

# RISE ABOVE

**The RAF has long led the way in areas such as technology and innovation. By sharing responsibility and authority according to function and role, and not just by rank or position, the RAF embraces a skilled, educated and professional workforce, which is inclusive, creative and innovative.**

With *Rise Above*, you will:

- Understand that everyone is a leader, whatever their level in the organisation.
- Discover a fresh perspective on leadership from the RAF and how to get the best results for your team.
- Find out what works best in times of conflict.
- Improve your own personal leadership competencies by transferring what works in the RAF to guide your own personal development and enhance your skills as a leader.
- Get inspiration from real-life leadership examples from over 100 years of consistent success within the RAF.

LEADERSHIP  
LESSONS  
FROM THE  
RAF

JOHN JUPP

**FT** PUBLISHING  
FINANCIAL TIMES

## **Praise for *Rise Above***

‘The RAF is regarded as a unique environment. In some ways it is, but it has one thing in common with business: people. In this engaging and fresh analysis, John Jupp demonstrates that hard-won lessons in leading people in the dangerous and demanding work of the armed forces have clear and very valuable application in the business world.’

***Sir David Walker, Non-Executive Director, Alexander  
Mann Solutions***

‘The RAF has entered into the nation’s affection through 100 years of outstanding leadership. Our admiration of battles in the air – whether over the skies of England in the Battle of Britain, the conduct of our aircrew shot down in the Gulf, or the flight of the Black Buck Vulcan and its attack on Port Stanley – is limitless and serves to cement in our minds the amazing bravery and leadership of the RAF. But can business learn from the RAF’s experience and skills? As a business person and an Honorary Group Captain in 601 Squadron, I’ve concluded that many of the leadership skills are transferable. *Rise Above* eloquently shows the way in a manner easily digested by the reader; one could say like a head-up display for business management!’

***Dr Andy Palmer CMG, President; Former CEO, Aston Martin  
Lagonda***

‘Much is written about leadership and there are no rules, but John’s collection of penetrating insights is a first-class handrail for those new to the challenge and others reflecting; I commend it equally to both.’

***Air Marshal Andrew Turner CB CBE MSc BA FRAeS  
CCMI RAF***

could be introduced and encouraged. While at the early meetings of the team some education was given using external speakers on topics such as trust, innovation and ambiguity, the team soon settled into discussing the ambiguous strategic issues facing the RAF – they practised handling ambiguity. The team was not there to make decisions but to ensure that the decision-making boards of the organisation were much better informed.

The second effort, the Strategic Leadership Development Programme, was set up to be, and remains, an education programme to prepare those who might become the strategic leaders of the future – selected individuals at group captain level who had the potential to be promoted to the ranks of air vice marshal and above. To ensure that the lessons learned were embedded, the programme was designed to last 18 months as a series of five meetings covering various aspects of strategic leadership. As a major part of the programme was also to improve knowledge and understanding of each other among the future leaders of the organisation, each cohort going through the programme was invited back over the subsequent 18 months to network with two later cohorts coming through. While improving networking between the cohorts, this also further reinforced the education. Handling ambiguity and leading without authority were directly addressed using theory and case study, while also discussing the formation of corporate strategy, leading change at the strategic level, creating strategic relationships with other organisations and the better understanding of the human relationships that make up strategic leadership. In other words, all the areas where uncertainty, volatility, complexity and ambiguity abound.

The two programmes were designed to be complementary. As the Senior Leadership Team became populated with more people who had been through the Strategic Leadership Development Programme, so the discussion of live volatile and ambiguous issues improved. The trust within the Senior Leadership Team also improved with the better networking provided by the Strategic Leadership Development Programme. Continually inviting the current members of the Senior Leadership Team into the junior programme to provide live experience of strategic leadership as well as more learning and networking also helped.

It would be valid to ask how successful the programmes have been. The first Chief of the Air Staff under whom this work started, Sir Glenn Torpy, certainly greatly valued and saw the difference they made:<sup>7</sup>

*'I can only speak for my time as Chief of the Air Staff, but as a result of your work [to set up and run the Senior Leadership Team] the RAF was more joined-up and aligned than I had ever seen in my career.'*

There is also some academic research that proves that the first five years of the programmes made a difference.<sup>8</sup> After twelve years of the programmes, and to quote a phrase attributed to Chairman Mao Zedong when asked about the French Revolution, 'it is too early to tell' the full effect. That said, there is certainly more cohesion in the strategic thinking at the top of the RAF, and the four Chiefs of the Air Staff to succeed Sir Glenn Torpy continue to rely on both programmes.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUED EDUCATION

The contemporary leadership environment that I have described is by no means confined to those who work in the military: we all face fast-moving, shifting and ambiguous circumstances that leaders in all walks of life must deal with. Leaders must, therefore, remain engaged with the contemporary environment and continually think about the future. A leader's continuous education is vital. When you stop learning, it's time to stop working.

The RAF is very fortunate in having a formal education programme for all personnel through their careers. At every step on the ladder of promotion to a higher position there is a course to continue that education. I have mentioned two, the Strategic Leadership Development Programme and the Senior Leadership Team, but there are courses before, after and during those two. The RAF sponsors master's degrees in leadership, air power studies and international relations. Those who do them then pass on their expertise by writing in internal RAF journals, speaking and mentoring. There are courses for those who need greater technical expertise and for flying, weapons expertise, engineering specialisations and so forth.

