversity—Intimate knowledge of and experience with foreign languages and cultures, inclusive of both citizen and non-citizen personnel, exchange officers, coalition partners, and foreign nationals with whom we interact as part of a globally engaged Air Force.”
- James and Welsh (2014, p. 5): “This dynamic security environment creates both opportunities and challenges . . . As we address known threats, we must also have the vision to understand the changing strategic landscape.”
- Welsh (2014a): “This [USAF resource strategy] will be reviewed every two years . . . Basically gives every new Chief or every new Secretary a chance to make a change, to adjust it in the way they think is best suited for that time.”
- Welsh (2014c): “And we have to listen to people from outside the Air Force who might be critical, but they're smart . . . This is our challenge. Luckily we have people who can meet it.”

**USAF contextual documents theme 3: USAF leadership development.** As stated in Air Force Manual 36, 2643, AF Mentoring (2013a), “People are the Air Force's most critical asset. It is essential that Airmen have the skills, knowledge, experience, and

motivation to meet current operational needs and ensure future capabilities of the Air Force” (p. 14). Similar to embodying the USAF Core Values and appreciating multiple USAF cultural aspects, leadership development remains a high priority for USAF senior leaders. Deliberate planning is used to create formal training curricula and leadership development processes implemented by USAF leaders in the work-place. Review of the data yielded continuous learning, mentoring, and interpersonal relationships. Additional attributes are transactional, transforming, and systems thinking leadership approaches.

***Attribute 1: Continuous learning—Formal leadership development philosophy.***

Similar to the purpose of the USAF Core Values and culture, USAF formal leadership development and education processes provide a foundation for Airmen to focus on a common mission. Leaders and instructors employ specifically designed tools to develop future USAF leaders. Examples are:

- SECAF (2011c, p. 22): “Leadership is the art and science of motivating, influencing, and directing Airmen to understand and accomplish the Air Force mission in joint warfare.”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 34): “In the Air Force, leadership is comprised of two main components: institutional competencies and leadership actions . . . Leaders apply these components at all three leadership levels: tactical expertise, operational competence, and strategic vision.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 7): “Respect for Authority. Junior personnel shall employ a courteous and respectful bearing and mode of speech toward senior personnel.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 8): “Different levels within the chain [of command] have different responsibilities and authority; however, all levels have some things in

common. Each level in the chain is responsible for all lower levels, and accountable to all higher levels.”

- Welsh (2014a): “So we’re going to make a requirement to be promoted to colonel that you must have a master’s degree . . . before you get considered for promotion [up to] . . . colonel, to have squadron officer . . . intermediate . . . or senior service school completed before you can be promoted.”

***Attribute 2: Mentoring—Formal and informal.*** Air Force Manual 36-2643

includes guidance for leaders to professionally mentor subordinates (SECAF, 2013a).

Informal mentoring may arise from formal mentoring events but may be conducted at any time. Examples are:

- SECAF (2013a, p. 3): “Mentoring is an essential ingredient in developing well-rounded, professional, and competent future leaders . . . promotes professional development at every echelon . . . [and] an ongoing process for building a professional relationship that fosters communication concerning careers, competencies, behavior, and organizational missions.”
- SECAF (2013a, p. 8): “Mentor--Wise, trusted, and experienced individual who shares knowledge, experience, and advice with a less experienced person.”
- SECAF (2013a, p. 8): “Mentee--Individuals who desire to expand their knowledge and skills by gaining advice from a more experienced individual.”
- SECAF (2013a, p. 11): Reverse Mentoring . . . Mentoring of a senior (in age, experience, or position) person by a junior individual. Aim is to help share unique knowledge sets, possibly in the field of information technology, computing, or

internet communications . . . Ability to create and maintain an attitude of openness regardless of status, power, or position.

- SECAF (2013a, p. 11): “Situational Mentoring . . . Providing the right help at the right time by a mentor when a member needs guidance, advice, or constructive correction . . . Informal mentoring that usually occurs as a short-term fix to address an immediate situation but can transition to a more long-term connection over time if both the mentor and mentee are inclined to do so.”
- SECAF (2014b, p. 9): “While documented ACA [Airman Comprehensive Assessment] sessions are required by this instruction, they do not replace informal day-to-day communication and feedback.”
- Welsh (2014c): “The key work on professionalism and the profession of arms doesn't come in the classroom, but afterwards when you get to your unit”

***Attribute 3: Interpersonal relationships and networking.*** Team building, unit cohesion, and successfully completing global mission tasks requires collaboration. USAF employees are encouraged to build and enhance relationships for personal and professional growth; however, some restrictions apply. Examples are:

- SECAF (2011c, p. 40): “Personal competencies are . . . needed in face-to-face and interpersonal relationships that directly influence human behavior and values . . . People/Team competencies involve more interpersonal and team relationships . . . [and] represent competencies that, when combined with the personal competencies, are essential as Airmen’s responsibilities are increased.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 12): “Professional relationships are those interpersonal relationships consistent with the Air Force core values . . . They occur and can be

developed face-to-face, by telephone, or by social media such as e-mail, blogs, and websites.”

- SECAF (2012d, p. 13): “Officers and enlisted members will not form personal relationships with each other on terms of military equality, whether on or off-duty, and regardless of the forum in which such relationships are formed or carried out.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 14): “Relationships are unprofessional, whether pursued and conducted on or off-duty, when they detract from the superior-to-subordinate authority, or reasonably create the appearance of favoritism, misuse of an office or position, or the abandonment of organizational goals for personal interests.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 14): “[A]s set forth in the UCMJ and Air Force Instructions . . . officers and enlisted personnel shall not fraternize or associate with each other under circumstances that prejudice the good order and discipline of the Armed Forces of the United States.”
- SECAF (2012d, pp. 17-18):

The Air Force culture is centered on the idea that a wingman will always safeguard his or her lead, and it adheres to the belief that a lead never lets his or her wingman stray into danger...Being a good wingman means taking care of fellow Airmen--and taking action when signs of trouble are observed, especially in situations where Airmen appear as if they are about to make a poor decision, are in despair or show signs of hurting themselves or others.



- James and Welsh (2014, p. 4): “It takes the combined efforts of all of our military Services and the whole of government to deny, deter, and defeat an enemy, and over the last decade this integration has tightened.”

***Attribute 4: Transactional leadership.*** The transactional, or top-down directed, leadership approach is effective for USAF leaders when assimilating new employees. The leader provides expectations, guidance, training, and answers questions to ensure the new USAF member completes assigned tasks to facilitate mission success. USAF leaders often employ this approach during tactical-level planning and execution. Selected examples:

- SECAF (2011c, p. iv):  
Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1-1 . . . provides the authoritative source for the Air Force core values, along with the supporting characteristics of valor, courage, and sacrifice that are fundamental to what an Airman is. It describes the mindset an Airman needs to conduct warfighting and . . . introduces the levels of leadership used in the Air Force for force development: tactical expertise, operational competence, and strategic vision. . . . The corporate body for ensuring there is a deliberate process employed in developing the workforce is explained. Institutional competencies and how they are used to identify desired expectations for the total workforce are clarified.
- SECAF (2011c, p. 4): “[USAF] leadership role[s] must be earned through demonstrated adherence to our core values and proven followership abilities. One must be a good follower in order to be a good leader.”

- SECAF (2011c, p. 28): “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 . . . master[ing] their core duty skills . . . [and] are being assimilated into the Air Force culture.”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 34): “Leadership at the tactical level is predominantly direct and face-to-face, first exercised at the junior officer and noncommissioned officer levels.”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 40): “Institutional competencies...provide a common language and a set of priorities for consistency across the Air Force.”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 44): “Tactical-level education and training should concentrate on building depth of knowledge and experience in the primary skill and skill-related areas.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 9): “Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Because military discipline enhances combat capability . . . and because military personnel serve throughout the world, a special system of laws and courts are required to maintain good order and military discipline.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 12): “The Air Force has a very important national defense mission; and you, as a member . . . are responsible for following orders, performing specific daily tasks related to your duties, and living up to the high standards of the Air Force.”
- SECAF (2012d, p. 20): “Airmen interact with individuals through many forms of communication, including face-to-face, telephone, letter, e-mail, text messages . . . and social media . . . Compliance with the standards discussed in this instruction

does not vary, and is not otherwise dependent on the method of communication used.”

- SECAF (2014b, p. 8):

The Officer and Enlisted Evaluation Systems have varied purposes. The first is to provide meaningful feedback to individuals on what is expected of them, advice on how well they are meeting those expectations, and advice on how to better meet those expectations. The second is to provide a reliable, long-term, cumulative record of performance and potential based on that performance.

- Welsh and Cody (2014): “We . . . need a system that differentiates between good and great performers . . . Airmen must know what we expect of them. We owe them direction and guidance so they can reach their fullest potential . . . If we fail at feedback, we fail our Airmen.”
- Welsh (2014a): “They needed to understand where they fit directly or indirectly in those core missions. Then they had to understand how doing those jobs well allows us to produce this Vigilance, Reach and Power for the nation.”

***Attribute 5: Transforming leadership.*** Transforming, or leader-directed guidance incorporating subordinate inputs, leadership approach is employed by leaders to develop skills and nurture growth. Inputs are solicited from subordinates to ensure guidance clarification, learn subordinate goals, and foster interpersonal, professional relationships. USAF leaders often employ this approach during operational-level planning and execution. Selected examples:

- SECAF (2011c, p. ii): “A growth period must occur to allow young leaders time to mature into the responsibilities required of senior institutional leaders and commanders.”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 29):  
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 . . . [and] apply an understanding of organizational and team dynamics . . . The operational level includes continued broadening of experience.
- SECAF (2011c, p. 34): “As leaders ascend the organizational ladder to the operational level, leadership tasks become more complex and sophisticated, accomplished most regularly at the field grade officer [level].”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 35): “Influence. Leaders motivate and inspire people by creating a vision . . . [and] tailoring their behavior toward their fellow Airmen’s need for motivation, achievement, sense of belonging, recognition, self-esteem, and control over their lives.”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 63): “Education requires transformative application. Knowledge and skills, such as critical thinking, that are cultivated during education are of great benefit in unfamiliar circumstances.”
- SECAF (2013a, p. 4): “Mentors are advisors and guides who share knowledge, experiences, and advice in helping mentees achieve their career goals. Effective

mentoring creates a balanced ongoing relationship that focuses on the unique needs of the mentee.”

***Attribute 6: Systems Thinking Approach.*** A systems thinking approach to leadership is employed by leaders who embrace the importance of obtaining multiple perspectives to evaluate and resolve complex problems. USAF leaders often employ this approach during strategic-level planning and execution. Selected examples:

- SECAF (2011c, p. 24): “Future Airmen will function in more intricate organizations with more complex duties, requiring the Airman to become a more ‘complex being whose behavior can less and less be placed within any simple pattern.’”
- SECAF (2011c, p. 59): “Change Management . . . Embraces, supports, and leads change . . . Understands the change management process, critical success factors, and common problems and costs . . . Perceives opportunities and risks before or as they emerge.”
- James and Welsh (2014, p. 12): “The Air Force has made great strides in understanding how a three-component structure . . . maximizes the integrated power of our air, space, and cyberspace forces. This needs to be the way we do business, without even thinking about it.”
- James and Welsh (2014, p. 16): “Air Force decision-making and operational capabilities are enhanced by enabling varied perspectives and potentially creative solutions to complex problems. Moreover, diversity is critical for successful international operations, as cross-culturally competent Airmen build partnerships and conduct . . . military operations globally.”

- Welsh (2014a): “[T]his . . . 20 year look . . . is an attempt to bring the multiple master plans . . . and integrate them into a single Air Force Master Plan . . . With cyber as a threat growing . . . how do you figure out different ways of doing control for these distant decentralized operations?”
- Welsh (2014c, p. 12):  
 Gary Hammel’s a great business adviser, a great strategist, recognized as maybe the best mind in the business. Here's what he says about companies that fail to look to the future. I think it's a great quote. They fail because they over invest in what is, as opposed to what might be. I have a great special assistant, Jason Yaley. Here's how Jason would have said this. It's time to become the Air Force we need to be, not the Air Force we used to be. I believe this, guys. I don't think we have a choice . . . We have to be able to do the same things in new and different ways . . . We have to think differently and open the aperture a little bit about potential solutions, and we have to unlock ourselves from the things we're used to and listen to some of the brilliant young people we have coming into our Air Force today when they have ideas that are different.
- Welsh (2014c, p. 12): “I'm getting old now, and . . . things don't grab my attention like they used to but every now and then I hear something, watch a video or I see somebody and I'm inspired.”

### **Theoretical Framework for Analysis**

Descriptions of three theoretical areas provide the foundation to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences.

Generation theorists have discussed the manifestation of peer personality characteristics

and potential conflict between members of different generations (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). As generation theory literature expands, new concepts to include like social learning and using multiple communication methods helps leaders minimize generation differences in the work environment (Andert, 2011; Shah, 2011).

Leadership theorists emphasize the importance of different leadership styles (Sarros & Santora, 2001). Leaders' uses of transactional approaches help new employees learn job skills or ensure task accomplishment (Sarros & Santora, 2001). Employing transformational leadership styles enables leaders to elicit follower needs, bolster the leader-follower relationship, and improve work place morale (Amernic et al., 2007). Focusing on systemic leadership styles helps leaders adapt to meet individual needs and help the team minimize effects of unpredictable events (Banathy, 1997).

Developing and sustaining organizational culture is the responsibility of the leader (Schein, 1983). Unable to complete the task alone, effective leaders realize and employ appreciative inquiry techniques to involve employees in the cultural maintenance or improvement process (Lambrechts et al., 2011; Schein, 2009). The synthesis of generation characteristics, leadership style, and organizational culture remain critical foci for leaders. However, a literature gap exists in each theoretical area as Millennials recently entered the work place (Shah, 2011).

Incorporating elements of the theoretical areas selected for this study, L. Wong's (2000, 2002, 2004) research with U.S. Army officers provides a portion of the theoretical framework foundation for this study. Since the establishment of the U.S. Army on June 14, 1775 (Department of the Army [DoA], 2005), historic achievements, leaders affecting worldwide change, and events bolstering the U.S. Army organizational culture continue

to affect leader decisions, including development of junior officers (DoA, 2005; L. Wong, 2002). For example, success experienced during combat could encourage senior Army leaders to provide leadership experience opportunities to junior officers (L. Wong, 2004). Conversely, some Army leaders who prefer to employ a strict transactional leadership style could suppress creativity and leadership development of junior, officers of a different generation (L. Wong, 2000, 2002).

Selected themes from L. Wong's research align with this phenomenological study as described in Table 2. For example, L. Wong (2000) examined U.S. Army GenX officer leadership development and interaction preferences compared with Boomer officers. Using qualitative methods to explore lived experience of USAF Millennials may include references to generational differences. Similar to L. Wong's (2000, 2004) examination of Boomer Army officer leadership behaviors that bolster or suppress GenX officer creativity and innovation, this study was designed to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe and create meaning for lived leadership development experiences. Organizational culture of the U.S. Army provides the cornerstone for this study as the U.S. Army Air Force organization is the predecessor to the USAF established September 17, 1947 (USAF, 2015).



Table 2

*Theories Related to Selected Aspects of the Study*

Selected Theories	L. Wong (2000, 2002, 2004)	This Phenomenological Study
Generation Theories	Boomer GenX	Millennial
Leadership Theories and Approaches	Transactional Transforming Adaptive	Transactional Transforming Systems Thinking
Organization Culture	U.S. Army	U.S. Air Force
Analysis/ Discussion	Results support: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generation differences</li> <li>• Lived experiences and duties in complex environments facilitate adaptive leadership skills in younger generation officers</li> <li>• Senior leaders should encourage growth instead of relying on U.S. Army or preferred leadership style to stifle creativity in younger officers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elicit descriptions of USAF Millennial officers' lived leadership development experiences and expectations of success as future leaders.</li> <li>• Analyze descriptions of lived leadership development experiences</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from (a) *Generations apart: Xers and Boomers in the officer corps* [Monograph] by L. Wong (2000). <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub281.pdf>; (b) *Stifled innovation? Developing tomorrow's leaders today* [Monograph] by L. Wong (2002). <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub279.pdf>; and (c) *Developing adaptive leaders: The crucible experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom* [Monograph] by L. Wong (2004). <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub411.pdf>. Approved for public use and unlimited distribution.

L. Wong's (2000, 2002, 2004) focus on one or more generations with a quantitative analysis to explore junior officers' perspectives aligns with the focus of this phenomenological study. With their recent entry into the AF workforce, in-depth qualitative exploration of USAF Millennial officers' lived experiences facilitates comprehension of how they develop as future leaders. USAF Millennial officers' descriptions inform how they interpret leadership development.

## **Conclusion**

Themes extracted from the literature review demonstrate the importance of generational characteristics, leadership behaviors, and organizational culture (Amernic et al., 2007; Schein, 1996a; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Researching these themes in the USAF revealed significant leadership development and culture documentation (AU, 2014a; SECAF, 2011c, 2012c). This study filled the generation characteristic gap by sharing lived experience descriptions provided by the youngest generation of USAF employees.

Review of several USAF contextual documents provided insight into the organizational and cultural environment experienced by USAF Millennial officers. Such documents are also relevant because USAF Millennial officers use the guidance to create meaning for lived leadership development perspectives and assimilate or enhance one's personal leadership skills. Transcribed speeches presented by current and previous Secretaries of the Air Force and Air Force Chiefs of Staff, governing directives communicated through Air Force doctrine and instructions, and articles about USAF senior leaders' policies contain processes and requirements to which USAF Millennial officers must adhere.

The three emerging themes and associated attributes provide an overview of the USAF organizational culture USAF Millennial officers experience upon USAF entry and during employment. Contextual documents theme 1 comprises the USAF core values: integrity, excellence, and service before self. Embodying the core values is essential for employees from diverse backgrounds to assimilate into the USAF. The value of integrity first includes honesty, consistency of behaviors, and doing what is right even when the decision is difficult. Excellence in all we do includes continuous learning and growth.

By adopting or honing skills, USAF employees are well-prepared to accomplish assigned tasks resulting in continued USAF mission success. Service before self is critical to ensure each USAF employee is devoted to completing the USAF mission. This core value includes supporting the employee's family to achieve a work-life balance. The concept of family also expands to include the USAF family collectively committed to support the core values and our nation.

USAF contextual documents theme 2 encapsulates elements of the USAF organizational culture and selected facets provide an overview of the USAF employee environment. Thematic attributes include the importance of Air Force heritage; taking care of the people; maintaining a work-life balance; appreciating diversity; and functioning in a complex, unstable global environment. Comprehending the USAF heritage and legacy enables USAF employees to learn from the past and perpetuate success. By focusing on taking care of USAF employees, leaders ensure employees have the skills and resources needed to nurture creativity and growth as a team or as individuals. Focusing on the family is essential to ensure family needs are met and ensure the USAF employee can focus on the mission when on duty. Encouraging diversity appreciation in the workplace enables USAF employees to recognize the benefits of unique characteristics of teammates. Assimilating new perspectives can result in innovation, creativity, and greater appreciation for unique perspectives. USAF employees work in an increasingly complex, unstable global environment. Budgetary restrictions limit some USAF employee options to include the possibility of being forced to depart the USAF. Unstable global conflicts may increase strain on a USAF employee's personal and work families if the Airman deploys frequently. A benefit of

the instability is to enable USAF employees to employ creative thinking and develop options to reduce stress on USAF employees, families, and resources.

Leadership development processes and perspectives comprise the third USAF contextual documents theme. By employing USAF leadership development philosophies, leaders encourage continuous learning to develop individual skills. Assimilating and honing new skills enable USAF employees to effectively contribute to team projects and USAF success. Formal and informal mentoring are essential tools to help new USAF employees comprehend leader expectations, one's assigned mission, and develop as a future USAF leader. Acquiring mentors and guidance is available to all USAF employees seeking career or personal guidance to achieve goals. Successful USAF leaders seek partnerships to expand knowledge and skills. Expanding one's professional network enables leaders to consult with global partners to develop novel solutions and remain current on global events.

