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Institutional Change and Employee Commitment in the United States Space Force

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LD 850: Leadership Integrative Capstone

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Institutional Change and Employee Commitment in the United States Space Force

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Finally, to any current or future Guardians that may read this publication, you all are exceptional professionals and unrivaled in this world. Know that my research on this topic is not an indictment against any of you; instead, it was a scholarly attempt to identify how the United States Space Force's state of constant change impacts each of you—us.

Abstract

Change is desirable by organizations seeking to increase their competitive advantage and the United States Space Force is not immune to those same demands. As the United States' newest military service, the Space Force initiated sweeping changes in an attempt to modernize how space operations are performed. Each of these changes imposed themselves upon stakeholders across the Space Force enterprise and my project sought understanding about their effects. With an increasing rate during the preceding decades, literary publications show linkages between the success or failure of an organization's desired change outcomes and the level of commitment demonstrated by its employees. This project connects what is known about organizational change and employee behavior in non-military environments with the Space Force's change efforts since its architecture deliberately emulates corporate design. The literature review explores change from institutional, organizational, and employee perspectives to better understand the relationship between change demands and employees' commitment. The research methodology balances qualitative and theoretical design, using my personal experiences as a Space Force member to formulate a novel research project.

Keywords: Organizational change, leadership, stakeholders, management, employee needs, commitment, purpose, training, stress

Introduction

The United States Space Force (USSF) was created on December 20th, 2019, marking 77 years since the United States (U.S.) government's last military service activation with the United States Air Force (USAF) in 1947. When the USSF was activated, it primarily consisted of transferees from the USAF, equipped with leadership and management competencies unattuned for the change environment immediately levied by the USSF. Whereas years of air power influence preceded the USAF's activation (Air Force Historical Research Agency, n.d.), the USSF's occurred abruptly, lacked a strategically planned foundation, and possessed little institutional substance (Farley, 2020). As the title given to USSF employees, "Guardians" working within the USSF's immature framework faced unprecedented change with no roadmap to help them navigate its demands.

With growing competitive concerns regarding other nations' activities in the space domain, the USSF's senior ranking officer, the Chief of Space Operations, defined the USSF's new identity as bold, lean, agile, and lethal (United States Space Force [USSF], 2021). Subsequently, one day after the USSF's activation, institutional changes shaped by those new characteristics erupted across the enterprise with effects persisting today (Erwin, 2023). Charged by the United States with a mission to "protect the Nation's interest in space," the USSF's capability to fulfill its competitive demands relied upon the commitment of its Guardians (Office of the Chief of Space Operations [OCSO], 2024, p 1).

Failing to change is detrimental to the USSF's achievement of its assigned mission. However, even when the need for change is operationally justifiable, Guardians weigh the USSF's institutional transformation objectives against their own sense of well-being and their connection with long-term job satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. Additionally, emergent

demands challenge the change management competencies that most Guardians learned and employed in the preceding decades as members of the USAF. Furthermore, any potential lessons learned from the USAF's activation era during the 1940s-1950s ranged from elusive to irrelevant—too much time surpassed and the world was too different. Finally, despite many of these challenges, the USSF's emergence as its own military service enabled the creation of a new identity and values systems that signaled unprecedented Guardian empowerment and autonomy. Ultimately, the resulting environment of confused empowerment inspired the development of this research project to determine how it impacts Guardians' commitment.

Compounded with the USSF's expectations of its Guardians' performance is the service's unorthodox structure. The USSF's organizational structure is unique among U.S. militaries; intentionally designed to mirror non-military corporations' flatter structures to reduce bureaucratic obstacles and empower decision making. For instance, compared to the USAF's six-level hierarchal command structure (Squadron, Group, Wing, Numbered Air Force, Major Command, and service Headquarters), the USSF streamlined its design to include only four (Squadron, Delta, Field Command, and service Headquarters). In either case, the majority of employees are assigned at the Squadron level, the organizational tier where missions are performed and the success of the USSF's desired change objectives are both determined and felt most severely.

Understanding the Guardian "condition" is vital for understanding the purpose of my research and it is important for me to convey that I am one. While I have been a space operations professional since 2002, I was an Airman in the USAF for the first 18 years of my career. In 2020, along with thousands of others, I transferred into the USSF and became a Guardian. This year, I will reach my twenty-second year of active duty service and fourth year

as a Guardian. Today, I serve as a Command Senior Enlisted Leader as one of 53 Chief Master Sergeants in the USSF and the research in this publication builds upon a framework structured by my unique experiences and observations of Guardians in the professional environment.

The USSF's ambition to emulate a corporate-like structure confidently reinforces my research approach to use scholarly studies on institutional change and employee behavior in non-military organizations and draw evidence-based conclusions about the USSF and Guardians' commitment. Additionally, aside from contractual differences in the terms of employment between military and private sector professionals, the existence of employee wants and needs are universal regardless of industry, product developed, or service provided. Therefore, my research to understand how the USSF's rate of change impacts Guardians builds upon existing studies about organizational and human factors, such as the link between a company's perceived need for change and employees' response to its demands.

My objective is to discover whether a correlation exists between the USSF's change demands and Guardians' resulting commitment. Combining my personal experiences as a senior leader in the USSF with scholarly research, my literature review first dives into change management and its contemporary implications to set a foundation I view as critical. This is important for readers of my research because few people possess insight on the topics of "USSF" and "Guardians." Additionally, the USSF's recent activation and niche nature means that my research taps into an unexplored domain, offering privileged insight into its corporate design and employee behaviors that fulfill a gap in academic publications. Furthermore, attaining better comprehension about Guardians during this era in the USSF is supported via exploration of private sector employees' roles and needs during periods of institutional change. A potential

root cause for the phenomenon I observe is disharmony between Guardians' capabilities and the USSF's expectations of their performance.

Can Guardians utilize their newfound empowerment for autonomous engagement and a bias for action to effectively answer the USSF's demands if the rate of change outpaces their capabilities? My research into organizational change and employee behaviors in non-military corporations delivers relevant insight to USSF leaders seeking better comprehension about factors affecting their Guardians' commitment. In the following section, I employ a deliberately sequenced literature review that begins with broader institutional change research, intersects with organizational factors, and ultimately leads into employee-centric variables associated with commitment. Afterwards, my methodology enables research data resulting from the integration of my personal experiences and direct observations of the USSF and Guardians. While seemingly large in scope, these factors—institutional, organization, and individual—reflect the demands Guardians face daily in the USSF's environment of change.

Literature Review

Increasing USSF Competitiveness

Change is required to remain competitive. Change management is “the process of continually renewing an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers” (Moran & Brightman, 2021, p. 66). Driven by strategic purpose, companies pursue organizational change when they sense that a transformation is necessary to maintain or improve their competitive posture (Kotter, 2007). Subsequently, successful change management endeavors result in innovations, new efficiencies, and improvements to production or service quality (Kotter, 2012).

For the USSF, increased competitiveness translates into improved capabilities to deter its global competitors and, if necessary, defeat adversaries in the space domain (OCSO, 2024). Yet, despite drastic differences in how the USSF and private corporations measure effectiveness—warfighting capability versus profitability—fundamental organizational and employee aspects are similar and relatable. Understanding the employee aspect is made easier by first establishing a foundation of relevant organizational change factors, particularly on the journey towards increasing comprehension about how USSF’s change environment impacts Guardians’ commitment.

