

Ep. 29: Strategic Alignment

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Welcome back to the "Sword and Shield" podcast. I'm Colonel Rick Erredge, and today I'm joined with Mr. Bud Boehnke. Bud, how are you doing? - Doing great, sir. Thank you. Good morning, Gladiators. Looking forward to having a discussion with you. - Yeah, I'm excited too. And I know we've been talking about doing this for a while, and we've been working on our strategy kinda nonstop since I got here, and it's kind of evolved. This is good opportunity for us to kind of give some behind the scenes to all of our airmen out there and anybody listening about kind of how we came up with our strategy, why it's important, and what kind of things we're thinking about for the future. - No doubt, sir. So it's crucially and wildly important that everybody understands our mission, how we align with our partners, how we deter from our enemies, and making sure that we're just traveling in the same path together. There's too much outside and internal influence that can jeopardize the mission from being successful. And if we're not traveling in the same path, we're going to be in trouble, right? - Yeah, I spend a lot of time thinking about what things you and I talk about all the time: how we get the airmen at the lowest level in the organization on both coasts, either Langley or, I mean, even distance I think is a challenge for us, to get them to understand what we're trying to do, and what it means to them, and really have our airman say, "This is why I'm doing my job and this is how I align and support the overall goals of the organization." - Absolutely, so let me start by saying continuous process improvement, or CPI, is something that's never accomplished, if that makes any sense. It's a hamster wheel, but I mean that in the most affectionate way possible, right? Because we constantly have to improve. We're never satisfied with status quo or reaching a destination because that destination will always change. If we're driving up to Austin, we need to prioritize why we're going to Austin, right? If we're heading north. So if you have an emergency in Austin, you're not going to stop at your local coffee shop and get a coffee. You have an emergency, so you prioritize and execute. You gotta get there. However, on the other hand, if it's not a priority, you can allow for time, you can allow for roadblocks to set in, and then work those roadblocks. But if we don't prioritize really what the mission is, then we're going to go to New Braunfels; we're gonna have a stop. We're going to go to San Marcos; you're going to have a stop. And now you've got a three-hour trip that should have been one hour, right? - So, yeah, some folks would call that leisure and spontaneous. In our business mission, right, we want everything to be kinda measured and very deliberate. I remember being at the unit and when the wing commander would say strategy, my head would kinda go, "Oh, whatever I'm tactical, and this is what I'm going," but really what it was

getting at is if I was focused on that just making sure that what I was doing aligned and supported the overall wing strategy. So in a way I was supporting that even though I didn't think about it in the sense of, "Hey, I'm thinking about it from a strategic point." And then I went to school as lieutenant colonel, and then I got the big picture, and then all of a sudden it just clicked for me. And so I'm trying to, I think about that a lot as we try to implement the things that are important for us. - No doubt, sir. - So when we started on this journey, I'll say in April because that's really been the impetus for at least my implementation and my participation process, the kind of things I was thinking about was I didn't want to necessarily drive the narrative. I wanted it to be more of groupthink and group process because I don't have all the answers. And so talk to us a little bit about how you thought that, when, and the forming, norming, storming, and what's important, what kind of things you saw were successful for us and maybe what are some things we need to improve for the next time. - So initially, my gut instinct from how our spring Leadership Summit went, when we initiated our strategic alignment and deployment and execution plan, I think it went exceptionally well given the circumstances that we were all disconnected. We weren't face-to-face. Because typically when you run a StRAP planning events, it's four or five days, and you're locked in a room, and you're handcuffed to each other, and you have to get along with each other. You have to come away with a no kidding plan going forward after the four or five day event, and we weren't afforded that luxury, right? And so we had to communicate through technology, and we couldn't look each other in the eye. We could not rely on our body language and what the intent of what someone is really talking about and meaning and confident about when they say, "This should be a priority." "No, this is really our priority." And so I think it went exceptionally well given the circumstance. That said, we're