NPS-AM-26-021

ACQUISITION RESEARCH PROGRAM
SPONSORED REPORT SERIES

Contrasting Acquisition Mindsets: A Comparative Analysis Between Industry and Air Force Senior Procurement Leaders

December 2025

1st Lt. Francesca J. Porambo, USAF

Thesis Advisors: Lt Col Jamie Porchia, Assistant Professor
Dr. Paul Lester, Associate Professor

Department of Defense Management

Naval Postgraduate School

Prepared for the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943

ACQUISITION RESEARCH PROGRAM
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE MANAGEMENT
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

The research presented in this report was supported by the Acquisition Research Program of the Department of Defense Management at the Naval Postgraduate School.
To request defense acquisition research, to become a research sponsor, or to print additional copies of reports, please contact the Acquisition Research Program (ARP) via email, arp@nps.edu or at 831-656-3793.

Acquisition Research Program
Department of defense management
Naval Postgraduate School

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to apply a qualitative research approach to explore how differing mindsets between U.S. Air Force (USAF) procurement leaders and private industry executives influence acquisition decisions and training effectiveness in government contracting. This study addresses two research questions: (1) How do the mindsets of senior leaders involved in the Air Force procurement process compare to those of senior executives involved in the procurement process? and (2) What factors influence the development of their mindsets? This research hypothesizes that the USAF's compliance-driven, risk-averse culture contrasts with private industry's adaptive and innovation-oriented approach, shaping both acquisition outcomes and workforce development. The study evaluates Air Force contracting training structures, specifically the USAF Career Field Education and Training Plan (CFETP) and assesses their alignment with industry best practices. Through interviews with government and private industry participants, this study gathers process-based feedback to identify gaps, improvement opportunities, and areas where private-sector procurement techniques can be better integrated. The findings reveal that organizational culture, leadership philosophy, and structural incentives strongly influence mindset development, offering pathways to enhance innovation, efficiency, and agility in Department of Defense (DoD) acquisition and USAF contracting career development.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

1st Lt Francesca Porambo is an Air Force Contracting Officer. She commissioned through the United States Air Force, where she received a Bachelor of Science in Business Management. After graduating from the Naval Postgraduate School, she will be reporting to the 338th Enterprise Sourcing Squadron at Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph. She married her husband Miguel in January 2025, whom she met at the United States Air Force Academy as they were both on the Track and Field team. Miguel also serves in the Air Force as a Remotely Piloted Aircraft Officer. Lt Porambo is a health-focused enthusiast who not only is an avid chef and dinner party entertainer, but also competes in HYROX competitions and practices in health-conscious habits.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my tenacious thesis advisors, Lt Col Jamie Porchia and Dr. Paul Lester, for their dedication and professional guidance during this entire process.

Secondly, I would like to thank the participants in my research for their candor and shared insights aimed at solving my problem statement. I appreciate the level of mentorship and genuine advice imparted to me as I continue my journey as an Air Force Contracting Officer.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Miguel, and my family for their unwavering support during my entire master's degree program. I would not be where I am today without your love, guidance, and encouragement. You have always pushed me to be the best version of myself, and for that I thank you.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

NPS-AM-26-021

ACQUISITION RESEARCH PROGRAM
SPONSORED REPORT SERIES

Contrasting Acquisition Mindsets: A Comparative Analysis Between Industry and Air Force Senior Procurement Leaders

December 2025

1st Lt. Francesca J. Porambo, USAF

Thesis Advisors: Lt Col Jamie Porchia, Assistant Professor
Dr. Paul Lester, Associate Professor

Department of Defense Management

Naval Postgraduate School

Prepared for the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

LIST OF TABLES

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AF	Air Force
CFETP	Career Field Education and Training Plan
CGO	Company Grade Officer
CUI	controlled unclassified information
DAFFARS	Department of Air Force Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement
DoD	Department of Defense
EO	Executive Order
FAR	Federal Acquisition Regulation
GAI	generative artificial intelligence
GPT	generative pre-trained transformer
GS	general schedule
GWC	Graduate Writing Center
IRB	Institutional Review Board
LLM	large language model
MVA	market value added
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
PII	personally identifiable information
RLHF	reinforcement learning with human feedback
ROA	return on assets
ROE	return on equity
SAF/AQ	Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition
SAF/AQC	Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, Contracting
SES	senior executive services

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

DISCLOSURES

My thesis advisors, Lt Col Jamie Porchia and Dr. Paul Lester, approved the use of ChatGPT-5 and NVivo throughout the entirety of this thesis. ChatGPT-5 was used in accordance with the Naval Postgraduate School's Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) guidance provided on the Graduate Writing Center (GWC) webpage. It was also used to assist in the initial coding of anonymized interview transcripts and to support thematic coding, organization, and pattern recognition during qualitative data analysis. NVivo was then employed to refine and structure the coded data into higher-level themes aligned with the research questions. All AI-assisted outputs were independently reviewed, and determinations of their accuracy and relevance were made by the author and co-advisors.

This thesis was reviewed by the Naval Postgraduate School Institutional Review Board (IRB), which oversees all research involving human subjects at NPS. The IRB determined that this study does not constitute human subjects research and therefore does not require further oversight (IRB Determination Number: NPS.2025.0179-DD-N).

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This thesis analyzes how the mindsets of senior Air Force procurement leaders differ from those of private industry executives and how these differences shape acquisition outcomes and workforce development. The findings show that Air Force leaders operate within institutional structures that emphasize compliance, documentation, and risk aversion, while private-industry executives work in environments that reward innovation, adaptability, and continuous learning. These contrasting environments significantly influence procurement agility and leaders' ability to drive improvement.

Interview data from 18 senior leaders reveal that many Air Force personnel are intrinsically motivated to innovate, but their efforts are constrained by bureaucratic processes and cultural norms. Private-sector participants consistently emphasized agility, iterative learning, and people-centered leadership, reflecting environments designed to support experimentation and continuous improvement.

The study concludes that improving Air Force procurement requires shifting leadership mindsets, not just updating policy. Recommended actions include strengthening adaptive leadership development, aligning incentives to reward initiative and experimentation, and reducing unnecessary procedural friction while maintaining essential compliance. These changes would help cultivate a culture that supports responsible risk-taking and better meets modern defense challenges.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

I. INTRODUCTION

The Department of Defense (DoD) acquisition process is influenced by a culture that often prioritizes risk aversion and bureaucratic procedures, which can impact decision-making efficiency. Historically, military senior leadership has tended to adopt a more conservative approach, while private industry executives often emphasize dynamic and innovation-driven strategies (Heubeck, 2022, p. 1). General Mark Milley, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said it best in 2017: the DoD is "overly centralized, overly bureaucratic, and overly risk averse, which is the opposite of what we're going to need" (Schultz, 2020, para. 3). This thesis explores how these differing mindsets shape acquisition decision-making within the Air Force procurement community. The research aims to uncover the factors that influence these perspectives and provide recommendations on how industry approaches could be integrated into the government. The findings from the interviews provide insights into potential areas for improvement and whether adjustments to these mindsets could lead to a more agile, learning-oriented environment within the Air Force procurement domain.

A. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The DoD acquisition process values a conservative approach that tends to move more slowly than today's environment demands, which can unintentionally constrain innovation, reduce opportunities for learning, and reduce the Department's capacity to adapt effectively to emerging technologies and shifting mission demands (Drew et al., 2024, p. 1). In contrast, private industry is more likely to embrace flexible, risk-tolerant approaches that prioritize agility, innovation, and efficiency. Today's acquisition environment demands these very qualities: agility, innovation, and efficiency, which are often stifled within the DoD due to entrenched cultural and procedural constraints (Wong et al., 2022, p.26). This misalignment in mindset between DoD acquisition leaders and private industry executives has resulted in inefficiencies in procurement outcomes and limited the effectiveness of government procurement training structures such as the Contracting Career Field Education and Training Plan (CFETP). These contrasting

perspectives directly influence acquisition decision-making and the agility of organizational responses within the Air Force procurement enterprise.

This thesis examines the cultural and organizational differences between senior Air Force leaders involved in the procurement process and private industry executives, exploring how their mindsets impact both strategic decisions and training effectiveness. The goal is to identify how the DoD could benefit from adopting more entrepreneurial, risk-tolerant, and industry-informed approaches to streamline acquisition processes, foster innovation, and enhance the development of procurement professionals. Agile and innovative approaches are supported by FAR 1.102-2 (c)(2), which states that military procurement "must shift its focus from 'risk avoidance' to one of 'risk management.'" The cost to the taxpayer of attempting to eliminate all risk is prohibitive. According to the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), the Executive Branch will accept and manage the risk associated with empowering local procurement officials to take independent action based on their professional judgment.

B. PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how differing mindsets between senior Air Force procurement leaders and private industry executives influence acquisition decisions and training effectiveness in Air Force procurement. This research focuses on evaluating current Air Force procurement training structures, specifically the CFETP and assessing their alignment with industry best practices. Through interviews with participants from the office of the secretary of the Air Force for acquisition (SAF/AQ), senior Air Force procurement leaders, relevant government contractors, and private industry, the study gathers process-based feedback to identify gaps, improvement opportunities, and areas where industry-proven approaches can be better integrated within the DoD. The goal is to conduct a comparative analysis that enhances both the efficiency and agility of DoD acquisition processes and the effectiveness of career development pathways within the Air Force procurement community. The outputs of the comparison analysis show us what is different but that does not mean that alone enhances the efficiency and agility of the DoD acquisition process.

C. RESEARCH QUESTION

1. Primary

How do the mindsets of senior leaders involved in the Air Force procurement process compare to those of senior executives involved in the procurement process?

2. Secondary

What factors influence the development of their mindsets?

D. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative methodology, employing a comparative analysis framework to assess how leadership mindsets influence acquisition outcomes and training in government procurement. The primary method of data collection is semi-structured interviews with senior Air Force leaders involved in the procurement process and private industry executives. Additionally, a document review of the Air Force Contracting Flight Plan and the CFETP is conducted to understand how their stated objectives and training requirements shape the mindset of senior leaders.

Analysis focuses on identifying thematic trends that highlight mindset-based similarities and differences between the government and private sectors, as well as potential areas for cross-sector improvement. The study is limited to participants who are available and willing to participate during the research timeframe. In order to analyze the qualitative interview data, a combination of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) software and qualitative data analysis software (NVivo), is used. Further details regarding coding methods are provided in Chapter III: Methodology.

E. BENEFITS OF RESEARCH

Understanding the contrasting mindsets between DoD procurement leaders and private industry executives may help identify opportunities to improve Air Force procurement training and strategy. This research supports efforts to modernize acquisition by integrating private sector agility, fostering a culture of innovation, and improving the long-term effectiveness of the Air Force procurement career field. A key benefit of this research lies in its recommended updates to the current CFETP structure, informed by insights gathered through interviews. The results of this thesis may inform

policy adjustments and leadership development practices that support greater mission success through improved acquisition outcomes.

F. ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS

This is a five-part thesis that captures how differences in leadership mindsets between senior Air Force procurement leaders and private industry executives affect acquisition outcomes. Chapter I introduces the research topic, problem statement, purpose of the study, methodology, and research questions. Chapter II presents a literature review on mindset formation, acquisition decision-making, and training strategies in both the Air Force and the private sector. Chapter III details the methodology and data sources used for the research. Chapter IV provides a thematic analysis of interview data from Air Force and industry participants. Chapter V summarizes the findings, offers recommendations, and suggests areas for future research.

G. SUMMARY

The introduction chapter provides the foundation for this thesis by outlining the research focus and framing the study's objectives. It sets the context for the investigation and prepares the groundwork for the subsequent literature review, which establishes the scholarly background guiding the data collection, analysis, and development of recommendations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a literature review on mindset formation, acquisition decision-making, and training structures in both the Air Force and the private sector, establishing theoretical frameworks that explain how institutional constraints and learning-oriented cultures shape procurement outcomes. This literature review supports the study's aim to explore how differing leadership mindsets influence procurement decisions and help identify what cross-sector lessons learned could be implemented to improve Air Force procurement agility and innovation.

A. DEFINING MINDSET

Understanding the concept of mindset is fundamental to analyzing how leadership behaviors and decision-making patterns differ between the DoD and private sector organizations. The literature reveals distinct cognitive and behavioral frameworks that characterize leadership approaches across these two sectors.

Dweck (2017) provides the foundational framework for understanding mindset by distinguishing between a fixed mindset, in which individuals believe that intelligence and abilities are static, and a growth mindset, in which individuals believe that capabilities can be developed through effort, strategy, and learning. According to Dweck, "believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the fixed mindset—creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over" whereas a growth mindset "is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others" (Dweck, 2017, p. 6). This distinction parallels the bureaucratic versus agile leadership divide observed in organizations, where fixed mindsets reinforce rule-following and compliance, while growth mindsets encourage adaptability and innovation.

Maidique (2018) establishes that leadership mindset is not a singular construct but rather a complex portfolio of cognitive orientations. As he explains, "leaders rarely possess a single mindset. Instead, they have a portfolio of mindsets... which influences a leader's decisions and behaviors" (Maidique, 2018, p. 76). Throughout his framework, Maidique (2018) identifies four primary leadership mindset categories: Chameleon, Dynamo, Builder, and Transcender. The Chameleon and Dynamo mindsets align more

closely with traditional bureaucratic approaches, emphasizing adaptation to existing structures and high-energy execution within established parameters. In contrast, Maidique (2018) describes the Builder and Transcender mindsets as more innovative orientations that focus on creating new frameworks and transcending conventional boundaries. Collectively, his discussion supports the idea of a global mindset, where leaders demonstrate openness to new perspectives and a willingness to challenge established norms. This integration of frameworks, as Maidique (2018) highlights, emphasizes the importance of creating innovative pathways, an essential quality for organizations operating in agile environments (Maidique, 2018).

Denning (2019) extends this analysis by connecting bureaucratic organizations to fixed mindsets, emphasizing rules, roles, and shareholder returns, while agile organizations embrace growth-oriented principles focused on collaboration and continuous innovation. Nash (1997) further supports this contrast by demonstrating how the federal procurement environment fosters a compliance-first orientation that is consistent with fixed-mindset thinking. Collectively, these works establish mindset as a critical construct for examining how institutional environments shape leadership behaviors in both the DoD and private industry.

The distinction between bureaucratic and agile mindsets becomes particularly relevant when examining organizational decision-making processes. Denning (2019) provides a clear delineation of these contrasting approaches, explaining that "managers in traditionally run organizations are often said to have a bureaucratic mindset when they are primarily preoccupied with making money for the company and its shareholders, when they are organizing work according to rules, roles and criteria" (p. 2). This bureaucratic orientation stands in stark contrast to the agile mindset, which is 'preoccupied—and sometimes obsessed—with innovating and delivering steadily more customer value.'"

The agile mindset framework outlined by Denning (2019) emphasizes continuous adaptation, customer focus, and collaborative approaches to problem-solving. These characteristics directly contrast with the risk-averse behaviors commonly observed in

hierarchical institutions like the DoD, where decision-making processes are often constrained by regulatory compliance and standardized procedures.

Nash (1997) reinforces this understanding by highlighting the legalistic and compliance-first mindset prevalent in federal procurement environments. This perspective demonstrates how government legal constraints contribute to the development of fixed, rules-driven cognitive orientations among Air Force procurement leaders, further distinguishing their approach from the more flexible, outcome-oriented mindsets typically found in the private sector.