Organizational Change History

According to Burke (2007), the first recorded demand for organizational change spans backwards into biblical times, during a period of antiquity when rulers’ willpower and direction served as the only energy required for action. In Guidi’s article *The Evolution of Organizational Change* (2020), he describes this era of time as “Generation 1.0”, earning a position as the first of five progressive change management strategies due to its authoritative and non-negotiable approach. Associating this ruler-worker dynamic with organizational change requires a logical stretch as the outcomes were driven through workers’ subservience and their lack of choice. Millennia would pass before organizational change significantly evolved into something recognizable by today’s developed societies.

For instance, Burke (2007) highlights Frederick Taylor’s approach towards change in the 1800-1900s as one centered around managing the organization from the perspective of a “machine.” This approach remained dismissive of the worker’s condition beyond their impersonal contribution to the “machine’s” continuous functionality; a similar sensation increasingly vocalized by many Guardians in the USSF. Although Taylor’s approach was relatively progressive when contrasted against antiquity’s ruler-worker model, resistance still

ensued because employees felt sparse feelings of meaning, purpose, and safety (Albrecht, et al., 2023). Emergent scientific pillars for failing human factors during Taylor's period led to keener insights into the role that employees' fulfillment and sense of purpose play in determining organizational change outcomes (Burke, 2007).

Advancing into the 1950s, Kurt Lewin's social science work led to the development of his three-step change model. As a logical model based on rationality, Kritsonis (2005) suggests that Lewin's model falters in consideration for human feelings and experiences. However, in *The Origins of Lewin's Three-Step Model of Change*, Burnes (2020) argues that the model's methodical design fosters compatibility with complex change and behavioral demands. Furthermore, the management-leadership debate surrounding Lewin's three-step change model is noteworthy for this project due to the Department of the Air Force's (DAF) reliance on it as their principle change management curriculum in professional military academics—the baseline that the preponderance of Guardians are trained to lead and follow through during change events (Department of the Air Force [DAF], 2021).

Unique Change Factors in the Military

Understanding organizational change history is relevant for my research because the USSF exists simultaneously across the multiple eras of change theory presented above. First, in recognizing general societal advancements in change management theory, it is worth noting that military structure shares much in common with antiquity's ruler-worker authoritarianism. From the United States Constitution, subsequent Congressional statutes, and DAF doctrine, which includes the USSF, commanders receive authority over people, assigned resources, and mission accomplishment (DAF, 2020). Thus, military commanders possess the authority to order organizational changes, so long as they are legal, moral, ethical, and aligned towards achieving national security objectives. However, regardless of authorities, research showcases the perils of

companies engaging change in a manner that instills stakeholders with fear or perceived oppression because it leads to uncooperativeness, resistance, and in drastic cases, rebellion (Lewis, 2019). Even in acknowledging that commanders possess the capability to *order* subordinates into action during change, the observable presence of Guardians who 1) actively resist or 2) lack the capability to perform validates the pitfalls associated with overreliance on formal authorities. Instead, Errida & Lotfi (2021) suggest that inspirational leaders who connect with their employees' needs increase unified action towards a discernable end-state.

Enabling Guardians to Change

While the military values management as a necessary component of organizational functionality, it places leadership in the pinnacle position because of its inspirational potential for moving people into action (Gallagher, 2016). Although published twenty years ago, the research conducted by Wong, Bliese, and McGurk (2003) on military leadership demonstrates the importance of transformative leadership in military services. As the USSF pursues institutional transformation to deliver operational capabilities to meet competitive demands, so too must Guardians remain capable of effective leadership and followership to bring the desired transformation to fruition (Pope, 2023). Therefore, any stance that debates whether Lewin's change model exists as a management-centric tool is unsupported by the USSF as evidenced by their reliance upon it in their leadership development academics.

Additionally, while most research publications on contemporary organizational change utilize the word "management" as a by-product of traditional change management terminologies, these same publications reveal themes that emphasize the importance of including leadership principles in the change management process. Even when acknowledging that tasks are manageable elements, it is the DAF's expectation that change agents lead stakeholders and organizations through the change management process (DAF, 2021). As a military service

subordinate to the DAF, the USSF shares the same expectations of its Guardian leaders. Thus, giving Guardians a voice and active role during change are enablers for building early momentum and fostering a shared sense of urgency across large employee populations (Kotter, 1995). To do this, organizations must possess or implement policies and deliver an environment that enables their employees to step into those roles.

Subsequently, as a relatively new guiding set of principles for the USSF, *The Guardian Ideal* (2021) delivered a values system exclusively applicable to Guardians. Combined with the *CSO's Planning Guidance* (2020) and *The Space Force Handbook* (2023), Guardians were charged with an unprecedented level of empowerment, roles as institutional ambassadors, and demands for a deliberate bias for action (USSF, 2023). Successful organizations, particularly those undergoing change, require inspired employees who are dedicated and committed to achieving an envisioned future state. One way to achieve this is through “participative decision-making,” which is highlighted as a method to align stakeholders’ behaviors and engagements with organizational needs, including change (Jung, et al., 2020, p. 4). Although USSF publications convey Guardian empowerment, real-world environments are more complex as a result of the commander-subordinate paradigm and their risk for enabling the circumvention of vital change management considerations, most often related to employees.

Employees: The Human Side of Change

The USSF is not unique; achieving new strategic objectives in any organization relies upon the dedication and buy-in of its employees (Andrew, 2017; Shahid & Azhar, 2013). While external competitive demands may drive essential changes, embracing their positive nature stems from change owners accounting for cultural impacts, employee conditions, and sustainability (Abbas, 2023). Conversely, organizations that cross the boundary into excessive change and fail to account for those variables risk alienating, confusing, and disenfranchising stakeholders

(Sirkin, et al., 2005). For the USSF, the potential exists that the myriad institutional changes deemed necessary to uphold operational superiority in the space domain deteriorates the effectiveness of its most powerful asset: Guardians. While published literature acknowledges with overwhelming consensus the mutual bond between competitiveness and organizational change, stakeholders' perceived treatment and sense of connectedness along the way influences whether the sentimental pendulum swings towards increased ownership and commitment or disengagement and burnout (Day, et al., 2017). These two categorizations indicate the general distinction between stakeholder "buy-in" and "resistance."

Research demonstrates that change effectiveness is predicated upon leader and follower unity, organizational coherence, and a shared understanding of the newly envisioned end state. Therefore, organizational change and its subsequent management requires a human-based approach that demands change owners elevate their perspective beyond authoritative and mechanistic engagements towards one that considers stakeholders' emotions, psychological states, capabilities, and commitment. Failure in any of these categories risks creating an environment where "the power of tradition, inertia, and passive resistance to change" triumph (Kotter, 2012, p 1). Additionally, during complex institutional changes where change demands "violate a person's sense of purpose" (Moran & Brightman, 2021, p 66), employees' resistance may progress beyond passive tactics as self-doubt increases and commitment decreases.

