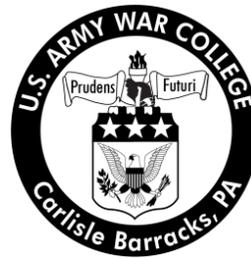


# Civilian Research Project USAWC Fellow

## Talent Management – Sharpening the Focus

by

Lieutenant Colonel Peder L. Swanson  
United States Army



United States Army War College  
Class of 2013

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USAWC CIVILIAN RESEARCH PROJECT

**Talent Management – Sharpening the Focus**

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## **Abstract**

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The Army has given significant consideration to the corporate practice of talent management and is beginning to implement elements of a talent management strategy. In the formative stage of this strategy, two critical issues warrant exploration. First, the Army must examine the impact its organizational structure will have on the talent management strategy. Two dimensions of organizational structure pervasive in the Army are explored: formalization and centralization. These two structural dimensions will shape the Army's talent management strategy. Second, the concept of "engagement" is examined. Engagement between leaders and followers is an essential element of leadership theory. Factors in modern organizations have the potential to inhibit engagement and initial research demonstrates that the Army is not immune to this problem. As a result of examining organizational structure and engagement as it relates to talent management, six "calls to action" are proposed. Action in each of the areas outlined will improve the Army's efforts to recruit, identify, develop and retain talent in order to maintain its effectiveness as an instrument of the nation.



## **Talent Management – Sharpening the Focus**

The purpose of this paper is to explore two distinct topics within the realm of talent management. Given that talent management has already been given significant consideration by the Army, the goal is to bring the two critical issues explored to light. Both topics will enable and inform ongoing Army efforts. The first issue concerns how organizational structure can enable or hinder a human capital initiative such as talent management. There is significant evidence from academic theorists that an organization's structure directly impacts organizational strategy. In particular, two dimensions of organizational structure pervasive in the Army, namely formalization and centralization, will be presented and discussed. The second issue concerns "engagement," defined as the authentic, relational interaction between organizational leaders and talent in an attempt to invest in the individual, ultimately to the benefit of the organization. Engagement is an essential element of the leader-follower relationship and clearly delineated in leadership theory. Factors in modern organizations inhibit engagement and limited scholarly research demonstrates that the Army is not immune to this problem.

This paper is unique in that it sheds light on two disparate but essential areas that have great bearing on the success of talent management initiatives. At the level of individual leader actions, nothing will have a greater positive impact on Army talent management than authentic, positive engagement between a leader and a follower. At an organizational level, it is critical to understand how organizational structure has bearing on the problem. None of the extant literature gives serious consideration to

how the Army's structure will enable or limit a strategy such as talent management. Additionally, there is too little emphasis on how powerful engagement is in the management of Army talent.

This paper is not intended to serve as a comprehensive literature review of the talent management business practice, dimensions of organizational structure or organizational behavior as it relates to engagement. Rather, it is a presentation of two critical issues that must be well understood as the Army continues to develop talent management strategy and processes. The two topics presented in this paper are not the only ones that must be well understood to effectively and efficiently develop the Army's talent management strategy. They are, however, concepts that, if not well understood, will thwart well-intended efforts. They are issues deemed "critical" to consider as the Army moves talent management forward. This paper espouses a framework that (a) a talent management program is of value to the Army, but (b) will be limited in success without understanding and action in the areas explored.

The paper is organized as follows. The first sections describe the strategic setting for this analysis, explore the "problem" that warrants action, and describe how talent management is typically viewed by business practitioners. Next, issues relating to organizational structure and engagement are examined. Finally, a series of "calls to action" are proposed as related to the Army's talent management initiative.

## **Strategic Setting**

Before beginning analysis of any human capital initiative, the strategic setting that drives the program should be well understood. The question might be asked,

“Where does the Army as an organization find itself at present?” The U.S. Army is arguably entering one of the most challenging periods in its modern history. A seasoned force experienced in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations must now navigate multiple and divergent threats to its readiness and relevance. The U.S. National Security Strategy has been revised to focus on perceived threats in the Asian-Pacific with the Navy and Air Force developing an emerging “Air-Sea Battle” doctrine for the region. The role of land power in this strategy remains largely undefined. Combined with the rise of what General (Retired) Montgomery Meigs terms “idiosyncratic” threats such as cyber security and the implications of our national debt, the Army’s future threats may not be “traditional” in nature.<sup>1</sup> While there is much role ambiguity and fiscal austerity ahead, history speaks for the necessity of a capable and ready land force. With this in mind, the Army must continue to learn from and apply lessons from the recent period of prolonged utilization. It must leverage the depth of leadership experience currently in the ranks and be savvy in its organizational strategy.

