

The grass is not always greener on the other side.

The life experience that has caused me to re-examine my mental model was my decision to get my Bachelor's degree as a non-traditional student with the hopes of being an Air Force pilot. The Air Force had been talking about raising the age limit for pilots from 27 1/2 to 30 years of age; at this time I was 27 years old and with no degree. While not a life or death crucible experience, I feel this decision solidifies who I am today and will greatly influence me as an organizational-level leader in the military in the years to come. Making the decision to get my degree and come back into the military has showed me the importance of making changes, leader development and organizational development.

I first enlisted in the Air Force at the age of 18 as an F-16 crew chief. After 6 years of service, I was done with the military and was ready to move on with my life and explore the civilian side of the working world. I soon realized that life outside of the military was not as rosy as I had envisioned it to be. As a FAA licensed Airframe and Power plant (A&P) mechanic, I was making a mere \$9.00 an hour as an aircraft mechanic. What I did not know at the time was that there was little hope for advancement and I was stuck in a somewhat dead-end job in Sioux City, Iowa. After two years of working in Sioux City, I was truly miserable and would dread Sunday night as I had to go back to work on Monday. I knew I needed to make a change, but making that change was difficult.

Just as the article, *Change or Die* by Alan Deutschman, I too was faced with a rhetorical question. Was I going to work in this dead-end job for the rest of life; or was I going to implement a change that would alter the rest of my life? As it turns out I feel like I made the right decision to go back to school and earn my degree, but it was not without challenges. My decision to go back to school was not difficult but finding the time and the resources to do so

was somewhat of a challenge. I worked full time, went to school at night and on the weekends, and took classes on-line. For three semesters, two times a week I drove 100 miles from Sioux City, Iowa to Offutt AFB in Omaha, Nebraska to take classes at the extended campus there through Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

Reflecting back on the changes required to earn my degree as a non-traditional student I hope will assist me in making organizational changes in the future. For example, without the goal of becoming a pilot in the Air Force, I doubt I would have been able to complete my degree in two and a half years. Therefore, I know it sounds simple, but to affect change you need a clear vision of what the end state will look like. With the end state in place, I enrolled in classes as soon as I could. Once I enrolled in classes, there was no looking back. I gave it 100 percent and some days it felt like I was giving more than 100 percent. The take away from this is that change, at the individual or organizational level, is difficult and it requires vision, action and dedication.

As a non-traditional student, I was able to witness firsthand the importance of education in leader development. Going to school did not make me a better leader, but it did give me a chance to be a leader. I have since received a graduate degree in Management and Leadership and it has opened doors for me such as being at this sister service school writing this paper. I have twice been a flight commander in the Air Force and have mentored both officers and enlisted airmen of the importance of life long education. I have encouraged officers to get a graduate degree and enlisted airmen to get a Bachelors or to somehow continue their education. If I am given the opportunity to command I will stress the importance of education both professional and personal on those who I command and lead.

The final leadership topic that I want to discuss is the organizational culture and climate in the military and how important it is. Back when I was a young enlisted airmen I didn't think I would miss the military life style. After separating from the Air Force, I soon discovered that I truly missed the camaraderie that came with serving my country. In my experience, the civilian sector was more concerned about your contribution to the bottom line and less concerned with the person who produced those numbers. Understanding this first hand, I hope to use this to benefit the culture and climate in my future organizations. Creating a positive, prosperous culture and climate is one way that a leader can create a winning team. One cannot underestimate the importance of family in the military and I will make sure to include them in my decision-making. Lastly, I want to stress that the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence. Having worked on both sides of the fence, I can say with confidence that I made the best decision to come back into the military. While military service is not for everyone, I feel I can use my experience in the civilian work force and my prior enlisted military time to give those I lead a unique insight on what was best for me.

When I separated from the Air Force in 1995, I did not plan to be stuck in a dead end job but that is what ended up happening. In hindsight, not getting the personal satisfaction from my civilian job was a blessing in disguise as it forced me to make a change in my life for the better. Looking back on this time in my life, I am so grateful for the change I made. I will use this experience to aid me as an organizational-level leader who needs to make a change. I plan to use this experience in own life to encourage those I lead and mentor them on the importance of leadership development. Finally, I understand how important organizational development is and that leaders need to set a positive work culture that makes people want to come to work. I am

glad to say that the grass looks greener on my side of the fence now and I hope my story
someday will help others.