

2017 Award Winner
USAWC Student Awards Program

Butter Bar to Four Star: Deficiencies in Leader Development

by

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United States Army War College
Class of 2017

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			Form Approved--OMB No. 0704-0188		
The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 01-04-2017		2. REPORT TYPE STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Butter Bar to Four Star: Deficiencies in Leader Development			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin R. Ogden United States Army			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Dr. Stephen J. Gerras			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited. To the best of my knowledge this SRP accurately depicts USG and/or DoD policy & contains no classified information or aggregation of information that poses an operations security risk. Author: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PA: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Word Count: 5889					
14. ABSTRACT The US Army has mastered the art of developing officers who dominate the tactical and operational levels of war, but it struggles to produce exemplary strategic leaders who excel within the civilian-military framework and under the complex demands of the strategic environment. What this paper carefully unpacks are the ideas that rigid cultural norms, faulty officer management practices, and significant flaws in Professional Military Education (PME) generate damaging gaps in the development of commissioned officers in the active component. In fact, the analysis will indicate that these discrepancies delicately nudge the Army towards sculpting its junior officers into tactically savvy and combat-effective generals instead of expert strategic leaders. The Army needs to recognize these shortfalls and make systematic adjustments within the Army Leader Development Model to reverse the trends. Recommended adjustments include merging Army University efforts with human resources practices, promoting critical thinking opportunities by redefining and enforcing broadening assignment requirements, enhancing the status of academic proficiency, restructuring inefficient segments of PME, and increasing continuing education requirements for General Officers. Doing so ensures all future Army generals emerge as proficient sources of strategic					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Strategic Leadership, Professional Military Education, Officer Education, Mentorship, Critical Thinking					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 30	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UU	b. ABSTRACT UU	c. THIS PAGE UU			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (w/ area code)

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(5889 words)

Abstract

The US Army has mastered the art of developing officers who dominate the tactical and operational levels of war, but it struggles to produce exemplary strategic leaders who excel within the civilian-military framework and under the complex demands of the strategic environment. What this paper carefully unpacks are the ideas that rigid cultural norms, faulty officer management practices, and significant flaws in Professional Military Education (PME) generate damaging gaps in the development of commissioned officers in the active component. In fact, the analysis will indicate that these discrepancies delicately nudge the Army towards sculpting its junior officers into tactically savvy and combat-effective generals instead of expert strategic leaders. The Army needs to recognize these shortfalls and make systematic adjustments within the Army Leader Development Model to reverse the trends. Recommended adjustments include merging Army University efforts with human resources practices, promoting critical thinking opportunities by redefining and enforcing broadening assignment requirements, enhancing the status of academic proficiency, restructuring inefficient segments of PME, and increasing continuing education requirements for General Officers. Doing so ensures all future Army generals emerge as proficient sources of strategic competency.

Butter Bar to Four Star: Deficiencies in Leader Development

It's incredibly easy...to work harder and harder at climbing the ladder of success only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall.

—Steven R. Covey¹

Steven Covey's insightful message reminds us that individuals and institutions create inefficiencies when their well-intentioned efforts veer from the direction of the desired destination. In national security parlance, unchecked ways and insufficient means induce a hefty risk to achieve desired ends. Just such a disparity exists in the United States Army between the officer development program and its ultimate objective: exemplary strategic leaders. Attaining the title of strategic leader depends on mastering three advanced competencies: conceptual competency dealing with specific thinking skills, technical competency which includes knowledge of external systems, and the interpersonal competency of consensus building and communication.² Yet, the road Army officers travel to acquire these competencies often contains hidden detours and obstacles that prevent them from becoming effective, relevant, and successful general officers within the post-tactical, strategic environment. Operating in this environment means curbing tactical expertise in order to deal with intense complexity, great uncertainty, unsolvable problems, vast time spans, interdependent systems, and dissimilar cohorts.³ Fellow strategic stakeholders are often civilian professionals with different educational and professional backgrounds, divergent thought processes, conflicting interests, and little experience operating in a tiered structure. Therefore, an officer's developmental process must include mastering civilian-military aptitude throughout the lifespan of a career, including a shift in standard mindset and actions so they are capable of keeping ahead of fast-moving complexity.⁴

Injecting elevated thinkers into the highest echelons of national security requires implementing an effective developmental strategy. The Army uses the Army Leader Development Model (See Figure 1) as its benchmark method. The model focuses on three equally important domains for optimal growth throughout a career: Operational, Institutional, and Self-Development. The domains overlap to provide the officer with a professional balance that enhances gradual development over a career, culminating with officers seemingly able to migrate into difficult positions in the strategic environment. Combined with a sound officer management system, the model provides an effective design for ensuring the most important goal of growing the right type of leaders. When put in practice and left unchecked, the model falls victim to forces that adversely affect the competency of Army generals and high-potential officers.

