

Integrity First
Service before self
Excellence in all we do

These are the Air Force Core Values. Whoever you are and wherever you fit on the Air Force team, [“The Little Blue Book”](#) is your basic guide to the Air Force Core Values.

This booklet is a basic guide to the Core Values. The *United States Air Force Core Values* booklet is available only as an electronic product. Organizations requiring physical copies must download this booklet and have it printed locally. Please submit questions regarding this publication to [AETC](#).



UNITED STATES AIR FORCE CORE VALUES

1 January 1997

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“The Little Blue Book”

Whoever you are and wherever you fit on the Air Force team, this is your basic guide to the Air Force Core Values.

The Core Values exist for all members of the Air Force family—officer, enlisted, and civilian; active, reserve, and retired; senior, junior, and middle management; civil servants; uniformed personnel; and contractors. They are for all of us to read, to understand, to live by, and to cherish.

The Core Values are much more than minimum standards. They remind us what it takes to get the mission done. They inspire us to do our very best at all times. They are the common bond among all comrades in arms, and they are the glue that unifies the force and ties us to the great warriors and public servants of the past.

Integrity first, Service before self, and Excellence in all we do. These are the Air Force Core Values. Study them . . . understand them . . . follow them . . . and encourage others to do the same.

Acknowledgments

— The quotation from General Curtis E. LeMay is used with the kind permission of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing. It is taken from *Mission With Lemay: My Story*, General Curtis E. LeMay and Mackinlay Kantor (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965), p. 572.

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DEFINITIONS

(1) INTEGRITY FIRST

Integrity is a character trait. It is the willingness to do what is right even when no one is looking. It is the “moral compass”—the inner voice; the voice of self-control; the basis for the trust imperative in today’s military.

- Integrity is the ability to hold together and properly regulate all of the elements of a personality. A person of integrity, for example, is capable of acting on conviction. A person of integrity can control impulses and appetites.

- But integrity also covers *several other moral traits* indispensable to national service.

- *Courage.* A person of integrity possesses moral courage and does what is right even if the personal cost is high.
- *Honesty.* Honesty is the hallmark of the military professional because in the military, our word must be our bond. We don’t pencil-whip reports, we don’t cover up tech data violations, we don’t falsify documents, and we don’t write misleading operational readiness messages. *The bottom line is we don’t lie, and we can’t justify any deviation.*
- *Responsibility.* No person of integrity is irresponsible; a person of true integrity acknowledges his or her duties and acts accordingly.
- *Accountability.* No person of integrity tries to shift the blame to others or take credit for the work of others; “the buck stops here” says it best.
- *Justice.* A person of integrity practices justice. Those who do similar things must get similar rewards or similar punishments.
- *Openness.* Professionals of integrity encourage a free flow of information within the organization. They seek feedback from all directions to ensure they are fulfilling key responsibilities, and they are never afraid to allow anyone at any time to examine how they do business.
- *Self-respect.* To have integrity also is to respect oneself as a professional and a human being. A person of integrity does not behave in ways that would bring discredit upon himself or the organization to which he belongs.
- *Humility.* A person of integrity grasps and sobered by the awesome task of defending the Constitution of the United States of America.

The Air Force requires a high level of professional skill, a 24-hour a day commitment, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices. Unfortunately, we've all seen what happens when people forget that basic tenet. Examples of careerism and self interest are present at every level, but they do the most damage when they are displayed by the leader. If the leader is unwilling to sacrifice individual goals for the good of the unit, it's hard to convince other unit members to do so. At that point, the mission suffers, and the ripple effects can be devastating.

— *Secretary Widnall*

(2) *SERVICE BEFORE SELF*

Service before self tells us that professional duties take precedence over personal desires. At the very least it includes the following behaviors:

