

Marine Officer Promotions:
Incentivizing and Retaining Top Performers

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The United States Marine Corps prides itself on having a professional and highly capable officer corps. Promotion of these officers through the ranks is largely determined by the amount of time a Marine spends at each grade, known as time in grade. Current promotion trends indicate that time in grade represents the single greatest factor in determining officer promotion eligibility, and unlike the enlisted ranks, the performance of officers within the ranks of captain through lieutenant colonel has little bearing on their promotion timeline. To diminish this disparity, the Marine Corps should place additional emphasis on performance criteria within field grade promotion boards in order to incentivize its officers to excel and to prevent its most competent officers from leaving active service.

Background

The role of time in grade as a primary factor in Marine officer promotions has been addressed in numerous *Marine Corps Gazette* articles over the years. Dating as far back as February 1975, 1st Lt D.O. Bailey presented a critique of the validity of officer promotions based primarily on experience. He proposed the following for consideration:

*In any promotion system, seniority must play a large part but should it be the prime factor? Should a Captain with six years in grade and with excellent fitness reports be promoted ahead of a Captain with four years in grade and outstanding fitness reports? Does that extra time really separate the two in ability and what added incentive does the Captain with four years in grade have to improve himself?*¹

Eleven years later, in his October 1986 Gazette article, Captain Joseph V. Medina directly addressed the reasons promotion boards do not select officers from below-zone. He articulates a rather simple yet feasible solution:

Senior officers, in particular those who comprise the selection boards, must conscientiously decide to select outstanding officers for early promotion. One of the major roadblocks to this change is the feeling that these below-zone selections will come at the expense of in-zone nominees. This might be true for a particular board if below-zone selections occur sporadically. It would not be a factor if promotion boards were consistent in selecting a credible number of below-zone selectees each board. At present, approximately 10 percent

¹ 1stLt D.O. Bailey, "Testing for officer promotion," *Marine Corps Gazette*, February 1975, 46.

of the selectees are from above the zone and 90 percent are from in the zone. If selection boards consistently promoted approximately 10 percent from the above zone, 86 percent from the zone, and 4 percent from below the zone, then the promotion opportunity would remain the same. Although four percent fewer officers would be selected from the primary zone in any given year, the shortfall would be made up by the below-zone selectees from the prior year.²

Building upon more than 20 years of analysis that has addressed the lack of performance criteria in officer promotion boards, articles relevant to the subject continued. In December 1997, 1stLt Adam Strickland commented on the reasons he believes contribute to poor retention of company grade officers:

Officer retention comes down to two basic issues: competition and quality of service. As I wrestle, as do others around me, with the decision of whether to stay in the Corps, I must ask myself, "Will the Corps reward me for hard work and superior performance?" When speaking of reward, I am not speaking of salary or vacation time; but rather, a chance to get ahead of my peers through hard work. Unfortunately, the answer

² Captain Joseph V. Medina, "Increasing below-zone selections," *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1986, 48.

to the above question is "No." Whether or not I outperform my peers in a qualitative sense, or even in a quantitative sense as far as productivity, does not matter; but rather, time in service or lineal standing at the Basic School.³

These articles represent just a sample of the many writings over the years which address the failure of promotion boards to select based on performance. Promotion trends exhibited in recent years remain unchanged; officers must first conform to time-in-grade requirements before they become eligible for promotion. This issue of performance as a measure of merit for promotion remains unresolved.

The Promotion Process

All officer promotion boards begin with a precept, a legal document that orders a selection board to convene. Authored by the Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV), the precept also provides instructions governing the proceedings of the selection board and appoints the president, members, and recorders. The precept guidance for the number of selections authorized during the fiscal year 2010 (FY10) Major Selection Board reads as follows:

³ 1stLt Adam T. Strickland, "Concerns of an officer," *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1997, 38.

