

Ep. 56: The roles of first sergeants and superintendents

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Welcome to another episode of the Sword and Shield, I'm Chief Master Sergeant Christopher Howard, superintendent 960th COG, and today with me I have... Staff Sergeant Lara McKinley with the 960th COG CSS, and Senior Airman Fernandez with the 960 COG CSS. Thank you I really appreciate you taking some time today to talk to me I know that earlier we were talking about first sergeants and superintendents I was kind of hoping we could share that conversation with our fellow gladiators do you remember what question you started off with what is the role of a first sergeant in the superintendent role of first sergeant superintendent so I'll start with the first sergeant first sergeant is a special title and duty for a senior NCO right um and they're part of what we call the triad and we talk about the superintendent as well you have uh the squadron commander you have the first sergeant and you're the superintendent that fills out the triad and the role of the first sergeant is really to kind of um it's a dedicated focal point for uh readiness health morale welfare and quality of life issues for all of your airmen right they're kind of a pinpoint they're meant to provide some guidance to airmen they're also a liaison between some of the enlisted and the officers or the commander in most cases and they're just really there to kind of gauge uh what's going on within the enlisted core or the whole organization as well as well there's a focus on the enlisted core but they're really there for all airmen one of the mottos is every airman is their responsibility right when it comes to the superintendent that role is a little bit different right so the superintendent um acts uh much more like a focal point for um readiness and all the stats but uh they're operationally focused they're looking at the organization uh manpower and there to help the commander focus all of them those mission assets readiness as well as all of the staff in place so and they're key to the airmen development as well.

Um what training is required to become a first sergeant so the first sergeant is required to attend an academy the first hearing academy is at Maxwell air force base in Alabama, Gunter Annex specifically and the requirements for the first sergeants is outlayed in af5 36 21 113 but to kind of summarize it right when we're looking at first-hand candidates we're going to look at their performance right we're going to look at the history we want to see a consistency in being the epitome of the standard right we're going to look at what they've done with their fitness are they meeting and exceeding that expectation on a regular basis we're going to look at their job

performance and look through their EPRs and make sure that they have a consistent meeting and exceeding that standard right we're really looking for what epitomizes the core values and have a history of performance there so that we're putting them some of the best enlisted in that position right because they're going to act as a mentor they're going to act as an advisor and they're also going to be a symbol of what therefore should be right now does that mean everybody's 100 perfect now does that mean it's always going to be the best we hope right everybody has their different experiences and it also depends on the perception but ultimately what we're looking at is based on that AFI is that consistent performance and the epitome of the standards while meeting all of the requirements um based on that AFI.

So since you were talking about how a first sergeant looks would you say they could be a mentor they are they can be a mentor right so when we talk about the mentorship program as a whole we don't necessarily assign that to individual roles in an effort to spur the conversation and spur the capabilities of a mentor we often lean on our first line supervisors and then we also look at our senior enlisted leadership as well when we talk about the holistic core and the first sergeant naturally falls into that position right um what we ask our first sergeants to do as well as our superintendents is to be engaged with the airmen on a regular basis so they're gonna walk around they're gonna talk to you they're gonna ask questions that naturally leads itself to those moments of mentorship right um think about all the conversations that we have just on you know spontaneously right I come into the into the facility I go into the work center saying we just said so how are you doing today or what's going on with this hey I get asked these questions right um would that be categorized mentorship or would it be just conversation I say it's a little bit of both I say the first sergeant does that as well right where they go into a work center and they're just checking on you and then hey I have a problem with this okay well what about this so it's all about spurring that thought and that that on the spot mentorship but there's also ways of actually leveraging the first sergeant through appointments or just going to their office most senior enlisted leadership as well as officer leadership has an open door policy I think that the first sergeants usually do pretty good and keeping that door open so that people come in hey I got this on my mind hey I got this uh going on or I'm thinking about this and you can use them as a as a bounce off and uh for that mentorship that was a really good answer what motivated you to become a first sergeant so when I was a first sergeant years ago now um it really came down to I had some good experiences and I had some bad experiences as a first sergeant but the tipping point was that my senior enlisted leadership my senior chief came to me and said you know I see something in you I see something that we think that you set that standard um right off the bat and um that belief in me made me believe I could do it so it wasn't something I was seeking at the time it wasn't something that I was gunning for I wasn't using it to gain rank or anything like that it's just that because my senior enlisted leadership felt that I had the qualities that met that standard made me believe that I could uphold that standard so I personally jumped into it the idea of like wow I can actually make a difference by being a first sergeant and being in that role right because they believed