For the Army, the past twelve years have been marked by significant change with a radical shift from conventional warfare and stability operations to a complicated counterinsurgency (COIN) fight. The threat of the past twelve years demanded conceptual and cognitive shifts both at the organizational and individual level. The challenge to grasp the counterinsurgency fight and form a sound strategy for the new operating environment has been well documented. General David Petraeus and his team at the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center have deservedly been lauded for the formation of a coherent strategy for counterinsurgency environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> As a result, new skill requirements have emerged, inclusive of a

commander's need to develop an in-depth understanding of local power structures, organizations, and culture (COIN). While COIN has dominated the method of recent operations, there is a cognizance that it is only one of many types of responses where the Army must demonstrate proficiency.

Correspondingly, the high operations tempo of the past twelve years has resulted in a depth of Soldier experience like never before. Mid-career officers and NCOs have arguably gleaned the most hands-on, practical experience prompting former Secretary of Defense Gates to term Iraq and Afghanistan "The Captains' Wars" because "officers of lower and lower rank were put in the position of making decisions of higher and higher degrees of consequence and complexity."<sup>3</sup> These Soldiers have been lauded for their success, rooted largely in their ability to be creative, adaptive, and discerning. They have been given extensive latitude of action in their decisions. There is a great concern that these experienced and creative leaders are returning to the more formalized, rigid structures and processes of the Army in garrison and are likely to (a) feel stifled by the bureaucracy, (b) challenged to find significance in a resource-challenged training environment, and (c) wary of leaders who do not value their creativity and initiative, and do not leverage the depth of their skills and knowledge. How the military can retain the best of these leaders is occupying Army executive leader focus and attention.

Given emerging skill set requirements for operational commanders, a depth of experience currently in the ranks, and concerns about retaining the best of these leaders, several ongoing questions beg answers. What does the Army's future leader look like? Should the leader of the future reflect those of the past and how might they

be different? Does the Army have the ability and means to retain top talent? Does the Army need a human capital program that focuses on the retention and development of a small group of top-tier leaders deemed essential to the future success of the organization? Can it affect necessary change given current organizational structure and culture?

### **Is There Really A Problem That Warrants Action?**

The Army is predisposed to attrition in its workforce. It expects attrition and is an “up or out” organization predicated on promoting its talent or forcing individuals out. Its structure demands attrition with fewer requirements for more senior personnel. So is attrition, as described in both scholarly and popular literature, problematic?

According to some authors, managing talent in the military requires attention. Most notable among the popular writings on the topic is a series of articles by Tim Kane published in *The Atlantic* and *Harvard Business Review*. In these compelling articles, Kane argues that the Army’s best officers are leaving military life for the private sector.<sup>4</sup> He goes so far as to state that there has been a “leadership breakdown” in the U.S. military and incompetence in “managing entrepreneurial and innovative talent.”<sup>5</sup> Limited scholarly articles, including a policy analysis exercise at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University by Sayce Falk and Sasha Rogers provide weight to the opinion articles of individuals such as Tim Kane.

The corporate world seems to believe that recruiting and retaining top talent is an organizational imperative. The value of talent management is typically measured in terms of corporate earnings and market share. In 2009, The Hackett Group found

“companies that excel at managing talent post earnings that are 18 percent higher than peers.”<sup>6</sup> Authors Heil, Bennis and Stephens state that corporations who “tap their human potential in the most productive manner are the ones who are enjoying enduring success.”<sup>7</sup> The CEO of Bayer stated, “the ability to hire, develop and retain talent in the developing economies has become a major point of competitive differentiation.”<sup>8</sup>

Given that the Army does not post earnings or garner market share, there is no analogous measure that can quantitatively demonstrate the military’s need to act in this area. The Army has arguably transitioned out of Iraq, plans to do so in Afghanistan, and seems to understand the complexity of counterinsurgency operations. The Armed Forces remains one of the most admired professions in our society, is not critically undermanned in its officer ranks, and the Army is preparing for a downsizing of seventy thousand personnel. Moreover, one could also argue that persistent economic uncertainty is good for retention. Officers currently in uniform may remain largely due to an austere job market. Young individuals who see uncertainty in the corporate sector may be prompted to consider officer accession programs. Why invest time and effort in a new human capital program such as talent management?

