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Design of Air Force Human Resource Management Governance Board Membership and Processes for Optimal Force Management

Preliminary Discussion and Recommendations

Shirley M. Ross, Charles P. Armentrout

Effective human resource development and human resource management (HRD/HRM) in the Air Force are challenging endeavors. The Air Force differs from corporate and most other governmental organizations not only in size, with more than 600,000 civilian and military personnel in 300+ different specialties, but also in complexity. The complexity stems in part from the wide variety of missions, including aviation, maintenance, administration, logistics, medicine, and so forth, as well as domains of ground, air, space, and cyber in which the Air Force operates. There is also a diversity of organizational cultures throughout its workforce, as well as an unusual breadth and depth of stakeholders both inside and outside

the organization (including Congress, which provides voluminous statutes governing HRD and HRM).

Moreover, on the uniformed military side, the human resources (HR) system is largely a “closed system.” In most corporate systems, if a shortage of midlevel or senior-level leaders arises, HR can select and hire from outside the company to fill the need. It is not normally possible, however, to hire into a midlevel or senior leadership role in the uniformed services from outside of the military. Therefore, if a miscalculation or an unexpected environmental dynamic creates a gap between requirements and available, developed human resources, the HR levers available to address the gap are much more limited than in the corporate world. This puts additional stresses on HRM modeling, analysis, and decisionmaking.

To meet these unique HRD/HRM challenges, the Air Force employs a sizable group of highly trained analysts and human resource professionals. Further, in recent years, the Air Force has leveraged governance structures comprising leaders with experience from across a wide range of specialties, missions, and domains—commonly called cross-functional leaders—who meet periodically to inform HR decisions, policies, and practices. This utilization of governance structures for HRD/HRM decisions is not unique to the Air Force. It can be argued, however, that it is particularly valuable for the Air Force, given the challenges just discussed as well as recent strategy imperatives, to develop a flexible and adaptive workforce capable of meeting emerging and indeterminate challenges of the future.

Within the past decade, the Air Force has employed two governance structures to oversee HRD/HRM. The first was known as the Force Management and Development Council (FMDC), and the current is the HRM Strategic Council (HSC). Recently, considerable interest has been expressed in discarding the HSC format in favor of returning to an FMDC-like structure. This Perspective reviews the two structures and provides analysis of strengths and weaknesses. The primary objective is to provide insights to assist in development of a new, more effective governance structure that will meet the challenge of providing greater adaptability and flexibility as outlined in current Air Force strategy. The insights offered are based on our informed judgments and perspective based on our experience, observations, and discussions with knowledgeable people and stakeholders.

To better understand past experience with HRM governance boards, we undertook unstructured interviews with a small group of senior leaders who had been key officeholders within the Office of Manpower, Personnel, and Services (AF/A1) and the office of

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the Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs (SAF/MR) and who had firsthand knowledge and experience with the governance structures discussed in this Perspective. Published documents and discussions with current staff, as well as our personal experience—which collectively included considerable oversight and participation in HRM governance processes in both the Air Force and large corporations—helped to shape the interviews and contextualize the information gained.

Although far from comprehensive, given the short time frame, our investigation did identify a number of strengths and weaknesses associated with the past and current HRM governance structures. Although these strengths and weaknesses varied somewhat by interviewee, three areas of agreement, or themes, emerged. We believe these themes in particular are significant considerations in the design of any new Air Force HRD/HRM governance structure. First, however, we will detail some of the history of Air Force HR policy and address the collective strengths and weaknesses of each structure that were identified by our experts.

Background

Modern force development constructs in the Air Force had their genesis in RAND work commissioned in the late 1990s to address mismatches between general officer requirements and the backgrounds of available candidates (Moore and Brauner, 2007). Although much of the early work in this area was officer-centric, it eventually expanded into a broader leadership base that included senior civilian and enlisted leaders. This work also informed policies and practices beyond the scope of senior leader management because the development of senior leaders necessarily begins much earlier than when a senior rank or position is obtained.

