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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

POTENTIAL:
OVERCOMING THE ARMY'S TALENT DELTA
WITH GROWTH OPTIMIZATION [MCCDU1]

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Executive Summary

Title: Potential: Overcoming the Army's Talent Delta with Growth Optimization

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Thesis: To enhance the Army's Talent Management (TM) system, the Army must: first, standardize its definition of "potential" thereby normalizing what the Army expects its senior raters to look for in those being rated; second, codify the framework for potential so that all senior raters can use disciplined initiative to evaluate and develop rated officers, with a clear understanding of big Army's intent; third, embrace/emphasize a culture of *growth optimization* that focuses on developing the traits of: *optimistic exuberance*, *strength of character*, and a *learning-agile mindset*.

Discussion: The Army has placed a lot of emphasis on, and consequently publication efforts into, understanding and evaluating performance of leaders in the Army. "Potential," on the other hand, is seen by the Army as the priority consideration of evaluating officers for future development and promotions. However, the Army does not currently have a standardized definition of potential, nor a codified framework for it that Army leaders can successfully navigate with disciplined initiative. By looking at past and current military leaders, civilian businesses, and prevailing theories on talent, performance, and potential, this paper seeks to evaluate how to define, evaluate, and develop potential in the US Army.

Conclusion: *Potential* is the ability to grow *current talent* (T_C) into predicted *future talent* (T_F). T_C is the talent byproduct of the present-day intersection of knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSBs); performance of a ratee's amalgamated T_C 's is assessed by the rater for the current evaluation period. T_F is the future talent(s) required from an increased role/rank/position's demand to solve future, more complex problems as predicted by, and an output of, the senior rater/ratee reflective counseling. Optimal *growth* ("*growth optimization*") reduces the friction of one's progression from T_C to T_F . Its characteristics include: *optimistic exuberance* (OE); *strength of character* (SoC); and a *learning-agile mindset* (LAM). Taken together, OE ignites the passion for growth while SoC sustains the LAM through the most difficult period of growth and under the least desirable conditions. These same characteristics can also be viewed as universal T_F traits for the highest-ranking leaders, and as talent, they themselves can be acted upon through ignition, deep practice, and mentorship.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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INTRODUCTION & THESIS

In recent history, the United States (US) military's personnel system has undergone both radical change and yet continues to resist change. Take for example the opening of combat roles to women as a drastic amendment to the US military's long history of preventing women from directly fighting in combat operations. By contrast, the US military continues to embrace its up-or-out promotion system deemed by many to be too rigid, inhibiting the growth of specialized talent within its ranks. The US Army's Talent Management (TM) system as a subset of the larger military has exhibited much of the same paradoxical practices of embracing and resisting change. Stimulated by the Academic Year 2018 U.S. Army War College Key Strategic Issues List, this paper seeks to analyze and evaluate whether the Army is assessing, retaining, and promoting the right people and developing the right kind of leaders (Themes 2.4/2.5) by addressing how the Army recognizes, codifies, and uses "potential" in consideration for evaluations, promotions, and further development. To enhance the Army's TM system, the Army must: first, standardize its definition of "potential" thereby normalizing what the Army expects its senior raters to look for in those being rated; second, codify the framework for potential so that all senior raters can use disciplined initiative to evaluate and develop rated officers, with a clear understanding of big Army's intent; third, embrace/emphasize a culture of *growth optimization* that focuses on developing the traits of: *optimistic exuberance*, *strength of character*, and a *learning-agile mindset*.

CONTEXT

To begin, it is useful to define various aspects of the Army's human performance enterprise to set the context for this paper. Understanding *talent*, *performance*, *potential*, *growth*, and *talent management* are key not only for what they mean and how they relate, but also why they are important to wrestle with to enact change on a specific segment of the Army.

The Army defines *talent* as the “unique intersection of skills, knowledge, and behaviors in every person.”¹ Contrastingly, Daniel Coyle in his revolutionary book *The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How*. defines talent as “the possession of repeatable skills that don't depend on physical size.”² Both definitions share the simple notion that people possess abilities. While the Army's definition suggests that perhaps every person possesses talent, albeit at a very precise juncture of peoples' various defining attributes—knowledge, skills, behaviors, or KSBs—Coyle's definition more strictly defines talent as being repeatable. Coyle implies that not every person has talent (if a person cannot reliably replicate a skill they possess then that person would not possess talent), but he shows us in *The Talent Code* how it is possible to develop talent for any population working in any type of field. His ideas are foundational to the theories subsequently presented and will be discussed later in more detail.

The Army vaguely defines *performance* as an output of KSB (*talent*) that can be evaluated.³ Traditionally the Army codifies *performance* via the subjective label (box check) and associated commentary a rater provides on an Officer Evaluation Report (OER) assessing the culmination of a rated officer's ability during a specified period.⁴ These rater assessments of officers' performance are based on leadership attributes (character, presence, intellect) and competencies (leads, develops, achieves) defined in Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22: *Army Leadership*.⁵ All six of these attributes and competencies are thoroughly

