

Strategy Research Project

Reshaping the Army Corps of Engineers' Workforce

by

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United States Army War College
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

Reshaping the Army Corps of Engineers' Workforce

by

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Abstract

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Critical to thriving in the dynamic world facing the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) in the future is adopting an agile, competitive concept of operating the organization. Current USACE performance is used as an indicator and catalyst to initiate transformation from a Good to a Great organization. This paper explores the potential of implementing a second network operating system that creates urgency and harnesses the power and innovation of a volunteer force that performs strategy maintenance and implementation. Exploring resources, research, and analysis from the private sector, there are talent management tactics, techniques, and procedures, which can effectively and efficiently reshape the USACE workforce. USACE has the potential to achieve prominence as an exemplar to other entities. This is achievable through the establishment of synergy between their hierarchical operating system and the integration of a complementary second operating system that accelerates the organization's strategic goals.

Reshaping the Army Corps of Engineers' Workforce

The future growth and survival of the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and its comprising agencies are in critical need of an evolution. The operational environment for these agencies in the 21st century is one of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA).¹ This VUCA environment is amplified by the appointment of a new Chief of Engineers, unprecedented budget constraints and uncertainty, challenging stewardship of tenuous infrastructure, and other USACE commitments worldwide.

This paper analyzes the current USACE strategy, which is constructed around the principles Jim Collins discusses in his book *Good to Great*. The implementation of the strategy presented in the USACE Campaign Plan has yet to provide the transition from a *Good* to a *Great* organization. Collins' first stage requires "Disciplined People: 'Level 5 Leadership' and the 'First Who...Then What' principles."² To increase the probability of getting the "right" people to whom Collins refers in the "Disciplined People" stage, this paper analyzes how private sector businesses recruit, hire, and retain people.³ Techniques in Lori Davila and Louise Kursmark's book *How to Choose the Right Person for the Right Job Every Time* and Gilt Groupe Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Kevin Ryan's methods of building a team of the "right" people are studied as possible options for USACE. With change inevitable, this paper explores methods to add speed and agility to create a strategic advantage in a faster moving world.⁴ John Kotter's method of installing a complementary secondary network operating system in *Accelerate* is reviewed to identify an opportunity to create urgency and harnesses the power and innovation of a sustainable network of volunteers to greatly accelerate the organization's strategic goals.⁵

The potential solutions identified while analyzing the previously mentioned approaches offer USACE an opportunity to reshape its workforce, create urgency, improve strategic agility, and ultimately generate a competitive advantage for the VUCA operating environment. In the 2012-13 Key Strategic Issues List assembled by the U.S. Army War College, USACE proposed the following questions:

With potential reductions in Army and Civil Works budgets that may result in a smaller affordable civilian workforce, what can the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers do to best reshape their workforce? How can the Corps achieve better hiring outcomes? How does the Corps best motivate, develop, and retain the engineering and other needed talent to continue to complete their missions now and in the future?⁶

The USACE leadership needs a new approach for intellectual and functional agility that adopts techniques and methods for success in the 21st century. This paper will begin by explaining the USACE mission, their operating environment, how they are organized, their current strategy, and why the transition from *Good* to *Great* has yet to occur. Subsequently, it will propose fiscally responsible methods for improving hiring outcomes and strategic agility, thus ultimately reshaping the USACE workforce.

Exploring the Scope

Mission and Operating Environment

To better understand the problem, we must look at the USACE mission, operating environment, and organizational structure. USACE is the world's largest public engineering, design, and construction management agency with approximately 37,000 Civilians and 765 Soldiers delivering engineering services to customers in more than ninety countries.⁷ Their mission is to provide vital public engineering services in peace and war to strengthen the Nation's security, energize the economy, and reduce risks from disasters.⁸ The current USACE vision is to build a *Great* engineering force of

highly ‘disciplined’ people working with their partners through ‘disciplined’ thought and action to deliver innovative and sustainable solutions for the Nation’s engineering challenges.⁹ With environmental sustainability as a guiding principle, their ‘disciplined’ Corps team is working diligently to strengthen the Nation’s security by building and maintaining America’s infrastructure and providing military facilities where service members train, work, and live. They are researching and developing technology for the country’s war fighters while protecting America’s interests abroad by using their engineering expertise to promote stability and improve quality of life. Energizing the economy, USACE dredges America’s waterways to support the movement of critical commodities and provides recreation opportunities at America’s campgrounds, lakes, and marinas. By devising hurricane and storm damage reduction infrastructure, they are reducing risks from disasters. Their men and women are protecting and restoring the Nation’s environment including critical efforts in the Everglades, the Louisiana coast, and along many of our Nation’s major waterways. USACE is continuing to clean sites contaminated with hazardous, toxic, or radioactive waste and material in a progressive effort to sustain the environment.¹⁰ These diverse missions and their associated operating environments require a decentralized structure spread over the numerous watersheds traversing the United States.

Hierarchical Structure

USACE is divided into nine major subordinate commands, commanded by general officers; 46 districts, commanded by military officers in the ranks of colonel or lieutenant colonel; and six specialized centers led by military officers or civilians. The three senior leaders in a district are comprised of a military commander, a military deputy, and a civilian deputy. The majority of the remaining employees are Department

of the Army Civilians. The commanders' positions of the divisions and districts mirror those of CEO's leading companies of 200 to 2000 employees. In both the divisions and districts, civilians serve as the branch and department heads and possess hiring authority in their respective areas of responsibility. The district commanders are responsible for managing the civil works and military program tasking across multiple states. In addition, they are responsible for managing the budget and all hiring actions in their respective district, while reporting directly to their assigned division commander. The process of recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees is decentralized and managed by the individual districts. With an understanding of the parameters of their mission, operating environment, organization, and operations, this paper will examine the current USACE strategy.