Prior to 2004, an officer's development was primarily controlled by trained assignment teams at the Air Force Personnel Center (AFPC), with some input from senior officers in an officer's career field, from any possible mentors, and from the officer's own understanding of what was needed to succeed in the Air Force. There was no institutional HRD or HRM governance structure, and there was little deliberate, institutional input and oversight of this process unless a failure occurred (e.g., if retention waned because of inadequate developmental opportunities in a specific career field).

During a 2002 CORONA meeting of Air Force senior leaders, increasing interest in earlier work by RAND and others culminated in the approval of a new concept of leadership and development, which was subsequently promulgated in AFDD 1-1, *Leadership and Force Development*, in February 2004 (Hanser et al., 2015). This new concept reflected recognition that strategic leaders had to be developed broadly, requiring a breadth of leadership

experience, education, and training inclusive of the institutional Air Force, as well as joint, intergovernmental, business, and international perspectives. To facilitate this broader institutional perspective, and to provide an institutional oversight mechanism, this new directive included an overarching strategic governance structure for force development known as the FMDC (Air Force Instruction 36-2640, 2008).

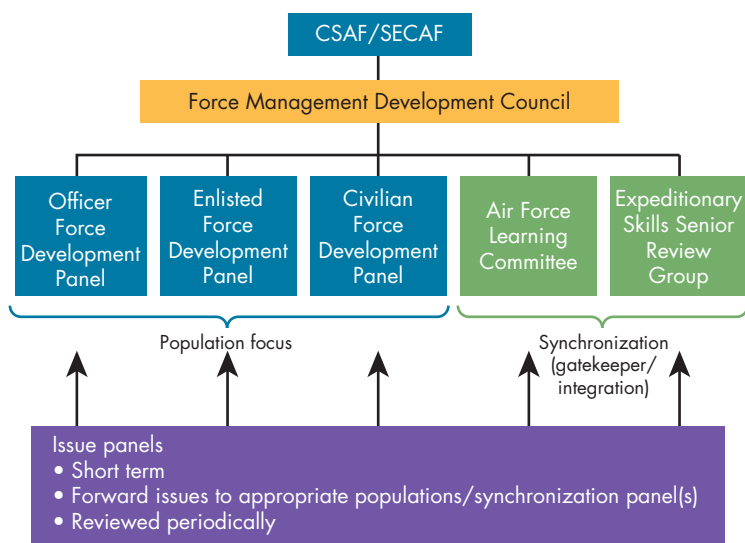
It is interesting to note that a second type of HRM governance structure focusing on developing functional leaders was also borne out of the 2002 CORONA gathering. This structure, known as development teams (DTs), endures to this day. Membership of each DT comprises leaders from the career field it oversees, and the primary focus of development is future leaders in that career field. DTs take direction from functional leadership (and previously from the FMDC when it was operational), and they play a critical role in developing officers and Department of the Air Force civilians to support current and projected mission capabilities. DTs do this primarily through deliberate assignment of officers to maximize desired experience, although they also play a role in selecting officers within their own functions for other institutional development opportunities.

By contrast, the FMDC was chartered to provide a broader, institutional perspective on U.S. Air Force (AF)-wide force management and development issues, and to make strategic-level recommendations to the Secretary of the Air Force (SecAF) and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF). Its membership included senior representation from across the force, including operational entities outside of normal HR policy decisionmaking circles. The Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force chaired the FMDC, and membership included representatives of AF/A1,

functional authorities, Major Command Vice Chiefs of Staff (MAJCOM/CVs), the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force (CMSAF), the Air Force Reserve Command Vice Chief of Staff, the Director of the Air National Guard (NGB/CF), and the SAF/MR. The Air University Commander and U.S. Air Force Academy Commander were advisors. The FMDC was designed to meet semiannually and to be administratively supported by the Directorate of Force Development. (See Figure 1.)

The FMDC's components also included Officer, Enlisted, and Civilian Force Development Panels (OFDP, EFDP, and CFDP, respectively). These panels made recommendations to the FMDC

Figure 1. FMDC Structure



SOURCE: AF/A1 slide.

regarding effective development and utilization of airmen, guiding future force development efforts and synchronizing functional community, MAJCOM, and Headquarters (HQ) AF force development initiatives. The OFDP was composed of MAJCOM/CVs and chaired by the AF/A1 director, the EFDP was composed of the senior enlisted advisors of the MAJCOMs and chaired by the CMSAF, and the CFDP comprised functional representatives and was chaired by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (A1).

