CAP Culture and Its Unique Challenges

Student Guide

The E&T program uses the **flipped classroom format** where students read the material before class and come prepared to discuss the topics. All students are required to come prepared to participate, which includes completing the reading and all assignments in advance.

Work submitted for this assignment should reflect your own knowledge, analysis, and effort. AI tools may be used to support research, brainstorming, and editing, but should not replace your original work. Any AI-generated content included in the submission should be appropriately acknowledged in accordance with course requirements and the Volunteer University Academic Integrity Standards.

Lesson Objective: This lesson helps Level V students understand the challenges facing Civil Air Patrol (CAP), aspects of CAP culture, and the leader's role in organizational change.

Desired Learning Objectives (DLO):

1. Analyze culture(s) in Civil Air Patrol for positive and negative aspects and determine how these aspects impact the organization.
2. Discuss the challenge of retention and explain the risk this presents to CAP.
3. Discuss the importance of our mission continuing to evolve and the impact if we don't evolve.
4. Understand how leaders set the example and influence organizational change that can impact culture and morale.
5. Understand the challenge of cadet protection, its importance, and how you can help CAP in this vital area.
6. Respond to a current organizational challenge identified by the instructor, such as airworthiness safety, aging membership, cadet protection, stakeholder experience, etc., with potential solutions for discussion and consideration.

Suggested Time to Complete Module (reading, discussions, and assignments):

Synchronous onsite/ViR classes: 90-105 minutes
Asynchronous online: 90-120 minutes

Required Reading:

- Student Guide

- CAP Mission Briefing (https://www.gocivilairpatrol.com/programs/emergency-services/capabilities-handbooks-briefing)
- Membership Charts

Introduction

Civil Air Patrol is a unique organization. We are volunteers in a Congressionally chartered non-profit organization, but we are also the civilian auxiliary of the United States Air Force. Our members perform critical search-and-rescue and disaster-relief missions. If you asked senior leaders what challenges CAP faces today, what would they say? The answers may change depending on when you ask; however, Civil Air Patrol tends to struggle in key areas. Culture is one of those areas. Retention is another area where CAP struggles. The evolution of our mission is a third challenge. Airworthiness, safety, cadet protection, and stakeholder experience are a few other areas where CAP can improve. CAP faces unique challenges that change over time. Senior leaders must recognize these unique challenges and help the organization evolve and improve.

1. Analyze culture(s) in Civil Air Patrol for positive and negative aspects and determine how these aspects impact the organization.

Culture is defined as the values, practices, and beliefs shared by a group's members. The Civil Air Patrol culture is the shared values, practices, and beliefs of our more than 69,000 members. As strategic-level role models, CAP's senior leaders encourage positive aspects of our culture and help shape the organization's culture. CAP culture varies from unit to unit, wing to wing, and region to region. What are some elements of CAP's culture that members share? What are some reasons we might see different cultures?

How do we know if our culture is positive or negative? Members tell us. Major Jonathan Hoefing shares aspects of broken or poor culture in his work "Unbreaking the Squadron." Among the negative aspects of a broken culture, we find:

- Extrinsic motivation
- Compliance
- Self-preservation
- Shame
- Fear
- Task orientation
- Lack of clear priorities
- Mistakes and malpractice are treated the same

- Knee-jerk reactions to problems
- Generalized and subjective feedback
- Enforcement of the status quo
- Aversion to risk
- Leaders who accomplish the mission using Airmen

Have you witnessed a negative culture in CAP? Think about the culture and how it felt to be a part of that unit or to visit it.

An unbroken or positive culture has a series of related qualities, including:

- Intrinsic motivation
- Improvement mindset
- Clear purpose
- Success for all members
- Mission orientation
- Clear priorities, goals, and objectives
- Treating mistakes as learning opportunities
- Seeking the root cause of problems and developing corrective action plans to address the root causes
- Objective and constructive feedback
- Encouraging ideas and innovation
- Risk tolerant
- Leaders developing Airmen who can accomplish the mission

Leaders set the tone for culture. Dynamic leaders build a positive culture where members thrive. Negative leaders allow a broken culture to exist or encourage it with their actions. Are you leading your unit in the right direction to have an unbroken culture? If not, what should you change? Are you leading your subordinates toward an unbroken culture? Do you help your leaders build a positive, unbroken culture?

