

Professional Military Education for Company Grade Officers

Targeting for “Affect”

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Editorial Abstract: A crucial part of Air Force education in leadership occurs at Squadron Officer College (SOC), located at Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB), Alabama. This article explores curriculum changes in SOC's four-week Aerospace Basic Course (ABC) for newly commissioned officers and Air Force–equivalent civilians, and five-week Squadron Officer School (SOS) for junior and midgrade officers and Air Force–equivalent civilians. A majority of SOC students are members of “Generation X.”



THROUGH THE YEARS, the professional military education (PME) curriculum for company grade officers (CGO) has been dynamic in order to meet Air Force needs as well as the changing characteristics of CGOs. Recently, SOC has initiated important changes by increasing its emphasis on the affective domain of learning in response to the demonstrated traits of the most recent generation of officers entering the Air Force.

This article outlines the characteristics of these officers—members of “Generation X”—compares them to those of the “baby boomer”

generation, and provides some opinions of Air Force leaders regarding their expectations of these CGOs. It discusses how PME plays a role in preparing CGOs to meet the challenges they will face in their Air Force careers and shows how the SOC curricula have been redesigned to enhance effectiveness in educating our future Air Force leaders.

Changing of the Guard

A shift in leadership roles from one generation to another has begun. As baby boomers

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retire, more and more Generation Xers enter the workforce.¹ By the early 1990s, they had surpassed baby boomers in total workforce population.² Soon, today's Air Force senior officers—consisting predominantly of baby boomers—will begin turning over the reins to Generation Xers.

Much has changed in American society over the last two generations, including the educational system. Some “progressive” educational movements produced curricula and methods that failed the average student. In fact, some curricula and methods have tended to create observable differences between Generation Xers and baby boomers so that today many of the nation's graduates do not share a common body of knowledge, common body of principles, or common moral and intellectual discipline.³ Yet, to remain effective as an institution, the Air Force needs members who share those commonalities. PME can play a critical role in this endeavor.

PME and the Affective Domain

Education includes two main categories or domains of learning: the cognitive domain of facts and figures, measurable in levels of knowledge or comprehension,⁴ and the affective domain of ideas, reflected in attitudes, values, and feelings.⁵ Air Force PME has traditionally concentrated on cognitive learning, which will continue to take place at SOC in lessons on Air Force doctrine, theory, and history. Yet, some of those subjects—history, for example—also contain important affective elements. In some subject areas, the affective domain is dominant. Concentrating on this domain is only one of many recent changes at SOC.

PME at the CGO level helps prepare newly commissioned and junior officers for leadership roles at the tactical level. In PME they acquire many of the skills needed to fulfill the expectations of senior leaders. According to

Gen Gregory S. Martin, US Air Forces in Europe, “the role of PME is to broaden CGOs’ understanding of the Air Force’s structure and mission, as well as provide an exposure to the teamwork and functional interrelationships necessary for the Air Force to succeed.”⁶

But PME falters in this role because curricula written to teach boomers aren’t nearly as effective for Xers. For the most part, Generation Xers want to be entertained while they learn, and they don’t look forward to hearing auditorium lectures from guest speakers who don’t have dynamic, technologically savvy presentations. This is not to stereotype Xers as people who lack the boomers’ attention span, patience, tolerance, or discipline. They simply appear to learn better under some circumstances than others. Why? They grew up that way—captivated by the media, advertising, and, most notably, educational methodologies designed to entertain and teach only the necessary requirements in minimum time.⁷ Years ago, auditorium presentations were the standard practice, largely because of the available technology. A speaker’s measure of merit was based on the power of words rather than the razzle-dazzle of his or her electronic slides. Students also accepted the premise that someone of higher rank was worth listening to and deserved their respect. Today, students might have respect for a higher rank but at the same time feel that guest speakers owe it to the audience to be entertaining. According to Dr. Hank Dasinger of SOC, “data [collected from SOC student critiques] suggests Generation X learners prefer to be engaged in their learning instead of [being] passive recipients.” Seminar sessions are more likely to appeal to them because the environment is conducive to open discussion and interaction between student and instructor.⁸

The Air Force needs to understand the basic characteristics of Generation Xers in order to better educate them with tailor-made

programs. Obviously, not everyone in a particular generation displays the characteristics of that generation, and military members often don't fit into a generational stereotype due to the influence of the military-socialization process. Nevertheless, most personnel demonstrate similarities, making it important to identify those general characteristics of the two major generations that currently make up our officer corps. This is why SOC has changed from a primarily cognitive teaching focus to an affective one.

