

**The Role of Trust in Leadership:
U.S. Air Force Officers' Commitment and Intention
to Leave the Military**

Jamiel Vadell

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THE ROLE OF TRUST IN LEADERSHIP: U.S. AIR FORCE OFFICERS'

COMMITMENT AND INTENTION TO LEAVE THE MILITARY

by

Jamiel Vadell

JOHNNY MORRIS, Ph.D., Faculty Mentor and Chair

JOSEPH R. AVELLA, Ph.D., Committee Member

ANTHONY W. POET, Ph.D., Committee Member

Kurt Linberg, Ph.D., Dean, School of Business & Technology

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Abstract

Trust continues to be a leading concept in organizational commitment. Milligan (2003) conducted a survey looking at trust in the Air Force among junior officers. This study was conducted as a follow-up study to determine whether trust continues to be an issue in the Air Force. The purpose of this study is to measure the comparative strengths and weaknesses, as well as the significance, of leadership's ability to gain trust from its subordinates in order to reduce the numbers of officers leaving after their commitment. This research measures organizational commitment and trust in a random sample of 372 Air Force captains. All participants completed the following surveys: The Management Behavior Climate Assessment, Organizational Commitment Scales, Intent to Leave Scale, and a demographics survey. Findings of the research concluded with the following points, as trust is a growing factor in leadership and junior officers leaving the Air Force, there is a relationship between trust and commitment. There is also a strong relationship between commitment and intent of junior officers leaving the Air Force. Finally, trust was the primary variable in this study and it was found that with an increase of trust in leadership, there is a decrease of junior officers leaving the Air Force.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to my family, Susan (wife), Victoria (daughter), and Jamiel II (son), my parents Julie Vadell (mother) and Sabato Del Pozzo (father). You all have stood beside me through this long journey and supported me when times were tough. I thank you for your love and dedication to my education and moving forward in life. You now have your husband, daddy, and son back. Finally, this paper is written to my grandparents; this was their dream and if it wasn't for them pushing me, encouraging me, and telling me to never give up, I would of never gone this far. Thank you Epifania Rivera (Mama) and Radames Rivera (Papa), I could not have done this without each of you. I love you all and this degree is dedicated to you.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
List of Tables	ix
List of Figures	xi
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction to the Problem	1
Background of the Study	2
Statement of the Problem	5
Purpose of the Study	6
Rationale	7
Research Questions	11
Nature of the Study and Theoretical/Conceptual Framework	12
Significance of the Study	16
Definition of Terms	17
Assumptions	18
Limitations and Delimitations	19
Summary	20
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	22
Introduction	22
Trust	22
Organizational Trust	24
Organizational Commitment	28
Leadership Characteristics	30

Leadership in the Air Force	32
Leadership Approaches	37
Trust in Leadership	41
Summary	43
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY	44
Introduction	44
Research Method and Design Appropriateness	44
Research Questions	47
Hypotheses	48
Population Sampling, Data Collection Procedure	49
Setting	50
Survey Instrumentation / Measures	53
Data Collection	56
Data Analysis	57
Validity and Reliability	59
Ethical Considerations	59
Summary	59
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS	60
Introduction	60
Data Screening	60
Demographics of Respondents	62
Psychometrics of Instruments	65
The Management Behavior Climate Assessment	66

Organizational Commitment Scales	69
Intent to Leave Scale	71
Statistics	72
Hypothesis Testing	73
Analysis of Variance by Demographics	79
Summary	92
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS	94
Introduction	94
Findings and Conclusions	94
Demographics	95
Trust	95
Commitment	97
Intent to Leave	100
Trust and Commitment	101
Commitment and Intent to Leave	102
Trust and Intent to Leave	104
Sample Comparison	105
Summary	106
Recommendation for Future Study	107
REFERENCES	110

List of Tables

Table 1. Respondent Demographic Information	61
Table 2. Gender Crosstabulation (Sample vs. USAF)	64
Table 3. Age Crosstabulation (Sample vs. USAF)	64
Table 4. Source of Commission Crosstabulation (Sample vs. USAF)	65
Table 5. Chronbach's Alpha Standards	66
Table 6. Reliability of MBCA	67
Table 7. Correlation Analysis of MBCA Scales	68
Table 8. Factor Analysis of the MBCA	69
Table 9. Reliability of Commitment Scales	70
Table 10. Correlation Analysis of Commitment Scales	71
Table 11. Reliability of Intent to Leave	72
Table 12. Descriptive Statistics for MBCA	72
Table 13. Descriptive Statistics for Commitment Scales	73
Table 14. Descriptive Statistics for Intent to Leave Survey	73
Table 15. Correlation Matrix for Trust and Commitment Scale	75
Table 16. Correlation Matrix Between Affective, Continuance, Normative Commitment, and Intent to Leave	77
Table 17. Correlation Analysis for Organizational Trust and Intent to Leave	78
Table 18. ANOVA in Trust by Age Group	81
Table 19. ANOVA in Intent to Leave by Age Group	82
Table 20. ANOVA in Trust by Gender	83
Table 21. ANOVA in Intent to Leave by Gender	85

