Air Force Sergeant’s Association Task Force Study on Corporate Governance: Change to a Board of Directors

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**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this paper was to study Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA) corporate governance and whether the current structure was adequate for the long-term viability of this Association. This task force was stood up to study the feasibility of incorporating a Board of Directors that would be more effective in governing the Association. This task force was mandated to look at all factors and make a recommendation as to whether AFSA governing body would be merged into a Board of Directors in the near future.

It’s important to note, the task force was only formed to make a recommendation one way or another to the International Executive Council, and that there will be much more work to accomplish should the International Executive Council approves any of our recommendations.

Would like to take the time to thank the following individuals for their time and effort in this undertaking:

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**Background**

In August of 2018, then current International President Jeffrey Ledoux, produced a discussion paper during the Pre-Professional Airmen’s Conference (PAC) International Executive Council (IEC) meeting to get feedback from the IEC members on whether AFSA has run its course with the current governing body format.

The discussion paper, located on next two pages, outlined his vision on transitioning to a Board of Directors governance of the Association. During the Pre- PAC International Executive Meeting, it was discussed that then IP Ledoux would introduce the discussion paper to the delegates and solicit their feedback. Overwhelming, the delegates thought this was a step in the right direction and should be studied.

During the PAC, the AFSA delegates elected a new International President, Michael Carton, who in the subsequent post-PAC International Executive Council Meeting, would stand up the task force to study this. The task force would be led by the International Vice President.

**Discussion Paper**

**On**

**AFSA Executive Leadership Construct**

The AFSA of 60s, 70s, and 80s is not the AFSA of 2018. Granted the mission and vision are the same; but when you look back, you see the AFSA evolving to meet changes and challenges. The fact is we continually evolve. The Executive Council used to be 19-21 members and the Council was very deliberate and slow in their actions. AFSA enjoyed membership at the 130,000 plus for several years so there was a ready pool of funds and enthusiasm from the members. Unfortunately, those times are gone. While we strive to return to some form of membership and financial stability, we must look at how we govern the AFSA in light of this “new normal” way of life. AFSA should deliberately discuss and examine methods and structures which provide for flexibility, embrace change, and allow us to tap into corporate expertise, which can help the association grow both in size and influence.

***Facts and Assumptions or What I believe:***

*Member/Chapter*

* The most important person in AFSA is the member…The second most important is the chapter, not the Division nor International.
* Many chapter members have embraced change via their AF career and understand the need for it.
* Some on the other hand are unable or unwilling to consider change, even when it may be in the best interest of AFSA and its members.

*Divisions*

* Divisions were established as an intermediate management level to directly assist chapters.
* Division Presidents primary responsibility is to act on behalf of AFSA, not their Division.
* Division population may remain constant, but there are fewer chapters under their purview.
* Should be proactive; not reactive and the conduit of information flow: up, down, and across. Yet, much information does not flow as it should…the proposed by-law change is a good example.
* Most Division Presidents are not able to accomplish their approved and documented duties because of time constraints, full time employment, job travel, funds, or for other reasons.
* Time and distance are also factors impacting execution of assigned duties. The Divisions are too big and diverse to allow Division Presidents to even begin to accomplish their primary duties.
* Funds are provided to Divisions so they can promote and foster membership, chapter growth, training, and leadership opportunities for the association, however...financial reports indicate the majority of funds are expended on a Division convention; not the intended purpose.
* The current Division construct does not lend itself to identifying, training, and mentoring individuals to serve on the Executive Council. How difficult is it to find qualified and willing chapter, division, and International leadership candidates?
* Division Presidents are effective within their immediate location but are losing their sphere of influence and control. Just look at inactive and struggling chapters as well as recruiting rates.

*International Executive Council and HQs*

* AFSA International is an important management element because it provides guidance and direction for chapters. The HQs staff operates the day to day activities of AFSA.
* The Executive Council, in some instances, does not reflect today’s reality. Rather, some members are holding on to the past constructs because it is our comfort zone.
* Should concentrate actions on the BIG PICTURE and address the weeds issues when appropriate.