USACE Campaign Plan Abstract

The new Chief of Engineers, Lieutenant General (LTG) Thomas P. Bostick, has adjusted the strategy slightly since taking over in May of 2012. Below is the Campaign Plan concept as listed on the USACE website:

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is marching forward with a new Campaign Plan to transform the way we do business. These are historic times in our Nation and in the world, and the Corps will play a pivotal role in helping shape America's future. The Corps will grow stronger and become a great organization by delivering superior performance, setting the standard for our profession, making a positive impact on the Nation and other nations, and building to last, as evidenced by the strength of our team — educated, trained, experienced, and certified professionals. We will deliver superior performance every time through disciplined people, thought, and action. We will use the Campaign Plan to establish our priorities, focus our transformation initiatives, measure and guide our progress, and adapt to the needs of the future. My intent is for the Corps to be *one disciplined team* — in thought, word, and action — and to meet our commitments by saying what we will do, and doing what we say.¹¹

Strategically, the USACE Campaign Plan describes the vision and goals for the entire organization.¹² The Campaign Plan incorporates the goals of the civil works, military construction, real estate, and research and development programs and shows how these are mutually supportive.¹³ The Campaign Plan has four goals with associated objectives. This paper will focus on their fourth goal: “recruit and retain strong teams.”¹⁴

The primary objective under this goal is to “establish tools and systems to place the “right” people in the “right” jobs then develop and retain this highly skilled workforce.”¹⁵

The original campaign plan was developed under the leadership of Lieutenant General (LTG) R. L. Van Antwerp and sustained as the organization’s overarching strategy when LTG Bostick assumed command of USACE. The common objective under both Chiefs of Engineers is transforming USACE into a *Great* organization. The framework and principles to which they are referring are those of the author Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*.

Good to Great Framework

For elucidation, this paper will examine the framework and principles Jim Collins explores in his book *Good to Great*, specifically Stage One: Disciplined People. Jim Collins and his team of twenty researchers spent five years looking at companies from years 1965 to 1995. Their criteria for judging companies are ones that remained at the general market rate or underperformed for fifteen years, followed by a transition, and subsequently returning at approximately three times the stock market rate for at least fifteen years. Their goal was to eliminate companies with short-term success from the results. The researchers further refined their focus list to ensure that companies outperformed their associated industries, eliminating spurious results involving entire industries that grew exponentially in a given period. Only eleven companies from the

Fortune 500 met these criteria. They were studied in depth and compared to competitors in their respective industries.¹⁶

Collins identifies three stages that enabled these companies to profit at least three times their competitors ultimately making them *Great*.

- Stage 1: Disciplined People (Level 5 Leadership and First Who...Then What)
- Stage 2: Disciplined Thought (Confront the Brutal Facts and The Hedgehog Concept)
- Stage 3: Disciplined Action (Culture of Discipline and The Flywheel)¹⁷

Disciplined People: Level 5 Leader Principle

Collins discovered these eleven companies had CEO's who embodied his definition of a "Level 5 Leader." This term describes an individual who is very humble on a personal level, yet possesses a great deal of drive and desire to succeed. This success is not personal, but defined by creating something great that will outlast their tenure. These are people with an unwavering will and commitment to lead, doing what is necessary to drive their organization to the top.¹⁸ "Level 5 Leaders" are the kind of people who do not point to themselves as the cause for an organization's success and acknowledge the credit of their subordinates' contributions.

Level 5 leaders are ambitious first and foremost for the cause, the organization, the work – not themselves – and they have the fierce resolve to do whatever it takes to make good on that ambition. A Level 5 Leader displays a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. Level 5 Leadership has two primary components: 1) Put Level 5 Leaders in the most powerful seats. 2) Create a Level 5 Leadership culture.¹⁹

Disciplined People: First "Who" then "What" Principle

Great companies are those that have solid foundations, and rely on the coordinated efforts of the team's establishment and maintenance of that foundation.

Each company that transformed from *Good* to *Great* made it a priority to focus on the “Who” by hiring the “right” people for their organization. The “What,” such as vision, direction, and strategy thus became achievable. By having a strong team, these companies avoided the pitfall of what Collins describes as the “genius with a thousand helpers CEO.”²⁰

First Who...Then What. Those who build great organizations make sure they have the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the key seats before they figure out where to drive the bus. They always think first about “who” and then about what. First Who has four primary components: 1) Get the right people on the bus. 2) Get the right people in the right seats. 3) Get the wrong people off the bus. 4) Put “who” before “what.”²¹

USACE Strategy Investigation

With a basic understanding of Jim Collins’ principles, one can now analyze how effectively USACE incorporates these principles into its strategy. The approach taken will discern evidence that determines if USACE is currently a *Good* or a *Great* organization. Since USACE is a government organization and does not have financial results to analyze, its performance is assessed in relationship to the organization’s mission.²²

The slow progress of USACE’s projects contrasts with private sector construction projects.²³ Private sector construction firms build effectively and efficiently to limit costs. A 2010 Government Accountability Office report on USACE found that “funding projects in increments hinders project efficiency by increasing costs and timelines.”²⁴ An example of the inefficient and ineffective performance is an estimated backlog of more than 1,000 feasibility studies and construction projects worth more than \$80 billion.²⁵ Numerous political leaders are targeting USACE for repeatedly missing deadlines and inefficiently executing projects. Garrett Graves, the chair of Louisiana’s Coastal

Protection and Restoration Authority said, “The Corps is a disaster. An outdated and inefficient project process, budget cuts, lack of accountability, rogue attorneys, and the rise of the bureaucratic morass has related the once-exemplary corps to an entity incapable of progress.”²⁶ USACE is responding to this issue with a transformation in their Civil Works program. Below is their goal for solving these issues along with the thoughts of senior USACE and government leaders:

The Civil Works program faces a myriad of challenges, which are prompting swift transformation in our business model. To meet current and future challenges and address the water resources needs of our nation, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) has initiated an effort to transform its Civil Works program with the imperative to improve performance and responsiveness; increase customer satisfaction, public trust and confidence; improve readiness; and maintain a competitive edge.²⁷

This transformation initiative will require significant changes to the organization and its culture, including important changes in planning strategies, business practice, and existing relationships and partnerships – both internal and external.²⁸

It is absolutely essential that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers transform its study processes if it is to remain at the forefront of federal agencies the Nation turns to when seeking answers for water resources challenges. The current study processes too often leave our stakeholders and the Nation waiting for critical answers.²⁹

Based on these documented insufficient results, the conclusion can be drawn that USACE has not made the transition from *Good* to *Great*. The focus on the different processes is additional evidence that USACE is solely focused on the “What” and not the “Who.”

Campaign Plan Analysis

The next step is to analyze the USACE strategy to determine why the transformation from *Good* to *Great* has yet to occur. The USACE Campaign Plan is very comprehensive with primary focus on “What” USACE needs to accomplish. There is

substantial detail on the process to deliver superior performance based on dependent variables of the spectrum for each mission. However, there is a void placing the necessary emphasis on Collins' Stage One principles mentioned regarding Disciplined People: exemplified by the "Level 5 Leader" attribute and the first "Who," then "What" technique. Since their campaign plan does not adequately address Stage One of the *Good to Great* process, their human capital strategic plan is analyzed in search of this absent step.

USACE Human Capital Strategic Plan Analysis

The USACE Human Capital Strategic Plan 2012-2017 further discusses the USACE Campaign plan as a framework and is adequately nested. It states:

Through disciplined people, USACE will attract, develop, and retain a world-class workforce that is innovative, constantly learns, and shares best practices. Using disciplined thought, USACE will implement strategies that ready our workforce to be an expeditionary force ready to deploy around the globe, often with little notice, to support wartime and disaster recovery requirements. We will actively collaborate with government and non-government agency entities as highly skilled teams to develop sound solutions. Through disciplined action, USACE will become the agency of choice by efficiently, effectively, and safely delivering sustainable projects and services.³⁰

The USACE Human Capital Strategic Plan 2012-2017 also discusses its human capital life cycle of Plan, Recruit, Develop, and Sustain. The Recruit section states "Get the 'right' person in the 'right' job and win the war for talent."³¹ As with the USACE Campaign Plan, the USACE Human Capital Strategic Plan is based on the principles covered in *Good to Great* regarding "disciplined people, having disciplined thought and taking disciplined action."³² Throughout both the USACE Campaign Plan and its Human Capital Strategic Plan, the *Good to Great* process is frequently referenced. However, looking deeper into both plans there is an absence of a process or system to implement

the “Level 5 Leadership” and the “First Who...Then What” principles. Subsequent evidence proves that the commanders and senior leaders do not primarily focus on Collins’ first stage of Disciplined People. The objective covering Disciplined People is the very last item of the Campaign Plan.³³ Fundamental to the successful application of the *Good to Great* process is the leadership’s ability to execute and focus on the Disciplined People stage before transitioning to the Disciplined Thought and Disciplined Action stages.

Examining Potential Solutions

“Level 5 Leader” Principle

The USACE strategy would be more effective if it included in its goals how it would implement Collins’ principles rather than allude to them. To determine the most powerful positions in USACE, analysis is applied to the hierarchical structure of the organization with specific focus at the district level. Placing or enforcing adherence to the “Level 5 Leader” characteristics in these most powerful and strategic positions to create the “Level 5 Leadership culture” can rectify this deficiency.³⁴ Collins’ explanation of placing “Level 5 Leaders” and creating “Level 5 Leadership culture” is below:

Put Level 5 Leaders in the most powerful seats.

The leaders who sit in the most powerful seats in our organization are ambitious first and foremost for the cause, the organization, the work—not themselves—and they have an iron will to do whatever it takes to make good on that ambition.

The leaders who sit in the most powerful seats in our organization display an ever-improving track record of making Level 5 decisions—decisions that prove best for the long-term greatness of the company and its work.

The leaders who sit in the most powerful seats in our organization practice the window and the mirror. They point out the window to people and factors other than themselves to give credit for success. When confronted with failures, they look in the mirror and say, “I am responsible.”

While some members of the leadership team might be charismatic, this is not the primary source of their effectiveness. They inspire others primarily via inspired standards—excellence, hard work, sacrifice, and integrity—not with an inspiring public persona.³⁵

Create a Level 5 Leadership culture.

The culture values substance over style, integrity over personality, and results over intentions.

Members of the leadership team dialogue and debate in search of the best answer (not for the sake of looking smart or winning a point) up until the point of decision.

Once a decision is made, members of the team unify behind the decision to ensure success—even those who disagreed with the decision.

We cultivate leaders who have all five levels in the Level 5 hierarchy, as laid out in *Good to Great*: highly capable individuals, strong contributing team members, competent managers, effective leaders, and Level 5 executives.³⁶

The “Level 5 Leader’s” interaction and interdependence dynamic should possess and practice the *Good to Great* characteristics mentioned by Collins.³⁷

“First Who then What” Principle

While analyzing the “First Who then What” hypothesis, another significant issue is identified. There is little formal training on how to hire the “right” people for the commanders, senior civilians, or the hiring supervisors. The “right” people identified by this term are the specific type of employees Collins defines as quintessential to transforming an organization from *Good to Great*.³⁸ The Department of the Army’s selection process for military officers is more than adequate as applied in placing leaders in USACE if the Chief of Engineers ensures these officers adhere to “Level 5 Leader” and “First Who then What” principles.