The FMDC also included an Air Force Learning Committee, which made recommendations to the FMDC on desired outcomes of AF institutional competency development programs, and it adjudicated additions and subtractions from these programs as well. A fifth group, the Expeditionary Skills Senior Review Group, was soon added, and it monitored what were perceived as overly burdensome ancillary training requirements. Advisory panels were added as needed to address issues in such career areas as space, nuclear, and cyber.

The FMDC concept survived for more than ten years and had several strengths that will be discussed further later. A combination of factors seemed to lead to its demise. The workload required to communicate and coordinate information on the issues and to manage the FMDC processes was substantive and, combined with the need for a significant commitment of time and resources by senior-level leaders from across the Air Force, led some we interviewed to conclude that the FMDC was eventually “crushed under its own weight.”

This explanation seems to be supported by the decision in the fall of 2013 by the Under Secretary of the Air Force and the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force. That decision changed the structure and the purpose of the AF Council (another strategic governance

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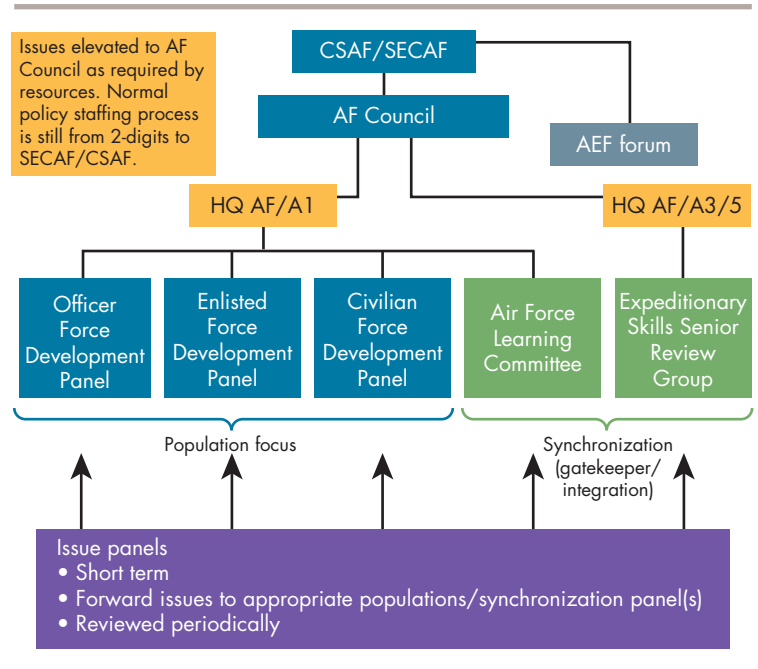
body that had many of the same members but was primarily focused on programming and budgeting issues) to an overarching governance structure that addressed all “big rock” Air Force issues in one forum, subsuming, in effect, the FMDC. According to the Director of Force Development in AF/A1, the stated purpose of this move was to improve efficiency and “bundle” all the meetings requiring MAJCOM Vices coming to Washington, D.C.

This roll-up included absorption of force development and management issues into the AF Council—issues that were previously under the FMDC’s purview. It was thought that the membership and responsibilities of the FMDC were redundant with the AF Council, which could consider force development inputs and insights from a broader base when needed or desired. This move was also expected to reduce the number of additional meetings, processes, and associated costs. The resulting flow that was envisioned is illustrated in Figure 2.

The AF Council remained primarily budget focused. This orientation raised concerns that policy and strategy decisions were sometimes being driven by budget concerns, rather than strategy

and policy driving the budget. For example, one individual noted that in late 2015, Air Force programmers, without consultation with the AF/A1 or SAF/MR, proposed to the AF Council that a 66-percent cut be made to advanced academic degree programs. In this case, the AF/A1 was able to engage and make a strong case, and the Under Secretary of the Air Force and Vice Chief of Staff reversed the cut in the end. Far too often, however, programming or budgetary cuts are neither informed nor driven by HR strategy or priorities, and, in fact, they directly contradict those priorities

Figure 2. New Force Development Decision Process



SOURCE: AF/A1 slide.

