

Burnout and Decision-Making in U.S. Air Force Maintainers: A Phenomenological Study

Lauren Archer
Bellevue University

Stephen Linenberger
Bellevue University

Despite the critical role played by aircraft maintainers in the U.S. Air Force (USAF), research on the perceived effects of burnout on maintainers' decision-making remains limited, creating a significant gap in the literature. This paper seeks to address this gap by presenting the results of phenomenological interviews with five veteran USAF maintainers who recently served in this career field and who experienced the effects of burnout on their decision-making capacity and quality. Our analysis of interview data, field notes, and observations revealed five key themes: toxic work culture, job tempo, self-efficacy, leadership support quality, and job satisfaction. These themes are analyzed in the context of existing literature on burnout, decision-making, and leadership to provide insights that can inform future management and leadership practices in the USAF maintainer field, with the goal of mitigating the effects of burnout on decision-making effectiveness.

Military life is riddled with stress. U.S. military members confront a continual variety of stressful situations, including extended exposure to war, deployments, challenging working conditions, and family separations. Members are frequently relocated to new duty stations, work long hours, and face the cold reality that the mission will always come first in their lives. This stress often leads to burnout, which has been shown to affect decision-making in organizations (Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1971). Burnout also contributes to costly safety issues and workers' compensation-related incidents (Chappelle et al., 2014). However, the relationship between burnout and decision-making in a military setting has yet to be fully examined. Thus, the guiding central research question for this study was: What are the perceptions of the effect of burnout on maintainers' decision-making within the USAF?

To answer this question, interviews were conducted with five U.S. Air Force (USAF) veterans to understand their lived experience of different levels of burnout and its effects on decision-making in a high-tempo, stressful military environment.

Literature Review

This section reviews the key concepts of burnout and decision-making, examines their predictors in military contexts, and integrates relevant empirical literature on burnout among military personnel. It provides the theoretical foundation for interpreting the lived experiences of U.S. Air Force maintainers in this study.

Burnout

While burnout has a wide variety of definitions, this study uses Wilcox's (2000) definition of burnout as the experience of occupational exhaustion from physical,

emotional, or mental factors. Wilcox (2000) explained that military members who experienced chronic exposure to occupational stressors would begin to develop symptoms such as a lack of personal accomplishment, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion. A lack of personal accomplishment often results in "professional depression," reduced energy or enthusiasm, and declining productivity. Burned-out military members may take more frequent breaks or become more absent than their colleagues (Wilcox, 2000). They may also avoid problems, changes, or decision-making, which ultimately impairs performance and jeopardizes mission success.

Emotional exhaustion leads to increased likelihood of job turnover (Wilcox, 2000). Members feeling significantly taxed by their job become incapable of dealing with additional stress. This strain affects colleagues as well, increasing the likelihood of shared burnout within a unit. Burnout develops not from sudden stress increases but from diminished coping capacity over time.

Decision-Making

Decision-making has been defined as the process of selecting between competing actions while considering the value of their consequences (Balleine, 2007; Michailidis & Banks, 2016). Risky decision-making involves choices with potential for both negative and positive outcomes (Maner et al., 2007) and is highly contingent on variations in the task environment (Payne, 1973). Stress in a task environment signals threat, activating psychological responses to reduce vulnerability (Barlow, 1988; Butler & Mathews, 1987). Burnout can lead members to resort to risky decision-making strategies that simplify choices and ignore relevant information (Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1971), which is a threat-avoidance behavior (Maner et al., 2007).

Predictors of Risky Decision-Making

The most dangerous factor linking burnout and risky decision-making relates directly to the work environment, including psychological and physical aspects (Nowakowska et al., 2016). Time pressures, role conflicts, emotional demands, and excessive workload contribute to burnout. Experienced leaders can falter in decision-making when there is no supportive environment (Stogdill & Coons, 1957). Structural conditions can trigger errors and unfavorable outcomes in decision-making processes (Mina, 2012).

Research indicated significant moderating effects between job enhancement and burnout (Constable & Russell, 1986). Military members working in highly demanding, uncomfortable environments face greater susceptibility to burnout (Constable & Russell, 1986). Members often rely on avoidance strategies when they lack control over their environment, especially during deployments (Rosebush, 1998; Romero et al., 2015).

