

Ep. 61: A command chief's perspective on Airmen development

[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)

Welcome to another episode of the Sword and Shield today. This is a Chief Master Sgt. Christopher Howard, 960th COG Superintendent. And with me... Hello everybody this is Chief Baber the brand new command Chief of the 960th Cyberspace Wing. Welcome ma'am. I don't think we've actually put it on the podcast that me welcoming you directly. So welcome to the team. Um And I look forward to chatting with you today. I had a lot of questions that I think a number of Airmen have. Um and it's really about progressive development. Right? So uh you know what rank are we looking at to really start thinking about the longevity of our career. Um And some of the things that we need to kind of look at or check the boxes as they would say um to get to that uh you know command chief position or even greater. So that's a great question. You know we have a pretty good progressive development model in the Air Force, you know you've got a. L. S. And C. O. Academy Senior N. C. O. Academy and then the Chief leadership course. So what do we do? How do we fill in those gaps and when do we fill in those gaps? And you know one thing that amazes me on a daily basis is the amount of responsibility or airmen have and you know not just our senior airman but are a one CS and just especially here in the cyber way I'm learning really quick. Just the massive amount of responsibility that these airmen have. And so when do we start developed and developing that leadership ability within them and how soon can we start that? You know we talk about they got to get there five level. They got to do all these things prior to us really digging in and finding out what their true potential is and I am a firm believer that we start as early as possible and in developing those leadership traits because I think sometimes we get wrapped up in which is really important absolutely you know learning their job, the technical skills that's absolutely important. There's no give on that. But how do we work in those leadership traits before they go into LS. And how do we keep instilling them before in between that and the NCO academy uh these airmen are like I said they've got way more on their shoulders nowadays than when we were airmen. And you know our airmen are doing N. C. O. Duties and our NCOs are doing senior N. C. O. Duties so we do need to look at developing them way earlier as far as the leadership and what that looks like, what that looks like. I don't know you know I'm trying to figure that out too. I know back in the old days when we first started off and even uh even when you look at the expeditionary model I know that quite often we would put senior man specifically and sometimes a one C's uh that were in the growth pattern as team leads and leading small projects at the union level right to kind of build that leadership skill set. Um you

know two or three people teams or even like uh when we had the vans and expeditionary side like a sense a van or a 100 alpha senior man could be the crew chief on that and they'd have three or four people. I always try to challenge the Superintendents in the group that look at that model to how can you get a senior man actually leading a you know small mission or leading a training session and getting after that problem set so that they can learn the skills. Um Then comes in the question about, well I'm a TR, so what's your perspective, how do we capture those opportunities for TRS or then how do we you know leverage other experiences? You know one of the amazing things about the reserve is the amount of experience that they get outside of the Air Force reserve and how do we leverage that in the Reserve. You know? Um I will have to say we're not very good about capturing talent in the reserve in the Air Force as a whole. And when I say capturing talent, we're good at capturing the talent that we need internally with ci special experience identifiers. HFcs shred outs, all those things capture that talent. But what about the talent that these guys are doing on the outside? You know, we've got we've got executives at Microsoft, we've got all this great talent out there. How are we leveraging that? Um And so I would hope at the unit level we are leveraging that at some in some way but we just I know Air Force why we have nothing that is able to capture that. You know, I would love to one day open up somebody's record and find out, you know, the security forces member down the hallway can build uh you know an access database and do it in record time. And I'm just using that as an example. I don't need anybody to an access database because you know that's historically we've used it, you know back in our day and people have built these amazing databases but they've moved on and now we're stuck with the database, nobody knows how to fix. So how do we leverage that within our unit, you know, how do we find that talent that, you know, even though they're a cyber operator or a calm guy? But on the outside he builds databases or he builds apps or he builds all these things and you know how wonderful that would be if we could just open up something and say, hey yeah, airman smith can come in and fix this database. It's a huge blind spot when it comes to the TR because you're right, there's a lot of talent, there's a lot of expertise that are getting avoided or just not being acknowledged when it comes to the capability of retirement as we look at that progression. Right? So what I tried to tend still to is uh how do we capture those experiences and making sure that we're giving those airmen those opportunities to lead, we were able to capture some of those things when we can correlate uh it with some of the experiences are doing with the military and balancing that out or even if you know that they have that experience, making sure that we put them on projects or put them forward into different teams so that can come into play. Like the wing priorities for example, they have had access database. Why are we putting them on one of these priorities to work through some of the things of data management or even capturing data or even building some of the out products. Right. So if you got a great leader out there, that's a senior man, like I believe we have a senior airman out on the wing that actually runs their own company, right? So how are we leveraging that airman's experience to building those teams so that we can capture it appropriately and get the right data into those records so that we can see that for future growth. Absolutely. And you know, and I also believe that we also have a