Research also shows that organizations often reflect the personal values of their senior leaders, which reinforces the importance of mindset shaping in procurement outcomes. For example, Selznick (1957) argued that organizations are not simply neutral but are "infused with value" when their leaders embed their own priorities and mindset into institutional practices (p. 1). Leaders do more than manage policies and practices, they imprint their vision and personality within the fabric of the organization like a "vehicle for embodying values" (Selznick, 1957, p. 17), directly shaping the decision-making culture. This supports the argument that the risk-averse orientation of DoD procurement structures is not solely institutional, but that senior leader input and oversight are important for shaping the level of risk-aversion within an organization.

B. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The theoretical foundation for understanding mindset differences between Air Force and private sector procurement practices rests on two contrasting organizational theories: Institutional Theory and Learning Organization Theory. These frameworks provide complementary lenses for analyzing how organizational structures and cultures shape leadership decision-making in procurement contexts.

1. Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory is a way to view how norms, rules, and organizational culture within the DoD tend to constrain Air Force leaders in their decision-making and limit their ability to enact change within established parameters. Meyer and Rowan (1977) provide the foundational understanding of how institutional environments shape

organizational behavior. They argue that "by designing a formal structure that adheres to the prescriptions of myths in the institutional environment, an organization demonstrates that it is acting on collectively valued purposes" (p. 349). This concept is particularly relevant to DoD structures, which often prioritize legitimacy and regulatory compliance over operational efficiency (Birken et al., 2017, p. 5).

Building on this foundation, Bhasin (2017) offers a modern application of institutional theory, explaining that "socially constructed belief and rule systems exercise enormous control over organizations—both how they are structured and how they carry out their work" (p. 1). This perspective illuminates how institutional isomorphism operates through coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures within military organizations, creating standardized approaches to procurement that resist innovation and change.

Bhasin (2017) continues to explain that institutional isomorphism is when organizations end up looking and acting the same because they face the same outside pressures and constraints. Instead of shaping their structure mainly for efficiency in the marketplace, organizations now follow rules set by the state and professional groups. As new ideas or innovations spread, they eventually get adopted more for legitimacy than for actually improving performance. This process forces organizations in the same environment to become similar so they can compete not just for resources and customers, but also for political power, social approval, and institutional legitimacy (Bhasin, 2017).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe three main ways institutional isomorphism happens in organizations. First, coercive isomorphism occurs when outside forces, like government policies, contract laws, financial reporting rules, or cultural expectations, pressure organizations to change to conform. Large organizations can also push their subsidiaries to adopt similar practices. Second, mimetic processes happen when uncertainty in an industry causes organizations to copy each other's strategies, structures, or behaviors, which can spread through employees moving between jobs or through consulting firms sharing models. Third, normative pressures come from professional norms shaped by formal and informal education, which lead people trained in the same way to approach problems similarly. These three mechanisms together make

organizations more alike, helping them interact smoothly and gain legitimacy within their field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

2. Learning Organization Theory

Learning Organization Theory provides a contrasting perspective to institutional rigidity by emphasizing how organizations can adapt through continuous learning and iterative feedback loops. Garvin (1993) defines this concept clearly: "A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights" (p. 78). The idea of taking new information and inputs to constantly improve an organization and the people within it, is at the core of this theory.

Kouzes and Posner (2019) extend this framework by empirically demonstrating that managers with a growth mindset display leadership behavior more frequently than those with a fixed mindset. Their research shows that growth-oriented managers are more likely to engage in collaboration, coaching, feedback, and risk-taking behaviors, all of which align with the characteristics of learning organizations. They emphasize that "improving leadership competencies is more likely to occur when managers hold a growth mindset that abilities can be developed through effort as compared to fixed mindset managers who believe that abilities are inherent and unchangeable" (Kouzes & Posner, 2019, p. 830). These findings illustrate how the mindset of individual leaders influences organizational adaptability and innovation potential. By integrating this perspective with Garvin's framework, it becomes clear that growth mindset leaders not only benefit their organizations by fostering adaptability but also model the very behaviors required for cultivating a learning organization culture.

The practical value of learning-oriented approaches is supported by empirical evidence. Ellinger et al. (2002) conducted one of the first studies to link learning organizations to objective financial performance through managerial surveys. By comparing survey data with financial metrics such as return on equity (ROE), return on assets (ROA), and market value added (MVA), Ellinger et al. (2002) found that "results suggest a positive association between the learning organization concept and firms' financial performance" (p. 5). As a result, firms with stronger learning orientations were

more financially successful, validating the claim that investments in organizational learning are linked to financial profitability. This research provides measurable data that supports learning-oriented approaches and demonstrates how private sector organizations benefit from adopting adaptive, knowledge-centered operational frameworks.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives reveals a fundamental tension between institutional stability and organizational adaptability. This approach directly contrasts with the institutional rigidity commonly observed in military procurement environments. While DoD procurement operates within institutional constraints that prioritize compliance and risk mitigation, private sector organizations often embrace learning-oriented cultures that drive innovation and efficiency improvements.

C. POLICY OVERVIEW

The policy framework governing Air Force procurement, which is separate from the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and the Department of the Air Force Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DAFFARS), demonstrates how institutional requirements shape leadership mindsets and decision-making processes. Air Force procurement guiding documents, such as the Air Force (AF) CFETP, currently serve as the overarching framework within DoD procurement. Current local policy documents acknowledge the need to be mission focused but within the bounds of regulatory compliance and standardization expectations which may inadvertently direct its procurement professionals to err on the side of caution when obligating taxpayer dollars in a heavily bureaucratic organization

The AF CFETP exemplifies this institutional approach. The AF CFETP is a tool that governs the training process for contracting personnel. This governing training plan outlines the basic definitions, roles and responsibilities, and organizational goals for its procurement professionals. According to SAF/AQC (2023), the fundamental requirement is to “ensure contracting processes are responsive to mission needs and requirements and ensure compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements” (p. 20). This policy statement highlights the dual tension between operational responsiveness and regulatory compliance, with compliance taking the focus in the training framework.

By "[ensuring] compliance with DoD policy/requirements" (Trevino, 2024, p.6), procurement officers are challenged with finding the appropriate balance of compliance with innovation, given the high level of constraints on the acquisition process. The CFETP's guiding principles and predetermined career advancement criteria emphasize accomplishing policy adherence and mission support but there is limited discussion on how the mindset of procurement professionals is developed through these processes. Interestingly, recent Executive Order (EO) 14265, "Modernizing Defense Acquisitions and Spurring Innovation in the Defense Industrial Base," acknowledges the need for organizational change while simultaneously revealing institutional resistance to such transformation. The DoD acquisition process requires modernization in order to keep pace with emerging threats and innovative technology, "rather than being bogged down with bureaucratic procedures" (The White House, 2025a, p.1). The Secretary of Defense is responsible for developing and implementing reforms to said acquisition processes, specifically prioritizing commercial solutions through incentivizing innovation (The White House, 2025, p. 1). This action underscores the internal awareness regarding overcoming the longstanding bureaucratic procedures and cultural norms that persist within DoD acquisitions. Trevino (2024) captured this tension in the Contracting Flight Plan with the statement: "Change is Hard, Losing is Unacceptable." This phrase demonstrates both the recognized need for increased agility and the acknowledgment of institutional barriers to implementing necessary changes. Change is hard, but the resistance against it in the form of institutional fear of failure may also be unacceptable in the face of adversaries.

In support of the claims of fear of failure, the RAND study *Improving Defense Acquisition: Insights from Three Decades of RAND Research* (Wong et al., 2022) demonstrates that institutional risk aversion is not a temporary challenge but a deeply entrenched feature of governmental procurement operations. RAND observes that "since its inception, DoD's acquisition system has been subjected to a constant stream of reform initiatives, many of which harken to earlier efforts whose effects may not have been fully assessed" (Wong et al., 2022, p. 44). This long-term pattern reveals a system that has relied on repeated reform cycles as a mechanism to avoid uncertainty and failure, rather than tolerating risk and learning from it. The result is a procurement culture that awards

rigid compliance over flexibility and innovation. In this way, the fear of failure has become embedded in the very fabric of defense acquisition, reinforced by decades of compliance-driven behavior.

The contrast between aspirational language in policy documents and the inherently governmental procedures outlined in training requirements highlights the challenge of implementing meaningful reform within existing institutional frameworks. This compliance bias highlights the importance of balancing adherence to the law, with the exercise of flexibility when statutes or regulations allow. FAR 1.102(d) reinforces this principle by affirming that "in exercising initiative, Government members of the Acquisition Team may assume if a specific strategy, practice, policy or procedure is in the best interests of the Government and is not addressed in the FAR, nor prohibited by law (statute or case law), Executive order or other regulation, that the strategy, practice, policy or procedure is a permissible exercise of authority" (FAR, 2025, p. 1). Similarly, FAR 1.602-2, Responsibilities of Contracting Officers, directs procurement professionals to apply "wide latitude to exercise business judgement," which makes it clear that compliance and innovation—operating within the gray—are not mutually exclusive (FAR, 2025, p. 1).

The repercussions of this tension are evident in recent major weapons systems acquisitions such as hypersonic weapons development. Lopez (2020) emphasizes the need to be "less risk-averse…It also means we're not afraid to take risks, or we're not afraid to fail," (para. 2) underscoring how cultural hesitation within the DoD slows innovation. His warning reflects a broader reality: risk aversion does not simply delay progress, it creates conditions where opportunities for rapid learning and adaptation are lost, leaving programs vulnerable to stagnation. While policymakers recognize the need for increased agility and innovation, the fundamental training and evaluation systems, will also need to keep pace to avoid creating a gap between strategic intent and operational execution.

D. PAST REVIEW

Previous research has examined various aspects of cultural and mindset differences between the DoD and private sector organizations, though a comprehensive

comparative analysis specifically focused on procurement leadership mindsets remains limited. The existing literature provides important context for understanding the historical development of these differences and their impact on acquisition outcomes.

1. Department of Defense versus Private Sector

Historical analyses reveal long-standing challenges in defense procurement that stem from fundamental structural differences between the government and commercial sectors. Templin (1994) identified political influences as a primary source of inefficiency, noting that "Congressional authorization of programs and appropriation of funding generate considerable political overtones ... major causes of program instability, cost growth, and overregulation" (p. 118). This political dimension creates procurement environments fundamentally different from commercial markets, where efficiency and innovation typically drive decision-making (Bogetoft et al., 2024, p. 190).

The quality of acquisition training has been a persistent concern across both sectors. Nash (1997) observed that "most government and industry managers are disappointed with the quality of government acquisition training. Indeed, government managers made frequent references to the heavy emphasis on communicating rules and regulations rather than building business management and judgmental skills" (p. 3). This finding directly relates to mindset formation, as the emphasis on rule compliance over judgment development may contribute to the formation of more rigid cognitive orientations among procurement professionals.

2. Leadership Mindset Research

Research on leadership development reveals significant differences in how organizations approach mindset formation and adaptive capacity building. Toegel and Barsoux (2012) emphasize the intentional nature of effective leadership development, noting that "great leaders make it look easy. But in truth, the majority of effective leaders that we have observed... have worked hard on themselves" (p. 1). This perspective highlights the private sector's emphasis on continuous self-development and adaptive leadership capabilities.

Pfeffer (2015) contributes additional insights into how organizational cultures shape leadership characteristics, particularly in contrasting collaborative versus hierarchical approaches to decision-making. These cultural differences have direct implications for procurement practices, as collaborative environments tend to foster more innovative and flexible approaches to problem-solving, while hierarchical structures often prioritize standardization and risk mitigation.

The literature demonstrates that while individual components of procurement performance have been studied extensively, a comprehensive analysis comparing leadership mindsets and their impact on acquisition outcomes across sectors remains underdeveloped. This gap represents a significant opportunity for contributing new insights into both academic literature and practical procurement management.

E. THIS RESEARCH'S CONTRIBUTION TO LITERATURE

The existing literature reveals several important gaps in understanding how leadership mindsets influence procurement outcomes, particularly in comparative analysis between the DoD and private sector organizations. While individual aspects of procurement, leadership, and organizational behavior have been studied extensively, a comprehensive examination of how mindset formation impacts acquisition decision-making remains underdeveloped.

Dweck's (2017) foundational theory demonstrates why such a comparative analysis is critical. If leaders' core beliefs about intelligence and capability influence how they approach learning and problem-solving, then procurement training that reinforces fixed mindsets is likely to hinder adaptability. Kouzes and Posner (2019) provide empirical evidence to this effect, showing that growth-oriented managers engage in more effective leadership behaviors independent of demographic or organizational factors. Importantly, they also note that growth mindsets can be cultivated through deliberate training interventions, suggesting practical pathways for AF procurement reform. Together, these works underscore the thesis argument that Air Force procurement leaders must have a growth-oriented leadership models if they are to achieve greater agility and innovation in acquisition practices and leadership.

Recent research confirms the persistence of these knowledge gaps. A 2024 study on procurement training impact noted that "despite the increasing recognition of the pivotal role played by procurement processes in organizational success, a substantial gap persists in the literature regarding the impact of procurement training on procurement process efficiency" (Dadzie et al., 2024, p. 25). This observation directly supports the need for research examining how procurement outcomes influence the mindsets of procurement professionals.

Historical analysis by the Acquisition 2005 Task Force (2000) demonstrates that while acquisition workforce challenges have been recognized for decades, there has been limited comparative analysis with industry practices. Their acquisition workforce study revealed that acquisition professionals and a range of stakeholders were aware of systemic problems, yet the study failed to provide comprehensive frameworks for understanding how different organizational cultures and training approaches contribute to varying procurement outcomes.

The literature gap is particularly pronounced in three key areas: first, mindset formation processes within DoD procurement environments remain understudied; second, institutional efforts to influence mindset development are not well connected to specific procurement training systems; third, few studies, including Ellinger et al. (2002), have applied Learning Organization Theory directly to DoD procurement environments as a framework for understanding organizational adaptation potential.

This research addresses these gaps by providing a systematic comparative analysis of how different institutional environments shape leadership mindsets and subsequent procurement decision-making patterns. By examining both Air Force and private sector leaders within similar procurement contexts, this study contributes new insights into how cognitive and cultural differences translate into measurable acquisition outcomes.

F. SUMMARY

The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates the significant influence of mindset, institutional culture, and leadership development systems on acquisition strategy

outcomes. The theoretical foundation established through Institutional Theory and Learning Organization Theory provides complementary frameworks for understanding how different organizational environments shape leadership approaches to procurement decision-making.

By comparing Air Force and private sector senior leaders involved in the procurement process within similar environments, this research addresses a critical knowledge gap and provides a foundation for understanding how institutional reforms might improve Air Force procurement agility and innovation. The chapter sets the groundwork for the interview-based analysis that follows, which tests these theoretical frameworks against real-world procurement experiences and leadership decision-making patterns.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. DATA SOURCE AND SAMPLING

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify participants who could provide in-depth insights into procurement decision-making and leadership mindsets in both the Air Force and private industry. As defined by EBSCO, purposive sampling is a "non-probability sampling technique where researchers intentionally select participants based on specific characteristics relevant to their study" (Bullard, 2024, p.1). This method aligns with qualitative inquiry by emphasizing depth of understanding rather than statistical representation, allowing for exploration of shared and divergent experiences.

For the purpose of this study, purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that participants had relevant procurement experience and could speak meaningfully to the pre-identified and approved research questions. In the Air Force, participants were senior uniformed and civilian Air Force procurement leaders at or above the O4-O6 or GS-14/ 15 levels and had significant operational responsibility for procurement decisions and oversight of organizational training initiatives. In the private sector, participants included Presidents, Founders, Heads of Procurement, Division Chiefs, and Chief Executive Officers, ensuring that respondents held positions of authority and influence in organizational decision-making. This targeted approach allowed the research to focus on individuals with the most direct experience and perspective relevant to the study objectives, providing rich, contextually grounded data on leadership mindset differences between sectors. Sample demographics are outlined within Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3.