still working on it, and that's okay because, again, continuous process improvement means that we're just continuing to evolve, continuing to figure out obstacles and barriers, how to work around them or go through 'em. And I'm very, very proud of the collaboration that everybody exhibited, the feedback that's been received, the communication, the compassion that everybody have and the patience that everybody displayed too because it can be really frustrating when you're not able to shake someone's hand or give them a hug, and we can't do that through a phone line, right? So what we came up with in April were our three wing priorities: empowering airmen and families, optimizing readiness, and executing the mission. Tremendous priorities for our wing, but also for our partners, also for our higher headquarters, ultimately with our National Defense Strategy, right? And so we've gotta be aligned from the very top all the way down to an airman basic in basic training, right? So everybody must be aligned. Again, if we don't, we're just going to be flying blind, our scope and our aperture is huge, and we've gotta minimize that waste, right? - Yeah, it was really important for me to make sure that we are aligned up and down the chain, especially with AFRC. And then as Sixteenth Air Force is evolving from an IW, I know we talked a lot about, what is Sixteenth Air Force doing? What is their leadership team focused on? And I think between... So we're trying to support both, right? Operationally Sixteenth Air Force, but AFRC is our parent organization. We've gotta make sure that we're aligned with that and eventually the NDS. And so I know we spent a lot of time

talking about that and trying to formulate that, and you did a good job in your documents, and we'll ask it. We'll tell everybody at the end where you can find them, and making sure that we're aligned and synchronized with both organizations as we go up and out, and then trying to push that down in through the organization so folks understand that. - I just thought of something, sir. So decentralizing command was a big part of success during our Leadership Summit both in the spring and the fall because it's really up to everybody who is a mentor, who's a supervisor, who's a leader, to share our information, where we've come from, where we are, and where we want to go with your peers and with your subordinates and with everybody, right? And the ability to rely on our commanders and our superintendents and everybody out there to relay that message, to communicate effectively, to ask really, really important and focus-driven questions is crucial to leadership, one. Two, you've gotta understand, like I said, where we're going to go, right? And so we're, as a wing, we're starting to get to the point to where we know where we are. And we're measuring key performance indicators, we're measuring internal control measures, and we're collecting all this data. What do we do with it? How do we win with this data? Is it the right data? How are we measuring? Is there a delay in the data that we're collecting? And so we know where we are, I think, and if not, we're getting better at it. And eventually we're gonna close that gap from where we are to where we wanna be through that communication, through that decentralized command. But it takes a village. It's not just through a podcast. It's not just superintendent. It's everybody. Everybody's gotta be involved. You have to eat food every day to survive. We've got to align and get some every day, right? - Yeah, so I tell everybody that we're in this maturity continuum, which you talk a lot about, is we're still a toddler, right? We're just 2 1/2 years old. We're just trying to understand who we are. We kinda figure out, hey, we're a wing now, and we have all these responsibilities as a wing. We've got all these gaps and seams and things we're trying to focus on, to fix. And operationally, I think I feel good about we're starting to understand who we are and what capabilities, and we bring all these different weapons systems together under one wing. No other wing in the Air Force has the breadth of weapons systems that we do. And so I'm proud of that fact, and I'm proud that we're working really hard in figuring out and trying to learn who we are better. And then I think we're starting to understand where we need to go in the future. - Yeah, so we're working very hard. And what I mean really by we are our priority champions, our goal owners, and our objective leads are working tremendously hard at relaying communication and messages, removing barriers. And then at the tactical level, our objective leads and team leads are really getting some, right? Because they're doing the actual boots-on-the-ground, missiles-in-the-air work. And it's interesting to watch this development. This is the first time in my five years of strategic planning that we've conducted this virtually. And so it makes me, it gives me the pose to question how quickly we could have evolved if COVID-19 hadn't taken place, if we were in a room for a week and we would have leaned out our priorities and goals and objectives face to face rather than virtually. But with that said, the ability for all the airmen to come together and work hard together as a working group has been the most rewarding thing that I've seen from my eyes because... So, yeah, so many obstacles take place when you're not, when you don't have five days, right? We've

