Ep. 20: Airman development and the future of cyberspace

[Narrator] Welcome to Sword and Shield, the official podcast of the 960th Cyberspace Wing. Join us for insight, knowledge, mentorship and some fun, as we discuss relevant topics in and around our wing. Please understand that the views expressed in this podcast are not necessarily the views of the U. S. Air Force, nor the Air Force Reserve, and no endorsement of any particular person or business is ever intended. (Upbeat music)

All right. Welcome back to the sword and shield podcast. I'm Colonel Rick Erredge - And I'm chief master Sergeant Chris Howard. - Hey chief. It's been a while since we've been back together here doing podcasts together so good see ya. - You too sir. It has been right, with everything going on and all the great guests that we've had over the last few weeks, we've been able to, to kind of break that up and we've got to talk to some great people but you and I haven't actually got to sit down and discuss a number of items. I know we just closed out DTS and we just closed out some of the KPLs recently, and we're closing out all the senior NCO EPRs and we're getting into the NCOs and there are a lot of questions out there. That's kind of hoping that we could talk about today, sir. - I think that'd be great. Some of these questions kind can come up every year. I think we've got to continue to refresh them. - Right. - And then there are some new things that come up that we should maybe address and how we handle and let folks know kind of what we're thinking about from a development perspective. - Yes sir. Agreed. And you know, from my perspective, I like to get your view on it as well, is that it all starts with the ACA, what are your thoughts on that sir? - Yeah, so we talked a few podcasts go about EPRs OPRs and we talked a little bit about the ACA but to me, the ACA is the foundational discussion between the supervisor and member. - Right? - You have to have that discussion about what you expect. And I think the ACA is maybe just a form or function for us to do that. We shouldn't be doing it anyways. - Right. (Chuckles) - And we should've been doing it all along and some supervisors do it and some don't and the ACA is just probably an Avenue to make that happen. And I've been in organizations where, hey, I want to see the ACA come with the EPR OPR that prove you did it. And I've seen other organizations where you ask them ACA and they go, - "What's an ACA?" - "What what's an ACA?" Right. - So, but I think it's important. And to me, I'm on the other end of, I want to see the ACA and I want to make sure that supervisors are doing their job. And it's really important for me. - Yes, sir. And I know ACA; we kind of get wrapped up around the form right? Versus the intent as well right? The form is one of those pieces that helps drive towards the intent of, of what that assessments for. When we look at the initial ACA, we're really talking about, okay, we've closed out this performance period whether it's your first time ever as a young airman, or if it's a, you're a seasoned individual like you and I were maybe this is our 25th 26th different in performance period but it sets the tone for what's going forward. Right? I know me personally I've had some periods where I just rocked it up. Right. And I thought that I was definitely high four or five and then there's been periods where I