responsibility to send these young airmen back to their civilian jobs better, you know? And how are we combining the two to make them better airmen and to make them better citizen airmen right to on the outside. And how are we leveraging what they're learning here to make them better at their job in the, in the civilian world. I truly think it's a symbiotic relationship, right? And that's where we have to instill in our capital airman. Um these are the skill sets I have and I'm learning on the Reserve, this is why my civilian employer should be aware of this so that we can show that there's a value added, get a little bit more buy in from the civilian side of I'm gonna get some free chicken over here, but we're also going to get free chicken here, so that when we both need each other and it works out together and that the relationship is really key, as well as being able to then capture some of that talent and keep it right? Because we're losing him enough to. Right. Right. And I think that's key also retaining talent is especially in this wing, it's a hard thing to keep. And so I think we really do need to focus on how we can make them better, not just, you know, within the Air Force's structure and the Air Force's development, but to make them better on the outside. So they're getting that benefit from both sides of the house and they can see it, it's a tangible benefit and I think we owe it to them. You know, I think we do owe it to them and then, you know, as we progress, right? So we know that we hit a less um then there's a way, but there's also some training or opportunities from just looking at the military side of the house when we're talking about the leadership mentorship capability is the N. C. O. L. D. C. Right? And do you know, of any other opportunities when it comes to actual tangible military training that that someone should be looking at in that tier from, you know, kind of staff sergeant, you know, senior tech. So that's a hard one. I'm sure there's something out there more, I would think career field specific at that 10.7 level courses. Yeah, leadership, they really do. The Air Force relies on us as senior leaders to kind of fill that gap when they are in between professional military education and the Air Force. And how do we fill that gap? And, you know, and I think we do a great job at offering, you know, this boy, once you get to the Tech Master, senior chief ranks, we've got the E. D. B. Right, the enlisted, the enlisted Development education Board and they've got tremendous classes that you can apply for. But again, you've got to apply for him, you got to be divorced competitive, right? But as senior leaders, it's up to us to kind of fill in those gaps. What is out there? What can we leverage on the outside to make sure that they're getting their leadership, their uh their development, you know, I like to, to leverage our top threes are, you know, are rising six is to say, hey, how do we, how do we feel that gap in between the N. C. O. The Chairman and CEO and Senior N. C. O. And those guys will always come up with something great and I think that's one of those brainchild's where the PDC is really come into play, right? You know, that professional development courses which the Professional Development Committee holds. So we got two pcs, but little things that nuances there, but all the different courses there, right? Um, and then when we're talking about those emerging leaders, Pcs don't have requirements for rank or necessary hard skill set to produce an actual course. So I think that the challenge there might be, you know our airmen and our junior N. C. O. S. Taking on those courses and leveraging some of that experience. Now that's one more opportunity that we can capture. Any P. R. S. In 12 oh six is um some of the skill sets as well as

some of the learning that's happening in that kind of field in that gray space that we talk about. Um And then there's skillsoft right that there's a number of different courses that one can take and execute for that development, peace and then because it is skillsoft um then we can actually put that in uh again E PRS and into 12 Sixes is that professional development and growth portion. Um and that leads to all kinds of different skill sets, A FSC and then just leadership things. Um I think uh I guess the next piece is uh you know when we're writing those 1260s and we're writing those EPRs, what are some of the key pieces are attributes that you would give advice on making sure in those reports and NPR's. Yeah those are those are always a monster. You know what is a good E. P. R what is a great EPR and what is the bad EPR uh you know that is one thing that is a constant that has been a constant in and both. Right we grew up together in in the air force and you know how do you write that structure that perfect bullet uh you know what is the impact of what they're doing? You know all those all those things and they're great they are you know bullet statements are small. You want to fit all you can in in one statement and you want that impact to be strong you know and it's and I've also found it's also you know, what is that? Local unit? Yeah exactly. What is the local flavor? And so we're all constantly learning and it's important though it's important that we capture that and it's important that we remember what Gprs are for NPR's already capture that and the impact our airmen are making and I think it's again it's important that we're capturing that impact and you know and not so much the structure of the bullet or you can we fit on one line, can we fit it onto lines. It's just important that we are documenting what our airmen are doing on an annual basis or bi annual basis depending on their status. And I know it's being looked at. Again it is it is something that's on the round table of what is the next step in our E. P. R. And R enlisted evaluation process and I think it's due you know it's do because again we've got super talented airmen and in today's world where efficiency is key which means less money and so which means less manpower and so our airmen were asking our airmen to do a heck of a lot. And again it is our responsibility to make sure that we were documenting that and we're developing them and we are letting them know that you are doing so much and you have such a heavy responsibility and we're taking care of them and making sure again that we are capturing that and doing them justice. Yeah. And that's what I try to always emphasize, no matter which way we go with these performance reports or anything like that. Is that that scope and impact? Right. I think we do um a poor job at times when it really when we look at the scope and impact, especially in certain FCS. Right? Uh in certain units really looking at, okay, how does this mission affect the greater air force mission? Or even if RC missions to make sure that we're showing that they are reaching globally. When we talk about cyber, you know, an Intel and all the day of the seas within this way is uh you know, when we talk about these domains, how many users are we supporting? How many different weapon systems are supporting? Um what would be the impact if you did not do your job? Right. Or if you did this special piece worked on this special mission, what that impact was across Cocom match COM's um, you know, really grasping what the bigger picture is. It's not that I'm just doing this and you know, one of the kinds of kickbacks I get is from some of the support airmen, right? And I hate to believe that support because it's all mission. But if I'm