The Army’s military recruitment, assignment, and retention process is inherent in its structure and provides commanders limited experience with the process for civilian

employees. Additionally, the civilian leadership is limited in its experience regarding hiring the “right” people due to the absence of formal training. In the corporate arena, human resources professionals are the primary recruiters and often possess expertise in interviewing and selecting candidates. In contrast, the civilian human resources personnel available to USACE leadership are often singularly focused on the technical aspect of filling vacancies according to federal guidelines and regulations instead of characteristics espoused by Collins. The USACE Campaign Plan’s success is centered on these ‘disciplined’ people having ‘disciplined’ thoughts and achieving ‘disciplined’ actions.³⁹ Developing a training plan and system that trains all leaders, hiring managers, and recruiters how to recruit and select the “right” people provides an adequate solution to this problem.

Fiscal Rewards of Behavior-Based Interviewing

In an era of dwindling defense budgets, this training plan and system must be affordable and must achieve the singularly fundamental objective: “how to get the ‘right’ people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the ‘right’ people in the ‘right’ seats.”⁴⁰ *How to Choose the Right Person for the Right Job Every Time* by authors Lori Davila and Louise Kursmark provides excellent insight in researching how private sector businesses recruit, hire, and retain people. Lori Davila has trained and coached thousands of professionals and executives around the world at companies--including The Blackstone Group, Delta Air Lines, The Coca Cola Company, General Electric, IBM, Viacom, Cox Communications, MasterCard, and Accenture. Louise Kursmark is a leading expert in resume writing and is a hiring consultant to Coca-Cola, Nortel, Siemens, and other Fortune 500 companies. She has authored 18 books about resume writing, interviewing, and executive search strategies. Her accolades include being

featured and quoted in countless online, print, and broadcast publications. She is the first person worldwide to earn the prestigious credential “Master Resume Writer” and is a 6-time “Best Resume” award winner.

Traditional interviewing techniques are notoriously inadequate when providing an accurate predictor of how a candidate will actually perform on the job.⁴¹ Davila and Kursmark present an interviewing technique that more accurately identifies the best-qualified candidates.⁴² This technique is called “behavioral interviewing,” and involves identifying candidates who truthfully describe how they responded to past job situations.⁴³ This is an indicator of how well they will handle assignments required in their new position. The book describes the financial burdens of hiring the wrong employees.⁴⁴ Their behavior-based interviewing strategy allows any leader in an organization to select the “right” person for the “right” job consistently.⁴⁵ Realistically, we understand that this method will not deliver the “right” person every time.

Research from the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, revealed that conventional interviews lead to selection of the best candidate only 19% of the time.⁴⁶ The same study identifies behavior-based interviewing techniques successfully increasing the success rate to 75%.⁴⁷ According to the formula provided in Davila and Kursmark’s book, behavior-based interviewing increases the success rate by 56%, potentially saving millions of dollars each year.⁴⁸ Vital hidden costs to consider in addition to the costs of interviewing and hiring are: lost productivity, missed opportunities, dissatisfied customers and stakeholders, damaged project continuity, lowered employee morale, and loss of any competitive advantage.⁴⁹

Recruiting the “Right” People

Based on a review of the assessment covered in the USACE Human Capital Strategic Plan, they appear to recruit successfully at colleges, universities, and national-level minority career fairs. The organization has established a recruiting cadre and provided some training for these individuals. However, this training is primarily focused on the organization’s mission, benefits, and current job vacancies. Despite being identified as a strength, the USACE recruiting cadre needs additional training to increase the probability of recruiting the “right” people based upon identified parameters. Two examples from the book *How to Choose the Right Person for the Right Job Every Time* follow. The companies referenced practice a similar decentralized recruiting strategy comparable to USACE’s strategy.

Hallmark requires its recruiters to participate in behavior-based interview training. Often these campus recruiters are new hires who are just a few years out of college themselves and not yet at a managerial level. The training ensures that they are using consistent standards for judging candidates and are supporting their recommendations with behavioral examples. In addition, because questions are based on job competencies and company fit, the behavior-based interviewing approach ensures that these interviewers do not ask illegal, impolite, or unprofessional questions. “We feel good about sending these folks out to represent us, knowing they are well prepared and will boost our company image.”⁵⁰

At General Electric, behavior-based interviewing supports the company imperative of “hiring the best” and puts a consistent face on decentralized recruiting and hiring programs that take place in diverse cultures around the world.⁵¹

Behavior-Based Interviewing Training

At General Electric (GE), their recruiters are employees from the various arenas of its business.⁵² USACE has similar decentralized recruiting teams in their districts, but lacks a structured system that consistently trains and prepares the recruiters how to recruit the “right” people. At Hallmark and GE, recruiters receive behavior-based

interviewing training before recruiting activities. These recruiters gain experience in two indispensable areas: recruiting the best and “right” people into the organization, as well as gaining the necessary practice of behavior-based interviewing. Consequently, this adds to their leader development and prepares them for achieving success as hiring managers.

GE efficiently conducts this highly cost-effective training in one-and-a-half days. In the classroom, training becomes ingrained via extensive practice with techniques that use both videotape and volunteer candidates.⁵³ Each participant is required to achieve certification from their instructors before they are allowed to attend recruiting functions.⁵⁴ GE also has enhanced its training program by providing online resources with e-learning components. These are meant to complement the classroom training rather than replace it. They refresh and reinforce the learning and provide tools for hiring managers throughout the organization.⁵⁵ The effectiveness of this invaluable training applies to both the leaders and hiring managers. Requiring the identical education using these techniques for leaders and hiring managers offers greater potential for success.