What of the opinions of Army executive leadership? Sometimes change is only prompted when there is an internal recognition of a requirement for action. In his “Marching Orders”, the Army Chief of Staff outlines a requirement for a smaller force with agile and adaptive leaders who can operate successfully in the complex twenty-first century environment.<sup>9</sup> Adding his voice to the issue of managing talent, Secretary of the Army John McHugh took time in October 2011 to publicly discuss a survey which found that “65 percent of active duty General Officers rated personnel management as

one of the worst performing functions in the Army.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is on record stating, “how can the Army break up the institutional concrete, its bureaucratic rigidity in its assignments and promotion processes, in order to retain, challenge and inspire its best, brightest and most battle-tested young officers to lead the service into the future?”<sup>11</sup> To add to the conversation, the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey commissioned an Army survey intended to “fix personnel management” and “put the person back in personnel management.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, the Army has commissioned a series of monographs published by the Strategic Studies Institute that addresses talent management.

Given both external and internal voices seeming to recognize and speak to the issue, action to more effectively manage talent has been initiated. Army leadership is bound to cite examples such as a current overhaul of the officer evaluation report that will go into effect in 2013. Two stated goals of the revision are to better identify high performers and to do so earlier in an officer’s career. In addition to strategic change, individual branches within the Army have undertaken efforts to better manage talent. The Engineer Branch has piloted an information system called “Green Pages” that attempts to (a) open greater dialogue and engagement in the assignment process, and (b) is a small step toward a market-based assignment process that attempts to better match available assignments with an officer’s interests and career goals.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the Army Nurse Corps has undertaken a sweeping review of positions within its ranks to (a) identify skills, knowledge and behaviors desired in various leadership positions, (b) pilot evaluation tools in addition to the officer evaluation report designed to identify individual officer capabilities and future potential, and (c) initiate a capabilities-based assignment

process that best matches an individual with organizational strategy, goals and mission.<sup>14</sup> These examples only serve to highlight multiple initiatives that are in various stages of planning and execution.

### **Back to the Beginning – Ensuring an Understanding of Talent Management**

It can be a challenge to determine what an organization means when it refers to “talent management.” In reviewing trade and scholarly literature, one can easily be inundated with the volume of material on the subject. Authors Lewis & Heckman struggled with how broadly the term talent management is used but clearly identified that it “centers on the effective management of employee talent.”<sup>15</sup> What remains open to debate is whether talent management is a concept, an outcome, a process, or a distinct organizational function in the management of human capital. Literature supports all of the above.

In understanding the history of talent management, it is generally accepted that the term and practice emerged in the late 1990s. Many credit the global management consulting firm McKinsey with coining the term in a 1997 study and subsequent survey titled, “The War on Talent.”<sup>16</sup> Many corporations began to emphasize the term and establish talent management functions within their respective organizations. A group of “best practice” models regarding talent management have emerged to include General Electric, Deere & Co., General Mills, PepsiCo and IBM.<sup>17</sup>

In conceptual discussions, distinct views of talent management have emerged. In the broadest sense, talent management serves to draw compartmentalized human resources functions together (recruiting and selection, succession management,

learning and development, executive compensation, etc.) into an “enterprise” model that aspires to work faster and across all functions.<sup>18</sup> Individuals who espouse this concept are likely to use the terms “human resources” and “talent management” interchangeably, emphasizing the latter. To illustrate this view, Olsen states, “A company’s traditional department-oriented staffing and recruitment process needs to be converted to an enterprise wide human talent attraction and retention effort.”<sup>19</sup>

An alternate view of talent management emphasizes the idea of “talent pools”. In this view of talent management, a focused effort is made to best match employees to positions in the organization. Processes are designed to flow individuals into jobs for which they are ideally suited largely based on skills and experience gained in previous roles. In this school of thought, the processes developed include specific qualifications for entering positions, are prescriptive regarding tenure, and seek to optimize the employment of the organization’s employees. This understanding of talent management is internally focused, largely concerned with maximizing the contributions of employees already present in the organization. It could easily be equated to more traditional “succession planning” or “workforce planning” efforts.<sup>20</sup>

