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THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES: ON THE PRECIPICE OF A SECOND DECADE OF DARKNESS?

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‘Just Do It’: An Assessment of the Impacts to RCAF Culture and Morale in a ‘Do More With Less’ Culture

AIM

1. The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) have been in a continuous cycle of mandatory mission success while suffering from low resource availability, lack of funds and decreased personnel manning.¹ The changing face of international conflict, along with climatic events due to climate change have only increased the demands on the military. This service paper will serve to inform the senior leadership of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and other leadership within the CAF of the long-term impacts of staffing shortfalls on the organization by maintaining a ‘do more with less’ culture and to propose recommendations of how to mitigate these impacts.

INTRODUCTION

2. ‘Doing more with less’ has become a common catch phrase across organizations as businesses have found themselves in a situation of being underfunded and undermanned. It is an attempt to motivate workers to work harder and put in more effort to achieve the same historical results (or better) with less support. In reality, it is simply a different way to characterize overworked personnel. “Overwork is defined as a volume of duties and responsibilities being placed on an individual that exceeds their capacity, as evidenced through working too many hours, having too many ongoing tasks at once or attempting a mission that is too complex.”² A ‘do more with less’ mentality within leadership, combined with the CAF philosophy of ‘mission first’, results in RCAF personnel routinely subjecting themselves to overwork to achieve mission success. This has become the expectation from the institution and is promoted and rewarded throughout the organization.

3. Recent studies have demonstrated a correlation between overworked personnel and increased job satisfaction.³ However, it is critical to recognize the nuances between realizing job satisfaction from achieving mission success and the impacts to the mental wellness of those involved in that success. For example, “a worker who insists he is highly satisfied with his job does not necessarily imply that he maintains a good mental health condition.”⁴ In fact, studies have shown serious impacts to mental well-being with increased overwork.⁵ The typical thrill experienced from a successful mission will increase job satisfaction. However, the mental stressors and issues that arise from the overwork required to achieve that success in an understaffed organization can have profound effects on the member’s overall well-being. Furthermore, a disproportionate emphasis on job satisfaction and an underestimation of the impacts to their mental health can cause a worker to exert additional effort, resulting in more overwork and further damaging their overall mental health.⁶

¹ Dana Sliwinski, “Overworked Personnel: Trying to do Too Much with Too Little,” (Joint Command and Staff Programme Group Service Paper, Canadian Forces College, 2021), 1.

² Sliwinski, “Overworked Personnel: Trying to do Too Much ...”, 1.

³ Sachiko Kuroda and Isamu Yamamoto, “Why Do People Overwork at the Risk of Impairing Mental Health?” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 20, no. 5 (June 2019): 1519-1538, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2071966195?parentSessionId=It11GrF8G8f9vPct095yqQ33HHjLK%2F59G%2FLZGV4q%2FH4%3D&pq-origsite=summon&accountid=9867>.

⁴ Kuroda and Yamamoto, “Why Do People Overwork ...”, 1533-1534.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1521-1522.

⁶ *Ibid.*

4. By focusing on mission success over mental well-being, the RCAF is likely to overlook the long-term damage taking place. Issues such as increased medical issues, alcoholism, poor leadership, decreased morale and lack of motivation will fall to the sidelines. Long-term, these issues will decrease the RCAF's effective strength and erode the overall effectiveness of the force. By preferentially favouring mission success and job satisfaction, the RCAF is at extreme risk of doing less with less. This paper will outline three areas within the RCAF that will experience long-term impacts due to overwork: culture, leadership and morale. It will demonstrate, in each of these areas, the risks to operations and personnel by maintaining a 'do more with less' culture. The long-term impacts of overwork must be recognized early in order to ensure continuous successful operation with the RCAF. This paper will also provide recommendations to mitigate the impact.

CONTEXT

5. Currently, the CAF is understaffed by approximately 10,000 Regular and Reserve force members.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the issue by slowing recruiting and training programmes due to capacity limitations. Additionally, newly implemented requirements for vaccinations has resulted in 900 members at risk of being released from the CAF.⁸ Despite the manning crisis, the missions and tasks for military members are increasing. *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE) established a set of core missions and launched 111 new initiatives, offering clear priorities that intend to "increase CAF structure, re-affirm commitment to long-lasting international alliances and provide new investments to ensure the maintenance and improvement of the institution."⁹ In addition to these priorities, the COVID-19 pandemic brought additional tasks (e.g. support to long-term care facilities) and climate change related Requests for Assistance (RFAs) have increased twelvefold between 2010 and 2020.¹⁰ As mandated by government, the CAF must continue to meet these demands with fewer personnel to share the load. Combined with aging equipment and a culture crisis, the mantra 'do more with less' has become common-place within RCAF culture.

