



Maj Gen McMahon speaking to his team. (Photo courtesy of 78 ABW/PA)

# It's All About Leadership: An Interview with Major General (ret) Robert H. McMahon, USAF

By Colonel (ret) Robert E. Hamm Jr.

On June 15, 2012, Major General Bob McMahon retired from the United States Air Force after more than 34 years of service. A career aircraft maintenance officer, Gen McMahon led organizations from the flightline to the Air Staff and everything in between, including assignments as the Director of Logistics at Air Mobility Command and the Director of Maintenance at Headquarters, US Air Force. He culminated his career as the final commander of the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center (WR-ALC) located at Robins AFB. After his retirement, the Center transitioned into a Complex and is aligned under the new Air Force Sustainment Center at Tinker AFB. The Complex consists of over 16,000 employees responsible for worldwide logistics support of the C-130, C-5 and C-17 transport aircraft, F-15 fighter aircraft and a variety of other support programs such as special operations forces C-130 gunships, electronic warfare radio and infrared jammers, basic expeditionary airfield resources and Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles. The Complex is the largest industrial employer in the state of Georgia with a \$4.5 billion dollar economic impact.

I had the opportunity to sit-down with the General in the weeks leading up to his retirement. The purpose of this article is to share his candid thoughts on leadership and process improvement as captured from our meeting.

## On Continuous Process Improvement, Leadership and Outcomes:

I got a request to talk about Continuous Process Improvement (CPI) and what we accomplished at the Center and quite frankly I didn't want to do the interview because I don't believe that we, as an Air Force, are committed to CPI. We've talked the story now going on a decade, beginning with our industrial plants, and trying to spread it across our entire Air Force, with, at best, mediocre results. There are tremendous islands of excellence out there, but in reality our Air Force hasn't gotten to where it should be or could be. But then I rethought it and I asked myself, "Can you ever stop trying?" The answer is no. You should never stop; you have to continue on the journey to improve. I knew that if I didn't make the effort for this interview, I would be a hypocrite in supporting the idea of CPI.

So let me be clear up front, this answer really has nothing to do with Continuous Process Improvement but it has everything to do with leadership. It is all about leadership and the other big part is outcomes. Leaders create outcomes, and the outcomes lead to fulfilling the requirements of the United States Air Force, the Combatant Commanders, our Senior Leaders, and our taxpayers.

CPI gives better outcomes and that's why it's worthy of our time, because it's an enabler to achieve success. You have to lead, not manage CPI, and it has to be in your DNA. Leaders have to be the passionate cheerleaders and the ones that say, "Here's the expectation, I'm walking the walk--not just talking the talk." Otherwise, it will be just another program that will fade from the landscape like it already has in some areas of our Air Force today.

Since I was a Second Lieutenant...actually, since I was a cadet at the Air Force Academy, we (the Air Force) have underscored a point that was drilled into me on day one, and it is still as valid today as it was 38 years ago, and that is--you can't delegate leadership! If you don't want to lead, go to K-Mart, go to Wally's Drug Store, or Joe's Bar-B-Q. Don't try Wal-Mart because they won't hire you ... they're looking for leaders too, just like any world-class companies are today. And so, if you get to lead--lead! Don't delegate it! CPI is all about leading instead of managing, and it gets back to the essence of why CPI is important. It helps generate better outcomes.

## On Setting Expectations and Providing Vision and Focus:

I took over command of Warner Robins ALC on 19 Nov 2010. I brought all of my direct reports together the afternoon of the change of command and told them

what my expectations were. I explained to them the vision and the focus for the center during my tenure as a commander for however long that was going to be. We were going to be world-class in acquisition and sustainment by exceeding both Warfighter and customer expectations, leading the DoD in cost management, and reenergizing and sustaining CPI. In 2004-2005, if you wanted to see how CPI was being