***Proposed AFSA Board of Directors***

* Comprised of a maximum of 13 members (All Voting)
* 1 President / Board Chair … elected – Odd years
* 1 Vice President /Vice Chair … elected – Even years
* 3 Executive Board Members … appointed – 2-year term (Industry experts)
* 4 Regional Vice Presidents … elected – 2-year term (2 on odd and 2 on even years)
* 1 Family Matters Vice President … elected – 2-year term (Odd years)
* 1 CMSAF – Appointed
* 1 Past President – Appointed
* 1 AFSA Executive Director…Position Appointment (Also serves as Board Secretary)
* All Board members elected/appointed, serve a 2-year term with a max of 2 terms and each has a vote.
* Executive Board Members are appointed by the Chair and approved by the Board of Directors
* The 3 appointed board members may be AFSA members and/or industry experts
* The industry experts will be selected at the discretion of the Chairman in consultation with the Executive Director. Industry experts may be asked, with board approval, to stay beyond a second term depending upon their area of expertise.
* Regional Vice Presidents and the Family Matters Vice President are elected at the PAC
* Any eligible AFSA member may run for President, Vice President, or Regional Vice President
* Any eligible AFSA family member may run for the Family Matters Vice President position.
* Regional Vice Presidents are not elected to represent a specific segment of the country.
* Regional Vice President’s will not have a staff or budget.
* Regional Vice President’s responsibilities are assigned by the Chairman of the Board/ International President.
* Board member’s primary duties will include:
* Accomplishes the duties outlined in the current/ updated governance documents.
* Meets annually at the PAC, in Nov/Dec and/or March, at President’s discretion. Off meetings may be via telecon
* Approves Budget, Major HQ Activity changes, Policy, Ways and Means
* Recommends changes that affect membership, incentives and other programs etc.
* Trains members on AFSA rules, reporting requirements, membership etc.
* Recommends By-Law changes and sends to general membership for approval
* Assists in HQs’ and AFSA’s success
* Examines methods and ways to enhance AFSA’s stature and recognition.

***Bottom-line***

Funding the Division construct has been difficult the past two years. It does not appear more funds will be available in the future as the funds are tied to membership recruitment/retention and those numbers are dwindling. Adoption of this concept would eliminate the Division construct within AFSA, reverting to the original AFSA structure. Chapters would report directly to AFSA HQ. This proposal does not affect the chapter construct, nor does it impact their ability to vote at the PAC.

**History**

AFSA historic rise from the basement in Oxon Hill, Maryland to become one of this nation’s premier Enlisted Veteran’s Service Organization wasn’t without struggle. AFSA had to overcome a lot of stigma associated with enlisted members looking out for themselves when no one would.

In 1961, AFSA governance started with the original founders, Benny McGehee as its first President, Lee Thompson as the Secretary/Treasurer and two trustees, Virgil Perry and Don Ward. In 1964, at the first AFSA International Convention, Earl Lehman was elected as International President.

From what has been made available through Past International Presidents and others, was that the governance established by the First International Convention in 1964, was a Board of Trustees, made up a total of 18 individuals, that included members of the **National Executive Committee:** the International President, 3 Vice Presidents, Chairman, Board of Trustees, 4 board members, Executive Directors of Air National Guard (ANG), and Air Force Reserves (AFR) and 2 additional trustees for the ANG and AFR. Governance also included **National Officers**: National Judge Advocate and AFSA Executive Director. This governance also included **2 Division Directors.**  Thought this was odd since Divisions didn’t come into fruition until 1978.

From what we have been able to gather and from Past International Presidents interviewed by the task force outlined that between 1964 and 1978, AFSA Board of Trustees were reduced from 18 to 8. And in 1978, AFSA incorporated Divisions into the management of AFSA field operations. A total of 16 divisions were established around the globe and representatives from those divisions were elected to serve on the executive committee. At some point, all Division Presidents were made a part of the International Executive Council.

Unfortunately, for the purpose of this study, there was very little historical documents made available to the task force to help determine what if any previous discussions that may have been held with regards to establishing a Board of Directors or type of governance that would assist AFSA accomplish their mission.