- **Rule following.** To serve is to do one's duty, and our duties are most commonly expressed through rules. While it may be the case that professionals are expected to exercise judgement in the performance of their duties, good professionals understand that rules have a reason for being, and the default position must be to follow those rules unless there is a clear, operational reason for refusing to do so.
- **Respect for others.** Service before self tells us also that a good leader places the troops ahead of his/her personal comfort. We must *always* act in the certain knowledge that all persons possess fundamental worth as human beings.
- **Discipline and self-control.** Professionals cannot indulge themselves in self-pity, discouragement, anger, frustration, or defeatism. They have a fundamental moral obligation to the persons they lead to strike a tone of confidence and forward-looking optimism. More specifically, they are expected to exercise control in the following areas:
 - *Anger.* Military professionals—and especially commanders at all echelons—are expected to refrain from displays of anger that would bring discredit upon themselves and/or the Air Force.
 - *Appetites.* Those who allow their appetites to drive them to make sexual overtures to subordinates are unfit for military service. Likewise, the excessive consumption of alcohol casts doubt on an individual's fitness, and when such persons are found to be drunk and disorderly, all doubts are removed.
 - *Religious toleration.* Military professionals must remember that religious choice is a matter of individual conscience. Professionals, and especially commanders, must not take it upon themselves to change or coercively influence the religious views of subordinates.

• **Faith in the system.** To lose faith in the system is to adopt the view that you know better than those above you in the chain of command what should or should not be done. In other words, to lose faith in the system is to place self before service. Leaders can be very influential in this regard: if a leader resists the temptation to doubt ‘the system’, then subordinates might follow suit.

(3) *EXCELLENCE IN ALL WE DO*

Excellence in all we do directs us to develop a sustained passion for the continuous improvement and innovation that will propel the Air Force into a long-term, upward spiral of accomplishment and performance.

True quality is embodied in the actions of Air Force people who take decisive steps to improve processes and products; who capitalize on quality as a leverage tool to enhance products, achieve savings, and improve customer service; and who exemplify our core values of integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do.

— *General Fogleman*

• **Product/service excellence.** We must focus on providing services and generating products that fully respond to customer wants and anticipate customer needs, and we must do so within the boundaries established by the taxpaying public.

• **Personal Excellence.** Military professionals must seek out and complete professional military education, stay in physical and mental shape, and continue to refresh their general educational backgrounds.

• **Community Excellence.** Community excellence is achieved when the members of an organization can work together to successfully reach a common goal in an atmosphere free of fear that preserves individual self-worth. Some of the factors influencing interpersonal excellence are:

- *Mutual respect.* Genuine respect involves viewing another person as an *individual* of fundamental worth. Obviously, this means that a person is never judged on the basis of his/her possession of an attribute that places him or her in some racial, ethnic, economic, or gender-based category.
- *Benefit of the doubt.* Working hand in glove with mutual respect is that attitude which says that all coworkers are ‘innocent until proven guilty’. Before rushing to judgement about a person or his/her behavior, it is important to have the whole story.

- **Resources excellence.** *Excellence in all we do* also demands that we aggressively implement policies to ensure the best possible cradle-to-grave management of resources.
 - *Material resources excellence.* Military professionals have an obligation to ensure that all of the equipment and property they ask for is mission essential. This means that residual funds at the end of the year should not be used to purchase ‘nice to have’ add-ons.
 - *Human resources excellence.* Human resources excellence means that we recruit, train, promote, and retain those who can do the best job for us.
- **Operations excellence.** There are two kinds of operations excellence—internal and external.
 - *Excellence of internal operations.* This form of excellence pertains to the way we do business internal to the Air Force—from the unit level to Headquarters Air Force. It involves respect on the unit level and a total commitment to maximizing the Air Force team effort.
 - *Excellence of external operations.* This form of excellence pertains to the way in which we treat the world around us as we conduct our operations. In peacetime, for example, we must be sensitive to the rules governing environmental pollution, and in wartime we are required to obey the laws of war.

WHY THESE CORE VALUES?

There are four reasons why we recognize the Core Values and have developed a strategy to implement them.

The first reason is that **the Core Values tell us the price of admission to the Air Force itself.** Air Force personnel—whether officer, enlisted, civil servant, or contractor—must display

Core values make the military what it is; without them, *we cannot succeed*. They are the values that instill confidence, earn lasting respect, and create willing followers. They are the values that anchor resolve in the most difficult situations. They are the values that buttress mental and physical courage when we enter combat. In essence, they are the three pillars of professionalism that provide the foundation for military leadership at every level.