just cutting orders or if I'm just pushing um, DTs reports or pushing out vouchers, how does that really, what kind of impact do I have? Well, he didn't write that order then uh, we wouldn't have been able to put airman snuffy on that C5 that went to the sale are that supported this. So understanding your role as a whole um, and making sure that that scope and impact is captured in those performance reports captured in those toilets. Sixes and really giving airman credit for the impact of being here every day or being here on a you to actually meets, you know, you, you hit the nail on the head. You know, again, back in our day, we, we had a little bit more manning a little bit more manpower where you could really learn to be an expert in a certain area of your job and you can focus on that in our airmen don't have that luxury today, right? We're combining FCS. We're combining; we're getting rid of shred out. We're doing all of these things that are making our air meant to be to be generalists and sometimes they will, we lose that scope of, you know reminding our air mint of what they are actually doing and how they are making that impact. That is hugely important that we continue to do that because they're learning later about their impact because they're not able to learn the specifics of their job and what it specifically hits right. Being a generalist, you're doing all kinds of different jobs, different responsibilities and they're learning all of this, you know, but at the same time they're not learning how that impacts the greater air force and we have senior leaders need to make sure that we are explaining that to them. Hey this is this is why this order impacts that F 16 that's going into battle, you know, So uh again it's our responsibility to make sure that they know that it's just a little bit, you know you're talking about, you know, back in the day when you did have an orders writer, they could focus on that and but now you've got that as an additional duty. And so they're not really understanding the impact of what they do on a day to day and they're going to move from those junior and senior NCOs um the game does change a little bit right as far as how we capture this and as well as what the importance of some of that capturing happens right? I know that you know when we started the master sergeant and we're taking on more of the load is a leader. Um the importance there really is. Looking back towards our junior and ceos and chairmen and making sure that we've done right there and make a short capturing everything we've already discussed because once we hit that master sergeant rank boom now things get looked at differently. So what kind of things are being looked at when you hit those senior and Ceo ranks for progression and development. So when you hit those senior N. C. O ranks you really need to supervision is huge supervision in the Air Force is kind of the foundation. You know when you become a supervisor that is really the first time should be you know the first time that you are responsible for another human life and for the first time somebody is more important than you if you're not married or have Children and you're the sole owner of that individual or individuals and once you hit those senior N. C. O. ranks, you know you've hit those milestones of, okay now I know what the impact is of taking care of people and that should always be first and foremost when you become a senior in SEO and hitting those milestones are super important and that's why it is very important that we make sure we're developing our folks to be those supervisors that we need because you know the first time I know it happens and sometimes it's out of our control were becoming the first time supervisors , a senior N . C. O. Is tough, it's your