had six months and so there's a lot of buffering and a lot of waste right there. And our job as a CPI practitioner is to remove waste, and some things are not in our control, but the airman that we have in our wing, sir, I know you're very, very proud of and you should be. Everybody should be proud of themselves, their leaders, and their subordinates all alike because they are truly getting after it given our obstacles, and not just our wing, but across the entire AFRC, across the entire big Air Force, and across our entire DoD, right? We're getting some. And so I'm looking forward very much so to getting together face to face with everybody and seeing how we can progress from 2020's StRAP plan to 2021 and '22's StRAP plan and seeing how our priorities change, who our adversaries are, and how we can close those gaps again. - Yeah, I think I'm very proud of what we've done and how far we've come. And I think one of the bonuses that I think about a lot is I've had a chance to meet and interact with more people in the wing, and especially these priority champions, goal owners, and objective leads that maybe I would not have had chance to do. And to see them conduct briefings and do the work and be proud of their work and be able to show their work is really been rewarding. And so I just had a priority three kinda update, and so I got a chance to hear from some people that probably wouldn't normally get a chance to brief the wing commander, right? And talk about all the hard work they did. The priority three is killing it, and all the priorities are doing a great job, but I think they're all kind of been on their timeline, and they're doing their own forming, norming, and storming inside their own groups, and we've got different challenges and different barriers, and they're all attacking those differently. So that's been interesting to see how that's evolved and how the leaders are participating, and I knew you were a part of this as well as their guiding and mentoring them as they go about their business. And then how they came up with the idea of having a cross-priority person to connect the tissue between what they're all doing to make sure there's not duplication effort. That was all your idea and the team's idea to make sure that we're not having waste. And so we've seen a lot of innovative things come out of this. And when I think about innovation, it's not just widgets, right? It's not, we're just going to do four widgets in the time we used to do two widgets in. It's really innovation and thinking, the diversity of thought. And frankly, some of the things came out have challenged me, and I think that's good, right? That's what we wanted. This is not Rick Erredge's thought. It's not Bud Boehnke's. It's what are we doing collectively and what we need to focus on. And I know you and I had a lot of discussion about this is a huge lift, huge ask, and I wanted to focus on just taking one bite at a time and not try to eat the whole elephant, but just take one bite at a time. - Yeah, so it's very easy for us to get overwhelmed, right? We cannot compartmentalize very well. So we've got to constantly work on it. We've gotta put work topics into the work folder. We've gotta put finances into the finances folder. Family in that folder. And if we don't, we're going to get overwhelmed and overrun, and stress, that sets in. And we stop exercising. We stop eating correctly. We stop sleeping, right? So a lot of barriers and obstacles can creep into to this mission. Let me put a plug in real quick. We're talking about the ability to communicate and interact and the work being done between the priority champions, the goal owners, and the objective leads. So we're going to be doing this again in the spring, right? We're going to be reevaluating what

we're doing currently and where we want to go. And so we need leaders to step up and volunteer for this tremendous opportunity to mold and mature the wing, but it's not just the wing, it's yourself, right? One of our core values in the Air Force is service before self, tremendous core value, but that doesn't mean put yourself second, right? You've gotta take the initiative, and you've gotta develop yourself and harness your sword and sharpen that sword and forge that sucker and make it as strong as possible for yourself, for your family, for your wingmen, for your organization, right? So the opportunity is there for you to work through barriers like virtual StRAP planning, which is huge, right? And it allows you to take the bull by the horns, work on your communication skills, your leadership, your ability to ask questions, your ability to follow and execute ultimately. So the plug is get off your tail and volunteer. - Yeah, we need everybody, right? Again, you talked about it