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The Marine Corps attracts some of the best and brightest civilians in the country to join the officer ranks, but the service fails to synchronize shifts in culture with changes in its personnel management system. Officers are frustrated with the military bureaucracy, poor leadership, promotions, compensation, and the assignments process. When their frustrations are not heard or addressed, they elect to exit the service. Marine Corps officer retention rates are significantly better than those at some of the civilian sector's top businesses, however the Marine Corps desires to retain its top performers to help influence and shape the future force. The Marine Corps needs an overarching strategy to guide talent management efforts and synchronize personnel management processes.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

THE WAY AHEAD FOR MARINE CORPS OFFICER TALENT MANAGEMENT

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Executive Summary

Title: The Way Ahead for Marine Corps Officer Talent Management

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Thesis: Despite numerous efforts to understand talent management challenges, current manpower models are outdated and permit the retention of underperforming officers, fail to effectively identify future performance potential, and fail to consistently and accurately align talent and performance potential with future assignments. While the Marine Corps values officer talent management and the retention of top performers with vigor and seriousness, the service needs to develop an overarching talent management strategy that incorporates contemporary personnel management practices to better align the labor force with future talent demands.

Discussion: The Department of Defense (DoD) stressed the need for talent management reform in recent years, specifically within the officer ranks. The Marine Corps lacks a strategic level talent management strategy, thus efforts at the tactical level are unguided and vary greatly from one officer to another. Such problems at the tactical level inevitably trickle up to the service level, and ultimately impact the joint force. Officers recognize these problems and become frustrated with military bureaucracy, poor leadership, the performance appraisal system, promotions, compensation, and the assignments process. When their frustrations are not addressed or fail to influence change, top performing officers exit the service. In the absence of a guiding strategy, the Marine Corps reactively pursues retention rates rather than proactively planning for retention before it becomes problematic.

Conclusion: The Marine Corps attracts some of the best and brightest civilians in the country to join the officer ranks, but the service fails to synchronize shifts in culture with changes in its personnel management system. Officers are frustrated with the military bureaucracy, poor leadership, promotions, compensation, and the assignments process. When their frustrations are not heard or addressed, they elect to exit the service. Marine Corps officer retention rates are significantly better than those at some of the civilian sector's top businesses, however the Marine Corps desires to retain its top performers to help influence and shape the future force. Intrinsic motivation is the underlying factor that determines whether or not an officer continues to serve, and the Marine Corps needs to improve its ability to identify and capitalize on those sources of intrinsic motivation. The Marine Corps needs an overarching strategy to guide talent management efforts and synchronize personnel management processes. A service level strategy will enable the Marine Corps to retain its top performers while ensuring the right officers are in the right billets at the right time. The Marine Corps then needs to modernize its personnel management system and processes to keep pace with cultural changes and technological advancements. In particular, key changes include updates to the fitness report format and content, implementation and inclusion of 360-degree evaluations within the performance evaluation process, development and implementation of an observed academic fitness report, design and use of an online talent marketplace, and the development of an overarching talent management strategy that synchronizes these changes and nests them within the joint force's strategy.

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Illustrations

	Page
Figure 1. US Army Talent Management Principles.....	7
Figure 2. Percentage of Army Brigadier Generals with Graduate Degrees.....	27

Tables

	Page
Table 1. Ideal Length of Time to be Assigned to a Project	19
Table 2. Ideal Length of Time to stay in a Particular Role.....	20
Table 3. Officers that Departed the Service from FY 2013 to FY 2018.....	26

Table of Contents

	Page
DISCLAIMER	i
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ii
LIST OF TABLES	ii
PREFACE	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
DEFINITIONS	5
Talent	5
Talent Management	5
Talent Management Strategy	6
DEFINING THE PROBLEM	8
Why Officers Leave	12
POLICY	14
THEORY	16
CULTURAL SHIFTS	18
TALENT MANAGEMENT STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, COUNTERARGUMENTS	21
RECOMMENDATIONS	28
CONCLUSION	34
ENDNOTES	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY	44

Preface

Like many other Marines, the Corps saved me from self-imploding. After 11 years of active duty service, I am in a better place mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The Corps has taught me to endure pain and suffering. It helped me build thick skin and taught me humility time and time again. I love the Marine Corps and everything for which it stands, which is why I wrote this paper.

Many of the sacrifices made by service members are inevitable. Late nights, long days, weekend duties, training exercises, and deployments are as routine as life itself to Marines. Unfortunately, many other sacrifices are completely unnecessary. I have witnessed numerous officers end their promising careers prematurely, in part due to avoidable frustrations. Developing a talent management strategy and modernizing personnel management practices will improve the Marine Corps' ability to retain talented officers for the future fight.

This paper is for those who have laid down their lives for our country, as well as their families. I have missed birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, family vacations, and weddings. I was not there when my son learned to ride his bike or when my daughter took her first steps. I have made countless promises that I was unable to keep. Nevertheless, others have undoubtedly sacrificed much more. I have broken promises to make it home for dinner, but at least I made it home. I have broken promises to get out of the field before the weekend, but at least I made it home. I have broken promises to come home from a deployment before Christmas, but at least I made it home. Many Marines did not have the chance to break a promise because they never made it home, and their families have sacrificed more than I can imagine. From the bottom of my heart, and with all the love that I have for my own wife and children, thank you.

Introduction

The Department of Defense (DoD) stressed the need for talent management reform in recent years, specifically within the officer ranks. In 2015, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter introduced the Force of the Future initiative. Similarly, the *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy* (NDS) demands “broad revision of talent management among the Armed Services.”¹ The *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* (CPG), released by General David Berger in July, 2019, also highlights this problem and states plainly that the Marine Corps’ talent management model requires improvements if the service intends to retain talented Marines.² The Marine Corps consequently began researching talent management problems in search of service-wide solutions.

The service stood up the Personnel Studies and Oversight Office (PSO), the Talent Management Oversight Directorate (TMOD), and the Talent Management Executive Council (TMEC) to address talent management and retention challenges. Additionally, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) completed multiple studies about individual Marine quality, retention, and the assignments process. Despite numerous efforts to understand talent management challenges, current manpower models are outdated and permit the retention of underperforming officers, fail to effectively identify future performance potential, and fail to consistently and accurately align talent and performance potential with future assignments. While the Marine Corps values officer talent management and the retention of top performers with vigor and seriousness, the service needs to develop an overarching talent management strategy that incorporates contemporary personnel management practices to align the labor force with future talent demands.

This paper focuses on Marine Corps officer talent management practices. It begins by defining common terms to include talent, talent management, and talent management strategy. Next, it describes the DoD's talent management problem from the strategic level down to the tactical level. The Marine Corps lacks a strategic level talent management strategy, thus efforts at the tactical level are unguided and vary greatly from one officer to another. Such problems at the tactical level inevitably trickle up to the service level, and ultimately impact the joint force. Officers recognize these problems and become frustrated with military bureaucracy, poor leadership, the performance appraisal system, promotions, compensation, and the assignments process.

Next, this paper highlights important and relevant policies that impact, influence, and limit talent management efforts. The 2019 National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA) authorized the services to make changes in officer talent management practices. The Army introduced several of those already to include direct commissions, brevet promotions, promotion list reordering, an interactive online talent marketplace, and the option to opt out of future promotions. Furthermore, anonymous assessments such as 360-degree feedback tools are useful in identifying hidden talents, strengths, and weaknesses that otherwise may have gone unnoticed, however policy prohibits their use during promotion, education, and command selection boards. There are obvious benefits to this type of feedback loop, and multiple civilian sectors successfully incorporated anonymous feedback into their talent management strategies.