Another view of talent management is one in which talent is emphasized “generically; that is, without regard for organizational boundaries or specific positions.”<sup>21</sup> This view emphasizes high performers or high potential employees and seeks to identify the top talent present in the organization. With this understanding, the most competent employees are sought and differentiated from their peers. They may be hired into positions not based on a set of specific skills or knowledge, but simply because they are known to be a high performer who achieves results. Those who espouse this view of

talent management emphasize the categorization of high, average, and low performing employees. They deemphasize the requirement for a prescriptive set of skills and experience associated with a specific position. They argue that employees known to be high performers will overcome temporary learning curves associated with background and experience. This approach advocates for filling the organization with only high performers and “weeding out” low performers who are not deemed essential to the success of the organization.<sup>22</sup>

The Army is apt to employ strategies from all three approaches described above. Army workforce planning initiatives and processes designed to identify high performers pre-date the concept of talent management. There is ongoing discussion about how the Army might refine its processes to achieve better outcomes with its talent. The evaluation and promotion processes of the Army have long sought to reward high performers and the current overhaul of the officer evaluation system seeks to better identify these individuals. It also stands to reason that the Army will be internally focused in its efforts given that it must grow and develop the preponderance of its leaders rather than recruit from outside the organization. To this end, Army Engineer and Army Nurse Corps efforts have focused on how to better match individuals to specific roles based on experience and desire/motivation. Much work has yet to be done and ongoing and future efforts must be informed by the two critical issues discussed below.

### **The Bearing Organizational Structure Has on Talent Management**

In the initial phase of the programmatic attempt at talent management, the Army must examine the bearing that organizational structure will have on the intended strategy. For years, a belief existed that any relationship between organizational strategy and structure was reciprocal. There is now widespread understanding, however, that organizational structure “can have a profound impact on strategy.”<sup>23</sup> Nowhere is this more true than in the application of the talent management business practice to the military. The Army must give pause to the fact that its structure may impede strategic activity in the application of talent management practices.<sup>24</sup>

Two key dimensions of structure warrant examination as it pertains to talent management. They are: centralization and formalization. Understanding the concept of centralization is relatively straightforward. It is the degree to which decision authority or evaluation actions is concentrated.<sup>25,26</sup> Formalization, on the other hand, specifies the extent to which an organization uses prescribed processes, procedures or business rules to direct action.<sup>27,28</sup> The pervasiveness of these two dimensions of structure in Army personnel systems warrants an understanding of their impact.

Several implications of the two structural dimensions in question include the following: (1) Centralization allows an organization to easily coordinate effective decision-making. Often, a cause for centralization in human capital decisions is a desire for equity and impartiality, given that these decisions will and ought to be subject to scrutiny. (2) Centralization places significant cognitive demands and those who retain decision authority. In talent management/talent selection processes, centralized actions become wholly reliant on other formalized processes such as performance management, which must produce accurate and valid assessments of employee

performance. (3) High levels of formalization limit members' decision-making discretion. It has often been argued that organizations should attempt to match levels of professionalism with levels of formalization given that formalization threatens professional autonomy. In talent management actions, high levels of formalization are likely to restrict the options of individual executives in favor of formalized selection or recognition processes. Given a current Army campaign plan that emphasizes the professionalism of its leaders, the high degree of formalization present in personnel processes stands in opposition to the premise of granting professionals discretion in the management of talent. (4) High levels of formalization eliminate role ambiguity. In talent management actions, this manifests itself by prescribing (or limiting) who may make decisions when recognizing individual performance/achievement.<sup>29</sup>

Most of the Army's human capital decisions are both highly centralized and formalized. Officer appointments, promotions, selections for civilian higher education programs and fellowships, professional military education opportunities and control of pay are all, with very limited exceptions, centralized. All these actions are also highly formalized. The military should not be indicted for these facts as many decisions are matters of law or policy set forth by the United States Government. The President and Congress retain decision making authority for pay and many aspects of military officer appointments and promotion. The formalized processes establish a transparency and a high degree of accountability, both of which the people of our nation are deserving of. The United States has always operated under the premise that the military will operate under civilian government control. Military officer appointments and promotions are just one of the ways that civilian leadership maintains oversight.

