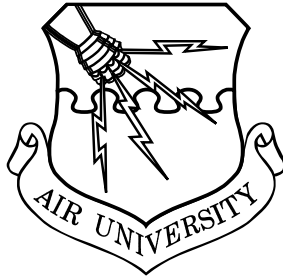


Sharing Success Owning Failure

Preparing to Command in the
Twenty-First Century Air Force



David L. Goldfein, Colonel, USAF



**Sharing Success—
Owning Failure**
**Preparing to Command in
the Twenty-First Century
Air Force**

DAVID L. GOLDFEIN
Colonel, USAF

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Foreword

Command is the ultimate service. It is a time when we have the singular responsibility to create and lead strong Air Force units. A time when our passion for our Air Force and our vision for its future must be overwhelmingly clear.

Early in the “Developing Aerospace Leaders” initiative, we began to focus on the way in which the institution teaches leadership and prepares airmen for command. What we found was a wide range of practices and a wide range of expectations—a complicating factor in today’s Expeditionary Aerospace Force.

We realize that preparing our officers to command effective, mission-oriented units must be a deliberate process. It must develop our unique airman perspective, creating commanders who are able to communicate the vision, have credibility in the mission area, and can lead our people with inspiration and heart.

The foundation of our institution’s effectiveness has always been its leaders. Colonel Goldfein’s work provides valuable lessons learned and serves as a worthwhile tool to optimize your effectiveness as a squadron commander.

This book is a must-read, not only for those selected to command a squadron but for all our young officers, helping them understand what the requirements of squadron command will be. Remember, command is a unique privilege—a demanding and crucial position in our Air Force.

Sharing Success—Owning Failure takes you a step closer to successfully meeting that challenge.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles D. Link". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and "L".

Charles D. Link

Major General, USAF, Retired

About the Author



Colonel Goldfein with his fellow Aviano warriors during Operation Allied Force

Colonel Dave “Fingers” Goldfein entered active duty in 1983 following graduation from the USAF Academy. He has completed a Masters in Business Administration, Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, Air War College, and the State Department Senior Seminar.

Fingers earned his pilot wings at Sheppard AFB, Texas, in 1984 and remained there as a first assignment instructor pilot (FAIP) in the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training Program. Following Sheppard, he checked out in the F-16 Fighting Falcon and joined the 17th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Shaw AFB, South Carolina. During this tour, the squadron deployed to Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, where Fingers led his

flight on 40 combat missions over Iraq during Operation Desert Storm.

Upon returning from the United Arab Emirates, Fingers was selected for Weapons School and reassigned as initial cadre to build the composite wing at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho. Flying with the 389th T-Bolts, Colonel Goldfein served as squadron weapons officer and then chief of wing weapons, tactics, and intelligence.

Following Air Command and Staff College in residence, Fingers served as Aide de Camp to the Commander of AIRSOUTH in Naples, Italy, and then as Executive Officer to the USAFE Commander at Ramstein AFB, Germany.

In 1997, Colonel Goldfein re-qualified in the F-16 and returned to Europe as Operations Officer and then Commander of the 555th Triple Nickel Fighter Squadron at Aviano AB, Italy. As commander, Fingers led his squadron on combat missions over Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina during Operation Allied Force. He is a command pilot with over 3,500 flying hours. His decorations include the Distinguished Flying Cross (1 OLC), Defense Meritorious Service Medal, Meritorious Service Medal (1 OLC), and Air Medal (5 OLC).

For 18 years and 13 moves, Fingers has been married to Dawn (Thumbs). They are the proud parents of two daughters, Danielle and Diana. He currently serves as deputy chief of Combat Forces Division at Headquarters USAF, Pentagon.

