

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND THE RSAF

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INTRODUCTION

The RSAF has come a long way in its development in the past decades. Growing from a small fleet of aircraft, it now utilises some of the most advanced aircraft in the world and a comprehensive, layered and networked air defence system with state-of-the-art technology. While it started out operating only 2 borrowed Cessna aircraft, the RSAF is arguably one of the most potent air forces in the region today.

There are many reasons why the RSAF has been so successful in its build up and one of the reasons identified is the RSAF's strong organisational culture. This essay will argue that a strong organisational culture is pivotal to the sustained success of any organisation and drawing upon evidence from the RSAF's history, we present a case for how the RSAF's culture has been instrumental to its success. Finally, looking ahead, the essay suggests how the RSAF can evolve its culture to ensure its continued success in the future.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE TO AN ORGANISATION'S SUCCESS

Our culture is the ballast that will determine the performance for future generations of airmen as they face the unknown challenges of the future.

- LG Ng Chee Meng, then-Chief of Air Force¹

Culture is defined as systems of shared norms, values, and practices² capable of evolving over time,³ and linked to social and professional circles.⁴ Mahatma Gandhi once famously said, "A nation's culture lies in the hearts and minds of its people."⁵ Similarly, the culture of an organisation resides in its people. Without people, there can be no culture.

At its essence, the culture of an organisation "is defined as a complex set of values, beliefs, assumptions...that define the way in which a firm conducts its business."⁶ Or, as what Chief of Defence Force, then-Chief of Air Force, LG Ng Chee Meng described, "Culture, in the simplest sense, is about how we do things around here."⁷

The father of organisational culture, Edgar H. Schein, argues that "culture matters because it is a powerful, latent and often unconscious set of forces that determine both our individual and collective behaviour, ways of perceiving, thought patterns and values."⁸ At the individual level, culture influences how each of us goes about our daily work. Aggregate that, you can see how culture would determine how an organisation would respond to a crisis and how it would organise itself to resolve the challenges

it faces.⁹ Schein puts it succinctly as he states that, “Organisational culture...matters because cultural elements determine strategy, goals and modes of operating. The values and thought patterns of leaders and senior managers are partially determined by their own cultural backgrounds and their shared experiences.”¹⁰

However, a strong organisational culture in itself does not guarantee sustained success. Indeed, the very culture that made some organisations great in a remarkably short period of time can become dysfunctional as the operational context evolves. Failure of the culture to adapt can become the root of the organisation’s decline. Hence, if our culture is to be ‘the ballast’, we must understand the role that our culture plays in organisational life and how, moving forward, the RSAF should evolve its culture to ensure that the RSAF would be well placed to maintain its edge over potential adversaries.

CULTURE AS A CORNERSTONE OF RSAF’S SUCCESSES

Culture of High Standards and Professionalism

From its inception, the RSAF has been responsible for the air defence of Singapore. This demands that it be ready to conduct operations at a moment’s notice. Our radar stations constantly monitor the skies while fighter pilots and Ground Based Air Defence (GBAD) crews are poised to respond to any potential threats. One of the major difficulties faced in developing the Singapore Air Force during its inception was the deep specialisation of skills required by each vocation. Each position in the Air Force required personnel who had undergone extensive training to accomplish their assigned roles. The first batch of pilot trainees completed their Basic Military Training in August 1968, but the pilots were only awarded their pilot wings after another year of intense training with the Royal Air Force (RAF) in October 1969.

The long lead time required to recruit and train air force personnel posed significant challenges given the short timeframe that Singapore had to create a credible air defence system. However, the deep-seated expertise obtained during these periods of training imbued a strong sense of professionalism amongst the airmen. In addition, RSAF personnel have trained with the very best in their field from its inception. For example, the first batch of air traffic controllers was trained by the RAF, which allowed them to benchmark their competence against a well-established Air Force. The high level of professionalism instilled at the RSAF’s infancy has carried on through the decades to current times.

Today, we continue to train with some of the best Air Forces around the world. We conduct professional exchanges and benchmark our standards against theirs. The strong culture of professionalism and high standards are what drive the servicemen and women of RSAF to excel in its operations. Each operational service person in the RSAF is respected as a professional who has passed a rigorous selection and training process and who is more than able to hold his or her own against another service person from any other Air Force around the world. A testament to the professionalism of our personnel is the successful operations that they have conducted, year after year.