Table 22. ANOVA in Trust by Source of Commission	86
Table 23. ANOVA in Intent to Leave by Source of Commission	87
Table 24. ANOVA in Trust by Education Level	88
Table 25. ANOVA in Intent to Leave by Education Level	90
Table 26. ANOVA in Trust by Prior Enlisted Status	90
Table 27. ANOVA in Intent to Leave by Prior Enlisted Status	92
Table 28. Trust Rating by Percentage of Respondents	97
Table 29. Commitment Rating by Percentage of Respondents	98

List of Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of trust in leadership between Air Force Officers' intent to leave the military service	15
Figure 2. United States Air Force Core Values	36
Figure 3. Research Design	45
Figure 4. Highest Level of Education	63
Figure 5. Gender	63

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

Trust in leadership is increasingly a problem of confidence and commitment in the military, a phenomenon documented in detail within the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) established in 2001 as a means of developing a strategic master plan of a common vision for the defense of the nation (Milligan, 2003). In 2003, Milligan examined the link between trust in leadership and the officer's commitment to either sustain or separate from military service in the U.S. Air Force. A follow-up study four years later is being conducted to test the reliability and validity of Milligan's conclusions as new variables are introduced into the analysis. These variables include the U.S. Air Force reducing their numbers and deployment opportunities because of pressures on recruitment and retention brought on by general concerns and skepticism about the ongoing war on terrorism.

A critical factor to be introduced into this study is the increasing rate of voluntary military force reductions in the U.S. Air Force. Recently, attrition, retention, and recruitment have become increasingly difficult, all at the same time (Randall, 2006). Therefore, confidence and trust in the military command are essential variables in determining the decisions a member of the military will make – whether to remain or leave. Randall (2006) concluded that civilian and military studies share a common base when it comes to identifying leadership traits and styles effective toward building employee retention within the organization.

Commitment in the U.S. Air Force as an officer is different than an enlisted member. As an officer there is usually a four-year commitment after being commissioned. There are some exceptions to this commitment time depending on the training received at the U.S. Air Force.

After the four years, an officer is no longer required to re-enlist with the military. The officer is free to leave the military at any time if no other commitment was added. However, it is hoped that officers will act conscientiously to continue their active service.

Meanwhile, an enlisted member signs up for a specific number of years and must re-enlist when the time has expired. This allows officers to be more conscientiously in leaving the Air Force sooner than an enlisted member.

Background of the Study

Military officers often have taken the role of a traditional leadership style, much as it was defined by Weber (1947). The legitimacy of leadership is built on precedence so that leaders act on and are perceived to have control and power because their predecessors had those essential elements. It is the position, not the leader per se, that calls for loyalty by the subordinated individual. Scholars have studied leadership for many years – often building on Weber’s work in which he defined three basic leadership styles (traditional, charismatic, and bureaucratic) – and have produced a wide range of theoretical work in leadership that often reflects the ever-shifting emphasis of organizational operations and communications in dynamically changing industries. Rather than view leadership as merely a product of personality traits, styles, and characteristics, researchers increasingly viewed leadership as a process-oriented function along an ever-expanding continuum. For example, Reinke (1998) described the process in which “leader characteristics and situational demands interact to determine the extent to which a given leader will provide successfully in a group” (p. 99).

As leaders are capable of emerging from many different scenarios in which uniquely defining characteristics of leadership are demonstrated, the perception begins to take shape of the leader as a trustworthy individual independent of the nature of his or her position. The organic

cycle of character traits became the basis of how Kouzes and Posner (2000) viewed leadership. Mathews (2006) demonstrated how the traditional process of leadership is conceptualized in to the context of motivating and influencing the followers to accomplish goals critical to the organization. Rather than position traditional leadership in one neat set of defining attributes as Weber did, Mathews showed how the practice of traditional leadership varied among organizations spanning a diverse range of industry and practice. Building even further on Weber's distinction of transactional (bureaucratic) and transformational (charismatic) leadership styles, one can see the need to assess the extent and place of trust in the foundation of organizational change and transformational leadership (Fairholm, 1994).