Transactional, transforming, and systems thinking leadership philosophies characterize USAF leadership. Transactional leadership aligns with the USAF level of tactical leadership. Leaders employ this approach to help new USAF employees comprehend how to complete their assigned tasks or provide applicable course correction. Establishing the core elements of USAF mission accomplishment helps the employee build confidence and learn skills to prepare for increased responsibilities.

Transforming leadership aligns with the USAF leadership level of operational competence. Leaders apply the operational competence perspective to provide direction and facilitate two-way communication between leaders and subordinates. At this level the USAF subordinate is expected to have technical competence whereby the leader

solicits goals from the subordinate and together they develop a strategy to accomplish the goals.

The systems thinking leadership approach aligns with the USAF strategic vision level of leadership. Leaders working at this level comprehend the importance of interconnectivity of diverse career fields, global mission partners, and successfully maneuvering in an organization with limited resources. Successful leaders at this level continue to mentor subordinates and share the broad scope perspective to reveal how and why each USAF employee's performance is critical to ensure the USAF perpetuates global dominance.

The theoretical framework selected for this study includes themes from L. Wong's (2000, 2002, 2004) quantitative research with U.S. Army officers and the selection of a phenomenological methodology to study U.S. Air Force officers' lived experience. L. Wong (2000, 2002, 2004) examined the influence of generation, leadership, and organizational culture and reported the existence of generational differences between Boomer and GenX employees, the influence of organizational culture, and leadership approaches that could encourage or stifle creativity. Similar to L. Wong's (2000, 2002, 2004) participants, the youngest USAF employees participated in this study by responding to questions developed from leadership theories and organizational culture. Different from L. Wong's (2000, 2002, 2004) investigation of differences between generational cohorts, the in-depth interview questions for this study focus on lived leadership development experiences described by USAF Millennial officers. The results from this study fill a literature gap by sharing qualitative

descriptions regarding Millennial leadership development perspectives within a hierarchical organizational culture.

### **Summary**

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. Literature selected for this study includes generation theories, leadership theories, and organizational culture. Selection of generation theories facilitates exploration of generation cohort characteristics, generation cycles, and potential effects of situational factors on cohort members (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Strauss & Howe, 1991).

Selected leadership theories are transactional, transforming, and systemic. Transactional and transforming leadership theories focus on the leader-follower relationship (Sarros & Santora, 2001). Transactional leaders consider what the follower can contribute to the organization whereas transformational leaders include the needs of the follower and nurturing of followers' growth (Sarros & Santora, 2001). For this study, systemic leadership incorporates adaptive and situational leadership theories (Banathy, 1997). This approach encompasses leader-follower interaction, environmental events, and leader ability to adapt and successfully lead organizational change (Banathy, 1997; Heifetz et al., 2009; Senge et al., 2007).

The leader's responsibility to develop organizational culture continues to increase in importance (Lambrechts et al., 2011). Organizational culture includes multiple elements such as the company's mission, geographic location, and employee demographics. Leaders must build relationships with employees to discern and establish acceptable organization values and beliefs (Schein, 1983). The cultural foundation

enables leaders and followers to develop interpersonal relationships that help prevent organization failure when unexpected contingencies catalyze change or to create new opportunities in the organization's industry (Schein, 1993).

USAF Millennial officers often fill designated leader positions (AFPC, 2014a). Accepting a commission is a potential problem as officers automatically serve as leaders (SECAF, 2013d). Leadership development approaches incorporate formal, informal, structural, and cultural characteristics (Callahan, 2007; EO 1998; SECAF, 2011b, 2011c, 2014b, 2013a). USAF Millennial officers must learn about USAF population generational differences, disparate skills, viewpoints, and expectations to lead effectively (Meriac, Woehr, & Banister, 2010).

Review of selected USAF contextual documents provided a framework to further explore the USAF Millennial officer interview responses. Documents include transcribed speeches presented, and email composed by, current and former USAF civilian and military leaders. The perspectives highlight formal guidance published to direct behaviors of USAF employees. Instructions, manuals, and other published directives provide USAF leaders with processes to facilitate standardization of behaviors, leadership development, and cultural awareness. The information extracted provides a thematic foundation of USAF core values, culture, and leadership development approaches for data analysis and determining implications and recommendations.

Examining United States Army officer Boomer and GenX leadership perspectives, L. Wong (2000) reported generational differences exist. L. Wong (2000) used quantitative methods to explore phenomena outside the scope of this study, but selected thematic results align. For example, generational views of work ethic, views of

authority, relationship expectations, and leadership provide a framework to explore the lived experiences of USAF Millennial officers during their development as future leaders. Chapter 3 encompasses a description of the phenomenological method selected for this study.



## Chapter 3

### Method

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. Employing a qualitative approach is ideal for delving into lived experiences and how individuals create meaning of events (Englander, 2012; Giorgi, 1997). Review of available research methods supports the selection of a phenomenological design for this study.

#### **Research Method and Design Appropriateness**

Within two basic research paradigms, quantitative and qualitative, numerous research methods and designs are available to explore phenomena or test hypotheses (Black, 2005; Shank, 2006). In some instances, depending upon the research focus, a mixed-method design yields optimal results (Whittemore & Melkus, 2008). A brief description of considered research designs supports selection of a phenomenological methodology for this study.

A transcendental phenomenological design is ideal for in-depth exploration of how individuals develop perspectives from lived experiences (Englander, 2012). Unstructured or semi-structured interviews enable participants to describe their lived experiences. A pilot test was conducted to analyze the credibility of the interview questions (Rubin, 2008; Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). Upon completion of the pilot test, in-depth interviews occurred after incorporating pilot test results into the final interview instrument to elicit participants' lived experiences, interpretations of events, and perspectives. Throughout the interview, respondents shared how they interpreted the

event to create meaning. The exploration of consciousness and meaning creation lies at the heart of phenomenological methods (Sokolowski, 2000; Van Manen, 1990).

Some researchers criticize the reliability of self-reported data and researcher bias (Rubin, 2008). According to Sokolowski (2000), transcendental phenomenological methods enable the researcher to suspend or *bracket* personal biases to focus on participant responses. Focus remains on descriptions provided by participants regarding their construction of reality instead of quantitative testing for reliability. Employing transcendental phenomenological methods enable researchers to explore contextual factors about events in conjunction with participant interview responses and create the essence of the phenomenon studied (Giorgi, 1997; Sokolowski, 2000).

Researchers review quantitative and qualitative research designs to determine which individual design or a combination of designs is appropriate for the study (Whittemore & Melkus, 2008). According to Rubin (2008), researchers employing quantitative methods focus on objectivity and numeric precision to generalize results, replicate findings, and confirm cause and affect relationships. The following analysis of quantitative, the Delphi, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study methods provides the rationale for selection of a phenomenological design for this study.

### **Quantitative Methods**

The rationale to employ quantitative methods is to generate and analyze numeric data, examine effects of an intervention, and facilitate generalizability of the findings to other populations (Martin, 2000). Specifically, “quantitative research . . . [is] based on the collection of considerable data from representative samples of a larger population for a few variables” (Black, 2005, p. 9). Other quantitative method distinctions include

minimal direct interaction with participants, identification and control of variables, not fully identifying variables, and determining causality or correlation (Black, 2005). The goal of this study was to explore lived experiences of leadership development that may also produce a clearer understanding of the potential variables for future research in military generational studies.

### **Delphi Method**

Researchers use the Delphi method in quantitative and qualitative research (Lindqvist & Nordanger, 2007). The specific data solicitation approach varies (e.g., surveys forwarded through mail or email) resulting in the researcher selecting an issue and obtaining responses from experts. Through a series of deconstructing collective responses and requesting feedback, the researcher publishes emergent themes based on the group's recommended prioritized consensus. Delphi method advantages include

- the ability to obtain comments worldwide,
- flexible response timing because participants respond according to their availability,
- minimized peer pressure in an anonymous environment,
- comprehensive feedback because participants receive and provide feedback throughout the process, and
- minimized potential researcher bias (Lindqvist & Nordanger, 2007).

Researchers applying the Delphi method focus on obtaining expert opinions and discovering phenomena for which consensus exists. Considering this study's goal of gaining insight into lived experiences of Millennial generation USAF officers, the Delphi method is not suited to this intended outcome.

## **Qualitative Designs**

Beyond quantitative approaches, researchers use qualitative science and inquiry to engage in human subject research (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative designs enable researchers to explore how people construct meaning and define reality through their lived experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005). Use of grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study methods could elicit how USAF Millennial generation officers describe leadership development events but the transcendental phenomenological design was ideal for creating essence of a phenomenon by blending participant descriptions with contextual stimuli (Englander 2012; Giorgi, 1997).

**Grounded theory.** The grounded theory approach employs induction to develop a data-based theory (Merriam, 2009). Observing processes in a field setting possibly combined with interviews and document review provides researchers with data from which to develop theories. The goal of grounded theory researchers is to develop a specific, substantive theory instead of a grand theory (Merriam, 2009). The goal of this study is not to create a theory of Millennial officer development, but to understand lived leadership development experiences of Millennial generation USAF officers.

**Ethnography.** Researchers use ethnographic designs to explore characteristics and beliefs of a specific culture (Merriam, 2009). Ethnographers explore how members of the studied society develop and reinforce acceptable behaviors (Merriam, 2009). Participant observations suggest ethnography could be a viable approach to explore the USAF culture, but completion time and distance restrictions preclude use of this design. An ethnographic approach to interview and observe USAF Millennial officers performing duties at global locations is not viable for this study.

**Case study.** When a particular phenomenon requires extensive study to fill a data void, basic qualitative case study techniques are ideal to explore the lived experiences of the population (Merriam, 2009). According to Yin (2009), case study methodology enables researchers to explore lived experiences by collecting data from multiple sources within case boundaries and in a specified period (Yin, 2009). Triangulation of interview responses and content analysis of documents and archival records reveals perspectives affecting defined boundaries. Thematically bracketed interview responses and selected data sources (e.g., documents and records) enable researchers to inform about specific characteristics within a bounded case (Yin, 2009). With the goal of this study being to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe lived experiences and create meaning about their experiences, the case study design was excluded.

**Phenomenology.** Researchers use phenomenological designs to explore the importance of lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). After selecting a phenomenon to study, researchers must consider philosophical underpinnings to select the ideal phenomenological design for the study. Stewart and Mickunas (1990, as cited in Creswell, 2013) stressed several assumptions and basic philosophical tenets to seeking knowledge when using phenomenological research methods:

- Investigators bracket personal perspectives.
- Analysis involves the conscious construction of meaning.
- Meaning is specific to the individual's experience.

Assimilating the philosophic tenets used by Husserl, Heidegger, Giorgi, Moustakas, and other phenomenologists enables researchers to design phenomenological studies that

generate human scientific knowledge within their respective academic discipline (Giorgi, 1997).

Hermeneutic and transcendental phenomenological approaches incorporate the philosophic tenets (Moustakas, 1994). Hermeneutic phenomenological researchers focus on interpretation of documents and events grounded in history and culture (Crotty, 2004; Shank, 2006). The continuous, or Hermeneutic, cycle of socially constructed interpretation enables participants to succeed in a complex environment (Shank, 2006). Instead of bracketing personal experiences, Hermeneutic phenomenologists synthesize their interpretations into the research design by interpreting meaning of the participants' lived experiences (Sokolowski, 2000).

Transcendental phenomenologists align research designs with the four philosophic presumptions described by (Moustakas, 1994). Differing from Hermeneutic phenomenologists, researchers employing the transcendental approach initiated by Husserl bracket personal experiences and focus on the research participant's constructed meaning of events (Giorgi, 1997). Additionally, transcendental phenomenologists understand the importance of historical influences but instead seek new knowledge as created by research participants (Shank, 2006).

A transcendental phenomenological design was ideal for this study. Several studies explored Millennial generation characteristics and cross-generation relationships, often employing quantitative or mixed methods (Andert, 2011; Drago, 2006; Schultz, 2010). Transcendental phenomenological results of this study help fill the literature gap focusing on how USAF Millennial officers describe and create meaning of lived experiences. Researchers may be encouraged to explore transferability of the results to

other Millennial employees' constructs of meaning when experiencing a similar phenomenon (Englander, 2012; Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). The results of this study may inform Department of Defense officials regarding potential future studies to explore lived experiences of Millennial employees (i.e., officer, enlisted, or civilian) groomed to fill leadership positions.

### **Geographic Location**

The selected organizations for this study are the 21st Space Wing, Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Peterson Air Force Base provides a convenient location to complete this study. Additionally, the variety of standard and specialized units located at Peterson Air Force Base and assigned officer population of sufficient size and range of duties to meet the needs of the study.

### **Population**

The United States Air Force was the source for the population in this study and the target population was active duty USAF Millennial officers. The USAF is comprised of more than 680,000 individuals from the Boomer, GenX, and Millennial generations (Howe & Strauss, 2007; USAF, 2014d). Excluded from this study were USAF officers filling Air Force Reserve or Air National Guard positions because their lived leadership development experiences differ from active duty officers (AFRC, 2005).

### **Sample**

Nonprobability, or purposive, sampling of the selected unit of analysis, USAF Millennial officers, resulted in acquiring appropriate respondents to explore lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). Purposive sampling typically begins without a predetermined number of participants as the focus is to interview until redundant themes

appear instead of applying a definitive sample size formula used in quantitative studies (Merriam, 2009). According to Englander (2012), a larger number of participant responses increase the variety of descriptions and the essence of the phenomenon studied.

Some researchers refute the existence of generational differences (Ballenstedt & Rosenberg, 2008; Ferguson, 2014; M. Wong et al., 2008), but the theoretical framework for analysis includes themes from research supporting the existence of generation differences (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010; Pew, 2010; L. Wong, 2000). Englander (2012) suggests fewer than four participants are acceptable for phenomenological research but a larger number of responses best illuminates the multiple facets of the phenomenon.

The sample size of 11 USAF Millennial officers for this study accommodated possible attrition caused by daily job requirements, preparation for overseas contingency operations, and participant's inability to participate in or reschedule the interview. All potential participants were combat capable line officers; individuals assigned to such functions as pilot, weather, personnel, logistics, or finance. Permission to recruit volunteers was obtained from competent officials at the selected input location. Participant solicitation commenced using an established group email address that included only USAF officers. The email message contained the rationale for participants to provide informed consent prior to participating in the interview.

The target population for this study was active duty USAF Millennial line officers filling short-notice-ready combat-capable positions. These officers also follow a mainstream leadership ascension path that ensures sample homogeneity (SECAF, 2011c; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Purposive sampling excluded officers with prior



enlisted or officer experience in any service or commissioning based on graduation from a military service academy (e.g., USAF Academy or West Point) to assure a homogenous sample. Excluding these populations was critical because the individuals have more military leadership development experiences than officers who attend an AFROTC training program while attending college. Similarly excluded from the sample are physicians, attorneys, and chaplains whose specialized functionary duties and developmental path different from mainstream USAF line officers. Potential participants' generation type and age group align with company grade officer designations as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

*Sampling Criteria—Generation and USAF Millennial Officer Characteristics*

Generation	Active Duty USAF Level	Life Phase	Typical Duty Level
Millennials (Born 1982 to c.2005)	Company Grade Officers (CGOs) 2Lt, 1Lt, Capt	Rising Adulthood/ Youth (Age 22-43/Age 18-21)	Technical/Tactical (Low hierarchy commanders and leaders focused on policy execution); active duty service 1 day to approximately 8 years

*Note.* Generation and USAF characteristics compiled from (a) “About the Air Force Personnel Center: The official source for Air Force personnel services” (2013), [public domain] by United States Air Force at <http://www.afpc.af.mil> and (b) “The next 20 years: How customer and workforce attitudes will evolve” by N. Howe and W. Strauss (2007), *Harvard Business Review*, 85(7/8), p. 45. Copyright 2007 by N. Howe and W. Strauss.

Excluded from the sample are Air Force Reserve (AFR), and Air National Guard (ANG) officers despite having assigned duties similar to USAF requirements in most situations (ANG, 2005; SECAF, 2014b; UCMJ, 2010). Active duty officer selection focuses on homogeneous characteristics and USAF cultural obligations that are different from most AFR and ANG officers (AFRC, 2005; SECAF, 2014b). For example, ANG officers often work as state employees whose obligations include moving to active duty

status when mobilized to support overseas contingencies (ANG, 2005). In consideration of the unique employment options within the AFR and ANG, the sample for this study was USAF active duty officers.

Millennial generation membership was the final sample selection criterion. Boomer generation numbers continue to decrease as USAF general and senior officers retire (AFPC, 2014c). Based on this criterion and interviewing officers projected as USAF leaders in the foreseeable 10-15 years, Boomer officer interviews were not requested. GenX officer interviews were not be requested because their years of experience as USAF officers create a peer personality different from Millennial officers (Strauss & Howe, 1991; L. Wong, 2000).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The primary data source for transcendental phenomenological studies is interviews (Englander, 2012). Often familiar with the phenomenon studied, researchers must bracket previous experiences and perspectives throughout the research process (Englander, 2012; Giorgi, 1997). Inclusion of USAF document and archival records analysis reinforces bracketing techniques by focusing on systematic scientific knowledge created within anticipated parameters such as USAF culture and directives (Giorgi, 1997; Van Manen, 1990).

Several studies inform the research and initial and revised interview questions (see Appendices C and D). Larsson et al. (2006) employed a grounded theory approach to discover elements contributing to military leader growth. Spear (2009) applied case study methodology to explore Generation X (GenX) leadership development of civilian personnel within the federal government. Gage's (2005) phenomenological approach

evaluated USAF active duty Millennial line officers and G.I. generation (born 1901-1924) leadership perceptions. Joseph (2011) explored experience-based perspectives regarding USAF senior officer development.

Filling the role of “participant-as-observer . . . [or] participating fully in the phenomenon being studied, but tell[ing] the people being observed” could result in research bias (Rubin, 2008, p. 207). Using rigorous descriptive phenomenological methods facilitated bracketing of the analyst’s experiences to focus on lived experiences of the interview participants (Englander, 2012). The semi-structured interview questions elicited leadership development perspectives from lived experiences. Obtaining approval to access USAF documents and demographic information facilitated development of additional questions as needed during the interview, grounded in USAF cultural context and the participant’s lived experiences. Evaluation of pilot test interview responses provided an opportunity for additional content analysis to modify interview questions. Permission was secured to use AF information obtained during data collection but sensitive or classified information (e.g., For Official Use Only, Privacy Act, etc.) was excluded during data collection, analysis, and final dissertation reporting.

**Interviews: Pilot test.** Prior to soliciting interview participants, an expert panel review and pilot test interviews assisted with determining the reliability and validity of interview questions (Rubin, 2008) by ensuring proposed interview questions (see Appendix C) addressed concerns presented in the guiding questions. A panel of five experts reviewed the interview instrument: three USAF members and two civilian educators. Three retired USAF colonels reviewed the interview questions and provided feedback using their extensive USAF experiences. Each officer had completed more than

20 years of active duty service and commanded large units or filled key leadership positions in staff organizations. During their military career, each had provided informal and formal mentorship to officers similar to the sample for this study.

The two educators, each holding a doctoral degree earned by employing qualitative or mixed methods, reviewed the interview questions. Without USAF or DoD affiliation, their recommendations resulted in superfluous jargon removal, question modification, and a refined approach to clarify results for readers unfamiliar with the USAF culture or leadership development processes.

Two USAF company grade officers (a captain and a lieutenant), a female and a male, were asked to participate in the pilot test. Each officer provided informed consent before the interview commenced. Pilot test participants shared the following demographics with the sample population:

- A member of the Millennial civic cohort, born 1982 or later
- Active duty
- Line officer
- Duty location: Peterson Air Force Base
- No prior enlisted service
- No prior sister service military affiliation, and
- Commissioned upon completion of a Reserve Officer Training Course; not a military service academy such as USAF Academy or West Point.