Table 1. Interview Participant Demographics Overview

Total Interview Participant Demographics				
Category	Total Participants	Male	Female	Experience (# of years)
Air Force Procurement	9	8	1	19
Private Industry	9	8	1	26
Total	18	16	2	45

Table 2. Air Force and Department of Defense Participant Demographics

Air Force / DoD Participants			
Name	Rank	Gender	Experience
Participant 1	0-4	M	12
Participant 2	NH-04 (GS-14)	M	18
Participant 3	NH-04 (GS-14)	F	16
Participant 4	0-5	M	20
Participant 5	0-7	M	30
Participant 6	SES	M	25
Participant 7	NH-04 (GS-14)	M	15
Participant 8	NH-04 (GS-14)	M	25
Participant 9	SES	M	11

Table 3. Private Industry Participant Demographics

Private Industry Participants			
Name	Title	Gender	Experience
Participant 10	Senior Director	M	30
Participant 11	Development Consultant	M	27
Participant 12	Vice President	M	20
Participant 13	Co-Founder & CEO	M	15
Participant 14	Director	M	33
Participant 15	Head of Procurement	M	22
Participant 16	Executive Partner	F	32
Participant 17	Technology Sourcing Lead	M	20
Participant 18	President	M	34

B. DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. A total of 18 interviews were completed, with each session lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview questions were organized into nine sections, beginning with participants' background and career experience and progressing through training, education, procurement decision-making, risk, innovation, flexibility, cultural influences, sector comparisons, long-term trends, recommendations for bridging gaps in procurement practices, and additional insights. These sections were intentionally designed to align with the study's two research questions, examining (1) how the mindsets of senior leaders involved in the Air Force procurement process compare to those of senior executives in the private sector, and (2) what factors influence the

development of those mindsets. The questions were designed to elicit both descriptive and reflective responses, allowing participants to share their personal experiences, perspectives on leadership development, and insights into organizational culture. Follow-up prompts were used to clarify responses and explore specific examples in depth, providing a comprehensive understanding of how mindsets influence procurement approaches in both sectors.

All interviews were conducted in accordance with this study's approved IRB protocol (NPS.2025.0179-DD-N) and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. Each session was recorded using Microsoft Teams' integrated recording feature and automatically transcribed for accuracy and completeness. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to facilitate systematic data management, sorting, and thematic coding. This approach enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns and key themes across participants' responses, providing a structured framework for comparing the perspectives of DoD and private sector leaders. Using NVivo allowed for meticulous organization of qualitative data, ensuring transparency, rigor, and reliability in the analysis process while supporting the study's focus on mindset-based differences in acquisition decision-making and training effectiveness.

C. INTERVIEWS

The interviews followed a semi-structured format to balance consistency across participants with flexibility to explore unique perspectives. Each interview began with general questions about participants' career trajectories and experiences in procurement, establishing context for subsequent discussions. Participants were then asked about formal and informal training, leadership development programs, and mentorship experiences, with emphasis on how these shaped their approaches to risk, innovation, and flexibility in procurement. Questions on procurement and acquisition decision-making explored approaches to balancing compliance, efficiency, and innovation. Later sections examined organizational culture, sector comparisons, trends, and recommendations for bridging gaps in mindset and practice. Not all interview questions were asked of every participant. The semi-structured format allowed for adaptive questioning based on each

participant's background, role relevance, and available time. This approach ensured that conversations remained focused, meaningful, and tailored to each individual's expertise while still maintaining alignment with the overall research framework. Confidentiality and ethical considerations were strictly observed, including informed consent, the option to skip questions, and secure storage of recordings and transcripts. This methodology ensured participants could speak candidly about experiences and perceptions that might otherwise be sensitive or organizationally constrained.

D. DATA CLEANING AND STORAGE

After each interview, the transcripts were cleaned (.docx files) by removing all personally identifiable information (PII) and controlled unclassified information (CUI), including names, units, and mission-specific references. Once fully anonymized, ChatGPT was used to assist with initial gerund-based coding to identify key actions and patterns within the data. Then the cleaned and coded transcripts were imported into NVivo for higher-level thematic organization and analysis. This process aligns with the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) guidance, which allows the ethical and documented use of AI tools for data analysis while ensuring no sensitive information is entered into the system (Office of the Provost and Chief Academic Officer, 2023, p.1).

E. MANUAL HAND CODING

Manual hand coding was conducted prior to AI-assisted analysis to ensure accuracy and contextual alignment of responses. Rather than uploading full transcripts into ChatGPT, each question-and-answer segment from all 18 interview transcripts was manually identified and extracted for thematic coding. This process ensured that the appropriate input was analyzed in accordance with the specific interview question being addressed. Each question was independently verified to confirm that the content corresponded accurately to the intended thematic domain before analysis. This manual process allowed for precise control over data integrity and ensured that themes were generated directly from the appropriate question context. Initial coding focused on capturing raw sentiment and recurrent language patterns before abstracting to higher-

order conceptual categories. This phase established the baseline thematic map used for subsequent AI validation and comparison.

F. CHATGPT (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE CODING)

As previously established, a combination of GAI, ChatGPT, and qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) were utilized to assist with interview transcript analysis and thematic coding. ChatGPT, a large language model (LLM) and GAI platform, was employed to facilitate both the analysis and streamlining of thematic coding through the use of gerunds. This step served to identify recurring linguistic patterns and generate strings of words and phrases for subsequent testing and validation within NVivo. This approach was applied to each interview question category aligned with the thesis's problem statement and research questions. According to OpenAI (2025), "ChatGPT is fine-tuned from GPT-3.5, a language model trained to produce text. ChatGPT was optimized for dialogue by using Reinforcement Learning with Human Feedback (RLHF) – a method that uses human demonstrations and preference comparisons to guide the model toward desired behavior" (para. 2). ChatGPT represents a unique model that integrates generative pre-trained transformers (GPT) with RLHF, allowing for efficient and effective data sorting, analysis, and thematic coding in an unbiased manner.

Following manual hand coding, ChatGPT was used to analyze excerpts from each question-and-answer segment. Transcripts were formatted to isolate participant responses by question, which were then input into ChatGPT for gerund code and thematic category analysis. ChatGPT was instructed to identify initial gerund-based codes and to cluster these into preliminary thematic categories for each interview question, for each participant. The model produced clusters of frequently co-occurring words and phrases that reflect patterns across responses.

G. THEMATIC CODING

The AI-generated outputs were not accepted at face value but were manually cross-verified to avoid overgeneralization and ensure contextual accuracy. Each AI-derived code was compared with participant transcripts to confirm that meaning and tone were preserved. Codes were drawn directly from participant language using an in vivo

coding approach, maintaining fidelity to the phrasing and sentiment expressed by interviewees. The validated strings of words and linguistic clusters produced by ChatGPT were then imported into NVivo, where they served as the foundation for subsequent text query searches, thematic node development, and pattern analysis.

To ensure methodological rigor and guard against model bias, thematic coding followed a transparent three-step process that culminated in the comparative analysis between Air Force and private industry sectors. First, manual in vivo/open coding established the initial thematic map by creating researcher-defined "buckets" for each sector by question, eliminating connective words and focusing on concept-bearing terms. Second, ChatGPT was used for ideation and repetitive parsing: the model identified gerund-based codes and proposed thematic categories and was explicitly prompted to output the strings of words and phrases associated with each theme (to be used later as NVivo text-search inputs). Third, these ChatGPT-generated strings were compiled into NVivo text searches, and NVivo frequency and matrix queries were run to validate the consistency and density of emergent themes at the section and question level; node frequency counts, text-query tallies, and, where applicable, charts were exported to document evidence. Manual comparison was used throughout to confirm or adjust ChatGPT's categories before acceptance, with any broad discrepancies among the three methods (manual coding, ChatGPT outputs, and NVivo results) noted for discussion in the study's limitations. This integrated, iterative approach combining manual insight, AI pattern recognition, and NVivo visualization provided the thematic coding that underpins the cross-sector comparative analysis.

H. PRELIMINARY DATA ANALYSIS

Preliminary data analysis began with systematic organization of interview logistics and participant characteristics. An Excel document was used to track the progress, scheduling, and completion of interviews, ensuring that all participants were accounted for and that data collection remained on schedule. Participants were initially categorized into two major groups: (1) AF and DoD and (2) Private Industry. This high-level categorization allowed for an immediate visual representation of the sample distribution and ensured balanced representation from both sectors. Within these two

major categories, further sub-categories were identified to capture the diversity of participant backgrounds and experiences. For the AF and DoD group, participants were classified as either active Air Force senior leaders (O5–O6 and above) or General Schedule (GS) equivalents. A separate sub-category included participants who had transitioned from military service into private industry, providing insight into individuals with experience in both environments. For the private sector group, participants were classified as Heads of Procurement, Division Chiefs, or Chief Executive Officers. These sub-categories facilitated nuanced comparison across sectors, highlighting differences in mindset and procurement approaches while also accounting for career trajectories that span multiple organizational contexts.

After organizing participants by category, preliminary pattern recognition began with cross-sector comparison of early indicators such as the frequency of risk-related language, references to innovation and flexibility, and mentions of organizational or cultural constraints. ChatGPT was first employed to assist in the initial stage of data analysis by identifying gerunds and generating thematic codes for each interview transcript. Each interview was systematically sorted and coded by question to ensure alignment with the thesis's problem statement, research questions, and interview guide. A series of AI prompts were employed to generate gerunds and thematic codes (Table 4). This approach enabled consistent identification of action-oriented responses and emerging behavioral themes. The gerund-coded data from all 18 interviews were consolidated into a master Excel document, where each response was categorized by both participant group and interview question. This comprehensive dataset provided a structured foundation for cross-comparison and pattern recognition.

Table 4. ChatGPT Prompts

ChatGPT Prompts	
1st prompt	"I am looking to analyze my transcripts from interviews of my qualitative data in order to draw conclusions and analyze the overall themes of my research and responses to my interview questions. I am looking to use 'gerunds' to systematically analyze the data and identify thematic categories of each interview organized by question. Educate me on this process and how would I go about doing this?"

2nd prompt	"I cleaned the transcript to remove all personally identifiable information (PII) and controlled unclassified information (CUI) prior to inputting data into ChatGPT. Please assist with gerund-based coding only; do not generate new interpretations."
3rd prompt	"I want to use gerunds to code the data. Can you give me examples of how to structure this process?"
4th prompt	"Can you assist me in sorting excerpts from interview transcripts into a table with three columns: Participant Quote, Initial Gerund Code (Gerund-Based Action), and Thematic Category?"
5th prompt	"Would it be best to have the theme be one of those three synthesis of themes in the table to aid in sorting, or is it okay to have multiple different themes?"
6th prompt	"Please analyze this transcript excerpt and identify all relevant participant quotes that demonstrate distinct actions or ideas, then categorize them into gerund codes and themes."
7th prompt	"Please perform the same gerund coding process for the next interview excerpt while keeping the table format consistent."
8th prompt	"Can you help ensure consistency across coded tables and check that each gerund code aligns logically with its thematic category before I export the data to NVivo for large-scale analysis?"

The finalized Excel document was then transferred into NVivo for larger-scale qualitative coding and thematic synthesis. Within NVivo, each transcript was re-examined and coded using both descriptive and analytical labels to deepen interpretation and confirm thematic consistency. Key themes surfaced across categories, including approaches to risk, innovation, flexibility, organizational culture, and effective training. These findings were considered preliminary until validated through comparative hypothesis testing and thematic triangulation across manual, AI, and NVivo analyses. The integration of ChatGPT-assisted gerund coding, question-based categorization, Excel organization, and NVivo analysis created a multi-layered framework for identifying patterns, contrasts, and connections between participants' experiences and perspectives. This preliminary analysis set the stage for the full thematic analysis presented in Chapter IV, establishing a clear roadmap for comparing leadership mindsets between the Air Force and private industry.

I. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Based on the study's research questions and theoretical framework, eight exploratory hypotheses were developed to guide qualitative analysis. Each hypothesis reflects a pattern expected to emerge from the comparative data between Air Force

contracting leaders and private industry executives. In keeping with the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, these hypotheses were not designed for statistical inference but rather for pattern validation through thematic comparison and qualitative evidence. Table 5, Table 6, and Table 7 present these hypotheses, their corresponding research questions, and the thematic domains through which they are tested. The null hypothesis posits that there are no meaningful distinctions between the two groups' leadership mindsets, suggesting that any observed differences are merely nuanced variations rather than substantive contrasts.

Table 5. Research Questions

RQ1	How do the mindsets of senior leaders involved in the Air Force procurement process compare to those of senior executives involved in the procurement process?
RQ2	What factors influence the development of their mindsets?

Table 6. Interview Questions

Section 1: Background and Experience	
S1Q1	Can you describe your career journey and what led you to your current role in procurement? Follow-up: What key projects or experiences have significancy shaped your approach to procurement and decision-making?
Section 2: Training, Education, and Development	
S2Q1	What formal education or training have you received that has influenced your approach to procurement?
S2Q2	What informal education, training, or programs have you participated in that have influenced your approach?
S2Q3	Can you describe any leadership development programs or mentorship experiences that have influenced your approach to procurement?
S2Q4	How much emphasis do you believe is placed on innovation, risk management, and flexibility in your training, and how has that impacted your approach to procurement?
Section 3: Procurement and Acquisition Decision-Making	
S3Q1	How would you describe your general approach to procurement decision-making within your organization?
S3Q2	How do you balance risk and innovation when making procurement decisions?
S3Q3	Can you share a moment in your career that significantly influenced your approach to procurement decisions?
Section 4: Risk, Innovation, and Flexibility	
S4Q1	How do you perceive the relationship between risk and innovation in procurement? Follow-up: Are there specific challenges you face in implementing innovative solutions or managing risk in procurement? How do these challenges differ between the public and private sectors?
S4Q2	Do you think more risk-tolerant decision-making could lead to faster, more innovative acquisitions? Why or why not?
S4Q3	How does your organization handle the challenges of adopting more innovative or agile approaches to procurement?
Section 5: Cultural Influence on Procurement Decision-Making	
S5Q1	How would you describe the culture of decision-making within your procurement leadership? Follow-up: How does this compare to what you know about procurement culture in the other sector (Air Force vs. Private Industry)?
S5Q2	How do external factors (such as global trends, cultural diversity, corporate social responsibility) influence procurement decision-making within your organization?
S5Q3	To what extent does your organization's culture emphasize risk tolerance, flexibility, and innovation in procurement?
Section 6: Public vs. Private Sector Comparisons	
S6Q1	How do you perceive the differences between procurement processes in the Air Force (or public sector) and private industry?
S6Q2	How do you balance bureaucracy and decision-making speed in procurement within your organization? Follow-up: What lessons could the private sector learn from government procurement processes, and vice versa?
Section 7: Long Term Trends and Industry Practices	

S7Q1	Are there any practices or strategies from the other sector (private or public) that you believe could benefit your organization's procurement process?
Section 8: Bridging the Gap and Future Recommendations	
S8Q1	What advice would you offer to procurement leaders in the government to help them embrace more innovative, risk-tolerant approaches?
S8Q2	What would be the main challenges in bridging the mindset gap between Air Force procurement and private industry?
S8Q3	How feasible do you think it is to adopt best practices from the other sector in your procurement process? Follow-up: What changes would need to be made to make this feasible?
Section 9: Additional Insights	
S9Q1	What has been the biggest change you've seen in procurement over the course of your career, and how did you adapt to it?
S9Q2	What is one thing about procurement that people outside your role might not understand but is critical to your work?
S9Q3	What do you consider the most important trait or skill for someone in a leadership position in procurement to have?