— *Secretary Widnall*

honesty, courage, responsibility, openness, self-respect, and humility in the face of the mission. All of us must accept accountability and practice justice, which means that all Air Force personnel must possess *Integrity first*. At the same time, a person's "self" must take a back seat to Air Force service: rules must be acknowledged and followed faithfully; other personnel must be respected as persons of fundamental worth; discipline and self-control must be in effect always; and there must be faith in the system. In other words, the price of admission to the Air Force demands that each of us places *Service before self*. And it is imperative that we all seek *Excellence in all we do*—whether it be product/service excellence, resources excellence, community excellence, or operations excellence.

With the incredible diversity of our organization and the myriad of functions necessary to make it work efficiently and effectively, core values remain unifying elements for all our members. They provide a common ground and compass by which we can all measure our ideals and actions.

— *Secretary Widnall*

The second reason for recognizing the Core Values is that **they point to what is universal and unchanging in the profession of arms.** Some persons are bothered by the fact that different branches of the service recognize different values; other persons are bothered by the fact that the Air Force once recognized six values and has now reduced them to three. But these persons need not worry. It is impossible for three or six or nine Core Values to capture the richness that is at the heart of the profession of arms. The values are road signs inviting us to consider key features of the requirements of professional service, but they cannot hope to point to or pick out everything. By examining integrity, service, and excellence, we also eventually discover the importance of duty, honor, country, dedication, fidelity, competence, and a host of other professional requirements and attributes. The important thing is not the three road signs our leaders choose. The important thing is that they have selected road signs, and it is our obligation to understand the ethical demands these road signs pick out.

The third reason for recognizing the Core Values is that they **help us get a fix on the ethical climate of an organization.** How successful are we in trying to live by the Core Values? Our answer to this question may not be the one we'd like to give. All of us have heard about the sensational scandals—senior officers and NCOs engaged in adulterous fraternization; the tragic and senseless crashes of the Ramstein CT-43 and the Fairchild B-52; contractor fraud and cost overruns; and the shutdown of the two Blackhawk helicopters over Iraq. We all have read about these incidents and experienced the shame associated with them. But these big ticket scandals don't just happen in a vacuum, and they aren't always caused by evil people acting on impulse. The people involved knew the difference between right and wrong, and they knew what professionalism demands in these situations.

These big ticket scandals grew out of a climate of ethical erosion. Because we believe our operating procedures or the requirements levied upon us from above are absurd, we tend to 'cut corners', 'skate by', and 'get over'. As time goes by, these actions become easier and they become habitual until one morning we wake up and can no longer distinguish between the 'important' taskings or rules and the 'stupid' ones. Lying on official forms becomes second nature. Placing personal interests ahead of the mission seems sensible. And we develop a 'good enough for government work' mentality.

In such a climate of corrosion the Core Values are like a slap in the face. How far have you strayed from integrity, service, and excellence? What about the folks with whom you work?

Fortunately, there is a fourth reason for recognizing the Core Values; just as they help us to evaluate the climate of our organization, **they also serve as beacons vectoring us back to the path of professional conduct; the Core Values allow us to transform a climate of corrosion into a climate of ethical commitment.** That is why we have developed the Core Values Strategy.

The Air Force is not a social actions agency. It is not an employment agency. ...The Air Force exists to fight and win wars—that's our core expertise. It's what allows us to be called professionals. We're entrusted with the security of our nation. The tools of our trade are lethal, and we engage in operations that involve risk to human life and untold national treasures. Because of what we do our standards *must* be higher than those of society at large. The American public expects it of us and properly so. In the end, we earn the respect and trust of the American people because of the integrity we demonstrate.

— *General Fogleman*

THE CORE VALUES STRATEGY

(1) Assumptions

The following important assumptions govern the Core Values Strategy:

- 1. *The Core Values Strategy exists independently of and does not compete with Chapel programs.* {The Core Values Strategy attempts no explanation of the origin of the Values except to say that all of us, regardless of our religious views, must recognize their functional importance and accept them for that reason. Infusing the Core Values is necessary for successful mission accomplishment.}
- 2. *You don't need to be a commander in order to be a leader.*
- 3. *The leader of an organization is key to its moral climate.* {As does the commander, so does the organization. But a commander must enlist and insist upon the help of all organizational supervisors and all assigned personnel in the effort to ensure a culture of conscience for the organization.}
- 4. *Leaders cannot just be good; they also must be sensitive to their status as role models for their people and thus avoid the appearance of improper behavior.*
- 5. *Leadership from below is at least as important as leadership from above in implementing Core Values.*
- 6. *A culture of conscience is impossible unless civilians, officers, and enlisted personnel understand, accept, internalize, and are free to follow the Core Values.*
- 7. *To understand, accept, and internalize the Core Values, our people must be allowed and encouraged to engage in an extended dialogue about them and to explore the role of the values at all levels of the Air Force.*
- 8. *Our first task is to fix organizations; individual character development is possible, but it is not a goal.* {If a culture of compromise exists in the Air Force, then it is more likely to be the result of bad policies and programs than it is to be symptomatic of any character flaws in our people. Therefore, long before we seek to implement a character development plan, we must thoroughly evaluate and, when necessary, fix our policies, processes, and procedures.}

(2) The Core Values Continuum

Obviously, the Core Values need to be a major topic of education and training—from accession schools (such as basic military training, OTS, ROTC, and USAFA) to senior professional military education schools (such as Senior NCO Academy and Air War College). As our people climb the professional military education and training ladder, they will be schooled to a level of knowledge about the Core Values appropriate to their next level of operational responsibility.

But it is equally obvious that all of the education and training in the world can be wiped out by a supervisor who says, “*Core Values? That’s what they taught you at Lackland. Now, let me tell you how we really do it.*” In other words, it won’t do any good to educate our people in the Core Values if we don’t also live them.

That’s why we need to create a Core Values Continuum. The Core Values must be woven into education and training, and we must be sure that all of our units operationalize the Core Values. We need to continually teach, reinforce, and practice the Core Values—and the only way we can do that is by asking the Schoolhouse and the Field to work together as equal partners. What is learned in the Schoolhouse also will be taught and practiced in the Field; and what is done in the Field later will be re-taught and re-emphasized at the next higher stage of education and training. The end result will be a cradle-to-grave Core Values Continuum for all Air Force Personnel.

(a) The Schoolhouse Weave. For their part in creating the continuum, those engaged in education and training will practice what is called the “Schoolhouse Weave.” That is, the Core Values will be woven into existing courses by an appropriate combination of the following three things:

— *Create a short, introductory lesson* dedicated to defining the Core Values and explaining their importance to the Air Force.

— *Build planned opportunities into the course.* Plan to discuss the Core Values in the context of the subject-matter you are teaching. Where are the values issues most likely to come up with your students? Identify those opportunities and weave core values discussions into the lesson plans you already have. For example, when discussing maintenance forms, an instructor may also add to that technical discussion a discussion of the temptation to lie on such forms. In this way the instructor will reinforce the Core Values and demonstrate to the students the everyday role of the values.

— *Take advantage of unexpected opportunities that arise in a course of instruction.* These are chances to discuss the Core Values as the course unfolds. Such an opportunity may come on the heels of a remark made by a student or it may present itself during the discussion of a technical point. In any case, instructors must be ready to take advantage of the occasion.

In addition, the following principles will govern teaching of the Core Values:

#1 > All education and training in the Air Force will address the Core Values. (Obviously, there are limits to this principle. The goal is to educate all officers, enlisted personnel, and civilians throughout their careers, but that won’t be feasible in all cases.)

#2 > *Teach to the level appropriate to the students once they have finished your course; in other words, prepare them for their next level of responsibility.*

#3 > *Passive learning techniques alone are not acceptable (briefings and lectures are not sufficient by themselves); instructors must primarily use active learning techniques (such as case teaching, collaborative learning, simulations, and directed discussion).*

(b) Operationalizing the Core Values. Making the values an integral part of the way we conduct our daily business will require three coordinated and simultaneous efforts:

— **The Top-Down Approach:** It is absolutely crucial that leaders at all levels (not just commanders) take full responsibility for implementing the Core Values Strategy in their organizations. At the very least, such a top-down emphasis should include the following:

- a public, sincere statement of personal commitment to the Core Values and their importance to Air Force operations.
- the acceptance of one's responsibility for the continuous education of all persons in the operational environment; if the Schoolhouse conducts education and training on more general levels, then operational leaders must conduct continuing education and training on the concrete and practical level. Unit leadership must make the role of the Core Values 'real' by engaging immediate subordinates in a discussion of the specific roles values play in the organization.
- an unflinching commitment to the just enforcement of standards of personal conduct; enforcement should consider the possibility of rehabilitating the violators.
- the courage to examine the ethical climate of the organization one leads and to take positive steps to improve the climate, as needed.
- a complete commitment to building the trust and openness necessary to creating a culture of conscience—even if such a step may invite criticism from superiors or peers.
- walking the talk: living the core values.
- developing a method to evaluate the ethical climate of one's organization that is not itself counter-value in nature.
- the conscious inclusion of the core values in all subordinate feedback and mentoring sessions, with a special emphasis on explaining your understanding of what the Core Values require in the context of your operation.

— **The Bottom-Up Approach:** At the same time that commanders and other leaders are giving the values their top-down emphasis, the members of the organization should be asked to examine all policies, processes, and procedures of the organization that may contribute to a culture of compromise. This involves the performance of a "corrosion analysis" in which members of the organization are asked to (1) list those circumstances in which they are regularly tempted to act

in a manner inconsistent with the Core Values, (2) share their feelings with others in the organization to identify common patterns of potential compromise across the unit, and (3) identify possible causes for these recurrent patterns of potential compromise.

Once the possible causes are identified, the results are surfaced to leadership for action, and such action may consist of one of the following:

- The leadership concurs with the identification of the problem and its cause, and action is taken to fix the situation.
- The leadership does not concur in the analysis and explains why the problem is something that must be lived with or is not caused by the factors identified.

— **The Back-and-Forth Approach:** In addition to the other two approaches, all of the members of the organization will engage in an extended dialogue of the ways to best inculcate the Core Values into the culture of the organization. What does *Service before self* actually mean in our operation? How far should we take the idea of *Excellence in all we do*? How do the demands for *Integrity first* impact working relationships and processes? Given our answers to these questions, what should we do next?

— IV — RESOURCES

This booklet is your basic guide to the Core Values. It is not meant to be your only resource. In fact, the U.S. Air Force has established a Core Values Website at <http://www.usafa.af.mil/core-value/>. It contains a copy of this book as well as a series of readings about the Core Values and their place in the Air Force. In addition, you will find a series of easy-to-use implementation guides, and you may submit questions about the Core Values via the Website mailbox.

This booklet was designed to be brief, to the point, and easy to carry. You are strongly encouraged to visit the Website for a more detailed discussion of the ideas you have been reading on these pages.

In 1965, I was crippled and I was all alone (in a North Vietnamese prison). I realized that they had all the power. I couldn't see how I was ever going get out with my honor and self-respect. The one thing I came to realize was that if you don't lose your integrity you can't be had and you can't be hurt. Compromises multiply and build up when you're working against a skilled extortionist or manipulator. You can't be had if you don't take that first shortcut, of "meet them halfway," as they say, or look for that tacit deal, or make that first compromise.

— Admiral James B. Stockdale

I would lay down my life for America, but I cannot trifle with my honor.

—Admiral John Paul Jones

The unfailing formula for production of morale is patriotism, self-respect, discipline, and self-confidence within a military unit, joined with fair treatment and merited appreciation from without. It cannot be produced by pampering or coddling an army, and is not necessarily destroyed by hardship, danger, or even calamity...It will quickly wither and die if soldiers come to believe themselves the victims of indifference or injustice on the part of their government, or ignorance, personal ambition, or ineptitude on the part of their leaders.

— General Douglas MacArthur

I hope that the United States of America has not yet passed the peak of honor and beauty, and that our people can still sustain certain simple philosophies at which some miserable souls feel it incumbent to sneer. I refer to some of the Psalms, and to the Gettysburg Address, and the Scout Oath. I refer to the Lord's prayer, and to that other oath which a man must take when he stands with hand uplifted, and swears that he will defend his Country.

None of these words described, or the beliefs behind them, can be sung to modern music. But they are there, like rocks and oaks, structurally sound and proven. They are more than rocks and oaks; they are the wing and the prayer of the future.

Whether we venture into realms of Space in our latest vehicles, or whether we are concerned principally with overhauling our engines and loading our ordnance here on the ground, we will still be part of a vast proud mechanism which must function cleanly if it is to function at all.

...Crank her up. Let's go.

— General Curtis E. LeMay