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DEVELOPING LEADERS

CMSAF# 18 Kaleth O. Wright



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A CLEAR PURPOSE

CMSAF ROUNDS OUT FIRST YEAR, SAYS THERE'S MORE WORK TO BE DONE



Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright marked his first year as the 18th CMSAF in February, 2018. As the chief looked back on the year, he agreed his team was able to accomplish some of what they set out to do on behalf of the enlisted force, and they have no intention of slowing down anytime soon.

“We started out the first year with a very ambitious list of items we wanted to accomplish,” Wright said. “And if I’m being honest, we were able to knock out a lot of them, but there is still more work to do.”

Among those accomplishments were policy changes for enlisted professional military education, including removing promotion and retention restrictions associated with the completion of distance learning courses. More recently, the announcement that officials have removed distance learning requirements for those in the active component, and are now allowing those in the Air Reserve Component to choose between either completing PME requirements through distance learning or by attending the course in-residence.

“We want to ensure each level of EPME is meaningful works to further develop them as professionals, warfighters and leaders,” Wright said.

Other changes included moving commander’s advance notification of promotions back to seven days prior to public release; allowing limited frocking opportunities for chief master sergeant-selects moving to specific billets; and decreasing the amount of bullet statements required for annual awards, beginning with the 12 Outstanding Airman of the Year program.

TRANSPARENT LEADERSHIP

Wright said other advancements his team made this year were less tangible, but were important all the same. He showed a focus on transparent communication with the force through both official platforms and social media. This was most evident during the government shutdown in January, when Wright and his team took to social media to address concerns and answer questions.

“A lack of trust in any workplace is often due to a lack of transparency,” Wright said. “Transparent leadership is huge in fostering a culture of trust between leaders and their Airmen.”

This is why Wright has shown a determination to communicate with the force whenever possible, noting that people



Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein and Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright speak with Battlefield Airmen in training during a tour of BA training facilities at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland June 15, 2017. For the first time in U.S. military history, the Air Force activated a unit solely dedicated to train the service’s ground component. The unit is called the Battlefield Airmen Training Group and it is a subordinate unit of the 37th Training Wing. (U.S. Air Force photo by Johnny Saldivar)

who are kept in the loop, understand their purpose and their organization’s goals are more apt to place trust in their leaders.

A lot of the changes Wright championed were intended to give Airmen more time back and to allow commanders more involvement in processes of leading their units.

FORCE OF THE FUTURE

Moving forward, his attention will be directed toward what the enlisted force needs in order to fully focus on the mission and to increase lethality across the force. He believes it won’t be any one thing, but a series of interconnected areas combined to reach this goal.

Using the 2018 National Defense Strategy as a guiding document, the chief will plot a course for building the force of the future.

One of the NDS’s key areas is building a more lethal force, noting the surest way to prevent a war is to be prepared to win one. Many factors play into reaching this objective, but for Wright, prioritizing readiness and talent management using a competitive approach to force development are at the top of his list.

When prioritizing readiness, Wright has focused on what the Air Force must do to ensure every Airman is properly trained and ready to perform their core mission at all times. One emphasis area he highlights to impact readiness is what he calls “basic NCO business.” He describes this as ensuring

Airmen are current on their individual mobilization readiness items such as physical health assessments, dental exams and immunizations, and that they have all required deployment equipment. This is foundational to total force readiness, and is something he feels all noncommissioned officers can and should affect within their own work centers.

Placing readiness as a priority means nothing is off the table for Wright, including topics that were once almost considered taboo, from studying the feasibility of returning warrant officers to the force to using enlisted Airmen in aircrew positions typically reserved for officers.

During a three day strategic offsite meeting with combatant and major command senior enlisted leaders and key subject matter experts from different Air Force specialties, Wright placed a priority on warfighting excellence to develop and train enlisted Airmen for a high-end fight and to shape the leaders the Air Force needs for the future. This type of leadership development ties directly into his emphasis on talent management.

“I am really looking at how we deliberately develop our Airmen from day one,” he said. “We need to look at our entire enlisted personnel management system, from tooth to tail, and see how to make the process work for how we’ll operate in 20 years.”