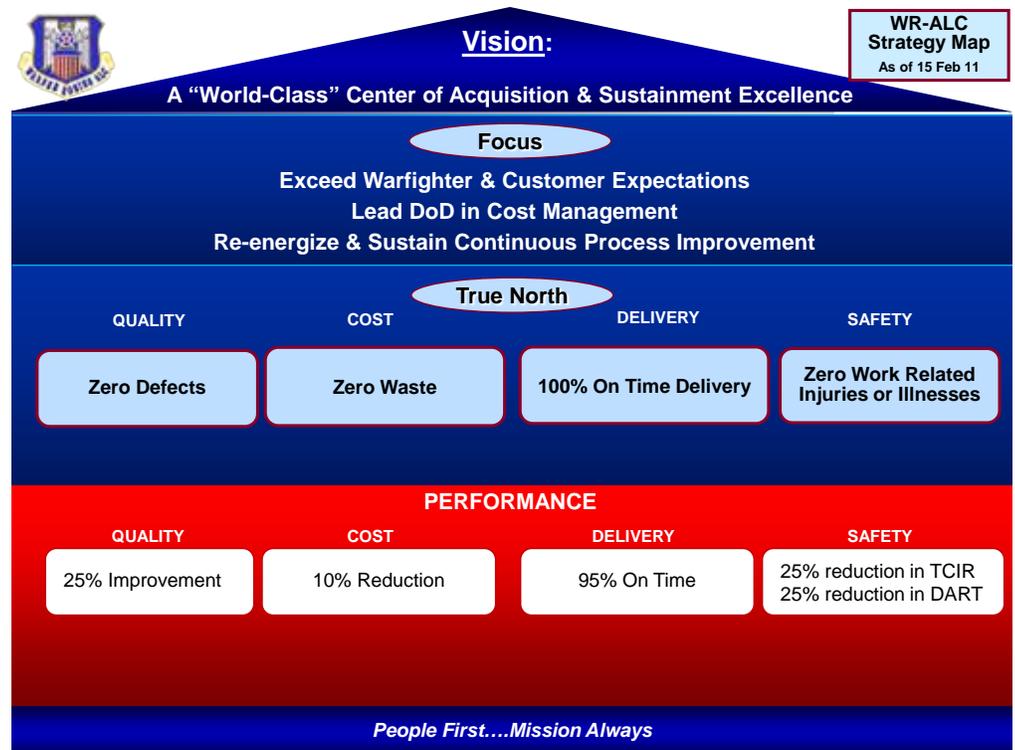
done anywhere, not only in the Air Force but the DoD, the gold standard for that was Warner Robins ALC. Sometime after 2005, we lost our way, which said although we had done it, we weren't able to sustain it. So my challenge to the workforce was not only to reenergize CPI, but to figure out how we could sustain this over the life of the enterprise that we called Warner Robins Air Logistics Center.

Now the vision and focus were downward driven by me. Folks didn't get a vote or have a choice on the vision and focus. I actually referred to my

favorite book, From Good to Great, and reminded my direct reports about the story of putting people on the bus. It was their choice whether or not they wanted to be on the bus for the journey I outlined with the vision and focus. I gave them until the following Wednesday, which was the day before Thanksgiving, to decide whether or not they wanted to get on the bus with me. They understood that in some cases perhaps they would move to a different seat on the bus and that would be okay. If they didn't want to be on the bus then we'd find something else for them to do, but they only had 5 days to decide whether they wanted to be part of the team. Interestingly enough, no one turned in their bus pass so I knew everyone was ready to get back on track to achieve the level of CPI greatness the Center enjoyed previously.

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ALC Strategy Map



### On Measuring Performance:

The second thing I told my folks on November 19th was what we were going to measure everyone to make sure we were making progress. Most high performing organizations focus on four key metrics: quality, cost, delivery, and safety. I identified our True North, the ultimate in perfection to strive for: zero defects for quality, zero waste for cost, 100% on-time delivery, and zero work-related injuries or illnesses. I defined some performance levels of where we wanted to go to get closer to True North and started holding everyone accountable to make progress in that direction.

