

RAF International Leadership Conference

Post-Conference Report



Published 2025

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Published by the Tedder Academy of Leadership, Trenchard Hall, The Royal Air Force College Cranwell, NG34 8HB, UK
in conjunction with Media Services, RAFC Cranwell.

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Foreword

The inaugural RAF International Leadership Conference was held at the Møller Institute, Churchill College, Cambridge in March 2025. The essence of true leadership in today's interconnected world lies in collaboration and the conference brought together over 20 nations with the aim of uniting diverse perspectives, checking each other's blind spots, pooling our resources, and forging innovative leadership solutions that transcend borders.

In an era of unprecedented global challenges, the call for visionary leadership has never been more important, and as we navigate a world shaped by rapid technological advancements, economic shifts, and pressing environmental and social challenges, no single leader, organisation, or nation can address these complexities alone. The ways and degree to which different nations were affected by common problems also offered novel insights and it was important to that each nation had unique positionality.

The output from this international leadership conference will serve as testament to the power of our collective wisdom. Our 3 days together allowed the exchange ideas, and it cultivated partnerships that will drive meaningful change. Through insightful discussions, hands-on workshops, and inspiring keynote sessions, we explored strategies to foster leadership, build resilient organisations and determine the leadership skills we require for the future. May this conference report inspire bold action and empower us to lead with foresight, integrity, and unity.



Global Strategic Trends and their Counters

Session Summary

The global strategic trends and the associated challenges facing nations were brought to life by Blair Sheppard (Strategy and Leadership, Price Waterhouse Coopers). In response, national representatives highlighted both the interconnectedness of these challenges, and shared the diverse lived experiences often associated with divergent national priorities taken in addressing them. Whilst global issues such as climate change, technological disruption, and geopolitical shifts are widely acknowledged, specific national contexts give rise to unique challenges. These include demographic shifts, economic vulnerabilities, and regional instabilities. The pervasive impact of migration, often driven by conflict, economic hardship, and climate change, emerges as a significant cross-cutting theme, creating both opportunities and frictions. The pervasive influence of disinformation and the need for strong, cohesive leadership, capable of navigating diverse perspectives are crucial factors in addressing these multifaceted issues and fostering resilience in a rapidly changing world.

Overarching Global Trends and Challenges

- **Technological Disruption.** Consistently identified as a global trend impacting industries, job markets, and the future of warfare. The speed of technological advancement and the potential for mainstream unawareness is noted across nations.
- **Climate Change.** A dominant and universally recognised challenge, with nations highlighting its diverse impacts, from agricultural consequences and risks to vulnerable regions to direct threats to infrastructure and ways of life. Specifically noted was the environmental impact of war and the challenges of post-conflict recovery in the context of climate change. Climate change is cross-cutting in its impact.
- **Geopolitical Shifts and Fracturing World.** Instability, conflicts, and rising tensions are significant concerns, particularly for nations in volatile regions. The impact of a fracturing world is seen as potentially hindering the resolution of other global problems, suggesting a need for greater international cooperation.
- **Demographic Shifts.** Declining birth rates and aging populations, and changing generational mindsets pose challenges to workforce capacity, pension systems, and more specifically, military recruitment and retention in many of the represented nations. A potentially positive viewpoint describes the influx of working-age migrants as adding value, helping to overcome aging population issues. Generational mindset shifts (Gen Z & Gen Alpha) are noted as requiring new approaches to engagement.
- **Social Instability.** Often linked to migration, resource scarcity, and internal divisions. The impact of diversity on social cohesion and the potential for blame cultures were highlighted as particular challenges.

Nation-Specific Challenges and Perspectives

- **Slovenia:** aging population leading to pressure on healthcare, pensions, and the workforce; economic dependence on exports, making the economy vulnerable to global fluctuations; environmental sustainability balancing economic growth with the preservation of natural heritage; increased migration placing pressure on resources and infrastructure.
- **Finland:** significant pressure from Russian action and the economic consequences thereof; recruitment and retention in the military; hybrid and cyber warfare; refugee migration; rising unemployment; struggling rural economies.
- **United Kingdom:** demographic challenges including an aging population and linked political polarisation, making consensus-building difficult; technical disruption with significant implications for military operations; the isolationism

created by Brexit, although the war in Ukraine is seen as partially mitigating this.