This paper then discusses how shifts in American culture impact officer talent management. Officers commissioned in 2019 receive information, analyze feedback, and communicate much differently than those commissioned just 10 years earlier. Nevertheless, the Marine Corps continues personnel management practices that were initiated in 1980 under the

Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA). Career aspirations and personal development goals have changed over the past 40 years, and the Marine Corps' reluctance to adopt modern personnel management processes have undoubtedly resulted in the attrition of some of its top performing officers. The Marine Corps has the opportunity to retain the population of strategists and critical thinkers desired for the future fight, but it will require service leaders to overcome the fear of change, adopt some of the talent management practices used widely by civilian sectors for the past few decades, and innovate ways to implement those changes into the military environment.

This paper also highlights strengths and weaknesses of current talent management efforts. The Marine Corps benefits from sound mentorship and counseling programs that add value to an officer's career. When implemented poorly, however, those programs lead to additional frustration. The 2018 Exit and Milestone Longitudinal Survey (EMLS) results highlight officer satisfaction with vacation time, retirement benefits, job security, and health care benefits. These are positive contributors to talent management efforts that increase retention. In contrast, 2018 EMLS results identify officer dissatisfaction with quality of life, pay and compensation, hours worked per week, amount of family time, and amount of personal time. These negatively impact retention which effects overall talent management. A final strength is represented by retention bonuses and incentives. These absolutely retain specific skill sets, however they sometimes fail to retain top performing officers who are not financially motivated.

Lastly, this paper makes recommendations to improve officer talent management efforts. First, the Marine Corps would benefit from launching an online talent marketplace similar to the Army's to give officers an opportunity to interact with commanders and M&RA during the assignments process. This would also give officers a chance to formally express their interests

and provide M&RA with additional information to match the right talents and skills with appropriate billets. Second, the standard fitness report has not been revised since 2003, so the Marine Corps intrinsically values the same qualities and attributes of its officers in 2020 as it did at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. War and culture have shaped the way leaders behave at all levels, so the service should update fitness report formatting and content to reflect the changes in leadership qualities desired by the nation. Relatedly, the service should create and implement an observed academic fitness report within the school setting. The current fitness report is not appropriate in an academic environment, especially since students receive unobserved evaluations upon graduation. The Marine Corps needs to develop a new format specific to academia that captures intellectual capacity, creative problem solving, and critical thinking skills.

A fourth recommendation is to propose changes to policy that incorporate 360-degree assessments into the performance appraisal process. This would provide officers an opportunity to improve their leadership skills while simultaneously identifying trends in poor leadership for consideration in the selection board room. A final recommendation is to develop a coherent, strategic level talent management strategy to guide efforts at lower levels in support of joint force talent demands. Key to this is understanding how war, technology, information, and culture shape the force and influence officer retention. It is also important for the Marine Corp to define key terms and goals, and then incorporate those terms into the performance appraisal process while appropriately linking talent management goals to an overarching strategy.

Intrinsic motivation is the underlying factor that determines whether or not an officer continues to serve, and the Marine Corps needs to improve its ability to identify and capitalize on those sources of intrinsic motivation to retain its top performers.

Definitions

Talent

Human resources professionals have defined talent as “an individual’s differentiated potential or ability to execute against the organization’s growth strategy.”³ The business and sports worlds describe it as “sustained high performance in the face of ever-increasing pressure and rapid change.”⁴ The Department of the Army defines talent plainly as the unique intersection of a person’s skills, knowledge, and behaviors.⁵ More specifically, the Army’s Strategic Studies Institute explained in greater detail that talent represents much more than the Army-provided training, education and experience. Talent exemplifies multiple dimensions that all combine to create the productive capacity of each person.⁶ Talent also includes “investments [people] have made in themselves, personal and familiar relationships (networks), ethnographic and demographic background, preferences, hobbies, travel, personality, learning style, education, and a myriad number of other factors.”⁷ Talent, writ large, has become the “key differentiator for performance management and for leveraging competitive advantage.”⁸

Talent Management

Talent management has widely been defined as an integrated and continuous process of ensuring that an organization has a continuous supply of highly productive individuals in the right jobs and at the right time.⁹ It has been referred to simply as “talentship” by human resource planning professionals.¹⁰ Organizational behaviorists claim talent management is a process that focuses solely on the top 10% of high-performing, high-potential individuals.¹¹ Applied psychologists believe it refers to a subset of human resource management that emphasizes only strategic level positions.¹² Yet, another group of business professionals define it as a process that allows an organization to circumvent employee turnover and avoid job burnout.¹³ Management

professionals identify talent management as the implementation of integrated strategies that increase productivity, attract and develop people with the required skills, and enable the organization to retain those people to meet future business needs.¹⁴

From a military perspective, talent management involves learning to apply capabilities better and with more creativity.¹⁵ It is the Army's approach to capitalizing on the unique talents of its people.¹⁶ The Army adopted an approach following many of the aforementioned disciplines to define talent management as "a deliberate and coordinated process that aligns systematic planning for the right number and type of people to meet current and future Army needs with integrated implementation so the majority of those people are optimally employed."¹⁷ Talent management aligns the talents of entry-level employees against the demand for those talents throughout their careers while simultaneously integrating accessions, retention, development, and employment strategies.¹⁸ Although the Marine Corps has not published a formal definition for talent management, it has informally referred to it as the process of "matching ability to [Military Occupational Specialty], billets, education opportunities, and career progression."¹⁹

Talent Management Strategy

The business and management industries emphasize that a comprehensive talent management strategy should include programs for recruiting, onboarding, learning and development, performance management, leadership development, and succession planning.²⁰ The overarching strategy should outline how those interconnected programs synergize to keep people engaged and productive.²¹ The University of California's Human Resources Strategic Plan for the years 2015 to 2019 defined the university's talent management strategy as the effort to "design an approach, strategies and programs to hire, deploy, develop and retain the best

people in their respective fields.”²² The food company Danone outlined a talent management strategy focused on accelerating the available individuals in its talent pools in an effort to transform its human resource structures and ultimately attract, develop, and retain talent.²³ These two examples demonstrate how large organizations can successfully broadcast talent management strategies to their workforce.

The Army identifies its talent management strategy as the overarching concept for the practice of future-focused human capital management. It is designed to improve total force readiness by aligning the capability and talent of each individual with the Army’s strategic needs while simultaneously optimizing human performance and engagement.²⁴ The Army published numerous strategic level documents to aid its service level staff sections in achieving talent management efforts. The Army also defined a comprehensive list of talent management principles, which is depicted in Figure 1.

Category	Principle
Talent Management is an Investment	1. Talent Management is an Investment
Effective Talent Management Requires a Systems Approach	2. Internal Synergy
	3. Vertical Consistency
	4. Single Integrator
	5. Senior Leaders <i>Lead</i> Change
	6. Branding
	7. Tailored to Fit the Organization
Effective Talent Management Must Balance the Needs of the Individuals with the Needs of the Organization	8. Balance Completeness with Simplicity
	9. Individualism and Collectivism
	10. Identifying and Leveraging Individual Talents
	11. Diverse Career Portfolios
Talent Management Must Ensure Job - Person Fit	12. Optimizing Tenure
	13. Validity and Transparency
	14. Optimizing All Talent
The Talent Management System Must Empower Employees	15. KSB Driven
	16. Right Person - Right Job - Right Team
	17. Enabling Organizational Agility
	18. Employee Empowerment
	19. Enhanced Employee Self-Awareness
	20. Reward Desired Behavior

Figure 1: The Army’s 20 talent management principles²⁵

These 20 principles span five central categories and guide officers when writing Officer Evaluation Reports (OER), assessing unique skills and talents for special projects, and assigning

future billets. Each is focused on human development and individually nests well within the Army's strategic level talent management framework.

