Chapter 9
Moving the Ball Down the Field: Improving the USAF’s Pacific Air Forces

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ABSTRACT
The US Air Force’s (USAF) Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) has an effective approach to turning observations of problems into accomplished actions and mission improvements. This common-sense approach relies on 1) motivated buy-in and participation from the Chief Stakeholder (i.e., CEO, Commander, the Boss); 2) a standard assessment framework; 3) experienced, enduring, corporate memory-equipped assessors; 4) Chief Stakeholder’s confidence in his assessors; 5) mid-managers empowered to fix their own problems; 6) access for the assessors to the Chief Stakeholder; and 7) an empowered ramrod to enforce the process and ensure follow-through. This chapter relates the steps of PACAF’s process, which Headquarters (HQ) US Air Force called in 2012 “the Air Force’s Best Practice at turning observations into progress” and illustrates these steps with PACAF’s very positive experiences.

INTRODUCTION
As organizations observe their own performance in an event or over time, most will comment (be moan, bellyache, gripe) about things that went wrong or could be better, some will conduct hot washes (group reviews of their strengths and weaknesses), some will gather their summary observations together, and some will state some recommendations, but few organizations actually transition those observations or recommendations into actions. We observed that our organization, USAF’s 13th AF (which was HQ PACAF’s Warfighting Headquarters at the time), was good at all these individual steps, but we were not making that last transition to act. It drove us nuts that we had identified the shortfalls in our Humanitarian Assistance, International Engagement, and Military Operations missions, but we were not corporately taking the next step to do something about it. This motivated us to propose and create a process which acted on what we saw and recom-
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mended, produced results, and as the then-13th AF Commander Lt Gen Ted Kresge stated, “Moved the ball down the field!” It is our intent in this chapter to:

1. Describe the steps we went through to build our process for turning observations into improvement,
2. Identify the theoretical concepts we were following,
3. Lay out the key tenets of what we think is a pretty darned good approach.

We will also attempt to provide some fun examples of how we applied the ideas in practice in order to keep you awake until the end of the chapter.

BACKGROUND

Much of the Lessons Learned (L2) community’s literature discusses the benefits of a lessons learned program (Henningsen, 2013), how to capture lessons, what the barriers to capturing lessons are (Murray & Lesher, 2007), the fact that implementing change is a good idea, and what some of the barriers to implementing change are. But most organizations stop short of implementing, or stop short of even discussing how change could/should be implemented.

Many organizations see the lessons learned process as getting the conclusions from an event captured in a lessons learned database and making these available to researchers. For them, the effort of capturing and documenting is monumental, and once achieved, they are done. It is hard for them to imagine another monumental effort (to accomplish implementation) on the heels of the first one. Their philosophy is that at that point, people who need the wisdom they have just reporotored should come and pull out what they need. Pull systems are effective if there is a great thirst for that information, and if the aphorism if it is built, people will come is true. In this case, we believe more in you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.

If the people in an organization do not want to drink (does not happen in Hawai’i—too many good mai tai' options), the situation which remains is a database of lessons observed. The lesson is learned when an organization implements a new process that fixes the original situation—so that the previous negative result does not happen again.

It may be that the approach we describe here has been created or applied elsewhere, in which case we may have reinvented the wheel, but what we developed cost no more effort than adapting from somewhere or someone else. We knew what needed to be done, tailored for our particular needs - - we created the logical process to do it.

Problem

Our self-assigned problem in 2011 was to create a process and an organizational attitude so that HQ PACAF (Headquarters, Pacific Air Forces) would be receptive to the additional effort (beyond observing problems) required to go the final yard and actually improve ourselves. We wanted to improve mission performance and become more effective without rediscovering the same thing each time.

This was the kind of monumental challenge we discussed above. We had to develop a Push system - - we had to figure a way to get our teammates to drink their mai tais when they were not sure if they liked mai tais. As our colleague Kevin Degnan at HQ US Air Force says:

Some staff officers may not like lessons learned getting involved in their ‘business’—they are used to setting their own priorities. Our issue then is building an internal staff process that helps drive
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