Table 7. Hypothesis Statements

Hypothesis	Statement	Linked Research Question	Linked Interview Questions	Thematic Domian(s)
H1	Air Force leaders' mindsets are shaped by structured mentorship and procedural training, while private executives' mindsets are shaped by experiential learning and diverse environments.	RQ2	S1Q1 S2Q3	Background and Experience; Training and Development
H2	Air Force leaders' training systems emphasize compliance and technical precision, while private sector leaders emphasize autonomy and innovation in professional development.	RQ2	S2Q1 S2Q2 S2Q4	Training, Education and Development
H3	Private industry executives will more frequently reference adaptability and innovation as leadership priorities, whereas Air Force leaders will emphasize standardization and stability.	RQ1	S3Q1 S3Q2 S3Q3	Procurement Decision-Making; Risk, Innovation and Flexibility
H4	Air Force contracting leaders will demonstrate a more risk-averse mindset,	RQ1	S4Q1 S4Q2 S4Q3	Procurement Decision-Making; Risk,

Hypothesis	Statement	Linked Research Question	Linked Interview Questions	Thematic Domian(s)
	emphasizing compliance and procedural correctness, while private industry executives will demonstrate greater risk tolerance and a results-oriented approach to decision-making.		S9Q3	Innovation and Flexibility
H5	Air Force leaders describe hierarchical, process-driven cultures while private industry leaders describe decentralized, empowerment-focused cultures.	RQ1	S5Q1 S5Q3	Leadership and Organizational Culture; Communication and Collaboration
H6	Air Force leaders frame mission orientation around compliance and stewardship of taxpayer funds, while private leaders frame it around customer satisfaction and competitive success.	RQ1	S6Q1 S6Q2 S9Q2	Communication and Collaboration
H7	Environmental and policy constraints are the dominant external factors shaping Air Force leaders' mindsets, while market competition and customer demand dominate in the private sector.	RQ2	S5Q2 S7Q1	Institutional Challenges and Constraints
H8	Air Force performance incentives emphasize compliance and process integrity, while private sector incentives emphasize innovation and measurable results.	RQ2	S8Q1 S8Q2 S8Q3 S9Q1	Motivation and Barriers to Change

To evaluate these exploratory hypotheses, NVivo outputs—specifically frequency counts—word co-occurrence matrices, and sentiment distributions, were analyzed to determine whether patterns in participant responses supported, partially supported, or contradicted each hypothesis. This approach allowed for systematic, data-driven validation of qualitative patterns while maintaining alignment with the study's theoretical

foundation and interpretive framework. Each hypothesis was further examined across its linked thematic domains using NVivo text-query frequency results as indicators of conceptual prominence.

The eight hypotheses presented in Table 7 can be conceptually mapped to the nine interview sections outlined in the data collection framework. Each section can therefore serve as a lens through which individual hypotheses are tested, ensuring consistency between the research questions, interview guide, and analytic structure. This organization preserves the exploratory focus of the study while allowing for deeper cross-sectional analysis between Air Force and private industry participants.

J. LIMITATIONS

Minor discrepancies emerged between manual, ChatGPT-assisted, and NVivo analyses, largely reflecting differences in how each method identified and weighted linguistic patterns. ChatGPT's reliance on term frequency occasionally led to context loss or overemphasis on common phrases, while NVivo's keyword-based approach limited semantic interpretation across varied expressions. As a researcher with Air Force contracting experience, the dual role of insider and analyst required ongoing reflexivity to minimize bias. Cross-checking themes across all three methods helped ensure interpretations remained grounded in participant language rather than researcher assumptions.

K. SUMMARY

Chapter III outlined the methodology employed to explore the differences in acquisition mindsets between senior Air Force procurement leaders and private industry executives. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that participants had sufficient experience and leadership responsibilities to provide meaningful insights. Data collection consisted of 18 semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Interview questions were designed to explore participants' career backgrounds, training experiences, decision-making approaches, risk tolerance, innovation practices, and cultural influences, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of leadership mindsets across sectors.

The preliminary data analysis involved organizing and categorizing interview participants to establish a structured framework for comparison. An Excel document was used to track interview progress, scheduling, and participant categories, dividing respondents into two primary groups: Air Force/DoD and Private Industry. Sub-categories within these groups, Air Force/GS-equivalent, military-turned-private industry, and private sector leaders, allowed for more nuanced insights into leadership trajectories and cross-sector experiences. NVivo was subsequently used for qualitative coding and thematic analysis, enabling the identification of key patterns and trends related to risk, innovation, organizational culture, and training effectiveness.

The analytic workflow followed a sequential process beginning with manual hand coding, followed by ChatGPT-assisted linguistic analysis, NVivo text-query validation, and culminating in hypothesis testing. This integrated process ensured triangulated and rigorous qualitative analysis by combining human interpretation, AI pattern recognition, and systematic data verification. This chapter established the methodological foundation for the study, providing a clear, systematic approach for understanding how leadership mindsets differ between sectors and setting the stage for the thematic analysis, presented in Chapter IV.

IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Senior Air Force contracting leaders and private industry executives described distinct and recurring differences in how they approach procurement, leadership, risk-taking, and organizational decision-making. Across the nine interview sections from the approved interview question list, participants highlighted contrasting assumptions about innovation, training, hierarchy, mission orientation, and external pressures that shape their leadership mindsets. Overall, Air Force and DoD participants emphasized compliance, structure, accountability, and stewardship, while private industry leaders emphasized adaptability, customer-driven decision-making, and innovation as a competitive necessity. These differences, along with shared challenges such as workforce development and the complexity of modern acquisition environments, form the core findings of this chapter.

This chapter presents those findings by examining the nine interview sections used to structure data collection and analysis. Each section corresponds to one or more of the eight hypotheses derived from the study's research questions. The findings reflect what participants reported, how frequently key concepts appeared in NVivo text queries, and how patterns diverged or aligned across sectors. The chapter proceeds through all nine sections, presenting evidence excerpts, NVivo-supported patterns, and the results of hypothesis testing.

A. OVERVIEW OF THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

The nine interview question sections provide the organizational structure for the comparative analysis presented in this chapter. Each section corresponds to a specific area of inquiry from the approved interview question list and is linked to one or more hypotheses derived from the study's two research questions. These hypotheses were evaluated using a triangulated analytic process that combined manual hand coding, ChatGPT-assisted gerund identification, and NVivo text-query analysis. This sequential workflow ensured that the findings were grounded in participant language, cross-validated through AI-generated word clusters, and systematically tested using NVivo keyword searches and frequency counts.

After conducting the interviews and obtaining the full transcript set, the data were manually cleaned and coded to remove identifying information, correct transcription errors, and organize responses by interview question. The cleaned transcripts were then further organized using ChatGPT-assisted gerund and thematic coding to surface recurring action-oriented patterns and higher-level themes. Based on this structure, the data were reconfigured in Excel so that each file represented a single sector's responses to a single interview question, creating separate Air Force and private-sector datasets for every question. These Excel files were imported into NVivo, where two primary cases were created (Air Force and Private Industry) and each dataset was coded to its corresponding sector case. Question-level nodes were then created for all interview questions, and every dataset was coded to the appropriate question node to ensure that responses could be analyzed both by sector and by question. Within this structure, word frequency analyses were first run by question and sector to compare how Air Force and private-industry participants described each topic. Next, word frequency queries were run at the hypothesis level (grouping the relevant questions) to identify salient keywords for each hypothesis. Those keywords were then used in NVivo text search queries, with the results saved as codes, which captured all instances of each keyword by sector. Finally, Matrix Coding Queries were conducted for each of the eight hypotheses to compare the frequency of these keyword codes across the Air Force and private-industry cases and to identify patterns that supported, partially supported, or contradicted the hypothesized relationships derived from the research questions.

Each of the nine interview sections were examined using a consistent structure:

1. Overview of the section and corresponding hypothesis,
2. Presentation of participant evidence, and
3. A data-driven comparison of Air Force and private-sector responses using NVivo text-query outputs.

NVivo was used to conduct text queries, frequency counts, word-co-occurrence checks, and sentiment-associated language reviews. These tools provided a systematic means of comparing how often key concepts such as "risk," "innovation," "mentorship," and "bureaucracy" appeared across sectors. The outputs from this process form the basis for determining whether each hypothesis is supported, partially supported, or not

supported. Table 7 lists the nine interview sections and their corresponding analytic focus.

B. RETURNING TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study's two research questions guided both data collection and analysis. The first examined differences in mindset between Air Force and private industry leaders, while the second explored the factors that shape the development of those mindsets. The following analysis tests eight hypotheses derived from these questions, with each hypothesis evaluated within one or more of the nine sections of the approved interview question list.

Research Question one (RQ1) is primarily examined through hypotheses H3, H4, H5, and H6, which focus on cross-sector mindset differences related to adaptability, risk tolerance, organizational culture, and mission orientation.

Research Question two (RQ2) is addressed through hypotheses H1, H2, H7, and H8, which examine formative influences that shape those mindsets, including mentorship, training systems, environmental constraints, and performance incentives.

C. COMPARATIVE AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

1. Section 1: Background and Experience

a. Hypothesis 1

Air Force leaders' mindsets are shaped by structured mentorship and procedural training, while private executives' mindsets are shaped by experiential learning and diverse environments.

b. H1 Comparative Analysis

S1Q1: Can you describe your career journey and what led you to your current role in procurement? Follow-up: What key projects or experiences have significancy shaped your approach to procurement and decision-making?

(1) Air Force

For S1Q1, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as “contracts,” “career,” “leadership,” “professional,” “acquisition,” and “development,” reflecting a focus on how their contracting careers and leadership identities evolved through both Air Force acquisition experiences and earlier professional backgrounds. Their responses emphasized the role of contracting rotations, mentorship, and the transfer of prior leadership lessons into their acquisition development, as illustrated by comments like, “That’s where I learned the foundational aspects of contracting from civilians and enlisted mentors” (Participant 1, major, AF, interview, AUG 12, 2025), and “Difficult conversations with people working a job not because they wanted it… choosing to be empathetic… hearing people out… learned it in a restaurant manager” (Participant 2, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 21, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S1Q1, Private Industry participants used words such as “contracts,” “managing,” “business,” “industry,” “vendor,” and “government,” indicating a greater emphasis on navigating complex business environments where contracting, vendor relationships, and industry-government interaction define their professional identity. Their responses highlighted themes of cross-sector experience, the need for speed and innovation, and a strong focus on practical business outcomes over bureaucratic processes. These themes are reflected in statements such as, “Industry is faster paced… more bottom-line driven” (Participant 12, vice president, interview, AUG 29, 2025), and “Now that I’m on the other side, I realize that we give it a lot of lip service and it’s really, really hard to do business with the government” (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025).

2. Section 2: Training, Education, and Development

a. Hypothesis 1

Air Force leaders’ mindsets are shaped by structured mentorship and procedural training, while private executives’ mindsets are shaped by experiential learning and diverse environments.

b. H1 Comparative Analysis

S2Q3: Can you describe any leadership development programs or mentorship experiences that have influenced your approach to procurement?

(1) Air Force

For S2Q3, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "learning," "contracting," "motivation," and "understanding," reflecting a focus on how leadership growth develops through accumulated experience, mentorship, and a deeper grasp of human and organizational behavior. Their responses emphasized the importance of learning through on-the-job application, understanding the motivations of others, and developing a leadership style shaped by mentors, informal lessons, and navigating contracting environments. This is illustrated by comments like, "OJT is… the best training really… actual application and seeing it in action, that's the way I learned best…How do you motivate certain parties to whatever end goal you're trying to achieve?" (Participant 1, major, AF, interview, AUG 12, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S2Q3, Private Industry participants used words such as "contracting," "work," "learning," and "trust," indicating a greater emphasis on problem-solving as a professional identity, continuous growth through experiential learning, and building trust-based relationships in both client environments and leadership roles. Their responses highlighted themes of curiosity-driven innovation, developing expertise by doing the work, and fostering trust as a leadership cornerstone, reflected in statements such as, "Curiosity is the key component to a growth mindset… if you don't have curiosity, you can't solve problems" (Participant 16, executive partner, interview, SEP 11, 2025), and "Competence and caring — you can't fake either one" (Participant 18, president, interview, SEP 16, 2025).

c. Hypothesis 2

Air Force leaders' training systems emphasize compliance and technical precision, while private sector leaders emphasize autonomy and innovation in professional development.

d. H2 Comparative Analysis

S2Q1: What formal education or training have you received that has influenced your approach to procurement?

(1) Air Force

For S2Q1, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "training," "learning," "understanding," and "business," reflecting a focus on how professional development is shaped by a blend of formal education and on-the-job experience. Their responses emphasized that while classroom-based acquisition education provides foundational knowledge, the most meaningful growth occurs through applied learning, problem-solving with experts, and developing a deeper understanding of the broader business and procurement environment. This is illustrated by comments like, "The most influential training I've had is the on-the-job training" (Participant 1, major, AF, interview, AUG 12, 2025), and "Understanding what motivates a company or contractor… not just profit… developing negotiation strategies" (Participant 2, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 21, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S2Q1, Private Industry participants used words such as "training," "learning," "team," and "contracts," indicating a greater emphasis on the informal, experience-driven nature of private-sector development and the reliance on collaborative problem-solving rather than structured acquisition education. Their responses highlighted themes of learning-by-doing, building ad hoc deal teams, and navigating contracting challenges through creativity, persistence, and external expertise rather than formalized instruction. This is reflected in statements such as, "We are making this up as we go… there is no formal training for getting to creative structures…It's more experiential training than it is

formalized like go sit in a classroom" (Participant 10, senior director, interview, AUG 21, 2025).

S2Q2: What informal education, training, or programs have you participated in that have influenced your approach?

(1) Air Force

For S2Q2, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "influence," "invested," "management," and "mentor," reflecting a focus on how professional growth is shaped by experienced practitioners who actively invest in developing others. Their responses emphasized the centrality of on-the-job learning, mentorship from seasoned contracting professionals, and the need to rethink traditional acquisition management approaches, as illustrated by comments like, "Having a person who's your mentor and is invested in your success… and is a true practitioner. Nothing can beat that" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S2Q2, Private Industry participants used words such as "training," "formal," "hire," and "contracting," indicating a greater emphasis on how private-sector organizations rely on hiring already-skilled contracting experts rather than providing structured internal development. Their responses highlighted themes of minimal formal training, rapid on-the-job immersion, and the expectation that new hires arrive with the expertise needed to manage clients immediately, reflected in statements such as, "Yeah, because private sector…they hire experts" (Participant 13, Co-Founder/CEO, interview, SEP 02, 2025), and "I rode shotgun with the dude… after three weeks I was like, OK, I got it, give me some clients" (Participant 14, director, interview, SEP 09, 2025).

S2Q4: How much emphasis do you believe is placed on innovation, risk management, and flexibility in your training, and how has that impacted your approach to procurement?