**Research**

With very little historical documents to help form a baseline for this study, it was imperative that this task force look at several questions to start the process:

**1) Does the current construct work?**

**2) If not, why doesn’t current construct work?**

**3) Is AFSA corporate governing structure correct in its current format?**

To answer the first question, it’s important to understand the process in which AFSA governs itself. The current International Executive Council is comprised of 14 members to include the International President, International Vice President, 2 Elected Trustees, 1 appointed trustee for Family Matters (will be formally elected in 2019), 7 Division Presidents, Senior Advisor and AFSA Executive Director.

Decisions regarding AFSA policy and procedures is made by the International Executive Council and all AFSA Operations decisions are made by the AFSA Headquarters led by the Executive Director. The International Executive Council per the bylaws shall have the supervision over AFSA operations and determine its policies or changes therein: it shall actively prosecute its objectives and supervise the disbursement of funds.

**Does the current construct work?**

There are a variety of opinions on this question, but the facts would suggest that the current construct works with regards to the policy and procedures aspect of the International Executive Council, but question that has long been asked, does it go far enough to think strategically for the long-term health of the association?

In 2010, the International President initiated a study about the size of our Divisions and whether a restructuring of our divisions would be prudent for the long-term success of the Association. The completion of that study recommended that we would merge our divisions from 14 to 7. The major effect of this merger saw the new divisions grow significantly in terms of size, number of chapters and members. A minor effect of that merger saw the International Executive Council reduce its membership from 23 to 14 members.

A byproduct of the merger provided new challenges to division presidents who were having to cover more territory and with the lack of funds available, finds fulfilling their primary responsibilities difficult to achieve. ***Most if not all Division Presidents have found that they needed a new operating construct***to accomplish their primary responsibilities and govern their divisions.

There is an expectation that our Division Presidents who make up the half of the International Executive Committee provide the field expertise and therefore are in a prime position to help position the Association in the future. But the concern is, is that maybe our Division Presidents have too much on their day-to-day plate to engage in long-term strategic planning. While this is a concern, there isn’t much data to suggest otherwise.

Our current construct provides for the expertise needed to accomplish its policy and procedures responsibilities but may not provide the expertise needed to provide the supervision of the operational side of our association.

**If not, why doesn’t current construct work?**

As mentioned above, International Executive Council members may not be in the best position to think long-term strategically and therefore only concentrate on their area of operations and not the bigger picture.

Historically, AFSA Headquarters has managed the Associations operations with minimal oversight and supervision by the International Executive Council or their predecessors. This raises questions on whose responsibility will it be to develop a strategic plan or forecast future business opportunities?

One of the concerns noticed during our research was the flow of communications is degraded based upon the roles and responsibilities of both the International Executive Council and Headquarters. For example, council members may only hear about a future opportunity at a mid-year meeting and have to make policy decisions based on a 10-minute conversation that may lead to just rubber stamping an issue and therefore strategic thinking becomes a moot point.

The environment that our Association operates in “becomes more challenging which produces enormous pressure on leaders to think more holistically about streamlining processes and leverage opportunities in order to be the best …One’s ability to think into the future and make projections needs to include an understanding of the ***nuances of your environment and economy*** to make the best possible decisions” (Carey-Ann Oestreicher, 2017).

**Is AFSA corporate governing structure correct in its current format?**

It was important that this task force to have some historical context into which the Association constructed their governing body. However, that didn’t come to pass, and we are left with trying to understand this question as it pertains to today.

With 71% of the International Executive Council (7 Division Presidents and 3 Trustees) providing field level expertise and experience, there is only 1 individual who oversees the operational (Business) aspect of our Association with oversight from the International President. The concerns generated by Past President Ledoux proposal is that the Association doesn’t have the resources in place to provide for long-term stability and financial health needed to remain solvent.

The current construct may not be totally adept or adequate in its current form to be relevant to meet the needs of the Association of the future. The question to be answered is “will a Board of Directors as proposed by Past President Ledoux be the right answer to meet the needs of the Association”.

**What impact can a Board of Directors have on an Association**

Research was needed to gather data on whether a Board of Directors was the right avenue to pursue, but the nagging question was whether or not a Board of Directors would add value to the Association.