2. Discuss the challenge of retention and explain the risk this presents to CAP.

Many people say Civil Air Patrol struggles with recruiting and retention. This is not true. Civil Air Patrol generally recruits quite well. Civil Air Patrol struggles with retention. The position of director of recruiting was recently established at national headquarters, which will impact retention. Review the retention charts in the attached Membership Statistics Charts. What are CAP's retention rates for cadets and senior members over the 2+ years on the slides? What do you notice about the retention rates over this period? Are there any patterns? Did the retention rates surprise you?

Why do volunteers leave the organization? You can brainstorm a long list. That list might include:

- Personality conflicts
- Mismatch in expectations and the reality of service
- Lack of a role
- Poor leadership
- Cadet finishes the cadet program
- Lack of people I can relate to in the organization
- An assessment or action taken due to a violation of rules

Given more time, this list would keep growing. What are some of the risks of not addressing retention? The obvious answer is flat or loss of membership numbers. What else do we risk? We have invested time and resources into training members who leave CAP, whether that's after one year or ten years. These members have participated in our programs and gained experience. What does it take to replace this experience? How does this loss of experience affect our ability to carry out our mission? How does this impact our strategic plan and its goals? What other risks do you see?

Do we know why members leave CAP? Do your units do an exit survey to ask members why they leave? Most units do not, and Civil Air Patrol has not asked in recent years. Solving the retention problem is difficult because we have not previously applied our resources to it. We often solve it locally rather than at the national level. Will you be a leader who studies this problem and seeks a solution?

3. Discuss the importance of our mission continuing to evolve and the impact if we don't evolve.

When CAP was founded in 1941, a group of visionaries saw the need for more eyes in the home skies. We celebrate the accomplishments of our World War II members and their service; however, we no longer chase German submarines with our aircraft. Now, we search for missing people and aircraft using forward-looking infrared (FLIR) systems, cell phone forensics, and radar forensics. During World War II, CAP towed targets for aerial gun practice. That was an exciting mission! We no longer tow targets, but we serve as targets when we act as aggressors, allowing air defense assets to train using our aircraft. In the 1980s, CAP did quite a bit of shelter management and damage assessment training. That tapered off in the 1990s. Now, CAP provides Points of Distribution (POD) during disasters and is a key mission partner for the Federal Emergency Management Agency for air and ground damage photography and geospatial damage assessment. Think back to our World War II mission and what we have done in the past. Now skim through the CAP Mission Briefing (found at https://www.gocivilairpatrol.com/programs/emergency-services/capabilities-handbooks-briefing). What is the same? What is different? What has a new name and technique yet is essentially the same objective?

As leaders, we must continually build partnerships and work to evolve our missions. CAP has three chartered missions; however, none take precedence over the others. We must evolve our aerospace education program beyond Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) kits. We must evolve our cadet program, as we have in recent years, by updating testing and physical fitness requirements to meet modern youth needs. We must also evolve our emergency services and disaster relief missions to meet our communities' needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that food distribution is a viable mission as was transporting items such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Operation Pulse Lift has shown the value of blood drives.

Keeping an open mind is important as a leader. We must balance our needs and interests with CAP's needs. We must remain competitive. Volunteer organizations compete for volunteers who want to serve. Keeping up with trends in volunteering, societal changes, and changes in our missions will help keep CAP alive for another 75 years and beyond. Our innovation efforts directly relate to our need to reinvent ourselves over time to stay relevant.

What do you see as potential missions for CAP? How do these tie into our mission/vision statement and our Strategic Plan? What existing or emerging technology could make us more effective? How do you see CAP evolving in the next 5-20 years? What will CAP look like in that timeframe if we don't evolve? Will it impact funding, missions, partnerships, recruiting, or retention? What else might it impact if we don't evolve?