Northouse (2004) defined transformational leadership to be the process whereby an individual engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower when certain conditions arise. Transformational leadership is a broad phenomenon, with specific events being used to influence followers at a one-on-one level and being facilitated to influence whole organizations and even entire cultures in leadership (Northouse). Symmetrical or two-way communication in the organizational hierarchy becomes an important attribute of transformational leadership where individuals are encouraged to share their thoughts, expertise, and experiences on events central to the organization's involvement and identity. The willingness to cultivate an open communications culture must be embraced by the leader to establish legitimacy and credibility. As the leader sets out the large-scale vision, employees or followers within the organization are encouraged to offer their input and to help shape that vision originally voiced by the leader.

Burns (1978) defined four key aspects of transformational leadership: charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and consideration for the individual. Bass (1985) further

refined the work of Burns by exploring the foundations of the followers' needs. Bass saw this as essential to an inclusive, encompassing relationship necessary to get followers to be fully vested in the challenge of making the large-scale organizational vision a reality.

Greenleaf (1977) meanwhile articulated servant leadership in which individuals would not necessarily be required to hold office or a particular leadership position. Rather, by encouraging the cultivation of trust and the ethical uses of power, the servant leader views the responsibility of service to the organization as first and then leadership as a means of expanding the organization's capacity to fulfill its core mission and its obligations to its stakeholders. The test of leadership, according to Greenleaf, therefore is to see whether followers became "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (p. 35).

Milligan (2003) critiqued the military's inability to fully assimilate new or modified leadership practices to address real-world situations where the composition of the forces was changing dramatically and the increased difficulty to sustain the military's retention rates. Rather than move toward a proactive stance, the military is more inclined to respond reactively, focusing more on the mission rather than what needs to be revised so that followers do not lose their commitment to the mission and to the larger organizational vision – transactional leadership as initially defined by Weber (1947) and updated by Bass (1999). Bass defined this leadership style where the focus is on the continuous contingent reinforcement of followers and therefore refers to the exchange relationship between leader and follower that is designed to meet their own self-interest. The top-down approach, often involving asymmetrical communication, discounts the value of feedback from the recipient of the leader's communication. The "wait and see" approach is perhaps the most simplistic manifestation of transactional leadership where the risk intensifies because situational dynamics change so rapidly that any action by the leader

might come too late. Continuous monitoring of followers' performance also is necessitated in this leadership style. Milligan summarized the inherent contradictions of transactional leadership: "[L]eadership is something that happens as a result of leader and follower collaborative action. Leadership is not a starring role. True leadership describes unified action by leaders and followers working together to jointly achieve mutual goals. It is collaborative." (p.28) Kouzes and Posner (2002) concluded, "At the heart of collaboration is trust." (p. 58)

The top-down hierarchical framework of traditional leadership has been at the historical core of the military. However, personality traits -- often a mix of confidence, competence, and a sense of nurturing -- are seen in contemporary leaders but they should not be viewed as evidence of the individual's "softening" stance on leadership (Jayne, 2005). The nurturing, cultivating environment is becoming increasingly prominent in the organizational dynamics. Leaders are starting to empower others but, in return, they also demand accountability for performance, forcing employees to live up to the trust placed in them (Jayne). Therefore, pressure is also placed upon the subordinates to demonstrate that the empowerment and trust given is justifiable.

Statement of the Problem

Several research studies have shown that trust in leadership is among the most important reasons why individuals tend to leave the military. As U.S. Air Force officials prepare several programs to transform the military to address future threats, goals, and visions, trust in transformational and servant leadership will address the successful implementation of these programs. Transformational and servant leadership are needed to promote these changes in a positive manner to help facilitate programs, training, skills, and motivational practices.

The problem in this research involves the lack of trust junior officers have with their leadership, which is directly connected to their decision or intent of leaving the Air Force after

their commitment. Cultivating a culture where the commitment between officers and the top-tier leadership in the U.S. Air Force is strengthened will not be easy unless a thorough planning process is undertaken. First, a case history of leadership styles and approaches within the U.S. Air Force is needed. Then, connections must be drawn between the most relevant aspects of transformational and servant leadership practices and the needs demanded by reinforcing a program of retention and recruitment in the U.S. Air Force. Thereafter, various measures will be designed to observe how the leadership and officers throughout the hierarchy envision the current environment of trust and its impact on decisions of individual officers to leave the U.S. Air Force after their required commitment of service has been accomplished.