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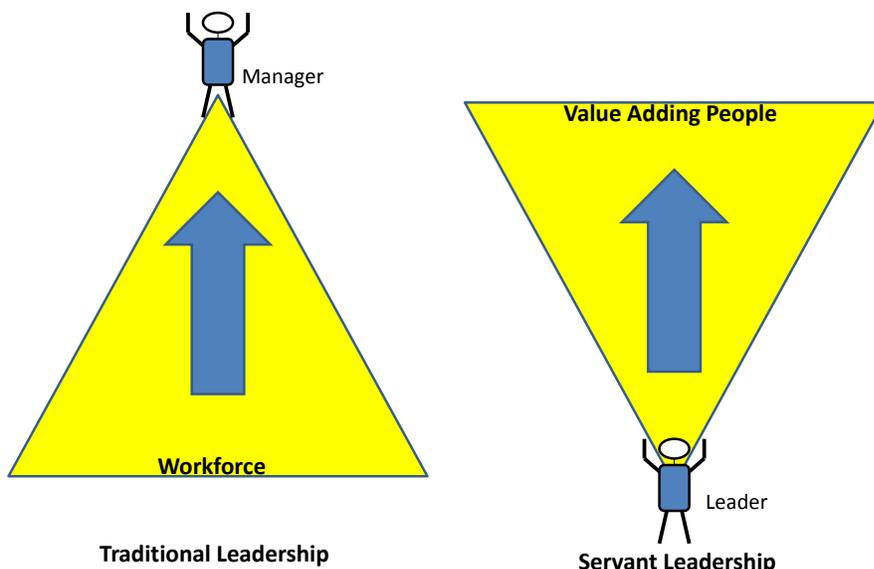
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### On Servant Leadership:

The Center did not exist to serve me, I existed to serve it. Now there was no doubt in the minds of the 16,000 people that worked there that I was a two-star general and commander of the Center, but that didn't mean the focus should have been on me. No high performing organization should focus on the leaders. Instead, the focus should always be on the people adding value to the products and services

## Servant Leadership



delivered to their customers. When we talk about the idea of lean, there is value added, and there is non-value added. Value added is when you are truly adding value to a product or service and non-value added is any

**Maj Gen McMahon briefing his team in the ALC Mission Control Room. (Photo courtesy of 78 ABW/PA)**



other action or activity besides that which adds direct value. So, that made me non-value added, which I was very comfortable with and something my staff had to overcome because they too were non-value added. But when we talk about non-value added, there is necessary and there is waste. I didn't want them to get to vote on whether or not I was necessary or waste. I told them I was necessary and they were necessary. But they had to earn the right of being considered necessary by their folks. If they weren't engaged and trying to drive improvements by removing impediments for the people who add value, that would make them waste and I didn't need any more waste around than I already had.

As a servant leader, one of your most important jobs is to remove the roadblocks from your direct reports, whose job it is to remove the impediments from their direct reports, all the way to the personnel who add value to the work.

### On Value of Horizontal Integration:

We operate in a world of vertical organizational stovepipes. For example, pilots are an element of what is necessary for an operating capability in our US Air Force. Mission-capable airplanes are an element, so are aircraft maintainers. But if you think about those three things as three separate stovepipes you never create combat capability. You have to take a horizontal cut across all three elements because you can't optimize one of those at the expense of the others. You've got to optimize the outcome, in this case combat capability, by understanding that the outcome is produced across all the elements to be able to get to where you need to be. As soon as you think that way, you have a better chance of achieving your full potential. So, I stressed the idea of horizontal integration across the variety of value streams at Warner Robins ALC such as C-5, C-130, C-17, electronic warfare, F-15, support equipment, automatic tests and Command, Control, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance. The key was to ensure leaders and organizations responsible for the outcome of a value stream not only understood their roles and responsibilities, but understood the impact of decisions and actions made vertically and horizontally. To enable horizontal integration, we made sure key players outside of the Center such as the Defense Logistics Agency and the Air Force Global Logistics Center were on board. We also committed to leadership standard work with dedicated block time across the ALC and a standard battle rhythm for all leadership meetings to ensure the supported and supporting commanders were always available to focus on the business of the center.

### On Leading Change:

In early January, a few months after I took command, I called together all of my direct reports and asked them a very simple question, "How are we doing?" Everybody said we were doing fine and that things were going well. I asked them to give us a grade, like on a report card, and the answer ranged from a C+ to a B-, even up to an A- as an organization. Now at the time we were delivering aircraft on-time back to our operational commands at a rate just over a 45%. My reply was very simple, "I'm not sure what college you went to, but when I went to school 45% was not a passing grade." Finally, one of the leaders said, "Sir, we're an F." Now the organization couldn't necessarily accept being an F, and so

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when we looked at it corporately we gave ourselves a grade of C.