- **Belgium:** climate change; disrupting technology and its rapid pace and lack of mainstream awareness; migration.
- **Australia:** climate change; geopolitical issues and tensions; vulnerability due to a large landmass, small population, distance from allies, and reliance on foreign imports.
- **Spain:** leadership challenges within the military in a changing global landscape, requiring the building of cohesion, trust to deliver effective results.
- **USA:** acknowledgement that all of trends matter but note the partisan political landscape often shapes the US role in world issues.
- **Jordan:** acute regional instability severely impacted by water scarcity and climate change, threatening food security and sustainable development.
- **Poland:** directly affected by geopolitical tensions with Russia and the conflict in Ukraine; technological development and staying competitive; the energy transition away from coal; significant regional economic disparities.

Key themes in-depth

Whilst key themes cut across most nations, and in identifying them it created a common understanding and unifying purpose, it was noted that the degree of effect varied with some key differences.

The impact of migration. Migration emerged as a central theme, often compounded by other global challenges.

It is seen as:

- a. A driving factor of change and challenge. Stemming from local instability, conflict, economic hardship, and climate change.
- b. A source of friction. Dual natured, friction of limited resource and friction of diversity, both potentially leading to social instability and blame cultures.
- c. An opportunity. In some cases, particularly for nations facing aging populations, migration is viewed as a positive influx of working-age people and promoting of resilience through diversity.
- d. Subject to exploitation. By organised crime and those seeking cheaper labour costs.

The role of mindset and disinformation. The interaction between both factors is potentially a key circular driver, one feeding and imbuing the other into a spiral of continued decline, which can only be broken by a deliberate effort to instil positive and outward looking mindsets.

- a. Mindset: A positive mindset towards challenges, particularly migration, is seen as crucial for future prosperity.
- b. Disinformation: Acts as a significant barrier to collaboration by exaggerating differences and fostering blame cultures. It influences both public opinion and political action.

Leadership and generational perspectives. The relationship, or the lack of intentional relationship, between existing leadership visions and practices and the needs, desires and attitudes of different generations was viewed as a key challenge.

- a. Leadership vision: A lack of clear leadership vision is identified as a challenge in cohering a clear purpose.
- b. Generational attitudes: Changing attitudes and values, particularly among younger generations who may not prioritise security in the same way, pose challenges for recruitment and societal identity.

The Challenge and so what for Defence?

Session Summary

Understanding how global trends impact national defence choices, present challenges and offer opportunities to ensure the success of future military operations is just part of the picture. AVM Cab Townsend (Air Officer Commanding 22 Group, RAF) went beyond to highlight the impact upon leadership and the leadership challenges the trends present. Critical amongst nations was the impact upon recruitment and retention, driven by generational differences, evolving perceptions of military service, and competition with the civilian sector. Adapting to rapid technological advancements and navigating geopolitical uncertainty and the evolving nature of warfare also emerged as significant leadership challenges. Furthermore, broader defence concerns highlight issues including resource constraints, information overload, supply chain problems, technological dependence, and a perceived decline in defence culture within younger generations.

National responses highlight a consistent set of complex and interconnected challenges. The need to adapt to a rapidly changing technological and geopolitical landscape, coupled with the critical imperative of attracting and retaining talent in a competitive environment, demands innovative and multifaceted leadership approaches. These include a focus on training, innovation, cultural development, and enhanced collaboration. A key takeaway was the understanding that addressing these challenges requires not only internal adjustments within the military but also a broader societal engagement and a re-evaluation of the value proposition of military service for current and future generations.

Recruitment and Retention: A Dominant Challenge

- **Generational mismatch.** Many nations highlighted a disconnect between the expectations of younger generations (Gen Z) and the traditional offer of military service. The perceived focus on short-term employment and rapid progression in the civilian sector contrasts with the traditional military career path.
- **Changing purpose of military service.** The shift from a primary focus of defence of a nation against threat and invasion, to roles encompassing humanitarian aid, border control, and global responsibilities has potentially reduced the intrinsic motivation for some individuals joining the military.
- **Civilian competition.** Armed Forces unanimously struggle to compete with the salaries and opportunities offered in the civilian sector, particularly for highly skilled technical personnel. Competition is not purely in the remuneration space, but also the struggle to reflect Gen Z values and imperatives.
- **Loss of defence culture.** A decline in the cultural memory of threats, and a perception that security is a given, contribute to recruitment and retention challenges.
- **Bureaucracy and processes.** The complexity of recruitment processes can deter potential candidates. Within the service, daily challenges of bureaucracy and process are retention negative.

Adapting to Technological Advancements

- **Pace of training change.** The rapid development of technologies including AI, unmanned aerial systems, and cyber warfare requires continuous adaptation and training. Current trainers may struggle to keep pace with technological advancements as readily as newer recruits. A clear demand exists for personnel with expertise in emerging technologies.
- **Technology as both threat and opportunity.** Technology presents clear opportunities for enhanced capabilities, but threats in terms of cyber security, resilience and reliance are too ever present.

