

PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

A Case for Intentional Teamwork Development at USAFA: The T3C Model

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ABSTRACT

Teamwork is a crucial element in effective military leadership and mission execution and, hence, is a necessary component in officer development at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA). DoD, USAF, and USAFA doctrine and guidance have numerous references spotlighting the necessity of effective teamwork across the military enterprise. Specifically, the USAFA Leadership, Teamwork and Organizational Management Institutional Outcome requires cadet proficiency in the foundational principles of teamwork. To define foundational teamwork principles, the members of the USAFA Athletic Department developed the T3C Teamwork Model and incorporated it into the execution of physical education team sport elective courses.

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This model offers one option to advance teamwork principles and development in future military officers as well as other populations.

Keywords: teamwork, competence, communication, commitment, respect

The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) mission is to build leaders of character and quality. The emphasis on leadership is institutionally and socially predominant; however, a major subcategory, *teamwork*, is less directly and intentionally developed. To ensure mission accomplishment, teamwork—a critical component of effective leadership and mission execution—must be more deliberately defined and cultivated throughout USAFA’s 4-year development process.

The necessity for intentional teamwork development at USAFA is supported by the widespread evidence that the U.S. Air Force considers teamwork a mission imperative and foundational to successful operations across the enterprise. Air Force doctrine highlights teamwork as “essential to triumph at every level” where “Airmen recognize the interdependency of every member’s contribution toward the mission...” (The USAF Blue Book, 2022). U.S. Air Force competency modeling describes teamwork as the “action of collaborating effectively with others to achieve a common goal or complete a mission task” (AFH 36-2647). Additional U.S. Air Force references, such as the Airman Leadership Qualities and Pre-commissioning terminal learning objectives, also point to the critical importance of teamwork.

At the USAFA institutional level, teamwork references are also plentiful. Policy dictates that each mission element (ME) will align education, training, and experiences with the Leader of Character (LOC) Framework, which explicitly demands the inclusion of leadership styles that build effective teams (USAFAMAN 36-3526, para 3.4). Teamwork development is further

mandated in the USAFA institutional outcome of Leadership, Teamwork and Organizational Management (LTOM), most importantly with the specific imperative to “apply foundational principles of teamwork to maximize mission accomplishment” across the 4-year course of instruction (USAFA, 2024). Additionally, the USAFA Superintendent emphasized “effective teams accelerate accountability” through its ongoing culture transformation campaigns.

There is a large body of scholarship and literature on teamwork in the broader context. The Academy recognizes the fundamental idea that “a group of individuals working together to achieve a common goal is better than the collective performance of the individuals” (USAFA, 2009). Similarly, Linda Riebe et al. (2016) describe teamwork as two or more people working interdependently toward a shared goal, objective, or mission. Moreover, multiple scholars have highlighted the importance of teamwork for the development of individuals, groups, and organizations to achieve a goal (Costa, 2003; Duel, 2010; Tarricone & Luca, 2002).

Despite the prevalent societal and institutional mandates and clearly established requirement for teamwork proficiency in our future officers, a USAFA institutional definition of the foundational principles of teamwork referred to in LTOM Proficiency #5 has been largely left to the interpretation of the individual MEs. One could argue this dynamic creates a vulnerability that diminishes the opportunity for optimal and complimentary cadet teamwork education and training throughout the 4-year developmental landscape. While teamwork

is referenced throughout USAFA leadership and curricular development activities, a common definition of teamwork principles has not been established. A gap exists in the formal delivery and assessment of teamwork, necessitating a standard teamwork model to use at USAFA.

