

Ep. 27: Accelerate change or lose

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. (Light music)

Welcome gladiators to another episode of the Sword and Shield. This is Chief Master Sergeant Chris Howard and with me today - Colonel Rick Erredge 960th Cyberspace Wing Commander. - Hey, sir it's great to talk to you again. It's been a few weeks since you and I sat down. And I'm excited actually. I just finished a CLC, which is the Chief Leadership Course, and it really brought some things back to the forefront of my mind. And I would like to get your opinion on some things. One of the big topics of CLC in this particular course was the NDS. And then we talked about General Brown's new initiatives and I was kind of wondering if you could kind of give me your perspective on Accelerate Change or Lose. - Yeah thanks chief. I think going through those courses is really important when I go through them as well I get re-blued, get re-motivated and then they do a generally do a really good job of focusing on strategic level at least for the courses that, you know, the chief and the O-6 level. - Right. - And so I think about those classes as well as an opportunity to challenge people and challenge us to think differently. And as I spend more time in this job I spend more time reflecting on what's happening to strategic level. - Right. - How to translate that into what we're doing at the wing maybe from an operational level and then helping the units understand the tactical level. - Right. - You know, really what that means. And I think at least growing up from being at the tactical level to the operational now a little bit strategic when I was at strategic level previous it's hard to do and it's hard for me to at times move between those and keep things, to me my mind tries to fit in, put stuff in boxes. This is strategic issues, operational tactical. - Right. - And so I think a lot about how to do that and what's important. And so we get these strategic documents from all different levels, right? You mentioned Chief Brown stuff we've got General Scobee's priorities we've got 16th Air Force for us. And then, you know the units got their mission partners and what they see. So before I answer your question I'm going to put a question back to you - Okay. - Because you just came out of class. So - Right. - How did you reflect upon that growing up from an Airman to a chief, and how did you kind of learn and try to understand those types of priorities and the things that were done way above our level? How did you do that as an Airman and understand that? - So I'd say starting out like most Airmen It was kind of lost on me to begin with, right? You come in the door and the first thing you're told is train, train, train. I need you to learn your job. I need you to learn your AFSC. I need you to be good at this piece. And that was the predominance of probably the better part of my first assignment. So I was at my first assignment at Ramstein for five years I did an In-Place COT, which is an In-Place Consecutive Overseas Tour, working out at a regional maintenance facility. So we

didn't understand that, but when we started going through some upgrade training on the digital European backbone back then, you know you started understanding what the strategic level piece of that mission was. Right, here I'm looking at it from just doing hilltop-to-hilltop radio relay, I'm doing fiber optics. But when you think about what it was built for in the cold war, the idea was to be able to get emergency action messages in a quick manner to the decision-makers. And this was that key infrastructure, right? So, but you didn't really grasp that sometimes you just hear Deb and you hear the acronyms. And. - So did you have a supervisor that tried to connect that for you or did you just through time kind of put cold war nuclear mission really important, you know, the big Russian? - I would say there was a couple of key conversations with a couple of NCOs I had and then just a lot of putting things together, right. When I was stationed over there I started reading a lot more as we moved into my secondary or my second assignment, I definitely got a bigger picture of what working for first (indistinct) and now we're supporting, you know, that mission that strategic mission, right? So what we're doing, you know, the doomsday plane and how that worked all. So that's when I really started getting the bigger picture of where some of these assets at, what the importance of each one of these missions went through. And then as I grew I learned a lot more about the National Command Authority and all these different agencies that all cross-linked to make these decisions. I happened to be there. I was transitioning between both of those assignments during 9/11. So I get to see it from here and at Ramstein to then getting into assignment at New York and really started seeing a bigger picture. I really think that after I started getting into some other assignments, we really started to see what impact each one of these mission sets had on occasion, I would get a superintendent or a supervisor that would really give me that knowledge. And I think that was one of the challenges with this course was kinda putting it back on us as chiefs and as leadership to explain the why a little bit further, right? You know, we do a good job understanding the why within the tactical level but do we get that why all the way through the process? And that's one of the challenges even with writing EPRs, right? If we want to take it back to the individual. If you understand where you sit in the mission set what the overall National Defense Strategy is and how you fit in that it helps you understand why you're doing this and what those potential impacts, especially in cyber. - Yeah. I agree. And I had similar experience growing up, right? As lieutenants, like shut up lieutenants, sit there, learn your job. You're there to do tasks you are there to create products and push stuff out. And I didn't spend a lot of time trying to figure stuff out. And then when I moved, you know to a couple assignments later, I was in DC during 9/11. And then it kind of makes you think, like why did they do this? Was there a strategic nature who did it? And thinking through all those things, you know I drove across the Woodrow Wilson Bridge on the way home on September 11th and big smoke plume going up and remember I had Jacob in the back seat. He was like three at the time. And he said, daddy, what's all the smoke. What's down the river? And I said someday I'll explain to you why. And so we've had those discussions and (indistinct) to think how, you know, I've grown to a point where it all kind of makes sense now but as a Lieutenant and a captain - Right. - Kind of not putting that stuff together. And I had a similar experience when I went to PME, but not till Lieutenant Colonel where it just kinda