Preface

Congratulations on your selection for the most challenging and rewarding job in the Air Force—squadron command. The intent of this paper is to help you prepare mentally for the task ahead by discussing a few themes central to a successful command tour. It will not answer all of your questions about “*how to command*”; nor will it break any radically new ground in the “*art of leadership*.” Rather, the ideas expressed here are intended to spark your imagination as you begin preparing now for how *you* want to command *your* squadron.

These thoughts are not mine alone. In researching this project, I asked officers from across the Air Force, recently from command, to share stories of the greatest challenges they faced. What was the environment? How did they react? Why did they choose a particular path? Most importantly—what did they learn from the experience? Many of the stories I included in this paper involve situations in which the individual failed. Why? Because it is from studying our failures that we learn, grow, and improve as officers and leaders. As a commander, you will be privileged to share in many successes of your organization; however, you will personally own every failure. In the end, this is the true *loneliness of*

command. Failure comes with risk and both are integral to a successful command tour.

So read over the ideas presented here with a critical eye and think now about how you will react given similar circumstances. Ask important questions such as: What are my expectations of command? What do the troops expect of me? What will be my vision? How will I create an environment that ensures mission success? How will I build my team? How will I handle justice? Who is ultimately responsible for fun in my squadron? By thinking critically about these questions now, you will be better prepared to lead successfully in the greatest job you will ever have.

Good luck commander!



The image shows a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is written in a cursive style. The word "DAVE" is written in all caps in a smaller, more upright font at the top left of the signature. The main part of the signature is "Goldfein", written in a large, flowing cursive script. Below the signature, the name "DAVE" is written in all caps, followed by "Goldfein" in a smaller, more upright font. Below that, the name "Dave 'Fingers' Goldfein" is written in a smaller, more upright font.

"FINGERS"
Dave "Fingers" Goldfein

Acknowledgments

I am greatly indebted to the officers who participated in this project. Sharing *success* is relatively easy. Owning *failure*, however, and then sharing the story of that failure in a published paper takes courage and a commitment to helping you succeed. Additionally, this project was significantly improved by the keen insight and editing skill of Maj Gen Perry Smith, USAF, retired. His book, *Rules and Tools for Leaders*, remains among the most practical guides on command and leadership written.

Maj Gen L. D. Johnston	Maj Gen (retired) Perry M. Smith
Maj Gen (retired) Chuck Link	Maj Gen (retired) Bob Taylor
Brig Gen Dan "Fig" Leaf	Brig Gen (sel) Steve "Goldy" Goldfein
Col Daniel "Doc" Zoerb	Col Terry "Hubba" New
Col Jim "Rev" Jones	Col Charlie "Clyon" Lyon
Col Judy Fedder	Col Brian "Bbop" Bishop
Col Dave "Face" Nichols	Col Anthony "Tony" Rebello
Col Lansen Conley	Col Mike "Boe" Boera
Col Jeff "Weird" Harrell	Lt Col Jeff "Butkus" Lofgren
Lt Col Bill "Bigfoot" Eliason	Lt Col "Ragman" Harvey
Lt Col Theresa "Junior" Giorlando	Lt Col Steve Laushine
Maj Duane "Imus" Creamer	SMSgt John Long
SMSgt Michael Brake	SMSgt Beverly Hill
SMSgt Christopher Schloemer	MSgt Larry Johnson

Sharing Success—Owning Failure: Preparing to Command in the Twenty-First Century was originally written as a research report for the National Foreign Affairs Training Center, Arlington, Virginia.

The photographs in this volume portray Allied Forces personnel at Aviano Air Base, Italy, during Colonel Goldfein's tour of duty as squadron commander, 555th Fighter Squadron. All are USAF photographs.

Abstract

The single most important element of success in war is leadership. Leaders inspire others to achieve "above and beyond." The expectations of both leader and follower play key roles in the development of leadership, as do the leader's vision, the working environment, and the example established by the leader. The squadron commander is essential to accomplishing the mission of the United States Air Force. He or she must ensure that justice prevails among and between those commanded, and he or she must establish programs that promote health and happiness among the families within the command.

