



NILE

PREVENTING SUICIDE IN THE MILITARY THROUGH INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AND A CULTURE OF CONNECTION

S2A's NILE program revolutionizes suicide prevention by empowering NCOs to claim their role in shaping military culture.

“I stood at the head of Airman Reed’s* casket, watching his mother mourn over the closed lid. ‘I want to see him,’ she said. ‘Can you open it?’”

Kevin Norman, a 29-year Air Force veteran in civilian clothes, pauses and clears his throat. He’s standing at the front of a cleared-out conference room. Before him sits a group of 16 Air Force NCOs who, minutes prior, had entered the room with sullen frowns and crossed arms, braced for three days of mind-dulling PowerPoints. Now, 10 minutes into Norman’s story, they’re leaning forward, rapt, locked onto his every word.

“I tried to hold myself together,” Norman continues in a choked voice. “I wasn’t there to judge the family. I was

**Name changed to protect privacy*

there to represent the Air Force and Airman Reed. And I knew he wouldn’t want his mother to see what that gunshot had done to him. So I told her, ‘I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t think that would be a good idea.’”

Norman is the program director of NCO Inclusive Leadership Excellence (NILE). This three-day leadership training program was created in response to the high rates of suicide among junior airmen in the Air Force. But unlike the dozens of other prevention programs these NCOs had undergone, this one started with a seasoned veteran being deeply vulnerable as he shared his personal connection to the issue.

Little did these NCOs know they would soon be sharing their own personal stories, with a level of authenticity and vulnerability they couldn’t see coming.



“This course is a valuable tool to help make us better supervisors and better people. It’s not just about suicide. It goes much deeper.”

—NCO Participant

SUICIDE PREVENTION REQUIRES MORE THAN JUST CRISIS RESPONSE.

When Kirtland’s 58th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron requested bids for solutions to the high suicide rates of its junior enlisted airmen, S2A Founder and Managing Director Brad Brezinski felt a personal pull to the mission. Decades before, his roommate at Naval Nuclear Power School had died by suicide at age 21. The experience had forever shaped Brezinski’s outlook on culture, leadership and mental health in the armed forces.

In fact, every member of S2A’s leadership team had a personal connection to suicide in the military. It’s no wonder, given the scale of the problem. Suicide has claimed many military lives over the decades, but in recent years there’s been a sharp rise that shows no sign

of abating. The 2021 annual report on suicide in the military reports an increasing trend line among service members ages 18–30 years old throughout the last 10 years. Without mass intervention, these suicide rates will become even more prevalent among NCOs and junior enlisted recruits.

The Department of Defense has long been committed to an intervention-based approach, with solutions focused on recognizing and reporting the signs of crisis. This methodology provides critical support during acute emergencies—but tragically, it has not succeeded in curbing overall suicide rates.

Rapid response solutions on their own aren’t enough to prevent suicide. We also need proactive prevention strategies that start long before the crisis takes hold.



MILITARY SUICIDE IS A CULTURAL PROBLEM, NOT JUST AN INDIVIDUAL ONE.

Feelings of loneliness, isolation and insignificance are major drivers of suicidal ideation and behaviors among junior airmen. But these feelings don't happen in a vacuum. They are amplified and exacerbated by the cultural conditions and stressors of the work.

The Air Force boasts some of the most stressful jobs on the planet, bolstered by a culture of toughness that leaves little room for vulnerability or connection. At the bottom of this power structure sit junior enlisted airmen who, unlike their peers with regular jobs, don't have the option to quit, transfer or go home if the conditions get to be too much.

Military leadership doesn't have the power to change these airmen's feelings. But it does have the power to change their conditions.

NILE exists to address the cultural conditions that feed suicidal ideation among these young servicemen and women. It does so by targeting the one person who holds the greatest influence over their day-to-day experience: their NCO.

NCOs HOLD THE KEYS TO CULTURAL CHANGE.

NCOs have the greatest single impact on the lived experiences of junior airmen. Yet NCOs typically feel little agency over their identities as leaders, or the cultures they foster as a result.

Because of this lack of agency, NCOs tend to perpetuate dominant Air Force cultural norms within the microcosms of their teams. This creates an experience often defined by hierarchy, harshness and self-erasure. Many NCOs describe

the Air Force culture as "toxic," without realizing that they themselves are stewards of their self-described toxicity.

NILE disrupts this passive mindset by facilitating NCOs through a process of connecting to their histories, their senses of self and their personal leadership missions. This helps them learn to recognize and break the cycle, discovering their agency and power to create inclusively excellent cultures.

THE NILE DIFFERENCE: TARGETING INFLUENCERS TO ACCELERATE CHANGE

NILE isn't a blanket program for all NCOs; it's strategically targeted to specific problem areas of a command where inclusive leadership is breaking down. S2A's development & support team identifies these problem areas in our cultural discovery phase, powered by Constellation AI.