Defining the Problem

Blair, Hughes, and Mashuda skillfully summarized the DoD's talent management woes when they explained that "if the American military cannot attract, develop, and retain the right people, producing an environment in which these people flourish, the joint force cannot expect to find success in competition below the threshold of armed conflict, major combat operations, or credible deterrence."²⁶ At the strategic level, this problem statement demonstrates how challenges with Marine Corps' officer talent management ultimately contribute to larger challenges for the joint force. Each fall, the top performing officers are selected for training, education, and command opportunities. Consequently, the population of available officers to fill other critical billets at the joint and strategic levels shrinks smaller and smaller. This trickle-up, trickle-down effect reverberates up the chain, down the ranks, and even across the services at the joint level.

Despite the existence of scientific and proven practices in the business, management, and human resource management fields, the Marine Corps has carried on with the belief that *if it ain't broke, don't fix it*. In the absence of a talent management strategy, officers tend to trust their own biased beliefs about how to manage the talents and careers of subordinate officers.²⁷ Although this informal process provides a level of flexibility necessary to respond to the "needs of the Corps," it provides a false sense of accomplishment and unintentionally creates additional talent management problems. First, officers at the tactical level are not exposed to service-wide trends at the strategic level to include recruiting strategies, Program Objective Memorandum (POM) cycles, or policy development. Each of these influences how General Officers shape the

future force, which has tactical level implications. Unique talents that could be valuable within a particular line of effort in the future may be overlooked in the absence of a coherent talent management strategy.

This type of informal talent management also neglects the importance of a comprehensive talent profile system. Past performance, previous duty assignments, awards, military education, and other information within an officer's Master Brief Sheet (MBS) are useful tools for gaining an initial impression of military experience and exposure. Though, the MBS fails to accurately distinguish one officer from another when independently considered because it ignores knowledge and expertise unique to previous experiences, personal and professional ambitions, strengths and weaknesses, hobbies and interests, and life experiences.²⁸ These data fields are not formally considered by officer assignment personnel. Mentors and superior officers must informally account for this information for each subordinate and communicate it to other officers and M&RA monitors. Unfortunately, as officers rotate billets, particularly field grade officers, much of this information is lost or simply neglected by incoming leadership.

At the service level, talent management practices have been confounded by systemic policy failures and systematic decision making errors.²⁹ Throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, the Army sought to retain as many officers as possible. Such quantity-focused decisions contradicted talent-focused desires, and the Army still suffers from a profusion of average and below average officers in leadership positions.³⁰ This makes it even more challenging to screen for talent and leads to increased promotion rates, increased time-inconsistent and risk-averse behavior in pursuit of short term gains, and compressed promotion timing.³¹ Increased promotion rates means that company grade officers have less time in critical

command billets at the platoon and company level.³² Likewise, increased promotion rates reduces the amount of time those same officers are afforded for personal and professional development at each rank, thus exacerbating the problem even further. Rising accessions unavoidably reduces command time for Lieutenants and Captains and yields a population of young, talented officers serving in apathetic roles where their talents are not recognized.³³

At the tactical level, performance appraisal and military compensation represent two areas that contribute to talent mismanagement. First, performance is appraised via fitness reports that focus on past behavior across a defined set of qualities that encompass individual character, leadership, intellect, and wisdom. Since the current manpower system is based primarily on time and experience rather than talent or potential future performance, individual performance is averaged over time.³⁴ Current performance receives very little weight during the assignments process, and so average officers with unique hidden talents are sometimes unnoticed. Officer raters include other officers who, like themselves, were not formally trained how to write standardized fitness reports. Furthermore, fitness reports seek a particular talent distribution in every officer, regardless of rank and despite obvious differences in desired skills, knowledge, and capabilities between military occupational specialties (MOS).³⁵ Applying the same evaluation criteria for all officers allows the fitness report to capture the Whole Marine Concept, but it fails to uncover the untapped talents of the 70% of all officers who make up the “hidden workforce.”³⁶

The oath charges officers with extraordinary authorities in the execution of their duties, but the service evaluates them using a curtailed list of qualities. As a result, officers may change their behavior to conform to the limited guidelines of the fitness report, which delays or nullifies the Marine Corps’ opportunity to capitalize on their hidden talents. This system devalues talent,

breeds mediocrity, and thwarts the motivation to stay in the organization.³⁷ Even when the service suffers from critically short skill sets across various MOSs, promotion selection boards still stress the importance to “make every effort to consider the needs of the Marine Corps for officers with these particular skills when determining those officers who are best and fully qualified for promotion.”³⁸ It is therefore imperative that the Marine Corps retains talented and motivated officers in accordance with an overarching talent management strategy.

Second, military compensation is one of the top separation influencers.³⁹ The Marine Corps’ antiquated compensation system is not linked to defined organizational goals or an overarching talent management strategy. It is based on an ineffectual performance evaluation system and incentivizes a particular type of homogenous performance from all officers, regardless of rank, experience level, or MOS.⁴⁰ Compensation is also based on time in service rather than manner of performance, thus unlike a meritocracy and unrepresentative of the professional military ethic.⁴¹ Initially designed to “complement an ‘up or out’ personnel system that treats people as interchangeable parts,” the Marine Corps’ compensation system has remained the same throughout decades of technological innovation, cultural shifts, policy changes, and changes in the way the Marine Corps trains, fights, and employs its commissioned officers.⁴² In the modern business industry, compensation is integral to maintaining a productive and motivated workforce. Military compensation, though, does not achieve strategic intent and yields undesirable behavior.⁴³

The middle 70% of performers includes a population of high performers who are motivated to improve the organization, dedicated to the mission, and seeking to reach the top 20% of performers. On the other end of the spectrum is the bottom 10% of poor performers who have adapted to the Marine Corps’ faulty systems and adopted a comparable work ethic. This is

known as the “20-70-10” split.⁴⁴ Unmotivated performers recognize the lengthy “time span of discretion” between action and feedback, and render it meaningless to attempt making any change.⁴⁵ They observe the limits of the up or out system, to include underpopulated company grade ranks and a closed labor market, and deliberately operate with less effort. These officers assume risk-averse behavior and focus on areas of lesser significance that offer a higher probability of immediate, positive feedback from their superiors.⁴⁶ These same leaders also contribute to talent management challenges when they apply similar, abbreviated levels of effort toward subordinates’ fitness reports. Consequently, below average performers are retained, receive follow on orders, and prepare for their next position at the expense of the current mission.⁴⁷ Unfinished work and larger problems are then assigned to competent, high performing officers who may eventually experience “job burnout.”⁴⁸ Even those with the strongest motivation to continue serving in the Corps become frustrated and leave, emphasizing “talent flight” as a real problem for the Marine Corps that festers into challenges for the joint force on a longer continuum.⁴⁹