Chapter 1

Expectations of Command

Excellent leaders stand for absolute integrity, absolute honesty. They preach the concept of honesty in the organization. Excellent leaders practice integrity in thought, word, and deed. And they insist upon integrity and honesty on the part of their subordinates.

—Gen W. L. Creech, USAF, Retired

Any dialogue on preparation for command must begin with a discussion on expectations. No doubt you clearly remember the day you were informed that you had been chosen for command. Anticipation mixed with pride and a fair amount of uncertainty and fear—sound familiar? This section will discuss some key issues associated with what your boss expects, what your troops expect, and, perhaps most important, what you can expect.

What Does the Boss Expect?

As a wing commander, the most important personnel decision I ever made was the selection of my squadron commanders. No other officer would have a greater positive or negative effect on our ability to accomplish the mission.

—Brig Gen Dan Leaf
31st Fighter Wing Commander

Leaders who hire subordinate commanders have a responsibility to clearly lay out their expectations for success. Too often, command in the Air Force is viewed as a test of the individual for future service rather than an opportunity for the organization to succeed and thrive under proven leadership. This over-arching focus on testing the *individual* rather than the success of the *unit* has resulted over time in a correspondingly shallow program to formally prepare you for command.

A Navy officer who is chosen for a 36-month command tour will spend the first 18 months as executive officer (focused on learning the art of command) in the very unit he or she will eventually lead. An

Army or Marine officer will attend several long training courses focused on command and leadership prior to accepting the colors of his or her first unit. In contrast, Air Force officers selected for command are currently required to attend a one-week major command (MAJCOM) squadron commander's course focused largely on *staying out of jail* rather than leading and managing effectively. This lack of emphasis on thoroughly preparing an individual to succeed in command suggests an even greater need for you and your new boss to establish mutually understood expectations for success.

As you begin the transition process, set up an appointment with your commander. Ask about his or her expectations and indicate that you are open to any advice—your commander has likely been in your position. Do not arrive without pen and pad in hand. One officer I know showed up for an interview with his numbered Air Force commander and was tossed out of the office to find writing tools—definitely not the way you want to begin your tour! The bottom line: Do not leave the interview until you understand clearly what is expected of you.

Sometimes, a face-to-face meeting is not possible prior to a command change. In these cases, send a note to your new boss and request his or her thoughts on success. Col William Lord, who served as communications director for Headquarters Air Mobility Command (HQ AMC), outlined his expectations in a letter to his new commanders. It helps them chart their own course for success:

Congratulations on being named squadron commander—it is the best job in the Air Force, and the toughest. To help you get off on the right foot, I'd like to offer some words to help with your mental preparation.

To start with, you need a command philosophy and initial focus. Three reasons: (1) you only have one chance at a first impression, (2) for much of what you actually accomplish in your 2-year command tour, you must first establish a focus in your initial 6 months, and (3) your first few weeks will haunt you if you aren't prepared. Those entrusted to your charge want and need to be led from day 1 of your command tour.

Get to know and network with your fellow commanders--irrespective of career field, MAJCOM, or specialty. If you succeed, you will become senior officers together before you know it. You will need one another. If you regard each other as competitors, you will hurt yourselves, your command chain, and our Air Force. Don't get lost in the "glamour of being the boss." You'll find the experience produces many rewards (not awards) along with a good measure of hard work and disappointments.

Now is a good time to send a short thank you to family members and any mentors that helped you during your career. Don't substitute with email [*sic*]--the personal touch and a hand-written [*sic*] note show good breeding. If you haven't sent a note to your new boss and wing king, do so--they selected you.

Take time to scrutinize your personal affairs. From relationships to money matters, you need to be squeaky clean. As a commander, you will sit in judgment of others,

and you cannot afford to surrender the moral high ground—ever! You are expected to be above reproach. Your personal life won't get you promoted, but it can rapidly do you in.