Defining Employee Commitment

In literature, commitment is defined as "a force that binds an individual to a target and to a course of action of relevance to that target" (Meyer & Maltin, 2010, p 324). For the USSF's aspirations, an ideal state of commitment manifests as Guardians' total dedication to achieving the service's desired changes. However, commitment is a generalized term and becomes more complex when considering its various forms. Affective commitment is an employee's perceived

emotional attachment to their organization, normative commitment is a sense of obligation to stay, and continuance commitment is a sense of loyalty derived from an employee's assessment that the cost to leave is too high (Mind Tools Content Team, n.d.). While Guardians' individual uniqueness determines their case-by-case degree of susceptibility to these commitments, the voluntary nature of military membership—initial and continued service—indicates general attunement with affective and normative commitment definitions. In their research on affective commitment, Alnıaçık et al. (2012) identify a distinct connection between an employee's sense of motivation and their commitment to an organization. Additionally, since military service is predicated on a moral obligation to serve, it aligns with normative commitment's quality where employees feel they "ought to" stay (Eslami & Gharakhani, 2012, p. 85).

While admitting that more research on commitment is warranted, Meyer (2016) conveys that stressors also play a role, impacting employees differently based on their psychology and needs. In one category defined by Meyer (2016) are employees whose sense of purpose and resulting commitment thrive during change, dampening the effects of stressors. Conversely, employees in his second category possess similar commitment levels but perceive the same stressors as threats, often with negative consequences (Meyer, 2016). Although specific demographic categorizations reflect over- and under-representation when compared to the U.S. demographic composition (Reynolds, 2018), military members join from every locale with vast financial and ethnical diversity (CFR.org Editors, 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable to view the USSF's Guardian population as susceptible to similar stress response categories found across non-military industries. Beyond my project's underlying contention that the USSF's organizational desires make it compatible with research on change in non-military organizations,

this revelation highlights the same relationship between Guardians and employees in non-military industries.

To better understand the magnitude that Guardians' commitment plays in the USSF only requires a cursory dive into its institutional structure. With 8,879 Guardians comprising the entirety of the USSF, each person's contribution possesses uncanny significance as a military service's administrative, personnel, and operational programs impose unmitigable baseline demands regardless of institutional size. To appropriately contextualize the USSF's miniscule size for anyone unfamiliar with military design, the next smallest U.S. military service is the U.S. Marine Corps at 172,577 Marines (USAFacts Team, 2024)—each service responsible for comparable scopes of responsibility. Beyond Guardians' responsibilities to manage these programs day-to-day, complex and layered institutional changes affects each of them in various ways. Without the ability to distribute tasks across a wider population to lessen change's impacts on individual Guardians, most balance an array of change demands simultaneously. These concentrated change demands mean that a single Guardian's commitment level noticeably contributes or detracts from the USSF's ability to achieve its change objectives. This concentration of change extends deeper into Guardians' lives, impacting their sustained commitment when they cannot make sense of its purpose, perceive it as excessive, or, as is often the case, question their own capabilities and readiness to answer the USSF's demands.

Employee's Perspective on Change

When dealing with change, demands are levied upon, and require the actions of, individuals, teams, organizations, and, in the USSF's change management environment, entire institutions. Whereas localized change may only require individual or single team engagement using linear, logical, and rational means to achieve simple outcomes, organizational and institutional change levies ambiguous and complex demands upon large stakeholder populations

(Cameron & Green, 2019). A distributed surge of interconnected change demands that impact entire organizations or institutions simultaneously are described by Burke (2012) in *Organization Change: Theory and Practice* as rare events. Thus, the USSF's on-going change demands align with this rare occurrence; described as a "re-creation" or, a transformation of all basic components to answer an immediate crisis (Chowdhury & Shil, 2022, p. 32). However, despite the imperatives driving change, researchers identify a threshold between essential (positive) and excessive (negative) change (Falkenberg, et al., 2005). Although the boundary between essential and excessive changes are subjectively determined by the employees most affected by them (Falkenberg, et al., 2005), their willingness or cynicism are powerful forces that impact corporate outcomes (Brown & Cregan, 2008). Given that employee cynicism "does not need to be grounded in facts" (Brown & Cregan, 2008, p 14), its role in the change equation is significant.

Competency's Role in Empowering Change

Current literature shows a direct connection between commitment and employees' performance, emphasizing how important it is for the USSF to employ and sustain a Guardian population with a high desire to contribute. Additionally, the linkage that training shares with employee performance and effectiveness impacts an organization's overall outcomes (Elnaga & Imran, 2013; Rodriguez & Walters, 2017). However, Aragon, et al. (2014) offer a different perspective and make a case that little empirical evidence exists that directly links individual training to increased organizational performance. Instead, they posit that training scoped to the organizational level—not individually focused—provides better competitive outcomes. Ultimately, the various nuances in literature claiming optimal states of training administration become less relevant when considering Errida and Lotfi's (2021, p 5) succinct reminder about its underlying intent: to account for, and accommodate, "employees' skills and abilities."

Despite researchers' opposing points of view in literature about training styles, *competency* is a thematic anchor point in many studies and I believe this is due to the dual role it plays both externally to the organization and internally to the employee (Cameron & Green, 2019; Lewis, 2019; Rodriguez & Walters, 2017; Shahid & Azhar, 2013; William, 2010). Regarding the USSF, it is worth noting that competency's prevalence in literature is particularly relevant for my research due to the service's efforts to incorporate a competency-based development model (USSF, 2021). However, this also serves as an example of the gap my research aims to reduce because it demonstrates the USSF's tendency to focus on end-states while failing to equip Guardians with the necessary tools to bring the change to fruition. This is compelling to my research for two reasons: 1) the USSF's own development model acknowledges that Guardians require deliberate training to perform while 2) offering no recourse for Guardians when it does not occur. Thus, Guardians inherit the requirement to contribute to the USSF's organizational change demands without having received the deliberate training enabling them to perform what is expected. In cases of deficient training, as perceived by employees who feel ill-equipped to contribute, Rahman & Rahman (2013) found that organizations should expect reduced commitment, lower motivation, increased employee turnover, and decreased productivity.

Impact of Stress on Engagement

While available literature generally agrees that training results in positive organizational outcomes, its effects at the individual employee level are equally important. As a mechanism capable of bolstering personal competencies, individual training mitigates negative sentiment and is critical for increasing employees' motivation and job satisfaction (Shahzaki, et al, 2014). To this point, cited publications correlate training as a positive impact on employee motivation, however, their context is shaped from the perspective of normal organizational tempos.

Therefore, it is reasonable to consider that Guardians' self-assessed adequacy to perform under normal conditions is exacerbated by the additional stressors associated with constant change.

Since military professions are considered stressful by their very nature (Defense Health Agency, n.d.), any role obscurity experienced by stakeholders amplifies stress beyond normal levels. Layering additional organizational change stressors atop routine work stressors affects employees' behaviors. Vakola and Nikolau (2005) concluded that mismanaged stressors associated with organizational change directly contributed to decreased stakeholder commitment, increased change resistance, and negative attitudes. When institutional change owners direct actions while simultaneously signaling empowerment to unprepared stakeholders, the stakeholders' uncertainty increases as they wonder whether they are truly leading and/or owning the change as a result of their biased action or being pulled along for the ride. As a component of stress, emotional states contribute significantly to stakeholders' health (Rafferty & Jimmieson, 2017) and can lead to sensations of exclusion, deficient psychological safety, and a fear of repercussions (Amjad, et al., 2020).