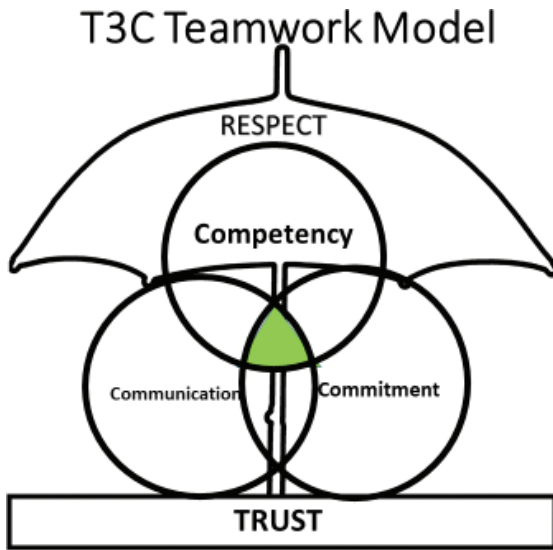
Members of the Physical Education Division (ADPE) identified the gap and set out to create a model to distinguish the foundational principles of teamwork in this USAFA context. This division was well-positioned to develop a teamwork model, as purveyors of the long-standing team sport course requirement for all cadets. Cadets take one of the following physical education (PE) courses to meet this USAFA Course of Instruction requirement: Volleyball, Basketball, Soccer, or Softball. Each of these four courses inherently fosters teamwork but lacked a common curricular teamwork framework to specifically facilitate teamwork development in cadets.

In 2016, cognizant of the importance of curricula standardization in teamwork delivery and inspired by the course director's volleyball coaching experience, the ADPE division director began an informal study and inventoried common teamwork qualities to determine the most critical elements. To develop this model, ADPE conducted a literature review of military and civilian sources and engaged in informal discussions with coaches. 74 teamwork attributes emerged, including many with strong interrelated correlations. The themes of trust, competency, commitment, and communication were prominent among the teamwork attributes. It was a goal that the resulting model be simple, succinct, and easily relatable, similar to the three component Air Force Core Values design (Integrity, Service, and Excellence) and designed to improve teamwork proficiency in the PE team sport courses. With this goal in mind, a teamwork model that focused on the foundational attribute of trust and the recurring themes of competency, commitment, and communication was created.

Trust appears prevalent throughout teamwork literature and was adopted as the principle foundational requirement. Trust not only facilitates openness and support but also drives commitment and enhances performance (Costa, 2003; Sheng et al., 2010; USAF, 2009). Furthermore, the absence of trust is considered a dysfunction of a team where the failure to build trust is damaging, setting the tone for another dysfunction: conflict (Lencioni, 2010). In the military, trust is defined as the shared confidence between all parties to effectively carry out the mission—a necessity for all operations (AFDP 1, *The Air Force*).

Building on this foundation of trust, a natural grouping of teamwork attributes further evolved in the three principal categorizations of Competency, Communication, and Commitment. These three attributes are referred to as the “3Cs.” Competency, the ability to do something successfully or efficiently emerged as a critical component to teamwork. Skill, knowledge, and ability pervade research as critical components of goal achievement. But competence paired with the social dimensions of commitment and communication lifts others and enhances the skills of teammates toward mission success (Mohammad & Dumville, 2001; Oetl, 2012). Communication, the imparting or exchanging of information, also appears in numerous studies as it is a critical component to achieving team efficiency and success (Costa, 2003; Sheng et al., 2010; Tarricone & Luca, 2002). Finally, Commitment, the dedication to a cause or activity, rounds out the third “C,” positively influencing teamwork behaviors often associated with trust and effectiveness (Costa, 2003; Sheng et al., 2010; Tarricone & Luca, 2002). A simple hypothesis emerged, asserting that optimized team performance would occur in the confluence of the “3C” Venn diagram, where simultaneous high competence (skill, strategy, etc.), clear and effective communication, and authentic and sustained commitment from team members all existed.

Figure 1
T3C Teamwork Model (©2024 Scott R. Nelson).



Finally, the “3Cs” function optimally under an umbrella of respect, a well-founded mission imperative. Respect encompasses self-respect, mutual respect, and organizational respect. This three-dimensional view drives us to embrace the unique value of all individuals and treat everyone with dignity, regardless of rank or position, creating an environment conducive to teamwork. Consistent with Maslow’s and Bandura’s foundational principals, mutual respect and the actualization of psychological needs strengthen teamwork while supporting a teammate’s ability to develop in areas of the model (Bandura, 1982, 2018; DePorres et al., 2024; Maslow, 1943). Ultimately, respect completes the model as the hedge of protection to cultivate effective teamwork.