Even with such an extensive formalised education system, the actual time spent in learning only comes around infrequently when you consider that careers can last 30 to 40 years, and in the future are likely to be longer. Informal opportunities must also be taken. Clearly, reading is one such way. The Ministry of Defence produces a publication, 'Global Strategic Trends', which is available online (the current edition covers up to 2045) and is excellent reading for those who think about strategy. (It was one of the places that you might have seen the 2008 global financial meltdown coming!) A reading list of useful publications for RAF personnel is sent out every year. There are annual leadership and air power conferences, as well as specialist conferences for engineers, suppliers, administrators and so on. Of course, there are less-formal ways of keeping abreast of the leadership environment, such as talks, lectures and networking. It is exceptionally important that opinions are not just reinforced, as diversity of thought is vital

and leaders need to look for those who will give them contrary thinking and different ideas. This is not easy to do. Just exhorting your people to speak up will not work, and leaders need to create the space, time and culture for it to happen. They also need to work on their own behaviours to ensure that they support their expressed desire to hear different opinions. One technique to use is mindfulness.<sup>9</sup>

It is also important for senior leaders to keep abreast of trends with young people, and even school children, whom they will wish to recruit in the future. Policy making needs to be done with the desires and expectations of young people within the organisation in mind. While the methods already mentioned can help, personal contact with young people is vital. Visits to all parts of their organisations are important, but senior leaders often do too much talking to get necessary communications across and not enough listening. We experimented with getting the youngest and more junior members of the RAF to talk to the Senior Leadership Team, which also helped, although it must be handled carefully to ensure that expectations of the junior people are not excessively stimulated. Some air marshals use reverse mentoring to keep in touch with the attitudes and expectations of young people. This also allows the most junior people to see the problems that policy makers must grapple with. Both sides learn an immense amount.

## SUMMARY

The contemporary leadership environment is exemplified by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. It shows in technological development, national and international politics, natural disasters and extreme weather, in the relationships between organisations, supply-chains and markets. It can be seen almost everywhere you look. As Heraclitus said millennia ago: everything changes, nothing stays the same.

To deal with all these things, leaders should remember the 3Ps. They can process it all out, though care needs to be taken with the numbing effect of the disempowerment of their people and the potential for leaders to become too busy to do the other parts of their job. They can permit it all to be seen and managed by their people so that fleeting opportunity to achieve results can be taken in time and in ways not at first considered. And they can profit from it all so that much greater achievements can be had that were not dreamed of at the start.

Careers last a long time and leaders must remain abreast of developments politically, socially and technologically. Life-long education is a

necessity, using every means at your disposal: organisations should set as much formal education as they can; and leaders should use as many informal ways of keeping up with it all as they are able to lay their hands on. If you stop learning, you stop working.

## THE TAKEAWAYS

- Leaders must be politically, technically and financially astute, embracing the complexity of their organisation and the system in which it works:
  - Through-life education to keep up with the changes and engaged with the world is vital.
- The world and its systems are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Leaders need to learn and choose appropriately between the 3Ps:
  - Process it all out.
  - Permit ambiguity and let followers deal with it and exploit fleeting opportunity.
  - Profit from ambiguity when leading without authority.

## CHAPTER 3

# LEADERS LEADERS EVERYWHERE: UNDERSTAND- ING THE MULTIPLE LEADERSHIP CONTEXTS

**W**hy is it so important in this volatile and ambiguous world to empower your people?  
How do leaders successfully change their organisations?

*All leaders have followers, but what responsibilities do the followers have in all this?*

## INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I examined the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world that leaders have to deal with and how important it is to allow leaders at all levels just to be able to get on and lead. In this chapter, I look at the necessity of properly using Mission Command in this context and also the power that it unleashes. So much more can be done in so much less time. It's really pretty obvious that ten people working without constraint can achieve more than ten people who must constantly find some time with the leader before anything can happen (the leader's time becomes a constraint not an enabler of productivity), as long as those ten people are all working towards the same ends.

In specific contexts it goes so much further than this. The most difficult of leadership contexts, yet one so familiar to any leader in organisations of any size, is change. Leading change in an organisation is something that has to be done all the time. For a multitude of reasons, organisations must change, whether it is continuous improvement programmes, transformations, or turnarounds, mergers, acquisitions – the list is endless, and change is endemic. Forced change from senior leaders is doomed to failure, as so many writers on the subject have proved. However, if leaders at all levels of the organisation are not managing change but leading it, it can be very successful.

I will also address another aspect of leadership that I mentioned in Chapter 1: followership. Sometimes characterised as 'leading upwards', followership can be much more than that. Far from being the supine and passive action of just doing as you are told, good followers should support their leaders actively. Good followers gainsay their leaders when they know something is going to go wrong and actively support them at other times to achieve the best results. Good leaders have to work hard to nurture this behaviour in their followers but, self-evidently, organisations working in this way are going to be better ones. Throughout it is important to think of the multiple contexts within which all leaders work.