Boomers versus Xers

In general, baby boomers, born from 1943 to 1960, grew up with a positive view of the world.⁹ Most of them lived in traditional nuclear families with a working father and a stay-at-home mother. Boomers were in the spotlight. They represented the hope for the future their parents had fought to preserve, so expectations for this generation were high. In fact, in January 1967, *Time* magazine actually gave its prestigious "Man of the Year" award to the baby-boom generation. *Time* proclaimed it the generation that would clean up our cities, end racial inequity, find a cure for cancer and the common cold, and prevent poverty and war.¹⁰

Common characteristics used to describe baby boomers include optimism, team orientation, drive to achieve, and strong ambition. As teenagers in the 1960s, many boomers rejected the traditional values held dear by the previous generation. Some of them challenged authority in every form—law, police, universities, elected officials, marriage—and developed new attitudes toward sexual mores and drug use. Boomers opposed or questioned almost all traditional beliefs.¹¹

As boomers matured, some discarded their idealism and embraced the very institutions they had rejected earlier. Ironically, the institutions and traditions boomers reembraced

deteriorated during their watch. Inflation, rising crime, declining family traditions, increasing violence, high national debt, and a nearly bankrupt Social Security system, to name a few, made up the legacy of the baby boomers.

One of the major contributors to the psyche of baby boomers in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the Vietnam War. There is no easy way to discuss what the Vietnam legacy meant, and still means, to this generation. The effect has been profound—almost haunting. The fallout of the Vietnam War and its various interpretations are more personal to this generation than to any other.

Also adding to the baby boomers' mind-set were many other significant events that occurred during their formative years—for example, the civil rights movement, the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of President Kennedy, the first manned moon landing, Woodstock, and the Kent State University shootings, to name just a few. Each of these, along with many others, was an important experience for the generation of people at the helm of our Air Force today.

Similarly, members of Generation X had profound and unique experiences. Born from 1960 to 1980, Generation Xers have been described as self-reliant, skeptical, unimpressed by authority, and reluctant to commit to relationships, whether personal or professional.¹² These characteristics have many sources.

As a whole, Xers are an attention-deprived, parentally neglected generation. Two main reasons drive this condition. First, nearly half of all marriages during this time period have ended in divorce.¹³ Many Generation X children grew up in an environment of joint custody. Second, this is the first generation of children predominantly from families in which both parents worked. Women are working in increasing numbers. Between 1969 and

1996, the number of working married women with children increased 84 percent.¹⁴

While their parents were busy earning a living, Generation Xers were left to entertain themselves. They watched TV, played video games, and learned how to use the personal computer. All of that free time created a technologically savvy generation. The typical Generation Xer coming on active duty today first began using computers in grade school. Many knew how to use a videocassette recorder before they could spell. But too much of anything can have negative consequences.

In the 1980s, child experts began warning that children were watching too much TV. Finally, in 1998 the American Academy of Pediatrics published the results of a three-year study of Generation Xers and members of the next generation (“Nexters” or “Generation Y”). After examining children from three to 18 years of age, they found that most of them watch approximately four hours of TV daily. The article further claimed that by the end of high school, many teenagers have viewed more than 18,000 hours of television—more time than they have spent in a classroom and second only to the time they have spent sleeping.¹⁵

In the '70s, '80s, and '90s, improved technology coupled with new media practices had TV bringing the violence of real-life wars and conflicts (Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, the Gulf War, and Bosnia) directly into their living rooms. This real-time, “entertaining” presentation of world events helped develop an “instantaneous” and “tell me what I need to know now” attitude.