clicked for me. - Right. I think once you start putting all those building blocks together, right. I definitely don't, wouldn't expect that every Airman would understand. And I'm talking about that Airman Tier specifically or even, you know, lieutenants to grasp all that. But if we're building those blocks as they grow and then we definitely get a better picture and maybe we'll get there a little bit faster as far as getting that knowledge. I definitely think that at times I feel at a decrement almost of some of that knowledge, because many times especially as a young NCO got focused in this small fire in front of me instead of understanding some of the bigger picture. - Yeah. I agree. And I think, I think our Airmen and NCOs, lieutenants and captains now want that. And I think frankly, they're better prepared to handle that information than I probably was. And I don't know about you, but I feel like the people that we're getting to the air force now are much better prepared to understand the big picture and maybe it's because of the news cycle we have now and their exposure to more of those things. It's easier for them to connect it. But I think having a little discussion today maybe about some of these strategic level things and how we think about it can maybe help bridge that gap for them and get them thinking about strategic level things early. And I think the one thing I would point to you is your experience of going to different jobs prepared you and helped you understand. - Yes, no I agree, right? And also the level of efforts you get to know what that job is and why that job's important, right? So I went behind the green door and really started getting into some interesting mission sets there as well which had some direct impact, a little bit closer to the tip of the spear in a number of occasions. And then you can start seeing what that impact is and understanding why you're getting those orders, right. That's one thing I learned with working with New York is we're watching the new cycle because it's help drive some of the hot fires, but also understand why are you getting this order to go here to location X? Why are we supporting nationwide? And then starting putting all that together? I definitely think that that swath of experience helps. And I think that this conversation, at least I'm hopeful that the conversation will kind of inspire some thoughts and maybe drive some individuals to dig a little bit deeper internally. - You know I think the connectivity piece is important, right? Helping them understand, you know, what they're doing and why it's important is a motivating factor for them to inspire them to do that work. And I think the connectivity piece for me is also important to grow the next chief Howard and the next Rick Erredge, right? And I think if we can do a better job early and create more opportunities for folks to understand the bigger picture the more they'll be interested and compete and we're just, you know, you and me wanna make it better for the next person - Right. And as long as we keep on that cycle, right, of developing faster giving individuals the tools in a timely manner I'm definitely hopeful that they will do a little bit better than I did, right? I don't think that I did horribly but I know that I can do a lot better. And that's one of those things that if we can get those next chiefs in line and the next the lieutenant colonels and colonels in line as well you know, it's really building that backbench, right? - Yep. And I think, you know, you mentioned accelerate, right? And connectivity and helping people accelerate that I really took to chief Brown's Accelerate Change or Lose. And for me, it's been something through my career that I've been frustrated with is the pace change. - Right. - In almost every job I found something that I was