NOTE: AEF = Air & Space Expeditionary Force; AF/A3/5 = Operations, Plans & Requirements.

at times. Late reversals of such programming inputs as the one described are not always possible. Further, the breadth and volume of responsibility given to the AF Council did not allow for detailed investigation, analysis, and consideration of the wide range of existing and emerging HRM issues.

This latter concern was partially addressed by the creation of a new governance structure near the end of 2013, not long after the AF Council realignment. According to multiple interviewees, the SecAF was interested in pushing total force integration considerations into the HRM arena as part of the larger “3-in-1” initiative. The “3-in-1” initiative was an attempt to align policies and practices among active duty, Air Force Reserve, and Air National Guard to promote transparency, understanding, and consistency across components. In November 2013, Air Force Policy Directive (AFPD) 36-81, *Total Force (TF) Human Resource Management (HRM) Domain Governance*, formally established a new governance structure comprising the Human Resource Management Strategic Board (HSB)—subordinate to the HSC—as part of this initiative. The goal of the new HSB/HSC structure was to improve agility and therefore to better develop, integrate, and execute HRM capabilities across the Total Force. (See Figure 3.)

The Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs serves as the HSC chair, and core members include AF/A1, AF/RE, NGB/CF, SAF/FM and SAF/US(M). The HSC meets quarterly, and it is the senior forum for cross-component consideration of the most critical Air Force HRM issues. The HSB is chaired by the SAF/MRR or designee. Core members include AF/A1X, REP, NGB/A1, and SAF/FMP. The HSB provides a strategic forum for initial corporate review and evaluation of HRM issues, and it also ensures each com-

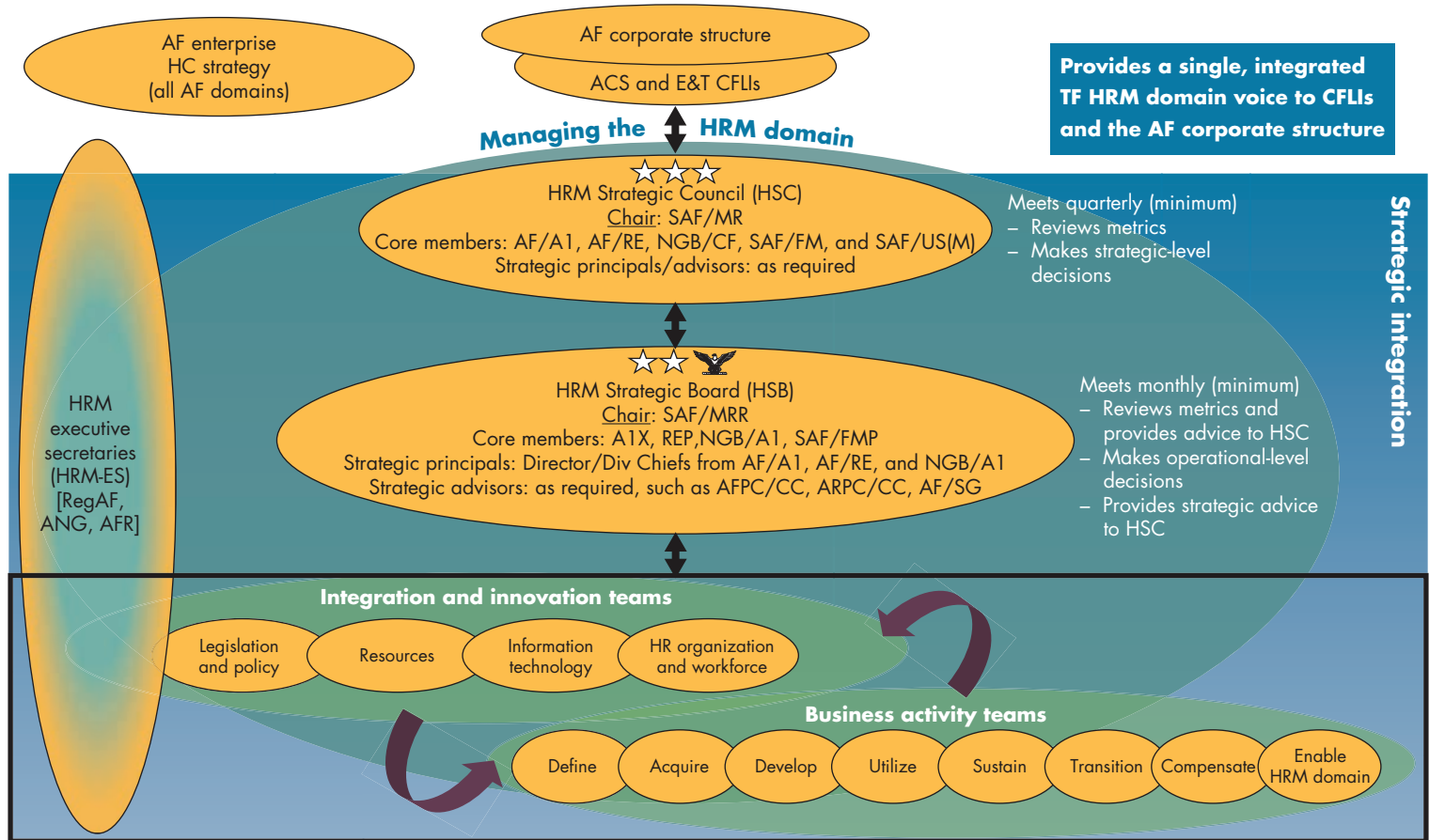
One concern mentioned repeatedly is the need for improved synchronization of the processes that drive strategic priorities and resource allocation decisions.