- **Dependence and resilience.** Concerns exist regarding over-reliance on external and international technology providers and the potential consequences of technological failure or disruption. The ability to revert to traditional methods is questionable.
- **AI and decision making.** The increasing role of AI in defence raises questions about its impact on decision-making processes, its efficacy and ethicality.
- **Training for unknown future roles.** The rapid evolution of technology makes it challenging to train personnel for jobs that do not yet exist.

Geopolitical Uncertainty and the Evolving Nature of Warfare

- **Ambiguity of future conflicts.** The nature of future conflicts is increasingly uncertain, characterised by overlapping strategies and the potential deployment of non-integrated weapon systems. Traditional warfare is being supplemented or replaced by hybrid warfare, requiring different skillsets and approaches. Leaders must be forward-thinking and capable of making quick, informed decisions in volatile and unpredictable environments.
- **Impact of global events:** Events [Finland joining NATO; war in Ukraine] necessitate significant changes in force posture, technology integration, and personnel mobility. Uncertainty about future threats impacts capability development.

Other Key Defence Concerns

- **Limited resources.** Insufficient funding to meet all requirements is a common constraint across most nations.
- **Information overload.** Individuals are often overwhelmed by excessive amounts of information generated by technology. Stripping, synthesising and processing it requires a change to force size and construct.
- **Supply chain issues.** Delays (often through bureaucracy) in acquiring necessary equipment hinder operational readiness and serve to exacerbate the negative consequences of bureaucracy and process.
- **Mental resilience.** The high-stress nature of air force operations necessitates prioritising the mental well-being of personnel. Whilst some nations are forward in their approach to mental health, there is still stigma and a lack of understanding in others.
- **Trust.** Concerns exist regarding internal and external trust, impacting collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- **Interoperability:** Ensuring seamless operation with allied forces remains a key challenge.

Addressing Identified Challenges

Approaches to addressing the challenges to defence were wide ranging:

- a. Continuous training and education: Investing in ongoing training programmes focused on new technologies and evolving operational requirements.
- b. Promoting innovation culture: Encouraging a mindset that embraces new ideas and technologies. There must also be resource and opportunity to allow innovation to succeed (and to fail).
- c. Holistic support systems: Implementing measures to improve workforce well-being and retention. Support to neurodiverse service personnel needs expansion in some nations, recognising the unique skills and benefits of a diverse workforce is key to gaining an operational edge.

Continued overleaf...

- d.** Leadership development programmes: Investing in initiatives to cultivate agile thinking, decision-making skills, and adaptability in leaders. These must be both external and internal in their approach.
- e.** Building alliances and partnerships: Enhancing collaboration with other nations to address complex challenges.
- f.** Mentoring: Providing guidance and support to personnel at all levels. Whilst there is a movement to see performance coaching as the answer to growing a stronger workforce, the cultural benefits of mentoring cannot be underestimated.
- g.** Focusing on motivation: Implementing strategies to effectively motivate personnel, recognising that this may not always be financial.
- h.** Prioritisation: Improving the ability to focus on essential tasks and avoid unnecessary activities. This again links to the need to demolish internal bureaucracy and undue process.
- i.** Understanding trends: Actively seeking to comprehend the evolving expectations and values of younger generations. This can be linked to reverse mentoring.
- j.** Adapting the offer: Exploring ways to make military service more appealing to the modern workforce, potentially including allowing migrant recruitment.
- k.** Raising awareness of threats: Recognising the need for a shift in perspective within the armed forces and broader society regarding military service and threats. Educating the broader society about the security challenges facing nations. Maintaining the air force at the forefront of public consciousness is essential.
- l.** Developing “Futurists”: Creating dedicated individuals within the service to anticipate future challenges and develop innovative solutions.
- m.** Scenario-based training: Utilising simulations to enhance decision-making skills in high-pressure environments.



Leadership Behaviours and Core Values across Air Forces

Session Summary

A dive into emphasised leadership behaviours and core values revealed both significant commonalities and unique national perspectives on effective leadership and the fundamental principles underpinning service. There was a demonstrable and significant degree of convergence: Integrity, teamwork, and leading by example emerged as universally important. However, the specific articulation and emphasis of these concepts, as well as the inclusion of more culturally specific values, reflect the unique identities and operational contexts of each nation's air force.