It is paramount for the military to examine organizational structure before embarking on a strategy for talent management. The primary reason lies in the marked differences between corporate organizational structure and that of the military. In the corporate world, executives generally have extensive decision-making discretion in human capital decisions as compared to their Army counterparts. Typical decisions for a business executive include hiring and promotion actions as well as an ability to extend pay incentives for talented individuals. Developmental opportunities to include internships or the creation of “stretch” experiences for high performing employees are also within the realm of more immediate and decentralized action. The decentralization and reduced formalization present in the corporate world allows for a broader range of “immediate” action toward recognizing, retaining or investing in identified “high performers”.

Compared to the extensive discretion of their counterpart, military executives do not have direct decision authority to promote their subordinates, extend pay incentives, or make guarantees on other centralized selection processes to include funded graduate school starts, fellowships and other desirable career enhancing opportunities. Considering the limitations on military executives in human capital decisions may be surprising to those not familiar with the Armed Forces. Internally, this lack of executive discretion in human capital decisions is understood and generally accepted given the laws and policies that govern the military.

Despite the limitations placed on Army executives in the area of human capital management, there is great reason to believe that targeted application of talent management initiatives will be met with great success. Throughout its history the Army

has maintained a rich tradition of developing exceptional leaders and there is no reason to believe that it will not continue to do so. Army efforts in talent management must be two-pronged. First, the Army should judiciously examine if and where it makes sense to reduce centralization and formalization in human capital processes. The purpose behind decentralizing and reducing formalization would be to provide Army leaders both flexibility and responsiveness in recognizing talent. Increasing executive discretion would afford a greater degree of responsiveness in areas such as focused attempts at retention and demonstrable ways to invest in individuals with high levels of documented performance and perceived potential. Second, the Army must identify areas where they are not encumbered by organizational structure as it pertains to talent management. These areas must be vigorously exploited for positive action due to Army's limited range of options available to recognize "high performers". Focus areas currently available to the Army in talent management are outlined in the "calls to action" portion of this research paper.

### **Emphasizing Engagement**

A strong practice common in the Army is that of applying "lessons learned" from previous experience. One of the important concepts from the practice of talent management in the corporate world is that of *engagement*. Talent management is not an initiative relegated to the human resources business unit. To illustrate this point, the Economist Intelligence Unit published a paper headed by the quote, "The management of a company's pool of talent is now too important to be left to the human resources department alone and has become the responsibility of the top executive."<sup>30</sup>

Leadership's engagement with talent is an issue that demands commitment at all levels of an organization. Corporations that have demonstrated success in the "war for talent" are those that emphasize high levels of engagement. One of the most recognized CEOs in recent history, Jack Welch, indicated that he spent half of his time on people while heading General Electric.<sup>31</sup> To further illustrate the need for leader engagement, the Saratoga Institute conducted a survey of nearly 20,000 key employees who left organizations. The disconnect between leaders and employees in this survey is startling. Of "bosses" surveyed, 85% believed that top employees were leaving for money and opportunity. Interestingly enough, 80% of those departing cited poor leadership and unsupportive company culture as their primary motivator.<sup>32</sup>

While engagement seems intuitive as it relates to talent development and retention, today's business environment exerts pressures that may inhibit authentic interpersonal engagement across all levels of an organization. Computer-mediated communication (CMC), a term that encompasses email, social media, smart phone messaging, computer-hosted meetings, and a variety of other interpersonal communication methods, has revolutionized the way people relate to each other in the workplace. On one hand, it has positively impacted a leader's ability to reach out to individuals or groups with immediacy. CMC has also overcome communication challenges related to geographic dispersion. There are indicators, however, that leaders may unwittingly send signals to employees through CMC. There is research to show that perceived ostracism can arise though it may not be intended.<sup>33</sup> People look for cues in email messages whereas in face-to-face communication they would scan for non-verbal messages. If the cues are perceived to be negative, counterproductive

feelings, actions and behaviors arise.<sup>34</sup> When leaders emphasize communication through impersonal technological methods to the virtual exclusion of meaningful personal interaction, talent may disconnect from leadership. Army leaders should be encouraged to leverage CMC as a powerful tool to facilitate talent management efforts but be wary of unintended effects. Nothing can replace the value of focused, authentic personal interaction.