Cultivating Ownership to Build Commitment

With militant ruler-worker organizational design juxtaposed with messages of empowerment and biased action, Guardians seek comprehension of their role in the USSF's change environment. As literature exposes vital aspects of followers' psychological condition during change management, it is apparent that the two are inseparable and worth consideration. While a litany of factors contribute to a person's psychological state, applying an organizational change management lens reveals the importance of understanding the role employees sense themselves in when compared to the institution's performance demands. Thus, exploring the importance of employees' sense of control, or agency, during change is relevant for leaders seeking to establish positive change environments (Georgalis, et al., 2015). However, literature

indicates opposing points of view that cautions against blanket applications. For some people, a heightened sense of control mitigates stress levels; however, others demonstrate increased levels of stress as more control was offered (Amoura, et al., 2013). Additionally, as Raelin (2003) conveys in *Creating Leaderful Organizations*, an employee's readiness or desire to engage shapes their reaction when offered the opportunity. Raelin (2003) further explains that while many followers seize the opportunity to assume leadership roles, others desire to maintain their follower role and resist the offer. This indicates that even if the USSF were to offer the most ideal change environment to Guardians—inspirational leaders, participatory engagement, and optimal training—some would still demonstrate low levels of commitment.

However, an authoritative entity imparting leadership or opportunities for control exists as only one part of the equation, revealing the second part as the employee's level of acceptance. Guardians opposed to assuming a leading role in change may do so from an innate personal desire to remain in follower roles but may also stem from a lack of confidence to lead as a result of inadequate or absent training. Similarly, while the uncertainty associated with change creates discomfort in many who are affected by it, others with high tolerance for the unknown "perceive it as a joyful situation" (Tinaztepe, 2012, p. 130). In this regard, the effect that uncertainty plays on followers' psychological state is associated with their sense of comfortable control and their individual demeanor shapes their response to leadership opportunities. Therefore, assessing the relationship between organizational change and employee commitment levels requires acknowledgement of Guardians' individuality. This indicates another layer of commonality with non-military organizations' employees and necessitates more granularity for employee groupings, as each responds to change differently.

Tenure's Impact on Change Response

Decades of publications identify employees' behavior as a critical component of organizational change, particularly its impact on the attainment of desired strategic outcomes. Additionally, tenure plays a similar role as emotions do in shaping employees' behaviors and subsequently contributes to their change receptiveness (Lestari & Sinambela, 2021). However, as explained by Ng & Feldman, (2013) literature over the last 30 years disagrees on the correlation between employee tenure and performance, challenging the "widespread assumption that workers with more years of service are generally better performers (p. 1221). This highlights employees' uniqueness and diversity, as well as the risk associated with overreliance on categorical groupings and definitive conclusions. However, demographic categorizations are useful for drawing general conclusions. As such, various researchers label tenure groups differently (I.e., "junior" or "young" and "senior" or "older"), but distinctions are clear enough to offer parallels relevant for USSF applications. I assess that three general demographic groups of Guardians exist within the USSF. Admittedly, these specific year groups are based on my experiences and are not definitively established in any publications. They are based on years of Time in Service (TIS):

- *Category 1:* 4 years or less TIS
- *Category 2:* 5-15 years of TIS
- *Category 3:* 15 or more years TIS.

Employees' perceptions during prior change events can influence their receptiveness to emergent change (Stensaker & Meyer, 2012). This indicates that an employee's change acceptance or resistance is also guided by experiential factors. Eriksson (2004) introduces the idea that new employees with little experience may welcome change initially and alter their

receptiveness to it upon undergoing its demands. This group is representative of Guardians in *Category 1* who comprise approximately 25% of the USSF. With no knowledge of pre-existing conditions, these Guardians' arrived at a "normal" state already defined by the USSF's intense change environment. Notably, Eriksson's statement hints at the temporal attributes of this category, particularly regarding new employees' receptiveness. This lends credence to tenure-based categorizations while concurrently acknowledging that many employees naturally progress through them as they gain experience.

Available literature on a "middle-tenured" category was elusive as most publications delineated between categories using binary "junior" and "senior" labels. This "middle-tenured" group is representative of Guardians in *Category 2* who comprise approximately 50% of the USSF. Despite literary scarcity, Eriksson's (2004) study on emotions and change offered an "in the shop" perspective that matched my interpretation of middle-tenured employees. His research revealed feedback from employees in this demographic unanimously associated "change" with "fatigue" (p. 120). Notably, the term "change fatigue" has become common Guardian vernacular in many work centers. Conversely, as the largest demographic group by population, leveraging its experiential diversity offers opportunities to positively influence performance and increase Guardians' commitment (Steffens, et al., 2014).

Research on senior employees offers significantly divergent perspectives. This group is representative of Guardians in *Category 3* who comprise approximately 25% of the USSF. Literature shows historical correlation between human capital theory and senior employees' capabilities. Succinctly, higher tenured employees offer more value to an organization based on their learned skilled and attained experienced (Ross, et al., 2023). However, an overwhelming quantity of literature opposes human capital theory's concepts as Marginson (2019) criticizes

their limitations and Fix (2018) labels them a “virus” against scientific progress. The divergent opinions in literature validate a decades’ long shift towards recognizing employees’ behavioral complexity and the obstacles present when attempting to define them via quantifiable measurements.

For instance, Stensaker & Meyer (2012) highlight that for senior employees, their apparent change acceptance and loyalty may be learned behaviors that veil their internal negativity about the change. Literature suggests that senior employees’ general sentiment of change is skepticism, particularly when assessing its outcomes—a contrasting reality when compared to the optimism demonstrated by a company’s newest employees, such as those Guardians in *Category 1*. Senior employees who are set in their ways oppose change, demonstrating the concept that tenure and resistance to change are directly proportional (Iverson, 1996). The magnitude of this relationship is annotated in modern publications as well (Georgalis, et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Throughout my research, literature agrees that organizational change outcomes are positively affected when employees’ needs exist as an integral component of the overarching change strategy. Research also indicates that change is not arbitrary and is centered around increasing competitiveness. My research highlighted that organizations pursuing large scale change should not approach institutional, organizational, or individual employee factors in isolation from one another. They are interconnected and inseparable.

The prevalence of studies identifying employees as the heart of successful change reinforces my contention that fundamental human factors exist universally; observable in non-military organizations just as they are in the USSF. While many publications concentrate on change management from a top-down perspective through organizational, leadership, and

management responsibilities, my attempt to connect employees' needs to the change formula offered significant insight into the challenges Guardians face in the USSF. Regarding employees, studies agree that commitment during change is complex and shaped by perception, learned behaviors, stress response, and internal assessments of personal readiness. Overall, the organizational change topics researchers focus on for non-military organizations mirrors the same themes I observe with Guardians, reinforcing my theory that their commitment is affected by the USSF's rate of change.