Hiring the “Right” People

With a natural expected attrition of 18% of the workforce eligible for retirement, hiring the “right” people is one of the most fiscally and conceptually strategic opportunities for USACE to reshape its organization and transition from *Good* to *Great*. To achieve this, the Chief of Engineers would need to demonstrate this practice by employing the techniques that place emphasis on the “Who.” Collins’ concept requires leaders in an organization to adopt the practices, thinking, and emphasis of the *Good* to *Great* leaders. Below are the three truths Collins determined the *Good* to *Great* leaders understood:

The good-to-great leaders understood three simple truths. First, if you begin with “who,” rather than “what,” you can more easily adapt to a changing world. If people join the bus primarily because of where it is going, what happens if you get ten miles down the road and you need to change direction? You have a problem. But if people are on the bus because of who else is on the bus, then it’s much easier to change direction: “Hey, I got on this bus because of who else is on it; if we need to change direction to be more successful, fine with me.” Second, if you have the right people on the bus, the problem of how to motivate and manage people largely goes away. The right people do not need to be tightly managed or fired up; they will be self-motivated by the inner drive to produce the best results and to be part of creating something great. Third, if you have the wrong people, it does not matter whether you discover the right direction; you still will not have a great company. Great vision without great people is irrelevant.⁵⁶

Obsessing Over the “Right” People

Successful executives of the *Great* companies in *Good to Great* focused their efforts on finding the “right” people, placing them in the “right” positions, and recommending ineffective employees leave the organization.⁵⁷ One CEO from *Good to Great* recalls, “Of all the duties facing a CEO, obsessing over talent provides the biggest return.”⁵⁸ Currently, it appears the commanders in USACE spend minimal time concerned with talent management due to proscribed constraints. These constraints limit their focus to the “what,” including: campaign goal reporting, congressional inquiries, budgets, senior leader conferences, endless travel, and daily functions. To make the transition from *Good* to *Great*, CEO’s must shift emphasis to hiring the “right” people, placing the “right” people in the appropriate positions, and recommending those who are ineffective to depart the organization.⁵⁹

Competencies of the “Right” People

It is imperative to define what competencies, behaviors, and values comprise the “right” people. It is critical to consider the dynamic and volatile environment of the 21st century and the strategic goals of USACE, and identify requirements needed to

transition the organization from *Good* to *Great* implementing the criteria above. To determine these “right” people, Jim Collins recommends placing more weight on character attributes than on experience, practical skills, specialized knowledge, or work experience.⁶⁰ Collins’ research concluded that discovering the “right” person has more to do with character traits and innate capabilities than with specific knowledge, background, or skills.⁶¹ You can teach people the vernacular of USACE, agency specific computer programs, special regulations in the government, and execution responsibilities for numerous construction and environmental programs. According to Collins, “character attributes are inherently ingrained.”⁶² One of the *Good to Great* companies, Nucor, “built its entire system on the idea that you can teach farmers how to make steel, but you cannot teach a farmer work ethic to people who do not have it in the first place.”⁶³ They located their plants in areas full of real farmers so these character attributes were in abundance.⁶⁴

To determine the character attributes of the “right” people for USACE, an analysis was conducted of the character attributes of the “right” people in the *Good to Great* companies. This analysis subsequently considered the different mission sets and operating environments specific to USACE. To transition USACE to the status of a *Great* organization, the employee character attributes from the *Good to Great* companies essential to transitioning USACE from *Good* to *Great* are: work ethic, basic intelligence, interpersonal skills, dedication to fulfilling commitments, willingness to adapt to change, self-motivation, discipline, desire to deliver timely outstanding results, and innovation. Embracing these character attributes, the leaders and hiring managers will align the beliefs and practices embodied in the Army values.

Increasing the Probability of Hiring the “Right” People

Most commanders and managers in USACE have varying levels of expertise in hiring people. There are currently no policies or procedures from Headquarters USACE, guiding the commanders and hiring managers to execute a selection process to hire the “right” people. Adopting a new policy and standard operating procedure for filling a position is a potential solution. The policy should require that all vacancies filled have a hiring panel. These panels would consist of 3-4 people who are trained and certified in behavior-based interviewing techniques mentioned previously in Davila and Kursmark’s book. These panel members should be the best people in the organization at interviewing and assessing talent. The late CEO of Apple, Steve Jobs, insisted that his hiring panels be comprised of A-players (“right” people), saying, “A-players hire A-players; B-players hire C-players; and C-players hire D-players. It does not take long to get to Z-players. This trickle-down effect causes *bozo* explosions in companies.”⁶⁵

Conducting a Successful Interview

Based on the research that has been cited, behavior-based interviewing has been analyzed and is one of the most advantageous interviewing techniques for an organization to implement. These techniques can result in successfully placing the “right” people in the “right” positions when the “right” people are conducting the interviews and making the hiring decisions. Davila and Kursmark recommend five basic steps for conducting successful interviews.

1. Define what you’re looking for – understand the job and the company
2. Identify job related success factors
3. Establish questions to extract the desired success factors
4. Conduct a successful interview

5. Perform a final evaluation – rate the evidence⁶⁶

To determine selection criteria in Step 1, the interview team uses the competencies needed to hire the “right” person for that particular job in the organization. The job description should be written to include specific attributes and competencies for that company, in addition to the minimum requisite technical knowledge and skills.⁶⁷

To accomplish Step 2, requires the interview team to seek people who are familiar with the job and its requirements to determine the job’s success factors. The success factors include technical knowledge, skills, and performance skills. Character-driven motivation is invaluable, as well as exemplified by a successful employee.⁶⁸