Overestimation and illusions of invulnerability may also emerge when military personnel believe strongly in their organization's inherent morality (Osder, 2013). For example, the USAF Aircraft Accident Investigation Board Report (Everhart II, 2010) highlighted four fatalities resulting from one pilot's risky, unsupervised demonstration maneuvers. Chronic fatigue and relentless schedules have been linked to aviation mishaps (Mitchell, 2020), suggesting that burned-out leaders may engage in riskier decision-making (Van Dam et al., 2013; Van den Bos et al., 2009).

In conclusion, Figure 1 summarizes the proposed connections between toxic work culture, job tempo, self-efficacy, leadership support, and job satisfaction with decision-making under burnout conditions, informed by the study's phenomenological themes.

Empirical Military Burnout Research

Military burnout studies often use nonexperimental cross-sectional surveys (Morrow et al., 2013; Cragun et al., 2016; Chappelle et al., 2014) and cohort studies (Jones et al., 2012) to highlight the harmful effects of burnout (Bryan et al., 2018). Common facets include exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy (Chappelle et al., 2014), with exhaustion and cynicism emerging as leading contributors (Bryan et al., 2018). Alarming, research suggested burnout increases suicide ideation risk (Bryan et al., 2018).

Occupational injuries such as meniscal damage or ankle sprains have been associated with active duty personnel (Cameron et al., 2010; Crawford & Helms, 2019; Jones et al., 2012), indicating that workplace factors affect mental and physical health. Good et al. (2020) underlined stressful conditions such as night shifts, sustained operations, and rapid time-zone changes as likely burnout drivers. These stressors are inherent to military work.

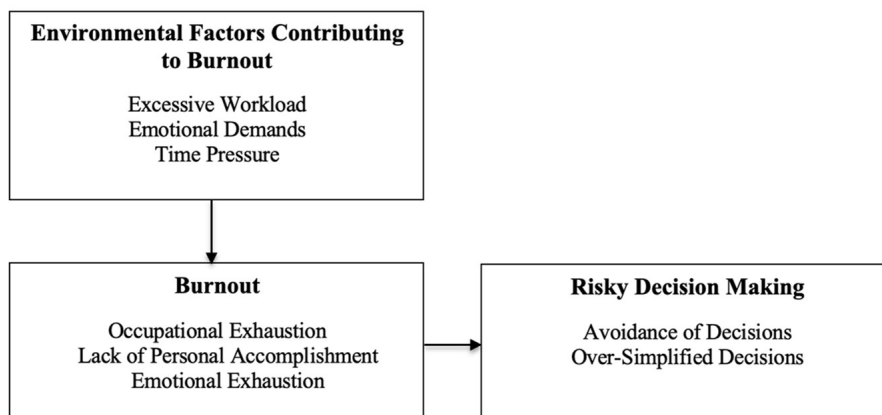
Within the USAF, burnout affects pilots, aircrew, intelligence operators, and cyber warfare personnel (Bryan et al., 2018). Mid-career groups often report higher emotional distress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction (Bryan et al., 2018). However, the link between burnout and deployment status remains mixed (Cragun et al., 2016).

Chappelle et al. (2019) found that drone operators exposed to real-time battlefield imagery, including civilian casualties, displayed PTSD and burnout symptoms. High weekly working hours (51+) and age group (31–40) were linked to higher PTSD and burnout criteria (Chappelle et al., 2019). This suggests high-stress environments with long working hours contribute significantly to burnout (Archer & Alagaraja, 2021).

Overall, evidence confirms burnout is prevalent among different military subgroups. Leadership plays a central

Figure 1

Conceptual Relationship Between Burnout and Decision-Making in USAF Maintainers



Note. This figure integrates theoretical perspectives on occupational burnout, job demands, coping mechanisms, and risky decision-making, informed by the literature reviewed in this study.

ing. Saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged. To confirm findings, triangulation involved multiple sources of verification, including observations, member checking, transcripts, and participant feedback.

