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Certain Competencies May Help Offset Lack of Expertise in Senior Air Force Jobs

Preparing senior leaders to take charge of an organization as complex as the U.S. Air Force is enormously difficult. Ideally, all senior leaders are fully qualified for their positions, but this is not always possible. The need for multiple areas of expertise, known as *domain knowledge*; the emergence of new weapon systems, technologies, and operating environments; and the constraints of long-term career development strategies frequently cause the Air Force to assign senior leaders to operational and functional domains in which they lack specific experience.

A RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) study shows that Air Force leaders in such positions draw on existing skills—called *compensating competencies*—to become engaged in and begin adding value to their organizations. Four are especially important:

- **Enterprise knowledge** consists of an understanding of how an organization fits into the parent organization and how it relates to its external environment. By providing a strategic orientation to problems and issues, enterprise knowledge enables a leader to develop comprehensive solutions and to learn the organizational processes and relationships that are associated with the domain.
- **Integration skills** are used to create or improve interactions among experts, processes, functions, organizations, and/or capabilities. They improve decisionmaking and learning. They also allow a senior leader to maximize the interaction among subordinate experts, thus enhancing the leader's ability to define problems robustly and to develop solutions.
- **Problem-solving skills** help senior leaders identify the data and information that are central to defining problems and developing comprehensive solutions. The act of using problem-solving skills for domain-specific problems and issues also helps senior leaders gain domain knowledge.
- **People skills** address power relationships between subordinates to create productive information flows. They create an organizational climate that allows people to feel comfortable and empowered to approach senior leaders with problems and to teach these leaders what they need to know.

Because of the broad utility of compensating competencies, the Air Force should take steps to ensure that its education and development programs develop a deep pool of leaders who are proficient in these competencies. Curricula designed around developing organizational analysis techniques, systems-level problem-solving strategies, and communication-analysis skills would be most instrumental to developing compensating competencies. Such an approach would augment the benefits already gained from broadening assignments. In return, the Air Force will have established a hedging strategy for developing leaders and staff members who can cope in a wider variety of organizations and operating domains in the future. ■

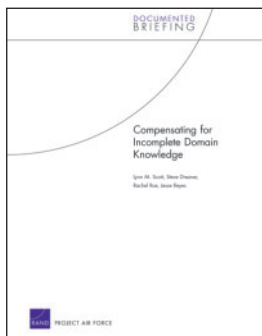
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