Several of the major events affecting Generation Xers include the *Challenger* space-shuttle disaster, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Operation Desert Storm, the Los Angeles riots, and the O. J. Simpson trial. In addition, prominent leaders, including former president Clinton and Gene McKinney, formerly the sergeant major of the Army, were charged with various counts of sexual misconduct. These events

adversely affected the basic levels of trust a generation should have in its leaders. This negative environment has left many Generations Xers very skeptical.

Characteristics of Generation X are prevalent throughout American society and may not be well understood or received by members of earlier generations, such as the baby boomers. For example, Generation Xers, often accused of having little or no attention span, may simply process information differently. According to one interpretation, “this under-30 generation thinks and sees the world in ways entirely different than their parents . . . largely because technology has created and reinforces certain cognitive changes in the way they perceive and process information.”¹⁶ This, in addition to their skeptical nature, has resulted in a generation that communicates differently. They tend to doubt information, ask more questions, and don’t always settle for pat answers.

CGOs see these traits in their peers. Second Lieutenant Mark Bailey, from Peterson AFB, Colorado, said he sees lieutenants with a “gimme attitude—a ‘what can you do for me?’ instead of a ‘what can I do for you?’ attitude.”¹⁷ This really flies in the face of what a military service is all about, if not approached correctly.

Air Force Expectations

The Air Force expects great things from its junior officers. Top Air Force leaders have identified some of these expectations as loyalty, commitment, credibility, and integrity. The service’s core values are the foundation of any Air Force member. One senior leader commented, “We need young CGOs to have strong values and an ethics foundation.”¹⁸ Technical expertise is also a high priority. According to Maj Gen Charles Link, USAF, retired, “we need leaders at the CGO level who are specialists, who are very highly trained in a fairly narrow piece of the workforce.”¹⁹ In

the opinion of Gen Ronald Fogleman, former Air Force chief of staff, the Air Force needs CGOs who have a strong focus on their primary functional area of expertise and the ability to build on an operational foundation for future growth.²⁰

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There is no better authority than Gen Michael Ryan, the Air Force chief of staff, to spell out what the Air Force expects from its CGOs: "Excellence in the performance of their duty. Company grade is where we have the depth of our knowledge; it doesn't matter if it's space, rated, nonrated, engineers. . . . Captains are the backbone of our force. They are the ones that actually do the work—the ones who lead at the tactical level. So it's excellence in knowledge of their business."²¹ Asked whether expectations have changed, he commented, "I think we expect much more of folks today than in my day. . . . We expect them to lead, and we expect them to be knowledgeable about our Air Force across a broad spectrum." As to the role of PME in fulfilling these greater expectations, the chief said that

PME actually broadens folks and exposes them to other people in our Air Force. Sometimes you get in your stovepipe and are never exposed. We have pilots who are never exposed to leadership requirements that some CGOs have had to have in maintenance or supply or transportation or civil engineering. . . . It exposes them not only to subject matter but to people. It is terribly important, the human piece of this—you know, where you are actually eyeball to eyeball, folks listening to what they say, learning what they do. That's a very broadening part of the curriculum.²²

Lt Gen Lance Lord, Air University commander, also discusses the need for CGOs who have a greater understanding of Air Force operations: "We can't afford to be stovepiped anymore. We aren't big enough. Tempo is too high. We all must have a profound appreciation for the profession of aerospace power. That's the business we're in."²³ Lt Gen Roger DeKok of Air Force Space Command summed it up by saying, "We still need CGOs who are committed to the future of our Air Force—an Air Force equipped with leaders who understand how to develop and employ a full spectrum of aerospace power. Our CGO PME helps build that understanding early in an officer's career."²⁴

Interestingly, CGOs also know pretty well what the Air Force expects of them; their perception is very close to that of the generals. They recognize the need for dedicated leaders who are able to adapt to a variety of situations. Second Lieutenant Louise Williams, stationed at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, said, "We need leaders—leaders who will lead by example and are willing to take responsibility for their actions."²⁵ Capt Rob Hume, of Einsiedlerhof Air Station, Germany, added that "the Air Force needs officers who are truly dedicated out of a calling to serve—not ones who didn't have job offers right out of college or are just here to get flying hours so they can go work for American Airlines."²⁶ The challenge for PME is to match curricula with people so that they can meet these expectations.