Constellation AI is a proprietary organizational network analysis (ONA) developed by S2A. We use this platform to map the informal networks of influence and collaboration—known as shadow networks—that exist underneath the formal command and control structure of a given command. This helps us identify:

1. The areas of greatest cultural need in your organization
2. The people who are making it worse or better
3. The people who are struggling hardest to plug into the existing culture

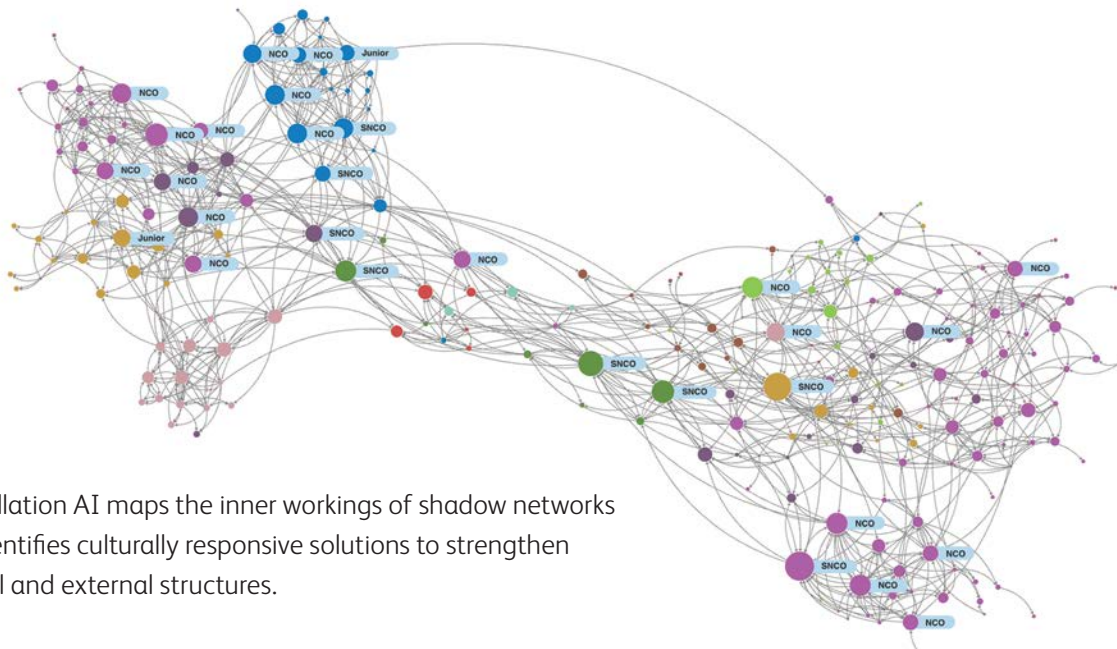
By using this innovative technology to map these influencers and isolates, we can pinpoint the problems and accelerate solutions.



*"Intense, transformative and deep. It really makes you think and self-reflect. I really got a good understanding of who I am, and I feel more at peace."
—NCO Participant*

CONSTELLATION AI

ACCELERATING INSIGHTS



Constellation AI maps the inner workings of shadow networks and identifies culturally responsive solutions to strengthen internal and external structures.

EMPOWERING LEADERS THROUGH ADOPTION, NOT IMPLEMENTATION

Each NILE cohort comprises 12–18 NCOs, hand-selected for their informal networks and positive cultural influence. These NCOs help spread the word, drive interest and accelerate widespread adoption of the program in the shortest amount of time.

Some participants are longtime sergeants with thick skins and “seen it all” attitudes. Others are in their 20s, with only three or four years of service and little leadership training. But one thing they definitely have in common: They’re utterly sick of mandatory suicide prevention trainings.

They shuffle into the first day with an air of resentful compliance. But they soon discover what sets NILE apart: its emphasis on adoption rather than implementation.

NILE doesn’t prescribe NCOs with a “correct” leadership style, or train them in rote behaviors. Instead it asks them to reflect deeply on the kind of leader they want to be and why. They’re prompted to identify the ways they have contributed to the various undercurrents within the Air Force culture, and to discover their own locus of control within those cultural dynamics.



“It’s not just a regular PME course. We were allowed to express opinions and beliefs in an open setting, amongst other fellow maintainers, without judgment. The course, overall, made you feel like you want to be better.”

—NCO Participant

DAY 1

BREAKING EXPECTATIONS

Day 1 opens with a NILE master facilitator, always a seasoned military veteran, sharing their personal story of how suicide in the military has affected them. Their stories are brutally honest, detailed and heart-wrenching. This shakes up the NCOs' expectations from the get-go, and sets a tone of introspection, vulnerability and accountability that pervades every subsequent activity over the next three days.



"It's an eye-opening experience, where you're able to delve into the nitty gritty of other peoples' values and learn why people do the things they do."