honestly earned a four and just needed some extra guidance. And I think that that helps set the tone for what's next and what that revolution looks like. That you're not always bound to that one period of time where maybe you did succeed or did not succeed. And how do we go forward and start cutting those lines? - Yeah, I think it's important to remember that some folks get wrapped around the fact that, well, I did the feedback at the midterm. That's all I have to do. Right. - Right. - And I think that's part of the problem with the ACA is that sometimes those supervisors aren't thinking about that the feedback process should be continuous. And in that case we talked about where you were performing at the four level, maybe some interventional the supervisor early would have provided some more motivation or helped you break some barriers to help you get to that five earlier in the process had there been some more kind of routine feedback. And so I think about that a lot. And when I have my ACA sessions I talk about, all right, so this is the formal feedback but are you getting enough feedback throughout the month, throughout the year, throughout the session try to have that discussion with my subordinates. - Right? No, the continuous processes is key there, because when we set that first list of expectations of, okay, airman so-and-so, here's what I see from you from previous. This is the things that I want to see forward for you. These are my expectations. And then we go through that whole process of what are your goals for this next reporting period? What are your goals long-term in your career? And then that continuous feedback of, "Okay. Yeah. See, you're hitting the Mark here. Here are some things I want to see improvements. Or remember, we talked about this in our initial feedback. Some of the items I wanted you to get after now, we're six months in the case of an annual report I'm talking about officers and a full AGRs or maybe where that year Mark, when we were talking about our arts and TRS of, okay, we're midterm here. These are the things that we've succeeded at, but we haven't hit the Mark here, here, and here. Or I'd like to see some refinement in these options. And then re-engaging with where are you at personally with your goals." Right? - Yeah, that's, I think that's key. It forces that discussion that I had some of those discussions where somebody I just ask them, so where do you want to be in 20 years? What are you going to be 25 years? Where do you see yourself? And they kind of go, "well, I don't know. I haven't thought about that." Well, you really gotta think about that. Now the path can change along the way, but at least say if you have a plan supervisor and the mentor can help you start on that path to achieve that plan. It may take a branch left or branch right. Or may slow down may speed up, but at least they're there to help you. And then for me in my career, that's been, I've been demanding of feedback, and so I've had supervisors where I fill out the ACA or the old feedback form and walk in and say "I had a meeting schedule here boss. Here's my feedback form. Tell me how I'm doing." - Right. - Like I had to very deliberate about it. - But for me, it's important to understand where I stood and especially, with my peers. And I don't think it's fair to people to just give them an EPR and say, or an OPR and say, " Sign it here's your performance for the year." And that they don't have one; don't have any input to it. And two, you hadn't done any feedback throughout the year right? That performance eval is supposed to be an evaluation of performance. And if it's not reflective of the entire year and the discussion interaction with supervisors, it's a little bit unfair to them. - No, I fully

agree. I personally I had an experience where I was A1C senior airman. Right. And I went to my supervisor. I'm like "I'd like to sit down and discuss what were you rating me?" Right. Cause we're closing out the EPR. And the answer I got was very telling another type of supervisor had "Well, you know what you're going to get?" "Oh, well, no, I don't. And that's why I'm asking you, can you kind of help me?" "Oh you know, you know, it's good, it'll be fair and whatever." And, and I was left, taken back of that this individual felt like they had actually discussed it with me when we had very little interaction. And on top of it, I was going through a couple of things in my career that was negatively impacting potential performance. Right. I knew that there was high potential of getting markdowns and that we were going through some upgrade training issues to get there. So it was really important for me to understand really where I was at so that I could make some decisions in my career as a senior man, I'm getting to the end of my first enlistment, do I want to continue on? Things like that. And the fact that that supervisor did not want to discuss it with me, really put a negative taste in my mouth, and then when I received the EPR was even more taken back because if you're telling me I'm doing great and everything will be fine. And then you get it here, you see these different markdowns and you're like "Well, that's not, I don't see it the same way." So... - It's a different definition interpretation of you're doing great. - Yes. - You're doing great means something the supervisor says you're doing great might mean something else. - Exactly. And then of course I think there was bad expectation management on my part too, looking back right. You know, a young airmen in the nineties the expectation was a firewall five, right. And that everything was going to be towards that direction. Then I'd have to do some monumental mistakes that ... (clears throat) pardon me, to move to the left. And here I have a performance report that has marked downs. And I thought I was performing quite well versus today where those expectations are that at that time, I was probably clearly just a little bit to the right of center. Not necessarily far right. - Yeah. We're trying to especially on with the EPR, we are trying to get to the point where we're we can level set that across, where we don't get that, that creep on the report where everybody's in a very small area and it's hard to distinguish between performance. I think if you're performing and doing your job, then that's what the expectation should be. And if you want to do more and you want different opportunities, then the supervisor needs to say, "Here's the things that you need to do, to do job X in the future. Or you want this opportunity; these are the things you have to do. And that all doesn't show up on an EPR OPR. - No. Definitely. It really comes to those feedbacks whether it's on that ACA or whether it's that continuum of actually providing that feedback and guidance in that airmen development, it leads to some of the questions that I've had recently in regards to breadth versus depth. We are starting to guide our airmen especially within the reserves, where do I aim them towards? I was wondering what you thought about that, sir. - Yeah. So I think when I grew up as a Lieutenant, I was told the stick my face down and put my nose down and work hard, learn the job, be the expert in your job. And then we get to be a captain to your captain major and then take on leadership opportunities. I think what we're doing now is we're asking people to take on more leadership opportunities at a much younger age and opportunity. And within the reserve command, I feel like there's a lot more opportunities for that to happen. Then maybe