Leadership theory also emphasizes the value of engagement. An emerging leadership theory referred to as Authentic Leadership Development (ALD) is no exception. Foundationally, ALD attempts to discern how a leader maximizes constructive engagement with a follower. It emphasizes a positive “emotional contagion” whereby a leader deliberately “influences followers and their development.”<sup>35</sup> ALD draws on social exchange theory that emphasizes the establishment of positive social exchanges with followers. Furthermore, ALD views the developmental process as “being much more relational.”<sup>36</sup> A unique aspect of ALD is the comparison between authenticity and inauthenticity. Given that talent retention efforts are directly related to the quality of leaders,<sup>37</sup> how leaders engage with followers is a critical consideration. Leaders are perceived as inauthentic when they are “overly compliant with stereotypes and demands related to the leader role.”<sup>38</sup> In an organization such as the Army with a formalized leader development program, authentic leaders must convey that they are engaging with talent because they (a) truly believe in it, (b) know it is the right thing to do on behalf of their followers and (c) because they are genuinely interested in their people. Comparatively, the inauthentic leader simply attempts to meet the requirements of a prescriptive Army program. All of the actions described above represent

engagement with followers. Engagement is deemed essential to the effective application of any leadership theory.

Unfortunately, there are indicators that Army leaders need to increase engagement with talent. In 2011, two Masters in Public Policy candidates at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard examined junior military officer retention. Consistent in their surveys of officers, both a cohort in the service and those who had left, was an indictment of the personnel management system. In examining the survey, it becomes apparent that many of the problems in personnel management could be overcome if there was increased engagement between officers and “the system” that manages them. One header in the study was simply titled, “talk to your people”, highlighting the need for engagement. When asked how the military might best ensure the best and brightest stay in the service one officer simply stated, “encourage more active mentoring.”<sup>39</sup>

A consistent theme in professional literature regarding talent management is a desire to close the gap between the human resource procedures of promoting and placing talent and an engaged operational (non-HR) leader who knows (a) what “mission critical” roles need to be filled, (b) what skills these roles require, and (c) knows their people and where they might be best challenged and rewarded in their next position. One critical consideration in all of this is the requirement for talent development to be inclusive, offering opportunities and support to all employees. While leaders are challenged to identify high-potential candidates to prepare them for mission critical roles, the overarching goal is to collectively develop everyone.<sup>40</sup>

The consistently cited problem of the Army's antiquated and bureaucratic personnel management system must allow for operational leaders to provide input. With regard to the assignment process, effective engagement on behalf of talent should be encouraged. Herein lies both the challenge and the opportunity presented by a highly formalized organization. The challenge is that change in a formalized system will most often be "motivated by reactive (e.g., solving problems or crises), as opposed to proactive (e.g., searching for opportunities), behavior."<sup>41</sup> If the case is adequately made that engagement is critical to the talent management concept, changes to the formalized system of assigning officers must be made.

The current assignment process for most Army positions involves only an assignment officer (acting in a human resources capacity) and the officer preparing to be moved. An operational leader may provide input in an informal mode, but it is often viewed by the assignment officer as "meddling" in the assignment process and adds to the volume of work associated with the assignment. The formal process does not seek input from the gaining leader ("hiring executive"). The only formal input the losing leader provides is an evaluation report that (a) is often not available for the assignment officer to view for the current evaluation period, and (b) may not even be consulted by the assignment officer. This process would be considered grossly inadequate in most corporate settings. That engagement between the hiring executive, the human resources function, and the current employee's supervisor would be discouraged or prohibited sounds foolish. Yet this process representing minimal engagement is the status quo for military assignments.

Finally, the very publication that should emphasize engagement, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, is surprisingly lukewarm on the subject. This recently revised publication is both prescriptive and strong in most of its verbiage. When emphasizing leader interaction with followers, however, the tenor of the publication grows soft. Under the “Taking Care of Soldiers and Army Civilians” header, comments are only suggestive in nature. “Many leaders connect at a personal level with their followers to anticipate and understand individual circumstances or needs.” “Building relationships is “a way” to encourage commitment from followers. Knowing others is the basis many successful leaders use to treat personnel well.”<sup>42</sup> Later, when emphasizing leader development, the publication simply states that a leader will, “Invest adequate time and effort to develop individual subordinates and build effective teams.”<sup>43</sup> Given indicators that engagement greatly impacts retention and is deemed critical to corporate talent management efforts, it is remarkable that an organization of great strength relies largely on suggestive terminology.

## **Calls to Action**

Given the necessity for action, a series of recommendations are proposed below. It should be noted that these are incremental changes deemed achievable in the near term, defined as within the next year. In an era of fiscal austerity and high operations tempo, it is understood that change adds complexity and workload to an organization already shouldering heavy burdens.