explained not only in ADRP 6-22, but also in supplementary material such as the *US Army Performance Evaluation Guide* prepared by the US Army Center for Leadership. Army Human Resources Command (HRC) notes that centralized officer promotion boards (who among other things assess and select captains through colonels for promotion) prioritize raters' assessments of performance—label and narrative—as fourth and fifth, respectively, of five characteristics boards consider when assessing OERs.⁶ The first three characteristics considered are the senior rater's narrative, label, and population size, respectively.⁷ That is, HRC's commentary to the total Army Force is that the Army leaders who choose which officers get promoted and in what precedence—the centralized promotion boards—primarily consider the senior rater's judgement codified in a small section of each OER that details the senior rater's narrative, box check, and total population against whom the ratee is being evaluated. Of note, both HRC and DA PAM 600-3 (*Officer Professional Development and Career Management*) state that boards consider the “Whole File/Person Concept” and that “each board receives a memorandum of instruction from the Secretary of the Army providing guidance for the selection process” that further clarifies what each board should consider, especially in light of the needs and realities of increasing specialization within the Army.¹⁸ However, of most importance in determining an officer's selection for advancement in the Army is what the senior rater is charged with evaluating. So then, what does the Army say that the senior rater must assess? *Potential*.

If *potential* is such an instrumental piece in determining an officer's future because of the senior rater's duty to assess it and the importance placed on these assessments during officer

ⁱ Matters tend to be complicated by the fact that each board member is reviewing hundreds of files in a limited amount of time, thus each file possibly receives 4-5 minutes of the board member's time (anecdotal from talking to senior officers). Therefore, reading through each officer's OERs' senior rater narrative, box check, and population commentary conceivably consumes the total amount of time the board member has to spend for a given officer's file.

boards, then how exactly does the Army define potential? Curiously, despite the amount of Army literature on *performance* and *talent*, there is a noticeable lack of definition for what *potential* is, what its elements are, or how to evaluate it. DA PAM 600-3 does the disservice of explaining that “promotion potential will be determined, for the most part, based on an officer’s record of performance in their designated branch or FA and the officer’s overall performance” and goes on to explain that “the officer evaluation reporting subsystem...includes the methods and procedures for organizational evaluation and assessment of an officer’s performance and an estimation of potential for future service based on the manner of that performance,” conflating *performance* with *potential*.ⁱⁱ⁹ However, the Army itself recognizes in its 2015 *Talent Management Concept Force 2025 and Beyond* that “past performance is insufficient to fully assess future potential” and that “the current promotion system values time in grade and evaluations but lacks a rigorous assessment mechanism to evaluate future potential” as two important problem areas for further consideration.¹⁰

So, for simplicity and the purposes of this paper, I will use one of Oxford Living Dictionary’s definitions of *potential*: “Latent qualities or abilities that may be developed and lead to future success or usefulness.”¹¹ Important to recognize in this definition is that a person’s potential, then, deals with the growth (development) of talent (latent qualities or abilities, or, in Army parlance, KSBs) that is already present in an individual in such a way that the talent provides future utility. Therefore, this would imply that performance can still be the rater’s

ⁱⁱ DA PAM 600-3 in the same chapter clarifies *potential* to some degree by stating “the assessment of an officer’s potential is a subjective judgment of the officer’s capability to perform at a specified level of responsibility, authority, or sensitivity....[and] is normally associated with the capability to perform at a higher grade” and that “potential evaluation contained on the OER is a projection of the performance accomplished during the rating period into future circumstances that encompass greater responsibilities;” however, this verbiage still blends the interrelated but not identical concepts of performance and potential to an inaccurate degree, omitting the important concept of growth (yet to come) of current talents to meet future challenges.

evaluation of an officer's current KSBs. Yet, the senior rater's evaluation of the ratee's potential is the senior rater's prediction of a ratee's ability to surmount the theoretical change or delta between current and future talent *after future development* to such a degree that would make an officer's future talent beneficial in solving problems presented at the ratee's higher grade or in a more complex position. This suggests that the senior rater would have to identify what the ratee's developmental gaps are between current and future predicted talent (the senior rater's interpretation of the ratee's talent delta), as well as suggesting how to address those gaps.ⁱⁱⁱ

Navigating the gap—or talent delta—from current talent to future talent involves positive development of a current talent into a more useful future talent, or growth. Therefore, *growth*, in the context of this paper, signifies “the process of developing physically, mentally, or spiritually” to overcome the talent delta as determined by senior rater/ratee reflection.¹² Moreover, successful growth in any fashion involves a deliberate period of stress followed by a deliberate period of reflection. Take for example physical activity such as lifting weights—a bodybuilder must intentionally undergo periods of exhausting physical strain followed by decided periods of bodily reflection, or rest. In a similar way, an intellect is always concerned with saturating his/her brain with the correct information followed by an interval of mental reflection—incubation—in order to allow the mind to illuminate (grow). A practitioner seeking growth likewise must undergo a period of stress followed by thoughtful feedback to perform at a higher level. Thus, growth is a purposeful consequence of the cycle of stress and reflection.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is especially relevant to all officer ranks since lieutenants and captains now senior rate non-commissioned officers (often times squad leader and platoon sergeants, respectively, or their equivalents in non-operational fields) using a limited distribution labeling system similar to that used in OERs.

THE PROBLEM & A METHODOLOGY FOR ADDRESSING IT

The first part of the problem is that the Army lacks a coherent *definition of potential*. The definition must fit into the framework of evaluating Army officers' growth and selection for promotion. Potential must address the talent delta relevantly and succinctly but in such a way so as not to merge the terms *talent* and *potential*. Coyle carefully notes that while "the word *talent* can be vague and loaded with slippery overtones about potential, particularly when it comes to young people—research shows that being a prodigy is an unreliable indicator of long-term success."¹³ Once again, potential must address more than just past performance.