**Revised instrumentation.** Feedback from the expert panel and pilot test participants resulted in several changes to the initial interview instrument (see Appendix C) that became the final interview instrument (see Appendix D). The final interview

instrument consisted of nine open-ended semi-structured questions designed to explore USAF Millennial officer lived leadership development experiences and perspectives (see Appendix D). The first two questions to the participants requested how long he or she had been serving on active duty and the reason or reasons they joined the USAF. The remaining questions solicited respondent descriptions of memorable leadership development experiences and recommendations to improve existing processes (see Appendix D).

**Interviews: Research study sample.** Descriptions follow of the population eligible to participate in interviews, volunteer solicitation, respondent demographics, and the interview process. The sample was comprised of active duty USAF Millennial line officers working at Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs, Colorado. To help protect the identity of interview participants, interviews took place in a private office at Peterson Air Force Base. The room included comfortable seating in an appropriate setting for audio-recording the interview. Selection of a private room at Peterson Air Force base to conduct semi-structured interviews minimizes participant absence from the office and facilitates discussion within the participant's culture.

Eligible USAF officers assigned to the 21st Space Wing, Peterson Air Force Base, received an email letter soliciting research participants. Aware of USAF participants' concerns when discussing perceptions, language was included in the recruitment email and informed consent form (see Appendices B and C) to assure participant confidentiality and facilitate sharing of honest perceptions without fear of penalty or reprisal. Deception is acceptable to further a study (Merriam, 2009), but for this study the interviewer's USAF affiliation was provided to promote transparency during completion of this

independent study. Participants received the interviewer's detailed contact information to seek additional clarification regarding inclusion in the study.

**Recruitment.** Upon completion of the pilot test and finalizing the interview instrument, a recruitment email message was sent to the total available population of 137 USAF Millennial officers at Peterson Air Force Base (AFPC, 2014c). According to sampling criteria, 26 USAF Millennial officers were eligible to participate in this study. Consistent with the research design, pilot test participants were excluded from the data analysis. Four volunteers responded to the initial email. To increase the sample size, snow-ball sampling (Merriam, 2009) commenced, resulting in 11 USAF Millennial officers participating who met the demographic criteria of this study. Eleven of the participants were members of the Millennial generation cohort (born between 1982-2005) defined by Strauss and Howe (1991). One volunteer was excluded based on the birthdate falling outside the Millennial generation cohort parameters selected for this study. The remaining fourteen eligible officers were not contacted because they were not mentioned during snow-ball sampling.

Each participant provided informed consent prior to starting the interview and responded to all revised interview questions (see Appendix E) with candid responses. Clarifying and conveying new information associated with the initial comments supports the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of participant responses. To protect the identity of the 11 USAF Millennial officer participants, the collected demographics are included in Table 4 using unique alpha numeric codes randomly generated to identify and analyze each respondent's perspective.

Table 4

*Respondent Demographics*

Alpha Numeric Code	Gender	Years Serving on Active Duty	Alpha Numeric Code	Gender	Years Serving on Active Duty
BN5	F	2	OF4	M	8
DA7	M	8	QV6	M	9
EK3	M	2	RC1	F	2
JX9	F	5	SI0	F	4
LW8	M	2	ZT2	F	4
MG9	M	7			

**Informed consent.** USAF Millennial officers who volunteered to participate in the study received an email with an electronic copy of the informed consent form attached. The email included instructions for the participant to review the informed consent form prior to arriving for the interview. The instructions also conveyed the participant's ability to withdraw from the study prior to, during, or after the interview. In the event of withdrawal, all information will remain confidential and any data obtained will not be included in data analysis.

Interviews commenced by reading the informed consent agreement to the participant. This ensured the participant had the opportunity to seek clarification and provide verbal confirmation of the participant's permission to audio-record the interview. All participants agreed to participate in the study and confirmed by providing written informed consent. The informed consent form remains a separate part of the study's data collection materials to ensure the participant's name and involvement in the study remains confidential. Participants agreed to audio-recording the interview, inked

concurrence, and signed the informed consent forms. Upon receipt of the ink annotated and signed form, and completion of final ink annotation and signature, the participants were asked semi-structured interview questions.

**Confidentiality.** Participant confidentiality began before recruitment and continues after interview completion. An interview location was selected to protect the identity of research participants by meeting in a facility less frequently visited, and in a private office. The recruitment email requested participants coordinate participation or withdrawal using a specific email address external to the USAF email network and a private telephone number. Storage of email and other correspondence with participants will remain in a fireproof combination safe.

Each participant received an alphanumeric interview label containing attribute codes associated with the participant providing the data (Saldana, 2013). Noting each participant's attribute code (not a name) on the informed consent form and research notes after the participant departs the interview preserves confidentiality. Upon interview completion, the audio recordings were stored in a password protected external hard disk drive and stored in a fireproof combination safe. A separate password-protected file on the external hard disk drive includes the name and assigned attribute code of the participant. All volunteers participated in the study and no one withdrew at any time, which made it unnecessary to create a separate password-protected file to store withdrawn individuals' assigned attribute code with a notation confirming deletion of any data collected.

When presenting results, participant identity remains confidential and comments sanitized to remove any information potentially revealing the identity of the participant.



Maintained for a minimum of three years as required, the password protected external hard disk drive, documents or notes used during data collection and analysis, and the fireproof combination safe will remain in Colorado Springs, Colorado, or subsequent residence. Deletion of electronic files and document shredding will occur at the end of three years.

**Interview process.** The interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes in length. Instead of applying a definitive sample size formula used in quantitative studies, purposive sampling began without a predetermined number of participants as the focus was to interview until redundant themes appear (Merriam, 2009). Although thematic convergence appeared after the first few interviews additional interviews were scheduled because the larger number of participant responses increases the variety of descriptions and the essence of the phenomenon studied (Englander, 2012). Data collected included audio recordings, 39 pages of interview notes, and 82 pages of audio transcriptions.

#### **Trustworthiness—Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability**

Validity is normally a term used in quantitative studies that represents control of data procedures to ensure quality in the analysis. In qualitative studies, notable researchers use trustworthiness to represent believability and serves to support legitimation of the approach to the research (Merriam, 2009; Schwandt et al., 2007). The four elements of trustworthiness parallel themes employed in quantitative studies (Oleinik, 2011; Schwandt et al., 2007). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability align respectively with the quantitative elements of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Schwandt et al., 2007).

Because this transcendental phenomenological study was descriptive, credibility was not required (Shank, 2006). Qualitative techniques used to ascertain how participants create reality derived from lived experiences, collaboration with phenomenology experts, and data clustering and thematizing enhances credibility of the study (Schwandt et al., 2007; Van Manen, 1990). Establishing credibility increases transferability of some or all results to other situations (Schwandt et al., 2007).

Effective use of credible and transferable data requires two additional elements. Phenomenological researchers focus on dependability and confirmability criteria respective to reliability and objectivity in quantitative research. Using a transcendental approach, researcher interview techniques facilitate exploring criteria participants use to describe their intentions about an object and resultant perspective (Sokolowski, 2000). Thematic consistency when describing lived experience supports dependability of participants' responses (Schwandt et al., 2007). Employing epoché and bracketing techniques developed by Husserl reinforces the importance of the participant's subjective description of an object (Moustakas, 1994). The resultant confirmability grounded in the participant's description yields the richness of the lived experience that highlights the importance of phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1990)

Conducting a pilot test with participants representing a study's sample increases interview question accuracy. This approach also facilitates accurate coding and grouping of participant responses to address the guiding questions (Creswell, 2013). Considering transferability, qualitative results are generalizable outside the population studied when the new population to study shares similar characteristics (Englander, 2012). Employing effective data collection and analysis techniques described by Moustakas (1994), Giorgi

(1997), and Saldana (2013) increased trustworthiness. Researchers can explore the transferability of the resulting phenomenon description of this study to different organizations or generations.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcendental phenomenological analysis of the data followed prescribed human science research criteria (Shank, 2006; Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological reduction and elimination of participant descriptions of an experience ensured extraction and labeling of themes pertinent to the study (Giorgi, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). Comparing the themes extracted during this process with an additional review of USAF Millennial officers' interview transcripts clarified the credibility and dependability of thematic analysis (Van Manen, 1990). The bracketing of researcher bias or previous experience continues to ensure trustworthiness in which focus remains on the participant's description of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997).

The transcendental phenomenological method involves systematic data analysis that follows prescribed disciplinary approaches, enhances transferability, and demonstrates critical thinking (Giorgi, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). Employing this method, interviews with USAF Millennial officers were audio-recorded, downloaded, and transcribed for use in NVivo 10 software coding. Each downloaded interview label contained a software-generated random identifier (Wainwright & Russell, 2010). Listening to the audio recording and visually verifying the downloaded audio transcription confirmed NVivo 10 interview transcription accuracy. Visual validation of transcribed responses ensures accuracy and researcher familiarity with participant descriptions (Giorgi, 1997; Wainwright & Russell, 2010). This detailed process also

reinforced dependability and confirmability by critically evaluating interview responses instead of merely accepting the interview participant's response (Giorgi, 1997).

Employing the NVivo 10 software application facilitated thematic coding obtained from multiple interview responses. Frequent word or phrase use synthesis occurred to associate with corresponding terms in interview notes. Manually exploring the data using horizontalization (Van Manen, 1990) resulted in sorting respondents' comments by significant emotional events and similar comments into clusters or themes (Moustakas, 1994). Subsequent data exploration using “chunks” (Saldana, 2013) and employing holistic and descriptive coding techniques resulted in more than 50 emergent codes.

Completing line-by-line analysis using NVivo 10 software resulted in creation of new codes and modification of existing codes to explore how USAF Millennial officer respondents created meaning from their leadership development experiences. Employing the NVivo 10 software application facilitated subsequent modifications to synthesize non-repetitive comments with clustered responses to illuminate a comprehensive description of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997; Wainwright & Russell, 2010). Imaginative variation created a composite description of participants' experiences that informs about the essence of a phenomenon by describing how the participants incorporated the situational context (Giorgi, 1997).

### **Summary**

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. Review of quantitative and qualitative methods resulted in selection of the transcendental phenomenological research design for

this study (Englander, 2012; Merriam, 2009). As the primary phenomenological data collection method, live, audio-recorded interviews facilitated exploration of lived experiences of USAF Millennial officers working at Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Transcendental phenomenological study design informs about how individuals describe events and their perspectives regarding a phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). During data collection, developed codes assist the researcher to cluster themes specific to the guiding questions and theoretical framework of analysis for this study. Review of interview responses incorporated methods grounded in Husserl's research as prescribed by Giorgi (1997). Using NVivo 10 software enabled the researcher to transcribe audio-recorded interviews and facilitate phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation (Giorgi, 1997). Chapter 4 contains a description of data collected and analyzed for this study.

## Chapter 4

### Results

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. Data analysis involved first and second cycle coding as well as analysis of thematic patterns emerging from interview responses to answer the guiding questions (GQ) for this study:

GQ1. How do USAF Millennial officers describe their own leadership development?

GQ2. How do USAF Millennial officers create meaning from leadership development experiences?

GQ3. In what way do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform formal leadership development?

GQ4. In what ways do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform informal leadership development?

Selected examples of respondents' perspectives illustrate themes emerging from textual analysis; such themes are termed results-themes in contrast to overarching study-themes that inform conclusions derived from systematic comparison of USAF Millennial officer interview responses and USAF doctrine.

#### **Findings: Overview of Results-Themes and Attributes**

Data exploration commenced with a review of the transcribed interviews as compared with the audio recordings. Manually exploring the data using “chunks” (Saldana, 2013) and employing holistic and descriptive coding techniques resulted in more than 50 initial emergent codes. Using NVivo 10 software to complete line-by-line

analysis resulted in creation of new and modification of existing codes to explore how USAF Millennial officer respondents created meaning from their leadership development experiences. Emergent descriptions and thematic convergence resulted in the following five themes and 19 attributes:

- Results-Theme 1: What's Important to Me; Why I Joined the USAF.
  - Attribute 1: Joined for college funds
  - Attribute 2: Joined from family influence
  - Attribute 3: Joined to serve something greater than myself
- Results-Theme 2: What's Important to Me; Will I Stay in the USAF?
  - Attribute 1: Yes, I am valued while serving something greater than myself
  - Attribute 2: Yes, Job security
  - Attribute 3: Undecided, Negative experiences
- Results-Theme 3: Leadership Definition and Expectations
  - Attribute 1: How I define leadership
  - Attribute 2: Perceived expectations of USAF leaders
- Results-Theme 4: Preferred Leadership Characteristics
  - Attribute 1: Take care of people and they will take care of the mission
  - Attribute 2: Integrity
  - Attribute 3: Achievement
  - Attribute 4: Trust and empowerment
  - Attribute 5: Leadership behaviors important to me
- Results-Theme 5: Leadership Development Experiences and Change Advocacy

- Attribute 1: All leaders are not alike but diverse leadership styles are useful
- Attribute 2: Always embody honesty and integrity
- Attribute 3: Talk more with me than to me about why my support is valued
- Attribute 4: Encourage USAF GenX leaders to proactively mentor and provide positive feedback
- Attribute 5: Encourage top-down, bottom-up, and lateral mentoring to facilitate leadership growth
- Attribute 6: Seek Millennial input when reviewing formal leadership development processes

#### **Findings: USAF Millennial Officer Responses—Selected Examples**

Each of the 11 respondents answered all interview questions. The interviewer or the respondent asked additional questions if the individual needed additional insight or clarification to explore a response. In addition to the following synopses of responses, expanded examples of responses illustrating each of the five themes are contained in Appendix E.

**Results-Theme 1: What's important to me; why I joined the USAF.** For this study, the USAF Millennial interview respondents conveyed how and why they ascribed meaning regarding their choice to join the USAF. Attributes that emerged from data analysis reflect several Millennial cohort characteristics, leadership approaches, and organizational culture aspects presented in the literature review (see Appendix E).



***Attribute 1: Joined for college funds.*** Five (45%) of the interview respondents conveyed their reason to join the Air Force was influenced by funds needed to attend college. Selected examples follow:

BN5: “To be honest, I wanted to go to college and I wanted to go to a good college so I signed the dotted lines. I had a full-ride scholarship to Air Force ROTC. It has never been an option to me until they offered me money. I know it sounds bad, but that's why I did it.”

DA7: “Honestly, I didn't quite know what I wanted to do when I got out of college, and I had college debt, and ROTC was doing a recruiting thing, and I went there and looked at it, liked it. Initially, it was to pay back college loans and have a job on the outside.

***Attribute 2: Joined from family influence.*** Seven (58%) of the interview respondents shared how a family member or members influenced her or his decision to join the USAF. Selected examples follow:

MG9: “Well first off, my parents were both prior military . . . there was a large military presence where I grew up--something that I've always enjoyed.”

OF4: “I grew up in a [sister service] family. My dad was in the [sister service] . . . so the military was always something I was interested in.”

ZT2: “ I joined the Air Force because I went to see my [sibling] graduate basic training . . . I got back to my dorm and I found the guy from ROTC on my floor and I said, “Hey how do I join?””

***Attribute 3: Joined to serve something greater than myself.*** Seven (58%) of the interview respondents conveyed their reason to serve included civic responsibility and

community service as factors influencing their decision to join the USAF. Selected examples follow:

JX9: “I had been exposed to Air Force customs and courtesies . . . in high school [Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps]. That was a big motivating factor.”

LW8: “I joined the Air Force to get leadership experience . . . I don't back down from a commitment that I've made so I definitely want to fulfill my commitment.”

OF4: “I thought it would be a worthwhile thing to do for my country.”

### **Results-Theme 2: What's important to me; Will I stay in the USAF?**

Meaning, or *why something is important to me*, differs from the assumption that Millennials are self-centered. However, the *perspective of self* is a GenX characteristic (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Strauss & Howe, 1991). The USAF Millennial interview respondents conveyed the reason or reasons for continuing to serve or separating from the USAF. Attributes that emerged from data analysis reflect several Millennial cohort characteristics (see Appendix E).

#### ***Attribute 1: Yes, I am valued while serving something greater than myself.***

Seven (58%) of the interview respondents shared that because they believe their service is valued by other USAF members while serving something greater than themselves are primary reasons to continue their service. Selected examples follow:

EK3: “[T]o lead people is a big thing . . . and be in charge of millions of dollars and actually have some important task that at the end result in someone's life or death by you being able to do your job.”

JX9: “I don't know if I would have those opportunities elsewhere at such a young age . . . The ability to make decisions that have an impact on an organization. You get to see the direct impact.”

SI0: “I like the different lifestyle from the civilian sector . . . it's not a job. It's something bigger than myself. And I felt being the military I'm doing my part to serve my country”

**Attribute 2: Yes, job security.** One interview respondent conveyed the reason for staying is based on job security:

QV6: “The job market has not been stable. I have a stable job right now. It pays well . . . [a]nd I just don't know what I would do as a civilian yet . . . this will work for now.”

**Attribute 3: Undecided; negative experiences.** Four (33%) of the interview respondents conveyed they were contemplating USAF departure based on negative experiences. Selected examples follow:

BN5: “I don't know if I'm to stay or not . . . I'm not enjoying it as much as I . . . thought I would.”

OF4: “My first assignment was absolutely horrible and I didn't want to remember my Air Force time by that assignment so I decided to accept a second to see where that would take me.”

ZT2: “I'll go through this next assignment, see if I like it. In the last year I've strayed more toward the, “Maybe I'll get out. Maybe I'll find a whole new career and not continue with this.” So, we'll see.”

**Results-Theme 3: Leadership definition and expectations.** The USAF Millennial respondents answered questions regarding how they define leadership, perceive USAF expectations of leaders, and leadership characteristics of leaders they prefer to work with or employ in the workplace. Interview responses reflect how and why they ascribed meaning to their experiences. Attributes that emerged from data analysis reflect several Millennial cohort characteristics, leadership theories and approaches, and aspects of organizational culture theory (see Appendix E).

*Attribute 1: How I define leadership.* All respondents shared their definition of leadership. Comments reflect aspects of leadership important to each respondent and reasons for ascribing importance. Although respondents described various factors, thematic convergence shows the importance of systems thinking and diverse leadership attributes of successful leaders. Selected examples follow:

LW8: “I’ve always had the mindset of leadership can be taught . . . you can enhance your leadership skills definitely with training and learning from others that have led before you...as a subordinate you can learn to lead just as well as being a leader. Learning what not to do as a subordinate being under someone you can enhance your leadership skills. Being in a leadership role yourself, definitely making mistakes, and learning what not to do and what works well and what motivates your people.”

MG9: “. . . a charismatic personality; most definitely have to be sincere because the people that you're leading or not leading can see through that. If you're not true to yourself and true to what you are saying, they can tell.”

RC1: “[T]he ability to influence the people around you and to motivate them to accomplish a goal in a constructive way, and to build . . . not just the team, but the people individually that are going to make up your team.”

*Attribute 2: Perceived expectations of USAF leaders.* All respondents conveyed how they perceived the expectations of USAF leaders. Although respondents emphasized various factors, thematic convergence shows the importance of assimilating diverse leadership expectations to develop and hone successful leadership skills. The following selected examples reflect a multi-faceted perspective:

EK3: “[B]e the best leader that you can possibly be . . . Make sure you're mentally stable, physically fit, and also emotionally stable as well . . . always pushing yourself to get better, to be better for yourself, and also for the Air Force.”

QV6: “I think always number one is accomplish the mission. But sometimes leaders put that too far above everything else. “Accomplish the mission” at what cost?...You can't accomplish [the mission] without your people.”