—NCO Participant

Asked to describe the culture of the military, the NCOs toss out words like, "Grinding." "Misogynistic." "Relentless." Occasionally a positive descriptor enters the mix: "Tight-knit." "Teamwork." But overwhelmingly, their words paint a picture of a hierarchical, masculinized, "eat or be eaten" culture in which compassion is seen as weakness, and individuality has no place at all.

Later they're asked, "What's one thing you like to do that makes you feel like you?" Many NCOs don't have a ready answer. Some offer a cliché reply like, "Spending time with my family." The facilitators push back, disrupting and challenging the NCOs to reflect deeply and critically on what makes them feel most like themselves.

As the NCOs grow in their ability to describe both their culture and their character, the facilitators help them recognize how the two create and reinforce each other. By the end of the first day, epiphanies are zinging around the room as the NCOs realize how they have been co-creating a negative culture for their airmen through their own self-erasure and disconnection.



"If everyone attended the course in our unit, we could get together to make it a better place."

—NCO Participant





The NCOs come to the second day activated, engaged and eager to continue the work. The day revolves around helping them build their sense of personal mission and identity as a leader. How do you take care of yourself? How do you define your leadership style? What is your core purpose? And how does that translate to the experience you create for your junior airmen?

The NCOs participate in writing exercises and share backs, through which they articulate the experiences and hardships that have shaped their leadership identities. Many begin working on their own stories of pain, trauma and loss, and practice sharing these with their cohort members.

By the end of the second day, the NCOs have a clear sense of their internal locus of control in shaping the cultures of their teams. They've practiced verbalizing their core motivators and formative experiences.

Most of all, they have connected to an authentic, compassionate "why" at the heart of their identities as leaders.



"I believe NCOs possessing an internal locus of control married up with a strong commitment to fulfilling personal and organizational virtues stand a much higher chance of building airmen who are connected to other people and to a bigger sense of purpose and mission, both of which are strongly protective against suicide."

—Maj. Samuel D. Oldham,
USAF Operational Psychologist

AUTHENTICITY IS POWER

On the third day, each NCO is joined by one of their junior airmen. The bulk of the day consists of the NCOs sharing, one by one, the stories that shaped them into the leaders they are today.

They speak with breathtaking vulnerability and courage as they share deeply personal stories, sometimes revealing their own experiences with self-harm. Almost all the stories culminate in success, hope and clarity on how these experiences have made them who they are.

As they listen to these stories, the junior airmen discover, perhaps for the first time since enlisting, that they're not alone in their struggles. They realize they can look to their leaders for support, and that there are safe spaces within the armed forces for sharing and connection.

By the end of the program, the NCOs are transformed. They no longer believe that leadership and authenticity are mutually exclusive. They understand that leading

from a place of inclusion and compassion is better for the mission, the team and themselves. They leave with a deep understanding of their own power to create inclusively excellent cultures.

In the words of Master Facilitator Dan Antrim, "The third day is just magic."



"Take it now."

"Please make this an Air Force-wide class."

"Best class I've been to in the Air Force."

"I would recommend it to any NCO, of any time in service."

"We NEED more classes like this."

—NCO Participants





NILE OFFERS TARGETED SOLUTIONS WITH VAST COLLATERAL BENEFITS.

NILE doesn't just help prevent suicide. It dramatically improves overall team and command performance.



"I do not believe that I could replicate NILE with my existing team and resources, and I believe its quality would be sharply degraded without continuation of contracted subject matter experts (SMEs). If fiscally realistic, I believe this would be a highly beneficial program targeting NCOs in high-stress work environments across the USAF."

—Maj. Samuel D. Oldham,
USAF Operational Psychologist

When supported, engaged and empowered, NCOs and junior airmen get measurably better at accomplishing the mission. Team cultures powered by inclusive excellence will outperform more disparate or fractured teams every time.

Why? Because feeling connected and in control empowers service members to activate their full and best selves towards the work at hand.

Since NILE's launch in April 2021, multiple cohorts of NCO participants have resoundingly affirmed the program's positive impact, and with an overall program rating of 4.9 out of 5.0 across all cohorts. In 2023, NILE was awarded the Major General Marcelite Harris Trailblazer Award by the Logistics Officer Association. Major Samuel D. Oldham called NILE "the best resilience-focused seminar I have personally observed or been part of in my eight years of service as a USAF psychologist."

By empowering participants to leverage their authentic and unique leadership abilities, NILE builds inclusively excellent cultures, improves mission accomplishment, and restores a sense of purpose and agency to the NCO community.



"This is the first program that gave me hope and feels like an actual solution. I wonder if I would have made it much longer without it—I have been in a bad place recently and feel hopeful again. I needed this. Thank You."

—NCO Participant

For more information and to schedule a free consultation, contact us at information@s2a.org.