Extracting the desired success factors is the focus of the established questions in Step 3. Davila and Kursmark have 401 sample questions in their book *How to Choose the Right Person for the Right Job Every Time*. These behavior-based questions are open-ended and often begin with the following exploratory phrases: “Tell me about a time when...,” or “Give me an example of...,” or “Describe...”⁶⁹ This will generate responses in the form of statements that cover situation, actions taken, and the results of the situation (SAR).⁷⁰ These responses allow the rating of the candidates on their attributes and job related competencies identified in Step 1 and Step 2. The crucial factor is wording questions to address the top-performance action statements developed in Step 2.⁷¹

Successful execution of the interview is delineated in Step 4. Davila and Kursmark present ten essential suggestions to ensure that you meet your interview goals:

- Practice, practice, practice

- Get the full story
- Handling silence
- Use prepared questions
- Control the interview
- Probe for information
- Evaluate candidates after the interview
- Take descriptive notes
- Have at least three interviewers and evaluators
- Follow the same guidelines in a second interview⁷²

Finally, Step 5 provides tools for evaluating and rating the evidence collected in the interviews. Davila and Kursmark's book recommends using a rating sheet for each competency evaluated during the interview. A rating scale of 1-3 is used. This scale designates that 3 equates to very strong evidence of desired competency; 2 equates to some evidence of desired competency; and 1 shows no evidence of desired competency.⁷³ After this evaluation is finished, the next step in the process is to conduct reference and background checks.

Improving Reference Checks

Some consider the reference check as more important than the interview itself. *Harvard Business Review* interviewed Kevin Ryan, the CEO of Gilt Groupe, on his philosophy of building a team of the "right" people. Mr. Ryan is a leading Internet entrepreneur in the United States having founded several New York-based businesses. They include Gilt Groupe, Business Insider, and 10gen/Mongo DB. Mr. Ryan helped build DoubleClick from 1996 to 2005, first as president and later as CEO. He fostered

DoubleClick's growth from a 20-person start-up company into a multi-billion dollar global corporation with over 1,500 employees. Under his direction, DoubleClick was awarded the title of "New York Company of the Year" by *Silicon Alley Reporter* in 2005.⁷⁴

Kevin Ryan says, "Most managers overvalue the resume and interview and undervalue the reference check. References matter most. However, you need to dig up people who will speak candidly."⁷⁵ He recommends safeguarding the reference check by not relying solely on the references supplied by the candidate.⁷⁶ Though difficult, sometimes leverage is needed within the organizational network to identify people who will speak frankly about the applicant.⁷⁷ Behavior-based interview questions are appropriate in the reference check; however, Mr. Ryan recommends the following questions at a minimum for this process.⁷⁸

- Would you hire this person again? If so, why and in what capacity? If not, why not?
- How would you describe the candidate's ability to innovate, manage, lead, deal with ambiguity, get things done, and influence others?
- What were some of the best things this person accomplished? What could he or she have done better?
- In what type of culture, environment, and role can you see this person excelling? In what type of role is he or she unlikely to be successful?
- Would you describe the candidate as a leader, a strategist, and executer, a collaborator, a thinker, or something else? Can you give me some examples to support your description?

- Do people enjoy working with the candidate, and would former coworkers want to work with him or her again?
- In what areas does the candidate need to improve?⁷⁹

Compromise is Not an Option

After the interview and reference checks, it is necessary to determine if the candidate is the “right” person. Compromise is not an option when selecting a candidate. If the person is not the “right” person, keep looking. A manager in one of the *Good to Great* companies was having difficulty finding the “right” person for a specific job. He asked Circuit City CEO Alan Wurtzel, “At what point do I compromise?” Mr. Wurtzel without hesitation remarked, “You don’t compromise. We find another way to get through until we find the right people.”⁸⁰ This is a significant validation of the exacting process.

Retaining the “Right” People

Harvard University research indicates that 80% of employee turnover is due to hiring mistakes.⁸¹ These mistakes should be dramatically reversed after adopting the previously mentioned hiring techniques. Laws, regulations, and union agreements are potential barriers for USACE in the quest to eliminate ineffective employees from the organization. Collins presents a specific approach to this practice:

Get the Wrong People Off the Bus.

When there is need to make a people change – after giving the individual full opportunity to demonstrate that he or she might be the right person – we deal with the issue.

When correcting a people selection mistake, be rigorous in the decision, but not ruthless in the implementation. Help people exit with dignity and grace so that, later, the vast majority of people who have left the bus have positive feelings about the organization.

Autopsy all hiring mistakes, then apply the lessons learned systematically to future hiring decisions.⁸²

The current training and emphasis USACE places on getting the “wrong” people off the bus are inadequate and costing them significantly in production and in performance related goals.

If someone makes a personal decision to leave the organization and meet the criteria of being a “right” person, it would be cost effective for leadership to intervene if possible. Retention would facilitate matching the person to a “right” position. Kevin Ryan instituted exit interviews at DoubleClick when people left his organization. The findings revealed that people usually left because of their managers.⁸³ He expects his managers to be accountable if great people are leaving the team. Ryan tells his leaders, “If great people are leaving your group that is your responsibility.”⁸⁴

Implementing exit surveys for people departing the organization is a very valuable tool and can prevent some of the “right” people from leaving. Human resource personnel and supervisors should identify why the person is leaving and determine if that individual is one of the “right” people. The supervisor should answer the following questions regarding the departing employee:

- Did the employee have conflicts with other employees?
- Would you hire this person in another capacity?
- Is this person’s departure going to negatively affect the organization?
- Was this employee “right” for the position that person occupied?

If it is determined that the person leaving is one of the “right” people, it is essential to intervene. Senior leadership should be notified immediately so action can be taken. The leaders could offer a retention incentive through different venues: a

retention bonus, relief from college loans, or a term promotion in a developmental position. If these actions are not successful, retain communication with the employee. This could lead to a return by the employee at a future date. USACE has optional exit surveys through an Army online system. This system is inadequate because it does not provide immediate feedback to that organization to enable leader intervention if needed to prevent one of the “right” people from departing.