The formal integration of these principles into training and doctrine highlights their perceived importance in developing capable and ethical air force personnel. A comparative analysis provides valuable insights for understanding global perspectives on military leadership and informs ongoing efforts in leadership development and international collaboration.

Key Themes and Observations

- **Universal Emphasis on Integrity and Ethical Conduct.** Integrity appears as a foundational element across air forces. Slovenia explicitly lists integrity as a key leadership behaviour, while the UK and Belgium also highlight it. Australia includes integrity as a core service value. Jordan specifically names *Integrity and Accountability* as the top leadership behaviour and lists *Honour and Integrity* as a core value. The USA prioritises *Integrity First* as a core value. This widespread emphasis underscores the critical role of ethical behaviour in military leadership.
- **Importance of Teamwork and Collaboration.** The ability to work effectively as part of a team is another recurring theme. Slovenia includes *Teamwork and Collaboration* as a crucial leadership behaviour. Finland emphasises *Working Together*. The UK Army highlights the *need to encourage confidence in the team* and for individuals to *strive for team goals*. Australia mentions the importance of *build[ing] the team*. Jordan lists *Effective Communication and Team Building* as a key leadership behaviour, and Poland includes both *Team Building and Collaboration*. This highlights the understanding that modern air operations are inherently complex and require coordinated effort.
- **Leading by Example.** The principle of *Lead by Example* is explicitly mentioned by the British Army and Australia as a key leadership behaviour; Belgium also includes leading by example within their doctrine. Spain articulates leadership as: *inspiring, leading, and commanding*, with the *great responsibility of being the role model*. There is strong recognition that leaders must embody the values and behaviours they expect from their subordinates.
- **Nation-Specific Values and Cultural Influences.** While common themes exist, the specific articulation of core values often reflects national culture and historical context. Slovenia links its values (*honour, courage, camaraderie, loyalty and dedication*), to the nation's culture. The Royal Navy's C2DRIL (Commitment, Courage, Discipline, Respect, Integrity and Loyalty) is unique to their service, standing separate from the RAF and British Army, however the approach of all 3 UK armed forces is coherent with the Defence Leadership Centres *Leadership in Defence* doctrine. Spain's list of nine core values is more extensive, reflecting a specific military ethos.
- **Formal Instruction and Embedding of Values.** Many air forces have formal mechanisms for teaching and reinforcing their core values and desired leadership behaviours. Finland teaches them in their Cadet and NCO schools and through mentoring. The Royal Navy explicitly mentions formal teaching in new entry and on leadership courses. Australia confirms their values are formally taught. Spain also indicates that their core values are captured and formally taught.

The USA notes this occurs through professional military education, basic training, officer commissioning programs and captured through doctrine and policy documents. This formalisation demonstrates a commitment to instilling core principles in their personnel.

- **Adaptability and Continuous Improvement.** Several national sources highlight the importance of adaptability and a willingness to learn. Slovenia lists *Adaptability* as a key leadership behaviour. Finland mentions *values and traditions of working together*, implying a need to balance heritage with evolving needs. Jordan includes *Adaptability and Continuous Learning*, and the USA mentions the need for continued education. Spain emphasises the deep desire to learn. Poland explicitly mentions continuous development as a core value. This reflects the dynamic nature of modern military operations and the need for personnel to be agile and receptive to change.
- **Decisiveness and Action Orientation.** Decisiveness is highlighted as a key leadership behaviour by Slovenia and Poland. Jordan also mentions *Mission-Focused Decision Making and Courage and Decisive Action in Uncertainty*. The UK, while officially promoting a people centred approach, acknowledges that getting things done is still the extant reality. This indicates the ongoing importance of effective decision-making and the ability to translate intent into action in a military context.





Key Themes and Ideas Emerging from Participant Discussions

The overarching message is one of proactive engagement with future challenges, built upon a foundation of strong values, collaborative practices, and a willingness to adapt and innovate while retaining core strengths. In summarising the main themes, important ideas, and responses and reflections on discussions surrounding leadership, we are better positioned to tackle future challenges and drive operational and organisational effectiveness.

The Pivotal Role and Perils of Technology. A central theme was the recognition of technology's crucial role in future operations and challenges. However, this is tempered by a strong emphasis on the inherent risks of over-reliance and the critical need for contingency planning.

- **Key Idea:** Technology is essential, but organisations must develop a Plan B to revert to traditional methods when technology fails.
- **Key Concern:** Over-dependence on technology and global supply chains presents a significant vulnerability.
- **Actionable Insight:** Rigorous training without technology is deemed essential to ensure preparedness across all generations, particularly for digital natives.