ponent is recognized as a mandatory coordinator on all HRM recommendations. Recommendations approved by the HSB are then presented to the HSC for consideration. Strategic advisors for both forums are added as required.

Factors Driving Change

Recent interest in returning to an FMDC-like structure is fueled by multiple concerns. One concern mentioned repeatedly is the need for improved synchronization of the processes that drive strategic priorities and resource allocation decisions. This need was highlighted recently by the disconnect between the considerable strategy and policy prioritization work performed under the Human Capital Annex (HCA) of the Strategic Plan and the separate budget prioritization arrived at independently by the AF Council, which left most if not all key priorities under the HCA unfunded.

Figure 3. The HSB/HSC Governance Structure



SOURCE: AFPD 36-81, 2013.

NOTES: HC = human capital; ACS = agile combat support; E&T = education and training; CFLI = Core Function Lead Integrator; AF/RE = Chief, Air Force Reserve; SAF/FM = Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Financial Management & Controller); SAF/US(M) = Deputy Chief Management Officer, Office of the Under Secretary of the Air Force; SAF/MRR = Deputy Assistant Secretary for Reserve Affairs; A1X = Headquarters, Department of the Air Force; REP = Reserve Enlistment Program; NGB/A1 = National Guard Bureau Directorate of Manpower, Personnel, and Services; SAF/FMP = Air Force Deputy Assistant Secretary for Programs; AFPC/CC = Air Force Personnel Center Commander; ARPC/CC = Air Reserve Personnel Center Commander; AF/SG = Air Force Surgeon General; RegAF = Regular Air Force; ANG = Air National Guard; AFR = Air Force Reserve.

Further, it appears that a lack of common vision regarding expectations and boundaries associated with an HRM governance structure may be driving some dissatisfaction. Before embarking on redesign of governance, it may be worth considering a deliberate process to clarify what purposes and outcomes are sought from the governance structure or body. Is it primarily intended as an advisory body, as a management body used to integrate shared management responsibilities (e.g., between AF/A1, functional managers, MAJCOMs, etc.), or as a true corporate governance structure? If a governance structure is desired, to what degree will the body take responsibility for strategy, policy development, and oversight from those who are charged in statute or policy to provide those functions? Will the staff functions in the offices of AF/A1 and SAF/MR then be primarily responsible for management and integration versus strategy and oversight? Further, based on answers to these questions, there must be a clear-eyed assessment of whether sufficient resources and support are available for effective operation of the desired end-state. Answers to these questions are key to design of governance, including determining who leads and who participates in this body.