First operational deployment to help our neighbours - Kuantan flood relief.

The RSAF demonstrated our professionalism from the early years. On 6th January 1971, five Alouette IIIs from 120 Squadron were dispatched to participate in the Kuantan Flood Relief Operations after the Malaysian Government made a request for assistance.¹¹ The RSAF helicopter crews flew search and rescue operations in aid of Malaysian civilians and they rescued three people from raging waters on the morning of 13th January 1971.

Again, on 29th January 1983, the RSAF was activated to save lives, when the mast of a drill ship damaged the cable car lines between the Singapore mainland and Sentosa.¹² This was one of the first rescue missions conducted within Singaporean territory and 120 Squadron successfully rescued 13 passengers from their stranded cable car cabins.

More recently, on 22nd January 2008, the RSAF intercepted an unauthorised aircraft that was heading into Singapore's Airspace.¹³ This was but an example of a continuous string of operations that the RSAF has undertaken since its earliest days. In 2014 alone, the RSAF was deployed in the search for Malaysian Airlines' MH370 and AirAsia's QZ8501 and to provide clean drinking water to flood-stricken areas in Kelantan.

The successes in these operations would not have been possible without the culture of high standards and professionalism that the RSAF has built up. Furthermore, the growing complexity of our systems and operations would mean that the expertise required of each individual will only increase. Consequently, each airman must trust and rely on one another to conduct operations.

Air operations require our airmen to co-operate and collaborate with their counterparts from other vocations, even at the most tactical level. For example, our Pilots depend on the Air Force Engineers to prepare and keep their planes ready. Similarly, the Pilots and the Ground Based Air Defence crew need to work together seamlessly to provide a robust air defence shield to safeguard Singapore's airspace. This is where culture plays a crucial role, as it can serve as an alternate and oftentimes more effective form of communication: where the excellence that needs to be achieved in each task remains unsaid as each professional understands that the entire system depends on his/her sense of responsibility and competency. This, in essence, is the impetus behind 'Forging Our Tribe'. The emphasis on *strengthening team competencies* and *strengthening sense of purpose, identity and belonging* go hand in hand, in building a tribe of high performing RSAF servicemen and women strongly bonded through a shared purpose and culture. The desired end-state is one where every airman and woman strives to be the best in his/her respective vocation, understands what his fellow airmen from the other vocations are doing towards a shared purpose and in so doing, ensures that the RSAF maintains its operational edge.

Culture of Safety

Preparing for and conducting air operations has always been an inherently risky task. Mistakes can rapidly become fatal and one can never afford to be complacent on the job. Though there has always been an understanding of this fact amongst our airmen, a period known as the 'A4/Skyhawk Crisis', with its unprecedented loss of life and machines, drove home the danger involved in aviation to the young RSAF.

Till this day, the RSAF places a strong emphasis on educating airmen about the inherent dangers of air operations. One of the RSAF's slogans is "Mission Success, Safety Always," and this priority is reflected in the safe conduct of operations 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all over the globe. Safety is one of the core values of the RSAF and an open reporting system, through which safety lessons pertaining to both air and ground operations are shared, is in place. Furthermore, there are also other channels through which any service person, regardless of seniority or vocation, can voice their concerns on operational safety. Indeed, the RSAF's safety system has piqued the interest of other organisations, such as the Singapore Police Force, SMRT and the RAF, which have sought to learn from our practices.¹⁴ Reflecting this, many of our retired officers are highly sought after and have been recruited to manage safety policies of other organisations.

However, a true safety culture goes beyond the safety policies, practices and even organisations that have been put in place. These are manifestations of a set of beliefs and values. The development of a strong safety culture, one where safety is seen as integral to everything we do, has been pivotal to the RSAF's strong safety record. Consequently, this creates a sustainable operational edge for the RSAF through the preservation of materiel, while also signalling our professional standards and capabilities.

The safety culture that the RSAF has today was passed down from one generation of airmen to the next and strengthened with the principles learnt from each mishap or near-miss. We must be proud of our strong safety culture and, more importantly, be mindful that our safety culture was built up over decades, through the conscious efforts of the RSAF leadership and servicemen. We must never forget the lessons learnt along the way.

