

Institutionalizing the Tri-Focal View: Continuing a Performance Evaluation Concept

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**Institutionalizing the Tri-Focal View:
Continuing a Performance Evaluation Concept.**

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Introduction

"Build me a son or [daughter] whose heart will be clear, whose goal will be high, a son or [daughter] who will model himself before he seeks to master other men, one who will reach into the future, yet never forget the past."¹

The Marine Corps prides itself on its ability to identify just such sons and daughters during Officer Candidates School (OCS), using a unique in-depth analysis often referred to as the tri-focal view. The tri-focal view encompasses how the staff views the candidate's performance, how his peers view his performance, and how he (the candidate) views his own performance. This methodology has proved to be an effective litmus test for leadership potential since its inception. Regrettably, after the young officer enters the operating forces, the view shifts to a one-dimensional construct: A reporting senior writes on a subordinate's performance from his perspective. However, the human factor, politics, and stovepipe observations tend to bias the reporting process and may not provide enough feedback to foster further development/construction of the self-regulated, accountable leader. Therefore, the Marine Corps must continue the tri-

¹ Courtney Whitney, *MacArthur, His Rendezvous with History, A Father's Prayer*. New York: Alfred and Knopf, Inc., 1956.

focal view beyond OCS in order to build/develop accountable, self-regulating leaders.

Background

This author had the opportunity to serve on the training staff of OCS and experienced the remarkable utility of the tri-focal view.² Without a doubt, the evaluation of a superior alone would not have revealed the true character of many of the candidates with whom he worked. However, the three dimensional tri-focal framework allowed the layers of a person's character to be exposed.

Tri-Focal Evaluation

Throughout the ten-week Officer Candidate Class (OCC) or six-week Platoon Leaders Class (PLC), the candidate is viewed through self-evaluations, peer evaluations, and staff evaluations. The first dimension is self-appraisal. The candidate is afforded the opportunity to conduct numerous self-appraisals. For example, the candidate receives evaluations, which include leadership billet evaluations, small unit leadership evaluations (SULE), and physical fitness and academic graded-event evaluations.

² Captain Lizarraga served as a candidate company platoon commander, candidate company executive officer, and H&S Company Commander at Officer Candidates School from September 2002 - August 2005, and is currently a student at Expeditionary Warfare School, Class 2006, Quantico, VA.

These evaluations result in a "chit"³ citing the candidate's deficiencies in the specific areas. The candidate is then required to respond to the chit with an explanation of his performance. This testimony becomes invaluable in understanding the candidate's own self image and assists the staff in determining both positive attributes and potential character flaws. Furthermore, self-evaluation fosters a self-regulated mentality and represents an honesty check for each individual candidate.

The second dimension is peer evaluation. Three peer evaluations occur within a candidate's squad. Each candidate is numerically rated by his peers in terms of their perceptions of his/her ordinal ranking within the squad and through open-ended written statements regarding his/her positive and negative qualities. The results are tabulated, and the platoon commander reviews the top three and bottom three candidates in each squad. He collects peer comments and assesses positive and negative patterns from which he creates a formal counseling document. Peer feedback is usually an eye-opening experience for the candidate and an exercise in humility. OCS conditions the candidate to reflect on his strengths and weaknesses. Here

³ Chit- is a written documentation form that identifies a discrepancy or positive attribute of a candidate's performance. Chits are given to every candidate for every event completed and depending on the results of the event; the candidates will receive a formal counseling with the platoon or company staff. All chits require feedback from the individual candidate to comment on his or her performance of the event.

is where the young officer first learns to be completely honest with him or herself and to face specific weaknesses directly in order to uphold the selfless traits every Marine officer should possess.

Finally, the third dimension of the tri-focal view is the staff's evaluation of the candidate's overall performance. This third evaluation is the most comprehensive of the three because it requires significant analysis in aligning all three focuses: self, peer, and staff appraisals. This tri-focal view provides the depth required to analyze a candidate's potential to lead Marines. Colonel Louis N. Rachal states, "This tri-focal view is arguably the best way to peel back the layers of a person's character and see what they are truly made of."⁴

For example, a candidate continues to fail academic tests and responds to the failure chits by stating that the construction of the test is flawed and unfair. The candidate's staff evaluations of leadership scores are above average and his peer's rate him middle of the pack, yet they describe his failure to take responsibility and selfishness. They cite his lack of teamwork as a deficiency. A determination can be made from the

⁴ Col. Louis N. Rachal, Commanding Officer, USMC, "Evaluating Candidates." Briefing presented at Officer Candidates School Staff Orientation Class. Quantico, VA, 16 May 2005.

candidate's self-analysis, peer evaluations, and staff evaluations that this candidate lacks the commitment, collaborative skills, and responsibility to work as a team member. This characteristic would not have been evident if viewed only through "the eyes" of a staff evaluation. However, the tri-focal view exposed multiple dimensions of the individual's performance.