ZT2: “The expectation of a commander . . . is to follow whatever the person above them says . . . I think commanders just think, “I need to do whatever that person above me says” and really there's not a whole lot of push-back, from what I've seen . . . I'm sure people do a little bit of push-back. But when somebody says, “Do something,” “Okay, I guess we'll do it.” “Jump?” “How high?”“

**Results-Theme 4: Preferred leadership characteristics.** For this study, the USAF Millennial respondents answered questions regarding how they describe characteristics of successful leaders. Respondents also shared how they assimilate or modify behaviors to enhance personal leadership skills. Attributes emerging from data

analysis reflect several Millennial cohort characteristics, leadership theories and approaches, and aspects of organizational culture theory (see Appendix E).

***Attribute 1: Take care of people and they will take care of the mission.*** All respondents emphasized the importance of supporting leaders, subordinates, and peers. Although mission focus remains important, without people the mission fails. Selected examples follow:

EK3: “I would say take care of your people, is one of those big things. Making sure their personal lives and everything solid with them, there's nothing huge going on that would affect them from doing their job.”

QV6: “The good leaders are the ones that empower the other people, the ones that don't micromanage.”

***Attribute 2: Integrity.*** All respondents explained how integrity is a key characteristic of successful leaders. Integrity as described by respondents includes honesty, confidence, and emotional stability in all circumstances. Selected examples follow:

DA7: “I think it's important to understand perception is reality. You need to . . . advocate for yourself-- not only to your boss, but to your guys . . . They need to understand that look, this is what you're doing for them because I think that builds that trust. If you step out there and take a hit for them, under certain circumstances, they're going to be like, “Well, he messed up and he's claiming it, and he's not blaming it on us” . . . they get credibility with their boss, but they also have credibility with their people.”

OF4: “I need to know everything that's going on. I need to understand the why we're doing it, the how we're doing it and even if I don't agree with it, still be able to get on board with it and explain the message.”

ZT2: “I think integrity is a huge thing. If you're not doing the right thing or if you're not doing things for the right reason, you can't really be considered a leader.”

***Attribute 3: Achievement.*** All respondents explained how achievement is a key characteristic of successful leaders. Descriptions of observed achievements clarify how the respondents differentiate between successful and unsuccessful leaders. Selected examples follow:

LW8: “You're put in a leadership role with trust that you can do the job. If they're putting you in that position, knowing, trusting you to make decisions and they've instilled that in you with the trust that you can handle it and not have to come to them for answers.”

RC1: “You need to be squared away as a leader and have a vision and motivate people to want to follow you and want to achieve the same goals that you have.”

ZT2: “Knowledge of what you're doing . . . speaks volumes because people want to follow someone who knows what they're doing. And if a person doesn't know what they're doing and they show that . . . [and] it cuts down on their ability to lead.”

***Attribute 4: Trust and Empowerment.*** All respondents specified how he or she believes trust and empowerment are critical to personal leadership growth. Building self-confidence results in seeking new challenges and creating an organization culture of employees who perform better when their opinions are valued. Selected examples follow:

EK3: “Where I really have grown as a leader is when I'm put into situations that I'm not comfortable doing . . . that make[s] you grow as a person . . . I believe it make[s] you really grow and become a better leader as well.”

MG9: “I was still a . . . lieutenant . . . my [unit leaders] were both . . . gone . . . [I requested] help . . . my commander wanted to come back [early] . . . [their boss] said, ‘Nope . . . I've got confidence that [the lieutenant] is going to be able to lead your squadron’ . . . that was really great because it kind of taught me you never know what someone’s capable of unless you believe in them and put them in a chance, or give them that opportunity to excel and lead.”

ZT2: “I said [to my commander], ‘Here's some of my goals for my Air Force career or the next couple years’ . . . [they] came to me and said, ‘Hey, I got this deployment . . . That meant a lot to me . . . to go out of [their] way to find me opportunities. That’s the start of a leader from what I’ve seen in the Air Force.”

***Attribute 5: Leadership behaviors important to me.*** All respondents highlighted how he or she continues to evolve as a leader. Examples provided describe leadership behaviors and importance to the respondent, unit personnel, and the USAF. Selected examples follow:

BN5: “I need to be worried or care about them as a whole person concept...[a]nd make sure that everything on the outside is well balanced so that their work ethics can be balanced.”

EK3: “I've let them know, if they ever have any questions . . . they can always come to me...I always want to make sure that they know that it's always a two-way conversation.”



MG9: “I know that there's a time and a place for every type of leadership tool, tactic, or however you like to refer that . . . you can always learn something as long as you take just one new lesson . . . it's beneficial.”

QV6: “I try to be real with my guys. I mentioned before; the humanization of it. A lot of that is realizing that the people that work for you are not stupid. You can't candy-coat an answer or candy-coat the solution to a problem and think that your people are not going to see right through it.”

**Results-Theme 5: Leadership development experiences and change advocacy.**

The USAF Millennial interview respondents described lived leadership development experiences and changes she or he would recommend. Attributes that emerged from the data include finding value in positive and negative leadership development events, the importance of leader honesty and integrity, and leaders sharing the value Millennial officer to the unit and Air Force. Additional attributes are encouraging USAF GenX leaders to proactively mentor Millennial officers, mentor throughout the organization, and seeking USAF Millennial officer inputs when developing leadership development processes designed to hone Millennial officer skills (see Appendix E).

***Attribute 1: All leaders are not alike but diverse leadership styles are useful.***

Each respondent shared positive and negative interaction examples with leaders. Although some events were described as negative the respondent conveyed she or he learned from the experience. Eight (67%) of the respondents described that the USAF may benefit from different leadership styles, especially when responding to unanticipated or diverse situations. Selected examples follow:

DA7: “The formal here-are-the-steps, I don't really think they were taught well enough or in-depth enough to really apply it . . . I guess the thing is there's not one universal approach that's good . . . you could be coercive . . . [like] Genghis Khan . . . or you could be inspirational and get your people to buy into the mission and make them feel like it's their idea to do well in the first place . . . I've learned different types of leadership. I think it's kind of a combination between inspirational, but also very open and honest.”

QV6: “I think that's a big part of leadership, is learning from your experiences. A lot of the way I have learned, unfortunately, in some of my past jobs is from poor leadership, in my opinion and the opinions of a lot of my peers . . . You've got to build from the bad too. I think I've built more from the bad, because I've had more bad examples than good examples . . . So you take those things, and you take the good that you've learned, and for me that's how I've built my notion of leadership.”

***Attribute 2: Always embody honesty and integrity.*** Eight (72%) of the respondents conveyed the negative environment created by leaders who micromanage employees or displaying dishonest behaviors. Results from these types of behaviors remove trust within the unit and creates a negative work environment because the symptom is treated instead of the root of the problem. Conversely, all respondents shared how honest interaction enables Millennial officers to gather more information about the USAF environment and create meaning for her or his role. Selected examples follow:

EK3: “One thing I like a lot . . . [t]hey're really good at staying calm. No matter what the circumstance, they're always level-headed . . . It's a very learned skill and something I wish I was better at.”

JX9: “One of the biggest experiences I've had would be finding out that a peer wasn't selected for [an award] in my unit, because [their] supervisor took [the] package and made it [their] own. And that really stuck with me as far as, how sometimes leadership up and down the chain, can allow certain things to happen. And it's really impacted me . . . it brought to my attention that things like that really do happen--people taking credit for someone else's work and not acknowledging it.”

MG9: “I tend to gravitate more towards people that will be honest with me, and that show you through their actions what they're telling you, rather than preaching something to you and then turning around and doing something different.”

QV6: “The Air Force seems to solve too many problems by throwing rank at a problem. ‘This organization’s not working out. There’s a captain in charge. Let’s put a major in charge of it.’ Well that doesn't solve a problem.”

***Attribute 3: Talk more with me than to me about why my support is valued.***

Every respondent described the value of enlightenment provided by supervisors or struggles without it. Each respondent provided positive and negative examples and recommendations to improve feedback in a formal setting to include the work place and formal training courses. Selected examples follow:

DA7: “I used to get very frustrated when people gave me criticism because I took it personally. And the [leader] that I was telling you about and my current boss were very good about telling me, ‘Look, take the ego out of it. Think about this, what I'm telling you.’ And through that kind of interaction, it has helped me look at the content of what they're saying, maybe not their tone or how they're saying it.”

LW8: “My gut instinct is to do it one way and then [my commander] comes back and says, ‘You might want to think on this. You might want to think about that.’ It’s very, very helpful to have that bug in my ear saying, ‘Check on this. Check on that.’ It’s teaching me to ask the questions that I don’t know to ask and with my subordinates and that kind of thing, and as well as the leaders over me.”

QV6: “Leaders especially, I think the generation or two above us, don’t understand how much more--and I’m not putting our generation on a pedestal--but how much more educated we are . . . we are so much smarter and intuitive than our leadership want to believe. That’s where the disconnect happens. That’s where you’re going to lose your people, if you don’t realize what you have to work with below you. If you talk to me like I don’t understand what you’re telling me, you’re going to lose me. So that’s something I always try and correct going down the chain.”

RC1: “I would say that once jobs actually come out . . . having somebody come in who has been in that career field to talk to the incoming sessions, that would be very helpful, and especially knowing what to expect.”

***Attribute 4: Encourage USAF GenX leaders to proactively mentor and provide positive feedback.*** All respondents described the need for mentorship and recommended supervisors spend more time sharing positive feedback. Ten (83%) of the respondents conveyed their seeking mentorship from supervisors. Seven respondents (58%) shared how some but not all of his or her supervisors shared feedback. Six respondents (50%) described receiving negative or minimal feedback that created a negative work environment. Selected examples follow:

BN5: “[S]ome of the commanders would give a lot of push back and push back on every little thing...it makes it hard to get the job done when there is constant push back...[and] always getting second-guessed.”

DA7: “A lot of times it’s, ‘Here’s your form. Any issues? Nope? I don’t have any issues either. Okay. Sign it.’ And now, we can put it on our OPR [officer performance report] that we did it.”

OF4: “I was deployed to an undisclosed location . . . as a commander . . . my boss expected me to have the presence of mind, and the knowledge of Lieutenant Colonels, and apparently got frustrated . . . that I was asking questions that [they] thought that I should know . . . I didn’t know how to do things, I didn’t know how to make things happen...I kind of felt stupid but I’m trying to learn from it.”

RC1: “My first month or two on active duty . . . my supervisor . . . sat down and gave me, you know, ‘These are my expectations and this is what I want you to do.’ . . . But official feedback sessions, just the one initial. Other than that, it’s good to sit down and take a look at this is what you’ve been doing well at and what you need to improve on. The day-to-day is just as important.”

***Attribute 5: Encourage top-down, bottom-up, and lateral mentoring to facilitate leadership growth.*** All respondents described the importance of formal and informal mentoring throughout the hierarchy. Ten respondents (83%) shared positive formal feedback experiences and six described negative feedback experiences. Selected examples follow:

BN5: “[M]y commander...we would just have conversations and [they] would talk about [their] former experiences . . . [they] would always tell us a story of what [they] experienced and then try to tie it in to what we're doing now which was nice.”

OF4: “The more experience I've had, the more disappointed I've been in my peers . . . I'm not saying I'm the best leader but I don't feel that there's a lot of opportunities to build those skills . . . Obviously been disappointed at the . . . lack of focus from my leaders on trying to foster my leadership development. They'd rather me be very good at making staff packages or some other thing, than actually becoming a leader.”

SI0: “I sent [a note] to our senior NCOs [non-commissioned officers] . . . describing the new [guidance] which describes the commanders' responsibilities . . . Mentoring the NCOs and let it trickle down to the airmen . . . [and] as the senior NCO, play that part of the commander's eyes and ears . . . see what can be done to create a healthier command climate . . . They see more than anyone else in the unit, which is what is supposed to happen because they're a commander. But go by and let him or her know that you got their back that the support system is there.”

ZT2: “If we fail the mission . . . we fail the Air Force. We fail the squadron. My commander fails if I fail. If my airmen fail, I fail . . . I just never really thought about it like that . . . I didn't think of it at a higher level . . . [my commander] taught me that.”

***Attribute 6: Seek Millennial input when reviewing or developing leadership development processes.*** Eight respondents (67%) shared experiences when attending the recently cancelled Air & Space Basic Course (ASBC). Five respondents (42%) shared experiences when attending or preparing to attend Squadron Officer School (SOS). Four respondents (33%) had only attended their career field training course to learn about her

or his assigned mission instead of formal leadership instruction. Although the comments reflected his or her learning something several recommendations reveal a lack of training needed to facilitate increased success as a CGO. Selected examples follow:

DA7: “As far as SOS, I think it's a good idea. I think it's a failure in execution. There was such a breadth of topics and things to work on...seemed like the curriculum was almost schizophrenic in some ways because it would go over here, and one day we'd talk about leadership, and then we'd have problem solving exercises, and then we'd take a test . . . But I think if they could have focused on, ‘Look, this is what we think is important’ . . . And maybe use some historical context, because that was the one thing we didn't do was . . . go back and reflect on, ‘Here's some past mistakes that led to these consequences.’ . . . It seemed like a waste of resources.”

JX9: “I think had there been a more performance portion of ASBC, it would have gauged my interest more. So I think what I remember most about the course was the chance to interact with NCOs and get their perspective on what it is that they expect out of lieutenants and vice versa. So I look at that mentoring part as what I would say as a highlight. So I think those are the things that we should use more versus a distance learning module.”

MG9: “I will say that the most helpful training that we got at SOS . . . was interacting with enlisted personnel. The senior NCOs came over and gave their perspective and said, ‘This is what we look for in leaders.’ And that was the shortest lesson that we got—less than a week—but unanimously that was the most beneficial for all the people in my class and I've had several friends that have gone and they said the same thing.”

SI0: “The transit between graduating college to going to the first PME, ASBC . . . it was really basic stuff that really didn't prepare me for the actual experiences on active duty . . . [instead of] things that could help you in the future . . . It's almost like a rude awakening . . . especially when you hear or see or go through a certain experience.”

### **Systematic Comparison of USAF Millennial Officer Interviews and Contextual Documents**

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. In-depth interviews elicited respondents' description and interpretation of events as well as experiences affecting their behavior, as Polkinghorne (2005) indicated is an objective in qualitative research. The following results-themes emerged when exploring descriptions provided by USAF Millennial officer respondents:

- Results-Theme 1: What's Important to Me; Why I Joined the USAF
- Results-Theme 2: What's Important to Me; Will I Stay in the USAF?
- Results-Theme 3: Leadership Definition and Expectations
- Results-Theme 4: Preferred Leadership Characteristics
- Results-Theme 5: Leadership Development Experiences and Change Advocacy

Reviewing interview data and results themes determined if results of thematic analysis would yield additional convergence for data analysis. To illustrate the importance of USAF Millennial officer perspectives and resolve the last two guiding questions, interview responses were systematically compared with USAF contextual framework descriptions arising from the literature review (Giorgi, 1997; Van Manen,



1990). Themes that emerged from systematic comparison of USAF Millennial officer interview responses and USAF doctrine were:

- Study-Theme 1: USAF Millennial Officers and the USAF Core Values
- Study-Theme 2: USAF Millennial Officers and the USAF Culture
- Study-Theme 3: USAF Millennial Officers and USAF Leadership Development

Development of the study themes provided a foundation to capture the essence of the USAF Millennial officers' lived leadership development experiences. For example, USAF Millennial officer descriptions revealed cohort characteristics and converging perspectives that aligned with USAF contextual documents. However, the respondents also described USAF GenX officer behaviors that differed from USAF Millennial cohort officer characteristics and perspectives.

### **Summary**

The problem addressed in this study was the absence of USAF Millennial generation (born between 1982-2005) officer voices to inform USAF senior leaders about Millennials' formal and informal leadership development perspectives. The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. Phenomenological methodology was ideal for in-depth exploration of how individuals develop meaning for their lived experiences (Sokolowski, 2000). To answer the guiding questions for this study, two sets of data were collected; sources were from in-depth interviews and review of selected USAF contextual documents.

Prior to soliciting volunteers for this study, expert panel review and a pilot test supported exploration of the reliability and validity of the interview questions. Revisions

to the open-ended questions reflected results of the expert panel review and pilot test. Solicitation of USAF Millennial officers commenced and eleven volunteers provided informed consent to participate in this study. Each respondent provided responses to nine semi-structured questions designed to explore USAF Millennial officer lived leadership development experiences and perspectives.

Themes extracted from the data collected for this study reveal different facets of USAF leadership development. In-depth interviews were conducted with USAF Millennial officers who volunteered to participate in this study. Eleven respondents answered semi-structured interview questions to elicit descriptions of lived leadership-development experiences. Follow-up questions and discussion revealed how the respondents created meaning from the events.

Five interview results-themes emerged during data analysis. Credibility of the themes emerged as a result of two or more attributes supporting each theme. The first results-theme concerns why each respondent joined the USAF. The majority of respondents conveyed more than one reason for joining the USAF. The three attributes conveyed were college funds, family influence, or a desire to serve something greater than themselves. Interview results-theme 2 describes whether or not the respondents will remain USAF employees. Desire to remain USAF employees to serve something greater than themselves was conveyed by seven respondents and one respondent mentioned job security. Four USAF Millennial officers are undecided based on negative leadership experiences.

The third interview results-theme emerged from each respondent providing her or his definition of leadership and expectations of USAF leaders. The descriptions provided

by respondents demonstrated the complexity of characteristics embodied by successful leaders. Similarly, the various descriptions shared by the respondents revealed multi-faceted expectations of USAF leaders. Descriptions of preferred leadership characteristics resulted in a fourth interview results-theme. All respondents described the importance of taking care of the people, integrity, achievement, and trust and empowerment and each respondent described how he or she continues to develop as a leader.

Leadership development experiences and change advocacy comprise the fifth interview results-theme that emerged from USAF Millennial officer interviews. Respondent comments described formal and informal USAF leadership development processes and experiences. Eight respondents conveyed the importance of diverse USAF leadership styles to include learning from USAF leaders whose behaviors result in a negative experience. Nine respondents described how leader dishonesty and lack of integrity create a hostile work environment. However, all respondents shared how leaders who always employ honesty and integrity bolster employee performance.

All USAF Millennial officer respondents described their cohort preference for open, two-way discussion with leaders and comprehension of his or her value to the organization. Respondents also recommended leaders should proactively engage in formal and informal mentoring. Effective mentoring techniques should include transparency (i.e., the real story instead of a prescribed USAF reply) and balance of constructive criticism and positive reinforcement. Another mentoring recommendation is multi-direction mentoring. This includes traditional top-down mentoring but would expand peer mentoring as well as the opportunity for subordinates to mentor leaders. To

help create change, USAF Millennial officers recommend consulting their cohort when building leadership development processes or a curriculum.

Results from interview responses reveal thematic convergence regarding why respondents joined the USAF and whether or not they will remain USAF employees, leadership definitions and expectations, preferred leadership behaviors, and change advocacy based on leadership development experiences. Subsequent review of the five interview results-themes yielded additional thematic convergence. Follow-on exploration of the convergent data within the USAF contextual document framework described in the literature review resulted in three study themes informing conclusions and recommendations presented in Chapter 5:

- Study Theme 1: USAF Millennial Officers and the USAF Core Values
- Study Theme 2: USAF Millennial Officers and the USAF Culture
- Study Theme 3: USAF Millennial Officers and USAF Leadership Development

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. In-depth interviews with USAF Millennial officers resulted in themes emerging from the reported data. Respondents' perspectives of meaning, or *why something is important to me*, differed from the assumption that Millennials employ a perspective of self that is a GenX characteristic (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Strauss & Howe, 1991). USAF Millennial officer respondents conveyed how and why they ascribed meaning to lived leadership development experiences. The five themes and 19 attributes that emerged from interview data exploration addressed the purpose statement and answered the first two guiding questions:

GQ1. How do USAF Millennial officers describe their own leadership development?

GQ2. How do USAF Millennial officers create meaning from leadership development experiences?

Systematic comparison of interview results and USAF contextual document descriptions presented in Chapter 2 was needed to explore the USAF Millennial officers' organizational culture. Review of selected USAF contextual documents yielded insight to address whether USAF generational differences existed and if current leadership development processes meet USAF Millennial officer needs. Information yielded from systematic comparison of emergent themes and USAF contextual documents included in Chapter 2 addressed the problem statement and answered the last two guiding questions:

GQ3. In what way do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform formal leadership development?