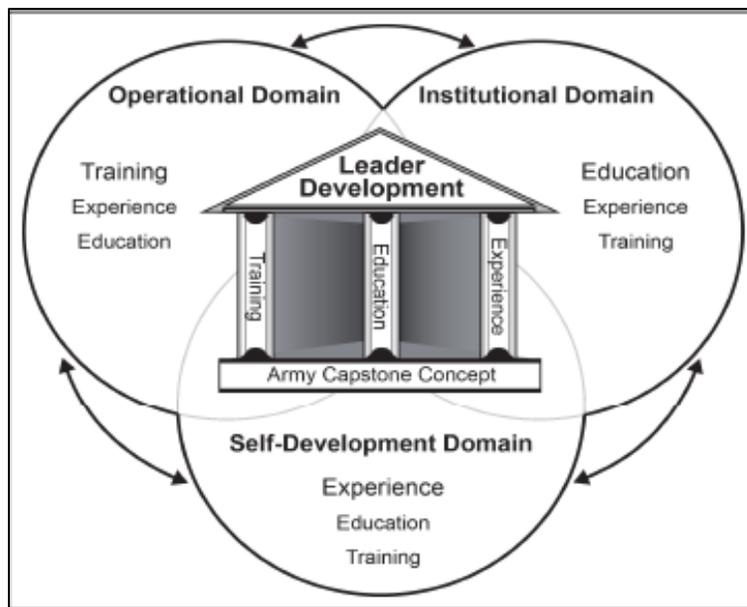


Figure 1. The Army Leader Development Model⁵

What this paper carefully unpacks are the ideas that rigid cultural norms, faulty officer management practices, and significant flaws in Professional Military Education

(PME) generate damaging gaps in the development of commissioned officers in the active component. In fact, the analysis will indicate that these discrepancies delicately nudge the Army towards sculpting its junior officers into tactically savvy and combat-effective generals instead of expert strategic leaders.⁶ The paper concludes with recommendations aimed at reforming complacent systems, challenging conventional thinking, and rebalancing components of the Leader Development Model so all future Army generals emerge as proficient sources of strategic competency.

Cultural Impacts to Officer Development

Even though the Army intends on using the Leader Development Model as the primary roadmap for an officer's career development, powerful cultural norms impede its precedence. Edgar Schein defines culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems...that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."⁷ In these terms, the cultural elements most influential to officer development center around the overwhelming importance placed on operational experience as the mainstream career pathway and the deep-rooted institutional behaviors that discourage critical thinking by its leaders.

Most officers will acknowledge the validity of a balanced approach for healthy development, but cultural forces have eroded this balance, tipping the scale in favor of the Army's operational domain. This particular domain encompasses training activities that units undertake, experiences within an operational or deployed setting, and education gained through unit professional development programs and local special skills courses.⁸ It equates to what an officer gains while "on line" in a unit or, more broadly, within their career track. Prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan coupled with

service members' patriotic duty to deploy in those wars naturally affect the emphasis for operationally-focused learning. For a generation of officers, operational experience, training, and education has usurped all other forms of development and eventually appears as an unofficial condition in the selection process for promotions.⁹ This promotion indicator uncovers a belief system that being tactically and operationally capable equates to being a successful general officer and explains why officers would hesitate to take assignments that are nonoperational for fear of falling behind their peers and jeopardizing the possibility to serve as a general officer. A narrow-minded operational pattern develops among emerging leaders, even though "approximately 65 percent of one-star billets, 80 percent of two-star billets, 82 percent of three-star billets and 92 percent of four-star billets are nonoperational enterprise management positions."¹⁰ In essence, a skewed path for success, accompanied by misguided developmental criteria, emerges even though comprehensive development remains the gold standard for producing future senior leaders.

This operational fetish also leads to anti-intellectualism among Army leaders. Diverting from the operational field into assignments that build strategic thinking ability, such as Advanced Civil Schooling, academic professor, or fellowships, are traditionally undesirable and considered damaging to an officer's career.¹¹ Many officers and, to some degree, promotion boards begin to believe that stepping away from unit leadership assignments and focusing on individual academic development is an indictment of the officer's leadership abilities. A profound example of that assertion emerged recently when the Army failed to select four company grade officers for promotion when their selection for advanced academic scholarships kept them from

taking the traditional route of serving in tactical units.¹² This operationally focused side of Army culture appeared in a broader scope as well. The Army's operational tempo over the years has caused myopic inclinations towards equipment modernization and readiness over restructuring its own PME system.¹³ These cases reaffirm the belief that time operating in units and operational capability are more valuable to an officer's leadership development than intellectually rigorous opportunities which result in strategic capacity.