Research Methodology

To my knowledge, my specific research about the USSF's change demands and their impact on Guardians is the first of its kind. Therefore, I fused qualitative and theoretical research methodologies using a strategy to combine findings for which little, or no, data exists with my personal experiences and observations as a senior USSF leader. To better understand the environment Guardians face and their behavioral responses to its demands, I used Google Scholar and the University of New Hampshire's Discovery Service to explore approximately fifty scholarly publications from recognized journals and multiple books about organizational change and employee behavior. Acknowledging that no specific scholarly data exists for the USSF or Guardians on this topic, this approach followed my contention and aimed to draw out similarities and differences between private sector organizational structures and the USSF.

My literature review attempts to set a foundation for readers unfamiliar with the USSF. By setting the stage with relevant change management models throughout history, readers become attuned to the non-standard change environment that Guardians operate within. Additionally, by choosing a sequential approach linking institutional and organizational factors with employees' needs, conclusions about how USSF change impacts Guardians' commitment became possible.

As my literature review progressed from change, as viewed through an organizational lens, it encountered a multitude of employee related elements. The vast availability of change management research related to employees solidified my project's pathway into better understanding Guardians, offering the bridge necessary for my theoretical understanding of the USSF to connect with other studies on change in non-military organizations.

My methodological procedure relied upon qualitative organizational change studies present in scholarly databases and used my own theoretical approach to draw correlations about USSF Guardians facing similar conditions. First, garnering institutional and organizational insight about change required the use of published studies found using keywords such as "change," "outcomes," "transformation," "communication," and "leadership." Next, understanding Guardians' behavior to USSF change required insight into non-military organizations' employees. To gain the necessary knowledge about human components and explore predominate factors that impact employees' acceptance or resistance to change, I used keywords such as "behavior," "commitment," "emotions," "purpose," "experience," and "capability." Finally, to find existing studies that have synthesized both organizational elements and human-based factors associated with change, I used the key words, "organizational effectiveness," "achieving outcomes," and multiple other impact focused word combinations to find correlating studies.

My research relied on published literature and personal experiential data because quantitative research would have required surveyed input from Guardians and that route was not viable for me due to my position as a senior leader. While none of the publications discovered during my literature review exhibited content specifically related to the USSF or Guardians, my research was not solely dependent on the existence of those direct connections. Instead, the key

terms above were used to find shared themes between non-military organizations and the USSF, use that commonality as a vehicle to draw conclusions from studies about non-military employees, and apply them to Guardians. That bridge relied upon qualitative research properties that offer a valid basis for scholarly engagement using stories, experiences, and feelings as a valid basis for scholarly engagement (Fossey, et al., 2002).

Furthermore, since qualitative research provided an environment where theoretical and subjective elements thrived, it provided me the opportunity to employ vignettes to reinforce my project's contention. As "a short, descriptive passage of a moment in time," vignettes allowed me, as both a Guardian and observer of other Guardians, to share my first-hand experiences to reinforce my theory that Guardians' commitment is impacted by USSF change demands (Griffin, 2023, para 2). Finally, conjoined with these vignettes, the data I present is shaped by Geertz's thick description concept so that the social and cultural complexities of the USSF come to life and are interpretable by readers who are not familiar with Guardians or their environments (Freeman, 2014).

Data and Results

My professional experiences in the USSF provide me an opportunity to share five vignettes to support my research about the USSF's change environment and Guardians' resulting commitment. These vignettes offer descriptions of five layered and concurrent change factors encompassing the USSF institution, hundreds of organizations, and thousands of Guardians. First, I provide an overview of who Guardians are and explain how the change environment they face impacts their commitment. Second, insight into Guardians' commitment is relayed through categories I created from my personal observations and experiences. Third, I offer details into how the USSF's harmed its own change efforts by forcing change so rapidly that it alienated its

employees. Fourth, I showcase the USSF's realignment of its organizations and how a failure to heed experts' advice resulted in consequences Guardians face today. Finally, as the fundamental component necessary for bringing successful change to fruition, I explain the impact of the USSF's failure to prepare Guardians for change and how it impacts their commitment.

Recently, I attended a USSF leadership summit where retired U.S. Army General George W. Casey said that the USSF was in a volatile position because both "the leaders and the led are charged with figuring out things together." His statements accurately portray the notion that all Guardians, regardless of their position on the leader-follower spectrum, experience the USSF's change demands together. However, where General Casey's message as an outside observer was inspirationally constructed, the change landscape Guardians face challenges their optimism, as demonstrated by the following five vignettes. As I convey the following data resulting from my experiences and observations, I was present and should be viewed as a participant in each vignette where the term "Guardians" is used.

Vignette #1: Guardians and Their Environment

When the USSF activated on December 20, 2019, thousands of USAF Airmen performing space related operational duties were poised to transfer into it and form the initial cadre of Guardians on September 1, 2020. This was my cohort and where I became a Guardian. Between October 2020 and today, the USSF also accepted additional transfers of non-space related professionals from the USAF as well as the Army, Navy, and Marines. Through voluntary processes, these Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines integrated into, and across, the USSF as Guardians. Regardless of the onboarding mechanism, all Guardians arrived to the USSF developed under different institutional values (Mattox, 2013). Hindsight offers the realization that finalizing administrative transitions should never have assumed implied readiness

for the USSF change demands since each of the military services core values vary, as demonstrated below:

Service	Core Values
Air Force	<i>Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence In All We Do</i>
Army	<i>Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage</i>
Navy	<i>Honor, Courage, and Commitment</i>
Marines	<i>Honor, Courage, and Commitment</i>

On September 21, 2021, the USSF published *The Guardian Ideal*, a foundational service document that defined both what Guardians were and what was expected of them. Included within it were the USSF's four new core values: *Character, Connection, Commitment, and Courage*. As a substantial change in the new USSF, Guardians were offered no input into its development and many felt little ownership of its existence—the first of many USSF changes where Guardians felt change occurring *to* them. Research reveals that if the USSF had employed a participative approach towards these new values, then Guardians' sense of ownership may have increased as a result of their inclusion before, during, and after the change (Jung, et al., 2020). Additionally, without a deliberately structured bridge between Guardians' prior service values, norms, and standards, they were left to their own devices about how to consume and implement the new ideals.

During the USSF's first four years, similar changes traditionally arrived in a top-down fashion, landing on Guardians with little of the participation-seeking that scholars identify as a critical enabler for fostering employees' buy-in and commitment to change. While this authoritative and assertive approach exists within the bounds of senior institutional leaders'

authorities, it routinely jeopardizes genuine integration and adoption across the enterprise at each of the three subordinate organizational echelons below the USSF headquarters. While most prevalent in 2022, pockets remain today and this authoritative approach devolved into memorization practices concerned with optics vice true implementation capable of bringing the USSF's desired Guardian culture to fruition.