GQ4. In what ways do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform informal leadership development?

The discussion of study themes is organized by topic to explore USAF Millennial officer respondents' lived leadership development experiences within the USAF organization context. Each study theme begins with interview results analysis and theoretical underpinnings followed by implications, recommendations, and conclusions. The topical study theme format was selected to simplify presentation of the analysis, implications, and recommendations emerging from a single study theme.

### **Study Theme 1: USAF Millennial Officers and the USAF Core Values**

Analysis, implications, and recommendations for this study theme filled a literature gap regarding USAF Millennial officers perspectives of leadership development and whether the needs of generation cohort members were being met. Analysis of USAF Millennial officers' responses revealed support for existence of distinctive generation cohort characteristics as shown in Table 1 (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Raines, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Additional Millennial generation cohort characteristics described by Lancaster and Stillman (2010) also emerged. Characteristics include meaning, the need for speed, limitless expectations, entitlement, social networking, and collaboration (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010).

**Alignment with core values.** Analysis of the USAF Millennial officer cohort characteristics and perspectives within the USAF organizational context revealed alignment with and support of the USAF core values of integrity, excellence in all we do,

and service before self. All respondents described preferences for embodying integrity and following leaders who consistently espouse this value. Respondents ascribed importance to continuous learning, achievement, and honing personal and professional skills to ensure success of their team, unit, and higher echelons. All respondents either conveyed motivation to join or remain in the USAF for the opportunity to serve something greater than themselves, to lead teams, or to function in an organization they describe as a family.

Respondents also shared descriptions of leaders whose behaviors conflicted with the USAF core values. Several respondents described events during which the leader's unpredictable or oppressive behavior created a negative work environment. A frequent perception was that some of respondents' leaders believe the leader's hierarchical position provides protection, using a *do as I say not as I do* justification. Perpetuation of this behavior was described by one respondent as the "Air Force seems to solve too many problems by throwing rank at a problem . . . well that doesn't solve a problem" (QV6). Similarly, respondents conveyed their desire for honing skills to accomplish assigned missions; however, some leaders fail to share where the respondents' contributions fit into the USAF mission.

**Core values theme, implications and recommendation 1: Provide USAF GenX leaders with guidance to refocus on the importance of behavioral balance.**

USAF senior leaders frequently emphasize the importance of integrity especially for individuals filling a leadership role. Published USAF leadership guidance validates USAF senior leader comments whereby all USAF leaders should maintain a strong code of ethics and morals, behavioral balance, and honesty (SECAF, 2011, 2012d). The

implication of several respondents describing leaders whose behaviors conflict with this core value, and are not removed from a leadership position, implies the converse of CSAF Welsh's direction of “not . . . protecting those who lack integrity or fail to uphold the core values” (Welsh, 2014a).

To alleviate the adverse events USAF Millennial officer respondents described, USAF senior leaders should increase mentoring of USAF GenX leaders at all echelons. As leaders move to positions of increased responsibility expectations of behaviors and measurements of success also increase (SECAF, 2011c, 2012d). Without reaffirming integrity during career progression some leaders could consciously or unknowingly compromise morals or ethics. Instituting checks-and-balances of integrity throughout the continuum of learning could help leaders maintain a healthy balance of hierarchical and collaborative behaviors especially as USAF mission demands and employee reductions increase.

Senior leaders could also consider institutionalizing a systems thinking approach to reinforce the importance of integrity. Soliciting views of multi-generation USAF employees could help develop informal discussion guidelines. This approach requires a minor paradigm shift with respect to professional relationships and power perspectives. For example, subordinates receive significant guidance why remaining in the subordinate role is critical for team, unit, and USAF success (SECAF, 2011c, 2012c, 2012d). Doctrinal guidance might be reinforcing some USAF leaders' perspective that the leader does not require or appreciate feedback from subordinates because of the leader's responsibility to lead others. Those leaders who might desire subordinate feedback could



fear violating professional relationship criteria resulting in removal from the command position.

If USAF senior leaders would encourage a systems approach to mentoring, in which Millennial officers share feedback with GenX general officers and senior non-commissioned officers give feedback to Millennial officers, positive outcomes can be anticipated. Promoting interpersonal relationships incorporating honest, professional, two-way communication builds trust that strengthens the leadership hierarchy. USAF GenX officers who embrace such change could learn about and alleviate blind spots; for example, discovering a particular decision resulted in negative unit morale. This could be difficult for some GenX officers to accept if they believe they're giving up power. Senior leaders' support through the USAF echelons would reinforce the continuum-of-learning for all leaders to include willingness to solicit and receive feedback.

**Core values theme, implications and recommendation 2: Champion an institutional paradigm shift to minimize use of hierarchical position power when developing USAF Millennial leaders.** USAF GenX leaders use doctrinal guidance, as directed, to develop USAF Millennial officers (SECAF, 2011c, 2013a, 2014b). According to respondents' descriptions, some USAF GenX leaders prefer to follow the guidance only, use position power to direct subordinate behaviors, or fail to help the USAF Millennial officer to develop as a leader. One implication is that by misaligning with the Millennial generation cohort characteristics of ambition, loyalty, achievement, limitless expectations, and entitlement, USAF Millennial officers could seek employment in an organization whose leaders value them as individuals filled with hope and ideas (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). Another implication is that

unappreciated USAF Millennial officers could leverage the social networking cohort characteristic to convey the lack of USAF GenX leader support. Negative descriptions could influence potential employees to seek employment elsewhere.

USAF senior leaders should consider respondents' preferences for someone to talk with them as a human instead of only as a subordinate. Millennial cohort characteristics such as selflessness, intellectual prowess, and cooperation would ensure the required hierarchy remains in place for mission accomplishment (Howe & Strauss, 2007). GenX leaders who leverage these characteristics and communicate how the Millennial officer's efforts are valued would improve multi-generational relationships. Resulting improvements could increase the Millennial officer's desire to enhance leadership development skills, employ the skills to build successful teams, and provide a solid relationship foundation when welcoming and integrating their successors from the next generation, the Homeland cohort. Millennial officers could share positive feedback on social media resulting in increased recruiting and retention of their generation's cohort members.

**Core values theme, implications and recommendation 3: Facilitate USAF Millennial officer excellence and service by sharing “big picture” insight.** Official USAF guidance validates USAF senior leader perspectives for junior officers to focus on learning one's job and how to accomplish tasks to support the USAF mission (SECAF, 2011c). Requiring Millennials to focus only on the tactical mission conflicts with generation cohort characteristics and preferences to see the “big picture.” Keeping USAF Millennial officers pigeon-holed in directed tactical-level training and leadership development could result in employees of this generation seeking employment in an

organization that encourages systems thinking. Constricting leadership development could also diminish creativity and innovation preferred by USAF Millennial cohort officers. Another implication is that continuation of restricted leadership development conflicts with CSAF Welsh's (2014c) perspective to “unlock ourselves from the things we're used to and listen to some of the brilliant young people we have coming into our Air Force today when they have ideas that are different” (p. 12).

USAF senior leaders should encourage GenX leaders to balance necessary tactical learning and leadership development with systems thinking. For example, while instructing a new USAF Millennial officer on how to complete a task in a specific career field the GenX leader could explain how what appears to be an insignificant task compliments other tasks in the unit and contributes to other units throughout the USAF. Two-way discussion about the task would satisfy the USAF Millennial officer's generational interest in community, entitlement, and ambition to continuously improve one's skills. Institutionalizing this approach would demonstrate to USAF Millennial officers that their efforts and ideas are valued while gaining insight into the need for hierarchical relationships to accomplish the USAF mission.

### **Study Theme 2: USAF Millennial Officers and the USAF Culture**

Analysis, implications, and recommendations for this study theme filled a literature gap regarding USAF Millennial officer perspectives of leadership development and whether the needs of generation cohort members were being met. Analysis of USAF Millennial officers' responses revealed support for existence of distinctive generation cohort characteristics as shown in Table 1 (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Raines, 2003; Strauss

& Howe, 1991). Although respondent descriptions aligned with USAF cultural themes they also reflected areas of concern for USAF senior leaders to consider.

**Alignment with USAF culture.** Analysis of the USAF Millennial officer cohort characteristics and perspectives within the USAF organizational context revealed alignment with and support of the USAF culture theme and heritage, taking care of people, leveraging diversity, and thriving in a complex, unstable global environment. All respondents ascribed importance to taking care of people, which aligns with the Millennial generation cohort characteristics of community, selflessness, collaboration and nurturing (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). Respondents also described lack of generation diversity appreciation in the workplace and USAF heritage.

**USAF culture theme, implications and recommendation: Increase importance of valuing generation diversity.** Former SECAF Donley (2010) conveyed to Airmen, “You will step into history . . . as links in an unbroken chain of service, among generation after generation of Americans. . . . Others will come after you.” CSAF Welsh stated, “It’s all about pride. If people think we’re taking it away, we’ll lose them. [Pride] is why they stay.” USAF Millennial officer respondents supported these senior leader perspectives but oftentimes GenX leaders failed to answer their question, *Why is this important to me?* If the communication disconnect continues, USAF Millennial officers could separate from service after a few years to work for supervisors who answer their questions. Another implication is that if Millennial officers continue USAF employment they could dramatically re-shape USAF leadership development to accommodate their needs and the needs of successor generation cohort members.

USAF senior leaders should increase appreciation of generational diversity throughout the USAF as Chief Master Sergeant of the USAF Cody illustrated:

We have to bridge this generation gap in order to move forward into the future . . .

I think the first step is that you have to acknowledge who they are as people, as individuals. You're not going to make them who you are, just as you're not the people who came before you (Raatz, 2014)

Institutionalizing such a view of generational differences would yield several benefits. Some respondents mentioned how current education curricula accentuate heroes from wars occurring before they were born or when very young children. Incorporating stories about heroes from conflicts Millennial cohort members watched on various forms of media would demonstrate USAF leaders are endeavoring to meet their needs.

Senior leaders could also promote generation diversity by incorporating generation cycle theories into USAF doctrine and course curricula. Enlightening the USAF multi-generation workforce on how generations flow in cycles, and characteristics of each generation, could increase cross-generational understanding and productive communication among personnel in different cohorts resulting in positive changes. Current USAF employees would learn that the characteristics are not all-inclusive and only reflect characteristics common to the generation cohort but may not specifically apply to each cohort member (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Individuals could use the cohort characteristics to create or enhance relationships especially if uncomfortable interacting with members of other generations or USAF echelons.

Applying recommendations from USAF Millennial officer respondents, USAF senior leaders could increase interaction between GenX senior noncommissioned officers

and Millennial company grade officers. In formal education courses the additional mentoring would assist USAF Millennial officers to understand expectations of members of the GenX generation cohort. This opportunity also helps USAF Millennial officers comprehend the value of lower-echelon employees' mentoring of higher-echelon employees (SECAF, 2013a).

From a generation cycle perspective, USAF senior leaders could leverage the importance of learning about heroes from other generations. Theorists convey how the G.I. Generation who fought World War II is also known as the Greatest Generation (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Sharing with USAF Millennial officers how their cohort shares characteristics with the G.I. Generation would help answer their *why is this important to me* question and nurture their ambitious and limitless expectations (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010).

Instead of conveying what attracted GenXers to join and remain USAF employees, USAF senior leaders should modify marketing strategies to convey value Millennials bring to the organization and how their technological skills would benefit the Service. The increase of public information about USAF personnel reductions and increased deployments to hostile environments are likely monitored by the most social media- and technologically- savvy generation (AFPC, 2014b, 2014d; Fanning, Welsh, & Cody, 2013; Gildea, 2013). A civic perspective and a desire to serve will attract some Millennials to join the USAF. Others who are undecided could consider joining if USAF strategies addressed why serving is important to meet short or long term goals. For recruiting and retention strategies, USAF senior leaders should include or cultivate the Millennial preferences for collaboration, social networking, and open communication to

help new employees define why the mission is important to them. Listening to and championing Millennial needs could increase USAF accessions and retention numbers to perpetuate and increase mission effectiveness.

### **Study Theme 3: USAF Millennial Officers and USAF Leadership Development**

Analysis, implications, and recommendations for this study theme filled a literature gap regarding USAF Millennial officers perspectives of leadership development and whether the needs of generation cohort members were being met. Analysis of USAF Millennial officers' responses revealed support for existence of distinctive generation cohort characteristics as shown in Table 1 (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Raines, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Interview respondents described support for USAF leadership philosophy. However, the respondents shared recommendations for attracting, retaining, and developing USAF Millennial officers.

**Alignment with USAF leadership philosophy.** Analysis of the leadership development theme revealed USAF Millennial officer respondents supported USAF leadership development philosophies and guidance Respondents' ascribed meanings also reflected alignment with generation cohort characteristics of loyalty, ambition, achievement, limitless expectations, entitlement, and the civic generation type (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Raines, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 1991). All respondents described preferences for continuous learning, improving interpersonal relationships, and expanding professional networks. In describing mentoring experiences, several individuals conveyed more negative than positive events. Understanding the need for tiered leadership development and transactional, or top-down, leadership upon initial USAF entry, respondents' collective preference was to develop as leaders through two-

way communication, expanded mentoring options, and taking formal leadership training courses that meet their Millennial cohort needs.

**Leadership development theme, implications and recommendation 1:**

**Increase open, two-way communication.** USAF contextual documents include guidance for subordinates to obey senior leaders, adhere to the chain-of-command structure, learn how to be good followers, and comply with standards (SECAF, 2011c, 2012c, 2012d, 2014b). USAF Millennial officers who participated in this study remain vigilant to abide by the UCMJ (2010) and complete transactional requirements directed by leaders. If USAF Millennial generation cohort officers are excluded from understanding why an action is required to facilitate internal growth or excluded from discussions to modify or create new processes, they could seek employment in an organization whose leaders encourage idea sharing and shared decision-making.

By encouraging open, two-way communication USAF senior leaders could maintain necessary hierarchical requirements while breaking down communication barriers to bolster informal mentoring. Using this approach helps build trust, loyalty, collaboration, and social networking which meets USAF Millennial officer generation cohort needs (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). For example, the Airman Comprehensive Assessment (ACA) is designed to generate transforming, two-way communication. Encouraging leaders at all levels to balance the formal ACA process with open, informal conversation could enhance workplace relationships and prepare future leaders to perpetuate positive working relationships. Employing this strategy can effect positive change by admitting personal limitations, withholding



judgment, and endeavoring to understand issues through the eyes of followers (Schein, 1983).

USAF guidance describes traits, characteristics, and skills members should employ at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels (SECAF, 2011c). Although these leadership elements are ideal, USAF Millennial respondents described how some leaders have displayed behaviors inconsistent with USAF guidance. USAF senior leaders should ensure training or mentorship is available to USAF GenX leaders unprepared to successfully employ transforming leadership or systems thinking leadership approaches. Implementing this approach would convey to USAF Millennial officers a senior leader focus on community, collaboration, and nurturing while simultaneously addressing needs of the Millennial generation cohort and all USAF employees.

**Leadership development theme, implications and recommendation 2: Modify USAF mentoring using a systems thinking approach.** Leadership guidance approved by USAF senior leaders includes formal mentoring processes. The ACA implemented in June 2014 begins with the employee self-assessment, supervisory-level review of the subordinate's responses, and conveying employee's job requirements, performance, and expectations. The final step is for open, two-way communication and the opportunity for the employee to seek guidance for achieving personal or professional goals (Gildea, 2014; Leslie, 2014; Welsh & Cody, 2014). Such expectations for the ACA process imply the leader has created an atmosphere of open discussion and a relationship of trust results in full disclosure by the subordinate. If the positive working relationship does not exist results of the ACA will not meet the intent of published guidance.

Published guidance states, the “ACA . . . do[es] not replace informal day-to-day communication and feedback” (SECAF, 2014b, p. 9). However, some leaders may consider informal mentoring risky because they are uncertain how to conduct this type of mentorship and maintain a professional and hierarchical relationship or a leader prefers not to use the leadership technique. Similar to formal mentoring, informal mentoring could be employed by some USAF leaders using a transactional, or top-down, approach as described by respondents of this study. The respondents’ perspective aligns with potentially conflicting USAF guidance conveying that all Airmen can fill the role of mentor and mentee, in that (a) wingmen take care of their wingman (with no mention of leader or subordinate roles), (b) Airmen encourage change management, and (c) Airmen appreciate diversity and diverse opinions (James & Welsh, 2014; James et al., 2014; SECAF, 2012d, 2013a). Without resolution of USAF guidance contradictions, the disconnect with Millennial needs, and the erroneous assumption all USAF leaders possess and successfully employ effective leadership skills, USAF Millennial officers could seek employment elsewhere rather than pursue a USAF career, and depart the service prior to retirement. In accord with their generational characteristics, USAF Millennials are likely to choose professions in which their intellectual prowess, ambition, entitlement, and unlimited expectations can flourish (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010).

Senior leaders should modify the formal mentoring process by encouraging a modified description of reverse mentoring or “mentoring up,” which is mentoring of a senior person (in age, experience, or position) by a junior individual. The aim is for the junior individual to “share unique knowledge sets, possibly in the field of information

technology, computing, or Internet communications . . . Ability to create and maintain an attitude of openness regardless of status, power, or position” (SECAF, 2013a, p. 11).

Although the comment “possibly in the field of information technology, computing, or Internet communications” (SECAF, 2013a, p. 11) aligns with the Millennial cohort characteristic of Internet knowledge, it should be removed. Mentoring should not be conditional but instead focus on the value of the mentor’s and mentee’s lived experiences, abilities, and ideas. Recognizing that Millennial generation cohort characteristics do not apply to all cohort members (Strauss & Howe, 1991), inclusion of the assumption all Millennials have technical prowess excludes those USAF employees lacking such skills.

Encouraging reverse mentoring also aligns with the wingman concept designed to ensure all USAF employees have someone to support them. Respondents who described negative leadership interactions explained the leader was not receptive to feedback although the leaders’ behaviors conflicted with USAF core values. The respondents wanted to provide feedback or recommendations to make the leader aware of the leader’s behaviors on the unit or identify a potential blind spot; lacking the means to do so, respondents elected to hope for a new leader, deploy overseas, or be hired to fill a new job at another unit. USAF senior leaders who encourage reverse mentoring could facilitate USAF GenX feedback receptiveness resulting in increased leader credibility as well as positive work environments and interpersonal relationships. Another positive outcome could be increased loyalty to the leader and unit as USAF employees feel valued as they are empowered with greater responsibility to ensure mission success.

By modifying USAF mentoring processes, USAF senior leaders could encourage increased use of a systems approach to mentoring. A transforming leadership approach, in which two-way communication occurs but the leader guides the interaction, and transactional approaches used by many USAF leaders, could be enhanced by employing systems thinking and mentoring up. A potential paradigm shift, USAF senior leaders could employ various processes to encourage subordinates to provide, and leaders to solicit, feedback in a non-attribution setting. The dialogue would remain professional to comply with the UCMJ (2010). The informal process could be in formal USAF mentoring guidance to affirm the importance of a systems thinking approach to supervisor-employee relationship-building and growth.

Some leaders might believe the paradigm shift would diminish a leader's authority. However, insight obtained from this approach could notify a leader of potential blind-spots, areas to improve, or encouragement to continue on a new path that diverges from behavior about which other employees have shared negative comments. Leveraging Millennial generation cohort characteristics of valuing loyalty, community, and preference to follow leaders who achieve goals could bolster the leader's authority. This recommendation also aligns with SECAF James' "bold leadership" (2014) approach to implement new processes to develop current and future USAF leaders.