on the right half side which is more structured and regimen. - Right. - We asked for people to step up and lead projects and opportunities. And especially in cyber, I think we need to get to the point where that crew commander doesn't automatically be the officer or the senior NCO. It should be that person who's the expert on that weapon system has experienced. And then the Lieutenant or the CNCO is part of the team, but they're not the crew commander. - Right? There are different levels of leadership, and when we're talking down to that lower team concept, it doesn't have to be structured where you have the highest-ranking individual. There are different events or missions where that may be required based on the need of that mission. But yes we, we do drive a lot more towards our younger airmen and that's a capitally airmen to take on those roles, whether it's a Lieutenant captain or a staff or tech Sergeant, and in some cases, senior airman, right? When we talk about our expeditionary comm, more often than not when we are the old vans, senior airmen would be the lead, right? And to be the crew commander for that particular van in some of these other missions and small packages we still leverage those senior air men staff sergeants to take charge and lead that mission and be that element that's supporting a bigger mission. Right? So... - Yeah, I came off, so I've got a great story here that really kind of puts the rubber stamp on it for me. So I was a new commander and I came over into cyber and comm as a major and so way behind my peers who were lieutenants that came up through the business. And I had civilian, a little bit of civilian experience and some education, but not experienced in military. And so the unit, we took the unit to an exercise called global medic, which has now transitioned to patient warrior - Okay. - The army was in charge and we were providing the LTC equipment. And so I didn't know anything about it, and so, but I showed up onsite, I showed up to the army Colonel, who was the site lead and I said, "Hey, we're here to provide you comms. And here is Eric and Eric is a senior airman and I'm leaving tomorrow and he's going to be in charge for the next two weeks and a couple of tech sergeants behind him, and then the staff Sergeant." I said, "Those four, got it. And the look on the army Colonel space was like, "You're not leaving. You're in charge. You're the officer. You have to be here." I'm like, "No sir, he's got it." This dude just came off, right half and was the expert. And he led the team. And by the time I got, I came back for that out brief, at the end of the exercise, the army Colonel was like, " We want him back next year. Like, you don't have to come major, (laughing) We don't need you. Like, we want Eric back by name." And I was getting emails throughout the year is "Make sure Eric comes back to exercise next year." - Right - So I think the air force is a little bit more accepting that and especially in this experience it really proved to me that putting the right people in charge and the right leadership opportunities is really gonna make the biggest impact of the mission. - No, I fully agree. Right, and that probably gave that a senior airmen a certain degree of breadth of experience from a leadership perspective, that if had another individual in charge may not have gotten that experience. Right. And that goes to part of the conversation of breadth versus depth. There's ways for us to expand that breadth of knowledge and experience even within our group fields and sometimes within our units so that they can get that experience so when it comes to an opportunity to lead at the next higher rank or for the ranks down the road, that that comes into play. I'm sure that that Eric in this case could look back and go, "I