(1) Air Force

For S2Q4, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "people," "think," "training," and "work," reflecting a focus on how innovation, risk-taking, and organizational change depend on the mindset and behavior of the workforce rather than solely on formal acquisition processes. Their responses emphasized the importance of experiential learning, developing people who can think critically in ambiguity, and shifting cultural norms toward accepting risk and change, as illustrated by comments like, "If you're gonna be innovative, you have to be willing to take risk… innovation is uncharted territory" " (Participant 1, major, AF, interview, AUG 12, 2025), and "It's really going to come down to the folks that do the work having willingness to change… you have to be welcoming to change" (Participant 2, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 21, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S2Q4, Private Industry participants used words such as "procurement," "data," "compliance," and "flexibility," indicating a greater emphasis on navigating innovation within structured corporate governance systems where risk tolerance, regulatory constraints, and data accuracy shape decision-making. Their responses highlighted themes of balancing creativity with compliance, relying on data-driven judgment, and negotiating organizational flexibility in the face of vendor-driven innovation, reflected in statements such as, "Procurement is considered a watchdog… a policing or compliance arm" (Participant 16, executive partner, interview, SEP 11, 2025), and "You have to use your own judgment—it's not enough to say, 'That's what's in the database'" (Participant 17, technology sourcing lead, interview, SEP 15, 2025)

3. Section 3: Procurement and Acquisition Decision-Making

a. Hypothesis 3

Private industry executives will more frequently reference adaptability and innovation as leadership priorities, whereas Air Force leaders will emphasize standardization and stability.

b. H3 Comparative Analysis

S3Q1: How would you describe your general approach to procurement decision-making within your organization?

(1) Air Force

For S3Q1, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "adopt," "aperture," "chain," and "commercial," reflecting a focus on broadening the Department's perspective to adopt commercial technologies while breaking down chain-of-command barriers that slow cross-service collaboration. Their responses emphasized the need for a wider organizational aperture, greater flexibility across services, and establishing credibility through clearer, more streamlined requirements, as illustrated by comments like, "We got to pull our heads out of the sand and see the more global impacts…Individuals are chained to their chain of command" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025)

(2) Private Industry

For S3Q1, Private Industry participants used words such as "innovate," "government," "business," and "avoidance," indicating a greater emphasis on how commercial firms balance innovation with financial logic while navigating government constraints and incentives. Their responses highlighted themes of pursuing creative solutions, shaping deals around business realities, and using negotiation strategy—including cost avoidance and leverage—to reach mutually beneficial outcomes, reflected in statements such as, "If people knew how to leverage these tools in a more innovative way… we would see those successes long term," (Participant 10, senior director, interview, AUG 21, 2025), and "You're a contracts manager, but you're a business advisor… you have to have strong business sense" (Participant 12, vice president, interview, AUG 29, 2025).

S3Q2: How do you balance risk and innovation when making procurement decisions?

(1) Air Force

For S3Q2, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as “program,” “balancing,” “customer,” reflecting a focus on the complexities of program execution and the need to balance cost, schedule, and customer requirements in weapon-systems contracting. Their responses emphasized the challenges of coordinating across program offices, navigating uneven field knowledge, and managing risk while meeting customer needs, as illustrated by comments like, “Program management side is willing to take a bad deal just to get things moving… show the Pentagon we’re executing” (Participant 4, lieutenant colonel, AF, interview, AUG 28, 2025), and “The two factors that probably influence that the most are one, cost… equally as important is can I deliver it right? Am I going to satisfy the customer’s needs?” (Participant 8, NH-04, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S3Q2, Private Industry participants used words such as “government,” “innovative,” “different,” and “implementing,” indicating a greater emphasis on evaluating whether government partners are willing to break from past practices and actually implement innovative approaches. Their responses highlighted themes of cultural resistance, uneven implementation of new authorities, and the need to shift from risk-averse habits to experimentation and value-focused decision-making, reflected in statements such as, “There is nothing in the regulations that prevents the government from being innovative… the only thing holding it up is that people just haven’t done it that way before” (Participant 10, senior director, interview, AUG 21, 2025).

S3Q3: Can you share a moment in your career that significantly influenced your approach to procurement decisions?

(1) Air Force

For S3Q3, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as “managing,” “urgent,” “fast,” and “authorities,” reflecting a focus on responding to crisis-driven operational demands that required rapid decision-making, cross-authority coordination, and adaptive management under extreme pressure. Their responses emphasized the need

to move quickly, assume risk, and secure buy-in from both leadership and external authorities in order to meet urgent mission and community needs, as illustrated by comments like, “Commander willing to assume risk to go fast … keeping flying mission while demoing base and managing temporary facilities” (Participant 4, lieutenant colonel, AF, interview, AUG 28, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S3Q3, Private Industry participants used words such as “flexibility,” “government,” “gray,” and “management,” indicating a greater emphasis on navigating ambiguity, adapting to shifting management expectations, and understanding how government processes shape business decisions. Their responses highlighted themes of operating in gray areas, adjusting to managerial demands, and balancing innovation with business realities, reflected in statements such as, “I realized we’re running a business…They liked the idea of on the one hand it was kind of black and white, but they also wanted that gray area” (Participant 15, head of procurement, interview, SEP 11, 2025).

4. Section 4: Risk, Innovation, and Flexibility

a. Hypothesis 4

Air Force contracting leaders will demonstrate a more risk-averse mindset, emphasizing compliance and procedural correctness, while private industry executives will demonstrate greater risk tolerance and a results-oriented approach to decision-making.

b. H4 Comparative Analysis

S4Q1: How do you perceive the relationship between risk and innovation in procurement? Follow-up: Are there specific challenges you face in implementing innovative solutions or managing risk in procurement? How do these challenges differ between the public and private sectors?

(1) Air Force

For S4Q1, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as “culture,” “encouraging,” “open,” and “selection,” reflecting a focus on how organizational culture and leadership openness shape risk tolerance and innovation within the acquisition environment. Their responses emphasized the need to encourage transparent communication, foster reasonable risk-taking, and improve how the Air Force selects and develops personnel with the right skills and temperaments, as illustrated by comments like, “If you get on to people because they failed trying something new… you’re discouraging that risk taking” (Participant 9, Senior Executive Services, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025), and “You get to dictate the culture of your organization” (Participant 9, Senior Executive Services, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025)

(2) Private Industry

For S4Q1, Private Industry participants used words such as “innovation,” “leadership,” “authorities,” and “buying,” indicating a greater emphasis on how commercial leaders view innovation and risk through the lens of business survival and empowered decision-making rather than compliance with government acquisition rules. Their responses highlighted themes of leadership support for innovation, the practical realities of buying in a competitive market, and the need to rely on authorities that enable speed rather than constrain it, reflected in statements such as, “Because you’re running a company, you’re not just buying… in the private sector, if you don’t win contracts, then your company shuts down” (Participant 13, Co-Founder/CEO, interview, SEP 02, 2025).

S4Q2: Do you think more risk-tolerant decision-making could lead to faster, more innovative acquisitions? Why or why not?

(1) Air Force

For S4Q2, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as “speed,” “affordability,” “budget,” and “contracting,” reflecting a focus on balancing rapid delivery with fiscal constraints and traditional contracting expectations. Their responses emphasized navigating the tension between fast, affordable solutions and rigid budget cycles, as well as pushing contracting officers to question entrenched requirements and

embrace more agile, iterative approaches, as illustrated by comments like, "Prioritizing speed and getting it to the warfighter … affordable mass with speed" (Participant 4, lieutenant colonel, AF, interview, AUG 28, 2025), and "guys from Silicon Valley…they have a mindset of agile, fail fast, prototype, build… move, move, move" (Participant 8, NH-04, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S4Q2, Private Industry participants used words such as "advocating," "balance," "emphasizing," and "fast," indicating a greater emphasis on pushing for accelerated acquisition timelines while still recognizing the organizational risks of moving too quickly. Their responses highlighted themes of embracing speed with caution, emphasizing the need for structural safeguards, and balancing rapid action with responsible oversight, reflected in statements such as, "I think DIU having a whole bunch of funding, they're buying faster [which] is a good try. But it's full of holes, right? It's like, when you go fast, you don't know what you're doing… that saying, I don't want to become DIU" (Participant 13, Co-Founder/CEO, interview, SEP 02, 2025)

S4Q3: How does your organization handle the challenges of adopting more innovative or agile approaches to procurement?

(1) Air Force

For S4Q3, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "capital," "decision," "empowering," and "risk," reflecting a focus on the structural and cultural constraints that limit the Air Force's ability to take risks and empower decision-makers compared to private industry. Their responses emphasized the challenges of operating without surplus human capital, the reluctance to accept failure, and the difficulty of empowering individuals to make rapid decisions in a hierarchical system, as illustrated by comments like, "They're preaching innovation… but no one is willing to back them up and give them the top cover" (Participant 8, NH-04, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025), and "No one wants to pony up that reputational risk" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S4Q3, Private Industry participants used words such as “finance,” “change,” “leadership,” and “lifers,” indicating a greater emphasis on how financial pressures, organizational inertia, and leadership mindset shape innovation in private-sector procurement environments. Their responses highlighted the tension between experimentation and financial return, the challenge of driving change within legacy cultures, and the importance of leaders with a growth mindset who can overcome “lifer” resistance, reflected in statements such as “CFOs… speak the language of return on investment,” and “Lifers… wait it out. ‘This too shall pass’” (Participant 16, executive partner, interview, SEP 11, 2025).

5. Section 5: Cultural Influence on Procurement Decision-Making

a. Hypothesis 5

Air Force leaders describe hierarchical, process-driven cultures while private industry leaders describe decentralized, empowerment-focused cultures.

b. H5 Comparative Analysis

S5Q1: How would you describe the culture of decision-making within your procurement leadership? Follow-up: How does this compare to what you know about procurement culture in the other sector (Air Force vs. Private Industry)?

(1) Air Force

For S5Q1, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as “think,” “innovate,” “legal,” and “people,” reflecting a focus on shifting entrenched acquisition habits, strengthening legal understanding, and enabling people to innovate with greater confidence. Their responses emphasized the difficulty of moving beyond legacy processes, the uneven field knowledge that constrains adoption of non-FAR approaches, and the importance of leadership support to empower risk-taking. This was illustrated by comments such as “People look at how it was done before and just do it again because they’re overtasked” (Participant 4, lieutenant colonel, AF, interview, AUG 28, 2025), “Let’s look at all the tools in the toolkit… not just go for the buzzword of the day”

(Participant 3, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 28, 2025), "People are nervous to take that next step… especially if your leadership isn't supportive" (Participant 3, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 28, 2025), and "Uneven levels of knowledge in the field make it harder to implement non-FAR approaches" (Participant 4, lieutenant colonel, AF, interview, AUG 28, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S5Q1, Private Industry participants used words such as "work," "force," "mission," and "time," indicating a greater emphasis on accelerating decisions, empowering the workforce, and maintaining a mission-first mindset rather than defaulting to bureaucratic process. Their responses highlighted themes of speed, delegated authority, and enabling people to act creatively and decisively in fast-moving environments. This emphasis was reflected in statements such as "80% now is better than 100% too late" (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025), "Let your people have their creative independence" (Participant 15, head of procurement, interview, SEP 11, 2025), "You actually save money the faster you go" (Participant 18, president, interview, SEP 16, 2025), and "Leaders have to be willing to let their people do stuff, even if it's not the way they would do it" (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025).

S5Q3: To what extent does your organization's culture emphasize risk tolerance, flexibility, and innovation in procurement?

(1) Air Force

For S5Q3, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "trying," "authority," "change," and "empower," reflecting a focus on shifting entrenched acquisition behaviors and enabling a culture more open to innovation. Their responses emphasized how difficult it is to change long-standing habits, overcome fear of the unknown, and empower personnel with the authority needed to operate differently in a rapidly evolving environment. This was illustrated by comments such as "We limit ourselves and our ability to do innovation" (Participant 9, Senior Executive Services, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025), "People are scared of the unknown… they don't want to get in

trouble" (Participant 9, Senior Executive Services, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025), "We get stuck in the rut… the way we've always done it" (Participant 9, Senior Executive Services, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025), and "We've got to remove all these layers and processes and councils and committees and roles… say to them…you are empowered" (Participant 8, NH-04, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S5Q3, Private Industry participants used words such as "mission," "self," "operate," and "communication," indicating a greater emphasis on aligning individual behavior with organizational purpose and improving how people work together to achieve outcomes. Their responses highlighted themes of cultural misalignment, personal accountability, and the need for open dialogue that enables organizations to operate more effectively. This was reflected in statements such as "80% now is better than 100% too late" (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025), "Let your people have their creative independence" (Participant 15, head of procurement, interview, SEP 11, 2025), "You actually save money the faster you go" (Participant 18, president, interview, SEP 16, 2025), and "Leaders have to be willing to let their people do stuff, even if it's not the way they would do it" (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025).

c. Hypothesis 7

Environmental and policy constraints are the dominant external factors shaping Air Force leaders' mindsets, while market competition and customer demand dominate in the private sector.

d. H7 Comparative Analysis

S5Q2: How do external factors (such as global trends, cultural diversity, corporate social responsibility) influence procurement decision-making within your organization?

(1) Air Force

For S5Q2, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "authority," "bureaucratic," "business," and "noise," reflecting a focus on navigating federal constraints while staying centered on mission execution. Their responses emphasized the need to cut through bureaucratic clutter and recognize how government processes shape industry perceptions, as illustrated by comments like "Everything you mentioned does not affect what we do—that's noise we have to work through ignoring" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025), and "They kind of view us as, 'This is why I don't want to do business with the DoD'" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S5Q2, no Private Industry participants provided responses to this question in this section, leaving insufficient data to identify themes or conduct meaningful analysis.

6. Section 6: Public versus Private Sector Comparisons

a. Hypothesis 6

Air Force leaders frame mission orientation around compliance and stewardship of taxpayer funds, while private leaders frame it around customer satisfaction and competitive success.

b. H6 Comparative Analysis

S6Q1: How do you perceive the differences between procurement processes in the Air Force (or public sector) and private industry?

(1) Air Force

For S6Q1, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "companies," "innovation," "risk," and "different," reflecting a focus on contrasting commercial business models with the government's acquisition environment. Their responses emphasized how varying corporate structures—from legacy defense primes to startups like Anduril—shape risk tolerance, innovation cycles, and incentives, as

illustrated by comments like “A company like Lockheed… 100% defense based… their risk profile and approach to decisions are entirely different than maybe a company that is like 50/50” (Participant 2, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 21, 2025), and “Anduril works five to six different programs and expects three to four of them to fail… to fail fast” (Participant 2, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 21, 2025).

Participants highlighted themes of incentive misalignment and cultural divergence between public and private sector acquisition approaches, noting that government programs demand compliance and stability while private firms succeed by iterating quickly, taking calculated risks, and tying performance to tangible rewards. This emphasis emerged clearly in statements such as “The difference I think I see is the incentives are different… I’m told get it done… and I’m given the right teams and I’m empowered to do that” (Participant 8, NH-04, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025), and “They’re investing their own money… completely different culture” (Participant 9, Senior Executive Services, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S6Q1, Private Industry participants used words such as “risk,” “government,” “innovate,” and “contracts,” indicating a greater emphasis on contrasting commercial agility with government procedural constraints. Their responses highlighted themes of inefficiency, misaligned incentives, and the need for stronger collaboration between government and industry. This emphasis was reflected in statements such as “Let’s save each other some time and stop doing things just because we always have” (Participant 12, vice president, interview, AUG 29, 2025), and “People operate off incentive… private industry can reward much heavier off these big wins” (Participant 12, vice president, interview, AUG 29, 2025).

Participants also underscored the importance of empowering people and reducing administrative burdens that stall innovation, stressing that excessive government processes delay capability delivery and frustrate both sides of the contracting relationship. These themes were illustrated by comments like “You’re asking me to justify a $50 a day rental car… you’re going to delay award for three or four days because of that?” (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025),

and “Non-innovative, non-quick, non-responsive… the warfighter pays for that” (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025).