**Leadership development theme, implications and recommendation 3: Tap into Millennial energy.** Several USAF Millennial officer respondents expressed a desire to continue USAF service based on a desire to serve something greater than themselves. The respondents also described their respect for authority, motivation to maintain optimism, and employment of a civic-minded perspective to comply with organization

requirements and respect leaders. When describing negative leadership experiences and whether or not they would remain USAF employees, several respondents expressed Millennial generation characteristics of entitlement, selflessness, collaboration, intellectual prowess, and a need for personal meaning or an answer to *why it is important to me* (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010).

To retain USAF Millennial officers, USAF senior leaders should encourage USAF GenX leaders to proactively explain to USAF Millennial officers why certain requirements or behavioral changes are important to the Millennial member. This approach could also help both parties, the Millennial and leader, to engage in open-communication, learn from each other, and possibly develop a better problem-solving strategy. Such enhancements to the leader/Millennial follower relationship would support USAF senior leader perspectives to “reflect and relate to the population it serves . . . To leverage the strengths of diversity . . . where all Airmen feel valued and able to contribute to the mission” (James & Welsh, 2014, p. 16). Soliciting USAF Millennial officer perspectives results in positive reinforcement and valuing of the youngest USAF officer generation. Encouraging transforming and systems thinking leadership approaches would be a paradigm shift for some USAF GenX leaders.

USAF senior leaders should also include USAF Millennial officer perspectives when developing or modifying formal leadership development courses. Contributions from Millennials would enlighten curriculum developers about Millennial cohort needs while sharing historic and GenX training development perspectives with Millennials. For example, USAF Millennial officer respondents recommended increasing USAF Millennial officers and senior noncommissioned officer interaction in the workplace and

when attending formal leadership development schools. Learning from career field experts would help USAF Millennial officers comprehend different missions and functions of various career field personnel. The non-attribution learning environment could encourage USAF Millennial officers to seek feedback by employing reverse mentoring to build effective leadership skills as they progress in military rank and job responsibility.

To facilitate USAF Millennial officer leadership development, USAF senior leaders should modify formal education curricula. As shared by several respondents who attended formal professional military education courses, instead of overwhelming students with an abundance of events, such as specific military battles followed by little or no discussion, the curriculum should be modified to minimize the number of events. Limiting the number of scenarios increases time dedicated to discussing why the event progressed the way it did, reflecting on lessons learned, and identifying essential tools for avoiding negative events or changing course to facilitate positive results.

USAF senior leaders should encourage increased dialogue with USAF Millennial officers to leverage younger officers' Millennial collaboration skills. Implementing this approach could also re-invigorate USAF GenX leader perspectives. For example, during his Air Force Update, Air Force Chief of Staff General Welsh stated, "I'm getting old now . . . things don't grab my attention like they used to but every now and then I hear something, watch a video, or I see somebody and I'm inspired" (Welsh, 2014c). Other leaders who proactively seek or encourage Millennial creativity and feel motivated by the results could benefit from the generation cohort characteristic of optimism (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Strauss and Howe's (1991) extensive research indicated generational characteristics occur in cycles. The cycles repeat every four generations and share similar characteristics. For example, members of the G.I. generation cohort are also known as a hero generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The G.I. generation

. . . cut trails and built dams during the Great Depression, landed on beachheads in Normandy and Iwo Jima, built Levittowns, conquered polio, built gleaming suburbs and interstate highways, landed astronauts on the moon, and held the White House for a record thirty-two years (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 325).

The G.I. generation also created a separate United States Air Force in 1947.

The amount of collective energy the G.I. generation cohort employed to catalyze change benefitting Americans and the global community is shared by their generation cycle cohort: Millennials. By incorporating generation cycle research findings and results of this study, USAF senior leaders could solicit and incorporate USAF Millennial officer perspectives when developing leadership development programs. Some current USAF leaders might view implementation of Millennial-focused institutional paradigm shifts as a high risk endeavor. However, changes to interpersonal interactions would neither change nor impact the viability of the necessary USAF organizational hierarchy. Modifying leadership styles to nurture Millennial officers aligns with the USAF core value of service before self and maintains chain-of-command or UCMJ authority (SECAF 2012c; UCMJ, 2010). Integrating Millennials' relationship requirements bolsters Millennial cohort characteristics that Millennial employees value. Meeting such needs, including loyalty and community, could strengthen USAF interpersonal relations at all echelons and retain a multi-generation workforce. A systems thinking approach to

leadership development could facilitate development of successful recruitment strategies for future generations as well as ensure mission success in an unstable, complex global environment.

### **Future Study Recommendations**

The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. If current approaches fail to meet Millennials' leadership development needs, this population may elect not to pursue a USAF career or depart the service prior to retirement. If Millennials remain in the USAF and progress to senior management positions they could become frustrated with current approaches and generate significant change.

In this study, USAF Millennial officers serving on active duty assigned to the same unit in one USAF facility were selected and contributed to systematic comparison of USAF Millennial officer interview responses with USAF leadership development philosophies and related guidance documents. Considering the limited scope of this study, a recommendation for future studies is to employ different research methods and expand the study focus to additional population demographics, respondent functions, and geographic locations. Analysis of insight received from multi-generational groups of employees functioning in differing capacities and in different locations could inform USAF and non-USAF leaders about adapting leadership development approaches to meet diverse and possibly unique needs. Results could inform whether leadership development experiences differ among members of the generation cohorts possessing different characteristics and prepare to recruit effectively Homeland generation cohort members who will succeed USAF Millennial officers.



**Future study area 1: Employ other qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches.** Phenomenological methodology is ideal for in-depth exploration of the meaning individuals ascribe to their lived experiences (Sokolowski, 2000). Focusing on Millennial officer perspectives provides a baseline for future studies. Researchers could use the design of this study to explore transferability of findings to other USAF Millennial officer populations. Ethnographers could conduct interviews to include cultural characteristics and beliefs excluded from this study. By taking a participant observer role and witnessing behaviors in the USAF cultural environment, ethnographers could explore whether or not the new criteria affect how USAF Millennial employees develop and reinforce acceptable cultural behaviors to include leadership development (Merriam, 2009).

Using quantitative and mixed-method approaches would enable researchers to solicit responses from a larger USAF sample, increase the amount of data collected, and examine correlations and causal relationships among variables involved in USAF leadership development (Black, 2005). In longitudinal studies, investigators could examine the Millennial generation cohort and inform USAF senior leaders about how to effectively attract, recruit, and retain future generation employees. Increasing the number of study participants could also increase the validity and reliability of quantitative results (Black, 2005) or trustworthiness (i.e., credibility transferability, dependability, and confirmability) of qualitative results (Schwandt et al., 2007).

**Future study area 2: Expand population demographics.** Soliciting views of employees excluded from this study could result in comprehensive understanding of

generation-specific perspectives. Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force James Cody stated

We have to bridge this generation gap in order to move forward into the future.

. . . I think the first step is that you have to acknowledge who they are as people, as individuals. You're not going to make them who you are, just as you're not the same as people who came before you (Raatz, 2014).

For example, individuals with (a) rank from additional commissioning sources, (b) prior enlistment, (c) sister service employment, (d) enlisted, noncombatant, or civilian status, (e) experience during deployment, non DoD employment, different echelons, departments of government, and geographical locations. Expanding the study population provides several advantages. Exploration of generation-specific perspectives across USAF components, career fields, in deployment or home station, and geographically could identify unmet leadership development needs to inform USAF senior leaders about incorporating or modifying processes to bolster leadership skills.

Researchers should consider using mixed methods when examining additional demographic groups. Employing qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews with a small sample could provide researchers with insight into various perspectives of different types of individuals. Based on the results, researchers could develop surveys to solicit opinions from USAF employees working in locations abroad. Leveraging technology to administer the surveys could increase the number of respondents and test the reliability, validity, and statistical significance of the findings (Black, 2005; Creswell, 2013). Using technology could reduce costs to conduct the study, minimize time respondents take to

participate in the study, and encourage participation by using an electronic survey method familiar to USAF employees.

***Interview active duty USAF Millennial line officers who received a commission from a non-Reserve Officer Training Corps program such as the USAF Academy or Officer Training School.*** Respondents would have been in enlisted service prior to receiving an officer commission. Leadership experience gained while serving as a USAF enlisted employee or attending a military service academy greatly exceeds the amount of leadership training available to others not following such routes to leadership (SECAF, 2013c). Exploring the leadership training of military service academy and prior enlisted service employees could yield similar or different descriptions of USAF Millennial leadership development experiences.

***Interview active duty USAF Millennial officer noncombatants such as physicians, attorneys, and chaplains.*** Including non-line officers considered to be noncombatants when serving in deployed locations (SECAF, 2014b) could yield descriptions to modify or enhance leadership development programs. Leadership development experiences of noncombatants may differ from those USAF Millennial line officers who are designated as combatants (AEF, 2014; SECAF, 2013c, p. 115).

***Interview enlisted and officer Millennial cohort members working in all career fields and the active duty USAF, Air National Guard, or the Air Force Reserve components.*** Including the Guard and Reserve employees as USAF senior leaders expand missions for each of the three components (SECAF, 2011c). With increased USAF total force mission synergy, discovering whether experiences in the separate components influence development of different leadership development perspectives and

whether espoused doctrine for all USAF officers is sufficient or requires accommodation for generational or organizational sub-culture preferences (Bell, 2008; Howe & Strauss, 2007; Schein, 1996). Include USAF multi-generation enlisted personnel serving in an active duty or ARC status. Leadership development processes are deliberate throughout an employee's tenure (SECAF, 2013c). Including multi-generation enlisted employee perspectives could reveal options to modify existing or develop new processes in response to changing USAF work force leadership development needs.

***Interview Air Force civilian employees.*** USAF civilians are not authorized to fill commander positions (SECAF, 2011c) and are classified as a separate personnel category according to the Geneva Convention (SECAF, 2013c). Based on differing roles, including USAF multi-generation civilian employees could inform USAF senior leaders if changes to leadership development are needed to best support all USAF employees (SECAF, 2011c).

***Interview USAF Millennial or multi-generation employees upon return from deployment.*** Work and personal life demands on USAF employees could differ while working at home station or when deployed. Conducting interviews upon deployment return could inform USAF senior leaders if leadership develop modifications could better prepare employees for deployment requirements and bolster training while at home station.

***Interview USAF and non-USAF multi-generation officers, enlisted members, and civilian employees.*** The decrease in DoD employees could result in greater interdependency and cooperation between the Armed Services branches. Exploring leadership development perspectives shared by Millennial or multi-generation employees

of the different Services could identify optimal leadership development approaches. Leveraging the descriptions of positive leadership development experiences and programs could result in developing new strategies to attract, recruit, and retain Millennial, GenX, and future generation employees.

*Interview non-Department of Defense employees.* Exploring or comparing leadership development responses from DoD and non-DoD employees could result in development of new strategies to develop future leaders. New perspectives may also generate changes to current leadership development processes to enhance skills of current DoD and non-DoD leaders.

*Include standard demographic diversity criteria including gender, race, ethnicity, religious preference or not, and sexual orientation.* USAF senior leaders and approved USAF contextual documents convey the importance of diversity and inclusion for organizational success (James & Welsh, 2014; SECAF, 2012c, 2012d). Exploring whether differences exist based on other demographic criteria could yield recommendations for maintaining or modifying existing leadership development processes.

**Future study area 3: Expand the geographic location and organizational structure.** The focus and nature of specific missions vary in different geographic locations, which could yield geographic- or structure-specific nuances affecting leadership development. For example, in this study volunteer participant solicitation focused on individuals assigned to a single unit, the 21st Space Wing, at Peterson Air Force Base. Unlike the majority of USAF installations, Peterson Air Force Base employees provide support for various units including three headquarters organizations,

each led by either a flag or a general officer (AFSPC, 2014; USAF, 2014d; USNORTHCOM, 2014). A specialized focus and subculture might exist at an F-16 fighter training base, which could yield unique leadership concerns.

***Interview USAF Millennial officers employed at worldwide military installations.*** Although USAF leadership guidance applies to all USAF personnel, maintaining the Millennial generation criteria could reveal whether working in geographic sub-cultures influences lived experience descriptions. USAF Millennial officers working at a U.S. location such as Hawaii, Kansas, Montana, or South Carolina) could share different experiences from USAF Millennial officers working at locations in Africa, Australia, Europe, or the Republic of Korea (USAF, 2014b).

***Interview USAF Millennial officers working at various organization echelons in the USAF hierarchy.*** Interviewing USAF Millennial officers working at different echelons could reveal whether organization sub-culture guidance influences leadership development perceptions. USAF organization echelons includes installations, geographically separated units located away from military installation property, major commands (MAJCOM) in which respective installation commanders report to the MAJCOM commander, and Headquarters USAF (2015).

***Interview USAF multi-generation employees, military and civilian, working at worldwide echelons in the USAF hierarchy.*** Including USAF total force personnel in the study could yield significant data to explore whether multi-generation characteristics and organization subculture philosophies influence lived leadership development perspectives.

*Interview USAF multi-generation employees working at non-USAF*

*organizations.* USAF leadership development processes help employees develop as leaders. Including employees who work at organizations external to the USAF could provide insight whether different organization culture leaders influence the employee's leadership development perspective. Organizations include the White House, Department of State, and United States Special Operations Command (DoD, 2014a; USA.gov, 2014).

USAF employees working at various geographic locations could provide descriptions of how different environmental stimuli influenced leadership development perspectives. Including generational criteria when analyzing the participants' working in different organization sub-cultures could yield data indicating influences of the respective mission tasks and requirements (e.g., logistics, fighter, personnel, or space systems support). Incorporating responses from USAF employees working at non-USAF organizations could provide recommendations to enhance USAF leadership development processes by incorporating diverse viewpoints.

**Conclusion**

Perceptions provided by USAF Millennial officers about meaning ascribed to particular leadership experiences provided insights needed to fill a literature gap regarding Millennial leadership development perspectives within a hierarchical organizational culture. Millennial generation cohort characteristics aligned with themes and attributes that emerged from review of contextual documents of USAF doctrine. However, descriptions of lived experiences revealed several areas USAF senior leaders should re-examine.

Analysis of the study themes revealed all USAF Millennial officer respondents supported the USAF core values, cultural perspectives, and leadership development philosophies. Systematic comparison of interview responses and the USAF contextual document framework revealed from a generational cohort perspective, the USAF contextual document themes align with Millennial characteristics of community, loyalty, achievement, ambition, hopeful outlook, and civic generational type (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Raines, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 1991). True to their generational characteristics, Millennial officer respondents conveyed their preference to follow leaders who embody behaviors described in USAF core values, and emphasized the importance of seeking out leaders who display consistent behaviors and go above-and-beyond to support their employees' needs. Respondents also described their preference to work for leaders who encourage personal and professional growth and why achievements in these areas are important to the individual, team, unit, and USAF. However, textual analysis also revealed difficulty in interacting with some USAF leaders and peers who fail to consistently uphold the core values.

Senior leaders nurturing current USAF GenX leaders should include the importance of consistently embodying the USAF core values and consider minimizing the use of hierarchical position power to develop USAF Millennial officer leadership skills. GenX officers' employment of systems thinking can bolster the USAF core value of service-before-self manifested by describing how the USAF Millennial officer's efforts contribute to personal development in accomplishing the USAF mission. Failing to do so could result in disenchanted USAF Millennial officers seeking employment in an organization whose leaders meet their needs.



Millennial officer respondents supported the USAF cultural attributes of heritage, taking care of people, diversity, and succeeding in a complex, unstable global environment. All respondents shared descriptions of leaders who effectively take care of their employees, including leaders who occasionally explain how collaborative efforts are critical to USAF success in an unstable global environment. A specific need emerged for USAF senior leaders to focus on in-depth explanations of heritage and incorporate examples Millennials are directly familiar with such as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A significant discovery was the necessity for USAF senior leaders to increase the importance of valuing generation diversity. Enlightening multi-generation USAF employees about generational characteristics can improve interpersonal relationships and mission success. Increasing the importance of diversity using a Millennial perspective could also help increase recruiting, hiring, and retaining Millennial employees. If the USAF fails to meet Millennial officer needs to satisfy entitlement expectations, a thirst for knowledge, ambition, and use of skills to collaborate effectively, USAF Millennial officers could seek employment in organizations whose leaders provide a sufficient level of detail.

All respondents supported USAF leadership development philosophies and guidance, and understood the need for tiered leadership development and receiving transactional, or top-down, leadership upon initial USAF entry. Expressing preferences for continuous learning, improving interpersonal relationships, and expanding professional networks, all respondents described mentoring experiences, with several conveying more negative than positive events. Their collective preference is to develop

as leaders with two-way communication, expanding mentoring options, and taking formal leadership training courses that meet their Millennial cohort needs.

Senior leaders should encourage GenX leaders to frequently employ open, two-way communication. Using this approach helps build trust, loyalty, collaboration, and social networking which meets USAF Millennial officer generation cohort needs (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). By modifying USAF mentoring processes to include informal and systems thinking leadership approaches, USAF senior leaders would facilitate multi-generation workforce leadership development and more productive teams to accomplish the USAF mission despite increased employee reductions. USAF senior leaders should also include USAF Millennial officer perspectives when developing or modifying formal leadership development courses. This will enlighten curriculum developers about Millennial cohort needs while sharing historic and GenX training development perspectives with Millennials. The collaborative process also nurtures leadership skill development of multi-generation officer, enlisted, and civilian employees.

Suggestions for future study include expanding the study population to include all USAF Millennial employees, USAF multi-generation employees, and USAF employees who work in various USAF or external to the USAF organizations. Including different demographic criteria could yield additional descriptions to explore generational perspectives and leadership development influences within the USAF and inform USAF senior leaders whether existing leadership development processes are meeting needs described by employees.

## Summary

The problem addressed in this study was the absence of USAF Millennial generation (born between 1982-2005) officer voices to inform USAF senior leaders about Millennials' formal and informal leadership development perspectives. The purpose of the study was to explore how USAF Millennial officers describe their lived leadership development experiences. If current approaches fail to meet Millennials' leadership development needs, this population may elect not to pursue a USAF career or depart the service prior to retirement. Millennials remaining in the USAF who progress to senior management positions could become frustrated with current approaches and generate significant change. Leaders can use the results to leverage USAF Millennial generational cohort characteristics when developing recruiting, training, retention, and leadership development programs (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

Generation theories, leadership theories and approaches, and organizational culture theories comprised the theoretical framework for this study. Millennial generation characteristics described by several theorists provided a foundation for the population selected for this study (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Leadership theories and approaches experts described leader behaviors USAF Millennial officers could experience during employment (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; Sarros & Santora, 2001). Organizational culture theorists highlighted the importance of a leader's role, communication strategies, and sub-cultures (Schein, 1993, 1996, 2009). These organizational attributes provided a framework to explore the organizational culture USAF Millennial officer respondents experience (SECAF, 2012d; USAF, 2015).

Phenomenological methodology was ideal for in-depth exploration of the meaning individuals ascribe to their lived experiences (Sokolowski, 2000). To answer the guiding questions for this study, two sets of data were collected: from (a) in-depth interviews and (b) review of selected USAF contextual documents. Results of interview data yielded five themes and 19 attributes and answered the first two guiding questions:

GQ1. How do USAF Millennial officers describe their own leadership development?

GQ2. How do USAF Millennial officers create meaning from leadership development experiences?

Analysis of USAF Millennial officer respondent descriptions answered the first two guiding questions and revealed generation cohort characteristics identified in research literature, including hopefulness, ambition, relaxed but polite demeanor, achievement, loyalty, and community (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Raines, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Additional Millennial generation cohort characteristics Lancaster and Stillman (2010) described also emerged: seeking of meaning, the need for speed, limitless expectations, entitlement, social networking, and collaboration. The Millennial generation cohort characteristics aligned with themes and attributes that emerged from USAF contextual document analysis.