Why Officers Leave

The most common reason officers leave is frustration. First and foremost, officers are frustrated with the personnel management system writ large, and the type of leaders it produces. Every officer values a unique set of intangible leadership qualities, and competitive selection boards for promotion, education, and command opportunities are composed of dozens of officers. Compounded by the limits of the fitness report and absence of a coherent talent management strategy, boards are forced to decipher a wide array of annotated and truncated fitness report comments, written by a diverse population of other officers, to search for intangible leadership qualities and future performance potential. This type of talent screening system can

unintentionally transform otherwise unselfish officers into narcissistic, risk-averse leaders, each broadcasting his or her own achievements as widely as possible in search of recognition. In direct opposition of the professional military ethic, these officers establish a poor command climate that spoils motivation and encourages subordinates to leave the service.⁵⁰

Second, officers leave because they are frustrated with the military bureaucracy. In 2010, Tim Kane surveyed 250 West Point graduates from classes between 1989 and 2004, and found that roughly 82% agree or strongly agree that they left the military because of “frustration with military bureaucracy.”⁵¹ Part of the military bureaucracy is its personnel management system for which 55% agree should be radically reformed.⁵² Two serious points of contention within the personnel management system are promotions and military compensation. Kane discovered that 89.7% of West Point graduates agree or strongly agree that the best officers would stay in the military if it was more of a meritocracy,⁵³ and 69.9% agree that they would stay if compensation was based on performance rather than time in service.⁵⁴ These statistics indicate that most officers recognize the gap between individual capabilities and salary cap, regardless of level of performance. The military bureaucracy dictates that the top 10% of Marine Corps officers are not promoted any faster or slower, and not paid any more or less, than their subpar peers.

A final source of frustration is that billets are assigned based on a lack of disqualification rather than qualification.⁵⁵ Kane found that a staggering 87.1% of West Point graduates agree or strongly agree that “many of the best officers who leave the service would stay if job assignments were matched with a market mechanism rather than central planning.”⁵⁶ In other words, officers are assigned to billets that may not match their individual talents or strengths simply because they are not disqualified by a lack of credentials. A better way to accomplish the officer assignments process would be to consider the unique qualifications of each individual and

align them with the unique future talent demands of the service. Officers generally represent a population of deeply patriotic and highly motivated individuals, but when the Marine Corps fails to employ them in accordance with their capabilities they become frustrated and exit the service.

Policy

Talent management practices remain impacted by DOPMA. Originally enacted in 1980, DOPMA serves as the regulating policy that outlines a uniform set of regulations to govern promotions and separations for all military services, namely the up or out promotion system.⁵⁷ DOPMA's guidelines served a unique purpose across the services immediately following the Vietnam War, but presently contribute to underlying structural challenges that inhibit the military's ability to effectively manage personnel. Plainly, DOPMA represents a mismatch between plans and reality.⁵⁸ The 1993 Bottom Up Review addressed DOPMA's impact on talent management processes, but it was ineffective in making change since, at that time, personnel reform was criticized as a solution in search of a problem.⁵⁹ The annual NDAA has historically attempted to provide amplifying guidance on DOPMA restrictions as well. Stemming from DOPMA and the NDAA are several initiatives, studies, and policies laid out by the DoD and the individual services over the past 20 years.

First, from 2000 to 2001, changes to the basic pay table provided simplicity, equity, and transparency during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁶⁰ As the nature of war changed, however, the American military's understanding of talent management changed, and leaders now value different aspect of talent than they did in 2000. Then, in 2010, the Army introduced the Critical Skills Retention Bonus (CSRB) and the Officer Career Satisfaction Program (OCSP) with the unified goal of increasing retention. Unfortunately, those programs were aimed at the wrong populations of Soldiers and costed taxpayers more than \$500 million without any evidence they

succeeded in retaining talented personnel.⁶¹ Third, from 2010 to 2012, the Army experimented with an online talent marketplace called Green Pages where officers, commanders, and human resources representatives could populate data to help identify appropriate future assignments. After three years, though, the service did not recognize any significant differences in sense of selflessness, devotion to duty, or obligation to serve among the 750 active duty officer participants.⁶² The Army has since implemented an improved online talent marketplace called Assignment Interactive Model, Version 2 (AIM 2.0), which is still in its infancy and has not yet been studied holistically to determine its effectiveness in managing the talent of Army officers.

Fourth, the 2013 NDAA established the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC). This effort was designed to study and modernize the military compensation and retirement systems in an effort to incentivize performance and increase retention. The initial framework for programs such as the Blended Retirement System can be traced back to the MCRMC. Then, in 2015, Defense Secretary Ash Carter originated the Force of the Future concept, but it quickly failed to attract resources from Congress. The DoD attempted to buy into the concept and stood up the Defense Digital System in 2015 and the Office of People Analytics in 2016; both organizations desired to modernize the personnel management system through recruitment and retention policy changes.⁶³ Navy Secretary Ray Mabus also directed the Culture of Innovation study designed to inculcate an innovative culture within the Department of the Navy and identify new ways to integrate innovative combat capabilities with personnel management processes.⁶⁴

The Marine Corps took its turn investigating talent management processes in 2018 when the Combat Development and Integration (CD&I) department completed the Characterizing Individual Marine Quality study. The study focused on themes that could provide analytic

support to policy makers such as retention incentives, cultural differences, collection and management of big data, and the physical and emotional characteristics of Marines.⁶⁵ Also in 2018, the NDS identified the need to “cultivate workforce talent” because the “creativity and talent of the American warfighter is our greatest enduring strength.”⁶⁶ With the 2019 NDAA, Congress gave the service secretaries more authority to modernize officer personnel systems, and the Army has already started implementing changes.⁶⁷ Also in 2019, Defense Secretary Mark Esper directed another influential advisory panel titled Reforming Talent Management in the Army,⁶⁸ the Joint Chiefs of Staff J7 published overarching guidance on developing talented officers for the future joint force,⁶⁹ and General Berger identified in his CPG that talent management is a problem linked to policy and law.⁷⁰ In essence, there is no shortage of historical attempts to counter DOPMA’s restrictions when it comes to personnel management.

Theory

The most valuable asset to any organization is efficient and loyal employees.⁷¹ The Resource-Based View (RBV) theory suggests that an organization can achieve a sustainable competitive advantage over competitors by investing in people.⁷² In Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, the DOD spent \$152.9 billion on personnel to include salary and benefits, and another \$12.9 billion on military construction to include family housing renovations and improvements.⁷³ These investments represent nearly one quarter of the DoD’s entire budget.

Modern economic theory suggests that a thoughtfully designed total compensation system is vital to maintaining a satisfied, motivated, and productive workforce.⁷⁴ Furthermore, economic decision theory postulates that people choose the option they believe represents the highest degree of satisfaction.⁷⁵ These theories clash within the Marine Corps when young and talented officers identify flaws in the up or out promotion system, and associated salary cap,

based on time in service rather than merit and performance. This results in a population of officers that leave the service to pursue more rewarding and challenging opportunities. Thus, there exists an opportunity cost for “the value of an officer’s next best employment alternative” outside the Marine Corps.⁷⁶ Those officers with the highest opportunity cost have the most to gain by leaving the service, and likely also possess the unique talents desired by the Marine Corps.

