

SENIOR OFFICER TALENT MANAGEMENT: FOSTERING INSTITUTIONAL ADAPTABILITY

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For the better part of 2 decades, a growing chorus of government and military leaders has expressed concern over the way senior officers are selected, assigned, and developed. Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the House Armed Services Committee, multiple defense secretaries and under secretaries and several service chiefs have identified specific problem areas. These include the rapid rate at which general and flag officers churn through senior leadership positions; a dearth of specialized educational opportunity or preparation; poor succession planning; restrictive, one-size-fits-all career paths; and an evaluation and promotion system that fails to differentiate officers into the diverse talent pools needed to create highly adaptive military institutions.

An examination of the Army's current senior officer management practices corroborates many of these concerns. Taking a "generalist" officer management approach, the Army has for years been successful at creating senior leaders adept in the art and science of land combat after honing their leadership at the direct and organizational levels. While those experiences remain invaluable, undue reliance upon them to create leaders with deep institutional leadership and management acumen is increasingly unsuited to current and future security challenges confronting the United States.

Current senior officer management practices may have been sufficient during the relative equi-

librium of the Cold War era, with its industrial economies, planned mobilization of conscript armies, clear adversaries, and manageable pace of change, but they are unequal to the needs of a volunteer force facing the challenges of a competitive labor market; a relative decline in American economic power; the increasingly complex, interconnected and technical nature of information age work; and a global threat and operating environment that changes at breakneck pace.

While several recent studies have recommended improvements to existing senior officer management practices, they tend not to go far enough. Because the Army's officer corps is a closed labor market with extremely limited lateral entry, its junior officers are the feedstock for its senior officers. Any changes to senior officer management practices must therefore be rooted within a comprehensive, all-ranks officer talent management framework—early and continuous individual career planning is critical to creating senior leaders who can foster true institutional adaptability.

The Army must therefore differentiate people—seek and employ a diverse range of talents; develop relevant and specialized expertise via individual career paths; invest in higher and specialized education; improve succession planning; and provide sufficient assignment tenure to officers with strategic responsibilities so that they can produce strategic outcomes. These changes must be prepared for, however. The first preparatory

step is culture change, an acknowledgment that talent management is not just an “HR [Human Resources] thing” –it is something an entire organization undertakes to reach desired outcomes. True talent management rapidly increases the effectiveness, competitiveness and intellectual capital of organizations, ensuring that the majority of people are employed optimally. It does this by integrating its accessions, retention, development, and employment strategies.

The second preparatory step is a deep redesign of Army HR, which today focuses upon standardization and uniformity in the face of a labor force that is heterogeneous and complex. Like many large workforce management agencies, it pursues what is organizationally expedient at the expense of increased productivity and satisfaction. Army HR must evolve from a process-oriented, current-focused domain into a people-oriented, future-focused one.

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