really frustrated with and I tried to spend my time and effort to fix those things. And I think that really helps me from a perspective to think about, we need to change things and the more we can accelerate the change and fix problems that are at our level, right? We shouldn't fix problems below our level let people fix their problems support them, the better off they're going to be. And I kind of think about a snowball rolling downhill, right? So if we can remove the barriers, so we can remove them fast and spend effort to help that snowball roll faster then I think it's really helpful to (indistinct) our wing and we're gonna see changes for the positive by leaps and bounds. - I fully agree. I think that's part of your perspective when we talk about the wing priorities, right sir, of why you laid out certain priorities and why we're heading that way is to start identifying what those barriers are. And then for us to start breaking those barriers down so that we can accelerate that change and be a more agile force. - Absolutely. And I think when I look at General Brown's Action Orders he recently released common update this week. And we're going to talk a little bit about that too. So he talks about some of the same themes that are important to all of us leaders and John Scobee and Chief White set out their priorities and they're also focused in similar areas and there's a reason for that, right? We all think that's important up and down the chain and for us to be synchronized and aligned to make sure we're doing those things that are important. And so, you know, we talk about Airmen and the Airmen are important. So we're going to talk more with Mr. Boehnke coming up about specifically our strategic priorities and what our goals and objectives are and how those synchronize. But if you hear the words, and so I had the luxury of a wing commander event with General Brown when he first laid this out sitting in his office at the Pentagon virtually and talked about those things. And I was like, ding, ding, ding. Yes. I agree. Like it was so nice to hear him talk about how important Airmen are and all those things Airmen it's about training. It's about giving them opportunities. It's about making sure that they're able to do their job without barriers and allow them to innovate iteratively faster, quicker and let them have more say in what they do. - Right. - And I think the, you know, bureaucracy I think I spent time on MAJCOM staffs two different MAJCOMs. I've spent time in the NCR and nothing's more frustrating than bureaucracy. And I can't remember which General said it, but I was at a meeting or a commander's call or something. When I first joined the Air Force Reserve. And I remember this two stuffs standing up must have been a NAF commander. And he said, Hey we're not going to let headquarters be chocks on the wheels of progress. And that has stuck with me forever. And so we gotta think through that. And when we push people to different jobs we've gotta think about, hey, I'm not going to be the cog that's going to slow this down. - Right. - I need to be the enabler for people. And so, and then when he talks about compete and 16th Air Force talks a lot about we're competing now in the competition phase and General Hawk says all the time that the Air Force and 16th Air Force is the competition force in this new environment, the information environment. And we're not preparing the battle space for future conflict. We are in conflict right now. And we're right in the middle of that. - Yes, definitely this, I mean we talked about domains and some of that inherit fabric, cyber is one of those domains that is multi, right? It instantly cross domain (indistinct) - Absolutely. So now we're talking about when we talk

about command and control we're talking about coalition joint Air Force we're the enabler for that we're enabler for every mission and every domain, you talk about space, right? They do Space Ops. They need to do Space Ops through cyber. - Yep. - And so we should feel important about that. And so we need to compete there as well. And then talking about design and rotation, you know, General Scobee talks about reform the organization is his third priority. And so we think, I think a lot about that being at the staff when he joined and thinking about what that means to us. And of course we're always working on our design I think we're still a brand new wing. We're in the toddler phase. We're a little over two years old. And so we're still trying to figure out what this thing is. And there's some frustration out there (indistinct) And I understand that we know we don't have things right. And I think you and me spent at least Monday through Friday every day, assessing and trying to address and fix problems but that's what we're here for. And that's what I'm really interested in doing. - No, I agree. I actually, just to kind of piggyback on that I find that that's one of the bigger joys of this job besides the Airman, right? So we have the Airman development, see how they grow how they develop and then see them take on those challenges and exceed what you originally thought for them, right. Don't want to get into that parent mode. But I would say that there's a similar sense of pride. When we talk about, here I have Tech Sergeant or Senior Airman or Master Sergeant that we put in this role and we're like, I know they're gonna do good, right. I know they're going to do well, but then they just they crush it, right. Each one of them steps up and makes some something that you know, great happen. And then when we talk about how we gonna shape and make this force little bit more agile, I get to geek out the most in that part of the job besides developing Airman. And I find it just absolutely interesting. I wanna say this week alone, outside of some of the coursework, I was able to geek out for about three hours, just talking about how we can make some adjustments in our domain to make things a little bit faster and make things a little bit more agile and you know, a little bit more effective - Yeah I wanna create space for you to do that. I want to create space for Airman X to do that. I want to Sam to be able to do what she needs to do because she's like, hey, these are the good things we need to do. We can do better. Sam needs to go do that. Chief needs to go do that. Airman, Sergeant, Lieutenant, Captain, Major needs to go do that. And I get tremendous satisfaction from seeing people succeed. That's where I get my energy. And that's where the best part of the job for me as well. - Yes sir and you know, even with this, we do pull on the string of cyber specifically but all of the different AFCs that all feed into this mission, right? We're not just talking about the 3Ds we're not talking about the 1Bs or the 17S but whether one ends we're even talking about the (indistinct) we're talking about all the different AFCs that come together from, you know, identifying the mission to executing the mission. Every single one of these AFCs has a key piece in that role. And that kind of draw on that back to the original part of the start of the conversation about how does this all work together within the MDS, right? We would not be able to get Airmen from base A to base D without that 3F in place, making sure those orders got done or the 4N's over on the medical side, making sure that they're cleared (indistinct) all of these things come together. I think sometimes though, when we talk about that I'd like to give them* a little bit more shout out about how much that effort goes into making