in me and I could look at all the things that I did and did not like from my previous experiences with my first surgeons right I had one first surgeon who just really I felt like kind of picked at me a little bit and then I had one first sergeant that just laid it out simple gave me a little bit of slack and made me understand that you know um these things weren't so such a big deal and helped me kind of work through things so a lot of good examples there and I just wanted to pay that forward again right.

So as being a first sergeant or a superintendent when airmen come to you unless the door officer can they how does the conversation go can they be secure can they be confidential or does it have to be linked to their supervisor in some way that's a really good question right because it gets into some real gray areas when we talk about some of these roles so both the first sergeant and uh the superintendent the hard thing is they're not the priest I'm not the chaplain and not the lawyer right um and prairie if I there's a lot of regulations there that state when certain things are said that they are mandatory reports right what I would say that from a leadership perspective being in both those roles it's um when a conversation happens if it doesn't meet the intent or meet the requirement of the AFI that I have to report it um it's about that trust right so let's just say that either one of you came to my office and said hey I just have this problem that's going on um maybe it's a personality conflict or something like that I would by all means sit down listen to what you have to say and then I would turn it into a mentorship moment right unless of course there was something in that conversation that led me to believe that there was a mismanagement of resources like personnel or if um there was something illegal happening then I would have to report it or if there was any kind of harassment then I'd have to report it if it's just you know um sergeant Snuffy over here it's just a jerk all right every time I come in they're rough they're mean um anytime I ask them a question they're short with me um how do I handle that right and both the superintendent and the first sergeant are going to kind of take different perspectives on how to angle at that problem right so first sergeant might look at you and say okay have you um engaged with sergeant stuffy have you told sergeant stuffy that hey when I asked you for help you're always short with me why right um how what it what am I doing to make you sure with me is there something wrong have I have we uh kind of uh you know butted head somewhere and kind of work on the teamwork aspect and the relationship aspect of that conversation and mentorship right of uh being able to build that up right because you don't want to go in there and listen to certain stuff and be snippy with you right you're not going to be happy um you're not going to want to come into work so the overall cohesiveness of the work center is challenged a superintendent might in some cases look at it okay now I have a sergeant Snuffy I'm telling Airman Fernandez hey um I'm not gonna train you right now look at it at a different perspective of okay so we're getting trainings being forwarded I'm not getting airmen uh qualified and now I'm not being able to hit mission uh requirements right so then hey what kind of questions are you asking is it training related is it um you know uh just based on feedback what are the problem sets here and then kind of working through that of hey I need this training these are the ways I need to get qualified in my job and kind