This leads to the second part of the problem: addressing how the Army *evaluates* potential within its officer corps. Since there is a lack of nuance defining potential and detailing/codifying the discernment or application of potential in any noticeable Army publication, ambiguity remains as to what to look for in evaluating officers' potential. This then leaves the determination almost entirely up to each senior rater distributed throughout the Army.^{ivv} While this enables some aspects of Mission Command philosophy (such as exercising disciplined initiative), it lacks the fundamental precepts of creating shared understanding and clear commanders' intent throughout the force.¹⁴ By creating a model for what potential is (definition) and what theoretically comprises it (codification), senior rater evaluations can be

^{iv} While acknowledging that higher-ranking senior raters gain a good understanding of what they are looking for as they serve longer and gain wisdom through many experiences, there still remains some poignant questions. For example, is every senior rater's understanding of potential the same or guided similarly? Are their decisions then based on their appreciation of what a good senior officer should be (personal experience of getting to the top), or does each and every senior make decisions that fall within a greater model for potential? What about junior officers that now make senior rater determinations (box checks) that are inherently limited by percentage?

^v From my face-to-face discussion with Colonel Angeli: The question of personal experiences influencing a leader's judgement of potential when not constrained by a well-defined framework for potential leads to the very real (and unbeneficial) possibility of a systemic self-promoting confirmation bias where leaders only select individuals similar to themselves to be their future replacement.

given initiative to act within a larger, understood framework, thus reinforcing a disciplined approach that is appreciated within the larger Army's intent.

The third and final part to the problem is: how should the Army *develop* officers based on its definition of potential and how it evaluates potential in its officer corps? By first understanding what potential is and how it applies to the evaluation of Army officers, the Army might then glean some useful ways to grow officers to overcome talent deltas. This paper seeks to address this concern along with the first two by narrowing its scope to some aspects of the Army's Talent Management system as it applies to operational active duty Army officers.

Talent Management (TM) as a system within the Army addresses many subsystems and processes; it is a complex system of systems that attempts to generate the best outcome for both the individual and the organization.¹⁵ Within the Army TM's concept, there are five core functions of the system: "(1) workforce planning, (2) acquisition, (3) employment, (4) development, and (5) retention."¹⁶ Thus, for the purposes of this paper, evaluating potential is confined to the employment and retention of officers, and developing officers through the lens of potential (for future study, concepts in this paper could also be considered for the acquisition of officers). Applying potential to all three of these core functions—employment, development, and retention—involves looking to the future in varying degrees. Predicting how officers' current talent can evolve (grow) into a yet-to-be-seen future talent or how to evaluate the closing of such a gap is naturally difficult.

Predicting the future in any way is very difficult. Consider for example that entire global enterprises are built on such things as predicting the future of stock markets, forecasting "talented" athletes' contributions to any sport, or foreseeing the character of the next war the US Army will fight. All of these endeavors are extremely complex, do not guarantee accurate

results (perhaps even going so far to say that 35% may be seen as excellent, such as a baseball player's batting average), and are fraught with imperfection. The essence of this paper is to aid in predicting future "talent" in the Army officer corps. To do so, this paper will attempt to define what potential is (applied within the military officer setting) and identify some of the ways in which military officers' potential can be evaluated and developed by looking through the lens of discrete case studies concerning militaries of the past and present, civilian business, and modern insights into performance and potential, applying their lessons to the three foundational problems identified by this paper: the (1) definition, (2) evaluation, and (3) development of *potential*.

MILITARIES OF THE PAST: CLAUSEWITZ

Why begin with a study of General Carl von Clausewitz and his revelations on war? First of all, Clausewitz was a lifelong soldier, involved in and thinking about war and warfare from childhood to his death. Born to a retired Prussian lieutenant, Clausewitz first saw war at the age of 12 when he was a lance corporal fighting for Prussia in 1793 against revolutionary France.¹⁷ His experiences took him from fighting French Revolutionary Wars to graduating first of his class in 1803 at the new War College (under direct tutelage of Gerhard von Scharnhorst) to fighting in the Napoleonic Wars, eventually becoming a Prussian corps chief of staff in 1815.¹⁸ Both a historian and a dedicated theorist, Clausewitz toiled on his compilation of ideas from 1815 until his death in 1831 (at that point, he was a Prussian major general), the culmination of which was his posthumously published volume *On War*.¹⁹ Thus, his many years of experiencing war firsthand and thoughtfully reflecting on them gives him expertise. Second, Clausewitz's ideas continue to be relevant. From Helmuth von Moltke's (the Elder) successes during the German wars of unification that made Clausewitz's ideas cogent^{vi} to *On War*'s eminence amongst pre-World War II German military leaders, Clausewitz' ideas have endured.²⁰ Even today his notions are seen in US military doctrine, especially the Marine Corps. Of special interest to this paper is *On War*'s Book One, Chapter Three, *On Military Genius*.