Solution

Since Generation Xers differ from their predecessors and because the Air Force culture has changed, the Air Force needed to change its PME methods for CGOs. Hence, SOC developed a two-pronged approach, modifying education in both the cognitive and affective domains of learning but emphasizing the latter. Affective learning is more difficult to teach

and measure, but—according to education experts involved in Air Force PME—it is more important right now. According to Col Ann Testa, SOC commander, “our number-one objective in ABC is to make our students proud of who they are as members of the finest institution in the world. In SOS we rededicate them and teach them to deal with future challenges. We are attempting to reach their hearts and souls in SOC!”²⁷

What does this mean for the Air Force? Understanding these and future generational differences will allow the service to develop strategies to recruit, retain, and educate. It has helped SOC transform its teaching methodology. Specifically, ABC changed from lectures and slide presentations to guided discussions that more effectively engage students, providing ownership and “buy-in” of the subjects discussed. The newly modified SOS curriculum spends more time with history and doctrine, which helps students bond to the institution.

Self-reliant Generation Xers tend to have individualistic attitudes and usually prefer solitary activities. To help overcome this tendency, SOC incorporated challenging, team-based events into both the ABC and SOS curricula. ABC emphasizes teamwork and problem-solving skills during several outdoor athletic activities, and its capstone team event—Operation Blue Thunder II—has students conducting simulated combat operations as members of a deployed aerospace operations center. SOS puts its students through a war-game exercise called Operation Atlantis, and they participate in other team airpower simulations and athletic-field campaigns. These situations provide a dynamic challenge against a thinking opponent and reinforce the value of teamwork.

Because many Generation Xers are unimpressed by authority, SOC needed to enlighten students with a variety of impressive speakers who exemplify Air Force ideals and core values. Both SOS and ABC invite guest speakers who

serve as positive role models, such as former prisoners of war, Medal of Honor recipients, and other heroes, like the Tuskegee airmen. SOC encourages open and frank discussions among the students, faculty, and speakers by facilitating discussions on important moral issues.

Generation Xers also have the reputation of making only short-term investments rather than long-term commitments. Therefore, the SOC curricula are designed to enhance their sense of commitment by emphasizing the unique capabilities of the Air Force. SOC wants its students to understand where they fit into the big picture and to appreciate their contributions to the Air Force mission.

To accommodate Generation X’s desire for flashy, short-term learning, ABC and SOS have increased video, simulation, and technology methods to reinforce educational concepts. For example, ABC developed an award-winning digital video disc (DVD) series called “What Now, Lieutenant?” which presents ethical dilemmas for discussion. In addition, ABC modified a commercially available, computer-based, interactive war game that is not only entertaining, but also emphasizes relevant airpower concepts.

Is SOC providing its students the skills necessary to fulfill the expectations set forth by today’s senior leaders? Students think it is. They believe SOC is providing them a greater knowledge of how the Air Force operates. “SOS exposed me to a broader understanding of the Air Force outside of my career field. I can now take what I have learned back to my unit and apply it to situations I will face in the future,” commented Capt Thomas Sherman, stationed at Aviano Air Base, Italy.²⁸ Capt Joel Meyers, of Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, echoed that sentiment: “I appreciated learning the development of the Air Force and our role in society. It opened my eyes to the bigger picture.”²⁹ Second Lieutenant Bailey said that “ABC gave me the resources—the tools

and ammunition—I needed to see how my piece fits into the puzzle.”³⁰

Today it is important for PME to affect the heart as well as the mind. With the downsizing of the force and demands for doing more with less, PME needs not only to educate our CGOs, but also to reinforce the dedication they felt when they first joined the Air Force. According to General Link,

We rely on PME to help officers understand their importance to the larger institution. If we do this right, they will love the larger institution in a way that will be helpful in the discharge of their duties, in a way that will be helpful in their relationship with their subordinates, and in a way that will be helpful as they deal with frustrations and demands of day-to-day duty per-

formance in the Air Force. Loving the Air Force is something PME ought to be all about.³¹

Conclusion

Although not all CGOs born between 1960 and 1980 fit neatly into the stereotypical characteristics of Generation X, the Air Force has wisely taken them into consideration in modifying its company grade PME courses. PME must be as effective as it can be in order to reach members of this generation and provide them the tools necessary to become successful leaders. The Air Force currently has some of the best and brightest young officers it has ever had. If they love what they do and work together for the good of the nation, everyone wins. □

Notes

1. Margot Hornblower, “Great Xpectations,” *Time*, 9 June 1997, 58. According to Hornblower, the term *Generation X* was first coined by Canadian writer Douglas Coupland.