The sports industry accepts the theory of “talent spawning,” which posits that the most inspiring, influential, successful coaches have the innate ability to develop subordinate coaches until they reach similar levels.⁷⁷ These types of leaders have been referred to as “superbosses” and “talent magnets” because they have a level of charisma about them that attracts the most talented people.⁷⁸ Sports coaches of such caliber seemingly spawn equally talented staffs by simply employing them in accordance with their strengths and weaknesses. Such a theory is common knowledge in the Marine Corps and is embodied by Leadership Principle 10, which directs, “Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities.”⁷⁹ This inherently requires commanders to teach, coach, and mentor their Marines to understand and appreciate their strengths and weaknesses. The theory of managing the “20-70-10” personnel split, made popular by Jack Welch, General Electric’s Chief Executive Officer from 1981 to 2001, follows a similar thought pattern.⁸⁰ The majority of Marines constitute the middle 70% of performers, and it is within that group that commanders will find untapped talent that can be groomed and molded to replace the top 20% of performers as they leave, retire, or otherwise exit the service.

The psychology field recently began studying the theoretical concept of “psychological contracts” between employers and employees.⁸¹ In particular, psychologists are interested in employees’ perceptions to supposed breaches of that psychological contract, and the impacts on

talent management efforts such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and employee retention.⁸² This same theory is applicable in the Marine Corps at the micro level. For example, the breach of an inherent psychological contract between a Battalion Commander and one of his or her Company Commanders could trigger several other underlying, dormant grievances that cause the subordinate to consider leaving the organization. This also applies at the macro level. An officer who holds a particular, fundamental psychological contract with the service, or even the DoD, may interpret that contract breached by a particular change in policy. One significant factor that shapes how young officers interpret such psychological contracts can be found by analyzing shifts in culture.

Cultural Shifts

Historically, senior DoD civilians and military leaders have understood and appreciated how culture shapes and influences the officer corps. During the interwar period, General George Marshall replaced the Army's officer promotion and assignment processes with deep succession planning that prompted him to fire numerous commanders and promote junior officers to fill the gaps.⁸³ He recognized the need to train and educate those young officers for their new responsibilities, so he subsequently ensured officers spent roughly half of their military careers between 1919 to 1941 as either students or instructors at West Point, in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), at branch schools, or at the service schools at Fort Leavenworth and Carlisle Barracks.⁸⁴ More recent, Defense Secretaries and general officers have routinely acknowledged talent management challenges, but the Marine Corps has not materialized the necessary changes to keep pace with shifts in culture.

The "employee-employer relationship paradigm"⁸⁵ changed dramatically since the world entered the "age of now."⁸⁶ Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, are now the largest

generation.⁸⁷ The Marine Corps failed to align cultural shifts with its Title 10 responsibilities during the transition from the industrial era to the knowledge era, which undermined talent management efforts⁸⁸ as talented officers left the service for the business industry.⁸⁹ Analyzing the millennial generation is critical to understanding how the service can implement necessary changes to compete in retaining young and talented officers.

More than previous generations, millennials desire to control their own careers. Specifically, they want to define their own milestones needed to achieve their professional goals rather than rely on superiors or a human resources department to arrange their future training and experiences.⁹⁰ They are also interested in rotating positions frequently⁹¹ to maximize their potential to develop their skills and knowledge⁹² while searching for their passion.⁹³ In a 2018 study in which 398 employees from Innovation Research Interchange (IRI) participated by completing an online survey to identify attractive attributes of workplace environments and cultures, respondents answered the question, “What is your ideal length of time to be assigned to a project?”⁹⁴ Responses identified “6-12 months” as the most popular amount of time to be assigned to a project,⁹⁵ although a higher number of young employees identified “2-6 months” as the ideal timeframe.⁹⁶ Table 1 provides the full results for this question.

	<i>Age Group</i>			
	<i>22-25</i>	<i>26-30</i>	<i>31-35</i>	<i>36+</i>
<1 month	1	0	1	3
2-6 months	33	20	14	4
6-12 months	43	38	33	32
13-18 months	15	30	32	32
19 months-3 years	4	10	17	22
>3 years	1	0	1	5

Table 1: Percent of responses for the ideal length of time to be assigned to a project⁹⁷

Respondents also answered the question, “What is your ideal length of time to stay in a particular role?”⁹⁸ Table 2 provides the full results for this question.

	Age Group			
	22-25	26-30	31-35	36+
<1 month	1	2	1	1
2-6 months	40	15	6	1
6-12 months	27	20	20	11
13-18 months	20	43	40	24
19 months-3 years	5	15	29	49
>3 years	5	2	4	13

Table 2: Percent of responses for the ideal length of time to stay in a particular role⁹⁹

Again, younger employees desired to rotate roles more frequently than older employees. The majority of company grade officers are millennials between the ages of 22 and 30 years, and this study shows that between 80% and 90% of that age group desires to rotate through different roles sooner than 18 months.¹⁰⁰ This is problematic for the Marine Corps since duty assignments are ordinarily 36 months in length. Next, 49% of employees over the age of 36 years showed interest in roles between “19 months-3 years” in length.¹⁰¹ Compared to 15% for those between 26 and 30 years, and just 5% for those between 22 and 25 years,¹⁰² this highlights cultural differences between officer generations within the Marine Corps. Future Marine Corps talent management strategy discussions should consider the insights gained from both of these tables.

Young people in their 20s and 30s want a “meaningful challenge that provides them the opportunity to stretch themselves and see what they can accomplish.”¹⁰³ They want to add value to an organization and be able to impact its ability to succeed. Understanding they possess unique knowledge and talents, millennials desire to be recognized for their positive contributions¹⁰⁴ and expect instant and frequent feedback to refine their skills.¹⁰⁵ They value “quality of service” and the potential to change how the world lives more than they value job security,¹⁰⁶ which is uniquely different from previous generations. Millennials as a generation have therefore adopted “meaningfulness” as the core motivation to guide their work.¹⁰⁷ For their meaningful contributions they want to be rewarded, for example, with extra time off or

recognition at a meeting more than they want a pay raise.¹⁰⁸ It is critical for Marine Corps to consider these widely accepted generational shifts in its talent management strategy.

Another cultural difference between millennials and previous generations is that personal and peer coaching are now considered more important than performance appraisals as the primary feedback mechanism.¹⁰⁹ The desire and expectation for feedback has all but nullified the value of annual performance appraisals such as the Marine Corps' fitness report. Young officers expect instant and constructive criticism to help them improve, and that feedback does not always have to be face-to-face. Advancements in technology provide the ability to be connected to systems and programs from home, on the road, or from remote training areas, and millennials consider electronic feedback more valuable than previous generations. Likewise, the ability to be connected from virtually anywhere replaces the work-life balance with a concept of work-life integration.¹¹⁰ These shifts in culture are important for the Marine Corps to consider while forming the force's talent management strategy.

Talent Management Strengths, Weaknesses, and Counterarguments

One strength of Marine Corps officer talent management efforts is the use of "stay interviews,"¹¹¹ or mentorship and counseling sessions. These are effective management tools for superior officers to use as opportunities to answer questions, identify career goals, provide feedback and guidance, and assess future performance potential. Unfortunately, officers sometimes formalize these sessions so much that subordinates sense a lack of genuine interest. Some officers allocate time for counseling sessions but execute them poorly. A comprehensive analysis of 607 separate and distinct studies found that more than 33% of all counseling sessions backfire and actually decrease future performance.¹¹² The Marine Corps has published iterations

of mentorship programs, directives, and orders, yet they are often practiced differently than originally outlined.¹¹³

The EMLS was announced in 2018 to provide Marines an “opportunity to communicate to senior leaders what factors have the greatest influence on Marines with regard to accession, retention, and exiting the Marine Corps.”¹¹⁴ The 2018 EMLS results reveal numerous strengths and weaknesses of current manpower models. For example, the results show that Marines believe the service is better than the civilian sector regarding vacation time, retirement benefits, job security, and health care benefits.¹¹⁵ This indicates that the work force is largely satisfied with each of these aspects of military service. In contrast, the results also indicate that Marines believe quality of life, pay and compensation, hours worked per week, and the amount of family time and personal time are better in the civilian sector.¹¹⁶ Expectations of Marine officers are strict because the risk of failure is significantly greater in the profession of arms than in most civilian professions. Aside from pay and compensation, the Marine Corps heavily advertises the other three factors as part of its brand as the world’s premier warfighting organization.