Clausewitz defines "genius" as being a term that describes "a very highly developed mental aptitude for a particular occupation" that, when applied to the military profession, goes beyond a simple "superlative degree of *talent* [emphasis added]" but includes "all those gifts of mind and temperament that in combination bear on military activity."²¹ His exploration of

^{vi} Important to note: "Clausewitzian phrases about the will-power of the commander, his need for resolution, self-confidence and *coup d'oeil* resound through German military writings; though perhaps it was the influence of Moltke rather than of Clausewitz which stressed the need for these qualities at every level of command and not simply in the commander-in-chief" (*On War*, p. 34).

intellect and temperament's proper synergy within the most talented military leaders of his time—especially France's Napoleon Bonaparte—apply directly to the understanding of what historically was seen as the highest form of *talent* in military leaders. Thus, beginning with the end in mind by understanding the expected *future talent* of aspiring military leaders, perhaps some universal characteristics can be gleaned to help identify the goal of closing the talent delta (developmental gaps) or the very progression of *potential*.

At the simplest of levels, Clausewitz wrote that military talents' minds are *inquiring*, *comprehensive*, and *calm*, and upon closer examination, he details more explicitly some of the characteristics that symbiotically work together to form the mind of a military genius.^{vii22} Clausewitz used two important terms to describe part of the genius's symbiotic mind: *coup d'oeil* and *coup d'esprit*. Together these form an important piece of the intellectual-temperamental combination he refers to. The former, meaning a quick glance that takes in a broad view, refers to the intellect's ability to see the "truth," and the latter, meaning the body's spirit, refers to the courage to follow the "faint light" presented by the former, no matter the difficulty of the circumstances.²³ *Coup d'oeil* is both the physicality of what a leader sees as well as the "inward eye" that permits a quick recognition of truth, engendering a sound decision executed in the midst of havoc—truth that under ordinary circumstances would be missed or only realized after extensive examination.²⁴ Just as *coup d'oeil* is a product of intellect, *coup d'esprit* is also formed consciously. However, Clausewitz notes, the courage to follow the *coup d'oeil*-informed "faint light" (wherever it leads) in the darkest of hours is purely an act of temperament.²⁵ He

^{vii} Of prime importance to Clausewitz, he underscores the necessity of military genius' courage, both in the face of personal danger and accepting moral responsibility. He explains that in the face of danger the highest form of courage is a combination of both indifference to danger (a so-called permanent condition that is more reliable) and the temporary feeling or emotion derived from ambition, patriotism, or enthusiasm that stimulates the mind (a bolder form, thus achieves more). Though these are all prominent factors, they do not contribute to the synthesis of potential presented later in this paper.

synthesizes this courage of the spirit as *determination*, a singular display of which is a mere expression of courage; repeated exhibitions connote a mental habit. The purpose of determination is to dispel doubt and minimize the “perils of hesitation when the motives for action are inadequate.”²⁶ A determined mind recognizes doubt but subdues the distrusting inner voice despite a lack of additional evidence. Since determination is formed by the intellect and sustained by the temperament of a person during crisis, determination proceeds more so from a strong mind vice a brilliant one, yet still requires the thoughtful reflection of a well-informed intellect to go beyond a brash decision.²⁷

Closely related to determination, and of equal significance, is Clausewitz’s commentary on *strength of character*. He refers to it not in the context of morality, but in terms of willpower. In Clausewitz’s estimation, energy, staunchness/endurance, firmness, and emotional balance all play crucial roles for a military genius’ actions to acquire the coveted qualities of “steadiness and consistency” prescribed to *strength of character*.²⁸ First, a leader must have the energy to act with both intellect and temperament, maintaining passion and ambition as instrumental motives for success, yet, in not overreacting to minor incidents, a leader retains emotional strength and durability, being moved only gradually.²⁹ Furthermore, a leader must be able to mentally withstand the strike of an enemy: staunchness to resist a single strike, endurance to endure over protracted periods.³⁰ Firmness of a genius’ resolve based on “fundamental principle derived from reflection” should not be confused with obstinacy that implies a flaw of temperament when a leader is unwilling to change his/her opinion based on emotion rather than from superior insight of intellect.³¹ Tying together all of these impressions is the notion of emotional balance, best synthesized in that “strength of character does not consist solely in having powerful

feelings, but in maintaining one's balance in spite of them. Even with the violence of emotion, judgment and principle must still function like a ship's compass..."³²

In summary, the principles of military aptitude Clausewitz espoused culminate in the synergy of *coup d'oeil* and *coup d'esprit* combined with *strength of character* to form a talented mind readily identifiable by its inquiring, comprehensive, and calm qualities. Strength of character connotes immense self-confidence resulting from strong intellect and the right balance of energy, passion, and cool-headedness. Clausewitz argues that strength of character is a grave necessity in military commanders because as each subordinate soldier's strength gives out, no longer does each soldier respond to his own will, but the inertia of the soldier-machine comes to rest on the commander's will alone, and the greater the command, the greater the strength of character needed.³³ These ideas are similar to those espoused by General George C. Marshall,^{viii} which again are relevant to the analysis of what commonly defines *future talent* and more broadly *potential*, how to recognize and evaluate *potential*, and how to develop latent abilities to get to the desired future talent.

^{viii} Planning for the defeat of Germany in WWII, Marshall himself leant from "Clausewitzian" concepts that surfaced in Army doctrine in 1923 (On War, p. 42).