Systematic comparison of interview data results and USAF contextual documents resulted in emergence of three themes reflecting the importance of USAF Millennial officer perspectives and whether generation cohort needs are being met within the USAF organizational culture:

- Study Theme 1: USAF Millennial Officers and the USAF Core Values

- Study Theme 2: USAF Millennial Officers and the USAF Culture
- Study Theme 3: USAF Millennial Officers and USAF Leadership Development

Systematic comparison of interview data and USAF contextual documents helped fill the literature gap regarding Millennial generation cohort needs as the youngest generation in the work place (Shah, 2011). Analysis of the study themes yielded several implications and recommendations to answer the last two guiding questions:

GQ3. In what way do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform formal leadership development?

GQ4. In what ways do themes derived from USAF Millennial officer interview responses inform informal leadership development?

From a generational cohort perspective, the USAF contextual document themes align with Millennial characteristics of community, loyalty, achievement, ambition, hopeful outlook, and civic generational type (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Raines, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 1991). These generation characteristics align with the USAF contextual themes of USAF core values, culture, and leadership development. However, USAF Millennial officers' responses yielded several implications and change recommendations.

USAF senior leaders should consider implementing leadership development process changes for several reasons. Modifying existing programs would demonstrate USAF senior leader commitment to ensuring USAF Millennial cohort needs are met. Creating processes to ensure GenX leaders display increased transforming and systems thinking leadership approaches would help retain current USAF Millennial officers as well as enlisted and civilian employees of the Millennial cohort. Increased focus and published guidance addressing Millennial cohort needs validates USAF senior leader

commitment to “unlock ourselves . . . and listen to . . . the brilliant young people we have coming into our Air Force” (Welsh, 2014a, p. 12).

Some current USAF leaders might view implementation of this institutional paradigm shift as a risk not worth taking because such change might jeopardize or weaken the necessary command hierarchy. However, changes to interpersonal interaction would not impact the viability of or change the necessary USAF organizational command relationships in the hierarchy. Instead it bolsters USAF Millennial cohort characteristics employees value and which are consistent with USAF core values and doctrine. Meeting their needs, to include loyalty and community, could strengthen USAF interpersonal relations at all echelons, retain a multi-generation workforce, and facilitate development of recruitment strategies for future generations.

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## Appendix A

### Glossary

**Active duty.** “Full-time duty in the active military service of the United States, including active duty or full-time training duty in the Reserve Component.” (DoD, 2014c, p. 2).

**Adaptive generation type.** “[E]ncounters a secular crisis entering youth and a spiritual awakening entering midlife” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 430).

**Baby Boom (Boomer) Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 1943-1960; Idealist generational type (Strauss & Howe, 2011c, p. 428). USAF Boomers are typically general officers in midlife (ages 44-65), with institutional/strategic duties at the top of the hierarchy as commanders, leaders, and decision makers (SECAF, 2013d, p. 504).

**Civic generation type.** “[E]ncounters a secular crisis entering rising adulthood and a spiritual awakening entering elderhood” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 430).

**Cohort group.** “All persons born in a limited span of consecutive years” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 429).

**G.I. Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 1901-1924; Civic generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). USAF personnel are retired or deceased (SECAF, 2013d, p. 504).

**Generation.** “A cohort-group whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 429).

**Generation cycle.** “A set of consecutive generations beginning with an Idealist-type and ending with and Adaptive-type; alternatively, a set of constellation eras,

beginning with an Awakening era and ending with an Outer-Driven era” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 430).

**Generation X (GenX).** Cohort-group members born between 1961-1981; Reactive generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). USAF GenXers are typically field grade officers (major, lieutenant colonel, or colonel) in rising adulthood or midlife (ages 22-65), with managerial/operational duties as mid-hierarchy commanders, leaders, and policy designers (SECAF, 2013d, p. 504).

**Generational type.** “Four basic types of peer personalities and life-cycles, determined by age location relative to social moments; they normally recur in the following fixed order: Idealist . . . Reactive . . . Civic . . . Adaptive” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 429).

**Homeland Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 2005 and approximately 2025 (Howe & Strauss, 2007); adaptive generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). Officers entering the USAF active duty service in approximately the year 2027.

**Idealist generation type.** “[E]ncounters a spiritual awakening entering rising adulthood and a secular crisis entering elderhood” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 430).

**Line officer.** Serving in a line assignment; for example, pilot, weather, personnel, logistics, finance (SECAF, 2013d).

**Millennial Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 1982- c.2005; Civic generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). USAF Millennials are typically company grade officers (2nd lieutenant, 1st lieutenant, captain) in their youth or rising adulthood (ages 18-43), with technical/tactical duties as low

hierarchy commanders and leaders focused on policy execution (SECAF, 2013d, p. 504).

**Non-line officer.** Career fields include chaplains, attorneys, and physicians (SECAF, 2013a, p. 262).

**Reactive generation type.** “[E]ncounters a spiritual awakening entering youth and a secular crisis entering midlife” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 430).

**Secular crisis.** “When society focuses on reordering the outer world of institutions and public behavior” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 430).

**Silent Generation.** Cohort-group members born between 1925-1942; Adaptive generational type (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 428). Elders and USAF retired officers (SECAF, 2013d, p. 504).

**Social moment.** “A brief era (typically about a decade) when people perceive that historic events are radically altering their social environment. There are two types of social moments: Secular Crisis . . . [and] Spiritual Awakening” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 430).

**Spiritual awakening.** “When society focuses on changing the inner world of values and private behavior” (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 430).

## Appendix B

### Glossary of Abbreviations

**ACA:** Airman Comprehensive Assessment

**AEC:** Air Expeditionary Center

**AF:** Air Force

**AFCLC:** Air Force Culture and Language Center

**AFDD:** Air Force Doctrine Document

**AFPC:** Air Force Personnel Center

**AFR:** Air Force Reserve

**AFRC:** Air Force Reserve Command

**AFROTC:** Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps

**ANG:** Air National Guard

**ARC:** Air Reserve Component (consisting of Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard)

**ASBC:** Air and Space Basic Course

**AU:** Air University

**CGO:** Company Grade Officer

**CMSAF:** Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force

**CSAF:** Chief of Staff of the Air Force

**DoA:** Department of the Army

**DoD:** Department of Defense

**EO:** Equal Opportunity

**ISAF:** International Security Assistance Force-Afghanistan

**JCS:** Joint Chiefs of Staff

**NAM:** Non Aligned Movement

**NCO:** Non-commissioned Officer

**PME:** Professional Military Education

**SECAF:** Secretary of the Air Force

**SL:** Situational Leadership

**SOS:** Squadron Officer School

**UCMJ:** Uniform Code of Military Justice

**USAF:** United States Air Force

**USF-I:** United States Forces-Iraq

**USFK:** United States Forces Korea



## Appendix C

### Interview Instrument for Expert Panel Review and Pilot Test:

#### Initial Items and Changes Made

<b>Initial or Proposed Interview Items</b>	<b>Nature of Changes Made</b>
1. How long have you been serving on active duty?	No change.
2. Please describe the reason or reasons why you chose to join the Air Force. Please elaborate the reasons or reasons why you continue to serve in the Air Force.	No change.
3. Even if you have not served as a supervisor, please describe your feelings about filling a leadership position at this stage of your career.	Replaced with two questions asking how the respondent defines leadership and leader expectations.
4. Describe your most influential leadership learning experience since becoming an Air Force officer. What made this experience stand out? In what way do you believe this experience affected your perspective of leadership and your leadership behaviors?	Added two clarification questions and simplified the wording.
5. Describe your formal officer development experiences. In what ways have you taken full advantage of these opportunities? If not, in what ways would you modify how the opportunities were presented, or your perspective to take advantage of the opportunities?	Added formal officer development examples and two clarification questions; simplified the wording.
6. Describe formal or informal mentoring experiences. In what ways have these interactions affected your development as a leader?	Added informal officer development examples, added two clarification questions, and simplified the wording.
7. In what ways have you applied the leadership training and growth opportunities you received? Do you perceive your leadership skills have improved? Please describe one or more examples.	Simplified the wording.

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8. Based on your experiences, in what ways do you believe the USAF could develop or enhance formal development programs to cultivate your leadership skills? What type of informal development approaches (e.g., spontaneous professional development discussions begin when meeting for lunch or at the gym) would you recommend?	Simplified the wording.
9. This concludes the interview questions. Are there any questions you would like to review?	Deleted.

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**Thank you for your participation.**

## Appendix D

### Final Interview Instrument

1. How long have you been serving on active duty?
2. Please describe the reason or reasons why you joined the Air Force. Please elaborate why you continue to serve.
3. How do you define leadership?
4. What do you feel the Air Force's expectations are of leaders?
5. Describe your most influential leadership learning experiences as an Air Force officer.
  - 5a. What made the experience stand out?
  - 5b. How did the experience affect your perspective on leadership and your leadership behaviors?
6. Describe your formal officer developmental experiences. For example, professional mentoring, feedback required for OPRs, discussing training opportunities on or off base, completing the Air & Space Basic Course and/or SOS, etc.
  - 6a. How have these experiences affected your development as a leader?
  - 6b. How would you modify these opportunities to increase your interest in developing your leadership skills?
7. Describe your informal mentoring experiences. For example, meeting for lunch or at the gym and discussion about leadership spontaneously occurs.
  - 7a. How have these interactions affected your development as a leader?
  - 7b. How would you modify these opportunities to increase your interest in nurturing your leadership skills?
8. How have you applied the leadership training and development you've received? Do you perceive your leadership skills have improved? Please describe one or more examples.
9. Based on your experiences, how do you believe the Air Force could modify leadership development opportunities to enhance your leadership skills?

**This concludes the interview questions. Thank you for your participation.**

## Appendix E

### Expanded Examples of Interview Responses

#### **Theme 1 Expanded Examples: What's Important to Me--Why I Joined the USAF**

- ***Attribute 1: Joined--College funds.*** Five (45%) respondents conveyed their reason to join the Air Force was influenced by funds needed to attend college.

BN5: “To be honest, I wanted to go to college and I wanted to go to a good college so I signed the dotted lines. I had a full-ride scholarship to Air Force ROTC. It has never been an option to me until they offered me money. I know it sounds bad, but that's why I did it.”

DA7: “Honestly, I didn't quite know what I wanted to do when I got out of college, and I had college debt, and ROTC was doing a recruiting thing, and I went there and looked at it, liked it. Initially, it was to pay back college loans and have a job on the outside.

- ***Attribute 2: Joined--Family influence.*** Seven (58%) respondents shared how a family member or members influenced her or his decision to join the USAF.

EK3: “I originally wanted to fly for the Air Force. My dad was a pilot and he kind of brainwashed me to like airplanes, growing up as a kid. I didn't really have a choice in my career. “

MG9: “Well first off, my parents were both prior military. So as a kid, that's one thing that I always admired and I always wanted to do, so we traveled around from base to base. Even after they separated, we were close to a military base, so there was a large military presence where I grew up-- something that I've always enjoyed.”

OF4: “ I grew up in a [sister service] family. My dad was in the [sister service] . . . so the military was always something I was interested in.”

ZT2: “ I joined the Air Force because I went to see my [sibling] graduate basic training at Lackland and I wasn't really going in a career path in my major at school. I was like, ‘You know, I need to do something.’ I saw [my sibling] graduate. I was like, ‘That's pretty cool. I think I want to do that.’ So, I got back to my dorm and I found the guy from ROTC on my floor and I said, ‘Hey how do I join?’”

- **Attribute 3: Joined--Serve something greater than myself.** Seven (58%) respondents conveyed their reason to serve included civic responsibility and community service as factors influencing their joining the USAF.

JX9: “I had been exposed to Air Force customs and courtesies . . . in high school [Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps]. That was a big motivating factor.”

LW8: “I joined the Air Force to get leadership experience . . . I don't back down from a commitment that I've made so I definitely want to fulfill my commitment

OF4: “I thought it would be a worthwhile thing to do for my country.”

QV6: “My parents instilled in me a strong sense of patriotism and service.”

RC1: “The school that I wanted to go to . . . there were a couple of different factors for wanting to go there and the Air Force was one of them”

## **Theme 2 Expanded Examples: What's Important to Me; Will I Stay in the USAF?**

- *Attribute 1: Yes-- I am valued while serving something greater than myself.*

Six (54%) respondents shared that because they believe their service is valued by other USAF members while serving something greater than themselves are primary reasons to continue their service.

DA7: “I've just really enjoyed doing the job and making a difference . . . [w]hen that stops . . . I'll do . . . some other [voluntary separation program] available at the time . . . I know I'll take the best care of them, so I'm going to stay and do that . . . I really feel like I'm actually doing something important, so it's gratifying”

EK3: “Being able to lead people is a big thing, being able to lead multiple people, and be in charge of millions of dollars and actually have some important task that at the end result in someone's life or death by you being able to do your job.”

JX9: “Just the opportunities that the military has afforded me. I don't know if I would have those opportunities elsewhere at such a young age. The ability to lead a large group of people. The ability to make decisions that have an impact on an organization. You get to see the direct impact.”

MG9: “The camaraderie is one thing I look for . . . I've always loved the thought of just having a really close team that you can rely on. I've had alot of really good opportunities to meet some amazing people, done some pretty interesting things very different missions both stateside and deployed. I think I really value that ability to travel and do things I normally wouldn't do had I been a civilian.”

SI0: “[A]fter experiencing active duty . . . I like the different lifestyle from the civilian sector . . . it's not a job. It's something bigger than myself. And I felt being the military I'm doing my part to serve my country”

- **Attribute 2: Yes—job security.** One interview respondent conveyed the reason for staying is based on job security.

QV6 “The job market has not been stable. I have a stable job right now. It pays well . . . [a]nd I just don't know what I would do as a civilian yet . . . this will work for now.”

- **Attribute 3: Undecided—Negative experiences.** Four (33%) respondents conveyed she or his is contemplating USAF departure based on negative experiences. Selected examples:

BN5: “I don't know if I'm to stay or not . . . I'm not enjoying it as much as I . . . thought I would.”

LW8: “I'm not completely happy where I am right now . . . my direction may change . . . I may end up really enjoying it”

OF4: “My first assignment was absolutely horrible and I didn't want to remember my Air Force time by that assignment so I decided to accept a second to see where that would take me . . . In the Air Force, it almost seems like you need to convince everyone why you're doing something before they'll do it . . . Things that you would just think would be no-brainers . . . I have to explain a lot more about what I'm doing, why I'm doing it. It doesn't matter how junior, senior person it is. It's a very different culture in the Air Force”

ZT2: “[A]ctive duty service commitment . . . because I got an awesome assignment I'm going to go for it . . . I think what I'll probably do is I'll go through this next assignment, see if I like it. In the last year I've strayed more toward the, ‘Maybe I'll get out. Maybe I'll find a whole new career and not continue with this.’ So, we'll see.”

### **Theme 3 Leadership Definition, Expectations and Preferred Characteristics**

- ***Attribute 1: How I define leadership.*** All respondents shared her or his definition of leadership. Respondent comments reflect aspects of leadership that are important to each participant and why. Although respondents highlighted various factors thematic convergence shows the importance of systems thinking and diverse leadership attributes of successful leaders.

Selected examples:

BN5: “Leadership to me is people are able to act without you giving them the direct order, they know your intentions and they will work for you. And you don't have to outline everything to them they'll just do it for you because they respect you.”

EK3: “Leadership is the ability to be able to be a good example for the people around you by leading, by going from the front, doing what you need to do first, and they'll follow through your actions.”

LW8: “Definitely being able to motivate your subordinates. I've always had the mindset of leadership can be taught. If you're a natural born leader, you can enhance your leadership skills definitely with training and learning from others that have led before you...as a subordinate you can learn to lead



just as well as being a leader. Learning what not to do as a subordinate being under someone you can enhance your leadership skills. Being in a leadership role yourself, definitely making mistakes, and learning what not to do and what works well and what motivates your people. I think respect plays a big portion in it as well. If you don't respect your subordinates, they're not going to respect you. You may not be an effective leader.”

MG9: “I think you have to have a charismatic personality; most definitely have to be sincere because the people that you're leading or not leading can see through that. If you're not true to yourself and true to what you are saying, they can tell . . . “

OF4: “Leadership is a way of motivating people to do the mission. It's not what I want, it's not necessarily what they want, but it's to do the mission. Ideally you can get them to want to do the mission, but leadership is getting the mission done.”

RC1: “I think leadership is having the ability to influence the people around you and to motivate them to accomplish a goal in a constructive way, and to build a team and to build--not just the team, but the people individually that are going to make up your team.”

SI0: “I define leadership as being yourself and taking care of your subordinates. Not necessarily trying to . . . I want to say project as that person that's always front and center. But a person that can also follow, as well as lead others, guide others, and mentor. Being that whole person and example for others.”

- ***Attribute 2: Perceived expectations of USAF leaders.*** All respondents conveyed how she or he perceives expectations of USAF leaders. Although respondents highlighted various factors thematic convergence shows the importance of assimilating diverse leadership expectations to develop and hone successful leadership skills. Selected examples reflect a multi-faceted perspective:

DA7: “As I said before, the formal here-are-the-steps, I don't really think they were taught well enough or in-depth enough to really apply it. I guess the things that I've incorporated the most are just the examples I have seen . . . that's hard to say what recipe do you think would be best for everybody. I guess the thing is there's not one universal approach that's good.”

EK3: “I would say you need to be the best leader that you can possibly be. Make sure you push yourself as hard and work as hard as you personally can. Make sure you're mentally stable, physically fit, and also emotionally stable as well. Make sure you're always pushing yourself to get better, to be better for yourself, and also for the Air Force.”

JX9: “I think the expectation is really to be able to make tough decisions. Most of the time within a certain time constraint and also lend yourself to your subordinates, so mentoring and availing yourself to those with whom you work with.”

QV6: “I think always number one is accomplish the mission. But sometimes leaders put that too far above everything else. ‘Accomplish the

mission' at what cost?...You can't accomplish [the mission] without your people . . .”

SI0: “Do what is expected, which is continue to grow, educate yourself, be professional, open to different ideas, willing to adapt to different environments. I think that's mainly it.”

ZT2: “The expectation of a commander, or a group commander, or a wing commander is to follow whatever the person above them says. I get protocol and I get things like that to an extent, but . . . I think commanders just think, ‘I need to do whatever that person above me says’ and really there's not a whole lot of push-back, from what I've seen . . . I'm sure people do a little bit of push-back. But when somebody says, ‘Do something,’ Okay, I guess we'll do it. ‘Jump?’ ‘How high?’”

#### **Theme 4 Expanded Examples: Preferred Leadership Characteristics**

- ***Attribute 1: Take care of people and they will take care of the mission.*** All respondents highlighted the importance of supporting leaders, subordinates, and peers. Although though mission focus remains important, without people the mission fails. Selected examples:

EK3: “I would say take care of your people, is one of those big things. Making sure their personal lives and everything solid with them, there's nothing huge going on that would affect them from doing their job.”

QV6: “The good leaders are the ones that empower the other people, the ones that don't micromanage.”

- **Attribute 2: Integrity.** All respondents explained how integrity is a key characteristic of successful leaders. Integrity as described by the respondents includes honesty, confidence, and emotional stability in all circumstances.

Selected examples:

DA7: “I think it's important to understand perception is reality. You need to be aware of, at every level, what you're giving off, and you need to advocate for yourself-- not only to your boss, but to your guys, in a way. They need to understand that look, this is what you're doing for them because I think that builds that trust. If you step out there and take a hit for them, under certain circumstances, they're going to be like, ‘Well, he messed up and he's claiming it, and he's not blaming it on us.’ . . . they get credibility with their boss, but they also have credibility with their people.”

OF4: “I need to know everything that's going on. I need to understand the why we're doing it, the how we're doing it and even if I don't agree with it, still be able to get on board with it and explain the message.”

ZT2: “I think integrity is a huge thing. If you're not doing the right thing or if you're not doing things for the right reason, you can't really be considered a leader.”

- **Attribute 3: Achievement.** All respondents explained how achievement is a key characteristic of successful leaders. Descriptions of observed achievements clarify how the respondents differentiate between successful and unsuccessful leaders. Selected examples:

EK3: “Being competent, I would say. Making sure you know what you're doing and you're very knowledgeable about what you do. You don't just make up stuff because that hurts you, especially when you talk to higher ups.”