Results

The results are presented using a top-down approach, beginning with broad superordinate themes, then related sub-themes and emergent themes that contributed to understanding patterns in participants' experiences. Five superordinate themes emerged across all interviews, giving voice to participants' shared experiences of burnout and decision-making in the USAF maintainer role. These themes include: (1) toxic work relationships/culture, (2) job tempo, (3) self-efficacy, (4) leadership support quality, and (5) job satisfaction.

The findings from this study align closely with Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), providing a deeper understanding of how burnout impacts decision-making among USAF maintainers. The toxic work culture described by participants—characterized by favoritism, ostracism, and lack of support—indicates a deficiency in transformational leadership behaviors. Similarly, the high job tempo and excessive workloads create overwhelming job demands that exceed available resources, contributing to burnout and disengagement.

These insights can be integrated into a conceptual model (Table 1) that highlights how each theme contributes to risky decision-making under burnout conditions. This model visually represents the interplay between organizational stressors, individual resources, and decision-making effectiveness under burnout, offering a practical framework for USAF leadership development and intervention planning.

Theme Descriptions

The following sections describe the five superordinate themes identified in the analysis. Each theme represents a significant aspect of how burnout impacts decision-making among USAF maintainers. Descriptions are supported by direct participant quotes that illustrate the complexity and nuance of these lived experiences, offering a deeper understanding of how organizational culture and operational pressures shape decision-making under stress.

Theme 1: Toxic Work Relationships and Culture

When asked what made them feel drained from work, four participants cited toxic relationships and culture as the most exhausting aspects of their jobs. Participants described favoritism, ostracism, and manipulative behaviors that generated frustration and conflict. For example, one participant shared that certain leaders made themselves indispensable despite poor leadership skills, breeding internal anger. Others described favoritism in assignments and promotion opportunities, undermining trust and collaboration. Toxic peer dynamics also directly impaired decision-making: participants felt information was hoarded and decisions were routinely undermined, making it difficult to act confidently or effectively. The no-fail, perfectionistic culture heightened stakes, with participants citing punishment, paperwork, or nonjudicial punishment for errors, fostering fear-based compliance rather than thoughtful decision-making.

Theme 2: Job Tempo

Job tempo was another major contributor to burnout. Participants described 24/7 availability, last-minute schedule changes, and weeks of 12-hour shifts without relief. One described working "for a week straight on 12-hour shifts" as physically exhausting. Others highlighted unpredictable flying schedules alternating between extreme busyness and inactivity, contributing to chronic

Table 1

Themes and Sample Quotes

Superordinate themes	Sub-themes	Participant quotes
Toxic work relationships/culture	Favoritism, Ostracism, Humiliation, Narcissistic Behaviors	"Knowledge is power, and there are people that want to keep that information to themselves."
Job tempo	24/7 Availability, Last-Minute Schedule Changes, 12+ Hour Shifts	"Working for a week straight on 12-hour shifts was physically exhausting."
Self-efficacy	Confidence, Reputation, Perceived Competence	"A lot of times you can get undermined by your coworkers due to the fact that they just want to look good."
Leadership support quality	Micromanagement, Decision Undermining, Lack of Trust	"Leaders routinely hijack a decision that was mine to make."
Job satisfaction	Work-Life Balance, Perceived Value in Role, Intentions to Stay or Leave	"My biggest reason for leaving was a lack of job satisfaction. I would not go back under any circumstances."

stress. These conditions forced hasty decisions with inadequate time for quality control. Participants reported sacrificing thoroughness and attention to detail, knowing their rushed work increased error risk. The time pressure transformed complex problem-solving into simplified, stress-driven calculations under constant scrutiny.

Theme 3: Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy emerged as both a personal resource and a point of vulnerability. Participants explained that confidence in their skills shaped decision-making quality, but burnout eroded this confidence. Some described being consistently undermined by coworkers eager to appear competent, leading to public embarrassment and reduced trust in their own judgments. Others felt over-relied upon, forced to take responsibility for every task while facing criticism for inevitable mistakes. Poor decisions damaged professional reputation severely: one participant recounted a colleague's single error halting their career progression for years. These pressures fed a cycle of stress, reduced self-efficacy, and riskier or more avoidant decision-making.