MILITARIES OF THE PAST: MARSHALL AND HIS PROTÉGÉS

Marshall, his protégés, and the military system that he fostered coalesce into another significant case relevant to this paper. As Army Chief of Staff prior to and throughout World War II (1939-45), Marshall was instrumental in orchestrating and rapidly expanding the US military establishment on an unprecedented scale, upholding the Anglo-American coalition, and ensuring their collective successes during WWII, to the extent that his character and competence often suggest comparisons with George Washington.³⁴ Marshall was not only a military genius, but also a remarkable statesman, serving as both Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, among other positions. He was known for his ability to spot and develop talent; to recognize potential in military officers.³⁵ He devoted enormous amounts of his own time and energy into assuring American soldiers had the best leaders possible as the nation prepared and endured war. Among Marshall's notable protégés were Dwight D. Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, J. Lawton Collins, and Matthew Ridgway—all future chiefs of staff of the Army four-star generals (both Eisenhower and Bradley attained a fifth star).³⁶ There is a plethora of literature dedicated to Marshall, his leadership qualities, and what he recognized as *potential* in fellow officers; however, certain traits^{ix} resonate consistently throughout Marshall's own experiences, his espoused beliefs, and the writings dedicated to discussing them.^x

Of primary importance to Marshall were embracing and identifying in others the qualities of *optimism* and *energy*.³⁷ During the pre-war years, Marshall purged the Army establishment of

^{ix} In a 1920 letter to Brigadier General John Mallory, Marshall lists in order of precedence the traits he viewed as key to successful officers: "good common sense," "have studied your profession," "physically strong," "cheerful and optimistic," "display marked energy," "extreme loyalty," "determined" (Ricks, 25). For this paper, I have consolidated optimism with energy and determined with stamina (physically strong); I contrast extreme loyalty (teamwork) with the ardent candor Marshall often displayed and requested from subordinates. "Good common sense" and the intellectual requirement of "studying your profession" intuitively compare with Clausewitz's *coup d'oeil/coup d'esprit* synergy and his emphasis on intellectual development, respectively.

^x For more information on Marshall, many resources can be found online at the George C. Marshall Foundation located here: <https://marshallfoundation.org/marshall>.

many older “château” generals who preferred remaining behind a desk instead of being active in front of troops.³⁸ Moreover, Marshall understood the need to radiate these qualities in front of soldiers, especially during the darkest of hours. Following his experiences in World War I, in a 1920 letter Marshall wrote to a VMI professor, he remarked:

When conditions are difficult, the command is depressed and everyone seems critical and pessimistic, you must be especially cheerful and optimistic. When evening comes and all are exhausted, hungry and possibly dispirited, particularly in unfavorable weather at the end of a march or in battle, you must put aside any thought of personal fatigue and display marked energy in looking after the comfort of your organization, inspecting your lines and preparing for tomorrow.³⁹

Marshall clearly valued an officer’s ability to exude energy and optimism, but at the core of these leaders he looked for some other characteristics that would sustain them through every trial and tribulation.

Determination and *stamina* both require the energy that Marshall repeatedly called for, but retain a sense of drive and talent.⁴⁰ Marshall called upon leaders to be able to pull from within deep stockpiles of personal stamina to arouse in subordinates the fighting spirit, that “the more alarming and disquieting the reports received or the conditions viewed in battle, the more determined must be your attitude.”⁴¹ Marshall recognized the importance of a leader’s ability to exhibit such personal traits as optimism and determination, not in a vacuum but in the context of working within the team of a whole fighting machine.

Teamwork (loyalty to one’s boss, peers, and subordinates) was absolutely stressed by Marshall, although it was seen as a necessary counterpoint to the much-expected trait of *ardent candor*.⁴² He viewed extreme loyalty to one’s superiors as essential to the point that “in your efforts to carry out [superior’s] plans or policies, the less you approve the more energy you must direct to their accomplishment.”⁴³ However, as was evident when (then Major) Marshall personally confronted General of the Armies John Pershing during WWI—in front and in

defense of Marshall's division commander—Marshall valued proactive openness, in spite of any preconceived notion of superior/subordinate restrictions.⁴⁴

To evaluate his subordinates for their future potential as commanding officers, Marshall developed and instituted his own crucible to which he then subjected them. Marshall described his assessment to a military journalist as such:

I'm going to put these men to the severest tests which I can devise in time of peace. I'm going to start shifting them into jobs of greater responsibility than those they hold now.... Then I'm going to change them, suddenly, without warning, to jobs even more burdensome and difficult.... Those who stand up under the punishment will be pushed ahead. *Those who fail are out at the first sign of faltering.*⁴⁵

The pre-war talent management approach that Marshall created—the Marshall system—and his appointed senior officers propagated during the war emphasized a pertinent approach: failures were not tolerated, but learning and growing from them was permitted. Tremendous success was greatly rewarded, such as was the case when Marshall promoted a talented Major in the new Army Air Corps *directly* to brigadier general, completely bypassing lieutenant colonel and colonel altogether.⁴⁶ Failure, however, was quickly and unemotionally dealt with, as was the case with many of the generals relieved prior to and during WWII. But, in the Marshall system, a combat leader who was removed could still prove his own worth after personal *growth* and future demonstrated performance, thus showing he had the *potential* that Marshall's system demanded. Pertinent examples of this include Charles Bolte who was relieved as an aide but went on to be a division commander in Italy and eventually a four-star general, and, as author Thomas Ricks notes, “indeed, at least five Army generals of World War II—Orlando Ward, Terry Allen, Leroy Watson, Albert Brown, and, in the South Pacific, Frederick Irving—were removed from combat command and later given another division to lead in combat.”⁴⁷

CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS ANALYSIS: LEARNING AGILITY

So how does current corporate America view what makes the difference between how leaders perform at their current job and how they will perform at a future job? There are a lot of presiding theories that attempt to answer such a question, and many more ways of articulating each of those theories. However, the notion that receives a preponderance of attention is *learning agility*.