Before outlining the proposals, however, it should be understood where the Army cannot, will not, or is unlikely to take action in the area of talent management

First, with the country in a period of fiscal austerity, the Army does not have the freedom to incentivize retention or “manage talent” through fiscal means such as pay and benefits. Congressional authority is necessary to make substantive changes in this area. Second, the Army’s centralized promotion process is not likely to be changed. Much of it is bound by law and there is sufficient reason to believe that it is a sound system that rewards those deserving of promotion. Third, the Army is actively adapting and refining the recruitment process. Given that the Army must develop the preponderance of leaders internally, emphasis in the area of recruitment related to talent management is not likely to be deemed critical to the Army.

Army talent management efforts would be well served by implementing the following:

**(1) Increase Engagement in the Army Assignment Process**

Given the repetitive indictments of the personnel management system, the following thoughts are offered to improve the experience of talent resident in the organization. First and foremost, operational leaders who know the talent pool must be given a voice in the assignment process. The assignment process should not be confined to the Army’s Human Resources Command (HRC). Working with HRC assignment officers, a “council of colonels” or similar method should consistently be employed to review and slate officers for their next assignment. This proposal is a first step in employing a critical lesson learned from corporate executives – increase engagement on behalf of talent.

Second, the engagement concept inherent in the Army Green Pages “pilot” should be further explored. As an alternative to a “new start” information system, however, the following proposal may achieve the ends of Green Pages in a more streamlined manner. It is recommended that a simple “pop up screen” be developed in the current Total Army Personnel Database (TAPDB/TAPDB-R) or future Integrated Pay and Personnel System – Army (IPPS-A). This pop up screen would present any time an assignment officer opens an individual’s file to take action. The pop up screen would include narrative free text input entered by the individual Soldier’s rater and/or senior rater. It should mirror the developmental counseling process occurring every 90 days (engagement between Soldier and leader). Text entered by the rater/senior rater would expire every 90 days to ensure currency of the data entered. Content should include the officer’s desires for future assignment, unique skills not readily apparent to the assignment officer, and assignment recommendations from the rater/senior rater (inclusive of job type, geographic preference and other considerations). The pop up screen concept would not significantly slow down an assignment officer’s actions but would serve to provide them timely, relevant, operational leader input regarding the individual Soldier every time the Soldier’s record is opened. The primary inherent challenge in this proposal is granting “write” privileges to operational leaders in the personnel databases and ensuring that the correct operational leader has access to his/her Soldiers.

While this proposal is more limited than Green Pages, the critical intent of “giving a voice” to operational leaders in the assignment process is met. Given the current fiscal challenges, adding simple functions to an existent information system may be

preferable to a “new start”. Green Pages also adds a burden to HRC personnel that the above concept does not. Arguably, it may reduce calls/emails from operational leaders to assignment officers made on behalf of individual Soldiers in favor of a standardized means of providing input.

**(2) Ensure that a (Limited) Range of Unencumbered “Incentive” Opportunities Exist for High Performers (not bound by Centralized/Formalized Processes)**

With sound purpose and intent, most career progressing actions in the Army are centralized and very formal. These actions include promotions, selection for most senior level commands, and many civilian and military educational programs. The centralization of these selections lends impartiality and objectivity to the process and greatly reduces both a real and perceived arbitrary nature of selection. Nonetheless, general officers, specifically branch/corps chiefs should possess executive discretion to award a limited number of opportunities not encumbered by dimensions of organizational structure. These opportunities would be reserved for officers deemed essential to the future success of the Army with demonstrated high potential. These opportunities would be administered at either the Army or branch (e.g. Infantry, Signal, Logistics) level to either retain an officer that might be considering separation or to powerfully demonstrate investment in the individual. Examples of these opportunities might include (a) a civilian school-of-choice graduate program or fellowship, (b) a training with industry experience, or (c) a “stretch” or “experiential” assignment outside a valid Army authorization.

The scope of this executive discretion and available programs would necessarily be communicated to operational leaders to ensure awareness. Operational leaders would then be encouraged to contact the executive with decision authority on behalf of an individual and make the case for consideration. The Army executive would determine the degree of local formalization associated with selection process. It is understood that there are compelling arguments on both sides when considering a departure from formalized processes. The need for strategic flexibility, however, is deemed essential to respond to emerging needs and “adapt to substantial, uncertain and fast-occurring (relative to required reaction time) environmental changes.”<sup>44</sup> Static, annual selection boards do not allow the Army any flexibility in responding to individual career decision cycles. If the organization is unsure of the ability to retain a high performer, pursuing a degree of strategic flexibility in this area of talent management will be of great value. Elements of this concept already exist to varying degrees throughout the Army but should be formalized and broadened.