of take over approach more of a mission aspect it's not secluded to both of those right those are just some examples of you know different types of focuses right especially uh you know first sergeants um have a little bit more soft skills when it comes to emotional intelligence that doesn't mean that superintendents don't it's just that's the job jar a little bit superintendents look at things more often than not with a little bit more mission impact so that's why I use those two examples to also differentiate between the two because sometimes uh they can be kind of confused in regards to some of the roles when it comes to the mentorship and handling the personal pieces of the overall cohesiveness of an organization right but both of them are there to advise mentor and help develop both of these problems out now what uh a superintendent and a first sergeant is not going to do is walk in there and go sergeant stuffy I'm gonna you know punch you in the head if you don't start talking to someone so nice now unless of course it's necessary right there's gonna be something like that what they're gonna try to do is help develop you help you work on that relationship because ultimately what's going to happen is if um you go to superintendent shirt and shirt and superintendent they go into certain stuffy and beats on certain Snuffy every time you come into the office what's going to happen right I mean we've seen that right you guys have been around long enough uh to say okay now starting somebody's gonna be mad because you're tattling on me or every you know now uh I'm in trouble versus let's try to work this out as a team member and work through that that's the organic level at that tactical level the results are much better than having the top down doesn't mean that the leadership can't come in there and help fix those things ultimately me personally chief Howard's view of it and when I was a first sergeant was I want to give you guys the skills to have that conversation and us to go through a number of mentorship moments to get there and then if we can't hit that uh that mark then we have a different type of conversation you know and that that might lead to mediation where you have started stuffing yourselves in there and then we kind of work through that problem now I talk a lot like I use the scenarios though those were good what would you encourage the airmen to come to the first sergeant for I know there's a lot of things but are there any like so awesome top item so I would almost say you can go to the first heart about anything right um they're not necessarily a counselor there but they're there to help counsel right um the top things right if you've got some pay issues if you get some personality conflict issues if you have just hey you with questions the first sergeants can get inundated as well as superintendents with the day-to-day workload but ultimately I can tell you from my experience always love the conversations of a shirt hey chief what do you think about this or hey I have this going on um ultimately you want to be able to be able to build a relationship so even just talking to the first sergeant and the superintendent um about non-important things um helps you build a trust right now you can trust that superintendent and you can trust that first sergeant so when something bad does happen or something inconvenient is happening hey I haven't been paid into UTAs or I haven't paid in three months or um hey I'm having this issue going on here that you feel comfortable going to them and having that conversation so I don't want to limited only these items here ultimately yeah there's some key things like if you're not getting paid if lodging is going south if uh you know there's issues um and with your

career and career development and things like that obviously you want to talk to the first sergeant superintendent uh about those items but I encourage everybody just to have good normal conversations with superintendents and for sergeants and I challenge all of my first sergeants and superintendents out there to be engaged at the airman level right and I say capital a right we want to talk to everybody in the organization so that I have that trust built in that way if there is an issue you have no qualms they're going hey chief you got a minute hey sure do you have a second can we talk about this this is what's going on right um even if it's just something as simple as um uh hey I where do I get the sex uniform item hey what are some of the uniform changes to something that as big as you know today is the worst day that I'm ever having and I really need to talk to somebody I want you know but we don't build up that trust then how are you ever going to feel comfortable so that's the challenge to all those gladiators out there is have those conversations the day-to-day uh just g-whiz things right um there's a couple of NCOs here at the staff that like to play stump the chief which is fun uh I enjoy it I love the challenge uh of what do you think about this or what's going on especially like anything's going on in the news anything that's going on with air force so that answers that question thank you yes which wrap really good question sure even though airmen and officers enlisted can come to you right how would you recommend that they come to you I mean would you recommend the user training command first or can they go directly to you it depends on the situation right so if it's uh if you've given your super when it comes to like airmen development in some cases when it comes to specific issues within your work center right or specific issues with your supervisor um the first thing we're going to ask is have you talked to your supervisor right if it's working through an issue that's organizational we want to use the chain of command let's say it's a it's an issue with an EPR or if it's even a discipline issue and even some personality conflicts you want to go at the lowest level first so you're going to want to talk to the supervisor or the airman that's involved with it first then if you make no resolution or you make no traction then obviously you'd want to up channel that to the first sergeant and the superintendent now that does not mean that from a mentorship moment that hey if you're having those issues and you don't know how to approach your supervisor that you could talk to the shirt for sergeant or first sergeant and the superintendent and say hey I have this issue I need some advice on how to approach the subject so that they can help you kind of approach that subject right we don't have those skills naturally so sometimes asking for that mentorship and asking for that help is fine um it's the involvement level that you're asking for and then so even if it doesn't matter about rank right so you know a lot of times supervision especially at a staff levels um could include lieutenants and captains and majors and when it comes to personalities it makes no real difference it's just a matter of a matter of respect uh how we approach the subjects as well as you know some of the nuances and if it's one of those things where it is um or organizationally an issue um and we have to up channel it then that's where the first sergeant superintendent might take it to the commander directly um enlisted the war officer thank you no problem what else is on you guys is there anything that we absolutely have to go to the first sergeant for that's a good question right um you know I there's a lot of things that that have to happen right uh when it comes to mandatory reports so I