Preliminary Analysis

The FMDC

One strength of the FMDC governance configuration identified by multiple interviewees was a membership that mirrored the AF Council's membership, thereby providing policy and budget linkage. Additionally, the FMDC was timed to influence the Planning,

Programming, Budgeting, and Execution system. In addition to the funding linkages, the CFDP in particular filled critical conceptual gaps at the strategic level of civilian management and development, when previously there had been little structure and oversight. An example was the introduction of a sustainable force management framework, including a competency-based workforce management approach, that sought to develop both career field and corporate leadership professionals across the Air Force and Department of Defense—a significant step forward in civilian development.

On the other hand, perceived weaknesses included a broad group of concerns:

- a. insufficient TF perspective
- b. tendency to be uniform-centric
- c. insufficient input from programmers and budgeters
- d. high demands on the “engine room,” the small group of personnel required to manage and integrate the large volume of work as an ancillary duty
- e. tendency of the OFDP in particular to be very tactical and invasive in its policy efforts
- f. limits on frequency of decision meetings and the council's agility due to the number of high-ranking members.

Important Themes

Overall, through discussion of strengths and weaknesses of both governance structures, three important ideas or themes related to governance structures in the Air Force emerged. We believe these themes, in particular, should be carefully considered in any process seeking an updated or alternative HRD/HRM governance structure.

First, regardless of what form the governance structure takes, a dedicated, credible, high-performing “engine room” is necessary for success. Cross-functional teams require a wide range of information and analysis to reach their decisions, and a great deal of effort is required to manage the process of educating and coordinating among a large group of senior-level members. The amount of effort spent with senior leaders on coordination of schedules, education on the pending issues, and effective influence regarding optimal recommendations is directly correlated with success. We share the concerns voiced as to whether current, thinly stretched manning levels at the Air Staff and SAF/MR offices could accommodate a sizeable staff dedicated to managing an FMDC-type structure. However, there is a considerable number of strategic initiatives, and there is a need for strategic integration and communication. These functions could also be assigned to an engine room and removed as workload from the staff—similar to the Army’s use of a Strategic Initiatives Group.

A second theme had to do with the propensity of Air Force senior operational leadership, at times with narrower interests, to come in forcefully with its own ideas of development and management of the force. While this input was sought after, forceful personalities sometimes overrode analysis, expertise, and concerns from A1 and SAF/MR leadership and disproportionately affected resolutions or recommendations. Some interviewees expressed the opinion that MAJCOMs crossing the line from providing informed input to implicit policy ownership may have been one of the deciding factors in A1 and SAF/MR ultimately going along with the elimination of the FMDC.

Skillful effort is typically required to address this second theme. Maintaining the focus of functional and operational

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senior leaders on topics and solutions currently being worked, and not segueing into “pet” theories or extraneous issues, requires a disciplined process. So in addition to effort, there is an additional requirement to mitigate this issue: Those staffers working with an FMDC-like board membership to prepare for board meetings must have the credibility to exert influence on the most-senior leaders of the Air Force. Much influence takes place before formal meetings, and thus agreement or alliances leading to favorable or optimal decisions typically must be forged prior to the board meeting itself. In other words, for the process to remain disciplined and focused, the staffers in the “engine room” must be seasoned and credible.

The choice of board membership and design of board processes are also factors critical to successfully influencing senior leadership to stay within the bounds of sound HRM and HRD practices. One member of our team, as an example, was successful in maintaining the discipline of a focused agenda and positive outcomes in a large corporation’s executive HRM subcommittee through a combination of several features. First

was careful selection of board membership for advocacy and influence in the full Executive Committee (EC). A second important feature was attachment of HRM subcommittee meetings to prescheduled bimonthly EC meetings, so that senior leadership was already in place and available. Subcommittee meetings took place after the full Executive Session as a separate entity so that HRM agenda items could not be “kicked” to the next EC meeting. Third, decisions were teed up with chronological alignment to major executive budgeting cycles. Lastly, there was faithful and timely outreach to individual board members before board meetings, to educate on and advocate the upcoming agenda. This combination of features resulted in the tamping down of nonproductive ideas before they reached board discussion. In summary, maintaining tight control of the agenda and confining discussion to the most pressing issues and reasonable resolutions are necessary to address the second theme.