**Beyond OCS: Current Performance Evaluating System
(PES)**

The newly commissioned officer enters the operating forces and a whole new evaluation process. He or she transitions from being evaluated by himself, his superior, and his peers to being evaluated by a reporting senior and a reviewing officer. The PES is a traditional hierarchical review. In traditional reviews, the supervisor evaluates the employee and articulates how he or she has "measured up." However, some superiors inflate the performance marks, which can complicate others' perceptions of an individual's performance. Usually, traditional reviews are adequate in detecting both outstanding and poor performers. However, top-down reviews fail to account for those in the middle.⁵ For example, the average captain may receive just

⁵ Richard Lepsinger and Anntointte D. Lucia. "360 Degree Feedback and Performance Appraisal." *Training*, Vol. 34, (1997): 64.

enough feedback to feel competent and satisfied with his performance, yet he or she may not feel the need to improve his current performance because it seems to be enough to satisfy the boss.

Moreover, biases often adversely affect traditional reviews. "The traditional method of having only a boss rate an employee has been criticized for almost 2000 years. A third-century Chinese philosopher complained that one civil service evaluator seldom rates men according to their merits but always according to his likes and dislikes. And modern-day research confirms what every employee knows: A boss who happens to be in a bad mood gives employees harsher ratings."⁶ Therefore, one-dimensional evaluation is simply not comprehensive enough. Make no mistake, the Marine Corps possesses enough leaders with moral courage, but it is the depth of the analysis that one must address.

The current Marine Corps evaluation system assumes that superiors have a complete view of the subordinate's performance.⁷ Unfortunately, this is a weakness within the current system. Not all reporting seniors have enough observation and qualitative performance data on their subordinates. The PES manual attempts to minimize limited

⁶ Kim Clark, "Judgement Day." *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 January 2003, 31.

⁷ Thomas X. Hammes, "Time for a 360." *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 2002, 49.

observation by mandating directed comments for those who have not had the benefit of enough observation time by the reporting senior. In fact, the PES manual directs the superior to annotate the review with a non-observed fitness report. Regrettably, had the reporting senior been given the benefit of the other (tri-focal) information from which to derive his appraisal, the need of submitting a non-observed report would not be necessary.

Other main issues and concerns with traditional reviews are that they contain certain biases, such as the "halo effect," which describe the tendency to extend the perception of an employee's strengths in one area to other areas. Likewise, leniency and strictness errors can occur depending on the personality of the rater.⁸ If mission accomplishment is the Corps' main concern, it needs accurate and effective tools to assist the leaders who accomplish these missions.⁹

Beyond OCS: Proposed Tri-focal Approach

Mark Faram writes, "Each [performance evaluation] program must be tailored to the organization and its needs."¹⁰ The Marine Corps is an institution that prides itself on its ability to take care of its own. According

⁸ PES seeks to mitigate this by providing relative value ratings, but this does little toward providing a more comprehensive rating for the person being evaluated.

⁹ Owen West, "You Can't Fool The Troops." United States Naval Institute. Proceedings, Vol. 124 (1998):55.

¹⁰ Mark D. Faram, "360 Author See Idea Return Home." *Navy Times*, 17 January 2005, 16.

to Marine Corps publication MCWP 6-11, Leading Marines, "Marines overcome our natural fear of injury and death and fight for three chief reasons: First, we are well-trained and well-led. Second, we have convictions that will sustain us to the last sacrifice. **Third, we fight for one another.**" Marines depend on each other and hold the opinions of their peers and subordinates close at heart. Col Thomas Hammes states, "The first measure of a truly effective leader is that he executes the mission and pleases his boss. He must also motivate his subordinates, ensure they grow professionally, and earn the trust and confidence of his peers."¹¹ Hence, given the history and legacy of the Corps and armed with knowledge of the Marine Corps ethos, the constructive criticism of one's peer suggests a necessary evaluation construct.

Accountability

Moreover, "Competency is the key to leadership."¹² No one knows better than one's peers and if he/she is competent or not. Hammes points out that it is easier to fool your boss than your peers.¹³ Ironically, as officers become more senior in rank and become removed from front-line leadership, they tend to be held less directly

¹¹ Hammes, 49.

¹² General Anthony Zinni, USMC Ret., President of International Operations M.I.C. Industries, Inc., Guest Lecture presented at Expeditionary Warfare School, Quantico, VA, 12 December 2005.