A CULTURE FOR OUR FUTURE

Culture of Innovation

As the RSAF celebrates its 47th anniversary, it has entered a new era where the environment is changing rapidly. The evolving internal and external environments would mean that the RSAF can ill afford to maintain the status quo. The pace of change is only likely to hasten. A culture that embraces change and advancement is a prerequisite for a nimble and adaptive RSAF that is capable of securing mission success amidst a highly uncertain environment.

Innovation is a key driver for growth and advancement and the RSAF has demonstrated its ability to bring together disparate ideas to form innovative solutions to meet our own unique needs and challenges. Air Power Generation Command¹⁵ and Project CAYLEY¹⁶ are just two of the many examples demonstrating our ability to think-out-of-the-box and



From Republic of Singapore Air Force, One TA-4SU leading Two A-4SU Super Skyhawks taxi on the flight line at Korat AB, Thailand, during Exercise Cope Tiger '02. Cope Tiger is an annual, multinational exercise in the Asia-Pacific region which promotes closer relations and enables air force units in the region to sharpen air combat skills and practice interoperability with US Forces.



As part of Project CAYLEY's effort in deepening engineering expertise, 9 AELG was stood up on 22nd May 2014. The new Group will better allow the RSAF to better meet the escalating demands brought about by an increasingly networked 3rd Generation Air Defence Infrastructure.

break free from traditional mindsets and modus operandi. Such innovation speaks well of the organisation, but it is perhaps time to look into ways to allow this innovative culture to permeate the entire organisation.

Being a military organisation, the RSAF demands a high level of standard from its airmen. This often means a strict compliance and adherence to rules, orders, procedures and policies. With a comprehensive and entrenched set of rules, Standard Operating Procedures in place, it can be daunting to ask questions about the system and if there are other ways of doing old things. There have been examples of ground-up innovation, thus the question is whether such a culture can be more widespread and prevalent.

The focus of this section will be on the tangible steps that can be taken by the RSAF leadership to further encourage innovation.

1. Removing Disincentives. The first and most obvious step is to remove any disincentives that discourage our airmen from voicing their opinions and suggestions. Superiors at all levels should learn how to suspend judgment and be receptive to new ideas. They should be convinced that there exists hidden opportunities and values in all ideas and refrain from putting them down in haste. An emphasis should be placed on eliminating the negative reactions and aversion to new ideas that seem to challenge the status quo.

2. Supporting Innovation. This is the stage where the RSAF can put in place a reward structure to incentivise our airmen to generate ideas aimed at improving work processes. In terms of formal structures, the RSAF has done well with the PRIDE movement, USMS, and UWMS initiatives. One thing that prevents more of these efforts from achieving greater success is the lack of highly skilled facilitators to assist in refining and bringing to life some of the very good ideas that were conceived. Almost all great innovations have their roots in concepts that were initially coarse and unpromising. Only through a series of refinements and iterations can these ideas be developed into innovations that benefit the organisation. The organisation thus has to be prepared to set aside resources to make this process of fine-tuning possible.

Apart from establishing formal structures, much can also be done informally. Our airmen look up to and take reference from their superiors when prioritising their responsibilities. Commanders should therefore make deliberate efforts in encouraging innovation and reward good ideas in their professional capacities. Public commendation of a good initiative, for instance, can be a simple but effective way of demonstrating the organisation's emphasis on innovation.

3. Creating a Conducive Environment. In the book, *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Steven Johnson put forth his case of how collaboration is the key to generating good ideas.¹⁶ Hence, to build an innovative organisation, spaces that foster collaborations have to be built. To this end, the RSAF can take reference from the efforts undertaken by Google, one of the most innovative companies of recent times. The RSAF can take small steps by designing discussion-friendly spaces in selected pockets of the organisation. These specially designed spaces can then be extended to other parts of the organisation if they prove to be effective.

Contrary to popular belief, great ideas rarely come as epiphanies.¹⁸ Instead, they are born when one notices the connection between two seemingly disparate ideas—or between many different ideas—and this can only be achieved if one is either consciously or subconsciously looking out for it. The quote “chance favours the prepared mind” by Louis Pasteur illustrates this concept concisely.¹⁹ Hence, we must make innovation part of our identity. Just like safety, it would take time to cultivate this aspect of the RSAF culture and, similarly, it needs to start with Commanders understanding the strategic significance of innovation and making it part of their command responsibility to promote innovation at every level.