### **(3) Exit Interviews for all Soldiers Separating from Military Service**

Falk & Rogers (2011) have identified a lack of engagement between the Army as an organization and individuals separating from military service. There is no consistent, mandatory exit survey for Army personnel. If the Army does not understand “why” personnel are separating from military service, it cannot respond to systemic issues that warrant organizational change. The self-acknowledged shortfall of Falk & Rogers’ study is the limited population surveyed. Rather than relying on an external agency to

develop and maintain an exit survey, the Army should institute one that is a required part of the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) exit process.

**(4) Publish an Army-wide Talent Management Strategy and Ensure that a Proponency/Office is Identified to Synchronize the Initiative**

During the course of research, it became evident that there is no single office in the Army orchestrating disparate talent management initiatives. Talent management efforts are being explored throughout the Army in respective offices/branches for officers, noncommissioned officers and Department of the Army civilians without a centralized vision or strategy. If talent management is a concept that does not require a central proponent, the Army should, at minimum, clarify its intent. If it is envisioned as an enterprise-wide initiative with defined processes and desired outcomes, guidance should be published.

**(5) Consider Changes in the Leader Development Strategy**

Inherent in its organizational structure, the Army has created a robust leader development program. Army personnel are exposed to a series of career development educational opportunities (both civilian and military) and every Army unit is required to have an active leader development program. Two areas for consideration are as follows: (1) At present, there is no well-developed means to record and track leadership behaviors and no standard against which to measure them. The officer evaluation report emphasizes performance and potential but does not clearly capture leader behaviors. Most corporations place leaders into positions of responsibility by examining

leader behavior, not simply skills and experience. The development of a core set of leader behaviors should be more adequately emphasized as well as a means to evaluate them. In addition, behaviors are observed by peers and followers, not simply superiors. To this point, the Army should consider making its 360 feedback tool mandatory for senior leaders inclusive of the ability to use it in assessment or selection processes. (2) The Army leader development program has become so formalized at the unit level that commanders may be hard pressed to demonstrate “authentic” investment in leader development. If followers perceive that commanders are simply in compliance with a prescriptive Army program, we may be robbing leaders of the opportunity to demonstrate the “art” of leadership. The Army should continue to offer commanders tools and guidance in the development of their leader development programs, but not be so prescriptive that commanders are seen as simply “checking the block” on another Army requirement.

#### **(6) Emphasize the Importance of Engagement in Written Publications**

Given the need to increase engagement between leaders and followers, the Army should consider revising its written publications to emphasize the importance of authentic, relational engagement between leaders and followers. As long as “relating to Soldiers” or “caring for Soldiers” is merely “a way” that “some” leaders build commitment, “some” leaders will not feel the need to engage with urgency. The case for engagement must be clearly communicated in written publication. It must be communicated with strength so Army leaders understand the need to interact with their Soldiers and civilians in authentic, commitment-engendering ways.

## **Closing**

One could make the case that talent management is of greater importance to the Armed Forces than to the corporate world. Corporations have the ability to recruit at all levels. In general, the military does not. The primary entry point for military service is at more junior levels. Limited exceptions include medical professionals, lawyers, chaplains and other technical skills the military requires. Middle managers and executives in the military must be grown internally. One does not recruit a colonel or general officer with broad organizational responsibility. This limitation requires that the Army grow and develop its talent internally. If not done well, the future success of the organization will suffer. The Army understands these challenges but, nonetheless, needs to be diligent to adapt and be responsive.

The Army may not, however, be fully conscious of how its structure is limiting action. It may not be fully cognizant of the ways it must work within these structural limitations yet push judiciously for limited structural change. In the realm of talent management strategy, there is a requirement for action in the areas where the Army does have discretion. The Army must capitalize on these areas in order to develop an effective talent strategy. Finally, there will never be a replacement for an authentic leader who cares for those who follow, and in doing so, furthers the vision and purpose of the organization. No matter how technological the Army becomes, there will never be a replacement for committed, selfless, efforts in the human dimension.

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