Study up on your officers and senior NCOs before you take command—my office can help with personnel briefs and RIPs. These are your charges—worry about them, guide them, and develop them to become your replacement, or at least someone you'd be proud to have associated with your name. These troops shouldn't be worrying about their next assignment—that's your job.

Plan out your first 30 days now and have in mind what you want to accomplish. Some hints:

- Publish your command philosophy.
- Meet with your Top 3 (or 4) the first day.
- Visit every work center and every shift. Keep these visits regular.

EXPECTATIONS OF COMMAND

- Determine the areas you are least comfortable with and focus on these. Don't be afraid to ask questions--the troops will respect your interest
- Meet all of your fellow commanders on their turf.
- Call on the Wing SEA, MPF Flight Commander, Chaplain, and all other agencies that provide service to your unit.
- Inspect the dorm and eat in the dining facility.
- Write job descriptions of each of your key subordinates and give them out one on one.
- Schedule a commander's call within the first month.

Take ownership of every part of your organization and teach this to subordinate leaders. Once you've walked past trash on the ground, a wall that needs paint, or a broken door, you've just blessed it—and you'll continue to overlook it every day after that—until it gets pointed out by your boss.

Establish immediately that your signed signature is your bond. It's hard to get credibility back once your name becomes meaningless. Always insist on putting the actual date of signature on everything you sign.

Spouse involvement in unit and base activities—there aren't any absolutes. The only wrong answers are zero and everything. If your spouse is a joiner and a doer, encourage it. If not—don't force it. Just remember that taking care of the families in your unit is an important part of the job—we recruit individuals, but we retain families. How you go about this will vary but the responsibility will always exist. If not your spouse, find someone who will help you lead in this area.

Finally, be an officer and an airman first—a communicator last. Aerospace power is our business—command information is our contribution. Make a concerted effort to stay current on operational issues and doctrine. If you don't understand aerospace power application, it's

nearly impossible to effectively support the business.

Again, congratulations on your selection for command. I look forward to working with you to accomplish our mission.¹

Are there any questions as to what this leader expects of his new commanders? With a few personal touches, this letter can serve as an excellent start for your letter to subordinate leaders and supervisors. Remember, establishing clear and mutually understood expectations with your flight commanders and flight chiefs will be your responsibility as commander.

What Do the Troops Expect?

Good leaders are people who have a passion to succeed . . . To become successful leaders, we must first learn that no matter how good the technology or how shiny the equipment, people-to-people relations get things done in our organizations. People are the assets that determine our success or failure.

—Gen Ronald R. Fogleman, USAF, Retired

Now what about the troops—what are their expectations of you as a new commander? To answer this question, I surveyed the USAF Senior Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Academy at Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB)–Gunter Annex, Alabama, and asked attendees to answer the following questions:

- What do you expect from your new commander?
- How do you define a successful commander?
- What do you not want to see in your new boss?

Among the most thoughtful responses came this one from SMSgt Michael Brake, a flight leader at the academy and former assistant to commander in chief strategic command (CINCSTRATCOM):

1. I expect leadership in action—not by proxy. Commanders must get out from behind their own perceived comfort zones and get to know their folks. I've experienced too many stories of shift personnel being surprised by senior leadership visiting them on a mid, swing,

or weekend shift. Shouldn't be a surprise—should be expected. No other way for the commander to get the true pulse of their personnel.

2. Leaders make mistakes—and grow through the opportunity. Don't be afraid to make them and fess up when you do—subordinates will know you are real. At the same time, understand that subordinates also make mistakes and need the same opportunity to grow as a result. Accountability yes, perfection—impossible.
3. Communication is vital—goes with number 1. Unless it is detrimental to the organization, share information. The result will be inclusion and fewer rumors, thereby making everyone feel significant.
4. Empower personnel. Former Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Sam Parrish said it best: “If what they want to do is (a) good for the Air Force; (b) good for the individual; and (c) doesn't hurt anyone—why stop them?”