*The board may select for promotion to the grade of major, a number of officers which most closely approximates 90 percent of those eligible in-zone officers. Of those officers selected, not more than 10 percent may be selected from below the promotion zone. The board is not required to select to the maximum number provided.*⁴

Simply stated, the total number of Marines that the board is authorized to promote for the fiscal year equates to 90 percent of the in-zone population. For example, in FY09, 952 captains were in-zone for major. Of this number, the board was limited to promote only 90 percent or 857 Marines to major from all three zones. The precept further stipulates that of the 857 Marines that the Marine Corps can promote, up to 10 percent can be selected from the below-zone category. Therefore, during FY09, the SECNAV explicitly authorized the promotion of up to 85 captains from the below-zone category. Yet, none were selected. In fact, in the last seven major selection boards, only one captain has been selected from below-zone.⁵

⁴ Secretary of the Navy, Precept Convening the FY10 USMC Major Selection Board, August 28, 2008.

⁵ Officer Promotions Branch (MMPR-1), Manpower Personnel Management, FY07 USMC Major Selection Board Statistics, January 26, 2006.

Similarly, the precept for the FY10 Lieutenant Colonel Selection Board reads identical to that of the major selection board with one exception: the selection opportunity is limited to 75 percent of all in-zone officers. In the last seven lieutenant colonel boards, no officers have been selected from below-zone.

If the SECNAV authorizes the Marine Corps to promote a sizeable number of captains and majors from below-zone, why are promotion boards so reluctant to do so? Moreover, if the Marine Corps consistently abstains from selecting from the below-zone, what purpose does this zone serve in the promotion process? Per Marine Corps Order P1400.31C, boards are required to prepare cases for all Marines across all three zones.⁶ This means that officers in all zones are technically considered for promotion. LtCol Kelly G. Dobson, a member of the FY09 Major Promotion Board, provides insight into this process:

The first thing that is done is to prepare the in-zone cases. In-zone cases are prepared first to give the board members a sense of the competitiveness of that population. This is followed by preparing the above-zone cases and then the

⁶ Department of the Navy, Marine Corps Order P1400.31C (Washington, D.C., 2006), 3-7.

*below-zone cases. The board then goes to the in/out brief to determine which above-zone and below-zone cases are competitive with the in-zone cases and will get a full brief.*⁷

Though LtCol Dobson's account demonstrates that below-zone cases are in fact considered for promotion, it is difficult to discern this by looking at recent promotion statistics. The FY09 Major Selection Board considered 1,891 eligible officers across all three zones. Of the 857 Marines promoted, 29 were selected from above-zone, and 828 were selected from in-zone. Despite the consideration given to below-zone officers, and a sizeable population of below-zone candidates from which to choose, none were selected. With almost half of the total number of eligible officers for promotion residing in the below-zone category, it is incomprehensible that none were competitive enough to be selected. Given this analysis, time in grade arguably represents the single greatest factor in determining promotion eligibility with little consideration given to performance.

Performance-based Promotions

⁷ LtCol Kelly G. Dobson, "Demystifying the Promotion Board Process," *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 2008, 18.

Though the promotion boards review all below-zone cases, only one officer has been promoted from the below-zone population in the last seven years. One might argue that below-zone Marines are not selected because their experience level is not equivalent to those who are in-zone; the logical assumption is that the below-zone candidates are simply less qualified. Yet, how does one differentiate between the experience level of a Marine who just missed the in-zone cutoff by one month, and his counterpart who is one month senior? Does the senior Marine in this example really possess significantly superior qualifications based on 30 additional days time in grade? While certainly possible, the additional experience is just as likely to be based on fortunate circumstances (e.g. assignment to an operational billet) as it is on aptitude.

Without evaluating each Marine against the same performance factors, discerning the deservedness for promotion between in-zone and below-zone Marines becomes problematic, particularly when comparing Marines who are separated by zone based on a negligible margin of time. Recognizing this challenge, standardized performance criteria should be considered and applied equally to all officers who are eligible for promotion across all zones. Such performance criteria should include, at a minimum the following: physical fitness and combat fitness

test scores, performance evaluations, rifle and pistol qualifications, and recommendations, in addition to time in grade.

When the board analyzes the in-zone population to determine the average level of competitiveness, a threshold should be established. This threshold would establish a performance baseline against which all officers would be evaluated for promotion regardless of their zone. This selection method would create a culture in which only the most qualified Marines are promoted to the next rank, not just the most senior.