sure that those IONs can do what they need to do. - Yeah. That's an excellent point. So it takes a team, right? And I think one of the positives that I've seen in this wing is because we've had maybe not the right number of manpower and structured the right way, right. It brings a lot of challenges, but also, you know, we've seen tremendous success by giving people opportunities to do things that they probably maybe wouldn't necessarily had a chance to do had we had been built right. So for an example, today, I walked by the conference room and there's a Major, a Master Sergeant and a civilian in the room having a meeting all on our wing with the 433rd ironing out what the relationship needs to look like for their particular area, right? And so I didn't pick, hey civilian, hey Master Sergeant, hey Major in there. I was like, hey, who on the team has a stake of interest here? You guys get together and figure it out like Chief and Rick aren't driving this. Like we're letting the people drive it. And they come for vector checks once in a while. And 99% of the time, it's a thumbs up, keep pressing keep the pedal down and keep moving. And that's the way I'm trying to accelerate change by just giving people space to do with maybe a vector check left to right a little bit. Sometimes I come back and I say, hey this is like I told the team, I told the different team yesterday like this is something that I'm gonna fall on a sword for. This is something I'm not willing to bend on but these other things, those are negotiable, right? Whatever you think is going to work you design it the way you want. And then we'll talk about it. But this over here this is something I'm willing to fight at my level. And that's where I'm focused to try to accelerate change in our wing. - No, I, and being a, you know priority owner I definitely appreciated that leeway, right? It was just, here's the goal. You just kind of throw it on the wall. This is the goal. And then let us kind of build the team. We got a large swath of individuals across the gambit within the wing to all come together and bite off on it. And I'm hopeful that each one of us owners did the same thing in our level. And we iterated that all the way down. I definitely think that we got some great outputs from some of these individuals from each one of the teams, you know by being able to do that and giving them that ownership and then also the room to make decisions and make an impact. - So it's hard as a leader to not give direction like specific like I fight that that's my personality. - Right. - And so I found it a little bit amusing that, you know, all three teams kind of moved at a different pace which is normal cause forming, storming, norming, right, come together. Your area was more complicated and more. I don't want to say more complicated but significantly different complex - Right. - But different complexities in the other ones, right. So everybody moves at different pace. But you know, it was interesting to see how people came back. And there were some folks that wanted like, like every step of the way wanted, hey, how are we doing, we going? And I fought the urge and I just said, hey, listen this is something you guys need to work through. And I would deliberately say I'm not driving something I don't have. I don't know what's at the end. I just know that you're the right people to get us there. And I know I want to get better. So let's focus on those things that we can do that have a large impact Airman that improve our quality life and help move the mission forward. And so these things are going to evolve over time. And we talked about, we may do something now. We're like, that was a waste of time but I see that as you learn. So now we learn, right. That's a learning opportunity that, okay, went down this path and there's something stuff we

