Examining Options to Optimize the Air Force Enlisted Feedback System

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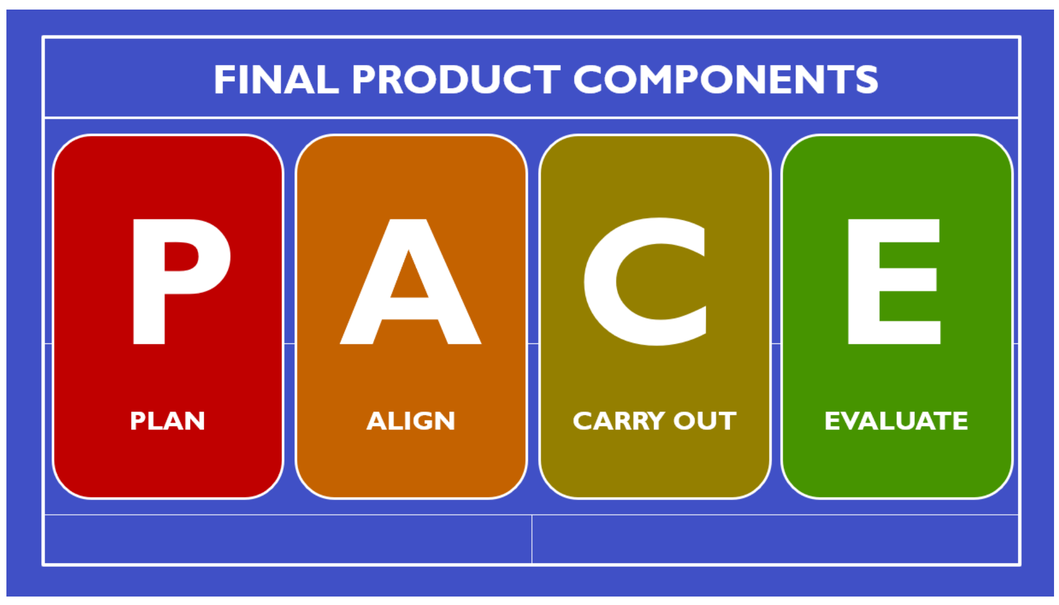
Abstract

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) faces persistent challenges in delivering effective developmental feedback to enlisted Airmen, with many personnel reporting that guidance from supervisors is inconsistent, transactional, or insufficient to support meaningful growth and promotion readiness. These issues stem from systemic gaps in supervisory training, cultural inconsistencies across units, and a lack of structured processes that promote continuous dialogue and developmental accountability. This thesis examines these challenges through a user-centered lens focused on a single Civil Engineering unit in the DAF. Using Hacking for Defense (H4D) methodology, and the output of 84 semi-structured interviews, the authors developed The PACE Framework, a cyclical feedback model built to enhance clarity, structure, and two-way communication between raters and ratees. Pilot testing demonstrated that the framework improves goal alignment, deepens developmental conversations, and supports greater ownership of professional progression, even within high-tempo operational environments. While limitations in platform, scope and timeline constrained full generalizability, findings indicate that targeted, unit-level interventions can significantly improve enlisted development without major policy overhaul. The authors recommend broader implementation, digital integration, and continued research to evaluate long-term effectiveness across diverse DAF contexts.



Methods

- 10-Week Sprint and 6-month pilot study using Lean and H4D methodology
- 61 beneficiary discovery interviews
- Policy review of AFI 36-2406 and Enlisted PME syllabi
- Development, deployment and continuous refinement of a Minimum Viable Product (MVP)
- Observation of 10 supervisor-supervisee pairs
- Surveys, closing interviews, and post-hoc focus groups

Results & Impact

- The PACE Framework standardized structure and communication, supporting meaningful dialogue, expectation clarity, and reduced feedback subjectivity between supervisors and supervisees
- Supervisees reported increased clarity of goals and timelines, empowering career self-advocacy and purposeful progression
- Supervisors reported improved confidence using the PACE tool, citing the prompts, goal-setting structure, and continuity tools crucial for conversation quality.
- The Pilot Unit committed to a full E-1 to E-6 rollout in 2026, noting framework potential to standardize development across the squadron and the broader DAF

Future Research

- Expand testing across additional AFSCs, wings, and mission sets
- Integrate PACE principles into PME and supervisor development courses
- Explore digital modernization via an app or web-based platform
- Conduct multi-year studies to assess long-term performance, promotion, and cultural outcomes
- Examine scalability for senior enlisted and officer career pathways

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