DISCUSSION

Impacts to Culture

6. The culture of the CAF has always been focused on mission success. Conceptual Foundations states "the dominant imperative is to accomplish the mission, often at some risk to the participants."¹¹ This idea reinforces the philosophy that putting mission before people and self is the main priority of CAF leaders.¹² As previously discussed, with manning shortfalls and the increasing mandates for the RCAF, achieving mission success will result in more overwork

⁷ John Ivison, "Canada's Neglected Military Reaching Point of Being Irrelevant," *National Post*, 18 Jan 2022.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2017), 11.

¹⁰ Wilfrid Greaves, "Climate Change and Security in Canada," *International Journal (Toronto)* 76, no. 2 (July 2021): 194, https://journals-sagepub-com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1177/00207020211019325?utm_source=summon&utm_medium=discovery-provider.

¹¹ Department of National Defence, *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2005), 20.

¹² Sliwinski, "Overworked Personnel: Trying to do Too Much ...", 9.

for individual members. In previous decades, several studies analysed the impact of increased work on mental health, and few indicated a significant correlation between the two.¹³ Based on the academic evidence that was prevalent during their formative years, the senior leadership of the RCAF fail to recognize the impact of overwork on members. As such, overwork has become the norm in RCAF culture. Phrases such as ‘just do it’, ‘failure is not an option’ and ‘suck it up’ have become common colloquialisms that are engrained in recruits from the first day of basic training. They have become part of the culture. This leads members to an understanding that despite all else, the mission must get accomplished. ‘Do more with less’ has simply become an additional catch-phrase to reinforce this mentality. More recent academic literature has shown that “... the military as an institution has created an environment where it is literally impossible to execute to standard all that is required,”¹⁴ and more importantly, that there is a strong correlation between overwork and decreased mental health.¹⁵ As the RCAF culture develops additional ways to encourage overwork, the impacts to personnel must be recognized.

7. A major impact resulting from overwork that is also promoted by RCAF culture is the use of alcohol. More recent academic research (2018) has indicated that personnel who work longer hours exhibited a linear correlation with eroding mental health.¹⁶ It also indicated that members who suffer mental health symptoms were more likely to use alcohol more frequently.¹⁷ While alcohol use in itself will not lead to significant impacts to the RCAF, increasing overwork can further deteriorate members’ mental health, which can eventually lead to alcohol abuse. As alcohol establishments are a large part of RCAF culture, access to alcohol is incredibly easy for members who wish to partake. Increased alcohol use and misuse will result in increased absenteeism, reducing the personnel available to complete tasks. It can also contribute to further decreasing overall mental and physical health over time, which places additional pressures on the medical system. A culture that embraces alcohol use and promotes overwork is impacting the available workforce while simultaneously increasing required work. This cycle promulgates the ‘do more with less’ ideology, while damaging the personnel required to carry out the missions.

8. Culture change in itself is also impacted by a ‘do more with less’ mentality. When personnel are short on time, tasks that do not qualify as missions get pushed to the sidelines. As it is easiest to stick with the status quo, culture change, and the effort required by personnel to effect it, becomes secondary to operational missions. Gender integration and inclusion is a prime example. Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) was introduced as mandatory training in the RCAF in 2017 but the training was only provided online and “and the analysis rarely [went] beyond a checklist or ‘box ticking’ exercise.”¹⁸ In studies, when asked why GBA+ has been slow to catch on with little impact to culture, respondents reasoned a lack of “political support and leadership, ... adequate financial and human resources, training and education, monitoring and

¹³ Kuroda and Yamamoto, “Why Do People Overwork ...”, 1520.

¹⁴ Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (Strategic Studies Institute: U.S. Army War College, 2015), 2.

¹⁵ Kuroda and Yamamoto, “Why Do People Overwork ...”, 1519.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ M. Virtanen *et al.*, “Long Working Hours and Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression: A 5-Year Follow-Up of the Whitehall II Study,” *Psychological Medicine* 41, no. 12 (Dec 2011): 2491, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/917420015?parentSessionId=4pUw8KAz4T%2B1P8Van16cg%2Fz%2BxCs%2BTBwrkOhGXWtyuKI%3D&pq-origsite=summon&accountid=9867>.