Another Marine Corps officer talent management strength is the use of retention bonuses and financial incentives. For example, in fulfilling General Berger’s intent to use money as a “focused weapon,”¹¹⁷ the Marine Corps has offered retention bonuses to pilots from various communities in an effort to retain their unique skill sets. Unfortunately, the service still lacks the required number of qualified pilots across multiple airframes. As of March 2019, the C-130, F-35, F-18, and AV-8B communities were populated at just 52% of the required pilot inventory.¹¹⁸ One reason for this could be that officers are generally not motivated by financial incentives. The 2018 EMLS results show that, for officers who commissioned that year, the top three reasons they joined include service to their country, pride, and personal development.¹¹⁹

Likewise, officers who completed the survey that year as they exited the service reported joining for the same three reasons.¹²⁰ Responses were consistent across both genders and all elements of the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF). Although the data represent just one year of survey results, it is apparent that among the officer population the intrinsic motivation to serve outweighs extrinsic factors such as financial incentives.

The Marine Corps' performance evaluation system represents both talent management strengths and weaknesses. Fitness reports offer a standardized format that is applied to all officers, regardless of rank, MOS, or billet. Fitness reports also request the same type of feedback from every rater in the Marine Corps because the form holds every performer to the same standards. As mentioned earlier in this paper, such a uniform process sets conditions to be able to juxtapose all officers against a common set of principles and standards as a method of identifying top performers. Regrettably, there are many side effects to this type of system. First, some officers conform to the regulated list of assessed attributes found within the fitness report. This unintentional consequence has the potential to stifle creativity, limit critical thinking, and develop risk averse behaviors since officers are tacitly guided to perform in accordance with only the assessed criteria of fitness reports.

Another unnatural result that stems from standardized fitness reports is that "sometimes, the top officers receive the wrong development."¹²¹ In contrast, yet equally as problematic for talent management efforts, is that "sometimes, the wrong officers receive the top jobs."¹²² Each drawback is made possible by a failure to identify unique talents and align them with future requirements. Career timing may also work to the advantage of some yet to the detriment of others because of the absence of a guiding talent management strategy. The result is that the service approaches officer retention reactively at the tactical level where the majority of young

officers operate, seek feedback and guidance, and ultimately make the decision to leave the Marine Corps.

A third weakness of the Marine Corps' performance evaluation system is that talented officers can be subdued by RSs or ROs who write poor and ineffectual fitness reports. In contrast, an average officer who is evaluated by a pair of competent and organized superior officers may have a better chance of being selected for command or education opportunities than his or her top-performing peers. A student at the Naval Postgraduate School who analyzed RS and RO fitness report comments found that "reports for the best-performing officers are well written, use simple words in longer sentences, and comment on future command opportunities."¹²³ Young officers recognize such a disparity in rater aptitude, which does nothing to cultivate longer-term loyalty to the Marine Corps.¹²⁴ Relatedly, another weakness of the performance evaluation system in general, and of fitness reports in particular, is the challenge to distinguish between talented, average, and below average officers.

A 2014 study completed by the Army's Office of Economic & Manpower Analysis (OEMA) highlighted numerous challenges with OERs that are relevant to Marine Corps fitness reports as well. The study found that RSs marked 99% of all Army officers as "best qualified," 99% as "outstanding performers, must promote," and just 2% as "Below Center of Mass."¹²⁵ Furthermore, RSs rated 66% as "best suited for command" while ROs supplied that same sentiment to 73% of all Army officers.¹²⁶ Fitness reports are structurally different than OERs but present similar challenges that ultimately narrow the gap between top performers and average performers. Phrases such as "retain and promote ahead of peers," "promote now," and "promote at first look" are overused by RSs and ROs, and therefore provide little help to selection board members. Negative or derogatory terms such as "failed" or "needs improvement" are flagged for

justification by the Automated Performance Evaluation System (APES), which makes it challenging to point out deliberate weaknesses in an officer. Also, checking “no” in the “recommended for promotion” box requires an associated disciplinary action, and so officers nearly always check “yes.” Identifying the bottom 10% of performers is generally easy, in part due to disciplinary and legal actions. But, differentiating the middle 70% from the top 20% is extremely difficult due to the nuances and limits of fitness reports.

One way to fill this void in talent management would be to implement anonymous assessments for all officers. Tools such as 360-degree feedback are used widely in the business sector by employees at all levels as a way to pool feedback from various sources such as coworkers, subordinate employees, and past and present bosses. These evaluations strengthen teamwork, improve individual accountability, and also reveal specific development areas for which employees should focus in the future. Counterarguments to 360-degree feedback systems include their high price tag, requirements for data collection and analysis software, the focus solely on employee weaknesses, and the amount of time required for individuals to review and analyze the information. They also require a high degree of maturity on behalf of all participants for the feedback loop to generate positive results in an organization.

Another key strength of Marine Corps talent management and retention efforts is strong employer brand. Strong employer brand leads to strong brand equity, which is critical to retaining talented employees¹²⁷ The Marine Corps brand stands alone to facilitate recruitment of the best and brightest civilians to join its officer ranks. In the 2019 pilot study that compared Criteria Cognitive Aptitude Test (CCAT) scores between The Basic School (TBS) Lieutenants and a population of college-educated civilians, 394 of 453 Lieutenants performed better than the civilian average.¹²⁸ The service undoubtedly attracts and recruits intellectual, motivated, and

talented employees, but retention involves different factors. Employers that are ineffective in developing, sustaining, or realigning brand efforts fail to benefit from such a powerful talent retention tool.¹²⁹ The Marine Corps recognized this in 1999 and subsequently published *Sustaining the Transformation*.¹³⁰

When compared to the business industry, Marine Corps officer retention is significantly better. The average annual executive turnover rate at Tesla is 27%, at Snap is 24%, and at Lyft is 23%.¹³¹ Amazon, Uber, and Facebook each average 9% annually.¹³² Table 3 shows the total number of officers that left the service between FY 2013 and FY 2018, as well as the percentage of the total population for each rank.

Grade	Total Pop	Total Dep	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18
Capt	38359	553 (1.4%)	105 (1.5%)	101 (1.5%)	147 (2.3%)	97 (1.6%)	47 (0.8%)	56 (0.9%)
Maj	23064	430 (1.8%)	78 (2%)	86 (2.2%)	133 (3.5%)	59 (1.5%)	34 (0.8%)	40 (1.0%)
LtCol	11346	363 (3.2%)	63 (3.3%)	41 (2.1%)	87 (4.6%)	61 (3.3%)	61 (3.2%)	50 (2.6%)

Table 3: Total number of officers that departed the service (% of total population)¹³³

Attrition rates of Marine Corps officers between the ranks of Captain and Lieutenant Colonel over the past six years are much lower than some of the world’s leading businesses. Thus, the specific officer talent management problem is not attrition rate, rather the individual qualities and talents of those who leave each year. Among the small percentage of those who leave are top performing officers with knowledge, skills, and talents that are critical to the future success of the Marine Corps.