Board of Directors can enhance organization effectiveness by bringing resources to the organization, assisting management of relationships with stakeholders (members), advocating for the Association, shaping or making decisions on organizational strategic and **lending prestige and legitimacy to the organization**.

Research has shown that having a combination of Board of Directors that consist of organizational insiders (i.e. Division Presidents and Internationally elected leaders) and outsiders (i.e. Experts in business, marketing, fundraising, etc.) can increase organizational effectiveness.

Organizational outsiders tend to be more independent and therefore offer more relevant experience within their areas of expertise and therefore are able to provide more strategic capabilities to the board as a whole.

Studies have shown that organizations that have gender and ethnic diversity in management and board of directors increase a firm’s profitability by as much as 21%. At the Board of Directors levels organizations with a diverse board were shown to see increases up to 43% in profits. While this Association may not be able to see this kind of increase, the potential is there.

Board of Directors when properly established, with the right mix of insiders and outsiders, sound strategic development, goal achievements, organizational reputation and sound financial practices, have shown the ability to increase an organization’s performance and profit potential.

Successful operation of an organization depends on the use of all resources. Board of Directors purpose should ensure ongoing development of resources such fundraising, building strategic partnerships and supporting the organization’s use of technological and human resources.

An organization that has a Board of Directors with the right combination of insiders and outsiders can have a positive impact on performance, profit, branding and provide legitimacy to the Association. How does AFSA stack up with other military Veteran Service Organizations that are the main competitors?

**The Big Four Veteran’s Service Organization**

The task force, for comparable purposes, looked at what is consider the largest Veteran’s Service Organizations in America to determine their governing body and their tax-exempt status.

**Table 1. THE BIG 4**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Veteran Service Organization** | **Tax-Exempt Status** | **Governing body** |
| American Legion | C(19) | National Leadership |
| Veteran’s of Foreign War | C(19) | National Leadership |
| AMVETS | C(19) | National Leadership |
| Disabled American Veterans | C(4) | Hybrid |

By comparison, we then looked at our partners in The Military Coalition (TMC)

**Table 2. The Military Coalition**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Veteran Service Organization** | **Tax-Exempt Status** | **Governing body** |
| Air Force Association | C(3) | Board of Directors |
| Army Aviation Association of America | C(4) | National Leadership |
| AMSUS | C(3) | Board of Directors |
| Association of the United States Army | C(3) | Hybrid |
| Association of the United States Navy | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| Commissioned Off Assoc of Public Health | C(6) | Board of Directors |
| Chief Warrant Off Assoc of US Coast Guard | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| EANGUS | C(19) | Hybrid |
| Fleet Reserve Association | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| Gold Star Wives of America | C(4) | Board of Directors |
| Jewish War Veterans of the USA | C(4) | Hybrid |
| Marine Corps League | C(4) | Hybrid |
| Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America | C(3) | Board of Directors |
| Marine Corps Reserve Association | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| Military Chaplains Association of the USA | C(3) | Not readily available |
| Military Officers Association of America | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| Military Order of the Purple Heart | C(3) | National Leadership |
| NGAUS | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| National Military Family Association | C(3) | Hybrid |
| Naval Enlisted Reserve Association | C(19) | National Leadership |
| Non Commissioned Officers Association | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| Reserve Officers Association | C(19) | National Leadership |
| Service Women’s Action Network | C(3) | Board of Directors |
| The Retired Enlisted Association | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors | C(3) | Board of Directors |
| US Army Warrant Officers Association | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| USCG Chief Petty Officers Association | C(19) | National Leadership |
| Vietnam Veterans of America | C(19) | Board of Directors |
| Wounded Warrior Project | C(3) | Board of Directors |

Table 1 highlights that three of the big four have the same type of tax-exemption status as AFSA but because of their large scale of operations have a National Leadership governance policy. The leadership is elected at National Conventions and they have a paid staff that they oversee as do all of the Veteran’s Service Organizations.

