



The Problem With Short Staffing and Maintaining a Strategically Relevant Air Force

Lieutenant-Colonel Kirri L. Lean

JCSP 49 DL

Exercise Solo Flight

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PCEMI n° 49 AD

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE - COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 49 DL - PCEMI n° 49 AD
2022 - 2024

Exercise Solo Flight – Exercice Solo Flight

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Lieutenant-Colonel Kirri L. Lean

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THE PROBLEM WITH SHORT STAFFING AND MAINTAINING A STRATEGICALLY RELEVANT AIR FORCE

INTRODUCTION

The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) is in a state where current personnel numbers are significantly below preferred levels. This results in deleterious impacts that threaten operational capability and the future state of the RCAF. To reduce the impacts, and strive to reach a state of strategic relevance, the RCAF needs to address personnel shortages by embracing some different organizational strategies such as clarity of purpose, organization-member value alignment and adjusting the work climate for members.

BACKGROUND

What is the issue?

The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) had defined their strategic objectives as “valuing our people and investing in their future, ready to conduct operations, modernize for tomorrow and engage and partner for success”.¹ This will lead to a strategically relevant air force for Canada.

Canada’s close allies, the US Air Force define a relevant air force as one that keeps up with the pacing threat, that is effects-focused, integrated. To this end, the US Air Force is focusing their efforts on readiness, power projection, capabilities development and people.² This bares a resemblance to the RCAF’s efforts. Both Air Forces identify that the current state of their respective Air Force’s are not where they need to be today to combat the existing and emerging threats. The reasons for this are varied. The changing nature of warfare from counterinsurgency to a return to state on state requiring different equipment, techniques and strategies, decades of underspending on equipment procurement and maintenance, significant delays to developmental programs are but a few of the reasons articulated for the current posture.³ The US has clearly articulated that should a large scale conflict arise in the coming years, with a fast developing adversary, they are targeting being prepared to win it. As part of their strategy, they intend to rely on

¹ Canada, *RCAF Strategy*, 14, [royal-canadian-air-force-strategy.pdf \(canada.ca\)](https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/royal-canadian-air-force-strategy.pdf)

² A summary on the view of the US Air Force articulated by Honorable Kristyn Jones, the undersecretary of the Air Force, and Lieutenant General Rick Moore, the deputy chief of staff for plans and programs, on 24 January 2024 at a discussion on “Air Force Priorities in an Era of Strategic Competition.”

CSIS, *Air Force Priorities in an Era of Strategic Competition*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/air-force-priorities-era-strategic-competition>

³ Ibid.

allies to achieve this aim.⁴ As a result, for the RCAF to be strategically relevant to the world stage and play a role in any future conflict, several goals need to be achieved.⁵

One of the major areas of focus to bring the RCAF back to strategic relevance is the focus on people. This includes focusing on desired values and behaviours, creating environments of inclusion, recruiting and retention efforts, creating work-life balance, refining support systems, enabling continuous professional development, optimizing talent management and succession planning and expanding the Primary Reserve.⁶

The CAF is currently short by over 16,000 personnel.⁷ With the replacement of existing and new capabilities outlined in Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE), NORAD Modernization (NORAD Mod) and Our North Strong and Free (ONSAF) indicated a requirement for additional positions. These requirements, if left unfilled, will result in the CAF being understaffed by more than 36 percent.⁸ This understaffing is not equally distributed across all CAF elements, and some trades are more impacted than others, such as pilots for example. This creates a significant problem for the RCAF.

Additionally, there is increased demand from government on the employment of the CAF to address global conflict, with the Government recently announced commitments in the Indo-Pacific strategy and increased presence in Latvia.⁹ These two factors combine to suggest that the mantra of ‘do more with less’ continues.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Canada, *RCAF Strategy*, 14

⁶ Canada, *RCAF Strategy*, 15

⁷ “Military dealing with more than 10,000 unfilled positions amid growing pressures”, *National Post*, 18 January 2022, <https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/military-dealing-with-more-than-10000-unfilled-positions-amid-growing-pressure>;

“I am very, very worried about our numbers,” Eyre told a House of Commons committee in April. “Our readiness is going down within the Canadian Armed Forces,” he said. “The military we have today is not the one we need for the future.””

David Common, “Long hair, signing bonuses and ‘try before you buy’”, *CBC News*, 13 September 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canadian-armed-forces-recruitment-1.6963988>.