In early cases during 2021, Guardians were challenged during job interviews or on-the-spot encounters to recite the four core values, demonstrating leaders' and organizations' lack of self-awareness that many Guardians were confused, uncertain, and still coming to terms with their new identities in the USSF. As a senior ranking Guardian, I experienced similar encounters, revealing a stressed change environment that leaders and followers experienced in unison. More recently, Guardians are pressured to sing the USSF song during ceremonial events under the erroneous premise that one's ability to recite it validates their alignment with the USSF's values. Additionally, these served as indicators that many USSF leaders valued the appearance of compliance with these top-down implements at a higher priority than exerting the energy necessary to lead Guardians in an enabling manner to genuinely reach the envisioned cultural reformation. In 2020, a top USSF General Officer stated, "if you are not excited about what is happening in the USSF, then you must not have a pulse," and I believe this single statement set a tone in the USSF where the appearance of change became more important than its actualization.

Vignette #2: Guardians' Commitment

As organizational change ensues, the most vital component in actualizing the envisioned outcomes are the employees and, like civilian corporations, the USSF requires the same of its Guardians. While I do not want to oversimplify the process in which non-military employees can quit when they no longer support their conditions, the reality is that Guardians cannot quit

their jobs due to their legally binding contractual obligations to the U.S. This is essential because a Guardian's level of commitment is not assessable through their continued presence in the work center and is much harder to determine. To stay true to the lessons acquired during my literature review, it would be unfair to place all Guardians into a category that suggests that each one struggles with the USSF's change demands and calls for biased action. Each Guardians' uniqueness, temperament, and demeanor play a role in their response to the changes and some excel in the volatile and demanding environment. Based on the rate of personal engagements I have with Guardians as a senior leader, I developed an internalized framing system that I rely upon in the performance of my professional duties. For this research project, these six Guardian commitment categories possess direct relevance to my research because they offer insight into how Guardians' commitment levels shape their response to change:

Guardian Type	Description	Commitment Level	Tenure Category
Refuge Seeker	Prior service conditions were so undesirable that any USSF demands are inconsequential	Medium-High	1, 2, and 3
Inspired	Aligns actions with USSF demands, seeks challenges, sometimes inconsiderate of others not in this category type	High	1, 2, and 3
Jaded	Possessed expectations of USSF based on preconceived notion, displeased with work center realities and USSF demands	Low-Medium	1
Indifferent	Low/moderate self-starter, avoids institutional challenges, performs well when specifically tasked	Low-Medium	2
Countdown	Very close to retirement or separation, sometimes jaded and absent but some remain motivated	Low-Medium	3
No Choice	Leaders in key positions where no other option exists other than complete acceptance of USSF change demands	High	3

It is worth noting that these are general categorizations and it is expected that Guardians will naturally transition between them at various points in their career, even while remaining in the same tenure category. Likewise, as USSF change demands exert themselves onto Guardians in any of these commitment categories, positive and negative shifts are possible.

I observe these types of commitment shifts routinely. Since the USSF activated so suddenly in 2019, a notable recurring change is based on the USSF's continued reliance on USAF programs and policies. Additionally, since the majority of Guardians are prior USAF Airmen, most of the programs and policies the USSF relies upon are familiar and recognizable. While the reliance itself is not problematic, the USSF's evolving behavioral trend over the last three years is a source of distress for Guardians. Recalling the ruler-worker change dynamic from antiquity, the USSF's willingness to pull a lever that terminates its reliance on a USAF program, simultaneously enact its own program, and fail to communicate the change to Guardians across the enterprise occurs frequently. The USSF seeks little stakeholder buy-in and often harms Guardians through variables the headquarters did not account for, replacing opportunities for inclusivity with increased employee cynicism. For instance, numerous award, recognition, and professional advancement opportunities evolved into new USSF programs with no communication, creating an environment where Guardians rarely understood which standards, policies, and/or programs applied to them or the personnel under their supervision. Military organizations and their members falter when standards are unknown, nebulous, and left to interpretation. When these vital pillars erode, I observe Guardians' connection with the USSF's identity deteriorate, particularly as it relates to the aspirational sentiment present within *The Guardian Ideal*.

While a counterargument exists that policy and programmatic confusion should be expected during sweeping institutional change, Guardians' commitment is inexcusably jeopardized when senior leaders catalyze disjointedness and confusion in their messaging. For Guardians, it is not uncommon to receive guidance or direction from one General Officer and then hear something contradictory from another General Officer. The fact that USSF General Officers, of which only 21 exist, cannot synchronize their messaging during the extreme changes that they initiated reveals the broad challenges faced by the other 8,858 Guardians as they operate in greatly disadvantaged positions. This results in outcomes that harm Guardians' willingness to sustain their existing efforts to actualize the USSF's change outcomes.

Although the USSF's changes culminate as a massive recreation effort, many individual changes are minor-to-moderate in scale and easily handled by Guardians through their ingenuity and innovation. However, the oppressive environments that organizations should avoid if they want inspired, motivated, and empowered stakeholders to perform often emerge in the USSF due to the mismanagement of compounding and layered changes. As Lewin's three step change model emphasizes the importance of "refreezing" to allow renormalization and an assessment of the change's effectiveness (Department of the Air Force, 2017, p 269), the USSF rarely makes it that far. For instance, Guardians tackle endless minor changes that, when viewed holistically, culminate into extensive task loads that routinely fail to account for their own shared interdependencies. Most egregiously, Guardians that pour their energy into larger change initiatives often face abrupt redirection, nullifying their sense of contribution and creating a feeling of professional futility as their efforts go unacknowledged and unrewarded.

In other cases, I observe Guardians who employ a stalling strategy upon initial change demand indicators as a means of self-preservation because they know another change is on the

horizon. Sadly, it works but over longer durations of time, this is an act of professional survival that inevitably leads to reduced loyalty, retention, and commitment. As a senior Guardian who has been on the receiving end senior executive leaders vocalizing their displeasure with the broader Guardian population using the term “change fatigue,” I argue that they have missed the point entirely. While most Guardians are *tired* of the constant change, the *fatigue* enters the equation as a result of the USSF continuously proving that their change demands are disparate, incompatible with each other, and not part of a comprehensive strategy (Yonekura, et al., 2024).

Vignette #3: Rushing Into Resistance

In the week following the USSF’s activation in December 2019, the service’s senior leaders directed the removal of USAF décor and organizational emblems. This was a complete elimination of USAF lineage and, in many cases, contradictorily included objects associated with space operations that the USSF would assume control of. Although the preponderance of Guardians would come from the USAF, between this point in time and October 2020, these soon-to-be Guardians were still Airmen in the USAF pending the USSF’s transition window. Many were offended and felt alienated as their professional identities were rooted in the USAF lineage that the USSF was so unnecessarily passionate about erasing. As a primer for what would become the USSF’s endless culture of change, this affirms what Moran and Brightman (2021) highlight about employees’ commitment when their sense of professional purpose is violated.

Erasing USAF lineage manifested as a midnight sledgehammering of semi-permanent outdoor emblems such as Air Force Space Command’s logo from outdoor fixtures on its headquarters building that existed since September 1, 1982. Equally abrasive, employees across the globe were directed to remove iconic USAF staples from their facilities, often symbols that defined their organization’s culture and the identity of its stakeholders. The USSF’s sprint away

from its USAF history shocked those who would become Guardians with deeply rooted connections to their USAF upbringing. As it pertains to change, the USSF's poor strategy was exposed as they had no emblems, icons, or logos of their own to put up at this point. This reality amplified many employees' negative sentiment about the USSF's perceived urgency, validating the emphasis Kotter (1995) places on employees sharing their organization's sense of urgency to foster change momentum.