earlier, about it takes a village. And sometimes the village expands, and we need everybody to participate, and we really want you to sharpen your personal development and really help the wing out with something maybe that you're passionate about, right? And so if you really feel strong about something, that we're not doing something the right way, no better way than to be part of the solution and help us understand the problem by participating. And we know we didn't, Bud and I, we talked about this, we know we didn't get this 100% right the first time, but I think that's okay, right? And we're going to do better next time. Continue to refine it. And we don't do celebrating enough. We don't celebrate our success enough in the military. We finish something, maybe we slap a high five, do a coin, and we move on to the next challenge. And so we're going to spend some time celebrating where we are and what we did. Today we did some celebrating internal for priority three. They're really close to slapping the table and be done with some things, and in the spring we're gonna say, "Okay, what's next?" And so we're really going to lean on you, Bud, to help us through that process and be that facilitator. Looking forward to seeing what's next. - I'm happy to do it, sir. So when this job came available for me, I was extremely happy in my previous job. I was not looking for a career move. I was told about an opening for a wing process manager at a cyberspace wing. I said, "Oh, great, I'm not gonna be considered for that. I'm not a cyber guy." And after reading the job announcement, I said, "Wow, I think I might have an opportunity. I might have a chance here." And this was a dream for a CPI practitioner to enter into a brand new wing and have the ability to shape it like Play-Doh, how exactly how not only the commanders want it, but how the airmen want it. It's a tremendous blessing to be able to talk with people, figure out problems. Influence, I think, is a key piece of leadership too, and we've got tremendous influence across the wing. So I implore everybody out there to continue to ask questions, how can we make what we're currently doing more efficient, more lethal and safer for everybody operating and for our allies and our partners. - Yeah, you said something that resonated with me, and that was the Play-Doh. And so I think some people... The perception I had from some folks when I got here was that that was the biggest challenge, was that it was too soft and squishy, and we had all these challenges and wasn't really focused. And sometimes you're overwhelmed by the number of challenges. You don't know where to start. And so hopefully I was able to bring some clarity to that and kinda focus on here's the things we're going to work on, and we're just gonna let the rest

worry about it. But, to me, the exciting part of the job is being able to mold it. And so when I talked to General Borgen and people outside of the cyber world, they're like, we talked to the IG last week, and they're like, "We don't know anything about cyber. You're gonna have to tell us what a cyber wing looks like, and how we're supposed to inspect the cyber wing, and what's readiness look like in cyber." We get a chance to write the history books here. We get to define it how we want to define it and how it makes sense, where if you're in a wing that's been around for 50 years, right? I've been there. Trying to change anything from an institution that's been there for 50 years, and the chief running that organization grew up as an airman and chief and has been for 30 years, really hard to make change. We're at a place now where we're making change every day. We're changing directions from 180 to 360 all the time. - Yeah, you're right, sir. We are the definition of change agents right now, right? And Play-Doh, if you play... I've got a three-year-old, and so I'm going back to Play-Doh. When you form and mold Play-Doh, it's squishy and it's not a strong foundation. But you know what? If you leave it outside for two days, it becomes hard as a rock. - (Chuckles) Yes, it does. - And so you keep forming it to where you want it, and then you just kinda let it marinate, and let it run, and now you've got a foundation. And so hopefully that's what our Play-Doh currently will probably look like, right? But we have to continue to shape it and take a knife and cut away and lean it out, but also add to it if we can, but we can't do that without a very, very strong piece of cement and foundation. So I think that's where we're getting. I know that's where we're getting because of everybody's commitment and everybody's ability to tackle barriers and overcome these barriers, especially virtually, right? - Right, and so when somebody volunteers to be part of one of these priorities, goals, or objectives, I really wanna focus on getting them to success, and if they can with whatever window that is, if they can give us six months, we'll take you for six months. And then we're going to slap you a high five, and say, "Thanks," celebrate it, and we'll let you move on, right? We're not going to, I'm going to air