The resulting model named T3C (depicted in Figure 1) represents the foundational component of trust, the “3Cs”: Competence, Communication, and Commitment, and the overarching necessity for respect among teammates.

The T3C Model compliments the U.S. Air Force Core Values, the USAFA institutional outcome of LTOM,

and the LOC Framework. It was enhanced over several years by applying it while coaching youth volleyball with great anecdotal success. The model was found to provide a useful focusing mechanism, easily understood by team members. ADPE incorporated the T3C Model into USAFA PE Volleyball curriculum in fall 2020, including the addition of evaluation and grading components.

In March 2021, with the intent to further validate and refine the model, ADPE initiated a “Teamwork Attributes” survey targeted toward Athletic Department teamwork experts (coaches, instructors, and sport administrators) asking them to list their three most critical attributes of ideal team members. This study comprised 47 respondents (38 coaches and 9 administrators/faculty) yielding 141 attributes. After grouping the attributes, three key observations emerged: (1) data collected aligned well with the existing model; (2) there were no attributes collected in the study that presented glaring deficiencies in the model; and (3) commitment-related attributes were favored by the respondents and indicated primacy over competence and communication.

ADPE then partnered with the Lifetime Sports Area Coordinator to further refine assessment and grading, and the incorporation of the T3C Model into the remaining three teamwork courses. The Basketball and Soccer courses adopted the model in fall semester 2021, and it was added to the Softball course in fall 2023. Furthermore, in April 2021, ADPE presented the T3C Model at the Center for Character and Leadership Development-sponsored USAFA Teamwork Summit, where it was well received, and the model implementation in PE continued.

ADPE continues to validate, refine, and implement the T3C Model. Furthermore, they seek collaboration partners, with the objective of providing an institutionally recognized and adopted model that will enhance officer development through teamwork. Moreover, the model enhances focus on the importance of trust,

competence, communication, and commitment, levied under an umbrella of respect. These principles are vital for future officers to adopt and apply in their imminent roles as Total Force enhancers and multipliers.

There are numerous opportunities for future enhancements and applications of the T3C Model at USAFA. Recommendations include the following: (1) establishing T3C as a foundational teamwork model for all USAFA organizations; (2) align T3C with the LTOM proficiency in order to contribute to teamwork literacy development in cadets; (3) advancing teamwork assessment efforts; (4) developing key performance indicators that assess the teamwork proficiencies; and (5) establishing standardized grading scales or rubrics for use in different teamwork contexts such as military training, PE courses, or academic group projects. These efforts will help refine practices, ensure continuous improvement, and advance USAFA's alignment with USAF Commissioning Education Learning Objectives.

Longer range initiatives might include establishing a USAFA Teamwork Task Force and promoting cadet research and development on teamwork practices. This initiative could help further develop teamwork literacy through athletics (intercollegiate, intramural, and club sport settings), military, academic, and airmanship activities to develop, evaluate, and optimize cadet teamwork acumen in their respective areas. Another possibility is the establishment of a USAFA "Teams of Authentic Character" program to incentivize and recognize exemplary teamwork across all USAFA MEs.

The T3C Model is an operationalized example of foundational teamwork competencies currently used in the USAFA PE curriculum. This model and its principles are derived from the body of literature on teamwork across various disciplines and applications. Moreover, the TC3 Model has been further validated by a survey of practitioners in the field of athletics, applied to athletic team settings, and used to teach the concept teamwork

and team development in PE courses. It is effective in explaining the foundational principles in a way that students and athletes can remember and apply in the context of sport. The model can also be applied in their daily lives as members of other teams and units and as leaders of military units and larger organizations. Beyond these applications, this model is likely very adaptable to other settings of leadership development, as well as government, businesses, and other organizations, to maximize effectiveness through teamwork. Nonetheless, further study and assessment are needed to understand the effectiveness of applying this model outside of athletics.

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