A final strength of Marine Corps officer talent management is the opportunity to attend resident Professional Military Education (PME) schools. Education is an important part of officer development, and annually the service selects roughly 30% of its officers to attend a variety of career-enhancing academic institutions to include Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Army Command and General Staff College, and Naval Postgraduate School.

Throughout the past three decades, though, all military services have seemingly elevated the importance of PME schools over the value of civilian education. Figure 2 shows how the percentage of Army Brigadier Generals with graduate degrees from civilian universities decreased between 1995 and 2010, while the percentage with degrees from PME schools increased during that same time period.

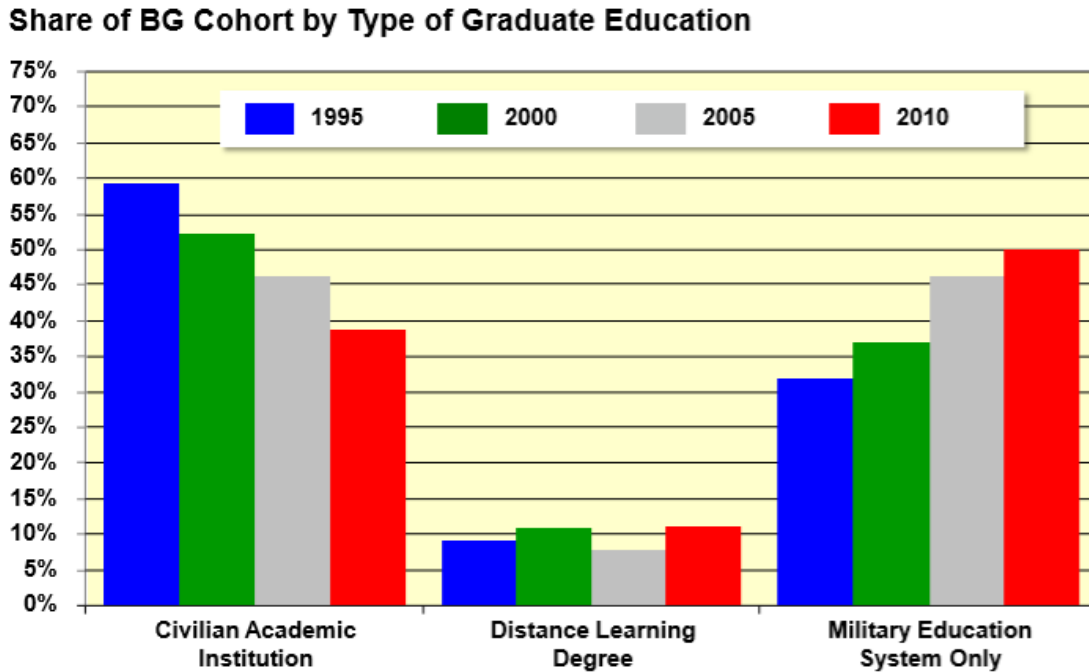


Figure 2: Percentage of Army Brigadier Generals with graduate degrees¹³⁴

Since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, the importance of military PME has elevated dramatically due to the importance to educate officers on lesson learned in the Middle East and prepare them for future deployments. The fight for selection to resident PME schools, combined with shortened dwell times between deployments, led to a decrease in importance and relevance of civilian education.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff identified the need for the services to get better at aligning education and utilization of talent, specifically with regard to follow on assignments of PME graduates.¹³⁵ The assignments process for PME graduates tends to consider all of them as having

equal skills, talents, and abilities. Graduates are typically assigned to key billets, such as Battalion Operations Officers or higher level staff planners, however individual strengths and weaknesses are not considered in every case. It is unlikely the Marine Corps truly suffers from an alleged “intellectual collapse” of its officer corps.¹³⁶ Talent management decisions in the Marine Corps are oftentimes made by well-intentioned officers who simply do not understand the associated talent implications.¹³⁷ It is evident that the Marine Corps plainly struggles in the same manner as the other services with aligning the unique talents of each officer with the demanding requirements of the joint force. An overarching talent management strategy stands to mitigate this challenge, improve retention of talented officers,

Recommendations

First, the Marine Corps would benefit from launching an online talent marketplace where every officer can populate a profile of individual skills, interests, and credentials. Then, officers could prioritize future billet vacancies and units could anonymously prioritize which officers they want based on those credentials and other unique talents.¹³⁸ This would provide officers more influence in their future assignments,¹³⁹ distinguish officers based on a diverse range of talents, monitor workplace attitudes before retention becomes problematic,¹⁴⁰ and more accurately match skill sets with unique billet requirements. Uploading documents, claiming credit for course completion, and editing a type of online resume is made easy in an online marketplace, and the Marine Corps possess the budget, personnel, and intellectual capabilities to implement this type of system into pre-existing assignments processes. Furthermore, commanders as well as M&RA monitors could use the online talent marketplace to specifically target officers who possess the exact talents demanded by the service.¹⁴¹ Managing the marketplace would require continuous assessment of the interface between officers and an

overarching talent management strategy,¹⁴² which inevitably involves time and effort as well as human input.

Talent optimization is a discipline that demands officers to proactively get in front of potential problems,¹⁴³ so the Marine Corps may benefit from eliminating some requirements to create time and space for officers to pursue this specific talent management line of effort. Raghu Krishnamoorthy, Vice President of Executive Development and Chief Learning Officer at General Electric, explained that “effective talent review is an intensely human process that calls for extensive demand on a leadership’s time.”¹⁴⁴ Online talent marketplaces have operated successfully in the business and human resource sectors for decades because industry leaders have adapted to changes in culture and built new leadership styles around new generations in the labor market. Likewise, the Army has implemented its second iteration of its online talent marketplace in the past six years. The Marine Corps has access to lessons learned from civilian sectors as well as the Army, and should undoubtedly consider those factors when developing its own online talent marketplace.

Second, designing and implementing a 360-degree assessment tool for all officers could provide meaningful performance feedback from peers, subordinates, and superiors alike. These types of evaluations can be designed to consider a broader range of metrics such as key performance indicators, counterproductive work behaviors, contextual performance, strengths and weaknesses within a team setting, and individual character ratings.¹⁴⁵ When nested within an overarching talent management strategy, anonymous feedback can positively influence employee behavior and provide employees with critical information required to pursue personal development. Improvements on a personal level naturally benefit the company, increase morale, improve teamwork, and increase retention of top performers.

Peer evaluations such as 360-degree feedback assessments inherently focus on weaknesses, however the Marine Corps could easily modify existing templates from the business industry to also incorporate individual strengths and talents as part of a larger talent management strategy. Feedback assessments could also be included in the online talent marketplace to provide a more holistic overview of an officer to commanders and M&RA monitors. Furthermore, this type of assessment validates particular feedback when referenced by multiple sources, thus providing opportunities for officers to mature, improve self-awareness, and improve overall performance. Adopting this process, though, requires policy changes to DOPMA, NDAA, or Title 10, so the Marine Corps will need to draft proposed changes to incorporate anonymous feedback as part of its performance evaluation process, route it through the Department of the Navy, and request the changes to be written into law. This type of change is necessary for the Marine Corps to remain competitive with civilian sectors in attracting and retaining talented individuals who demonstrate desirable critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Third, updating the format and assessment areas of the fitness report would complement the addition of 360-degree assessments in eliminating bias, personal opinion, and the “idiosyncratic rater effect.”¹⁴⁶ The restrictive nature of fitness reports effectively limits the type and amount of feedback an officer can provide. Desired leadership qualities have unavoidably changed since the fitness report was last revised in 2003. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff demanded that all officers across the joint force possess specific “desired leader attributes” such as being professionally competent, strategic-minded, and critically thinking.¹⁴⁷ These should therefore form the foundation of the revised fitness report.