Strategy Change Process

The dynamics of organizations as large as USACE engender a culture that resists change. The proposed strategy improvements presented in this paper are crucial to overcoming the challenges facing USACE. A complex aspect in successfully leading strategy changes in USACE is accomplishing this in the world’s largest public engineering, design, and construction management entity. The intellectual and physical energy required of the leadership to implement strategy change is an enormous burden that can lead to numerous negative second and third order effects.

Leading Change

To accomplish this strategic change, the leadership in USACE must be cognizant of the leading change process. A resource that provides insight into this process is the book *Leading Change* by John P. Kotter. He is the Konoshuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership, Emeritus at Harvard Business School and the author of 17 books.⁸⁵ Kotter presents a logical program that strategic leaders can implement. This program provides distinct guidelines to navigate effective change.

The eight steps of this process are:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency by showing both the benefits and the necessity for change;

2. Creating a guiding coalition with enough power to lead the change;
3. Developing a vision and strategy to direct the change and achieve the vision;
4. Communicating the vision throughout the organization;
5. Empowering a broad base of people to reduce obstacles and encourage risk-taking;
6. Generating short-term wins to validate the programs and keep the vision credible;
7. Consolidating the gains made and producing more change;
8. Anchoring the change in the organizational culture to ensure that the organization remains future focused.⁸⁶

Creating Urgency and Accelerating Strategy Implementation

Since Kotter created his eight-step *Leading Change* process, he has identified that companies are missing strategic agility, because their structure is optimized for efficiency.⁸⁷ He has determined that the hierarchical structures and organizational processes businesses have used for decades to run and improve their enterprises are not effectively or efficiently achieving their goals. He proposes that existing structures and processes that together form an organization's operating system need an additional element to address the challenges produced by mounting complexity and rapid change.⁸⁸

Kotter has determined that the solution to this problem is a second operating system. This system is devoted to the design and implementation of strategy maintenance and initiates change. It uses an agile, flexible network structure combined with different processes to achieve profitable results. This new operating system not only reacts with great responsiveness, creativity, and speed, but also reduces the

burdens of implementing strategy change on the traditional, hierarchical organization.

The hierarchical system's leadership is enabled to focus on the daily operations while the new operating system focuses on identifying and implementing strategy changes.⁸⁹

Kotter states, "The network is like a solar system, with a guiding coalition as the sun, strategic initiatives as planets, and sub-initiatives as moons (or even satellites)."⁹⁰

The eight accelerators enabling Kotter's strategy network to function are:

1. Create a sense of urgency around a single big opportunity.
2. Build and maintain a guiding coalition.
3. Formulate a strategic vision and develop change initiatives designed to capitalize on the big opportunity.
4. Communicate the vision and the strategy to create buy-in and attract a growing volunteer army.
5. Accelerate movement toward the vision and the opportunity by ensuring that the network removes barriers.
6. Celebrate visible, significant short-term wins.
7. Never let up. Keep learning from experience.
8. Do not declare victory too soon. Institutionalize strategic changes in the culture.⁹¹

Leading Change vs. Accelerate

There are three main differences between the original eight steps of leading change and the eight accelerators on which the strategy system runs.⁹²

- The steps are often used in rigid, finite, and sequential ways, in effecting or responding to episodic change, whereas the accelerators are concurrent and always at work.

- A small, powerful core group usually drives the steps, whereas the accelerators pull in as many people as possible from throughout the organization to form a “volunteer army.”
- The steps are designed to function within a traditional hierarchy, whereas the accelerators require the flexibility and agility of a network.⁹³

The guiding coalition is the core of this second operating system and requires an application process for membership although these are voluntary positions.⁹⁴ This is an excellent example of Collins’ theory of placing the “right” people in the “right” position. It must be comprised of leaders, managers, and employees whom the leadership trusts.⁹⁵ An effective guiding coalition has initiative groups sustaining their network. These initiative groups have sub-initiative groups providing support. All of the volunteers are comprised of no more than 10% of the organization’s population.⁹⁶ Once the network evolves, it should enable the remaining six accelerators.

Successful Implementation of a Second Operating System

A successful example of this speed and agility provided by a second operating system is Apple’s launch of their first iPhone. At that time, Blackberry was on the rise with over 20% market share and a 4-year lead over Apple. Apple designed, engineered, and manufactured the best device they could possibly have imagined. With the introduction of the first iPhone, the features, capacity, and versatility amazed and enticed consumers thus making Blackberry antiquated.⁹⁷

Apple designers did not solely create a competitive advantage with the invention of the iPhone. Surprisingly, the competitive edge came from an external volunteer army. Hundreds of thousands of developers created innovative ways to use the iPhone by

establishing Apps and a networked repository. Apple's App Store provides a way for thousands of users to improve the phone in ways the company alone could never have conceived of – or implemented – in such a short timeframe. The App Store provided agility and speed of innovation that has allowed Apple to far outpace Blackberry. This App Store concept has been so successful that Google's Android has copied this method. In addition to allowing users to create Apps, it allows device manufacturers to create a variety of innovative devices.⁹⁸ Apple's success using a second operating system highlights the tremendous potential of this method.

Lessons Learned

Kotter has implemented and coordinated the dual operating systems in both private and public organizations over the past three years.⁹⁹ He says, "Close communication between the executive committee and the guiding coalition is essential for synchronization of the systems." Building momentum is important and achievable by communicating success in concert between the two systems of the "right" people, in the "right" positions of leadership, management, and the coalition of supporters. Synthesis is attainable as the dual operating systems' slow and careful evolution avoids chaotic, dramatic change.¹⁰⁰

Recommendations

The education of the entire organization is fundamental to any change in a climate of constant flux and elicits the proposed changes for the Army Corps of Engineers. In order to thrive in the VUCA environment of the 21st century, these changes must be embraced, modeled, and communicated by the leadership of the organization. Though there is not a potential for precognition, an organization comprised of the "right" people can adapt and lead that organization through this inevitable change.

