

Building a Culture to Win

Expanding the Frontier of
Human Achievement

By Rob Ffield



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Chapter 2:

The Value of Relentless Innovators

Reinventing TOPGUN

It was a bright sunny day in June 1988 in San Diego when I walked into the front door of the U.S. Navy Fighter Weapons School, better known in the military as TOPGUN. It was my first of two tours as an air combat instructor. I was 29 years old, single and eager to begin training with this elite squadron made famous just two years earlier in the blockbuster movie, “Top Gun.”

The Navy’s then-20-year-old process of selecting and training its fighter pilots, as well as its policy to immediately send them right back to their fleet squadrons, remained unchanged since the program’s inception. That process made sense during the Vietnam conflict, as the Navy needed to get the best tactics back to the guys in the fight as quickly as possible—lives were at stake.

With all that publicity and fanfare surrounding the TOPGUN program at this time, I was sure that the tried-and-true method of training the best fighter pilots in the world and turning them into instructors was as good as it could get.

I was wrong.

The tactical landscape had changed dramatically in sophistication and capability. As before, we still needed pilots who had the eye of a tiger in the air-to-air combat arena. However, we also needed our pilots to have a highly technical understanding of their weapons system, as well as the teaching skills to coach others on how to successfully defeat the enemy. Additionally, the list of threat weapons systems that they had to know, equally as well as their own, was only increasing every day in both lethality and proliferation.

We needed to raise the level of performance for the best fighter pilots in the world – much, much higher.

Prompted by research into U.S. Air Force and Marine air combat training programs and by our own intuition that we could find ways to train our combat aviators better, my fellow TOPGUN instructors and I began to formulate a new training methodology. It was bold. It was very different. And it would require significant changes in the manning and equipping of TOPGUN and the fleet squadrons.

During that time, applicants are encouraged to get to know more about the team by attending pre-show briefings and also post-show public commitments each weekend. This is how the Blues can get to really know each candidate, who they are, and what they are all about.

It is important to note that there is no flying evaluation for the pilots. Their expertise in that area is well-documented through the Navy training system.

The team is looking beyond those metrics for the more subtle attributes found in chemistry and core values. It is also important to note that the entire team, from officer to enlisted, is involved in getting to know candidates, not just the other F/A-18 demonstration pilots. Similarly, the entire officer core is involved in the final interviews and selection deliberations, which take several days. They are brutal because the stakes are so high.

The support team members are also selected in a similar fashion and the process is conducted exclusively by the team themselves with no outside intervention from the Navy Flag Officers, other than some very basic guidelines on the candidates future potential as a Naval Officer.

This method is time-tested and is a critical element of the Blue Angel culture of excellence.

Like the Blues, world-class organizations develop cultures that go beyond assessing just the critical expertise and technical skills needed for a particular position. Those skills are only the beginning.

Leaders of world-class organizations want to know if the prospective team members can speak and communicate well. They want to know if the candidates have a passion for the job and for doing it right. They want people they can develop into leaders, people who are Relentless Innovators, people who understand that every program and process can be improved.

In my capacity as the Blue Angel's Commanding Officer and lead pilot, or "Boss," the process of picking team members was challenging – as important in many ways as the toughest aspects of flying. It is meticulous and time-consuming, but always worth the effort. It was a process I learned to never short-change. It would not be fair to me, or the organization, to have the wrong person join our team.

Observations Into the Nature of Top Team Performers

We have talked about the importance of passion and focus in selecting new team members for high-performance teams. My decades of experience selecting and observing pilots for the Navy's elite organizations has shown me that there is a direct correlation between documented performance during initial flight training and how quickly a pilot masters more advanced skills, such as the skills needed to perform precision flight demonstrations, dogfighting skills, and landing on an aircraft carrier.

I have found many of these fast learners are Relentless Innovators by nature. They are also fun people to be around!

The same is true of my experience in business. Some people are slower learners that may catch on eventually, but for high-level teams, you need fast learners who adapt and innovate quickly.

Again, we see a theme in common with the “reinventing TOPGUN” story: choose people who are flexible and adaptable and who have a strong passion for learning, improvement, innovation and persistence. They have fun doing these activities, which is why they are so good.

In general, it is useful to get insight into how quickly a team member can learn. For instance, a TOPGUN instructor could likely take a good college athlete with no flying experience and turn him into a good fighter pilot simply based on his passion for competition, work ethic, and how quickly he adapted and tackled new challenges in the past.

Attitude matters. Spirit and drive propel these individuals to perform beyond their peers. These are the people who I want on my team.

Finding Relentless Innovators for Business

From my experience in the Navy and also advising large fortune 100 companies, only a small percentage of people are Relentless Innovators. The entrepreneurial candidates

are who really make substantial contributions and innovations to an organization. Most of the other people are caretakers.

In putting together a team to win, emphasis must be on selecting more Relentless Innovators and putting them in the right roles. Sure, you need technical experts for specific areas, but these people may or may not be Relentless Innovators. Indeed, Relentless Innovators will sometimes execute even better without any prior experience as they quickly outpace the so-called “experts.”

It boils down to whether or not a candidate has a go-for-it attitude and can learn and reboot quickly to execute at a world-class level and make things happen.