LW8: “You're put in a leadership role with trust that you can do the job. If they're putting you in that position, knowing, trusting you to make decisions and they've instilled that in you with the trust that you can handle it and not have to come to them for answers.”

RC1: “You need to be squared away as a leader and have a vision and motivate people to want to follow you and want to achieve the same goals that you have”

ZT2: “I think having knowledge of what you're doing and what you're leading speaks volumes because people want to follow someone who knows what they're doing. And if a person doesn't know what they're doing and they show that, I think it cuts down on their ability to lead.”

- ***Attribute 4: Trust and Empowerment.*** All respondents specified how he or she believes trust and empowerment are critical to personal leadership growth. Building self-confidence results in seeking new challenges and creating an organization culture of employees who perform better when their opinions are valued. Selected examples

EK3: “Where I really have grown as a leader is when I'm put into situations that I'm not comfortable doing . . . that make[s] you grow as a person and all. So I believe it make you really grow and become a better leader as well.”

MG9: “I was still a . . . lieutenant . . . my commander and my operations officer who's the second in charge in our squadrons were both . . . gone . . . [I requested] help . . . my commander wanted to come back from his TDY . . . [their boss] said, ‘Nope . . . I've got confidence that [the lieutenant] is going to be able to lead your squadron’ . . . that was really great because it kind of taught me you never know what someone's capable of unless you believe in them and put them in a chance, or give them that opportunity to excel and lead.”

ZT2: “I said [to my commander], ‘Here's some of my goals for my Air Force career or the next couple years’ . . . [they] came to me and said, ‘Hey, I got this deployment. Do you want it?’ And I was like, ‘What, where, what, how?’ And [they're] like, ‘It's [one of my preferred jobs].’ And he said, ‘[in the Middle East].’ And I said, ‘Yeah. That's two things on my list that I want.’ So, he fought for me, as a . . . lieutenant, to go in a captain billet. They came back and said, ‘We don't want a . . . lieutenant.’ He said, ‘Would you rather have a . . . lieutenant who wants to be there or would you rather have a captain who doesn't want to be there?’ And they said, ‘We'll take the . . . lieutenant.’ That meant a lot to me . . . to go out of [their] way to find me opportunities. That's the start of a leader from what I've seen in the Air Force.”

- ***Attribute 5: Leadership behaviors important to me.*** All respondents highlighted how he or she continues to evolve as a leader. Examples provided describe leadership behaviors and importance to the respondent, unit personnel, and the USAF. Selected examples:

BN5: “I'm not just worried about their job duties, I need to be worried or care about them as a whole person concept. And make sure that everything on the outside is well balanced so that their work ethics can be balanced.”

EK3: “I've let them know, if they ever have any questions about what I actually want from them or if they have any questions at all, they can always come to me. I'm very open. I sit in the same office with all of them. I'm very approachable. For our feedback sessions, I always want to make sure that they know that it's always a two-way conversation, that if they have questions they can ask me, and it's a very open setting. One-way conversations, I feel, like me talking to them, would be if there are any disciplinary issues. That's how I make sure they know what I expect of them.”

LW8: “. . . not making the same mistake twice, for sure. If someone has made the same mistake, is in the same issue before, and has made a mistake with something that I'm going through. I'm 100% all ears. I'm like, ‘What are the details around this situation? What should I do? What shouldn't I do? Any information you can give me would be amazing’ . . . you're going to make your own mistakes I guess, and all new ones as well may be some successes due to the fact that you were able to gather that beforehand.”

MG9: “I tend to pick and choose what I think would work well in my specific situations . . . I know that there's a time and a place for every type of leadership tool, tactic, or however you like to refer that . . . you can always learn something as long as you take just one new lesson, something you learn one new thing that you think would work, I think it's beneficial.”

QV6: “I try to be real with my guys. I mentioned before the humanization of it. A lot of that is realizing that the people that work for you are not stupid. You can't candy-coat an answer or candy-coat the solution to a problem and think that your people are not going to see right through it.”

SI0: “I will say, setting a good example. Hardworking, don't really expect anything back, but willing to do for others, being me.”

### **Theme 5: Leadership Development Experiences and Change Advocacy**

- *Attribute 1: All leaders are not alike but diverse leadership styles are useful.*

Each respondent shared positive and negative interaction examples with leaders. Although some events were described as negative the respondent conveyed she or he learned from the experience. Eight (67%) of the respondents described that the USAF may benefit from different leadership styles, especially when responding to unanticipated or diverse situations.

Selected examples:

DA7: “As I said before, the formal here-are-the-steps, I don't really think they were taught well enough or in-depth enough to really apply it. I guess the things that I've incorporated the most are just the examples I have seen . . . I guess the thing is there's not one universal approach that's good . . . Well, you could be coercive, you could be tyrannical, lead through fear, work for Genghis Khan . . . or you could be inspirational and get your people to buy into the mission and make them feel like it's their idea to do well in the first place. I've dealt with all types of leaders. There's the narcissistic, where they act like they play the game, but they just do everything that makes them look



good and then don't give credit. A lot of those leaders, to me, are the ones that don't write award packages for their folks, don't take the extra time to promote them. They're just, 'Do the mission, do the mission, do the mission.' They look good, but in the meantime, they haven't done any of the back work to get their guys as pushed up and recognized . . . I've learned different types of leadership. I think it's kind of a combination between inspirational, but also very open and honest. Like I said before, taking care of your people, which includes recognizing them and punishing them--disciplinary action when needed, so everybody knows what your limits are and stuff. It's hard to say which type I think is--there's not one archetype that everybody falls into. “

QV6: “I think that's a big part of leadership, is learning from your experiences. A lot of the way I have learned, unfortunately, in some of my past jobs is from poor leadership, in my opinion and the opinions of a lot of my peers . . . You've got to build from the bad too. I think I've built more from the bad, because I've had more bad examples than good examples . . . So you take those things, and you take the good that you've learned, and for me that's how I've built my notion of leadership . . . “

- ***Attribute 2: Always embody honesty and integrity.*** Eight (72%) respondents conveyed the negative environment created by leaders who micromanage employees or displaying dishonest behaviors. Results from these types of behaviors remove trust within the unit and creates a negative work environment because the symptom is treated instead of the root of the problem. Conversely, all respondents shared how honest interaction enables

Millennial officers to gather more information about the USAF environment and create meaning for her or his role. Selected examples:

BN5: “I think more feedback would probably be beneficial. I know you're supposed to do a feedback before you have your annual report but I think maybe more feedback sessions would be beneficial. Or give honest feedback on the spot.”

EK3: “One thing I like a lot . . . [t]hey're really good at staying calm. No matter what the circumstance, they're always level-headed. They don't yell at their people, they don't yell at anyone else, they'll able to logically think through a situation, and get it done without having to lose their cool head, which I think is really hard. It's a very learned skill and something I wish I was better at.”

JX9: “One of the biggest experiences I've had would be finding out that a peer wasn't selected for [an award] in my unit, because [their] supervisor took [the] package and made it [their] own. And that really stuck with me as far as, how sometimes leadership up and down the chain, can allow certain things to happen. And it's really impacted me . . . it brought to my attention that things like that really do happen--people taking credit for someone else's work and not acknowledging it.”

MG9: “I tend to gravitate more towards people that will be honest with me, and that show you through their actions what they're telling you, rather than preaching something to you and then turning around and doing something different”

QV6: “The Air Force seems to solve too many problems by throwing rank at a problem. ‘This organization's not working out. There's a captain in charge. Let's put a major in charge of it.’ Well that doesn't solve a problem.”

- ***Attribute 3: Talk more with me than to me about why my support is valued.***

Every interview respondent described the value of enlightenment provided by supervisors or struggles without it. Each respondent provided positive and negative examples and recommendations to improve feedback in a formal setting to include the work place and formal training courses. Selected examples:

DA7: “I used to get very frustrated when people gave me criticism because I took it personally. And the [leader] that I was telling you about and my current boss were very good about telling me, ‘Look, take the ego out of it. Think about this, what I'm telling you.’ And through that kind of interaction, it has helped me look at the content of what they're saying, maybe not their tone or how they're saying it.”

LW8: “It definitely makes me think about things in a different way sometimes. My gut instinct is to do it one way and then [my commander] comes back and says, ‘You might want to think on this. You might want to think about that.’ It's very, very helpful to have that bug in my ear saying, ‘Check on this. Check on that.’ It's teaching me to ask the questions that I don't know to ask and with my subordinates and that kind of thing, and as well as the leaders over me. Being able to be knowledgeable on the subject for sure.”

QV6: “Leaders especially, I think the generation or two above us, don’t understand how much more--and I’m not putting our generation on a pedestal--but how much more educated we are . . . talk to somebody of the X generation . . . ask them if they took any college classes when they were in high school or middle school, well no, probably not . . . But you've got individuals of the millennial generation that take AP courses. They go to actual college campuses and they take courses. And we are so much smarter and intuitive than our leadership want to believe. That's where the disconnect happens. That's where you're going to lose your people, if you don't realize what you have to work with below you. If you talk to me like I don't understand what you're telling me, you're going to lose me. So that's something I always try and correct going down the chain.”

RC1: “. . . depend[ing] on how you come into the Air Force . . . looking at what your career field is going to be would be huge . . . I would say that once jobs actually come out . . . having somebody come in who has been in that career field to talk to the incoming sessions, that would be very helpful, and especially knowing what to expect.”

- ***Attribute 4: Encourage USAF GenX leaders to proactively mentor and provide positive feedback.*** All respondents described the need for mentorship and recommended supervisors spend more time sharing positive feedback. Ten (83%) of the respondents conveyed their seeking mentorship from supervisors. Seven respondents (58%) shared how some but not all of his or her supervisors shared feedback. Six respondents (50%) described receiving

negative or minimal feedback that created a negative work environment.

Selected examples follow:

BN5: “. . . some of the commanders would give a lot of push back and push back on every little thing. I understand they were trying to take care of their people but it makes it hard to get the job done when there is constant push back. I know sometimes you just have to shut up and color and do it. I noticed that caused a lot of issues. We are constantly trying to get things done and they're just coming back saying, ‘We can't do this, I don't know why we're doing this.’ It's good to ask a question sometimes, but if you do it all the time it's not effective...[low] morale, I think, because it was hard for us to get the job done up there when we were always getting second-guessed.”

DA7: “As far as feedback . . . I think that's been the most effective tool and I think it's not stressed enough for commanders to do with their younger CGOs. I think the requirement's like six months, and a lot of times it's, ‘Here's your form. Any issues? Nope? I don't have any issues either. Okay. Sign it.’ And now, we can put it on our OPR [officer performance report] that we did it in the last six months. I think that that could be a much stronger tool and there's no real emphasis put on it other than it's just in the reg[ulation], you have to do it.”

JX9: “So pretty much tell me the things that I'm doing well. Tell me the things that I'm not doing so well and then how do I improve on that?”

OF4: “I was deployed to an undisclosed location. I was a . . . Squadron Commander, which is very cool as a [junior officer] . . . I learned quickly that

the expectations of a [junior officer] who is a Commander versus just a [junior officer] are about night and day . . . my boss expected me to have the presence of mind, and the knowledge of Lieutenant Colonels, and apparently got frustrated . . . that I was asking questions that [they] thought that I should know. So from that one I learned that I went in very unprepared and I need to be focused on the expectations of the position, not of my rank . . . I didn't know how to do things, I didn't know how to make things happen...I kind of felt stupid but I'm trying to learn from it.”

QV6: “I feel like leaders just oftentimes don't realize that you can't give me the political answer and think that I am not going to speculate about what's actually going on . . . you shed your coat that you wear to work, that shield that will filter everything that comes out of your mouth usually at work for some people, and you get to speak as a human being to each other . . . why can't you just talk to me like I am another human being instead of somebody that's just going to get your work done for you.”

RC1: “My first month or two on active duty . . . my supervisor . . . sat down and gave me, you know, ‘These are my expectations and this is what I want you to do.’ Recognizing where I was at in my brand-new career, [they were] able to help me quite a bit, especially having been through it . . . But official feedback sessions, just the one initial. Other than that, it's good to sit down and take a look at this is what you've been doing well at and what you need to improve on. The day-to-day is just as important.”

SI0: “[formal feedback] has added to my leadership toolbox. Because you can say verbal feedback all day, but it doesn't really take effect. Once you see it on paper and somebody has that guide in their hand, and they can go back and say, ‘Hey, I need to work on this. How can I be a better subordinate or leader or follower?’”

- ***Attribute 5: Encourage top-down, bottom-up, and lateral mentoring to generate leadership growth and problem-solving skills.*** All respondents described the importance of formal and informal mentoring throughout the hierarchy. Ten respondents shared positive formal feedback experiences and six described negative feedback experiences. Selected examples:

BN5: “[M]y commander...we would just have conversations and [they] would talk about [their] former experiences . . . [they] would always tell us a story of what [they] experienced and then try to tie it in to what we're doing now which was nice.”

DA7: “The one thing I did get out of that [ASBC], though, was when we did the enlisted officer tag up, and it was like three days there where we did some leadership stuff together. And that was more enlightening just to get their perspective on things. To me, that should have been the longest thing. As a lieutenant, pair up with master [sergeants] and chief [master sergeants], and stuff and get their perspectives, because those are the people that you're going to be working with, especially in a support crew if you're like maintenance or something.”

JX9: “I think that's ebbed and flowed, just based off the motivation of my peers. I receive a lot more informal feedback in my previous assignment from first lieutenants and captains when I was a . . . lieutenant. And I think there was less of a competitive nature, whereas having the job that I'm in now . . . it just depends on people's personalities. I feel like I know and I can identify those people that I know I can go to for peer-to-peer feedback and mentorship.”

OF4: “The more experience I've had, the more disappointed I've been in my peers . . . I'm not saying I'm the best leader but I don't feel that there's a lot of opportunities to build those skills . . . Obviously been disappointed at the leadership skills of my peers, and the lack of focus from my leaders on trying to foster my leadership development. They'd rather me be very good at making staff packages or some other thing, than actually becoming a leader.”

QV6: “I've been in PME twice in nine years - so average that out its four and a half. Every four and a half years I've had PME. So what happens in that interim? What are you learning? Unless you're taking the time to be proactive on your own, which very few people do--to take courses that will develop your leadership abilities--you're not getting anything in that time frame. I think if there are certain milestones that officers need to check off or not even officers, maybe enlisted individuals too every year, then those things that you learn at PME, they won't atrophy.”

RC1: “[In my career field] we are required to go down to [an exercise] once every [few] years . . . they send all of different people from all over [my



career field] at the same time. That's a really good training opportunity . . . it's basically contingency training for when you actually have to deploy, and that's not something that we get a lot at home station. From a leadership perspective . . . all of the officers spent the entire week in a classroom planning . . . and then had to go execute it on the last day . . . Our highest ranking for our class was a first lieutenant . . . It had been a while since [they] had been to tech school and really done any of this, and [they were] expected to be in charge of it . . . [they were] also a very indecisive person and that made things very difficult . . . because the rest of us . . . had stronger personalities and were used to making pretty quick decisions. It was, again, an exercise in patience . . . [I] tried to suggest different things to [them] but recognizing that [they were] put in charge and nobody was going to be the one to undermine [their] authority. You need to know when to be a leader and when to be a follower. This was a situation where we all needed to be followers, but to help our leader to succeed.”

SI0: “I sent [a note] to our senior NCOs [non-commissioned officers] . . . describing the new [guidance] which describes the commanders' responsibilities. When a master sergeant . . . asked, ‘So the question is how do we help the commander get the goal of this AFI?’ I sent her a long feedback response saying that I can give you the book terms on being the middleman in the squadron, be good senior NCO, but I think it all falls along the line of mentoring. Mentoring the NCOs and let it trickle down to the airmen, just to provide that guidance and basically, help everyone in the squadron be

personally responsible and accountable for their selves first . . . So as the senior NCO, play that part of the commander's eyes and ears . . . see what can be done to create a healthier command climate . . . if it can be solved at the lowest level possible, ensure to take care of it ASAP. One other thing is to give the commander a pep talk, because commanders, they go through a lot. They see more than anyone else in the unit, which is what is supposed to happen because they're a commander. But go by and let him or her know that you got their back that the support system is there.”

ZT2: “When I get things from my senior NCO and I see [them] in action, I'm like, ‘That's working. I like that. I'll do that’ . . . if we fail the mission . . . we fail the Air Force. We fail the squadron. My commander fails if I fail. If my airmen fail, I fail . . . I just never really thought about it like that . . . I didn't think of it at a higher level . . . [my commander] taught me that.”

- ***Attribute 6: Seek Millennial input for formal leadership curriculum development.*** Eight (67%) respondents shared experiences when attending the recently cancelled Air & Space Basic Course. Five (42%) respondents shared experiences when attending or preparing to attend Squadron Officer School (SOS). Four (33%) respondents had only attended their career field training course to learn about her or his assigned mission instead of formal leadership instruction. Although the comments reflected his or her learning something several recommendations reveal a lack of training needed to facilitate increased success as a CGO. Selected examples:

DA7: “As far as SOS, I think it's a good idea. I think it's a failure in execution. There was such a breadth of topics and things to work on it really just felt like it was a grinder with a bunch of alcohol thrown in . . . It seemed like the curriculum was almost schizophrenic in some ways because it would go over here, and one day we'd talk about leadership, and then we'd have problem solving exercises, and then we'd take a test, and then do the - we call it the rate your neighbor - do the peer reviews with each other, and all that stuff . . . The only thing I really got out of it was a hangover that I can remember. And I met some great people that I'm still in contact with . . . the networking piece was great. But I think if they could have focused on, ‘Okay, the objective for this is not this bullet paper of a bunch of different objectives . . . we're going to expose you . . . many different models of problem solving. If you say, ‘Look, this is what we think is important’ . . . And maybe use some historical context, because that was the one thing we didn't do was--that I was surprised of--we didn't go back and reflect on, ‘Here's some past mistakes that led to these consequences.’ We would talk about—what was the Vietnam . . . where they shot up the village and stuff. That was like three hours of one day where there could have been a whole big exploration of here are the factors involved, here's what pushed the decision, here's what--looking hindsight being 20/20--this is what we think was a failure . . . because the case is very complex. We only went over for a couple of hours and it was done, and then we often did a reaction course. You know what I mean? Or we played flicker ball . . . It seemed like a waste of resources. I probably could have learned

more reading a general maze book, which I did on my own. You know what I mean? So, those were the two PME type things I've been in."

JX9: "I think had there been a more performance portion of ASBC, it would have gauged my interest more. So I think what I remember most about the course was the chance to interact with NCOs and get their perspective on what it is that they expect out of lieutenants and vice versa. So I look at that mentoring part as what I would say as a highlight. So I think those are the things that we should use more versus a distance learning module."

MG9: "I will say that the most helpful training that we got at SOS . . . was interacting with enlisted personnel. The senior NCOs came over and gave their perspective and said, 'This is what we look for in leaders.' And that was the shortest lesson that we got--less than a week--but unanimously, that was the most beneficial for all the people in my class and I've had several friends that have gone and they said the same thing."

SI0: "From graduating college to being on active duty it was a lot of things that I felt like I wasn't prepared for. Especially, the transit between graduating college to going to the first PME, ASBC . . . it was really basic stuff that really didn't prepare me for the actual experiences on active duty. It's like a case-by-case thing to deal with, because every situation is different. In order to get the experience, you have to go through the experience, I believe . . . when it comes to PMEs, it's really basic--like a refresher, some things that could help you in the future. But is not strictly, this is how you're supposed to do it or deal with it in this situation. It's almost like a rude awakening, as well

. . . especially when you hear or see or go through a certain experience. For example, if an airman gets in trouble and gets an Article 15, as far as being trouble with the outside law, I felt like my . . . PME [professional military education] . . . didn't really prepare me fully on how to go through the experience.”