Recalling the linkage between fulfilling employees' needs and their commitment towards leading organizational change to a desired outcome (Errida & Lotfi, 2021) reveals a significant fracture in the USSF's change strategy. As one of many early change actions taken by the USSF, the response from its future Guardians started a perpetuating theme of poor reception that, much like the USSF's layered changes, would become layered itself. In addition to the emotional impacts Guardians experienced with the removal of lineage icons, simultaneous and layered organizational restructuring added an additional layer of negative change sentiment.

Vignette #4: Consequences of Ignoring Subject Matter Experts

Within military organizational architecture exists numerous background factors associated with fiscal authorization and limitations that define the quantity of positions each organization has as well as who can be hired into them. The positions are referred to as *manpower authorizations* and the individual humans hired into them are identified as *personnel actions*. Historically, from year-to-year, significant changes were infrequent, however, with the USSF's activation, hundreds of organizations were realigned from other military services (predominately from the USAF) to the USSF and dozens others were newly activated. Coupled with the USSF's new agile and lean philosophy focused on emulating non-military corporations' agility, *manpower* and *personnel* experts cautioned against downstream risks if the rate of change outpaced the institutional management systems' support capabilities. Despite the USSF's

new existence as its own service, it was subordinate to the DAF and remains perpetually attached to the core systems that manage both USAF and USSF resources. This included Guardians and their assignments, monthly pay, promotion eligibility, performance reports, awards, supervisor allocations, chains of command, and countless other administrative functions capable of impacting service members and their families' lives when disrupted. As with any organization, isolated and infrequent errors in *personnel* matters are inevitable and remedied through established processes, but the USSF's widespread organizational change created a crisis impacting mass quantities of Guardians.

My experiences with this change management disaster began at the ground level between 2019 and 2022 as the Senior Enlisted Leader (SEL) of a tactical squadron, the organizational tier where most Guardians work. Traditionally, a SEL is a principal advisor to their commander and responsible for *manpower* authorizations and *personnel* assigned based on their given mission. However, the realignment of our organization resulted in the USSF stacking four separate organizations into ours; each designed to become its own organization over a period of time. While this type of organizational change acknowledges both a current and future state, the USSF's poor change management strategies emerge when realizing that it did not account for the dynamics between those two discrete states or the necessary sustainment post-change. These two states are where Guardians' commitment faced its greatest challenges.

By ignoring the *manpower* and *personnel* experts, the USSF set the Guardians it relied upon the most for its change outcomes on a deficient pathway that placed them at odds with their own sense of belonging and purpose. The USSF's institutional agility was not extended to its personnel and even the most fundamental studies on change management capture the risks of employee resistance when they feel oppressed (Lewis, 2019). For instance, Guardians selected

to join the USSF from other military services were passionately pursued during the institutional onboarding phase but upon assignment to a squadron, quickly encountered tactical unit supervisors and leaders who were not equipped by the USSF to resolve the administrative problems they faced. Once again, this demonstrated the USSF's acknowledgement of current and future states (I.e., a Marine (current) becomes a Guardian (future)) but provided nothing to organizational leaders receiving these new Guardians to assist with their in-processing, training, and employment. When considering this group along with the larger population of Guardians—leaders and followers alike—multiple examples of change's negative impacts emerge.

On numerous occasions, Guardians found themselves challenged by errors in their professional records that negatively impacted leaders' ability to account for their assigned personnel because the USSF engaged in functional changes that left behind the DAF accounting systems that commanders relied upon. Guardians missed promotions and nominative opportunities because the USSF's visible structure did not match the DAF's organizational accounting system—a requirement for leaders to maintain awareness of their Guardians' status and for commanders to make legal decisions. Regardless of the where the fault existed within the USSF architecture, Guardians' cynicism increased and this fostered negative perceptions about not only the specific changes they faced, but the USSF's general concern over their well-being (Brown & Cregan, 2008).

Vignette #5: Performative Expectations without Training

Appearances of effective change and feigned compliance overshadowed the actual enactment of *The Guardian Ideal's* entire purpose and this is primarily because most Guardians had little notion of what they were doing since they never received training on how to be a Guardian. When civilians sign up for military service, they are sent to basic military training to learn how to be part of a specific service and, upon graduation, complete a technical school to

learn the tradecraft they will eventually perform. Learning how to be a Soldier in the Army does not prepare you for being a Sailor in the Navy. Although a very small portion of existing Guardians have joined through the USSF's more recent basic training program, the preponderance of existing Guardians will never receive specific USSF training. This means that USSF-specific change demands levied upon Guardians are only answerable through the utilization of skills they learned in their prior services.

The disharmony between Guardians' training and the USSF's performative expectations is one potential root cause for the growing disenfranchisement and deteriorating commitment observed today. While this is my subjective assessment and disputable, I offer the following to support my stance. In 2023, the USSF eventually capitulated on the mediocre reception *The Guardian Ideal* received across the force and it released *The Guardian Spirit*, a more comprehensive description of the four core values. Fundamentally, this demonstrated the USSF's dedication to their values and would have served as a positive institutional step; however, critical analysis enabled Guardians' realization that the USSF would continue imposing itself through publications without any training. As Guardians' awareness on this trend increased, we began to realize that handling the USSF's complex change demands was a secondary concern to reality the service had zero intent on teaching Guardians how to be Guardians. This point is further reinforced by an upcoming USSF summit where a primary talking point is the reinvigoration of the Guardian spirit. For an institution that is less than five years old, the perceived need to revitalize fundamental Guardian principles indicates that the USSF truly subscribed to the belief that publications without training were suitable for changing Guardians' behaviors. Kotter highlights this approach as "declaring victory too soon" (2007, p

66) and is symptomatic of poor change management strategies because it dismisses the dedication and energy necessary to overcome cultural reformation challenges.

From an institutional change perspective, the lack of training necessary to teach Guardians how to be the prototypical Guardian envisioned by the USSF fractured confidence across the force. Although Guardians' personal attributes, psychological needs, and tenure resulted in an array of responses, many Guardians felt lost and underappreciated in the turmoil of the USSF's new change environment. However, the USSF's new demands for biased action meant that low commitment—regardless of its validity or source—was problematic because it jeopardized the institution's competitive objectives. This conundrum is one of many spurred by the USSF's inconsistency between its idealistic messaging and the actions necessary to equip Guardians with what they required.

Knowing that sustaining and/or increasing competitive posture is a primary catalyst for change (Kotter, 2007) while simultaneously observing little deliberate institutional action from the USSF to arm Guardians with the necessary skills to perform it confidently is a frustrating phenomenon. An example of this training deficiency is found in the USSF's professional academics. As I previously established, most Guardians were raised within the USAF's developmental system as Airmen so their training was only moderately suited for the USSF's change demands. Similar to the USSF's urgency to remove USAF symbols from its facilities, it was ambitious to create its own military academies for its enlisted Guardian population. Also similar to its expedient organizational changes, the creation of USSF academies proved an easier milestone than the incorporation of bespoke curriculum for the service's specific needs. As a result, the USSF military academies inherited outdated curriculum from the USAF that provided zero value to Guardians seeking their place in the USSF's changing environment.