⁸ “The shortfall cited by Blair is the gap between the Armed Forces’ current size and its authorized strength, he said — it doesn’t reflect what the military needs to carry out the new defence policy, or the demands of modernizing continental defence under NORAD. To meet those demands, Eyre said, the Armed Forces needs to take on an additional 14,500 people on top of the 16,500 required to bring the military up to authorized strength.”

Total new requirement for personnel is 85,500. Total personnel shortfall is 31,000 or 36%.

Murray Brewster, “Demand of defence policy almost double military’s recruitment gap, top soldier warns”, *CBC News* 19 April 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/wayne-eyre-bill-blair-armed-forces-recruitment-1.7177911>

⁹ “Minister Blair Announces Measures to Strengthen Canada’s Military Presence in Latvia”, Canadian Military Family Magazine, 22 December 2023, <https://www.cfmag.ca/policy/minister-blair-announced-measures-to-strengthen-canadas-military-presence-in-latvia/>

The current RCAF personnel shortfalls of 2500 are a significant concern for ensuring a strategically relevant air force that can undertake the required missions.¹⁰ Currently, the RCAF is also at a disadvantage with older, more resource intensive to maintain, equipment, however this is being addressed through the acquisition of replacement capabilities.¹¹

In addition to this, annual funding to the Department of National Defence (DND) has had spending restricted by close to a billion dollars per year; this will continue for the next couple of years.¹² This further limits the RCAF's ability to conduct business 'as usual', as the Deputy Minister Bill Matthews stated, "the streamlining and consolidation of training, reductions to travel budgets, reallocation of work, or re-absorption of certain functions into the Defence Team, as professional services costs are reduced".¹³ The RCAF will have reduced flexibility and options to undertake all mandates. This will further exacerbate the issues of insufficient personnel.

Why is this an issue?

The RCAF is acquiring many new platforms that both address obsolescence of current capability and will bring online new capabilities to address emerging threats. As these new capabilities come online, the demand for personnel will continue to grow.¹⁴

Thousands of required personnel will need to be recruited and trained to undertake highly technical and skilled roles within the RCAF. Even by recruiting skilled individuals, this process will take years for each person to reach operational effectiveness. Additionally, the RCAF is not responsible for recruitment of personnel for which it will employ, not the initial training of these members.¹⁵ In the meantime, there will continue to be mismatch between the number of personnel in the RCAF and the number of personnel the RCAF needs to operate, maintain and support capabilities. This will likely result in capabilities

¹⁰ Chris Thatcher, "Wanted – An appeal for all Trades", *Skies Magazine*, February/March 2024, 70 <https://issues.skiesmag.com/554/766/1704/CSV14I1-FebMar2024/index.html>.

¹¹ Canada, "Strong, Secure, Engaged", <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/canada-defence-policy.html>;

Canada, "NORAD Modernization project timelines", <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/allies-partners/norad/norad-modernization-project-timelines.html>;

Canada, "Our North, Strong and Free: A new vision for Defence", 8 April 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/north-strong-free-2024.html>

¹² "...planned spending reductions of \$810 million for 2024–25, growing to \$908 million per year in 2026–27 and ongoing fiscal years."

Canada, "DM/CDS Message: DND/CAF Departmental Plan 2024–25 and Spending Reductions", 4 March 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2024/03/dm-cds-message-dnd-caf-departmental-plan-2024-25-spending-eductions.html>

¹³ Canada, "DM/CDS Message..."

¹⁴ Brewster, "Demands of defence..."

¹⁵ Canada. Canadian Forces Recruiting Group HQ. <http://borden.mil.ca/33/10.aspx>

that will go un- or under-utilised and that the available personnel will continue to see a significant workload increase.

Understaffed workers see an increase in workload which in cases of significant mismatches creates a culture of overwork. Overwork culture creates dissatisfaction and burnout and attracts and retains certain personality types.¹⁶ This has several negative impacts on the workforce, including workaholism, reduced job satisfaction and motivation, unsustainable work pace leading to higher turnover, and short- and long-term health impacts.¹⁷ Workaholism is detrimental to an organization as it tends to create a culture that attracts and retains individuals who are rigid, perfectionist and achievement-oriented.¹⁸ These traits of rigidity and perfectionism are subjective, in that an individual determines and holds themselves and other accountable to them. This is contrary to the CAF institutionally valued traits of adaptability, innovation and partnering.¹⁹ Additionally, workaholism does not equate to increased performance or productivity and may in fact contribute to increased inefficiency.