Theme 4: Leadership Support Quality

Leadership support quality significantly influenced burnout and decision-making. Participants described micromanagement, inflexible rule enforcement, and decision-undermining behaviors. One participant attributed burnout directly to their commander's micromanagement. Another highlighted black-and-white thinking among section chiefs who refused to accommodate operational realities. Participants felt their decisions were routinely hijacked or second-guessed, leading to frustration and disengagement. The lack of trust and autonomy eroded motivation and fostered conflict between line maintainers and leadership, damaging team cohesion and degrading decision quality under stress.

Theme 5: Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction was intimately connected to intentions to stay or leave the organization. One participant explained their decision to separate was driven entirely by lack of satisfaction: "I would not go back under any circumstances." Others pointed to work-life balance as a rare positive, helping them manage stress and remain in the field. Participants consistently linked burnout with deteriorating morale, disengagement, and thoughts of leaving, underscoring the strategic importance of fostering job satisfaction for retention and readiness.

Implications for Practice

Based on our findings, three implications for practice are presented: (a) efforts to minimize toxic work relationships and culture; (b) putting measures in place to ease an intense 24/7 job tempo; and (c) enhancing leadership support.

(a) Efforts to minimize toxic work relationships and

culture should focus on reducing favoritism, humiliation, and fear-based perfectionism. This requires cultural change toward a model of excellence rather than unattainable perfection, aligning with the USAF core value of "Excellence in all we do" (USAF Blue Book, 2022). Leadership can model vulnerability, encourage open communication, and reward process improvement. Systems that view errors as learning opportunities rather than failures promote trust and innovation.

(b) Addressing job tempo requires recognizing its inherent demands while increasing available resources to mitigate stress. Organizations can implement voluntary, duty-hour social support and team-building opportunities. These should be designed to avoid "mandatory fun" during scarce off-duty time. Peer-support programs or buddy systems have proven effective in other settings, fostering connection and shared knowledge without increasing stress. Casual check-ins focused on well-being can help members feel heard and valued, reducing burnout and enhancing team effectiveness.

(c) Enhancing leadership support means moving beyond micromanagement to shared leadership practices. Training should help leaders trust their teams, provide broad guidance, and allow maintainers autonomy within their scope. This approach can reduce conflict, build trust, and foster team cohesion. Leaders who support decentralized decision-making empower airmen to exercise judgment, boosting morale and engagement while reducing burnout risk.

Discussion

The findings from this study align closely with Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), offering valuable insights into how burnout impacts decision-making among USAF maintainers. Participants described experiencing toxic work culture, relentless job tempo, eroded self-efficacy, poor leadership support, and diminished job satisfaction—all factors contributing to reduced decision-making quality under stress. These themes underscore the importance of understanding both organizational and personal factors that shape maintainers' ability to make effective, safe, and ethical decisions in demanding military contexts.

The toxic work culture identified in interviews—marked by favoritism, ostracism, and poor communication—revealed a failure of transformational leadership behaviors such as individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation. Participants reported that leaders who prioritized perfectionism over excellence created fear-based environments that stifled communication and collaboration. High job tempo, characterized by 24/7 availability and unpredictable shifts, acted as a constant job demand, exceeding available resources and promoting cognitive overload. Without sufficient support, these demands led maintainers to adopt riskier, simplified deci-

sion-making strategies as a coping mechanism.

Self-efficacy emerged as a critical personal resource in buffering stress. Bandura (1986) emphasized that individuals with high self-efficacy persist despite challenges, while those with diminished self-efficacy avoid responsibility or make riskier choices. Participants described how leadership practices, such as decision undermining and micromanagement, eroded their confidence. The result was lower engagement, increased stress, and poorer decision quality. Leadership support itself functioned as a key job resource in the JD-R framework, mitigating burnout and enabling more effective, confident decision-making when it was present—but contributing to stress when absent.

Participants also connected burnout directly to job satisfaction and retention intentions. Those experiencing supportive leadership and manageable work-life balance reported greater willingness to remain in the field, while others left due to persistent burnout and toxic culture. This aligns with prior research suggesting that retention depends on balancing job demands and resources while fostering leadership practices that encourage autonomy, development, and trust (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model derived from this study, highlighting how each theme contributes to

risky decision-making under burnout conditions. This model visually represents the interplay between organizational stressors, personal resources, and decision-making effectiveness under stress, offering a practical framework for USAF leadership development and intervention planning. It emphasizes the need for systemic cultural change, not just individual coping strategies.