So we created a Transformation Plan of Care (TPOC), much like the medical community does for a patient. Our patient, in this case, was the Air Logistics Center, and our TPOC was developed to get the center healthy. The TPOC was an A3 and we utilized the 8-step problem solving methodology in a formal lean event to drive breakthrough initiatives to help us get better. If anyone came to visit the Mission Control Room [MCR] at WR-ALC while I was the commander, they would have seen a picture of me over the center's A3. Why? Be-

cause it's all about leadership and accountability and it was my job to lead the center and get it healthy. I didn't delegate it. I couldn't delegate it. That's what I was paid to do. And my tool for making that happen was an A3. [Note: A3 refers to the paper size used to document the report. It originated with Toyota as means to capture the problem-solving process. Refer to <http://a3thinking.com/> for more information on A3.]

At the time we built the A3, we were disappointing our customers and they had little faith in us. Some were looking for alternatives to provide the services they needed. That was hard for folks to swallow, but it was important to define truth at ground zero if we had any chance of getting better. Until we admit that we have a problem, we can't get better. So together, the ALC leadership team publicly acknowledged that we had a problem that we needed to get solved.

Once we all understood we had a problem and quantified it with metrics and improvement goals, we did a root cause analysis and identified countermeasures. The countermeasures included five breakthrough initiatives such as deploying high velocity tenets across product lines beyond maintenance to include acquisition, installation support, engineering, and human capital management. The other major initiatives not related to high velocity tenets involved cost management, CPI, leadership, and strategic communication. Each breakthrough had an A3 developed and added to the MCR with a picture of the accountable leader on top of it just like the center TPOC A3.

The actual development of the MCR was created as a way of reporting overall Center improvement progress and included TPOC updates on quality, cost, delivery and safety, breakthrough initiative reviews, and Strategic Alignment and Deployment from each ALC organization as well as AFGLSC and DLA to track True North progression.

### On Results and Outcomes:

So where are we today? As of the time of this interview Warner Robins ALC metrics indicate that performance is either at the best ever or close to best ever in nearly every instance. We've produced probably 55% to 60% of the aircraft that we are going to produce this year, over 200 aircraft, and we're sitting at just over 98% on-time delivery back to the Warfighter. Is that perfect? The answer is no, but it is a dramatic change from where we were a year ago.

So did it work for us? The answer is absolutely. Can it work in the rest of the Air Force? The answer is absolutely. What does it require? It



requires leaders dedicated to making the organization better. It requires leaders defining where the organization needs to go and then leading it to where it should be. It requires asking four questions of each and every individual that works in the organization: What do you do? How are you doing? How do you know? What can I do to help remove impediments, eliminate waste and improve your processes?

Leaders have to understand through sustainable methodologies a way to describe to their folks how they are doing and help them to do better tomorrow than they did today, which gets us back to CPI. Leaders driving the right behaviors by ensuring personnel have the ability to recognize and eliminate waste allows them to be more efficient. This generates better outcomes for the enterprise and the essence of CPI is all about leadership and outcomes.

Maj Gen (ret) McMahan and his wife, Hope, chose Kathleen, GA as their home after his retirement. Hope continues her career as the Chief Technology Officer for the Air Force Reserves. Maj Gen (ret) McMa-

hon is now the Chief Executive Officer of the 21st Century Partnership, an organization dedicated to maintaining the viability of Robins through education and advocacy.

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*Management, Headquarters Air Education and Training Command (AETC), Randolph AFB. He's commanded three squadrons, was a deputy group commander, and served as a maintenance group commander. He has deployed to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Bosnia. He culminated his military career as the Deputy Director, Logistics, Installations and Mission Support, Headquarters AETC. Mr. Hamm is an Air Force*

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**Maj Gen McMahan briefing SECAF. (Photo courtesy of 78 ABW/PA)**

