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WING CHAPLAINS AND “CHANGE OF COMMAND”

As Wing Chaplains, you are probably aware of the term “Change of Command”. It is that word “change” that is the most difficult of the words in this term. The CAP regs dictate the terms of a commander’s tenure – so far we are good. It is a known fact that unless something major occurs that a Commander will serve for a four-year term.

We see what begins to take place as the time for a “change of command” looms in the distance. Names of aspiring applicants for this position start circulating among the wing members. Prospective candidates start to emerge and once the notice goes out that applications are being accepted, several qualified individuals submit their names for consideration. After a thorough process in which the candidate goes through including an interview with a panel of senior leadership members, one of the candidates is selected.

It is that part of the “change” before the actual “change of command” ceremony takes place where often the most difficult times occur. As with any organization, our members tend to gravitate toward a candidate. And when that candidate is not selected, there are often various displays of emotions.

Since becoming the Region Chaplain, every wing in this region has undergone a “change of command” – and next year there will be a “change of command” at the region level. I have witnessed the fallout as well as counseled with wing staff members following a “change of command”. Among the responses they have dealt with have been anger toward or doubts about the senior leadership panel who made the final decision, members resigning from the organization, and even efforts to sabotage the newly selected commander. Applicants who were not selected are disappointed – some feel that their previous endeavors weren’t appreciated or recognized...some feel betrayed...some question whether or not to remain in the organization.

We, as Senior Chaplains, should be part of the solution and not part of the problem. While we can listen and should to the voices of dissent, discontent or discouragement, it is our obligation to stand with the command. We serve the commander and not the crowd. We must also be encouragers to those who are disheartened.

As I was thinking through this, I thought of what the Apostle Paul observed regarding one of the situations in the Corinthian church. Now I know that CAP is not a church...but the common component is that CAP and the Church is comprised of people. People are people no matter whether they are in a secular or a spiritual organization.

The Apostle Paul address concerns in that church that bear a striking similarity to concerns that we face in CAP when a change of command takes place: sectarianism/divisions (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10-12). People have a way of gravitating around a person. And should that person not receive the recognition or the treatment that we feel they deserve, there is a response...and most of the time it is not positive.

So how do we as Chaplains respond – and counsel our people to respond? I wish that I could give you a 12-step process or a treatise on helping others deal with change. But I can share with you what I experienced.

Several years ago – 2005-2006 – I was distraught and discouraged about the course of events that were taking place within CAP. My tenure as the CAWG Chaplain was coming to end and my membership renewal was just a few days following the 2006 CAWG Conference. It was the optimal time to terminate my membership. Over lunch I shared with my friend and former CAWG commander, Col Larry Myrick, of my planned course of action

(I was his chaplain from 2001-2003). I felt that an explanation was owed to him because of the trust he had placed in me as well as the opportunity to serve as the CAWG HC. He allowed me to vent about the concerns that I had. Following the ranting and raving, Col Myrick asked me a simple but direct question: "Why did you join CAP in the first place?" After listening to me relate how and why I joined CAP, he asked, "Has any of that changed?" When I answered, "No." He asked, "Then what's your problem?" He then shared with me that CAP was not a "static display" but a dynamic organization that does experience corrective changes – not overnight – but over time. I listened to his wise counsel. Had I followed my pre-determined course of action, I would have not experienced some great opportunities that have enriched me personally and professionally in the years that have taken place since that conversation. Talk about a role reversal here....the commander providing counsel to the chaplain. But as I have reflected on that conversation, I learned that the best thing you can do with someone who is experiencing some angst about the situations they are concerned about is to have them remember what the big picture is...to focus on the mission.

So often the disappointments become the biggest distractions. These distractions cause one to take their eyes off the mission. There's a couple of lessons that I have learned that might be helpful in assisting others.

- 1) Our primary ministry should be one of encouragement and support. Encouragement should be offered to those applicants who were not selected. They are hurting and to hear the voice of someone who cares about them will be a source of comfort and strength. While they may not ask for your help or seek you out, you should seek them out. You can initiate the conversation by offering them a word of appreciation for placing their name for consideration. Your words of encouragement may make a difference in their course of action – just as Col Myrick's did mine. Support should be offered to the incoming commander – after all you might be requested to continue serving as the Wing Chaplain. A commander must feel that the chaplain can be trusted. You may even be asked to help facilitate a reconciliation session or two.
- 2) CAP and its 3-fold mission is bigger than any one wing or one person. We can and should learn from others in this organization. We should realize that we live in a mobile society and that there will be new faces that come into the organization and into our wings who bring a wealth of experience that can be beneficial to the continual success in fulfilling our three-fold mission.
- 3) Changes are inevitable – be it with a commander or with regulations. As chaplains we can assist our commanders and our fellow members by keeping focused on the thing that matters: fulfilling the mission. That is the goal of our commanders....to set the tone and to provide the members with the resources to accomplish the tasks that we face on a daily basis in CAP. One of our responsibilities is to pray for and support our commanders in reaching their goal.