¹³ Hammes, 49.

accountable for leadership shortfalls and become more insulated from the direct criticism of their peers. All Marines have seen the burnt out field grade officers who exceed weight standards and lack leadership and interpersonal skills. Often, officers in charge of these individuals overlook this due to the lack of time for adequate observation, biases, politics, and evaluation incompetence. Establishing peer appraisals within the PES system would be beneficial in preventing that situation from occurring.

Self-regulating

Second, self-appraisal is one of the most under-utilized components of a Marine officer and may be one of the most important missing pieces of the current PES equation. Kouzes and Posner cite *emotional intelligence* "as the ability to manage ourselves and our relationships effectively."¹⁴ General Zinni stated in a guest lecture at Expeditionary Warfare School on 12 December 2005, "Failure to fight our own pride and be realistic with ourselves and our capabilities and limitations results in grave consequences in today's fourth generation warfare demands."¹⁵ General Zinni also states, "An officer living

¹⁴ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner. *The Leadership Challenge*. (San Francisco:Josey-Bass, 2002), 284.

¹⁵ Zinni lecture, 12 December 2005.

in a dream world is dangerous to the long-term health of the Corps, both operationally and culturally."¹⁶ Marine officers are trained early to look inward as officer candidates and young lieutenants. Nothing would be more natural, especially in terms of USMC core values than for officers to continue introspective self-regulation during performance evaluation periods.

Counterarguments

Opposition to a multi-focal review argues that performance evaluation should be the sole responsibility of the supervisor. However, as Lepinser and Lucia point out, one person may have difficulty processing all the information necessary to perform an effective review. "In even the most successful appraisal systems, three weaknesses tend to undermine the process: lack of agreement on performance criteria; the inability of evaluators to process a lot of information; and people's need, when being evaluated, to preserve their self-image."¹⁷ Those who doubt the effectiveness of using multi-focal reviews, do not have to look far for empirical evidence. The 360-degree

¹⁶ Zinni lecture, 12 December 2005.

¹⁷ Lepinser and Lucia, 64.

evaluation already exists in the private sector.¹⁸ In fact, research in the private sector has shown that most people are more apt to modify themselves in the face of multi-source feedback. Management consultants, Lepinser and Lucia report that multiple views of a person's performance have proved to offer a more comprehensive analysis of a person's performance and to assure that important elements are not overlooked.¹⁹ Another concern that opponents may raise is that peer evaluations may contribute to "popularity contests" among colleagues. However, the USMC culture promotes honesty and self-regulation. Moreover, the superior ultimately controls the FITREP and will weigh the value of peer input. (Another alternative for the superior may be to require peers to send their comments directly to the subject Marine.)

Lastly, another argument may be that multi-focal review is inappropriate to a hierarchical organization. Lepinser and Lucia observe, "that there are three key ingredients to the success of multiple view performance

¹⁸ 360-degree evaluation is a performance evaluation system used by corporations that elicits and provides feedback about leaders through superior, subordinate, peer, and self-appraisals of an individual's performance. The feedback provides insight about the skills and behaviors desired in the organization to accomplish the mission, vision, and goals and live the values. The 360-degree appraisal allows one additional perspective that tri-focal does not address: subordinates' appraisals of their supervisor's performance. However, this would not be appropriate in a hierarchical organization, such as the Marine Corps because many junior Marines often are not aware of the nature of command decisions received by their leaders. In addition, encouraging this kind of participation could undermine the chain-of-command and discipline necessary to maintain order and carry out orders.

¹⁹ Lepinser and Lucia, 65.

appraisals: 1), an organization must have a culture that supports open and honest feedback, 2), an organization must have clear and agreed upon performance measures and behaviors, 3), an organization must have a system in place that minimizes irrational responses."²⁰ Again, these key ingredients are inherent in the Corps values. Moreover, the foundation for a multiple-view evaluation already exists within the Marine Corps. OCS and The Basic School (TBS) do just that, by introducing this paradigm in the officer's earliest stages of professional development. This construct carefully balances a climate of teamwork and trust while still holding each officer accountable for his or her actions by using the tri-focal model. Moreover, the Corps needs to develop leaders "who must build and sustain a culture in which people know and believe that we each have to do our part—and do it very well."²¹

Conclusion

The goal of any evaluation process is self-regulated accountability and performance improvement. For years, OCS has been using the tri-focal view to make Marine officers who internalize the values of the Corps and who are self-regulating in the field. Therefore, expanding the tri-focal view beyond OCS would promote greater accountability

²⁰ Lepinser and Lucia, 70.

²¹ Kouzes and Posner, 285.

and self-regulation throughout the officers' careers. After all, Marines deserve competent leaders who possess honesty, integrity, and self-confidence. Ultimately, through the tri-focal review, the Corps can ensure they will build officers "who model [themselves] before [they] master other men."

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