So how do you determine one’s propensity to be a Relentless Innovator?

First, use the direct approach and ask them to describe their history of innovation – from idea through execution. Really take the time to get to know the individual and ask for specifics. You will find out quickly how driven and sincere they are at putting the organization ahead of themselves.

Next, I found true character references are vital – the more in-depth, the better. Written references alone are almost worthless. They must be verified with probing questions. If you cannot directly observe a candidate in action yourself, discussing someone’s past performance with former colleagues in a confidential, non-attribution setting is the next-best option.

Whether promoting from within or hiring from outside, the most important question in determining your job candidate's expertise is: "What is his/her track record of innovation from idea to execution?"

Another indicator to consider is the candidate's passion. Passion is more than just a person's field of expertise or interest. Passion is, in the big picture, about the will to do a job – any job you give them – to the best of their ability and have fun doing it.

Again, the number one consideration in all of this is their track record. Have they, in their past roles, shown themselves to be passionate about executing tasks and accomplishing them to the best of their ability, regardless of the role's prestige? If so, they are Relentless Innovators.

They are the people you want on your team.

Finally, the elements of team chemistry and core values must be considered. When you have the luxury of being able to select from a large group of qualified candidates, these considerations become the tiebreakers. These elements are of such great importance that the next chapter is dedicated to exploring them further.

Raising Your Average

The Blue Angels and TOPGUN hiring experiences were fun.

The same was true when I was the executive officer running a four-star general's staff. The team and staff members had

a rewarding experience really getting to know the new job candidates.

They enthusiastically participated. Not only did they want to find the right person to complement the team, but they also learned a great deal with each round of interviews. Many of the individuals we did not select became great friends, as well as great professional contacts and colleagues, due to our spirited approach to hiring.

Our mindset went beyond just hiring great people. Our mindset was focused on finding the *right* great people.

When you are intent on building a culture of excellence, it is important to “raise your averages” in finding the best innovators. You will have to customize an approach that works for you – the “how.” The “what” should be a focus on providing clear job descriptions, identifying questionable claims on résumés, and uncovering more accurate information about a job candidate through traditional methods.

Even if you cannot do exactly what we were able to do in selecting Blue Angel pilots and instructors, you can and should use every tool at your disposal to locate and select top performers - Relentless Innovators. They will be key to creating a culture of excellence.

Your Relentless Innovators will help you recruit other Relentless Innovators, and they will even influence people in your organization who may not naturally tend to be

Relentless Innovators. They, too, will become excited and passionate – and they will start to contribute at a higher level.

Ultimately, once you have established an organization of Relentless Innovators, it naturally attracts more of the same who identify and want to be associated with a world-class team. You know you are world class when the process is fun, and you have Relentless Innovators knocking at your door.

Points to Remember

1. The world's best teams have cultures that attract, hire and retain Relentless Innovators. They not only provide the idea, but also execute to make sure the idea becomes reality.
2. Relentless Innovators are the entrepreneurs within an organization who make substantial contributions to innovation, improvement, and excellence in execution.
3. Cultures of excellence make the hiring process a learning experience that is exciting and fun for all involved, and make it an all-hands responsibility.

Chair Flying Exercise

Visualize the six-month process the Blue Angels use to select team members. Imagine culling through stacks of ap-

plications – every one of them highly qualified. Think about what Blue Angels pilots do – fly expensive, fast machines very close together while dynamically maneuvering through the sky. The situation is exhilarating, but could be terrifying, and even fatal, if done incorrectly.

What do you think is harder for us to determine from those applications – flying skills or the ability to stay calm under pressure? Flying skills are easily documented.

What are some of the characteristics you think we need to see from untested, potential team members? Someone who is relentless in finding ways to be even better than the best, who is also willing to implement those changes.

Now think about your organization. Do you have an in-depth understanding of the type of individual you want to hire – beyond the required expertise and experience? What characteristics beyond technical expertise do you envision your perfect employee possessing?

What process do you have in place to ascertain if they have these characteristics? Do you even have such a process?

If your organization had a culture that saw the hiring process as an all-hands effort, not just left to the human resources department, but as a team-wide responsibility – who would you want on that team? How would you make the process something to look forward to doing?

Now visualize your organization with a culture that naturally attracts Relentless Innovators. You have an

endless stream of applicants every time a position needs filling because your team's visible passion and *esprit des corps* attracts like-minded individuals. Your organization's culture of excellence takes the time necessary and uses innovative techniques to thoroughly learn about each individual candidate's true past performance.

Think about what that looks like, and write down a description of what you see. Who is in the room? What are they excited about in the new candidates?

Now think about what steps you need to take to get there - who needs to give their buy-in? How will you get your team enthusiastic about the process? What resources do you need to gather to make this happen?

The time and effort you put into hiring gives back in many ways beyond just the great people you bring onto the team. If you take the time to think about this and put your thoughts on paper, you will be on the way to having a world-class hiring process that attracts Relentless Innovators - your next step to *Building a Culture to Win*.



"The importance of chemistry and trust. High-performance teams look at much more than résumés and credentials in their personnel selection process."

U.S. Navy Photo Taken By MC3 Andrew Johnson