remember when I was in this team, here's some of the skills that I had to leverage to work as a senior admin with a tech Sergeant and giving that tech Sergeant some direction, right? Because here now, I'm not the highest-ranking individual, I'm just in a position. So I have a positional authority to say, "I need you to do this. I need you to do that." And what skill sets that that brought on? - Yeah, I think it's important. Right? So as a reservist, you don't necessarily bring that. You don't have to get that experience just in uniform. - Right? - And so there are people that are doing all sorts of wicked cool things on the outside. Maybe it's through a volunteer organization maybe it's through their church, maybe its there are a Cub Scout pack leader or a Girl Scout pack leader. We should encourage our people to take those leadership opportunities because we can benefit from that opportunity. We need to recognize that when they come into work, that they do have more experience maybe doing those things and give them that opportunity to lead and be in a different role than you would normally put on just based on whatever rank you wearing in front of you. - Oh definitely sir. I think that, I think we're exercising that within the wing too when we talk about the wing priorities right? We have a tech Sergeant leading up portions of it, master sergeants, we've got captains all the way through Lieutenant colonels and chiefs. Just depends on what the task is and the skillset that they bring to table. And I'd, I'd argue that not one of them has dropped the ball and taken it on didn't have anything to do with their rank. It had everything to do with their skillset and their ability to multitask and then us capturing that talent and putting it together. And then we'll capture that here at the end of the reporting period and show that they have that breadth of experience and kind of bring all of those things together right? So it started with the ACA and talked to the individual where they want to be, how do they want to showcase their capability, encouraged a few of them, sometimes dragging them along... (Sounds drowned off by background noise) - Sure, sometimes you have to do that, yeah. - Right? And now we've given them that opportunity to actually execute and build those skill sets up. The other piece I kind of want to push towards is sometimes how do we encourage individuals to step outside of those comfort zones? Do you have any words of advice on that sir? - So I think it's hard as an introvert, it's really hard for me to do that. And in my past career I've done all these really cool opportunities and be frankly many of them, I was pushed, like from the back, like, you need to go do this, you need to go do this. It leads to great opportunities. And I'm very comfortable in kind of, after six months or so and a job, very comfortable with what I need to do. And so as supervisors we just need to push those people and give them what's going to happen on with that opportunity and where that leads to, and try to tie it back to the individual goals, but what they want to do. And obviously we talk about, "Hey, we're looking for people to stratify as one of the differentiations that we use is what have you done above your organization? And that maybe outside of your organization as a way to show that, you know, hey, I'm doing great things here." And so I think there's an incentive piece there, there's a per personal and professional development piece. So we need to help people understand, and sometimes it's literally a push. And so we're gonna kind of start talking more about those opportunities outside the wing, because I think what the release of the CSI pad and the calm squadrons moving to MDTs and comms squadrons across air force turning cyber squadrons is going to be a lot more

opportunities - Right. - For people inside our wing to go do cyber things that are in not traditional - Right. - Cyber lanes that will become cyber lanes. And that part of the community needs you and needs us to go lead it, because they don't necessarily have the experience that we need you to go do that. So when we push some people, for opportunities to go do that we want you to get out there and do that, learn some things, get some new skills and then come back to the wing with new opportunities and a new perspective and be a better leader because of that growth. - No, I fully agree, sir. Right. So another arena that's really shown growth and I kind of use it as an example of how cyber is going to be moving is a space how space has are really matured over the last years right? I mean, granted, it's been out there for quite a long time when we talk about the space race in the sixties and on, and how that communications after Sputnik really blew up and how that worked. And we've gone kind of paired with them for many years and as they split off and is now cyber goes away from comm we have a huge opportunity here to take it to the next level. And I think those are some of those opportunities you're talking about. So if we take these individuals that have that expertise from the military side, in the civilian side, they can really help define what cyber looks like. Not only for their force reserve, but maybe even the air force as a whole. Right? - Absolutely. We don't know what space is going to, what opportunities are going to bring. We know they're going to be there. And as we try to figure this thing out, I think people just need to keep their minds open about those opportunities, because they may not be a traditional comm or cyber role but there's an opportunity for you to maybe grow as a person and then bring those skills back to the community and share them and do things differently, maybe than we're in doing right now. - Right. And just like space as embraced some of those changes, that's where I challenged our cyber airmen is to embrace some of those changes right? Because they were able to embrace some of the changes, see where they've gone and how they're growing. Cyber is primed just a few years behind them (clears throat) in the same sense. So, if we can use that as a model, in some cases, the good parts (laughs) and embrace that change, imagine what we can even grow a cyber to be, maybe... - Yeah. I think we're in the infancy still of what cyber is going to look like. I mean, if you asked me 20 years from, I have no idea but I can tell you it's not going to look like it does today, - Right. - For sure, and the skills we have now are not the skills that we're going to need the future. And so we're uniquely postured because of 80% of our people are part-time and they're cutting edge and a lot of places and their civilian community. And we want them to bring that to us and help us shape, and I think we're still small enough, and we think as a community I think we think very innovatively and we're willing to do that and make those changes continue to be part of this leading edge of what the air force is trying to get to be the real the sharpen sword front. - Yes, sir. The innovation is key right there. Right. So I'm just kind of looking back through my experience. We went from mil-spec mill-standard when I first came in, years ago and we moved into what they called cots, the comms off the shelf. And ever since we've just kept on iterating that rotation faster and faster and faster. So innovation and the experience that comes with that innovation is definitely going to be key to lead us in the next step for cyber. - Yeah. So Moore's law still applies and I think it's accelerating faster and faster. And we need to many of the people that are able to continue to keep up with that. What I