It is important to note that there is evidence to suggest that there are individuals who are able to work long hours, remain engaged and motivated and continue to produce efficiently. These are the exception not the norm.²⁰ A sustainable work environment should be developed that enables all personnel to thrive, not just those for whom long work hours is internally rewarding.

In addition to the negative impacts of overwork to employees, the organization sees increased levels of inefficiency, absenteeism, worker withdrawal, higher turnover and increased energy consumption and carbon emissions.²¹ Higher levels of inefficiency,

¹⁶ Mazzetti, G., Schaufeli, W. B., & Guglielmi, D., “Are workaholics born or made? Relations of workaholism with person characteristics and overwork climate”, *International Journal of Stress Management*, 21(3), 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035700>

¹⁷ Lonnie Golden and Morris Altman Chapter for R. Burke and G. Cooper (eds.), “Why Do People Overwork? Over-Supply of Hours of Labor, Labor Market Forces and Adaptive Preferences Effects of Work Hours and Work Addiction: Strategies for Dealing with Them.” Elsevier, 2008, 5 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228237502_Why_Do_People_Overwork_Over_Supply_of_Hours_of_Labor_Labor_Market_Forces_and_Adaptive_Preferences;

“The high prevalence of overwork has led to concerns about its impact on employee well-being. The harmful consequences of working long hours include sleep deprivation, decline in neurocognitive and physiological functioning, impaired performance, and an increased risk of illnesses and injuries (e.g., Caruso, 2006). In addition, working overtime leads to prolonged exposure to workplace hazards and demands, decreases time for leisure activities and family life, and reduces recovery time (Dahlgren, Kecklund, & Akerstedt, 2006).”

Mazzetti, “Are workaholics born”, 228.

¹⁸ Mazzetti, “Are workaholics born”, 230.

¹⁹ Canada, “CAF Competency Model”, http://cmp-cpm.mil.ca/assets/CMP_Intranet/docs/en/recruitment-careers/performance-and-competency-evaluation/caf-competency-model.pdf

²⁰ Mazzetti, 234.

²¹ Golden, “Why Do People”, 7-10.

absenteeism, worker withdrawal and high turnover further exacerbate personnel shortages. Increased energy consumption and carbon emissions are contrary to climate change efforts in place by the Government of Canada (GoC).²²

Should there continue to be such a significant shortfall of personnel, capabilities may need to be parked until such time as personnel numbers permit their operation.²³ This seems counter to the goal of having a strategically relevant air force, for which these new capabilities are being procured to achieve. It should be noted that adversaries are not delaying procurement and operation of capabilities, but rather are accelerating it.²⁴ Time is not on Canada's side.

DISCUSSION

What can be done?

To address personnel shortages, strategies that organizations, especially ones that are also facing economic hardship, can be evaluated for relevance to the RCAF.

The first consideration is that successful organizations take time to become exceptionally clear on what they want to achieve and where they provide unique services or products.²⁵ This can take time and must be revisited frequently enough to ensure that their stated purpose reflects the environment, but not so frequently that the organization exists in a state of crisis through constant change. The recommendation is no more frequently than every five years to ensure that the organization is pivoting appropriately to the environment.²⁶ Once this is clear, an organization must stop doing things that don't lead to achievement of these goals, ensure that the structure, systems and resourcing levels equip employees to achieve the organizational purpose. Anything that does not support the organization's purpose is either outsourced or divested. A deliberate decision must be

²² Golden, "Why do people", 8;
Canada. "Net-zero emissions by 2050."
<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/weather/climatechange/climate-plan/net-zero-emissions-2050.html>

²³ Brewster, "Demands of defence...".
²⁴ "we're not able to bring our investments up to those levels that we had planned. So we're continuing to cede time to our adversaries, and that's causing significant impacts now – even more if we don't get the appropriation" and "the combat capability that we need to field in order to stay relevant and to try and keep up with the pacing threat, they're not possible under fiscal guidance like this."

CSIS, *Air Force Priorities*.

²⁵ Sally Blout and Paul Leinwand, "Why are we Here?", *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/11/why-are-we-here>

²⁶ Girod and Karim, "Restructure or Reconfigure?", *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/03/restructure-or-reconfigure>.

made about what an organization needs to stop doing. Divesting of these parts of an organization must be done in a deliberate and purposeful manner.