S6Q2: How do you balance bureaucracy and decision-making speed in procurement within your organization? Follow-up: What lessons could the private sector learn from government procurement processes, and vice versa?

(1) Air Force

For S6Q2, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as “loss,” “learning,” “decision,” and “failure,” reflecting a focus on cultivating a more thoughtful, reflective approach to acquisition decision-making. Their responses emphasized the need to slow down, make informed decisions, and normalize small failures as part of a broader learning process. This was illustrated by comments like, “Sometimes slower is faster” (Participant 6, Senior Executive Services, AF, interview, SEP 02, 2025), and “We have to be able to make some mistakes at times and learn from those and see those impacts” (Participant 6, Senior Executive Services, AF, interview, SEP 02, 2025).

Their responses also emphasized cultural barriers to transparency and honest learning within the Air Force, particularly concerning how failure is perceived and recorded. Participants highlighted the importance of creating an environment where mistakes can be openly examined without career risk, as shown in statements such as, “I think a lot of times we’re not open about our failures, right? So we don’t have the opportunity to learn” (Participant 6, Senior Executive Services, AF, interview, SEP 02, 2025), and “Maybe we need to be more transparent about our smaller losses and smaller failures in order to make bigger wins” (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S6Q2, Private Industry participants used words such as “innovation,” “culture,” “bureaucratic,” and “progress,” indicating a greater emphasis on cutting through unnecessary bureaucracy and focusing on practical, user-driven innovation. Their responses highlighted frustration with what they described as government “innovation theater” and emphasized that true innovation comes from solving real problems quickly

rather than performing bureaucratic rituals. This sentiment was reflected in comments such as, “I guess the Air Force was really good at activity and not necessarily progress when it comes to innovation” (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025), and “We don’t care to do all that theater stuff… we’re driven by the airman that says, wow, this is what I really needed” (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025).

Participants also emphasized the strength of private-sector culture in enabling rapid decision-making, peer correction, and collaborative problem solving—traits they contrasted sharply with government bureaucracy. These themes appeared in statements such as, “If you post something that’s out in left field, folks will correct you… we self-correct each other and that works out” (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025), and in contrasts like, “It takes like 24 months of figuring out if we need another carrier… but if a company wants to go buy, then it just takes maybe a month” (Participant 13, Co-Founder/CEO, interview, SEP 02, 2025).

7. Section 7: Long Term Trends and Industry Practices

a. Hypothesis 7

Environmental and policy constraints are the dominant external factors shaping Air Force leaders’ mindsets, while market competition and customer demand dominate in the private sector.

b. H7 Comparative Analysis

S7Q1: Are there any practices or strategies from the other sector (private or public) that you believe could benefit your organization’s procurement process?

(1) Air Force

For S7Q1, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as “capability,” “capital,” “industry,” and “business,” reflecting a focus on leveraging commercial acumen to strengthen defense outcomes. Their responses emphasized the importance of understanding a company’s financial health, intellectual property ownership, and ability

to scale—skills they noted were more deeply embedded in private industry—alongside a shift toward contracting for measurable capabilities rather than simply buying inputs. These themes were illustrated by comments like, "You need to know who you're doing business with and do they have the potential to deliver" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025), and "Private Industry…knows everything about that company before acquisition" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S7Q1, Private Industry participants used words such as "change," "learning," "certification," and "industry," indicating a greater emphasis on adaptive improvement and continuous professional development. Their responses highlighted a culture that values evolving practices, on-the-job learning, and industry-informed decision-making, reflected in statements such as "It's mostly on-the-job training, mentorship, learning through doing" (Participant 17, technology sourcing lead, interview, SEP 15, 2025), and "If you've been using the same source forever, sometimes it's time to change" (Participant 15, head of procurement, interview, SEP 11, 2025).

8. Section 8: Bridging the Gap and Future Recommendations

a. Hypothesis 8

Air Force performance incentives emphasize compliance and process integrity, while private sector incentives emphasize innovation and measurable results.

b. H8 Comparative Analysis

S8Q1: What advice would you offer to procurement leaders in the government to help them embrace more innovative, risk-tolerant approaches?

(1) Air Force

For S8Q1, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "accountability," "empower," "levels," and "needs," reflecting a focus on redistributing authority and responsibility across organizational levels. Their responses emphasized the need for genuine empowerment paired with realistic expectations and clear prioritization,

as illustrated by comments like “There has to be genuine accountability and empowerment throughout the organization” (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025), and “We’re so afraid of holding people accountable… it’s not just downstream, it’s also upstream” (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025).

(2) Private Industry

For S8Q1, Private Industry participants used words such as “mission,” “innovate,” “business,” and “lead,” indicating a greater emphasis on aligning leadership behavior with mission-driven decision-making rather than procedural compliance. Their responses highlighted a theme of pragmatic leadership—using business acumen, measured innovation, and upward influence to drive outcomes. Participants emphasized that effective leaders maintain loyalty while still “bending the boss’s brain,” ensuring that decisions are framed in terms of mission benefit rather than personal gain. This is reflected in statements such as “Define them to you in the ways that it benefits the mission, not how it benefits me” (Participant 18, president, interview, SEP 16, 2025).

Their responses also highlighted a theme of encouraging innovation within the boundaries of mission needs—embracing experimentation, offering top cover to subordinates, and using the right tools rather than defaulting to rigid interpretations. Participants contrasted leaders who operate boldly in the gray with those who hide behind rules to avoid personal risk. This emphasis is reflected in quotes like “Lay yourself down on the line, give your subordinates the top cover that they need to innovate” (Participant 18, president, interview, SEP 16, 2025).

S8Q2: What would be the main challenges in bridging the mindset gap between Air Force procurement and private industry?

(1) Air Force

For S8Q2, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as “change,” “innovate,” “leadership,” and “people,” reflecting a focus on the organizational and cultural shifts required to modernize acquisition behavior. Their responses emphasized the need for cultivating a culture of adaptation—one that encourages individuals to accept risk, embrace new methods, and rethink entrenched habits. Participants repeatedly tied

innovation to human factors, noting that transformation depends on whether "the folks that do the work [have] willingness to change… you have to be welcoming to change" (Participant 2, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 21, 2025), and stressing that over analysis and hesitation impede progress, as seen in the warning to "quit overanalyzing things to a state of paralysis" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025).

Their responses also emphasized the role of leaders in shaping culture, empowering teams, and creating the conditions where innovation can take root. Many described the difficulty of shifting behaviors ingrained by bureaucracy, political forces, and legacy processes, arguing that leaders must reinforce the message through consistent action rather than rhetoric. This theme is reflected in statements such as "The government has incentivized a culture of don't make a move because if you fail, you're in trouble… private industry says move, otherwise you're in trouble" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025), and the view that "failure is the best way to learn" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025), underscoring that cultural and procedural change hinges on leadership modeling, psychological safety, and empowering people to experiment—even when that experimentation includes failure.

(2) Private Industry

For S8Q2, Private Industry participants used words such as "innovative," "change," "people," and "government," indicating a greater emphasis on redefining how organizations evaluate progress and incentivize meaningful modernization. Their responses highlighted a view that true innovation requires cultural and structural shifts—particularly in how risk, incentives, and performance are understood. Private industry participants repeatedly contrasted their environment with government norms, stressing that innovation demands an acceptance of experimentation and failure, reflected in statements such as, "If we're not failing, we are not innovating" (Participant 10, senior director, interview, AUG 21, 2025). Their comments further revealed a belief that innovation has long been technically possible within federal acquisition authorities but culturally underutilized, summarized by the critique: "All these new innovative ways of contracting — nothing is new. You've been able to do this for decades… you just haven't been doing it right" (Participant 14, director, interview, SEP 09, 2025).

Their responses also underscored that change depends heavily on people—specifically leaders who are willing to reward creativity, embrace discomfort, and realign incentives away from compliance theater and toward capability outcomes. Many participants described a persistent cultural barrier in which "we're incentivized to do the wrong things… and that's not innovate" (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025), noting that these misaligned incentives often suppress risk-taking. Others explained that psychological safety and positive recognition are central to fostering innovative behavior, remarking that "simple recognition is all people are really looking for" (Participant 12, vice president, interview, AUG 29, 2025), and "you've got to praise and lift up people who take risks and think outside the box" (Participant 12, vice president, interview, AUG 29, 2025). Participants stressed that leadership must actively cultivate an environment where "people know it's OK to take risks and fail, as long as they aren't breaking the law" (Participant 14, director, interview, SEP 09, 2025), arguing that innovation cannot emerge if leaders avoid change themselves. This theme was captured in the observation that "you've got to have leaders who crave change, who aren't afraid of change, who like it" (Participant 16, executive partner, interview, SEP 11, 2025), paired with the reminder that "we lose sight of what we're actually looking to accomplish" (Participant 12, vice president, interview, AUG 29, 2025), when incentives reward process over progress.

S8Q3: How feasible do you think it is to adopt best practices from the other sector in your procurement process? Follow-up: What changes would need to be made to make this feasible?

(1) Air Force

For S8Q3, no Air Force participants provided responses to this question in this section, leaving insufficient data to identify themes or conduct meaningful analysis.

(2) Private Industry

For S8Q3, Private Industry participants used words such as "leadership," "people," "training," and "working," indicating a greater emphasis on how organizational performance is shaped by workforce development, incentives, and the quality of

leadership engagement. Their responses highlighted the belief that talent cultivation and structural workforce management are central to solving persistent contracting challenges. Participants emphasized that both government and industry success depends on investing in people, aligning incentives, and ensuring that employees feel valued and competitively supported — a theme reflected in statements such as "The Air Force needs to do a better job of competing for their people and really incentivizing them" (Participant 14, director, interview, SEP 09, 2025).

Their responses further emphasized how individual career progression and organizational effectiveness rely on mentorship, sponsorship, and breaking stagnant workforce norms. Many participants described the continued need for leaders to actively develop their people, provide opportunities, and refresh organizational thinking through mobility and cross-pollination. This theme is illustrated by comments like "You're still trying to sell yourself, your capabilities, your potential to people in authority" (Participant 16, executive partner, interview, SEP 11, 2025), underscoring the role of influence and sponsorship in career advancement. Others stressed cultural stagnation and the need for deliberate workforce rotation to drive improvement, captured in the statement, "You've got to break the civilian mindset — rotate some fresh blood in there" (Participant 14, director, interview, SEP 09, 2025), showing that private industry participants view people-centered leadership actions as essential to strengthening capability, adaptability, and overall mission effectiveness.

9. Section 9: Closing Reflections and Additional Insight

a. Hypothesis 4

Air Force contracting leaders will demonstrate a more risk-averse mindset, emphasizing compliance and procedural correctness, while private industry executives will demonstrate greater risk tolerance and a results-oriented approach to decision-making.

b. H4 Comparative Analysis

S9Q3: What do you consider the most important trait or skill for someone in a leadership position in procurement to have?

(1) Air Force

For S9Q3, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "thinking," "communication," "people," and "listening," reflecting a focus on the interpersonal, cognitive, and collaborative skills required to improve acquisition decision-making. Their responses emphasized that critical thinking cannot occur in isolation, but must be grounded in openness, humility, and strong communication habits. Participants repeatedly stressed that failing to listen or assuming certainty undermines both teamwork and risk tolerance, noting that "the folks that fail are the ones that always think they know everything… those are the people that will never take any risk" (Participant 2, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 21, 2025). They described effective thinking as inherently relational—requiring awareness of others' perspectives and shared goals—captured in statements such as "If you can understand the people around you, if you can read the room… you can navigate around certain things and work together as a team" (Participant 2, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 21, 2025). These views underscore that cognitive effectiveness is entwined with human factors: listening, learning, and maintaining alignment.

Their responses also emphasized that communication is the backbone of organizational performance, enabling clarity, alignment, and empowerment. Many participants contrasted meaningful, intentional communication with the unnecessary meetings and fragmented coordination that often hinder progress. They emphasized the need for deliberate, purposeful interaction, explaining that "everything is intentional… making sure everyone is on the same page and then you let people do what they've been trained to do" (Participant 2, NH-04, AF, interview, AUG 21, 2025). Participants argued that relationships and mission success depend on trust and dialogue, with one noting that "fostering good relationships… starts with communication" (Participant 8, NH-04, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025). They further connected communication to inquiry-driven

leadership and healthy dissent, emphasizing the importance of questioning assumptions through comments such as "Ask why… not to be disruptive, but to make sure we're doing the right thing" (Participant 8, NH-04, AF, interview, SEP 16, 2025). Collectively, these perspectives highlight that effective communication, curiosity, and people-centered leadership are essential to cultivating a workplace where critical thinking, cohesion, and sound decision-making can thrive.

(2) Private Industry

For S9Q3, Private Industry participants used words such as "people," "leadership," "trust," and "caring," indicating a greater emphasis on the human-centered dimensions of organizational effectiveness and contractual outcomes. Their responses highlighted that strong leadership hinges on credibility, moral courage, and the willingness to prioritize people rather than process. This emphasis is reflected in comments such as "Have the balls to stand up for what you know is right or think is right, but for your people" (Participant 14, director, interview, SEP 09, 2025), underscoring that leaders earn trust when they protect their teams and advocate for sound judgment rather than bureaucratic compliance. Participants repeatedly emphasized integrity and purpose-driven leadership, noting that "If you choose to be someone, you'll sacrifice your integrity… if you choose to do something, your people will love you for it" (Participant 14, director, interview, SEP 09, 2025). These statements reinforce a view of leadership rooted in authenticity, ethical action, and the responsibility to cultivate trust within organizations.

Their responses also highlighted that caring for people is foundational to effective contracting and mission execution. Participants described how leaders must provide top cover, mentorship, and psychological safety, explaining that "Simple recognition is all people are really looking for" (Participant 12, vice president, interview, AUG 29, 2025). They drew clear connections between people-focused leadership and innovation, arguing that organizations falter when incentives are misaligned and risk-taking is discouraged, as reflected in the assertion that "We're incentivized to do the wrong things… and that's not innovate" (Participant 11, development consultant, interview, AUG 29, 2025). Private Industry participants stressed that trust is built through transparency, relationships, and

genuine care for people's growth and well-being, echoing themes such as understanding what people value, maintaining integrity, and ensuring teams have the confidence to experiment and learn. Their comments collectively reflect a belief that meaningful organizational change and improved procurement outcomes depend on leadership that values people, protects them, and creates conditions in which they can thrive.

c. Hypothesis 6

Air Force leaders frame mission orientation around compliance and stewardship of taxpayer funds, while private leaders frame it around customer satisfaction and competitive success.

d. H6 Comparative Analysis

S9Q2: What is one thing about procurement that people outside your role might not understand but is critical to your work?

(1) Air Force

For S9Q2, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "contracting," "documentation," "program," and "evaluated," reflecting a focus on clarifying the depth and rigor of contracting work within program offices. Their responses emphasized that their role is not a simple administrative step but a substantive, technical function that directly shapes program outcomes. This is captured in the remark, "My folks… write J&As, they write business clearances, so we're not just pencil whipping it" (Participant 5, brigadier general, AF, interview, SEP 02, 2025), underscoring their hands-on involvement in producing defensible acquisition documentation.

Their responses also highlighted the need to correct program office misconceptions about the purpose and importance of contracting reviews. Participants explained that documentation must withstand potential protests, noting that "any time a company can file a protest… that J&A has to stand up on its own for why we're going sole source" (Participant 5, brigadier general, AF, interview, SEP 02, 2025). They pointed to efforts to streamline and strengthen documentation, "we used to get J&As…

25 pages; we got that down to about eight" (Participant 5, brigadier general, AF, interview, SEP 02, 2025), as evidence of both rigor and efficiency. Overall, the focus centered on ensuring programs understand the evaluative, risk-sensitive nature of contracting work and its role in protecting acquisition integrity.