¹⁸ Tammy Findlay, “Revisiting GBA/GBA+: Innovations and Interventions,” *Canadian Public Administration* 62, no. 3 (2019): 522, <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1111/capa.12341>.

evaluation [and] accountability.”¹⁹ Culture change falls within the required tasks of the RCAF, but scarce resources and energy are put toward those missions that get the most recognition. Without the proper attention by leadership to ensure culture change initiatives take similar priority to operational missions, culture change will be impacted for the foreseeable future.

Impacts to Leadership

9. A culture that prioritizes mission success over its personnel will have issues with the type of leadership styles that proliferate. Those who are able to get the job done will be looked upon favourably over those who are more conservative. To achieve mission success in an undermanned organization, these personnel will commit additional effort, but will also achieve great job satisfaction from their success. Studies have shown that members who are overworked often overvalue job satisfaction while disregarding the negative impacts of overwork.²⁰ This trend is frequently caused by overconfidence or the satisfaction of feeling like a critical member of the team.²¹ These feelings subsequently lead to a desire to achieve increased mission success, leading to more overwork and greater satisfaction. Subordinates will emulate this conduct, creating multiple generations of officers and non-commissioned members (NCMs) who undervalue mental well-being and overvalue job satisfaction. Furthermore, these leaders will receive the most recognition and be promoted more quickly, further propagating the image that mission success at the expense of well-being is a desirable leadership quality in the RCAF.

10. In addition to leaders who undervalue personnel well-being, leadership styles that favour rapid decision-making may also be promoted. ‘Do more with less’, although usually referring to people or resources, can also be taken to imply having less time. Scholarship argues that a lack of time can lead to ineffective leadership and unsound judgments. Dr. Mary Crossan’s Character Based Leadership (CBL) framework argues that an equal balance of eleven essential leadership characteristics results in effective leadership.²² A lack of time can cause an imbalance in some of these characteristics, which skews the leader’s ability to make prudent judgments. The traits of Humanity, exhibited in leaders who “are available and generous with their time,”²³ as well as Collaboration, which is present in leaders who put in the “additional time it takes to pursue collaborative solutions”²⁴ will both be lacking in leaders who are overworked and short on time. The imbalance between traits causes the leader’s Judgment trait to be off-kilter, resulting in poor decision-making. In fact, poor judgment caused by overwork has been documented in studies that indicate that heavy workloads, and the related insufficient sleep “have detrimental effects on ... decision-making and subsequently, safety.”²⁵ An organization with fewer people who are overwhelmed by work and leaders that have insufficient time is at far greater risk of making poor

¹⁹ Olena Hankivsky and Linda Mussell, “Gender-Based Analysis Plus in Canada: Problems and Possibilities of Integrating Intersectionality,” *Canadian Public Policy* 44, no. 4 (2018): 307, <https://search-ebscohost-com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eoh&AN=EP134408398&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²⁰ Kuroda and Yamamoto, “Why Do People Overwork ...”, 1521.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1522.

²² Mary Crossan, Gerard Seijts, and Jeffrey Gandz, *Developing Leadership Character* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cfvlibrary-ebooks/reader.action?docID=4219389&ppg=27>.

²³ Crossan, *Developing Leadership Character* ..., 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁵ Takashi Yamauchi *et al*, “Long Working Hours, Sleep-Related Problems, and Near-misses/injuries in Industrial Setting Using a Nationally Representative Sample of Workers in Japan,” *PLoS One* 14, no. 7 (July 2019): 8, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2258359959?parentSessionId=rsw90wkYh8IVjZAzG5sj10bNpCtNNkEVGypphHpbsCM%3D&pq-origsite=summon&accountid=9867>.

decisions and compromising safety. By focusing on mission success and getting more done with less, leaders are exhibiting leadership styles that merely exacerbate the issue, encouraging subsequent generations of poor leadership.