If selecting highly qualified Marines from below-zone proves too cumbersome within the current architecture, then a performance-based prioritization of those selected from in-zone should be made. Consider for example, two captains who are selected for promotion to major, both in-zone. Captain A graduated in the top 25 percent of his TBS class, while Captain B graduated from the same TBS class but with a slightly lower overall standing; therefore, Captain A has a higher lineal standing than does Captain B. Throughout his career thus far, Captain A has been acceptably physically fit and routinely qualified as sharpshooter on the pistol and rifle range. He has done his job well and has received solid marks on performance

evaluations. On the other hand, Captain B has maintained superior physical fitness and holds nine expert awards for both pistol and rifle. His performance evaluations were consistently above those of his peers. Despite both officers being selected for promotion, Captain A will be promoted months in advance of Captain B and solely because his TBS grade point average was better 10 years earlier. Captain B is clearly the higher performing Marine; however, he will never be eligible to promote faster than Captain A because of his lower lineal standing. Prioritizing promotion lists based on prior performance will fix this shortfall and serve to incentivize top-performers.

Incentivizing the Officer Corps

Incentivizing officers to excel will only serve to benefit the Marine Corps. Doing so will further solidify the “lead by example” model which personifies Marine Corps culture. For an example on how to incentivize officer performance, one need only look to the meritorious promotion process utilized in the enlisted ranks. The Marine Corps manual pertaining to enlisted promotions grants commanders the authority to promote, by means other than the regular promotion system, exceptionally well-qualified Marines in recognition of outstanding leadership and

performance.⁸ The order goes on to state that minimum time in grade requirements are waived in the case of meritorious promotions. Although such unrestrictive freedom should not directly transfer to officer promotions, an incentive to excel in some form must exist.

Without parameters in place to encourage and reward superior performance, the Marine Corps routinely risks losing its most talented and motivated leaders. Moreover, officers who might otherwise be encouraged to improve their performance have little external motivation to do so, especially when they will likely be promoted anyway once they meet their requisite time in grade. To counter mediocrity, officer promotion boards should be granted the authority to reprioritize those Marines selected for promotion by rank-ordering selection numbers based on performance. Such a measure could considerably encourage officers to excel and remain on active duty.

In the professional civilian sector, an employee's performance is often paramount and typically has a direct influence on his promotion timeline. Mediocre performers are routinely overlooked for promotion, and under certain circumstances, they may be terminated. Jack Welch, former chief

⁸ MCO P1400.32B *Marine Corps Promotion Manual*, Volume 2, Enlisted Promotions.

executive officer of General Electric (GE), expresses the importance of incentivizing top performers by using a personnel management technique called *differentiation*. He argues that companies “win” when they are able to distinguish between top performers and the general employee population, and then reward the former accordingly. To cultivate a highly skilled and efficient employee base, Jack Welch emphasizes that the top performing 20 percent of an organization should be “showered with bonuses, stock options, praise, love, training, and a variety of rewards to their pocketbooks and souls.”⁹ He further articulates that organizations which treat all employees equally suffer, because equal treatment often leads to a system where underperformers become “protected.”

Welch’s description of organizations that treat all employees equally is one that mirrors the current Marine Corps promotion process. By not differentiating between its highest performing officers from average performers, the Marine Corps is undervaluing its most qualified and thus risks losing them. While certain incentive programs utilized by the commercial industry may not be feasible for use by the Marine Corps, the significance of incentivizing top performers remains vital.

⁹ Jack Welch, *Winning* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 41.

Conclusion

To keep the “best and fully qualified,”¹⁰ the Marine Corps must provide its officers with reasonable incentives, beginning with performance-based promotions for field grade officers. Failure to do so will lead to Marines leaving active service for careers outside the military, careers that they perceive are more rewarding. Given the challenging operating environment facing the Marine Corps today, we must strive to retain our most competent officers. Performance-based promotions may very well be the answer.

¹⁰ MCO P1400.31C Marine Corps Promotion Manual, Volume 1, Officer Promotions.

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