Latching onto the competitive catalyst for change offers another training misstep that negatively impacted Guardians performance. Since global competitors and their associated behaviors in the space domain spur many of the actions taken by the USSF, many demands for change occur within the operational environment present within the tactical squadrons responsible for performing specific missions. As the USSF's emergence established the nation's evolution from non-competitive (benign) operations to combat-focused (contested) missions in the space domain, its expectations of its technical operators grew. It was no longer acceptable to view operational success through the lens of maintaining operations, operators across the USSF were expected to perform all actions from a threat-based, warfighting perspective. I will admit that the envisioned transformation is critical and necessary, however, in traditional USSF fashion, these new requirements were messaged via publications and notes without any substantial resourcing to modify Guardians' training environments to enable them to meet the new standard. The performative expectations levied upon Guardians exceeded the institution's commitment towards enabling it. Instead, Guardians received the order to change along with the expectation that they would somehow figure it out and that is neither indicative of transformative leadership nor a pathway towards inspiring commitment.

Recommendations

It is important to restate from the introduction and remind readers that I conducted this research as a Guardian actively serving in the USSF. Acknowledging that even qualitative studies are analyzed using the researcher's "own subjective interpretations" (Efron & Ravid, 2019, p 17), it is logical to view theoretical methodologies' reliance on the researcher's experience as even more subjective. Therefore, since this topic is close to me personally and professionally, it is unlikely that I completely eliminated all bias. However, by purposefully

using search terms to find contradictions to my hypothesis, I did not find results that sufficiently countered the dominant themes connecting the impact that change has on employees.

While my personal experiences and observations as a Guardian enabled me the development of this project using those lenses, it also leaves opportunities on the table for researchers to explore the topic. A qualitative study using surveys that capture Guardians' direct input provides them a voice to speak on their own behalf, creating a project framework supported by valuable evidence. Additionally, research about the USSF and Guardians deserves a wider aperture to leverage others' diverse perspectives and observations in order to evolve the body of work beyond what I was capable of as a single researcher. For instance, acknowledging my place in tenure category 3, the ideas that a researcher from tenure categories 1 or 2 may offer likely differs from my own as their position within the USSF offers a different vantage. Furthermore, as my research used existing research about non-military organizations to draw conclusions about the USSF's change impacts as an insider, outside researchers who are unaffiliated with the USSF or the military may expand the research to new heights by using perspectives currently veiled to me. Finally, as my project's structure used a framework following an institutional, organizational, and employee path, there is significant potential to explore each of the micro components present in each of those categories, particularly as it relates to military employees' psychology, individual conditions they experience, and the fulfilment of specific needs.

Conclusion

My research leads me to the realization that no matter how unique an organization may seem, or niche the product or service it provides, there is no way to circumvent the role that employees' commitment plays in actualizing change. Although the details present within my

vignettes are specific to USSF events, their underlying components share common change management considerations worthy for organizations across any industry. The emphasis necessary for successful change to occur must reside on the employees' needs and their inclusion in the organization's overall change strategy. Merely stating what is expected of employees or explaining how they should act is not enough, even when optimistically conveyed such as the empowered messaging in the USSF's values and guidance publications. Therefore I conclude that the USSF's *rate* of change, while stressful to Guardians, impacted their commitment less significantly than *how* change was imposed upon them and its effects on their sense of purpose, professional identity, and perceived belonging.

While establishing expectations during change is a vital component, its presence in real-world environments—non-military and military alike—must be supported by pillars capable of fulfilling employees' needs, enabling their performance, cultivating buy-in, and bolstering their sense of purpose. By exploring myriad studies about organizational change and employee behavior in non-military organizations, it becomes clearer that the USSF's change strategy faltered as a result of it ignoring the importance of those Guardian-centric pillars. Although command authority is the critical heart of military design and, in the USSF's change endeavors, never violated ethical, moral, or legal boundaries, it has proven an ineffective tool for cultivating Guardians' increased commitment. Prolific patterns exist across organizations and industries regarding change because its outcomes are predicated upon human performance, especially during massive institutional changes with unprecedented scope.

Additionally, my contention that change in the USSF is comparable to studies about change in non-military organizations is further reinforced by the fact that the publications I used for this project were available resources prior to the USSF's activation. This means that the

relationship between competitive change outcomes and the vital role that Guardians' buy-in and commitment fulfill for bringing them to fruition were factors knowable to the USSF before it embarked on its institutional change endeavors. Guardians enamored by the energy present during the USSF's activation era in 2019 became increasingly skeptical and cynical about the observable rate of change as they realized that the USSF's change efforts did not include training that would enable them to perform to the new expectations. As a result, the reduced Guardian commitment I observed over the last five years validates the USSF's susceptibility to the same fundamental change management challenges found in non-military organizations, particularly when employees' sense of purpose and connection with their institution are violated.

The scholarly change management studies found throughout my project's literature review decisively validate the connection between employees' buy-in to change and the achievement of an institution's desired outcomes. As a critical link already recognized by non-military organizations, positively increasing Guardians' commitment during change required their inclusion into the USSF's change strategy as humans with needs worthy of fulfillment, not mechanical resources to execute tasks. As Guardians' awareness about these deficiencies grow, their commitment—along with the USSF's competitive objectives—are held at risk as they realize many of the change challenges they face were unnecessary and avoidable.

What remains inconclusive as a result of my research is whether the USSF's change environment negatively impacted Guardians' commitment due to its unwillingness to incorporate employee-centric factors into the change strategy or whether its immaturity as a new organization prevented it from discerning those factors' importance. However, my experiences with senior USSF leaders, their statements, deliberate tones, and acknowledgement of Guardians' lack of readiness while concurrently offering no remedial path forward indicates the

possibility that hubris played a role. Additionally, while additional research is necessary for a causal determination, it is possible that the USSF's change environment is a by-product of temporal urgency imposed by competitive pressures that made it believe an unorthodox approach was necessary. Regardless, the USSF's deliberate incorporation of lean corporation design elements into its architecture means that it made itself *more* susceptible to the demands of employee-centric change requirements, not *less*. Research grounded in decades of organizational change and employee behavior proves that the fulfillment of employees' needs and their perception of their environment are superior factors for influencing their buy-in or resistance, despite the institution's legal authority, moral foundation, or passionate justification.

People voluntarily join the military for many reasons but a predominate theme associated with affective commitment is they *want* to be a part of the USSF. People want to be Guardians and accepted into something bigger than themselves. Therefore, once they are Guardians, it is the USSF's responsibility to instill a sense of belonging and pride that facilitates the development of normative commitment within existing Guardians so that they feel inspired, committed, and obligated to *stay*. Yet, as long as the USSF continues talking *at* Guardians and pulling them along for its change initiatives rather than speaking *to* Guardians as an integral part of a change strategy that creates a shared sense of purpose, commitment will remain elusive. The most compelling factor revealed by my research is that Guardians join the USSF fully committed. If the USSF continues to defy decades of change management studies showcasing the vital importance of employee-centric change strategies, then they must be willing to accept sole responsibility for harming Guardians' commitment and, ultimately, its own competitive objectives.

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