

Self-licking Ice Cream Cones

Huh? Yeah. Self-licking ice cream cones! Picture that for a moment. A self-licking ice cream cone is something that exists only for its own enjoyment and no one else's. So what good is it?

The Double Tongue Dictionary defines a self-licking ice cream cone as: n: a process, department, institution, or other thing that offers few benefits and exists primarily to justify or perpetuate its own existence. Sadly, there are a few in the U.S. Air Force.

Let's talk about a few processes that we deal with on a daily basis. The Enlisted Evaluation System is an outstanding process that allows us to communicate standards, provide feedback and accurately rate our subordinates' performance...to make them better Airmen. And we ruined it. How often do you sit in the club or in line at Subway and listen to friends complain about being wronged on their EPR and how they did not deserve the rating or promotion recommendation they received on their last report? Or about what a screw-up their troop is.

Too many supervisors fail to communicate the standards to their Airmen and more importantly, fail to hold their subordinates accountable to those standards. They don't want to be the bad guy.

You have to communicate with your Airmen. Have the tough conversations as well as the easy ones. Most Airmen do not need to agree with you; they want to understand why something "is." And Airmen, you have to communicate with your supervisors. Are you willing to ask questions when something isn't clear? Subordinates should not be surprised at what rating and promotion recommendation they are getting if supervisors do their job properly. Sounds easy, right? Three times in the last month I, at the Group level, have had to give Non-commissioned Officers and Senior Non-commissioned Officers tough feedback their squadron leadership should have given.

See why we recently revamped the Enlisted Evaluation System? Under the old system everyone received a "5." It became a self-licking ice cream cone. How the heck are we supposed to figure out who gets promoted? What good is the system that fails to make our Airmen better because we fail to give candid, accurate feedback?

How about physical training (PT)? What a great program -- on paper. Mission allowing, your commanders are encouraged to authorize up to 90 minutes of duty time, three to five times a week to perform PT, when you are required to perform a fitness assessment only once or twice a year. Furthermore, commanders provide you with trained, motivated physical training leaders and encourage group activities from time to time. The PT program was never designed to simply help you pass the assessment, but to encourage a healthy lifestyle that guarantees your success and longevity.

I have seen wing commanders preach the glory of PT -- health, camaraderie, teamwork, increased morale -- as they should. We're warriors. However, the wing commander's enthusiasm isn't always appreciated in the trenches. Some of us are just plain lazy and don't like having to perform PT three or four times a week. When we (supervisors) fail to address these problems and hold our Airmen accountable, we turn the program into a self-licking ice cream cone.

Both the EPR and the PT processes were designed to make us intelligent, fit warriors, and to clearly separate the best from those that need some work. We all have a responsibility to establish and communicate standards. When our troops meet and exceed those standards, we should give them the Scooby snacks that will sustain that performance or make it better. The unenviable part is holding troops accountable for poor performance and communicating what it takes to bolster that performance -- instead of just whining about it at the club.

Do you have the guts to?