Codified in 2000, learning agility refers to “the willingness and ability to learn from experience, and subsequently apply that learning to perform successfully under new or first-time conditions.”⁴⁸ One of the most insightful studies and subsequent synthesis of learning agility came from the *Center of Creative Leadership*. Published in 2014, Adam Mitchinson and Robert Morris’ white paper “Learning About Learning Agility” coherently summarizes the concept’s importance and five key facets. In the following quote, the authors emphasize learning agility’s magnitude and the need to embrace it as a cornerstone for evaluating and developing potential:

This understanding has created a revolution in terms of how we view leadership potential. In the past, we have tried to predict an individual’s *potential* for future success based *exclusively on past performance and demonstrated skills and abilities* [emphasis added]. However, this approach is inherently flawed. Research shows that fundamentally different behaviors are required across organizational levels and that the behaviors that are effective at one level do not necessarily lead to success at the next. Moreover, the rate of change within organizations is greater than ever; thus, leaders are constantly required to adapt. When discussing the issue of long-term potential then, an individual’s current skill-set is of secondary importance to their ability to learn new knowledge, skills, and behaviors that will equip them to respond to future challenges. **As a result, our focus must shift to finding and developing individuals who are continually able to give up skills, perspectives, and ideas that are no longer relevant, and learn new ones that are** [their emphasis].⁴⁹

Embracing learning agility or having a learning-agile mindset (LAM) involves several characteristics. These include four learning agility enablers—innovating, performing, reflecting, and risking—and one learning agility “derailer”—defending.⁵⁰

Of the four enablers, risking was annotated in the author's study as being the hardest to enact and thus the least occurring of their sample population.⁵¹ Risking involves risk-taking, but not for the purpose of thrill-seeking; rather, risking is being a pioneer of opportunity characterized by someone intentionally placing themselves outside of their comfort zone and into challenges, knowing failure is a real possibility, yet personal growth is inevitable.⁵² Innovating individuals are also pioneers of sorts, but in the sense of using one's ability to address issues from multiple perspectives to discover new ways of doing things, thus challenging assumptions and perhaps the status quo.⁵³ Performing seems commonsense, though the attribute is caveated with the notion of being "present and engaged, handling the stress brought on by ambiguity... [by using] keen observation and listening skills, as well as the ability to process data quickly."⁵⁴ The last enabler, reflecting, is key to success for the LAM, as experiences alone cannot guarantee growth without a hunger for feedback and subsequent energy focused on rumination.⁵⁵ All of these traits, however, have the potential of being derailed if one exudes "defending." Being defensive means being closed-minded or responding negatively to opportunities of critical feedback or when a viewpoint is challenged; thus, defending by its very nature represents an obstruction to learning and/or conducting business in a novel way.⁵⁶

While the authors acknowledge there is a lot more research to be done on learning agility (and its associated mindset), there is no doubt of its efficacy in leadership potential. By embracing the four enablers and minimizing the inhibitor, a leader is better suited to learn, and to do so quickly at any level. Through agile learning leaders grow more readily, and they can maximize their potential.

SYNTHESIS: A MODEL FOR *POTENTIAL*

Potential is the ability to grow *current talent* (T_C) into predicted *future talent* (T_F). T_C is the talent byproduct of the present-day intersection of KSBs; performance of a ratee's amalgamated T_C 's is assessed by the rater for the current evaluation period. T_F is the future talent(s) required from an increased role/rank/position's demand to solve future, more complex problems as predicted by, and an output of, the senior rater/ratee reflective counseling. T_F is dependent upon many factors, some of which include: the ratee's desired future role, the senior rater's understanding of that future role and its requisite talents (understanding that with time the required talents themselves may change), and the prioritization of such requisite talents. Optimal *growth* ("*growth optimization*") reduces the friction of one's progression from T_C to T_F . Its characteristics include: optimistic exuberance (OE); strength of character (SoC); and a learning-agile mindset (LAM). Taken together, OE ignites the passion for growth while SoC sustains the LAM through the most difficult period of growth and under the least desirable conditions. These same characteristics can also be viewed as universal T_F traits for the highest-ranking leaders, and as talent, they themselves can be acted upon through ignition, deep practice, and mentorship.^{xi}

The principles of LAM define the characteristics that allow for a leader to affect his/her own growth and, through influence, the growth of his/her organization. The higher or more advanced a leader's LAM traits, the less friction exists when transiting a talent delta. OE relates to LAM in that OE is the energy and enthusiasm that ignites the passion of a learner attempting growth of T_C into T_F .

^{xi} Ignition, deep practice, and mentorship are the three cornerstone concepts Coyle espouses in *The Talent Code*.

OE is a product of abundant energy and positivity—a positive outlook for both how the current state of affairs appears as well as how one perceives the future state to be. As with Clausewitz, Marshall recognized the need for talented military leaders to exude energy, especially as war taxes one's soul. Marshall, however, specified in addition to energy there needs to be an abundance of optimism, not just for the leader's sake, but more so for all of the soldiers under the leader's command. To sustain the passion ignited by OE, a different virtue is necessary to maintain the momentum—SoC.