Our country's infrastructure, the reduction of risks from disasters, and immeasurable fiscal savings are among the greatest concerns of the USACE leadership. By adaptively solving these challenges, reorganization that is fiscally responsible, and providing infrastructure and risk reduction measures, the American economy benefits exponentially through many facets. The following are the proposed changes in USACE to make *Greatness* a reality.

Implementing Solution 1

The USACE commanders and senior civilian leaders should alter their top priority to placing emphasis on the "Who" and selectively prioritize energy and emphasis on the "What." This will ensure the USACE transformation from *Good* to *Great*. The focus should start with placing the "right" people, or enforcing adherence to the "Level 5 Leader" characteristics, in the most powerful and strategic positions from the headquarters down to the district level to generate the "Level 5 Leadership" culture.¹⁰¹ These "Level 5 Leaders" should possess and practice the *Good to Great* characteristics mentioned previously.¹⁰² All of the *Good to Great* companies' CEOs exhibited "Level 5 Leader" characteristics and were obsessed with hiring the "right" people, placing them in the "right" position, and getting the "wrong people off the bus."¹⁰³ All USACE commanders, military deputies, and civilian deputies must practice these *Good to Great* CEO characteristics rigorously.

Implementing Solution 2

Develop and institute a training plan and system that trains all leaders, hiring managers, and recruiters how to recruit, select, and retain the "right" people. The behavior-based interviewing techniques mentioned earlier from the book *How to Choose the Right Person for the Right Job Every Time* should be adopted by USACE

for recruiting, hiring, and placing the “right” people. This system adheres to Jim Collins’ principle of being rigorous in the selection process of acquiring the “right” people.¹⁰⁴

Following these principles gives substance to candidate selection and placement.

Implementing Solution 3

Adopt the character attributes for selecting the “right” people based upon the character attributes of the “right” people in the *Good* to *Great* companies, the different mission sets assigned to USACE, and their operating environment. The character attributes determined to facilitate the transition to the status of a *Great* organization for USACE are the following: work ethic, basic intelligence, interpersonal skills, dedication to fulfilling commitments, willingness to adapt to change, self-motivation, discipline, desire to deliver timely outstanding results, and innovation. By adhering to the character attributes, the leaders and hiring managers will align the beliefs and practices embodied in the Army values.

Implementing Solution 4

There appears to be limited formal policies or procedures from USACE Headquarters, guiding the commanders, senior civilians, and hiring managers to execute a selection process to hire the “right” people. Adopting a new policy and standard operating procedure for filling a position is a potential solution. The policy should mandate that all vacancies filled have a hiring panel approved by the commander. These hiring panels should consist of 3-4 people who are trained and certified in behavior-based interviewing techniques mentioned previously from Davila and Kursmark’s book. These panel members should also be the best people in the organization at interviewing and assessing talent.

Reference checks should also be mandated as part of this process. This paper recommends USACE adopt the reference check system Kevin Ryan uses at the Gilt Groupe. He recommends safeguarding the reference check by not relying solely on the references supplied by the candidate.¹⁰⁵ Though difficult, sometimes leverage is needed within the organizational network to identify people who will speak frankly about the applicant.¹⁰⁶ This reference check process is necessary to increase the probability of hiring the “right” people. Compromise is never optional when selecting a candidate.

Implementing Solution 5

The current Army survey online fails to provide the immediate feedback needed to possibly prevent the “right” people from leaving the organization. USACE should implement exit surveys that are performed in writing so the results can be immediately processed and analyzed to possibly prevent the “right” people from leaving the organization. If it is determined that the person leaving is one of the “right” people, it is essential to intervene. Senior leadership should be notified immediately so action can be taken. The leaders could offer a retention incentive through different venues: a retention bonus, relief from college loans, or a term promotion in a developmental position.

Implementing Solution 6

Leaders of USACE currently struggle with establishing urgency and accelerating strategy implementation.¹⁰⁷ This paper recommends implementing a second operating system and follow Kotter’s 8-Step Accelerate process to initiate and lead strategy changes. The first mission of this system would be to implement the previous five recommendations. This all-volunteer army would be chosen using the behavior-based interviewing methods to ensure these are the “right” people. Although these positions

are voluntary, an application process for membership is necessary. Since it is an all-volunteer force comprising of no more than 10% of any one department, there is not a need to create new permanent or temporary positions. The guiding coalition is the core of this second operating system. It must be comprised of leaders, managers, and employees whom the leadership trusts.¹⁰⁸ This guiding coalition would have initiative groups sustaining their network.¹⁰⁹ These initiative groups have sub-initiative groups providing support.¹¹⁰ All of the volunteers are comprised of no more than 10% of the organization's population.¹¹¹ Once the network evolves, it should enable the remaining six accelerators. This second operating system network should be applied at the USACE Headquarters, Division, and District levels.

Conclusion

Critical to thriving in the dynamic world facing USACE in the 21st century is adopting a competitive concept of operating the organization. A multi-functional complex of strategies will lead this change successfully. These strategies must start with emphasis and focus on acquiring the “right” people and removing the “wrong” people before strategies on other processes can begin. The USACE commanders and senior civilian leaders must adjust their top priority to placing emphasis on the “Who” and selectively prioritize energy and emphasis on the “What.” If a second operating system is installed to implement this paper's recommended solutions that focus on the “Who” effectively, efficiently, and successfully, USACE has the potential to achieve prominence as an exemplar to other organizations.

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