you know obviously anything of significant value of resources and manpower if someone's being harassed there are reporting chains uh for like through the SARC um or if there's um any kind of other types of harassment uh that they can use these other programs but going to uh the first sergeant anytime you're having any significant issues I would leverage the first sergeant first um they're going to help direct you to where they can go obviously if it's something that you're much more reserved about when it comes to certain assaults obviously there's ways to go reported and unreported that I would leverage those programs first if you have significant life changes uh I'll let your supervisor know the first surgeon know um if uh there's any potential loss of life limb or um major damage to uh equipment then you want to bring that to the first sergeant superintendent um and it's not so clear-cut there are some things that uh you definitely want to drive up and again it goes down to those major categories right um that you really should go to the first sergeant yeah like for example if someone came to me that's also an airman and they're maybe telling me something about something that's going on their personal life that's very sensitive but I mean I'm not should I be going to you for that for to this first sergeant for that there are things like that.

But you know if they're going through the personal things you know obviously you can't make someone talk about their personal life that you want to be a good advisor good mentor good friend good airmen wingmen then you might want to suggest have you talked to the first sergeant so the first sergeant knows a lot of the ways that they can get support you know military one source they're going to leverage there's going to be the chaplain core that they're going to leverage they're going to be able to leverage you know potential other base agencies to support airmen or help them get off-base support as well when it comes to some of these subjects right so speaking of you know your roles and responsibilities as a traditional reservist obviously we only work one weekend a month you know to two weeks a year and obviously AGRs or full-time reserves can get a hold of you anytime especially if you're a full-time but if you're a TR how would they be able to get a hold of you so what we do with our first sergeants is we provide our first surgeons with phones so one of the requirements of being a first sergeant even as a TR is that they're going to be available that's where the phone comes into play what we do with their first sergeants if they're working items throughout the month then they get RMPs they also have RPA set aside to cover down on these things so you can leverage your first sergeant um pretty much anytime throughout the month um the level of engagement will vary based on their personal life but they will be engaged fairly quickly especially if you call that phone uh and then they may get some of the full-time staff involved to get those things moving throughout the month obviously when it comes to some statuses um there are limitations to what resources they may will be able to provide but they would be available to take the call and help advise you through some of those programs and processes and then we covered a lot of things is there any last questions that you guys might have and one last question so if you have a phone and it's not a UTA weekend would they be able to they only get a hold of you if it's for emergencies and not just chit chats or how do

you recommend that policy yeah contact policy is if it's an emergency you call non-UTA right um if it's a significant issue non-UTA you call them um if it's something that that can probably be handled in two to three days I would suggest maybe sending them an email and seeing where they engage because we're checking their emails as well right so it depends on what the severity is and then there's nothing to say that you can't ask for mentorship throughout the month depends on what the workload is for that individual first sergeant whether they can support it or not um but nothing hurts to ask right um obviously you just don't want to blow up someone's phone with hey so I was cooking dinner and I had this wild thought but sometimes that's okay too it just depends on the relationship you end up having the first sergeant um or the superintendent um and just kind of working through that right did you have any less questions no sir you've answered all my questions thank you well this is also a unique uh opportunity for you guys to say anything you might want to say to your fellow gladiators so is there anything you want to say sermon count to any of your fellow gladiators um I would say probably don't be scared but don't be hesitant to ask never hurts to ask a question right you may not get the answer right away but at least you can get that question out there right and get the response maybe not immediately but maybe at a later time so it doesn't hurt to go to your first sergeant or superintendent to say hey I got this what do you think and then go from there I fully agree what about you yes um kind of backing off of what um sergeant McKinley just said um don't be afraid to go to your first sergeant for any kind of mentorship you need but just remember that some things may not be confidential so if it's something that you don't feel comfortable with leadership knowing or maybe there's something that you don't want action taken on I would maybe hold back on that awesome well thank you very much for being part of this today I'm glad that you guys were able to take the time thank you so much to the gladiators out there thank you for your time thank you for your service thank you for your sacrifice we appreciate everything you do throughout the month on the UTA and the commitment that you made to this organization and to your nation so with that said, remember, stab your enemy in the face through cyberspace.