Disabled American Veterans (DAV) who have a C(4) tax-exempt status has what we call a Hybrid form of governance, in that, there is the National Executive Committee, elected by the members, as well as a Board of Directors. The National Commander, elected by the members, acts as an Advisor to the board but isn’t the Chairman.

The task force decided to look at our mission partners within The Military Coalition (TMC). Table 2 highlights the TMC tax-exempt status and form of governance. Of the 29 Associations listed, 19 of them have Board of Directors. For those 14 Associations with the same tax-exemption as AFSA, **10 Associations have Board of Directors**, 3 have National Leadership and one is a Hybrid (mixture of both national and board of directors).

Hopefully the above tables have provided a little clarity on what our competitors has seen to be the right mix for their Association, let’s break down the proposal as how it might apply to AFSA.

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS PROPOSAL**

The proposal submitted would require that all chapter be aligned under the Headquarters purview which would make them Direct Reporting Units. This would eliminate Divisions and therefore eliminate Division Presidents. From a cost analysis perspective this raised several questions: 1) would additional staff be needed to service the chapters, 2) how much would it cost for additional personnel, 3) would there be a loss of esprit de corps or fellowship among our members, 4) would membership decline?

From what we have been able to gather, Headquarters would be requesting to hire at least 4 personnel to assist with the Chapters. While a final price tag was not provided, we were able provide an estimate of $40K per employee based on data provided by Headquarters. It will cost the association at a minimum an **additional $160K** to implement this portion of the proposal.

The consensus among the task force and those interview that there would a significant loss of esprit de corps and fellowship amongst our members and that would have a negative effect on the Association. Although difficult to put it into numbers, we could see a loss of membership, more than we have undergone already.

Electing Regional Vice Presidents (RVP) to serve in place of Division Presidents would be the next step in the proposal. As noted earlier in the report, Division Presidents already are covering more territory and chapters than ever before. Many believe, although not spelled out in the proposal, that the RVP would have the same duties as the Division President minus the care and feeding of the chapters. To the task force, this made no sense, in that if the HQ is taking care of the chapters to include care/feeding, training, providing guidance, etc. what would the RVP be asked to do. Without a clear and defined job description, it’s difficult to assess what their role would be, would they be glorified trustees that we already have or have other duties as assigned?

Back in the late 1960’s to 1978, Regional Vice Presidents were paid members of the staff who reported to the Executive Director. With our current fiscal realities, paying an RVP would not be possible nor providing them with additional staff. It would change the dynamic of the all-volunteer board and would have an impact on the IRS Form 990 among other things.

The proposal noted that the current Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force (CMSAF) be appointed to the board. While this is encouraging, the task force doesn’t believe the Air Force will allow the CMSAF to sit on a board that has an active lobbying mission as it may conflict with their duties.

The two active Trustee positions (Uniformed Services and Retired and Veteran Affairs) would be eliminated but the Family Matter trustee position would still remain on the board. The question asked was who would represent the Uniformed Services and Retired and Veterans? Would it be the RVP? Again, it was difficult to provide sound information when, so little was provided in the original proposal.

One past president would be appointed to the board per the proposal, but the feeling was that a Past President is already on the International Executive Council, just not as a voting member which the task force would recommend that the Past President Senior Advisor be given voting privileges.

The proposal sought to include three executive board members (industry experts), who would be appointed, and could be members or non-members of AFSA. Research has shown as noted earlier, that having outsiders (industry experts) can have a positive impact in terms of organization efficiency, profitability, enhance the image and provide legitimacy to the Association.

As noted in the proposal, the time for change to better align with today’s operating environment as opposed to the ways of old, requires the current International Executive Council look at this with an open mind. Maybe the time is right for some fresh perspectives be allowed to assist the Association moving forward.

As with any organizational change in structure and governance, we must undertake a cost analysis to see if there is a cost benefit one way or the other. As with any cost analysis, there are many hidden costs and factors that can’t be evaluated. We have attempted to provide what we believe the true and factual cost to the Association.

**Cost Analysis**

The task force operated under the assumption that there would be no additional funds to pay salary for Regional Vice Presidents or to the Executive Board members who would be appointed. As with most Board of Directors for nonprofit organizations, they are typically volunteering because they identify and believe in Association’s mission.