think is interesting is that the air force some let's take a look at the programmer developer right? We had this massive force back in the 80's we're doing all of our development and we went to cots, we kind of cut that competency out of our force because we're purchasing it from commercial community. But look what we're doing now we're trying to do still continue to use the civilian community to innovate and help us or we're trying to build some competencies back. And it's interesting when you look at castle run and best been in the software factories and air force works, and Cyber Works, they're looking for people with the skills and they don't care what your FSC is. - No. - Like, they put a call out or whatever programming language we need help with. And if you know it, and if you don't know it you've got a little bit of it. They'll teach you if you're willing. - Right? - So they're taking these people and the air force recognizes because they're now doing the red guys going through and having people document their programming languages as a language skill. - Yap. - And so I think that that shows we're there for set of other services. They're not thinking that way in order for us to be competitive in this near peer grade competition we're in with our adversaries that we need to do that and continue to grow those people and develop them. - Yes sir. Right. And it really does start with what are your goals as an airman right? What do you want to do? And then how do we align all that together, right? - Yeah. So if Lieutenant Eric was sitting here and airman Howard and we were having this discussion 26 years ago, (laughing) - It would, I would not tell you I was going to be a wing commander that I wanted to be wing commander. - Right. - And so those changed over time and I think that's fine, but what helped me along the way is people force me to think about my development and using the feedback process, and then the ACA and my OPRs and my decorations of document, my performance, which gave me some positive self-esteem about what I was doing and that I was making a difference and helped me grow. And, and then the nudges, and the pushes to go do different things along the way. It really me who I am. It's not because who I was. I was a punk Lieutenant who thought he knew everything and was going to do four years in this air force and then go do other things. And here I am today due to all those great commanders and supervisors I've had over the years that helped push me and some bad ones too. Let's be honest. - Yes (laughs) - Right. There are in a couple out there, that's for sure. - I think you can learn just as much from them as that as you can the good ones. - Right, definitely. Right. I've had some great ones, mediocre ones and some bad ones, and each one has provided at least a little bit of knowledge and experience that helps me decide how I'm going to handle certain things or develop my airmen. And what's really important when it comes to those connections with those airman. - Yup. Staying connected, being a leader, thinking about the future, learning the job, knowing the job, demanding expectations, all these things are important. And so we're going to charge all of our airmen, doesn't matter what uniform you wear or what rank you're wearing that a demand feedback be a good mentor, and, I've had mentors that are outside the community, the civilian world. So I've got four or five people that when certain things come up, I'm bouncing things off them and get some ideas and then understand that each one of them is a data point, - Right. - That it's not necessarily the end all and they see it from their perspective. But I think it's important for us to continue to push that on our airman and I'm going to charge

everybody to be that good supervisor, be that good airmen, demand that feedback and demand the opportunity to develop yourself. - No, sir, there's no one way to get to success right? There's no one single pathway. It all depends on a series of events and experiences that each airmen go through and the decisions that they make based on those experiences, lead them to the next step, which leads into the next step. And then as supervisor sometimes where we're taking them just in the shoulders, pointing them in the direction, sometimes we're just picking them up, dust them off. And sometimes we're just moving out of their way so that they can succeed. Right. - And sometimes you're in front of them, creating a pathway too, or you're walking alongside, holding hands or chatting them up, motivating them the whole way. - Yes sir. - So the future is bright and we're going to talk more about that in the future. And there's a lot of great opportunities headed our way. So thanks for joining us in this episode, and we'll, we'll talk to you next time. (Upbeat music)