



## Smart Ops 21: Improving the Air Force one process at a time

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**(AFPN)** -- "What have I improved today?"

That's a question Secretary of the Air Force Michael W. Wynne urged Airmen to ask themselves in his March 8 Letter to Airmen titled Air Force Smart Operations 21.

Airmen in Air Force Space Command will soon drive improvements through the Smart Ops 21 program, which combines the best parts of several civilian efficiency programs, including Lean and Six Sigma, to develop an Air Force-unique process improvement program.

"General (T. Michael) Moseley (Air Force chief of staff) has laid out a transformation plan for the Air Force," said Col. Deborah A. Kirkhuff, Maintenance Division chief, AFSPC Directorate of Logistics.

Over the next several years the Air Force intends to reduce its force by the equivalent of approximately 40,000 active duty manpower positions.

"We've all read about these reductions. Bottom line: AFSO 21 is how the Air Force that remains will become even better than it is today," the colonel said.

The Air Staff's AFSO 21 office has already laid out a plan to move the Air Force in the "Lean" direction, the colonel said. An Air Force team trained about 100 AFSPC wing, center and numbered Air Force commanders, along with headquarters AFSPC directors and deputy directors on AFSO 21 in an executive training session March 22.

"In order to implement Smart Ops 21, it is absolutely essential that senior leaders be well-versed in Lean and other modern business practices, and then take charge of the Smart Ops 21 process within their own organizations," said Lt. Gen. Frank G. Klotz, AFSPC vice commander. "The key thing for all our Airmen to remember is that AFSO 21 encourages and enables us to find ways to improve our processes so that we eliminate waste and needless duplication."

Improving a process however, entails that we take a good, hard look at how we do business, which means change, the general said.

"Reluctance to change in itself may be one of the hardest obstacles we have to overcome," General Klotz said. "But, just because we've done something the same way for 10, 20 or 30 years, doesn't necessarily mean we must keep on doing so. Technology changes, conditions change, requirements change, our people's skill set changes. So it only makes sense that the work we do and how we do it must also change with the times."

The Air Force has had tremendous success with process improvements in the logistics arena since 2000, Brig. Gen. Taco Gilbert, chief of the Air Staff's AFSO 21 office, told AFSPC leaders. However, he cautioned against the mindset that AFSO 21 is a logistics program. Instead, he emphasized that all Airmen must realize that "AFSO 21 is about combat power."

"We believe that there isn't a core or enterprise-level process in the command that shouldn't be reviewed for efficiency," Colonel Kirkhuff said. "Examples of processes might be your unit-level ancillary training process or scheduling processes."

To date, the command has forwarded three specific tasks to Headquarters Air Force as "win-win" efforts to start AFSPC down the AFSO 21 path, Colonel Kirkhuff said. Two of the tasks, consolidating vehicle ops centers at 20th Air Force units and decreasing fossil fuel consumption by reviewing transportation processes, were chosen because of the opportunity for a quick return on the improvement effort. The third, reviewing acquisition roles and responsibilities between Headquarters AFSPC and the Space and Missile Systems Center, on the other hand, will take greater effort and time to see improvement.

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“Relatively small-scale AFSO 21 events give us the chance to train some folks on the basics of AFSO 21 and introduce them to ‘value stream mapping,’” Colonel Kirkhuff said. “Some of us might recall the ‘spaghetti charts’ of the past. Value stream mapping is similar to that.”

Although the program doesn’t have a specific implementation date, Colonel Kirkhuff said the end goal is a culture change in which Airmen feel they are part of the Air Force’s constant improvement. Most importantly, our people need to realize and understand that continuous process improvement will be ingrained into the new way we do business in the Air Force.

Secretary Wynne said AFSO 21 asks Airmen to look at not only how they can improve each task, but also ask why things are done that way. He encouraged Airmen to begin seeking improvements in their day-to-day business as soon as practical.

“Is each of the tasks relevant, productive and value-added?” he wrote. “In other words is it necessary at all? With AFSO 21, we will march unnecessary work out the door -- forever.”

Colonel Kirkhuff has some practical advice for Airmen who want to become involved in the AFSO 21 program.

“Be thinking about what you would make better if you were king for a day,” she said. “There may never be another time in our Air Force to have our senior leadership so open to change. General Moseley has said nothing is off limits. Realistically, you might want to focus on those activities you can change at your level.”

The colonel said the best resource available to Airmen is the AFSO 21 web site at [www.afso21.hq.af.mil/](http://www.afso21.hq.af.mil/). The site includes links to briefings and real-world examples of Lean activities that resulted in better ways of doing business.

Many Airmen may wonder if the existing IDEA program fits into AFSO 21.

“You could probably say the IDEA program is a subset of AFSO 21 -- it’s all of us seeking to do our business better,” Colonel Kirkhuff said.

She said AFSO 21 handles large, enterprise-level process improvements, while the IDEA program typically targets a specific part of the process -- usually because it is a single individual with a good idea.

“AFSO 21 encourages using groups of stakeholders and those involved in the process every day,” she said. “It is about finding out what parts of the process actually add value and what parts do not and are then considered waste.”

The fundamental premise for AFSO 21 is that all Airmen will seek continuous improvements for the way they do business, Colonel Kirkhuff said.

“From shop chiefs to major command four-stars, we must make our day-to-day operations more efficient,” she said. “AFSO 21 is how the Air Force that remains (after personnel reductions) will become even better than it is today.”