5. Live by the core values. Live by the core values. Live by the core values.²

Here is another entry from SMSgt Beverly Hill, also a flight chief at the Senior NCO Academy and former command systems manager at Robins AFB, Georgia, who explains her expectations of a new commander as follows:

1. In the commander, I am looking for someone who lives the core values every day. If you are wrong, admit it up front. Have the courage to stand up, without ever compromising personal beliefs, for what is right and fair. Don't say one thing and do another—we see what is *done*, not what is *said*.
2. I define a successful commander as one who supports, and in some cases stands up, for his or her people when they are right. Additionally, I look for someone who treats everyone fairly and is inclusive (decision makers should include male, female, minorities, enlisted). Finally, a successful commander has high standards

and demands that his/her officers also reflect and live the core values.

3. What I don't want to see is a commander who is partial to certain individuals; one who won't support you as a professional; or one who doesn't have the courage to support tough, unpopular decisions up the chain of command. Clearly, I don't want a commander who is dishonest.³

The final entry comes from SMSgt Christopher Schloemer, former first sergeant and now an instructor at the Senior NCO Academy:

1. Listen. I have a lot of experience to offer. Nothing puts me off more than a new commander that knows it all already. Obviously, you have new ideas and a new perspective, but hopefully, also an open mind.
2. Be decisive. A wishy-washy commander is death for an organization. Make informed decisions as much as possible. See #1 above.

3. **Be consistent.** As with anyone, you will have both good days and bad. However, if the troops come in and ask the secretary “what kind of mood is he/she in today,” your organization will not be as effective.
4. **Be visible.** The troops need to see you. I used to put “walk around” time on my commander’s schedule. Nothing raises morale more than knowing the commander cares enough to visit them in their work areas.
5. **Don’t micromanage.** You don’t have time to handle every detail. That’s why you have so many people in your squadron.
6. **Have high expectations of your senior NCOs.** Hold their feet to the fire and ensure they are earning the title “senior NCO” every day by upholding high standards and leading troops.
7. **Integrate the core values into your squadron every day.** If you expect your troops to live by these, you

must live by them. I once had a commander who made reference to the core values in every corrective action he took—it was very effective.⁴

If there is a central theme in all of the essays I received, it is the expectation that commanders live the core values every day. While accomplishing this might appear simple, it takes continuous effort to ensure you never make a decision or take action that might give the impression (even unintentionally) that you are compromising these core values.

As an example, here is a story of a bad decision I made while commander of the 555th Fighter Squadron. It taught me a great deal about unintentional consequences.

The time and place: July 1999 at Aviano Air Base (AB), Italy

We had recently ended Operation ALLIED FORCE, the air campaign over Serbia and Kosovo. I received a call from aviation artist Robert Taylor, among the most respected and well-known painters of military air-

craft in the world, asking for assistance. He was working on a painting of the F-16 entitled “Viper Venom” and asked for help by providing unclassified information on our squadron aircraft. Talking on the phone to the artist, we worked together to ensure he had the exact details in order to recreate the F-16 to his impeccable standards. Shortly after the painting was completed, I received a call from his staff asking if I would agree to sign the print as a commander and combat veteran (all of his aircraft paintings are signed). I was both honored and humbled by the request. After some thought and discussion with the JAG to ensure there was no ethical or legal dilemma, I agreed to sign the print. Additionally, I shared the story of a particular mission that highlighted the international NATO team effort of ALLIED FORCE. So why was this a failure?

First—as a commander, I failed to put my troops first. Remember what Colonel Lord said in his letter? There are rewards that come with com-

mand—not awards. By allowing myself to be singled out, I failed to represent my people, who contributed more than I ever did. A commander should be out front and in the lead in all but one circumstance—when there are accolades to be received or success to be shared.