Culture of People-Centricity

The RSAF today boasts of advanced technology, exceptional safety records, robust work protocols and processes and rigorously thought-out Concepts of Operations. However, we are only as potent and as effective a fighting force as the quality of the people we have. The RSAF today is a well-regarded Air Force, but we can only continue to be one if we

continue to have capable people in the organisation. Today's best practices might, in a blink of an eye, become obsolete tomorrow. It is the people, with their ability to conceive new ideas, who would be the drivers of change and who will ensure that the organisation continues to enjoy sustained success.

Looking ahead, the RSAF will continue to face challenges in the areas of recruitment and retention of committed and talented individuals. Singapore's declining birth-rate, coupled with an ever-increasing competition for the limited pool of labour, will place significant constraints on the quantity and quality of personnel that we can attract. To prepare ourselves for the future, the RSAF needs to take incremental steps to progressively reduce its manpower requirement without losing its competitive edge against our potential adversaries.

Apart from streamlining work processes to enhance efficiency and acquiring more advanced weapon systems that require less manpower to operate, we have to pay more attention to our people, with the aim of building a workforce that is "competent, committed and imbued with the SAF Core Values."²⁰ Indeed, that is the impetus behind Project CARDINAL, which encompasses the different elements of Developing Professionals, Realising Your Potential and Engaging the Heart. The RSAF understands that in order for us to fully optimise the technology and concepts that we have, we need a rigorous and holistic way of developing our people.

In the words of Chief of Defence Force, then-Chief of Air Force, LG Ng Chee Meng, "Forging a people-centric culture is perhaps the most challenging part of our transformation journey... Imagine an organisation with consistent high standards, deep pride, and a strong sense of purpose and values. Imagine an environment that is fun and where our people feel happy coming to work each day...where each generation takes it upon itself to groom the next. That would be the sort of Air Force that we would have no hesitation in encouraging our children to join."²¹ The RSAF needs a culture of people-centricity if it is to continue to be successful in the future. However, as the essay has expounded upon, culture is not created overnight. A culture of people-centricity can only evolve when the organisation recognises its imperative. Project CARDINAL is a clear step towards that goal. Though the reception to this movement has been generally positive, it is still early days yet and only the continued emphasis by the RSAF Leadership and Commanders will ensure that the RSAF will be successful in building the "Air Force that we would have no hesitation in encouraging our children to join."

CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have shown that a strong organisational culture is pivotal to the sustained success of any organisation. We have also discussed the origins of the RSAF's culture of high standards, professionalism and safety and have examined how they have been instrumental to our success. Finally, we have contemplated how the RSAF could evolve its organisational culture to ensure that it remains successful in the future.

We hope that the essay has provided readers with ideas and insights on how to enhance the cultures of their respective organisations. This is our Air Force—let us work together to make it a better place.

In the years ahead, as you go about your daily duties in defending our nation's skies, I trust that you will continue to draw strength and inspiration from the men and women in our Air Force Tribe, both past and present, to bring our Air Force to greater heights.²¹

- MG Hoo Cher Mou, Chief of Air Force

ENDNOTES

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13. MINDEF statement on civilian aircraft intercepted by the RSAF, MINDEF, 23 January 2008, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2008/jan/23jan08_nr.html.
14. LG Ng Chee Meng, "Our Culture: The Cornerstone of Our Enduring Success", in The RSAF Journey – Voices from the Past, Present and Future, (POINTER Supplementary Issue, 2013).
15. Air Power Generation Command is one of a kind. The RSAF is the only Air Force that has a Command that focuses on generating Air Power for operations. This innovative organisational structure is conceived to meet the RSAF's unique operating environment whereby our air bases

are situated very close to our borders because of our small land area. The other Air Forces in the world have the luxury of space to site their air bases far away from territorial borders, thus lessening the threat of the air bases coming under fire during hostilities.

16. In anticipation of the continued tightening of technical manpower supply, and the increased demands arising from the induction of new capabilities in the areas of Air Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (AISR), Electronic Warfare (EW), and Air Power Generation (APG), Project CAYLEY was initiated to transform the Air Engineering & Logistics Organisation (AELO), in an effort to rebalance its engineering resources within existing manpower constraints. For instance, maintenance crews were integrated across 1st and 2nd lines to increase workforce flexibility.
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18. Scott Berkum, *The Myths of Innovation*, (Canada: O'Reilly Media, 2010).
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22. Speech Delivered by Chief of Air Force, MG Hoo Cher Mour, during the 46th Anniversary Celebrations held on 1st Sep 2014.