However, it would be prudent to pay for the lodging, meals, and travel to and from meetings, the Professional Airmen’s Conference and other events that would require Board member presence. This would be consistent with what is already covered with our Internationally elected officers and Division Presidents (minus travel).

Table 3 will outline what it cost to service one International Officer and Division President per year. Table 4 outlines the Annual cost for all members of the International Executive Committee.

Table 3 **Average Annual cost to Association for IEC for 1 Member**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Council Member | Travel | Lodging Meals |
| International Officer | $1700 | $1800 |
| Division President | $0 | $1800 |

Table 4 **Annual Cost to Association for entire IEC**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Council Member | Travel | Lodging Meals |
| International Officer | $10.2K | $10.8K |
| Division President | $0 | $12.6K |

For the proposal, cost analysis operated under the assumption that all members of the Board of Directors would be considered International Officers. Travel will be based on the International Officer as noted in Table 3. For analysis purposes, we will total 17 board members.

Table 5 **Annual Cost to Association for Board of Directors**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Council Member | Travel | Lodging Meals |
| International Officer | $28.9K | $30.6K |

The major cost increase would be $18.7K in travel cost to pay for the Board of Directors travel and $7.2K for lodging and meals. Important to note, that if the chapters were to be aligned under HQ, we could see an additional cost of at a **minimum of $160K.**

Tables 6 outlines increases to the Association by just adding Executive board members should International Executive Council wants to modify original proposal:

Table 6 **Executive Board Members**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Council Member | Travel | Lodging Meals |
| International Officer | $5.1K | $5.4K |

**Recommendation**

From every single source reviewed, interviewed, and in private conversations during multiple meetings, the overwhelming majority believed that eliminating Division Presidents and replacing them with Regional Vice Presidents would have a bad economic and esprit de corps impact on the Association.

Divisions has been part of this Association since 1978 and while there have been restructuring of the original divisions over the years, it’s been an been an integral part of this Association and its successes. The comradery that exists in each of the Divisions can’t be replaced and shouldn’t with this proposal. The task force believes that Divisions and therefore Division Presidents play a vital role in the overall lasting success of the Association.

The task force believes there are multiple recommendations to be made with regards to the original proposal and are outlined below.

**Recommendation #1:**

To approve a modified version of the original proposal, to which the International Executive Council would become a Board of Directors which would consist of: The International President (Chair), International Vice President (Vice-Chair), current Trustees, Division Presidents, Executive Board Members (outside experts), Senior Advisor, and Executive Director (non-voting). The board size would be a maximum of 17 members.

This would ensure that the Association would continue to benefit from the field expertise and allow the Board to recruit industry experts to help in such areas as Membership, Strategic Planning, Marketing and Fundraising. This Association would be adopting a Hybrid governance model that has been found in other Associations as noted in Tables 1 and 2. The proposed timeline is located on the following page.

**Recommendation #2:**

Keep the International Executive Council the same structure but change the name to “Board of Directors” and give the International President the authority to recruit industry experts to form an Advisory Board which would be separate from the International Executive Council governance and provide the President the advice that they need.

It’s been noted that Advisory Boards can offer many benefits to an Association such as diversity of opinions, a large network of influence, and help with strategic planning.

**PROPOSED AFSA BOARD OF DIRECTORS IMPLMENTATION SCHEDULE**

July-August 2020:

* Election of AFSA International President to serve as Board Chairman
* Vice President elected from 2019 International Convention to serve as Vice Chairman
* Election of Uniformed Services Trustee
* Family Matters Trustee elected from 2019 International Convention
* Retired and Veterans’ Affairs Trustee elected from 2019 International Convention
* Division Presidents
* President appoints 3 Executive Board Members (recommend staggered terms (1,2,3 yrs.)
* President appoints a Past International President as Senior Advisor
* AFSA Executive Director

July 2021:

* Election of Vice President to serve as Vice Chairman
* Election of Family Matters and Retired and Veteran’s Affairs Trustees
* Appoints Executive Board Members to begin normal 2-year rotation as needed.