Second—I failed my fellow commanders who fought side by side with me. A commander has loyalty to three groups—his command chain, his fellow commanders, and those he is privileged to lead. By not insisting that my fellow commanders be represented on the print, I failed to fight for their interests and the interest of their squadrons.

Finally, and most important for this discussion: when I had time to ponder this decision in the weeks and months that followed, I had to admit that I had not put service before self. In Senator John McCain’s book, *Faith of My Fathers*, he states, “glory and honor are achieved only when one serves something greater than himself.” The very best commanders

are truly selfless in all things and at all times.

This was a great lesson on making decisions with our USAF core values in focus. While your initial intentions may very well be honorable, you must think through your decisions and actions to ensure our Air Force core values are at the heart of your existence every hour of every day.

What Do You Expect?

A good leader sets goals, measures progress, and rewards performance. He or she tries to give everyone a stake in the mission of the organization and its outcome. That's the role of leadership.

—Gen John M. Loh, USAF, Retired

To complete our discussion on expectations, we must explore perhaps the most difficult question to answer—what should you expect from the command experience? A squadron command tour is equal parts inspiration and aggravation—times of exhilaration and times of depression. It is all-encompassing, and

it becomes pervasive in every aspect of your life. Decisions will often be gut-wrenching and unclear. Your people will, at times, both inspire you and disappoint you. It will be, for many, the first time you are responsible for areas you don't truly understand; that is, outside your technical stovepipe and/or comfort zone. The larger and more diverse the organization under your command, the greater this discomfort will be.

As a new commander, you might be hesitant to ask questions of subordinates for fear of appearing uninformed and losing respect. Remember, however, that you have been chosen for command because of your demonstrated leadership abilities. You will garner far more respect from your airmen if you take the time early in your tour to understand their part in achieving your vision. Can you think of a single instance during your career when a commander asked you to explain what you do or how you do it and you were bothered by the intrusion? Chances are, you appreciated the fact that he or she took the time to ask your opinion. Your airmen will be no different. They don't expect immediate

tactical or technical expertise in every area. However, they do expect you to understand how they fit into the big picture so you can be a credible advocate.

Maj Gen John G. Meyer, USA, wrote an outstanding book titled *Company Command: The Bottom Line*. (You need a copy!) General Meyer asks the following key questions, aptly describing the command experience:

1. Are you willing to dedicate yourself 24 hours a day, seven days a week, if necessary, for your unit and your troops?
2. Is your family willing to bear the sacrifices?
3. Are you willing to lead by example in everything you do—to live in a fish bowl with your personal and professional life open to view?
4. Do you understand that loyalty is a two-way street?
5. Can you challenge your troops to go the extra mile, knowing the challenges may increase even though the rewards remain the same?

6. Are you willing to put your neck on the line and take risks when necessary?
7. Are you willing to make the tough decisions, regardless of the consequences?
8. Are you willing to take responsibility for everything that happens, or doesn't happen, in your unit?
9. Are you willing to support your boss completely and wholeheartedly, even if he or she is not a person you like?
10. Are you willing to sacrifice your career to protect and preserve the dignity of your troops?⁵

If your answer to each of these questions is “yes,” then you can expect to enjoy the single most difficult, most challenging, and most rewarding professional experience of your career.

In the next chapter, I will offer some thoughts on the commander's vision and share a few stories intended to help you develop and communicate your own vision. I will then offer some ideas on building an environment for success.

Notes

1. Col William T. Lord, USAF, interviewed by author, November 2000.
2. SMSgt Michael Brake, USAF, interviewed by author, December 2000.
3. SMSgt Beverly Hill, USAF, interviewed by author, January 2001.
4. SMSgt Christopher Schloemer, USAF, interviewed by author, January 2001.
5. John G. Meyer, Maj Gen, *Company Command: The Bottom Line* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1990), 8. Reprinted with permission by Byrrd Enterprises, Inc., Alexandria, Va., 1996.