SoC is nearly synonymous with such words as *grit*, *determination*, or *willpower*. However, SoC encompasses more. In total, SoC is having the intellect, self-reflection, and self-confidence to know where one is coming from and the vision to know where one needs to go; the fortitude to continue along this formulated path whenever pressures increase and mental vices crank down their grip; the resilience to pick back up and continue along the path after being knocked from it; the focus of mind not to get distracted by minor events; the stamina to see it all the way through; and the superior intellect and emotional balance to understand if/when to change course for the right (unemotionally cerebral) reasons. Clausewitz and Marshall both understood the essence of SoC, but talked about them in their own words. They knew that SoC is essential for the fighting soldier, the leader of many soldiers, and also for the growth of a leader who shows *potential*, as was the case in Marshall's numerous protégés.

So, how do you evaluate potential? Marshall did so by taking leaders through a crucible that challenged their ability to perform at a higher level. In the most general terms, potential must be evaluated by establishing the desired T_F (senior rater/rater reflections), evaluating T_C (rater's responsibility inherent in evaluating *performance*), and assessing either the T_F directly (as was the case in Marshall's tests) or, indirectly, the optimal growth traits associated with

closing the talent delta (this would then be the combined responsibility of the senior rater, rater, and ratee).

Practical methods of evaluation include evaluating an officer's ability to temporarily perform skills associated with their predicted future role (discrete T_F assessments). A "realistic job preview" or "step-up assignment" is an opportunity for an officer to knowingly step into a superior's role and temporarily assume complete responsibility for their duties.⁵⁷ This occurs frequently during deployments when officers' mandatory leave period forces the next officer in line to assume responsibility; in garrison, these opportunities seemingly appear less frequently due to either mass leave programs (when everyone leaves at once and therefore the opportunity to conduct a step-up is unimportant) or the lack of effort for a premediated plan of execution. So often missed is the opportunity for the deliberate evaluation, or, if the opportunity for a step-up presents itself, the necessary and purposeful coaching that must occur before and after the assessment. Prior to, a thorough explanation of the "why" for the assessment must be communicated, and clear expectations must be established of what will be evaluated (T_F's and their outcomes) during the step-up as well as ample time given to prepare for the assignment. Afterwards, an objective and conscious review of how the ratee performed, what T_F's must be developed, and a plan for that officer to develop them must be clearly conveyed. The overall opportunity in this case is for the Army to make such occasions mandatory discrete T_F assessments, which have the additional effect of being calculated learning periods.

Another practical method for evaluation is an "assessment center."⁵⁸ An assessment center sounds like it should be a formal establishment (it could be), but it simply involves a ratee being "subjected to simulated challenges like those faced at higher levels of responsibility and are rated by trained people at or above the targeted levels," which sounds eerily similar to

Marshall's assessments.⁵⁹ While the Army regularly submits officers to intense training crucibles such as live fire exercises or a Combat Training Center rotation—which are extremely useful and necessary both as evaluations and for development—these tests are conducted almost exclusively with officers in their current roles, exhibiting T_C's, not the T_F's that must be evaluated when executing at a higher position. An intentionally designed assessment center within each brigade combat team could allow lieutenants to be evaluated as future executive officers or company commanders, or company commanders as future field grade officers. At the very least, existing assessment centers such as the Maneuver Captains' Career Course should be given more precedence in evaluating officers' potential.

A final suggested method for evaluation is a “portfolio assessment.”⁶⁰ This can mean having rateses “supply work samples like those prepared at higher levels of responsibility, and the samples are ‘graded’ against measurable standards prepared in advance.”⁶¹ This relates particularly well to staff officer positions where submitting formal recommendations or draft decision memos could serve as products for a portfolio assessment. Future commanders could also be evaluated by using military case study appraisals or recommended scenario decisions. As a corollary, portfolio assessments could also be a tool to examine the ability of an officer to overcome talent deltas in the past by submitting relevant examples, and then appraising the OE, SoC, and LAM growth traits established within.

Considerations for the three proposed practical methods of evaluation and development should include—especially for leaders—elements of rapid decision-making connected to prudent risk calculations under stressful circumstances, followed by reflection.⁶² All three case studies presented in this paper discuss this notion to some degree. Clausewitz accentuated the need for a combat leader to quickly grasp a situation (*coup d'oeil*) and follow the resultant decision despite

the darkest of hours (*coup d'esprit*). Marshall emphasized studying one's profession and applying good common sense. The "performing" tenet of LAM highlights an ability to quickly receive (listen and observe) and process (decide) data during ambiguous, stressful situations. "Performing" sounds like the same kind of aptitude required of a combat leader that Clausewitz and Marshall alluded to. Adding in the key ingredient of understanding risk calculus made during a leader's decision-making process could provide an excellent basis for evaluating and developing potential during post-decision reflection. Appreciating and accurately articulating why a leader chose to act and with what risk calculations in mind would be a useful way not only to grow an individual, but also an organization. Conducting an evaluation in the context of a superior's provided intent and the subordinate leader's ability to interpret and operate within the given guidance—with minimal supervision—could provide added benefit to such decision-risk exercises.⁶³

Another consideration is that, ideally, evaluations would include comparisons to all other ratees in similar positions (similarly evaluated Tc's) seeking the same requisite TF's. This would more than likely be the same desired position, but several positions may desire the same TF's. A way to go about leveling the *potential* playing field is to consider something similar to what the Marine Corps officer evaluation system does. That is, an automated system compares all senior raters' evaluations for a ratee against any other officer of the same rank that the senior rater evaluated at any time in the senior rater's profile history. Even more reliable and objective would be a system that evaluates ratees against the past performances of every other ratee in a given senior rater pool. This would ensure that evaluations are grouped into a so-called strength of schedule similar to how a college football schedule is assessed. This sort of system would balance the evaluations of "big fish in little ponds" with "many fish in giant ponds," or

equalizing assessments of officers that had to compete to get into selective assignments such as the Ranger Regiment or competitive commands with that of officers that stand out in an assignment with comparatively fewer talented individuals.