The Importance of Narrative, Intent, and Collaboration. The conference highlighted the fundamental need for clear communication of purpose and intent. The power of narrative in shaping our understanding and motivation, and the necessity of collaborative approaches to address complex challenges, was discussed at length.

- **Key Idea:** Clarity of intent and a compelling narrative are crucial for operational success and for attracting future talent. Collaboration and coalition-building are essential for understanding shared problems and, more importantly, developing shared solutions.
- **Key Concern:** Within a fractured world the importance of owning the narrative and ensuring that it is communicated effectively is vital to minimising the impact of disinformation and division within already vulnerable societies.
- **Actionable Insight:** Individuals have a responsibility to actively understand their purpose within the organisation, and from this can derive the key messaging within and beyond the organisation.

The “Humble Hero” and Empowered Decision-Making. The concept of the “Humble Hero” (Blair Shepard) emerges as a significant ideal, emphasising a leadership approach that values expertise over hierarchy and encourages decisive action, even in the face of uncertainty.

- **Key Idea:** The “Humble Hero” embodies a leader who is competent and decisive but also humble enough to recognise the value of diverse perspectives and empower others.
- **Key Concern:** Leadership should focus on empowering the most qualified individuals to make decisions, fostering a team-oriented approach, however highly structured and governed settings make this harder to implement.
- **Actionable Insight:** Indecision is seen as the worst outcome, and leaders should make timely decisions based on all available information at a moment in time.

Innovation, Tradition, and Adaptability. The relationship between innovation and established practices is significant, leading to the argument that progress doesn't necessarily require abandoning traditions, and more significantly, core values. Adaptability is identified as a crucial trait for future leaders.

- **Key Idea:** Innovation can build upon existing strengths and traditions rather than necessitating radical change in identity.
- **Key Concern:** Strong core values and purpose are seen as essential for navigating the pathway of innovation, but the language of innovation often runs counter to deep-held values and tradition. Similarly, core values and tradition can be exclusionary and be held as barriers to an inclusive approach which strengthens innovation.
- **Actionable Insight:** The future leader is envisioned as part of an existing team, not separate to it, and, more radically, leadership can more often be described as a team not an individual behaviour.

Additional Concerns and Challenges. Inter-nation discussions highlighted several significant concerns and challenges facing their represented organisations.

- **Leadership and Knowledge:** The question of whether a leader needs to know everything was addressed, with the consensus being that empowerment and leveraging team expertise are more critical.
- **Resilience of Younger Generations:** While acknowledging the potential of younger generations, concerns were raised about their resilience in mission execution. Additionally a lack of a wider understanding about military life and standards was seen as a barrier to recruitment. Obstacles can be mitigated by providing clear purpose; the WHY is essential in all that we do.
- **Interoperability:** The need for effective interoperability training to enable seamless collaboration between specialists is crucial. There is a blunt difference between interoperability and multi-skilling, with the latter being viewed as a drive to do more with less.
- **Every Crisis as an Opportunity:** On the whole, a positive outlook is presented, recognising that challenges can also create avenues for progress. This must be championed.
- **Humility and Coalition Building:** These are identified as key attributes for effective engagement and problem-solving. This is dichotomous with reporting systems that reward individual. Rather than collective, effort.
- **Trust as Integral:** Trust is recognised as a fundamental element for effective teamwork and leadership. It is eroded by process and bureaucracy – micromanaging the pennies does not look after the pounds in this case.
- **Interconnectivity:** The interconnectedness of various factors and challenges is acknowledged. The interconnectedness of people is a strength – opportunities (including this conference) should be harnessed for greater good.
- **Environmental Responsibility:** A collective effort is needed to change cultural views on environmental factors. What will it take for us to act?
- **Mission Command as Quarterback:** The role of Mission Command is likened to that of a Quarterback, implying strategic oversight and empowering field units.
- **Blair's 6 Trends:** While acknowledged as frightening, the applicability of Blair's 6 Trends at levels below senior governmental leadership was questioned.

Conclusion

The inaugural RAF International Leadership Conference was a demonstrable call to action for ongoing collaboration. It is the antecedent to future opportunity that should be harnessed across nations and air forces.



Attending Nations

1	Australia
2	Belgium
3	Canada
4	Chile
5	Finland
6	Italy
7	Jordan
8	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
9	Kosovo
10	Malaysia
11	Netherlands
12	New Zealand

13	Norway
14	Oman
15	Poland
16	Qatar
17	Republic of North Macedonia
18	Singapore
19	Slovenia
20	Spain
21	Ukraine
22	United Kingdom
23	United States Of America



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