stumbled upon that we hadn't thought about they hadn't thought about that ended up being really important that we're working through that we're gonna fix things. And so I'm really pleased about how we're approaching that. Certainly I would like to move it faster but understand there's different inputs that are happening and people have lives. We have other things to do too. And just because I want these doesn't mean, you know, that mission still doesn't need to go forward. - Right. What I would say from a little bit outside perspective serves that think we will be able to see that change accelerate with each one of these iterations, right? As you said, we're still in our toddler stage, right? We're in our second year of iterations I've already seen a large change in how fast that change is happening, how much acceptance to that is going on and how much more involvement across the board that we actually had. And I think that when we go to the next step you'll see that even faster, right? And like you said we're gonna find some things that didn't work well or things that we didn't necessarily see as challenges that come up, but that's the whole point of this, right. Of this the constant iterations of going back and forth and just keep on in constant improvement, right? - Yeah assured in that time cycle down, over and over again. And realistically, I'd like to like you all to put me out of a job, like, ideally, like I just wanna be a cheerleader, pat people on the back, take care of people, make sure you got money, the resources you need and that the problems are getting worked at the levels they need to get worked. And I learned something from a General at the Wing Commander Course that was very enlightening that I had never thought of. And now, I mentioned it earlier, but it was we should work problems at our level, right. And I shouldn't work and fix problems of things that are another people's irresponsibility, right. It's not necessarily just an empowerment. It's degrading to them. It's where's my time best used and where's your time best used. And so I think about that a lot and making sure I'm putting effort where I need to. And so I've actually changed some of the way the things I've done and tried to step back from things and try to engage more with people at my level on things. I think that's, for me, it was just, it's a maturing and moving from the vice where I thought it was very tactical in nature and stuff to try to do more strategic things 'cause as General Olson told me if we don't do it who's gonna do it. - Right. Know I would say that I've had similar problems, right? So I'm a problem solver by trade. I'm going to, you know, maintain, right? I like fixing things and getting them to work. That was one of the big things for me to change up too. And I got to the point where I felt that sometimes I'm sure there's a couple of times couple of individuals as people will run in and go chief take the wheel. You know, their hands are flown in their and go chief fix this, fix this and understanding that at first I grabbed that, okay I got the wheel let's go to now I'm like, okay, look, put your hands down put them on the wheel. I'm going to walk you through this, right? And you turn left turn right. And you've got it. That's all you really need. You can handle this. You don't need chief to drive for. You just need to give you the reassurance that you can do it. And that we have faith in you and help build that culture that we're really talking about, right. If these individuals taking those problems on at their level. - Yeah. So I failed as a leader when I was a brand new Colonel this kind of similar example that I learned from was I'd a Master Sergeant retired Air Force Master Sergeant who was GS14, now through the years, had grown to this place where he was all knowing about

everything. And he was the one dude. He had a team of 25 people doing work. And he was a division chief and he's supposed to be supervising people and ensuring that we're getting after the priorities and things. And I didn't hold them accountable because I didn't realize that every time there's a major problem. And instead of him training and helping us people think through the problem and fix it he did himself because it was easier as faster for him as a software guy just to fix it and move on. And then I left and moved on to different job. And then he eventually retired and it put the unit in real bad position. And just wasn't me, right? But I was, I felt like I had an opportunity to change that and I didn't do it. So I've learned from that. And then, so he was a great guy, loved him, did great work but I think he had hard time getting out of that role of being the fix it fixer and to being (indistinct) at a more strategic level. - It was painful for me personally it's been painful to adjust, but. - But you have - yeah, I think so. So let me work, right, I mean am not perfect by any means I still sometimes grab the wheel and turn it hard right turn left, but I do hand it off a little bit. - And I think we can help each other and everybody should be able to do that, right? You should check me, I should say, hey is that something that you really need to do? Or is that something, you know, somebody else can work on? I think we're going to ask our supervisors and our Airmen to do more of that and to help them understand where they fit in and how they can be best used their skills capabilities at their level. - Sure. I agree. I mean, I really do appreciate you walking me through your thoughts on this, sir. So I didn't know if you wanted to have any parting shots for everybody. - No, I, and again I just really liked the opportunity to share how we think kind of in a very laid back kind of discussion type thing. And we, you know, we cut open a vein every once in a while here and tell as it is but That's important for people to understand that we're trying to think through this all the time, we trying to make life better for everybody improves everybody's quality life. And again set us up for the future. And by, you know, we're not talking about General Brown wants us to stop using the word diverse and talk more about future design and what the Air Force needs to look like and what is the Air Force of the future. And so I think about and I'll leave everybody with this question what do you want the 960th to be in the future help us figure out what that looks like. - Yeah everybody has a voice. Everybody has something to say and we can take every single one of those and come up with the best option. That's for sure, sir. Again, thank you so much. I didn't know if you wanted to go ahead and close up the, close it out or you want me to sir? - Go ahead. - All right I just want to say thank you again for your time, sir but I also want to thank all the gladiators out there for their time. Thank you for what you do for your country. Thank you for, you know, investing your time in us. Hopefully you find an equal investment from us into you. Thank your families over the holiday season as they come and go and thank them every day for being there and supporting you. And thank you for being a great American and I hope you have a great Gladiator Day.