quote, punish people for their great work and make them continue to do this stuff, right? Unless they want to, unless they have a passion for it. We want to get a number of people through the process to understand how we do strategy, and I think personally I needed that way before being a lieutenant colonel. This would have given me opportunity to understand why it's important to get involved in strategic planning and then how we use data to make decisions and how we're aligning all of our metrics and goals to ensure that the organization continues to move forward. - Definitely so, and sometimes we have to step back. We have to observe. And I've talked about OODA loop quite a bit, right? Observe, orient, decide, and act. So imagine if you're a fighter pilot, right? Obviously I'll be Maverick- - Obviously. - And Colonel Erredge can probably be like- - I'll be Goose. - He'll probably Merlin, right? But you kill two bogeys, right, and you've got 30 more coming your way, and you're talking to E-2 above you, saying, "Okay, two bogeys, down." E-2's saying, "Oh, well, that's great, but you've got 30 more." Well, you're not going to fight 30 bogeys at 12,000 feet. You might need to get up to 30 and take a bigger picture. And so that's exactly what we're doing here, right? We're trying to look down at the big picture of our organization, how it correlates to AFRC and Air Force, and figure out, okay, we need to prioritize which bogey is going to go first,

right? Does this bogey have Tomahawks, do they have Sidewinders, or are they just gas? And we never go after the Sidewinder first, right? And so we prioritize, and it's very, very important to communicate with that E-2 or your higher headquarters, it's very important to coordinate with your other wingmen and figure out where they're going to be, and then ultimately make a decision on your plan. But if you don't have that strategic plan, you're just going to be firing blind, right? And we've gotta have a target. I think that we've done a great job at recognizing targets, and they're in our sights, and some targets have been destroyed, some targets are still remaining, and it's a continuous evolution, right? We cannot be satisfied with two bogeys down. We still have 30 to go. - Yeah, that's a great way to look at it. And I think, for me, I think about that our three priorities should be enduring and all the work we're doing should fit in one of those three priorities. And if it doesn't, if we're asking you to do something that doesn't necessarily fit under one of those, then we need to talk about what we're doing and why we're doing it. But I just want to say thank you for joining us today. I appreciate it. You play a very important role in helping this organization understand who we are and the direction we're headed. And you're kinda the traffic cop, I think, helping us stay on the road and keep moving the direction and make sure we're not speeding, but make sure we're not going too far under the speed limit as well, right? Pushing us forward. And so if anybody's interested, please ask you to reach out to Boehnke or myself or anybody in your chain and volunteer. There's lots of opportunities for you to make an impact and influence what our wing looks like and help write that history. So I'll leave you the last word, Bud. - Yeah, thank you, sir. It's been a pleasure to be a part of this wing and to have such an opportunity to develop myself, develop others around me, and develop and mature our organization. And so I definitely encourage everybody, if you're looking to contribute, if you're looking to be valued and to speak your opinion, because your opinion is absolutely crucial to the success of our mission, relay that that message to your superiors, relay that to anybody in the wing, and your voice will be heard. Everybody listening right now is a stakeholder. I'd even go as far as to say everybody here is a customer. And so make sure that your demands are being voiced so that everybody else can meet 'em and make sure you're meeting demands that are being voiced to you, right? And so work with each other. Everybody's done a great job working virtually. Looking forward to getting back into the office. And we talked about celebrating success. There's nothing like the sound of a really loud high five. Everybody turns around and looks because it's a great sound. And so looking forward to getting that again with y'all Gladiators. And so if you have any questions for me, please email me. You can also visit the CPI SharePoint site underneath the 960 Wing SharePoint. So just look for the CPI at the top, and there's a boatload of templates. There's a boatload of strategic planning documents and information, ways ahead, and ultimately our dashboard that tracks our key performance indicators, our internal control measures. It gives you a snapshot of where we are, how we're progressing, and what's next. And so visit those things, and if you have any questions, please reach out, and let's go get some. - Thanks, Bud. Appreciate it. - Thanks, sir. - Until next time, Gladiators. (Paper crumpling) (Easygoing rock music)