2. *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1999), table 651.

3. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 289, 320–21.

4. Benjamin Samuel Bloom, ed., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*, vol. 1, *Cognitive Domain* (New York: McKay, 1956), 201–7.

5. D. R. Kathwohl, Benjamin Samuel Bloom, and B. B. Masia, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*, vol. 2, *Affective Domain* (New York: McKay, 1964), 176–85.

6. Gen Gregory S. Martin, commander, US Air Forces in Europe, Ramstein Air Base (AB), Germany, interviewed by author, January 2001.

7. Ravitch, 295–96, 320–21.

8. Dr. Hank Dasinger, chief, Evaluations and Testing, SOC, Maxwell AFB, Ala., interviewed by author, 1 March 2001.

9. The birth years that define baby boomers vary from source to source. In *Marketing to Generation X* (New York: Lexington Books, 1995), Karen Ritchie says baby boomers are Americans born between 1946 and 1964 (page 12). In *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace* (New York: AMACOM, 2000), Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak say baby boomers were born between 1943 and 1960. They cite the addition of the three years prior to the end of World War II because they feel that these individuals identify with baby boomers more often than with the previous generation. They subtract people born from 1961 to 1964, arguing that those individuals feel more affinity with Generation Xers (pages 64–65). The recurring, accepted definition of a baby boomer is an American born from approximately the end of World War II to the beginning of the 1960s.

10. “Young Generation: The Inheritor,” *Time*, 7 January 1967, on-line, Internet, 1 March 2001, available from <http://www.time.com/time/special/moy/1966.html>.

11. Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, 69–70.

12. Ibid., 98–102.

13. US National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: US Bureau of the Census, 1995), table 87.

14. *Futurework: Trends and Challenges for Work in the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: US Department of Labor, 1999), chap. 3, on-line, Internet, 1 March 2001, available from <http://www.dol.gov/dol/asp/public/futurework/report/chapter3/main.htm>.

15. Donald Shifrin, MD, “Three-Year Study Documents Nature of Television Violence,” *AAP News*, August 1998, 23.

16. Marc Prenski, in Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, 112.

17. 2d Lt Mark Bailey, program manager, Peterson AFB, Colo., interviewed by author, 29 January 2001.

18. General officer speaking on condition of anonymity.

19. Maj Gen Charles D. Link, USAF, retired, director, Developing Aerospace Leaders Program Office, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Headquarters US Air Force, Washington, D.C., interviewed by author, 29 November 2000.

20. Gen Ronald R. Fogleman, USAF, retired, interviewed by author, December 2000.

21. Gen Michael E. Ryan, Air Force chief of staff, Washington, D.C., interviewed by author, 5 March 2001.

22. Ibid.

23. Lt Gen Lance W. Lord, commander, Air University, Maxwell AFB, Ala., interviewed by author, 4 January 2001.

24. Lt Gen Roger DeKok, vice commander, Air Force Space Command, Peterson AFB, Colo., interviewed by author, December 2000.

25. 2d Lt Louise Williams, weather officer, Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, interviewed by author, 29 January 2001.

26. Capt Rob Hume, intelligence officer, Einsiedlerhof Air Station, Germany, interviewed by author, 9 February 2001.

27. Col Ann M. Testa, commander, Squadron Officer College, Maxwell AFB, Ala., interviewed by author, 31 January 2001.

28. Capt Thomas Sherman, security forces officer, Aviano AB, Italy, interviewed by author, 13 February 2001.

29. Capt Joel Meyers, F-15E pilot, Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, interviewed by author, 13 February 2001.

30. Bailey interview.

31. Link interview.