4. Understand how leaders set the example and influence organizational change that can impact culture and morale.

Leaders set the tone for culture in their units. Units value what leaders value. What you say and do as a leader impacts what your followers say and do. Complacent leaders let the negative aspects of a broken culture take root. More observant, active leaders will see the unit's culture and work to fix it. Change occurs when leaders define a vision and goals, then build a coalition or team to achieve them. Leaders must empower members to embrace the change the organization needs to survive. When members have a purpose and feel their service matters, they are more likely to enjoy volunteering. When members can serve in a positive culture, they are likelier to do so.

5. Understand the challenge of cadet protection, its importance, and how you can help CAP in this vital area.

Cadet protection is a very important duty of CAP. Parents send their most precious thing to weekly meetings and events. We must take the best care we can of cadets. Hazing, inappropriate intensity at events, and inappropriate behavior shape lives, but not in the way we want.

What kinds of challenges does cadet protection present? Helping everyone understand what is appropriate and how to report is an ongoing challenge in organizations that serve youth. What do we do to address the understanding of the rules? We implement and continue to improve our training. In 2025, cadet protection training will move to every twelve months instead of every four years. This will benchmark against standards set by other youth-serving organizations, provide refresher training, and keep members updated on current trends. Every member needs to understand both violations and boundary concerns. Members need consistent reminders on how to report cadet protection concerns. If members and leaders do not report incidents, cadets may have a poor experience or one that harms them. We don't want that. Members must report cadet protection issues promptly and appropriately.

Screening adult members is challenging for organizations with youth, such as ours. We use background checks to identify members who are not eligible for membership. How do we identify volunteers who may not fit well with CAP? We use unit membership boards and their interviews to screen members. Membership boards are important in helping units determine who to accept as members. What is the risk to CAP if we don't adequately screen applicants?

Every member can help us in this vital area by reporting issues. Don't assume someone else will handle it. If you see something, say something!

6. Respond to a current organizational challenge that is identified by the instructor, such as airworthiness safety, aging membership, cadet protection, stakeholder experience, etc., with potential solutions for discussion and consideration.

Organizations will always face challenges. In 2025, CAP focused on several challenges as part of our year of ownership. You read about cadet protection above.

Safety and airworthiness are important focus areas for CAP. We have the world's largest fleet of single-engine piston aircraft. Having the largest fleet is not enough. We want the best fleet. We need members to help us by owning their hard landings and other challenges. When in doubt, report. Damage to an aircraft is not always apparent. It's better to have a shop check an airplane than to let someone fly it with damage. The second area where every member can help is in making good decisions. If you see something, say something. Take the time to get it right. Ensuring the aircraft is airworthy matters more than responding quickly. We can always move assets or

reschedule missions and flights. Finally, don't take chances if you are unsure if you are ready for a maneuver or a mission. Take time to prepare or defer to another aircrew. We have options. What can you do to help us achieve excellence in airworthiness?

Similarly, we all have a role in safety. We must speak up when something seems risky. Anyone can call “knock it off”. It’s better to speak up before an injury or fleet damage than after. If there is an injury or damage, report it and enter it in the CAP Safety Information System (CAPSIS). We get better when we own our challenges and use them to improve. If you are assigned to investigate a CAPSIS incident, ensure it’s a quality review. Do your best to identify the root causes and address them. What can you do to help us improve our safety culture?

The stakeholder experience means everyone who works with CAP has a positive experience. We want every cadet to have a wonderful experience, whether they earn three stripes or three diamonds. We want them to tell their friends they should be a cadet. We want every parent to tell other parents they should send their kids to us because we take great care of them. We want every adult member to have a rewarding and positive experience. We want every partner to say that working with CAP is incredibly valuable.