As a final synthesis, *potential* development has been discussed throughout the concepts for evaluation, but it deserves some additional considerations. For one, as in the Marshall system, failure must be punished (not tolerated) but the overcoming of it permitted. From failure, important lessons must be internalized and if done so appropriately, a leader be allowed to continue progressing in his/her career. In practical application, this signifies emphasis being placed not on the first iteration of an exercise, but the second or perhaps third iteration, after successes and failures have been identified and opportunity given to demonstrate *growth*. A baseline level of accomplishment (avoidance of egregious moral or safety failure) is always necessary, but some failures should be permitted and the basis of evaluation shifted more towards assessing the accomplishment of growth vice only on the results of one evaluated iteration, at least for the determination of one's *potential*. Above all, development must involve explicitly identifying talent delta gaps through careful senior rater/rater/ratee examination (coaching and counseling), a plan of action to address those gaps through mentored deep practice, and the opportunity to display T_F (during evaluation) subsequent to a period of growth.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues that, currently, the US Army faces a problem that performance resulting from the application of current talents does not completely correlate to performance in the long run, or potential. Moreover, potential is more than present talent or past performance. The Army needs to establish a formal definition for potential (as compared to “performance” or “talent”), codify it to establish a framework under which senior raters can evaluate with disciplined initiative, and advise on ways to cultivate growth optimization traits that are beneficial for potential.

While it is important to recognize the difference between *talent* and *potential*, these ideas are interrelated. People can have unique, repeatable abilities or *talent* without necessarily having the ability to grow using such abilities—*talent*—at a higher level or in a more complicated context or problem set. That is, having the potential to perform in the future under more difficult circumstances. Thus, *potential* is the ability to grow current talent into a future talent that can be used to solve the anticipated, more complicated, problem set. The application of talent in the future likely will occur under more difficult circumstances, increased responsibility, or a combination therein.

Talent Management may be a misnomer, especially in the context of a system given only two options: move up, or be forced out. Capitalizing on a given talent instead of focusing on moving up may mean stagnating without promotion, but may be necessary (think highly technical fields such as the emergent Cyber Command or in the development of Big Data Analytics). In the current system, every soldier has to be considered a leader, otherwise face being forced out of the Army. If the up-or-out system remains—and the argument for changing this system extends beyond the scope of this paper—*talent management* is a less appropriate

term, as determining the best outcome for every individual is not possible given the prospect of leadership stagnation for those seeking highly specialized talents.

Regardless of the system, *growth optimization* can be applied to the talent deltas of any soldier, whether they seek leadership roles or not. This is a new way of looking at the system, a paradigm shift towards how to optimize every soldier's growth, with the understanding that no matter how much leaders optimize, some soldiers still will not meet the expectations of "up"—whether that be a higher leadership role or a more developed specialized talent—and therefore will be out.

The aforementioned topics could certainly be addressed in more depth, as could many more areas in connection to potential, what it means, and how it is used in any talent management context, civilian or military. Some recommended topics for future research include:

- Significant historical military leaders. How did they view "talent" and "potential"? What were they looking for when they selected their subordinate commanders or staff members? How were these leaders ignited? Was there a pattern of parental loss early in their lives amongst significant military leaders? What did they practice deeply: tactics, strategy, decision-making, or a combination therein? Who were their mentors and why?
- Examination of the characteristics which showed significance amongst the great military leaders and theorists who shaped the beginning of modern western warfare and non-western warfare alike.
- Current Army senior raters. Do all view "potential" in the same way? If not, why is there a variance? What methods do high-ranking senior raters use to evaluate and develop potential?
- How does talent acquisition as a core function of the Army's TM system relate? Does potential apply in the same regard for recruits, cadets, and/or brand-new officers? Does the focus of evaluation versus development of potential differ for this population? Are the characteristics of *growth optimization* the same for this group; if not, how do they differ?
- How can development and testing of Big Data Analytics be used to accurately and objectively compare officers' potential on a more level playing field? Can sports' theories and methodologies apply to this realm?

- Ethical decision-making and concepts of morality. These are extremely important aspects that must be considered when analyzing any leader; however, as currently defined, “strength of character” is a recognition of intellect and willpower, not morality. Are the aspects of morality merely talents that can be evaluated/developed, or are they in combination an essential benchmark for determining the potential of any leader at any level?

With all of these questions and topic areas, there is a lot more to explore in regards to the theory and modeling of potential. Undoubtedly, as more technology is created and evolves, the more and different possibilities may emerge as to the application and understanding of human dimensions, trends, and predictions. By thoroughly understanding the past and present, we endeavor to anticipate the future of leaders, leadership, and human potential.

END NOTES

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