Table 2 summarizes how each theme identified in this study maps onto elements of Transformational Leadership Theory and the Job Demands-Resources Model, reinforcing the theoretical grounding of our findings. By linking qualitative evidence from maintainers' lived experiences with well-established leadership theories, this analysis underscores the importance of building supportive, trust-based leadership practices and balancing demands with adequate resources. These insights can inform concrete policy recommendations for leadership training, unit management, and organizational culture change within the USAF maintenance community.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study offers an in-depth understanding of how burnout affects decision-making among U.S. Air Force maintainers. Through rich, first-person accounts, participants revealed the complex, interrelated

Table 2

Mapping of Themes to Transformational Leadership Theory and the Job Demands-Resources Model

Superordinate themes	Sub-themes	Connection to transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985; Kark et al., 2003)	Connection to job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014)
Toxic work relationships/culture	Favoritism, ostracism, humiliation, narcissistic behaviors	Lack of individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation fosters toxic culture.	Acts as a job demand increasing stress and reducing available resources.
Job tempo	24/7 availability, last-minute schedule changes, 12+ hour shifts	High job tempo reduces motivation and engagement.	Creates excessive job demands, leading to exhaustion and disengagement.
Self-efficacy	Confidence, reputation, perceived competence	Low self-efficacy undermines inspirational motivation and team confidence.	Acts as a personal resource buffering the impact of job stressors.
Leadership support quality	Micromanagement, Decision Undermining, Lack of Trust	Weakens idealized influence and trust in decision-making.	Leadership support serves as a job resource mitigating burnout.
Job satisfaction	Work-life balance, perceived value in role, intentions to stay or leave	Influences commitment and retention, central to transformational leadership.	Results from balancing demands and resources, affecting well-being and retention.

Note. This table shows how each superordinate theme aligns with theoretical frameworks, highlighting connections to transformational leadership behaviors and the balance of job demands and resources affecting burnout and decision-making.

factors contributing to burnout—including toxic work relationships and culture, relentless job tempo, diminished self-efficacy, inadequate leadership support, and reduced job satisfaction. These themes illustrate the human impact of operational stress and organizational culture on critical decision-making processes in a high-stakes military environment.

By interpreting these findings through the lenses of Transformational Leadership Theory and the Job Demands-Resources Model, the study underscores the need for leadership practices that move beyond compliance and micromanagement toward trust-building, individualized support, and shared decision-making. The conceptual model developed from these results emphasizes that mitigating burnout is not merely about improving individual coping strategies but requires systemic cultural and organizational change. Balancing job demands with adequate resources, fostering supportive leadership, and cultivating a culture of excellence—rather than unattainable perfection—are essential steps toward enhancing decision-making effectiveness and mission readiness.

For the USAF maintenance community, these insights offer a clear mandate for leadership development, policy reform, and sustained attention to the lived experiences of maintainers. By prioritizing airmen's well-being and empowering them to make confident, informed decisions even under stress, the organization can strengthen retention, safety, and operational success in its mission to "Fly, Fight, and Win."

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Topic: Effects of Burnout on Decision-Making within U.S. Air Force Maintainers

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee Code:

Questions:

1. How long have you been in the USAF?
 - a. Any personal reasons?
 - b. Any cultural reasons?
 - c. Any spiritual reasons?
2. How long have you been stationed at Joint Base Andrews?
 - a. Intentions to stay?
 - b. Intentions to leave?
3. Tell me about what your duties are in the squadron?
 - a. Professional duties?
 - b. Additional duties?
4. Tell me about what makes you feel enthusiastic about your job?
 - a. Professionally?
 - b. Personally?
5. Tell me about what makes you feel drained from work?
 - a. Job itself?
 - b. Coworkers?
 - c. Leadership?
 - d. Working environment?
6. What impacts your decision-making at work?
 - a. Time constraints?
 - b. Environment?
 - c. Leadership support?
7. What consequences, if any, exist from poor decisions at work?

Lauren Archer (lauren.archer.l@outlook.com)

Stephen Linenberger (stephenl@bellevue.edu)