Purpose of the Study

This study uses a quantitative research method instead of a qualitative or mixed method. In this study, a nonexperimental correlational descriptive design is created by using a survey methodology (Babbie, 1998). The research is classified as non-experimental because it fails to control for variables, and descriptive because it explores possible correlates among two or more phenomena as they currently exist (Milligan, 2003). The research design consists of three instruments (surveys). These three surveys will measure management's behavior climate assessment, commitment scales, and intent to leave survey. The management's behavior climate survey focuses on the relationship between trust and commitment. In this measurement, the variables consist on trust. The commitment scale illustrates the relationship between commitment and intent to leave the Air Force. In this measurement, the variables consist on the organizational commitment. The final measurement tool is the intent to leave survey. This survey is used to portray the relationship between trust and the intent of the junior officers to leave the Air Force after their commitment. The variable in this measurement is the intent to leave.

The purpose of the study is to measure the comparative strengths and weaknesses, as well as the significance of leadership's ability to gain trust from its subordinates to reduce the numbers of officers leaving after their commitment. Because trust seems to be an issue in the military, the existence of and the commitment to trust needs to be explored more comprehensively within the leadership hierarchy of the U.S. Air Force. This study builds on Milligan's earlier work on the relationship of trust in U.S. Air Force captains to officers' organizational commitment and intentions to leave service. Eliciting the reasons and explanations for what influences the intent of officers to leave the military after their commitment would give top-tier leadership a starting base for understanding the problems with retention and to begin developing relevant, effective ways of reducing the impact of internal and external variables so that retention rates improve. Once these factors have been identified, then a leadership protocol can be developed incorporating the most applicable elements of various leadership styles so that leaders can adapt their flexibility to the needs and demands of their specific troop units. Moreover, the leadership protocol could become an eventual proving ground for cultivating a continuous stream of leaders.

The target group in this survey is captains in the Air Force. By using an online survey service, the study will allow a larger number of participants to have access to the surveys.

Rationale

Among identified leadership styles, servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) is a relatively new approach that is beginning to attract the attention of senior military officers. Already some of the servant leadership philosophy has been manifested within different ranks and units of military service. As part of its leadership development program, the U.S. Air Force has encouraged communication networks that help to build trust among all members – regardless of

rank, gender, race, enlistment status, officer position, or identification as civilian contractors.

Kouzes and Posner (2002) concluded that leadership cannot exist in a vacuum without trust and individuals often then pursue their work without any clear understanding of the roles and work being simultaneously pursued by their colleagues and superiors.

Earlier, the popular concept of a “heroic” leader still held force – one who “steered an organization with a firm grip and solved problems single-handedly while still managing to keep the troops inspired” (Cairo, Dotlich, & Rhinesmith, 2005, p. 28). The traditional leadership style as defined by Weber was the preferred method. Yet, in light of increasingly complex and interdependent society, Robert Greenleaf’s (1977) vision of servant leadership seemed to take on heightened relevance. It is defined as the theory of leadership where valuing individuals, developing people, building community, practicing authenticity, and providing leadership that focuses on the positive of those who are being led and whom the organization serves (Hamilton & Nord, 2005). Much as in transformational leadership, symmetrical or two-way communication is essential to the effective practice of servant leadership.

Northouse (2004) defined servant leadership with “a strong altruistic ethical overtone which emphasizes leaders being attentive to the concerns of their followers; they should take care of them and nurture them and in return they will take care of the leaders.” Here, the leader is held as being fully responsible for the follower’s outcome in the organization. In fact, the way an individual emerges to be a leader is by becoming a servant first (Northouse). In the servant leadership style, the authority shifts to those who are being led so that the dynamics of power and control, so important to traditional leadership styles, become secondary to the need to strengthen relationships of trust within the organizational hierarchy. (Perry & Mankin, 2007). Value and trust in leadership as it is presented in the Air Force resemble those articulated by Greenleaf

(1977) and Northouse (2004), which emphasize the mutually complementary effects of community and individual for support and leadership strength.

Similarly, transformational leadership motivates followers to transcend their self-interests for a collective purpose, vision, and/or mission (Feinberg, Ostroff, & Burk 2005). Here the focus on the followers becomes the pretext for trust and admiration for the leadership. In military training for officers, the concept of being a good follower before being a good leader is emphasized (Promotion Fitness, 2003). Plainly, without followers, there are no leaders or leadership (Howell & Shamir, 2005).

Finding a universally acceptable and operational definition of trust is difficult because it is shaped as much by cultural and social perceptions as it is by organizational realities. However, there are a few worth considering given the context of the current research problem at hand.