Almost as important is an organization's decision on what not to change or stop doing. This continuity of purpose needs to be communicated to employees with the same vigour as what is changing.²⁷

The second consideration is to strengthen the organization-employee value alignment.²⁸ This alignment moderates the impacts of overwork on motivation and job satisfaction.²⁹ Alignment begins with an organization clearly articulating their values. Rona Lynn Fitzpatrick, Organization Conflict Mediator, conducted a literature review to understand the preventative approach that value alignment can have regarding conflict management.³⁰ She identified three fundamental business strategies that were used to by organizations. These strategies are product leadership, operational excellence and customer intimacy. While the research suggests that an organization needs to develop all three, these should be categorized hierarchically by an organization to ensure that when resources are constrained, or conflicts arise between competing strategies, one will have primacy.

Product leadership pertains to innovating products or services, operationalizing them quickly, continuous improvement and reduction of bureaucracy that slows this process down.³¹ Operational excellence focuses on minimising costs and inconvenience, efficient service or products and optimizing processes. Values relating to this include efficiency, discipline and performance standards as they apply to planning, quality assurance and accounting.³² Customer intimacy strategies focus on “continually modifying products and/or services” and organizations that strive for this will concentrate on customer needs, decentralize operations to empower those who work directly with the customer allowing them to quickly respond to customer needs.³³

²⁷ Girod, “Restructure or Reconfigure?”

²⁸ Esteve, Marc, C. Schuster, A. Albareda, and C. Losada. "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), 544, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/puar.12766>

²⁹ Ibid., 549

³⁰ Portions of this literature review were part of a thesis, “Exploring values alignment as a strategy to enhance collaboration in a government agency”; submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in conflict analysis and management from the Royal Roads University (August 2005).

Rona Lynn Fitzpatrick, “A literature review exploring values alignment as a proactive approach to conflict management”, *International Journal of Conflict Management*, Vol. 18 No. 3, 2007, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/10444060710826007/full/pdf>

³¹ Ibid., 293

³² Ibid., 294

³³ Ibid., 294

Once an organization has determined its hierarchical values they should be articulated to the employees. An underutilized, but important process, is to seek employee feedback on these values. Employees should be asked to identify which of the organizational values they identify with.³⁴ Common values should then be routinely highlighted to ensure strong value alignment between organization and employee. This will serve to mitigate some of the impacts of overwork and contribute to retention efforts of an organization.

The third consideration is to modify the work climate to reduce levels of overwork for employees, assist employees to perform work more efficiently, and reward this.³⁵ Mazzetti makes a distinction between workplace culture and workplace climate. Workplace culture is defined as “a set of shared meanings on core values, beliefs, underlying ideologies and assumptions of organizational life taught to newcomers as the proper way to think and based on stories, myths, and socialization experiences.”³⁶ Whereas workplace climate is defined as “the shared perceptions of and meaning employees attach to the policies, practices, and procedures they experience and the behaviors they observe being rewarded and that are supported and expected.”³⁷ An example of this is an organization that rewards employees who achieve productive outputs and that also enjoy nonwork activities.³⁸ Organizations should continue to target the right candidates, train and retain individuals to reduce instances of overwork. They should embrace technologies that allow for efficiencies and train people to use them.

In addition to this, a small-scale Turkish study looked at the correlations between five work environment factors and employee performance. These factors were workload, physical work environment, supervisor and coworker support, training and development and employee benefits. The study concluded that while all factors contributed to employee performance, the strongest correlation was contentment with employee benefits. Second to this was supervisor and coworkers support, which is supported by a RAF study on a sense of positive group memberships and increased resilience.³⁹ Employee benefits are considered compensation in any form other than monthly salary or pay, examples include child and elder care, insurance, paid vacation and sick leave, pensions, medical and dental care.⁴⁰ The study also highlighted that there was no one-size-fits all approach that can be applied to all employees.

³⁴ Ibid., 298

³⁵ Mazzetti, “Are workaholics”, 247

³⁶ Ibid, 234

³⁷ Ibid., 234

³⁸ Ibid., 248

³⁹ White, C.A., Slater, M.J., Turner, M.J., Barker, J.B. “More positive group memberships are associated with greater resilience in Royal Air Force (RAF) personnel. British Journal of Social Psychology, Volume 60, Issue 2, 400 <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12385>

⁴⁰ Mohamad Shammout, “The impact of work environment on employee performance”, International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science, Volume 03, Issue 11,

What should the RCAF do?

With these described strategies, the RCAF should consider and adapt them for use.