For Wright and his team, talent management means looking at how the Air Force promotes the enlisted corps. But, he understands promotions are the end results of a much more deliberate process. In order to ensure the Air Force is promoting the right people with the right skill sets at the right times in their careers, it’s important to first address how supervisors and commanders assess performance. He emphasizes that performance assessment must start much earlier than the end of an Airman’s enlisted performance report cycle, and has to begin with quality feedback.

To get there, Wright says it will take innovation, risk, creativity and purposefulness.

The 18th Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force is constantly looking at alternative approaches to personnel management. He spends a considerable amount of time researching and studying how other large organizations manage talent, provide feedback and assess performance. But mostly, he listens.



Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright flies in an 8th Special Operations Squadron CV-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft above Eglin Range, Florida, Aug. 9, 2017. Wright shot the .50-caliber machine gun on the ramp and sat in the cockpit to better understand the diverse capabilities of the CV-22 and how it contributes to special operations. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Joseph Pick)

BUILDING TRUST

“I listen to our Airmen, to what they really want from leaders and what they believe they need,” Wright said. “I listen to leaders at all levels. And what I hear each group saying is they want a system that allows them to be more candid in their feedback, to provide areas of improvement and a means to honestly document how Airmen are performing.”

Wright is emphatic that there are great Airmen coming into the Air Force every day, who are eager to serve. His attention now is on how to keep them in uniform.

“Not just how do we retain them, but how do we keep them motivated, how do we keep them encouraged, how do we keep them inspired?” Wright asks. “Because that’s how they come to us. They come to us motivated, encouraged, inspired, agile, innovative, and ready to roll. They come to us feeling a sense of connection. They come to us feeling a sense of purpose.”

He continues, “But, along the way somewhere, something happens. Some of it has to do with the nature of our business; some of it has to do with our extremely high ops tempo. Some of it has to do with what we as an Air Force have to get after some of the additional duties, computer-based training, and moving things out of the way. We are doing a lot of work in that arena.”

“But most of it has to do with the level of leadership and encouragement we provide, the environment we create as leaders in our Air Force. That’s how we get them to stay, how we keep them motivated and inspired. That’s how we keep them resilient; how we utilize them and keep them thinking and being innovative.”



Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright talks to 363rd Training Squadron armament apprentice Airmen in Training Jan. 25, 2018, at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas. The CMSAF visited several schoolhouses that make up the 82nd Training Wing technical training mission, providing insight to the diverse career fields taught at the Air Force's largest technical training installation. (U.S. Air Force photo by Alan R. Quevy)

DEVELOPING RESILIENCE

Wright said that in his second year he will continue to place a premium on resilience, highlighting the need to develop resilient Airmen and families who have the tools to manage stress, instability and unpredictability.

“I don’t see our operations tempo decreasing any time soon, and I don’t see our mission requirements lessening any time soon,” he said. “So, as the global environment changes and the world continues to be increasingly unpredictable, it’s imperative they are prepared to manage stress, cope with change and succeed in an environment with less-than-ideal manning and limited resources.”

He said a focus on resiliency is intrinsically tied to warfighting and readiness. But in order to strengthen resilience, leaders must ensure Airmen and their families are fully equipped with the necessary tools, support systems and mentality to persevere through difficult situations while taking care of the mission, themselves and their families.

But Wright contends that part of addressing resilience within the force is helping Airmen move past the mindset that bonding and working to strengthen their resilience should simply be tied to a specific date on the calendar. Instead he’d like to

pave the way for an environment in which Airmen are present for each other and take care of one another every day of the year.

“If we want to change our culture and attack suicidal and disruptive behavior, we need to get into the mindset that ‘wingman day’ is every day,” he said. “We need to pay attention and make ourselves available. And, this is sometimes the hard part, we need to be willing to step in and do the work necessary to identify and to address behaviors before they reach the point of crisis.”

As Wright moves well into his second year as the service’s most senior enlisted leader, he does so with a passion for fighting for the enlisted force. And while there’s more work to be done, he’s not shy about tackling it head on, saying he’s looking forward to what’s to come, keeping his eye on what’s important for enlisted Airmen and the Air Force.

“Readiness, talent management, leadership, education and development, and innovation— those are all vital to the future of our Air Force,” he said. “We have real work ahead of us to determine what the future holds for the Air Force and how we should be preparing. Because it’s up to us to develop leaders for the future. It’s what our Air Force needs, and it’s what our country demands.”