Trust (Bhattacharya, Devinn, & Pillutla, 1998), could be defined as “an expectancy of positive (or non-positive) outcomes that one can receive based on the expected action of another party in an interaction characterized by uncertainty” (p. 468). Trust, then, is seen to be related to events that have yet to occur. This is seen in Luhmann’s (1988) definition of trust, which supports the idea of individuals acutely conscious of the various alternatives present when a course of action needs to be decided. Sabel (1993) defined trust as “the mutual confidence that no party in the relationship will exploit the vulnerability of the others” (p. 1154). With this vulnerability, managers and leaders may have a hard time developing trust from their followers.

Managers today may have a hard time trusting their employees as evidenced by an increasing need for continuous supervision and quality control activities (Andersen, 2005). In creating more time and effort for the supervisors, employees are then treated as lackeys incapable of independent decision-making. However, in a symmetrical environment in which

notions of trust are actively cultivated, decisions from leadership levels are more likely to be accepted by subordinates (Andersen, 2005). As an equation then, the sum of positive actions equals a stronger sense of trust between leader and follower. The corollary is that the sum of negative actions equals distrust between the two. Covey (1991) explained that “trust, or the lack of it, is at the root of success or failure in relationships and in the bottom-line results of business, industry, education, and government” (p. 44). In any organization – including one such as the U.S. Air Force already with a firmly entrenched leadership culture – the challenge of developing trust on a symmetrical basis is decidedly difficult.

Naturally, situational circumstances are potentially important if not significant from a research perspective. Fiedler’s (1967) contingency model was employed to study group dynamics that included followers’ loyalty, support, and cooperation with the leader as analytical factors for developing a situational determinant of the effectiveness of people-oriented versus task-oriented leaders (Howell & Shamir, 2005). The study most closely resembled the traditional enlistee-officer relationship in the military and Fiedler’s contingency model became the basis for identifying multiple behaviors leaders will call on during situations of differing circumstances. These behaviors include the structure of tasks, as well as the roles taken by followers through the execution of those tasks and decision-making processes (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Northouse (2004) concluded that the context of a leader’s response in different situations is among the most important indicators of leadership effectiveness. Certainly, the contingency model then becomes useful in understanding the reasons and causes of a decline in officer retention especially as different leaders can be assessed and compared on the basis of how they respond to contingent conditions. The contingency model also becomes a good tool for identifying the roles taken by

followers in particular circumstances as evidence of the development of trust between the hierarchical levels of the organization.

Research Questions

The main focus of this study is to determine the increased number of junior officers in the Air Force staying or leaving after their commitment due to trust, and to include recent operation tempo and the force shaping board. The following research is a follow-on study conducted four years after Milligan's (2003) research and the research questions were kept as close as possible to retain the validity and reliability of the study.

1. What is the relationship between trust and organizational commitment in Air Force captains and their intent to leave the Air Force as junior officers?

H₁. There is a relationship between trust and commitment in junior officers staying in the Air Force.

H_{1o}. There is no relationship between trust and commitment in junior officers staying in the Air Force.

H_{1a}. Trust is directly related to commitment.

2. What is the relationship between organizational commitment and intent to leave the Air Force?

H₂. There is a relationship between organizational commitment and intent for junior officers leaving the Air Force.

H_{2o}. There is no relationship between organizational commitment and intent for junior officers leaving the Air Force.

H_{2a}. Organizational commitment is directly related to the intent for junior officers leaving the Air Force.

3. What is the relationship between trust and intent to leave the Air Force?

H₃. There is a relationship between trust and intent for junior officers leaving the Air Force.

H_{3o}. There is no relationship between trust and intent for junior officers leaving the Air Force.

H_{3a}. Trust is directly related to the intent for junior officers leaving the Air Force.

Nature of the Study and Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Quantitative research is a method where there is an attempt to precisely measure something, as seen in the study of retention of military officers and members (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). This method is used to help quantify research by numbers. This is possible by using computerized methods and analysis. The researcher may use this method to describe or predict a research question. Qualitative research approach uses nonprobability sampling design and quantitative is focused on probability. The researcher's involvements in quantitative research compared to qualitative research are different within these two methods. Quantitative uses a high volume of indirect methods of contact with participants, where as qualitative uses a high level of participation with the participants in the research (Cooper & Schindler, 2006).

Qualitative research is a method used by a scholar who has the ability to make choices about various elements of his research. The research question guides the researcher to have a better understanding of which form of sampling is going to be used (Robson, 2002). A qualitative research method allows the researcher to choose the sampling size of the research and might include just two or three focus groups or even a few dozen individual in-depth interviews (Cooper & Schindler, 2006). In this research methodology, there is a sampling approach known as nonprobability. Nonprobability is where there is little attempt in generating a representative