The first consideration is to provide clarity on organizational purpose. The RCAF strategy, published in February 2023 addresses organizational purpose and direction. It outlines the objectives the RCAF it is seeking to achieve in the next decade, including the new capabilities and.⁴¹ The RCAF Campaign plan further elaborates on this.⁴² Given that personnel levels are predicted to be short by thirty percent and that adjusting resource levels is largely outside of the RCAF's control, limiting operations and mandates commensurate with personnel levels is necessary to ensure that these strategic level goals will be achievable in the next decade.⁴³ To align with the intent of organizational clarity outlined above, the RCAF needs to be just as purposeful and deliberate about what it will stop doing as it is with the goals it intends to achieve. Consideration should be given to divestment of activities that no longer support the current or future state of the air force. Activities that have not seen the return on investment expected should be considered for divestment, an example being expensive recruitment initiatives that are not increasing recruiting numbers in desired trades as needed.

The second consideration is to increase value alignment between the RCAF and its members. Using Fitzpatrick's findings, first the RCAF should decide which of the three strategies will be the priority between product leadership, operational excellence and customer intimacy. Currently the RCAF appears to prioritize all three to about the same extent. In this time of personnel shortages, focusing on operational excellence first would pay dividends as efficiencies are found to deliver on existing processes, both freeing up capacity to undertake lesser priorities and setting the stage to enable faster transitions to future capabilities. The next priority should be product leadership through the implementation and transition strategies of new fleets and capabilities. The RCAF can afford to have this be a lesser priority as the majority of acquiring new capabilities is completed through a centralized process for which they play a part but are not solely

November 2021, 90, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Engr-Mohamad-Shammout/publication/357836304_THE_IMPACT_OF_WORK_ENVIRONMENT_ON_EMPLOYEES_PERFORMANCE/links/61e1ee579a753545e2d00b4c/THE-IMPACT-OF-WORK-ENVIRONMENT-ON-EMPLOYEES-PERFORMANCE.pdf

⁴¹ Canada, RCAF Strategy.

⁴² Canada, RCAF Campaign, http://rcaf.mil.ca/assets/RCAF_Intranet/docs/en/campaign-plan/cp-placemat/rcaf-campaign-plan-to-2035-final-page-2.pdf

⁴³ Canada, RCAF crews travel across Canada in a recruitment blitz, *The Maple Leaf*, 26 March 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2024/03/rcaf-crews-travel-across-canada-recruitment-blitz.html>

responsible.⁴⁴ The lowest priority at this time, would be customer intimacy. As this is applies to the RCAF, this would be the improvements in product or service that are made over time through consultation with customers. These would be the in-mission decisions made by operational or tactical level commanders and are changes made to fit the needs of the specific client. Once these priorities are clearly articulated, the RCAF should seek member feedback on these and seek opportunities to highlight shared values, priorities and objectives. Consideration should be given to including highlighting these during the recruiting process also.

The third consideration is to review workplace climate factors, primarily employee benefits. While employee benefits are under the purview of a separate organization, the RCAF can engage with members to determine which employee benefits would be helpful. Not only should the RCAF engage serving members, but members who have released could be consulted. Consideration could be given to having multiple available benefits available for personnel that they can take advantage of as their situation deems. As an example, a new member in a high cost of living city with young children that require day care would need different benefits than a member who has been in longer with a mortgage close to paid off, that has grown children but aged parents who require care. The ability to tap in and out of benefits more readily as they apply to the various stages of a member's career could be something the RCAF can advocate for.

Of the organizational strategies described above, the RCAF is limited by nature of it being an organization nested within a government department. As such, control over certain types of organizational changes are limited. The actions that the RCAF can undertake are to focus on clearly defining and articulating the organizational purpose with hierarchical values, engaging in more retention strategies such as instituting value alignment and advocating for employee benefits that work for RCAF members, it can also continue to support recruitment activities where able, reduce workload for individual members in the short-term through supporting efficiencies and reducing operations and mandate to levels supported by trained personnel numbers.

CONCLUSION

The RCAF finds itself in a position of transition preparing to address the next major conflict for which it requires strategic relevance. Attempts to modernize are inhibited by the personnel levels, which put a strategically relevant RCAF at risk. The RCAF can undertake several steps to reduce this risk. They can clearly define and articulate organizational purpose, increase retention strategies by instituting value alignment and

⁴⁴ Canada, "Project Approval Directive", 2019, <https://collaboration.vcds.forces.mil.ca/sites/dspp/pad/SitePages/pad.aspx>

advocate for employee benefits that work for RCAF members. Intensive recruitment activities should be continued where able and efforts to reduce workload for individual members in the short-term should be undertaken through supporting efficiencies and reducing operations and mandate. In this way, the RCAF can work towards a strategically relevant air force that is prepared to respond to emerging threats along with allies and partners.

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