(2) Private Industry

For S9Q2, no Private Industry participants provided responses to this question in this section, leaving insufficient data to identify themes or conduct meaningful analysis.

e. Hypothesis 8

Air Force performance incentives emphasize compliance and process integrity, while private sector incentives emphasize innovation and measurable results.

f. H8 Comparative Analysis

S9Q1: What has been the biggest change you've seen in procurement over the course of your career, and how did you adapt to it?

(1) Air Force

For S9Q1, Air Force participants most frequently used terms such as "contracting," "automation," "innovative," and "process," reflecting a focus on modernizing acquisition through improved tools and stronger technical judgment. Their responses emphasized that innovation is not separate from contracting expertise, noting that "you need enough business acumen and contracting experience and bring all those elements together" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025). Participants also highlighted that innovation requires intentional experimentation, captured in the idea of "building failure into your battle plan" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025), which signals a shift toward learning-oriented approaches rather than strict risk avoidance.

Their responses further stressed that effective innovation depends on leadership skill, not just technical proficiency. As one participant explained, "you're all of those and you need the soft skills as a leader in order to convey all this knowledge" (Participant 7,

NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025), underscoring the human dimension of new authorities and processes. Others noted that advanced tools like OTAs require deeper judgment, stating that "it takes a good contracting officer to be a good agreements officer" (Participant 7, NH-04, DoD, interview, SEP 12, 2025). Overall, the emphasis was on blending contracting expertise, adaptive leadership, and process innovation to meet evolving acquisition demands.

(2) Private Industry

For S9Q1, Private Industry participants used words such as "accelerated," "advocating," "process," and "faster," indicating a greater emphasis on shortening acquisition timelines and reducing unnecessary delays. Their responses highlighted a strong preference for streamlined processes and quicker decision cycles, reflected in statements such as "I don't think it should be two years or three years. It should be much shorter…" (Participant 13, Co-Founder/CEO, interview, SEP 02, 2025), which underscores their push for accelerated pathways and more responsive procurement practices.

D. HYPOTHESIS RESULTS

This section summarizes the results of the eight hypotheses tested across the nine interview sections. Each hypothesis was evaluated using the combined outputs of manual coding, ChatGPT-identified linguistic patterns, and NVivo text-query results. The tables below present a consolidated view of the evidence by showing: (1) which interview sections were used to evaluate each hypothesis, (2) the NVivo-supported patterns for Air Force and private-industry participants, and (3) whether the data supported, partially supported, or did not support each hypothesis. Additionally, Table 16 provides a reference list of the interview sections, while Table 17 displays the hypothesis outcomes across sectors.

For each hypothesis, NVivo was used to systematically evaluate sector-level differences in participant language. First, a word frequency query was conducted across all interview questions associated with the hypothesis to identify the most prominent and theoretically relevant terms used by participants. These high-frequency words were then

converted into keyword nodes through text-search queries, which captured every instance of each keyword within the relevant question set. Next, a Matrix Coding Query compared the frequency of these keyword occurrences between Air Force and private-industry cases. This approach provided a consistent, data-driven means of examining how often each sector referenced core concepts tied to the hypothesis, allowing for quantitative comparison supported by qualitative excerpts. The resulting matrices form the basis for the sector comparisons and hypothesis evaluations presented in the following sections.

1. Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 predicts that Air Force leaders' mindsets are shaped by structured mentorship and procedural training, while private-industry executives are shaped by experiential learning and diverse environments. The matrix coding results clearly reflect this pattern. Air Force participants referenced "career" more than three times as often as private industry (50 references vs. 14) and used "leadership" nearly three times as often (63 vs. 23). Air Force respondents also referenced "learning" almost three times more than private industry (42 vs. 15). The strongest difference appeared in the keyword "contracts," where Air Force referenced the term 83 times compared to private industry's 51, reinforcing the structured, process-oriented nature of Air Force development pathways. The only term used at the same rate by both sectors was "manage" (25 vs. 25), which does not meaningfully reflect structured mentorship or developmental processes.

Table 8. Hypothesis 1: Matrix Coding Keyword Query

	Career	Contracts	Leadership	Learning	Manage
Air Force	50	83	63	42	25
Private Industry	14	51	23	15	25
Total	64	134	86	57	50

These quantitative differences align with Hypothesis 1, showing that Air Force respondents place greater emphasis on formal career structures, procedural development, and institutional learning than private-industry participants. Overall, the keyword patterns support Hypothesis 1, confirming that Air Force mindsets are more strongly shaped by structured mentorship and procedural training.

2. Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 predicts that Air Force leaders' training systems emphasize compliance and technical precision, while private-sector leaders emphasize autonomy and innovation in professional development. The matrix coding results reveal a clear distinction that aligns with this pattern. Air Force participants referenced "training" more than twice as often as private industry (54 vs. 24) and used "learning" more frequently as well (33 vs. 26)—both terms reflecting formal, structured development emphasized in Air Force environments. In contrast, private-industry respondents referenced "innovative" more often than the Air Force (39 vs. 31) and used "risk" more frequently (37 vs. 29), indicating greater emphasis on experimentation, adaptability, and autonomy in development practices.

Table 9. Hypothesis 2: Matrix Coding Keyword Query

	Innovative	Learning	Risk	Training
Air Force	31	33	29	54
Private Industry	39	26	37	24
Total	70	59	66	78

These sectoral differences mirror the hypothesis: Air Force responses center more heavily on structured instruction and technical development, while private-industry responses highlight innovation and risk engagement. Overall, the keyword patterns support Hypothesis 2, confirming that the two sectors emphasize different developmental priorities consistent with their institutional environments.

3. Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 predicts that private-industry executives will reference adaptability and innovation as leadership priorities more frequently, whereas Air Force leaders will emphasize standardization and stability. The matrix coding results show a clear and consistent pattern supporting this expectation. Private-industry participants referenced every adaptability-related keyword at substantially higher rates than their Air Force counterparts. They used "innovative" eighteen times compared to only one Air Force reference (18 vs. 1) and referenced "cost" nineteen times versus one in the Air Force, indicating a greater focus on resource responsiveness and flexible decision environments.

Private industry also used "government" seventeen times compared to three Air Force references (17 vs. 3) and referenced "contracts" more than twice as often (16 vs. 6), suggesting broader contextual engagement across procurement settings. Even for "risk," private-industry participants referenced the term more frequently than the Air Force (14 vs. 10), consistent with environments that require navigating uncertainty and innovation pressures.

Table 10. Hypothesis 3: Matrix Coding Keyword Query

	Contracts	Cost	Government	Innovative	Risk
Air Force	6	1	3	1	10
Private Industry	16	19	17	18	14
Total	22	20	20	19	24

Taken together, these quantitative differences support Hypothesis 3, demonstrating that private-industry leaders emphasize innovation, adaptability, and flexible decision priorities to a greater extent than Air Force leaders.

4. Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 predicts that Air Force contracting leaders will demonstrate a more risk-averse, compliance-oriented mindset, while private-industry executives will exhibit greater risk tolerance and a results-oriented approach to decision-making. The matrix coding results present a clear, sector-divergent pattern. Air Force participants referenced "risk" more than twice as often as private-industry respondents (33 vs. 14), consistent with a heightened focus on identifying, mitigating, and managing risk within procedural constraints. In contrast, private-industry participants referenced "innovation" twenty-one times compared to fifteen Air Force references (21 vs. 15) and used "leadership" nearly twice as often (27 vs. 14), reflecting a greater emphasis on initiative, autonomy, and outcome-driven decision environments. Private industry also referenced "people" at higher rates (34 vs. 25), suggesting a stronger orientation toward stakeholder responsiveness and organizational adaptability.

Table 11. Hypothesis 4: Matrix Coding Keyword Query

	Innovation	Leadership	People	Risk
Air Force	15	14	25	33
Private Industry	21	27	34	14
Total	36	41	59	47

Collectively, these quantitative differences support Hypothesis 4, indicating that Air Force participants foreground risk and procedural considerations, whereas private-industry respondents emphasize innovation, leadership initiative, and human-centered decision priorities consistent with results-oriented practices.

5. Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis 5 predicts that Air Force leaders describe hierarchical, process-driven cultures, while private-industry leaders describe decentralized, empowerment-focused cultures. The matrix coding results reveal clear sector differences consistent with this expectation. Air Force participants referenced "contracts" twenty-seven times compared to twenty references in private industry (27 vs. 20), reflecting stronger emphasis on procedural structures, compliance mechanisms, and rule-bound organizational environments. In contrast, private-industry respondents referenced "culture" more than four times as often as the Air Force (14 vs. 3) and used "leadership" more than twice as often (13 vs. 6), both of which indicate greater attention to decentralized decision-making dynamics and empowerment-oriented organizational contexts. Private industry also made higher use of "people"-centered language (22 vs. 20), while Air Force participants referenced "thinking" at substantially higher rates (22 vs. 7), suggesting more structured, cognitively guided approaches to decision behavior.

Table 12. Hypothesis 5: Matrix Coding Keyword Query

	Contracts	Culture	Innovative	Leadership	People	Thinking
Air Force	27	3	23	6	20	22
Private Industry	20	14	19	13	22	7
Total	47	17	42	19	42	29

Taken together, these quantitative differences support Hypothesis 5, showing that Air Force participants foreground process-driven, hierarchical structures, while private-

industry participants emphasize cultural flexibility, distributed leadership, and human-centered organizational dynamics.

6. Hypothesis 6

Hypothesis 6 predicts that Air Force leaders frame mission orientation around compliance and stewardship of taxpayer funds, while private-industry leaders frame it around customer satisfaction and competitive success. The matrix coding results show sector differences that align partially with this expectation. Air Force participants referenced "incentives" more frequently than private industry (10 vs. 7), reflecting a stronger focus on institutional accountability and compliance-related motivators. They also referenced "innovation" twenty-one times compared to eighteen in private industry, suggesting an Air Force emphasis on controlled or structured innovation tied to organizational mandates rather than market competition. Conversely, private-industry respondents referenced "government" more frequently (16 vs. 10), indicating greater engagement with regulatory considerations relevant to customer-facing or competitive environments. Private industry also referenced "people" and "risk" at higher rates (12 vs. 8 and 17 vs. 13, respectively), consistent with environments that prioritize stakeholder responsiveness and competitive risk-taking.

Table 13. Hypothesis 6: Matrix Coding Keyword Query

	Government	Incentives	Innovation	People	Risk
Air Force	10	10	21	8	13
Private Industry	16	7	18	12	17
Total	26	17	39	20	30

Taken together, these patterns provide partial support for Hypothesis 6. The Air Force shows stronger engagement with compliance- and stewardship-oriented concepts, whereas private-industry participants reflect greater attention to customer-facing factors and competitive dynamics, though some keyword distributions are more balanced than hypothesized.

7. Hypothesis 7

Hypothesis 7 predicts that environmental and policy constraints are the dominant external factors shaping Air Force leaders' mindsets, while market competition and customer demand exert stronger influence in the private sector. The matrix coding results demonstrate clear sectoral distinctions that align with the first half of this hypothesis but offer mixed support overall. Air Force participants referenced "capability" seven times compared to zero in private industry (7 vs. 0) and used "mission" six times versus no references in private industry (6 vs. 0), reflecting a strong focus on mission requirements, capability-driven constraints, and policy-defined operational boundaries. They also referenced "industry" at twice the rate of private-sector respondents (6 vs. 3), further suggesting attention to external institutional environments and regulatory or policy frameworks. In contrast, private-industry participants referenced "change" five times compared to one Air Force reference (5 vs. 1), indicating greater emphasis on adaptability and market-driven responsiveness. Differences in "share" were minimal (4 vs. 3), providing limited insight into competitive pressures.

Table 14. Hypothesis 7: Matrix Coding Keyword Query

	Capability	Change	Industry	Mission	Share
Air Force	7	1	6	6	4
Private Industry	0	5	3	0	3
Total	7	6	9	6	7

Taken together, these patterns provide partial support for Hypothesis 7. The Air Force demonstrates clear emphasis on mission and capability constraints, consistent with policy-driven external pressures, while private industry shows some evidence of market-responsive orientation through higher references to change. However, the competitive and customer-driven indicators are less pronounced than anticipated.

8. Hypothesis 8

Hypothesis 8 predicts that Air Force performance incentives emphasize compliance and process integrity, while private-sector incentives emphasize innovation and measurable results. The matrix coding results show a clear sector distinction consistent with the latter half of the hypothesis. Private-industry participants referenced

"innovative" thirty-three times compared to twenty-five Air Force references (33 vs. 25) and referenced "people" more frequently as well (26 vs. 17), both reflecting incentive structures that reward creativity, responsiveness, and outcome-oriented performance. Private industry also referenced "mission" twenty-three times compared to six Air Force references (23 vs. 6), suggesting stronger orientation toward achieving measurable, mission-driven results aligned with organizational performance metrics. In contrast, Air Force participants referenced "leadership" at substantially higher rates than private industry (20 vs. 13), reflecting incentives tied to formal roles, institutional responsibility, and process adherence. References to "change" were comparable across sectors (21 vs. 24), offering limited insight into incentive-specific differences.

Table 15. Hypothesis 8: Matrix Coding Keyword Query

	Change	Innovative	Leadership	Mission	People
Air Force	21	25	20	6	17
Private Industry	24	33	13	23	26
Total	45	58	33	29	43

Taken together, these quantitative patterns support Hypothesis 8, demonstrating that private-industry participants emphasize innovation and results-driven priorities more strongly, while Air Force responses align with incentive structures rooted in process integrity and institutional accountability.

Table 16. Interview Section Titles

S1	Background and Experience
S2	Training, Education, and Development
S3	Procurement and Acquisition Decision-Making
S4	Risk, Innovation, and Flexibility
S5	Cultural Influence on Procurement Decision-Making
S6	Public vs. Private Sector Comparisons
S7	Long Term Trends and Industry Practices
S8	Bridging the Gap and Future Recommendations
S9	Additional Insights

Table 17. Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	Interview Sections Used to Test	Air Force Patterns (NVivo Matrix Keyword Query results)	Private Industry Patterns (NVivo Matrix Keyword Query results)	Supported (Y/N/P)
H1	S1 S2	Career, Contracts, Leadership, Learning	Manage	Y
H2	S2	Learning, Training	Innovative, Risk	Y
H3	S3	N/a	Contracts, Cost, Government, Innovative, Risk	Y
H4	S4 S9	Risk	Innovation, Leadership, People, Risk	Y
H5	S5	Contracts, Innovative, Thinking	Culture, Leadership, People	Y
H6	S6 S9	Incentives, Innovation	Government, People, Risk	P
H7	S5 S7	Capability, Industry, Mission, Share	Change	P
H8	S8 S9	Leadership	Change, Innovative, Mission, People	Y

In conjunction with the above Table 17. Hypothesis Results table, the following comparative bar chart illustrates the difference between the two sectors by analyzing the highest frequency keywords across all eight hypotheses. Throughout the entire data set, the four highest frequency keywords derived from the NVivo Matrix Keyword Query results were "people," "risk," "leadership," and "innovative." As illustrated below in Figure 1. Keyword Frequency Comparison, private industry participants referenced the keyword "innovative" 148 times, compared to the Air Force participants at 116 times. The visual discrepancy illustrated in this figure supports this research's hypothesis by identifying and reporting the difference in mindset development through keyword frequency comparison.