Impacts to Morale

11. Personnel motivation is perhaps the most important factor within the morale sphere that will impact future operations within the RCAF. Unfortunately, very little research has been conducted on the impact to motivation within a context of overwork, “despite its centrality in achieving more with less.”²⁶ Some deductions can be made, however from the available scholarship. Morale and life satisfaction have been demonstrated to follow an inverse U-shaped curve when compared to working hours; life satisfaction increases with working hours to a certain point, but then rapidly declines as working hours extend.²⁷ Beyond a certain threshold of hours, *job satisfaction* can subsequently increase again, but this satisfaction is only achieved with work in excess of 55 hours per week.²⁸ There is therefore an ideal amount of work that effectively balances morale and job satisfaction. Above this threshold, the negative impacts to mental health and morale far outweigh the benefits to job satisfaction. As morale decreases, motivation will be lacking to achieve the mission. By demanding too much work from members, their motivation may become so low that they are no longer effective.

12. Misalignment of personal values with those of the organization also have significant impacts to the morale of RCAF members. “Several prior studies ... have shown that the congruence between an individual’s personal values and those reflected in the organization ... is a significant predictor of job satisfaction.”²⁹ While perhaps more subtle, studies have indicated a movement away from the values of honesty and integrity within armed forces as a whole due to resource-mission mismatch (i.e. ‘doing more with less’).³⁰ A study in the US Army indicated an overwhelming culture of ‘pencil-whipping’ training requirements in order to meet the requisite demands.³¹ “The long-term result of resource–mission mismatch is cheating, dishonesty and a corrosive ethical culture that few acknowledge.”³² As job requirements and personal values diverge, morale across the ranks decreases, resulting in fewer personnel who are committed to mission success. Other values such as humility, fairness, temperance and accountability can also understandably be misaligned in an overworked culture.³³ Scholarship indicates that “value alignment will moderate the negative effects of worse working conditions on work motivation”³⁴ and should be sought by leaders to increase and maintain morale within their units.

²⁶ Marc Esteve *et al*, “The Effects of Doing More with Less in the Public Sector: Evidence from a Large-Scale Survey,” *Public Administration Review* 77, no. 4 (March 2017): 545, <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.cfc.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1111/puar.12766>.

²⁷ Kuroda and Yamamoto, “Why Do People Overwork ...”, 1521-1522.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1533.

²⁹ Esteve, “The Effects of Doing More with Less ...”, 546.

³⁰ Allan English, “Corruption in the Canadian Military? Destroying Trust in the Chain of Command,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23:1 (December 2016): 35-36, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/11926422.2016.1250654?casa_token=O7el5RqSzdQAAAAA:cWM7cZHENLT3b5t4QLWZZ5bIeAmwPQ-cEJeTco7jj4u3H9muXJcYDsEKo0RSCBlcKM5IY8hUn5wsPw.

³¹ Wong and Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army* ..., 7-8.

³² *Ibid.*, 33.

³³ Crossan, *Developing Leadership Character* ..., 17.

³⁴ Esteve, “The Effects of Doing More with Less ...”, 546.

CONCLUSION

13. This paper has illuminated some of the long-term impacts by maintaining a ‘do more with less’ culture. A culture that tolerates increased risks to mental health, alcoholism and lack of effort to non-operational missions is less effective at mission success. Leadership styles that disregard member well-being and make poor decisions will proliferate in this culture. Finally, member morale will decrease through value misalignment and lack of motivation due to overwork. While this is not an exhaustive list, it does represent some areas of concern of which the RCAF leadership should remain cognizant and the potential impacts of staying the current course. The RCAF needs to begin taking a serious look at what can reasonably be achieved with the manning shortfalls, before the impacts to personnel result in the RCAF becoming irrelevant.

RECOMMENDATIONS

14. The following recommendations should be taken into consideration by RCAF leadership to facilitate ‘doing more with less’ while protecting the work force:

- a. Implement working hour regulations, similar to Crew Duty Day rules, to those employed in support trades, limiting hours they may work in the office or remotely. This will facilitate increased rest-work cycles, mitigate the risk of poor decision-making and increase the chances of sound judgments.
- b. Modify the concept of ‘do more with less’ to ‘*be effective with less*’. A redefinition of the capabilities that the RCAF can reasonably employ and a re-focus of energy and resources into most effectively employing only those capabilities will allow the RCAF to remain relevant while minimizing overwork.
- c. Redefine the philosophy of the CAF to “People First, Mission Always”. A shift in focus to ensure proper support to personnel well-being, as mission success cannot be achieved without a healthy and motivated force of aviators, soldiers and sailors to accomplish it.

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