detriment that you truly are, believe it or not, it happens more than you think. I've seen it many times. Yeah. So, you know, even if we and since I've seen it so many times, if we have to restructure whatever we have to do within our ranks to make sure we're giving our guys this experience, it's hugely important. It's, you know, it could be detrimental and, you know, once you get those senior N. C. O. Writings, you are just thrown a heck of a lot more responsibility and we need to make sure we are again developing our folks at the right time at the right place and making sure that they get those leadership experiences that we need them to have to be successful. Senior leaders, right? And it's also this is where those soft skills that they learned as that supervisor, as that team member, as a team. We really start to show in a number of ways. Right? So how successfully we are as senior and ceos can we really balanced not just on the technical skills but those soft skills. Absolutely. That's where some of those breaking lines are when we talk about going from master to senior and senior chief, is that okay, technically competent, technically solid. They can do X, Y and z. They can they can make sure every mission is going to happen as far as the technical side of it. But when it comes to the soft skills, making sure that the team is successful and the mission is successful gets highlighted a little bit differently. What do you what would you say is some of the key soft skills that are Airmen should be trying to develop or be asking for development? Yeah. So you know emotional intelligence, I know that word comes up quite a bit is huge. It is it's you know, one of the things we need to learn growing up in the ranks is my experience is going to be the same as your experience. Your experience isn't going to be the same as somebody else and we can assume that everybody is going to have the same experience as you. And so I think it's really important to understand that and to learn that because I think we've all had that supervisor, you know, hey you're, my standard is you need to run a marathon and if you don't run a marathon you're not going to get marked up on your E. P. R. You know, and you're just like what I understand. Yeah. So but we've had those like that's a that's a ridiculous standard and that's great that you do that but that's not for me and so I think we need to be able to if we're going to retain this talent if we're going to keep these Airmen in our re force, we have to understand those better and make sure that, you know, how I got here as a command chief is not going to be the same way that you get to be a command chief. And um, so the different experiences and we have to embrace those and you know, and I can go into another speech about diversity, but that's another day. Um, but you know, and just embracing each other and embracing our backgrounds and what we bring to the fight and leveraging what every individual brings to the fight and understanding that it makes us better. Right? And I think that the split can be kind of hard, right? Because all through your time growing as an airman in your fc's, here's a here's a tech order, Here's an F. I. This is lays out X, Y, Z, X, Y, Z. So it's and that's where we get the box checking theory into play. But when it comes to the soft skills, there's no X, Y, and Z. Right? And there is no one way to chief, as you pointed out. Right? So, um it's always the hard part to accept. What do you mean? There's no one-way, There's must be a way. And the reality is that you're right, everybody's different. Everybody's experience is different. Um there are very few people that have been in the same unit, step by step by step, right? It's not like we all started out of the COM squadron or started at an NPF and worked out all the

way up here, right? Um we talk often you and I out the side about, you know what those pathways for command chiefs are right, um when we talk about union level group level, in this expectation, we're gonna hit each one of these tears and hit each one of these uh these opportunities. And the reality is it's not going to be the same for everybody or necessarily easy for everybody. So how do we capture those soft skills? How do we capture that experience and that development so that the right environment is in the right place at the right time? Absolutely, and you know, not just not just capturing them, but also, you know, also leveraging it and using it to our advantage because just because we don't hit those milestones, like maybe somebody else hit those milestones, that doesn't make them bad, you know, and it doesn't make them not ready and of course our responsibility is to make sure that they are ready, but to use that to our advantage rather than telling that, you know, as looking at it as a negative, you know, the way somebody grew up , if they hit all those milestones , that's great . That's awesome. And we're glad, but others aren't able to hit those milestones to no fault of their own and how to re leverage that and how do we, how do we build off of that? And that's where those other things, this is our understanding what opportunity is, right, opportunities isn't always an assignment, opportunities might be a mission, it might be, I'll hit the priorities again, leading a priority um leading some kind of initiative. Right? And especially when we talk to senior ceos that scope and impact outside of just your unit. Right? So if we're looking at progression master to senior and senior to achieve your scope and impact, it's expected yes to be in that box of your unit, but now you have to expand it. A group expanded the wing, the match COM, you know, irk as a whole, all these things. Exactly, I need you to be uncomfortable exactly what I mean. And I tell that to people all the time, I need you to be uncomfortable and find those things out of your comfort zone and that's usually outside of the squadron outside of the group and uh and wherever that lies, but I need you to be uncomfortable. Right? Because the uncomfortable drives change and it drives experience right. If you're comfortable, that means you've probably done it one or two times. And what are you really learning other than solidifying your base and kind of building that box in that wall around that learning exactly, awesome. Um any parting shots that you might have for, you know, development or thought processes towards development for our gladiators out there chief, you know the things that happened in this wing are just amazing and the airmen that do the mission every day or even more amazing and you know what I ask is we just continue to develop these guys and make them the best that we can make them because we owe that to them. We truly owe that to them and when is you know, I'm leaving that to the to the supervisors tell me when is the best time to start developing them for those leadership responsibilities? You know, a less may be the best time that we first start getting those leadership skills. I don't know, I think earlier because these guys just have a massive amount of responsibility and I think it would benefit them and us if we did start right before Airmen leadership school but I'm looking for, you know, you tell me, you know, you Chief Sawyer, all of you guys out there, what is the best way to move on with our airman's should have started yesterday. It's always you know, we have had the mentality that you know, I should have started developing yesterday, which means that a priority today to constantly challenge are meant to expand their capabilities

and experience and don't be afraid of opportunity and don't be blinded that when given um an option to do something that is truly an opportunity to excel and learn something. Yes, very well said all right, I'll give you the closing statement for this, uh, this podcast. All right, well, thanks for joining us today on the on the sword and shield. And I look forward to many more. And then I'll have to throw that one in there. Remember, stab your enemy in the face through cyberspace? Yeah, yeah.