A third theme was a strong recommendation that the governance structure be hard-wired into programming and budgeting decision processes, by means of board membership selection and alignment of governance processes with corporate processes. Major strategies and policies arrived at without assurances of similar priorities within the budgeting and programming community risk failure. The downside of nonaligned governance and budgeting processes can be seen in the recent uncertainty of funding for HCA initiatives developed with considerable time and effort through the HSB/HSC.

To address this third theme, design elements are again crucial. Board membership once more comes into play: If membership is overlapping, or if the membership in the HRM board and the

funding bodies are duplicative or corresponding, advocacy is built in. Also important, of course, is chronological and structural alignment with corporate funding processes. Although this alignment would take some amount of redesign work for HRM leadership to accomplish, it would facilitate availability of funds by ensuring that the desired strategic proposals and initiatives are in the right funding discussions at the appropriate junctures.

Recommendations

It is too often the case that proposed initiatives that are strategic and cross-functional—initiatives that could solve pressing organizational problems—are not acted upon because the organization has not systematically designed or maintained the structure and processes by which to get them funded and implemented. Ambiguous governance stemming from lack of accountability, absent or ineffectual advocacy, or inability to align with funding sources will almost guarantee that meaningful strategic initiatives will fail to get out of the starting gate.

Given the changes in governance currently under discussion, we would recommend the following action plan:

1. Accomplish a clear-eyed assessment of whether sufficient resources are available for an effective “engine room.” There are no shortcuts.
 - a. If resources for an “engine room” can be assembled, establishment of a good foundation will be under way. If not, any FMDC-like structure will likely not be successful, and an alternative design might be more pragmatic.

- b. If an “engine room” can be staffed, its personnel should be selected for high credibility and should have demonstrated records of successfully influencing top leadership. Engine room personnel will be interfacing with board members on board processes and issues prior to the formal board meetings, and they therefore must be willing and able to engage and set the stage for focus on relevant issues and reasonable resolutions. Effective upfront work with board members can help deter “pet” theories and ill-considered solutions.
2. Whether an FMDC-like board is created or a hybrid of that design is seen as a better alternative, carefully craft board membership and board processes.
 - a. Select board membership with an eye toward top-level advocacy, which can often be accomplished with overlapping membership in both the HRM governance board and corporate boards that determine prioritization and funding.
 - b. Redesign the architecture and timing of HRM governance board processes to align with corporate funding cycles and processes.
 - c. Instead of a separate board process, explore whether an HRM subcommittee can be feasibly attached as a separate subentity to an already existing top-level, regularly scheduled leadership decisional body.
 - d. The board should act as a central clearinghouse for force development initiatives across the components, functional communities, and MAJCOMs, and it should facilitate communication across these entities.

Regardless of approach, mature and highly developed organizations have recognized that HRM as a function must have its seat at the table in top-of-the-house decisional bodies of the organization. Advocacy from that level comes easiest when the most-senior leaders have foreknowledge of initiatives and have the opportunity to weigh in. Maintaining those inputs at a level so as not to overwhelm functional expertise is an art, requiring planning and skillful efforts by HRM leadership. Although governance can be challenging to design and manage, an effective and advantageous governance structure can propel orderly approval and funding of sound strategic initiatives in ways often not otherwise forthcoming within the organization.

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About This Perspective

Within the past decade, the Air Force has employed two governance structures to oversee human resource development and human resource management (HRM). The first was known as the Force Management and Development Council (FMDC), and the current is a nested structure of the HRM Strategic Council (HSC) and HRM Strategic Board (HSB). Recently, considerable interest has been expressed in discarding the HSC/HSB format in favor of returning to an FMDC-like structure. This Perspective reviews the two structures and provides analysis of strengths and weaknesses. The primary objective is to provide insights to assist in development of a new, more effective governance structure that will meet the challenge of providing greater adaptability and flexibility as called for in current Air Force strategy. The insights offered are based on the authors' informed judgments and perspectives based on their experience, observations, and discussions with knowledgeable subject-matter experts and stakeholders.

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