The new fitness report format should also make it harder for raters to inflate reports. Inflated reports create challenges for selection board members to distinguish top performers from average performers, and leads to faulty future assignments. This is predominantly a challenge for the Army's OER, however Marine Corps fitness reports suffer from similar problems. Checking "yes" in the "recommended for promotion" box is a given when completing a fitness report, however RSs and ROs should have the latitude to check "no" without additional legal or disciplinary action. This would make it easier for selection boards to identify the below average performers within the middle 70% of officers.

The new format should also include rankings from 360-degree evaluations. The current performance evaluation system is one-sided in that evaluations are provided from only superiors, and the professional evaluations of peers and subordinates are irrelevant. Thus, adding the average ranking from anonymous 360-degree evaluations into the new fitness report, for example, would add value in the board room. This would also help identify leadership trends among the officer population, and allow top performers and below average performers to stand out amongst their peers. This recommendation, too, requires changes to DOPMA, NDAA, or Title 10 policy, but is necessary for the Marine Corps to keep pace with civilian sectors in providing useful feedback to help employees mature and develop.

A fourth recommendation is that resident PME students receive observed fitness reports upon completion. An entire year of unobserved time while attending competitive, rigorous, rewarding academic institutions simply does not fit into any talent management strategy. Intellectual capacity, creative problem solving, critical thinking skills, the ability to work in a team setting, planning strengths and weaknesses, and the ability to analyze and synthesize information are observable behaviors in an academic environment that need to be captured in an

observed academic fitness report. The current fitness report is not appropriate for students, so the Marine Corps needs to develop a separate academic fitness report. All officer students, regardless of rank, school duration, or the rank and service of the reporting senior, should receive an observed academic fitness report that captures useful information about their intellectual capacities in accordance with the mission and graduation requirements of each specific school. The current, unobserved fitness report issued to PME graduates is plainly a time-space filler that signifies completion of a joint PME requirement but provides little value to board members.

In contrast to the current, unobserved fitness reports that students receive from academic institutions, observed academic fitness reports could be used to certify an officer's level of expertise for entry into the next phase of his or her career.¹⁴⁸ Intellectual expectations increase exponentially among officers from rank to rank, yet completing either a resident or non-resident service-level PME course does not necessarily certify that an officer is intellectually ready to fulfill roles and duties at the next rank. It is imperative that the Marine Corps captures the intellectual capacity, creative problem solving skills, and critical thinking skills of Marine officers in an academic environment in an effort to identify strategic thinkers and groom them for demanding billets. This would serve as a step toward aligning merit-based performance with additional education opportunities, promotion selections, command selections, and the assignments process. It would also achieve the Commandant's intent in the 2019 CPG to "accurately identify the individual's success while in school,"¹⁴⁹ as well as the Chairman's intent to assess the cognitive abilities of all officers in the academic environment.¹⁵⁰

The most important recommendation, though, is for the Marine Corps to develop a coherent talent management strategy that nests within the joint talent management framework. Such a strategy is needed for officers at the tactical level to appropriately employ and assess

subordinate officers with a mind toward joint readiness. Moreover, an overarching talent management strategy is necessary to ensure the recommended changes in this paper are implemented appropriately and in accordance with the demands of the joint force.

Empowerment without a guiding strategy will surely result in failure, just as guidance without empowerment limits the effectiveness of an officer to make changes.¹⁵¹ In this effort, the private industry offers much to learn through its widespread use of advanced analytics and data-enabled tools.¹⁵² It is imperative that the Marine Corps connects with civilian industries to develop and continuously refine a strategy to identify, assess, employ, and retain talented individuals. It is equally important for the service to incorporate its talent management strategy into wargames at M&RA and the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab (MCWL) to project short term and long term impacts. Once the strategy endures wargame iterations, the service needs to publish it down to the lowest levels.

The Marine Corps' talent management strategy should define terms to include *talent*, *talent management*, and *talent management strategy*. Definitions need to be specific enough to hold officers accountable to a standard, yet flexible enough to apply to all aspects of performance to include physical capabilities, occupational specialty expertise, and most importantly, intellectual capabilities. Definitions then need incorporated into the Fleet Marine Force fitness report as well as the new observed academic fitness report. Moreover, the list of attributes in the current fitness report needs to be reviewed in accordance with the service's talent management strategy. Definitions should shape and influence a new set of attributes that combines aspects of the current fitness report with new and future talent demands, yet also nests within the service's talent management strategy.

Such a strategy also needs to define talent management goals that drive decision making at lower levels. Those goals should encompass talent management definitions and inextricably link Marine Corps talent management efforts to the needs of the joint force. The Marine Corps would undeniably benefit from a common strategy that translates well at the tactical level to guide officers when writing and reviewing fitness reports. Similarly, a common understanding up and down the chain of command of the service's future talent demands would help promotion, education, and command selection boards in identifying officers with the talents desired by strategic military and civilian leaders. The collective understanding of what talent means, how to find it, and how to employ it has changed dramatically in the past 20 years, so it makes sense to keep pace by periodically modifying evaluation criteria to ensure the Marine Corps is retaining the right types of officers for the future fight.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps lacks a coherent talent management strategy to guide officers at the tactical and service levels. Current manpower models, the performance appraisal process, fitness report criteria, and the assignments process are outdated. As a result, officers oftentimes act with the best interests of the service in mind, however talent management errors at the unit level predictably lead to challenges at the joint level. The Army implemented numerous changes authorized by the 2019 NDAA, and the Strategic Studies Institute published the Army's findings on talent management changes in multiple references. The civilian sector has widely studied, implemented, and published findings on a variety of talent management processes as well. Thus, the Marine Corps has the unique opportunity to learn from other small and large organizations to develop a talent management strategy that capitalizes on intrinsic motivation and properly incentivizes top performing officers to stay in the organization.

The Marine Corps attracts some of the best and brightest civilians in the country to join the officer ranks, but the service fails to synchronize shifts in culture with changes in its personnel management system. Officers are frustrated with the military bureaucracy, poor leadership, promotions, compensation, and the assignments process. When their frustrations are not heard or addressed, they elect to exit the service. Marine Corps officer retention rates are significantly better than those at some of the civilian sector's top businesses, however the Marine Corps wants to retain its top performers to help influence and shape the future force. Policy limits the service's ability to change many personnel management processes, however the lack of a coherent talent management strategy creates unnecessary frustration. Looking to the future, the Chairman's "desired leader attributes" should form the foundation of the Marine Corps' officer talent management strategy to ensure it is nested within the DoD's strategic vision of the future force.¹⁵³ Implementing an overarching strategy to guide talent management efforts and synchronize personnel management processes will enable the Marine Corps to retain its top performers while ensuring the right officers are in the right billets at the right time.

Notes

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