A positive stakeholder experience means we use our emotional intelligence to notice when people are struggling, leaving, or frustrated. We do our best to listen and to resolve conflicts. This does not mean everyone always gets what they want. If someone violates a rule, we still hold them accountable, but we do it with empathy and compassion. We can still part on good terms if membership isn’t a good fit. If members leave CAP, we want it to be amicable and for them to be willing to come back later or bring their kids, refer their friends and colleagues, etc. What can you do to ensure a positive stakeholder experience?

Related to stakeholder experience is aging membership. CAP benefits from having many retired members. They are valuable teammates and bring significant experience. We appreciate their participation; however, to stay dynamic and grow, we also need younger members. Younger members can be less likely to volunteer because they balance work, life, family, and school. This means we must adjust so members don’t have to choose between these areas and CAP. When we force members to choose, we often lose them. What can you do to remove barriers and allow younger members to participate?

Exercise

Make a list of challenges CAP faces as an organization. Rank the challenges in the order you would like to address them.

Instructions for Synchronous Onsite/ViR Classes

Bring your list to class to discuss the challenges and possible solutions you can help implement with your classmates. Consider the qualities of a positive culture discussed in this lesson and how these can be incorporated in the solutions. There is no written assignment to turn in.

Instructions for Asynchronous Online Students

1. Write a point paper (using the template on the national website under Publications) that discusses the challenges and possible solutions that you can help implement. Consider the qualities of a positive culture discussed in this lesson and how these can be incorporated in the solutions. Briefly discuss the pros and cons of each solution and the resources needed to implement. Upload to Absorb for evaluation and feedback.

Because asynchronous students do not have classroom interaction, a second assignment is required.

2. Answer the following review questions in a separate document and upload to Absorb for evaluation and feedback:
    a. What challenges does Civil Air Patrol face today?
    b. What are some of the positive and negative aspects of CAP's culture, and how do these aspects impact the organization?
    c. Why is retention a challenge?
    d. Why is mission evolution a challenge?
    e. How can leaders help CAP face challenges related to cadet protection?
    f. How can leaders help CAP face challenges related to airworthiness?
    g. How can leaders help CAP face challenges related to safety?
    h. How can leaders help CAP face challenges related to stakeholder experience?
    i. How do these challenges relate to each other?
    j. What is the role of the leader in helping CAP overcome these challenges?

AIM HIGHER! (Optional activities):

Review your region and wing membership numbers in eServices. Analyze for trends or patterns. Does anything emerge? How does this compare to a similar region/wing? You can find membership numbers by selecting the four-way arrow in the corner of the Statistics box on the main page. It defaults to your assigned unit for the past six months, but you can select any unit and any period back to Jan 2000. If you select a headquarters unit, it will include all subordinate units unless you check the “Unit Only” box. To see the national numbers, select “National” at the top of the unit list.

In Absorb, watch some of the Year of Ownership presentations on current organizational challenges.

Read the book, “Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALS Lead and Win”, by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin. Consider how you can incorporate these concepts into what you learned in this lesson and your CAP leadership to address challenges. Available at archive.org for no cost at https://ia801207.us.archive.org/12/items/extreme-ownership.-jocko-willink/EXTREME%20OWNERSHIP.%20JOCKO%20WILLINK.pdf.

Lesson Summary and Closure

Civil Air Patrol is a unique organization with three evolving missions. Evolving our missions is key to our success today and in the future. CAP faces several challenges: culture, retention, evolving missions, airworthiness, safety, cadet protection, and stakeholder experience. These topics relate to one another and help CAP keep its members. Leaders play a key role in ensuring followers' health and safety. The culture leaders allow to develop will impact the other challenges.

Closely Related Lessons: Level V - Strategic Leadership, Ethical Leadership

Resources

- CAP Publications Templates

Acronyms and Abbreviations Used in this Document

- CAP: Civil Air Patrol
- CAPSIS: CAP Safety Information System
- DLO: Desired Learning Objective
- FLIR: Forward-Looking Infrared
- POD: Points of Distribution
- PPE: Personal Protective Equipment
- SG: Student Guide
- STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math

- ViR: Virtual In-Residence
- VOLU: Volunteer University