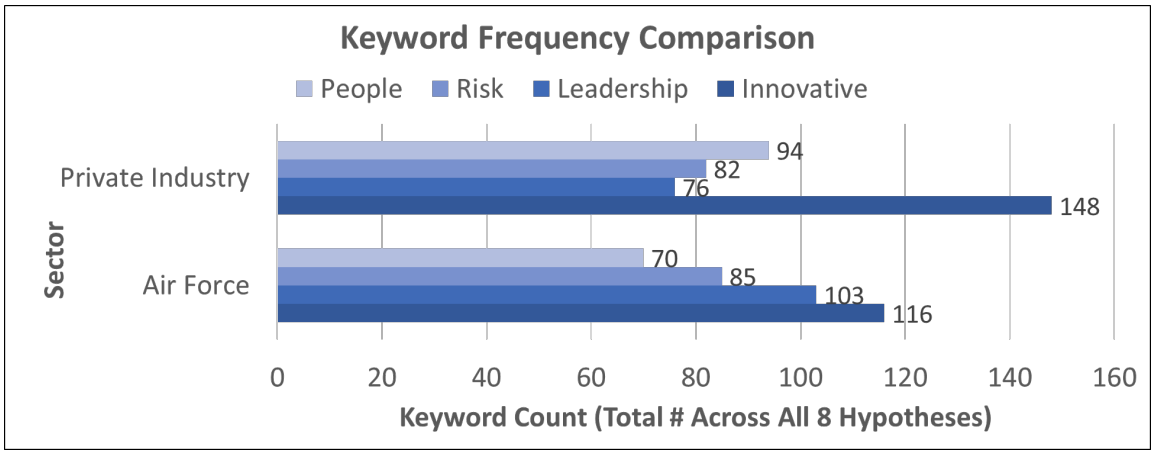

Figure 1. Keyword Frequency Comparison

E. INCONSISTENCIES IN ANALYSIS

Several inconsistencies and ambiguities emerged across the hypotheses that merit acknowledgment in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. First, some hypotheses showed mixed or partial support due to overlapping language patterns across sectors. For example, in Hypothesis 6 the Air Force referenced "innovation" more frequently than expected, despite predictions that innovation would be more prominent in private industry. Similarly, in Hypothesis 7 private-industry respondents referenced "change" at a higher rate, but other market-driven indicators were not as distinct as anticipated.

Second, internal contradictions appeared within sectors. Certain Air Force leaders described behaviors associated with flexibility and agile decision-making, which are not fully consistent with predicted risk-averse tendencies. Conversely, some private-industry participants emphasized structure, documentation, and internal bureaucracy, reflecting patterns typically associated with public-sector environments.

Third, the analysis was limited by the inherent constraints of text-query methods. NVivo word frequencies can occasionally register overlapping or duplicate terms, and keyword searches do not fully capture context or nuance. Additionally, manual coding and dataset restructuring introduce the possibility of human error, even with multiple rounds of review.

To minimize these risks, I took deliberate precautions throughout the analytic process, including manually cleaning and coding all transcripts, cross-checking ChatGPT-generated word lists for accuracy, validating all NVivo outputs by hand, and ensuring that no automatically generated content replaced participant language. These steps strengthen the credibility of the results while acknowledging that qualitative, text-based methods inherently involve analytic judgment and the potential for minor inconsistencies.

F. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings align closely with the study's two theoretical frameworks. Institutional Theory helps explain why Air Force leaders consistently foreground compliance, hierarchy, documentation, and stewardship, patterns reinforced by the formal structures and constraints of the federal acquisition system. Their language and behaviors reflect the normative and regulatory pressures characteristic of public-sector institutions.

In contrast, Learning Organization Theory aligns strongly with private-industry responses. Private-sector participants frequently emphasized innovation, change, people-centered leadership, and iterative learning, traits consistent with organizations that reward adaptability, experimentation, and continuous improvement in competitive environments.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that sector-specific institutional environments shape leadership mindsets in predictable but not absolute ways. While strong sector patterns emerged, several cross-sector overlaps and internal contradictions underscore the nuanced and evolving nature of procurement leadership across both the Air Force and private industry.

V. CONCLUSION

This research set out to compare the mindsets of senior Air Force procurement leaders and private-industry executives and to understand how those mindsets shape acquisition decisions, leadership behaviors, and training systems. The findings consistently show that Air Force leaders operate within organizational structures that reinforce compliance, documentation, and procedural correctness. By contrast, private-industry executives demonstrate language patterns centered on innovation, adaptability, customer responsiveness, and iterative learning.

Across the interview data, many Air Force participants expressed a genuine desire to pursue innovation, improve processes, and take on new initiatives. Several described intrinsic motivation to solve problems, mentor others, and modernize procurement practices. However, these personal aspirations frequently collided with structural and cultural constraints. They also described a system in which senior leaders with positional authority often exercised risk-averse decision-making, with limited support for experimentation or unconventional approaches. This led some Air Force leaders—particularly those who were highly motivated, growth-oriented, or innovation-driven—to leave government service altogether and transition into private industry, where they perceived greater freedom to implement new ideas.

These findings suggest several actionable recommendations. First, Air Force contracting leadership development should explicitly address the gap between individual motivation and institutional constraints. Leaders need structured opportunities to practice adaptive thinking, cross-functional collaboration, and outcome-based decision-making—skills strongly associated with private-industry success.

Second, incentives should be aligned to recognize initiative, experimentation, and continuous improvement, rather than rewarding strict conformity to process alone. Third, contracting organizations should strive for a more balanced model of bureaucracy—one that preserves necessary compliance requirements while reducing unnecessary procedural friction that suppresses innovation. Finally, leadership at all levels should communicate clearly that responsible risk-taking is welcome and that failure, when tied to deliberate

experimentation, is a learning opportunity rather than a career liability. These changes would help cultivate a culture that retains high-performing talent and supports the kind of mindset shift necessary to improve acquisition agility.

A. LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

This research is limited by its scope, sample size, and methodological constraints. The study focused specifically on senior Air Force procurement leaders and private-industry executives, which means the findings may not represent the experiences of junior personnel, mid-career members, or leaders in other defense organizations. Participation was dependent on the availability of senior leaders, which naturally limits the diversity of perspectives.

The qualitative design employed here also presents inherent limitations. Semi-structured interviews rely on participant self-reporting, which may reflect personal interpretation, recall bias, or organizational framing. While the mixed manual and software-assisted coding approach strengthened accuracy, the process still carries the possibility of human error in transcription cleaning, coding, and interpreting NVivo outputs. Word-frequency queries can overcount stemmed terms or capture decontextualized language, and qualitative pattern identification depends on analytic judgment.

These limitations do not undermine the overall findings, but they do indicate that results should be interpreted as reflective of the sampled population rather than universally representative of all procurement professionals across the Air Force or private industry.

B. AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The most immediate area for future research is assessing how the findings of this thesis can be integrated into a revised Air Force Contracting CFETP, particularly within its leadership development pathways. A focused study should evaluate how incorporating private-industry-aligned practices—such as iterative learning, psychological safety, empowerment-focused leadership, and incentive structures tied to outcomes rather than processing strengthen the development of Air Force contracting professionals. Future

research should also explore how these changes could be operationalized across training pipelines and career milestones, ensuring that growth-oriented, innovation-supportive behaviors are modeled and reinforced from the earliest stages of professional development.

Additional research should expand the scope of this study by examining mindset formation among Company Grade Officers (CGOs) and junior-grade procurement contract specialists, whose developmental experiences may differ from those of senior leaders. It would also be valuable to investigate why intrinsically motivated, innovative-oriented personnel sometimes become discouraged by institutional rigidity and, in some cases, transition to private industry. Further lines of inquiry include exploring how the same public–private mindset comparison manifests in the broader Joint acquisition community, identifying organizational conditions that meaningfully support responsible innovation, evaluating strategies to balance bureaucratic requirements with flexible decision-making, and assessing how structural or cultural reforms can improve talent retention and procurement agility across the defense enterprise.

C. SUMMARY

Dweck's (2017) framework of fixed versus growth mindsets provides a foundational psychological lens for understanding leadership behavior, and Kouzes and Posner's (2019) work extends this to show how growth-oriented leaders more frequently engage in collaborative, coaching-based, and risk-tolerant behaviors. These ideas align directly with Denning's (2019) emphasis on the agile mindset and Garvin's (1993) conception of the learning organization. Together, these theories help explain the clear difference in mindset structures revealed through the interviews: Air Force leaders operate within a system that reinforces fixed, compliance-driven orientations, while private-industry executives more commonly operate within environments that reward adaptability, experimentation, and continuous learning.

The findings of this research confirm that mindset and institutional environment jointly shape procurement behavior. While recent Air Force policy documents express a desire for greater agility, the underlying structures—training systems, evaluation frameworks, and cultural norms—continue to reward procedural adherence over

innovation. In contrast, private industry's competitive environment incentivizes flexibility, rapid learning cycles, and outcome-focused decision-making. This comparative analysis fills a documented gap in the literature by offering a detailed, NVivo-supported evaluation of how these differing mindsets manifest in acquisition contexts.

Ultimately, the research demonstrates that meaningful modernization of Air Force procurement requires more than policy reform; it requires a shift in the underlying leadership and organizational mindset. Many Air Force participants expressed strong intrinsic motivation, creativity, and desire for improvement, yet structural barriers and risk-averse cultural expectations constrained their ability to act on these motivations. Sustained progress will require intentional cultivation of a culture that supports responsible risk-taking, rewards innovative-minded leaders, and balances necessary bureaucratic requirements with greater operational agility. By integrating growth-oriented practices into leadership development and institutional training systems, the Air Force can better align its procurement culture with the dynamic challenges of modern defense environments.

LIST OF REFERENCES

Bhasin, S. (2017). Institutional theory: The logic of institutions. *International Business Management*, *10*(23), 5422–5431. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316474609_Institutional_theory_the_logic_of_institutions

Birken, S. A., Bunger, A. C., Powell, B. J., Turner, K., Clary, A. S., Klaman, S. L., … Weiner, B. J. (2017). Organizational theory for dissemination and implementation research. *Implementation Science*, *12*(62). 175–196. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-017-0592-x

Bogetoft, P., Kromann, L., Smilgins, A., Sørensen, A., Andersen, E., Christiansen, C., … Smith, N. (2024). Innovation strategies and firm performance. *Journal of Productivity Analysis*, *62*, 175–196. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11123-024-00727-1

Bullard, E. (n.d.). *Purposive sampling*. EBSCO. Retrieved Sep 11, 2025, from https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/purposive-sampling

Dadzie, E.B, Amoah, J., Egala, S.B., Keelson, S.A. & Jibril, A.B. (2024). The impact of procurement training on procurement process efficiency and organizational performance: A PLS-SEM analysis. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Knowledge*, *12*(1), 24–42. https://doi.org/10.37335/ijek.v12i1.228

Denning, S. (2019, August 13). Understanding the agile mindset. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2019/08/13/understanding-the-agile-mindset/

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*, 147–60. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101

Drew, J., Shelton, W., Snyder, D., & Van Abel, J. (2024). *Getting space acquisition right: Steps to realize enduring change* (RBA1735-1). RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1735-1.html

Dweck, C. S. (2017). *Mindset: Changing the way you think to fulfil your potential*. Updated edition, Robinson.

Ellinger, A. D., Ellinger, A. E., Yang, B., & Howton, S. W. (2002). The relationship between the learning organization concept and firms' financial performance: An empirical assessment. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 13*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.1010

FAR, 48 C.F.R. ch. 1 (2023). https://www.acquisition.gov/browse/index/far

Garvin, D. A. (1993, July-August). Building a learning organization. *Harvard Business Review*, *71*(4), 78–91. https://hbr.org/1993/07/building-a-learning-organization?utm

Heubeck, T., & Meckl, R. (2022). More capable, more innovative? An empirical inquiry into the effects of dynamic managerial capabilities on digital firms' innovativeness. *European Journal of Innovation Management, 25*(6), 1238–1257. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJIM-02-2022-0099

Kouzes, T. K., & Posner, B. Z. (2019). Influence of managers' mindset on leadership behavior. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, *40*(8), 829–844. https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-03-2019-0142

Lopez, C. T. (2020, June 30). Risk aversion impedes hypersonics development. *DoD News*. U.S. Department of Defense. https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2243224/risk-aversion-impedes-hypersonics-development/

Maidique, M. A. (2018, May 25). The mindsets of a leader. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-mindsets-of-a-leader/

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, *83*(2), 340–363. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2778293

Nash, R. (1997, July–August). Training the contracting officer of the future. Program Manager, *26*(4), 2–5.

Office of the Provost and Chief Academic Officer. (2023, March 15). *NPS interim guiding principles for use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools* [Memorandum]. https://nps.edu/documents/106660594/140848999/Interim-Guidance-on-Generative-AI-3.15.23+Memo.pdf

OpenAI. (2025). *What is ChatGPT?* Retrieved Oct 23, 2025, from https://help.openai.com/en/articles/6783457-what-is-chatgpt

OpenAI. (n.d.). *ChatGPT (GPT-5)* [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/

Pfeffer, J. (2015). Leadership BS: Fixing workplaces and careers one truth at a time. HarperBusiness

SAF/AQC, DAF Contracting. (2023, April 14). *Change 2 AFSC 64PX contracting, career field education and training plan*. Headquarters, U.S. Air Force. https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/saf_aq/publication/cfetp64pxc2/cfetp64pxc2.pdf

Schultz, B. (July-August 2020). Moving from risk-averse to innovative opportunity-seekers. *Defense Acquisition Magazine*. www.dau.edu/library/damag/july-august2020/moving-risk

Selznick, P. (1957). *Leadership in administration: A sociological interpretation*. Harper & Row.

Templin, C. R. (1994). Defense contractor buyer-seller relationships: Theoretical approaches. Acquisition Review Quarterly, *1*(2), 114–128. DTIC: ADA487945

The Acquisition 2005 Task Force. (2000, October 1). *Shaping the civilian acquisition workforce of the future: Acquisition 2005 Task Force final report* (SEC809-AWF-00-0031). Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness & Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics. https://dair.nps.edu/handle/123456789/3871

The White House. (2025a, April 9). *Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump modernizes defense acquisitions and spurs innovation in the defense industrial base*. https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/04/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-modernizes-defense-acquisitions-and-spurs-innovation-in-the-defense-industrial-base/

The White House. (2025b, April 9). *Modernizing defense acquisitions and spurring innovation in the defense industrial base*. https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/modernizing-defense-acquisitions-and-spurring-innovation-in-the-defense-industrial-base/

Toegel, G., & Barsoux. J.-L. (2012, March 20). How to become a better leader. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-become-a-better-leader/

Trevino, A. W. (2024). Department of the Air Force contracting flight plan. SAF/AQC, DAF Contracting. https://ww3.safaq.hq.af.mil/Portals/63/documents/organizations/DAF%20Contracting%20Flight%20Plan%202024.pdf?ver=dPk0bpSQq-ODiIpAKJsaQg%3D%3D

Woida, C. (2024, April). *Supporting research and writing with generative AI* [PDF slides]. Naval Postgraduate School. https://nps.edu/documents/111693070/151421299/Supporting+Research+and+Writing+with+Generative+AI+slides+2024.04.pdf

Wong, J. P., Younossi, O., LaCoste, C. K., Anton, P. S., Vick, A. J., Weichenberg, G., … Whitmore, T. C. (2022). *Improving defense acquisition: Insights from three decades of RAND research* (RRA1670-1). RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1670-1.html

Acquisition Research Program
Naval Postgraduate School
555 Dyer Road, Ingersoll Hall
Monterey, CA 93943

www.acquisitionresearch.net