The Army's complacency towards officer self-development as well as assignment culture also enhances the gravitation towards operational development. Unlike enlisted leaders who follow a structured self-development model, Army officers' self-development consists solely of "self-initiated learning" to meet personal training, education, and experiential goals.¹⁴ Because officers are strictly in charge of their own self-development, they tend to exert more time towards succeeding in their current or next operational assignment versus following a tailored approach that nests with long-term career objectives culminating in strategic aptitude. In fact, over half of surveyed officers confirm that their most-selected activities include professional reading, improving a skill they already mastered such as physical fitness, or networking.¹⁵ This data implies that officer self-development basically merges with operational development. Moreover, the length of assignment tours within Army culture creates conditions where leaders feel compelled to lean heavily on operational topics as a matter of immediate self-interest. Officers generally do not spend more than a year in the same position and can't be expected to have immediate proficiency with all aspects of a new job. Becoming proficient as a leader in these positions requires most of an

inexperienced officer's time; therefore, developmental habits typically form related to near-term tasks with operational overtones. Cultural habits of anti-intellectualism and neglected self-development end up pushing officers towards a singular focus of operational skills, leaving them critically shortchanged when it comes to the in-depth growth that officers need beyond the tactical realm.

While a mindset stuck in operational mode impedes an officer's development, the Army's unwitting discouragement of critical thinking as a cultural standard nearly derails it. Some psychologists define critical thinking as "reasoned thinking with a purpose" that "depends upon three core abilities: appreciating that your own opinions may be wrong; accepting statements as true even when they conflict with your own views; and temporarily adopting an initial position with which you disagree, and then reason from that starting point."¹⁶ Senior Army leaders who embrace and master this art have the ability to recognize their own biases, avoid fallacies, and objectively challenge assumptions when faced with new or existing ideas. These skills are vital for leading in the uncertain and rapidly-changing environment where conventional solutions may be obsolete, but the Army's track record in this area presents a discouraging pattern.¹⁷ Past studies presented to the House Armed Services Committee have uncovered significant officer deficiencies in critical thinking due to lapses in officer development.¹⁸ Being able to apply objective and reasoned thinking requires constant practice, which expands beyond using it primarily in academic settings. Even when used in Army academic institutions, the faculty only delivers critical thinking concepts and knowledge to students versus instilling in them how to apply it.¹⁹ If successful and routine immersion of this practice into an officer's career is paramount, then the operating environment and

culture need to allow reasonable skepticism to flourish; however, overt skepticism in any military setting clashes with conventional and traditional behavior.

The United States Army thrives on standardization and conformity, both as official and cultural customs, to reinforce disciplined behavior.²⁰ These norms invariably conflict with the freedom to objectively assess an idea or situation, particularly if the idea is a standard practice. In organizations like the Army, a fine line exists between being skeptical in the name of critical thinking and nonconforming to the Army Values of duty and loyalty. Since pressures to conform in a group are substantial, failure to do so can result in being perceived as insubordinate or undisciplined, or even being sanctioned or expelled.²¹ Likewise, the Army prides itself on having a deep sense of belief in traditions. Some traditions akin to rowdy military balls, host calling cards, and unit slogans represent superficial and benign experiences. More operative traditions that members of the Army covet tend to originate from collective experiences relating to the creation and sustainment of an effective fighting organization that wins wars.²² These types of practices contribute to what makes the Army a cohesive organization and an officer showing skepticism towards them through critical thinking methods risks professional isolation and even survival in combat situations.²³ This phenomenon could render officers incapable of divorcing themselves of those norms even when overwhelming evidence exposes a contrary viewpoint. As a current consideration, one only needs to look at the Army's continued use of an obsolete physical fitness test established in 1985, even though significant advances in physical training have emerged as better assessments of physical readiness.²⁴ In the end, the culture of

conventionality and tradition outweighs the urge to truly examine ideas, leading to a significant deficiency in the cognitive methods prized later in a senior leader's career.

Complementing conformity and tradition within Army culture is the dependence on doctrine and regulations. As of the publication of this paper, the Army Publication Directorate website displays 537 Army Regulations and 16 Army Doctrine Publications in inventory, and that excludes hundreds of volumes of joint doctrine, local regulations, various degrees of standard operating procedures, and multi-echelon policy letters that lay the operating framework for soldiers.²⁵ Providing top-down directives for nearly everything in the Army encourages outsourced thinking and makes it improbable that officers will spend time objectively questioning why or how something is done. Even if doctrinal leeway existed, most officers possess an innate aversion to the intellectual exploration that enables the critical thinking process. Army officers tend to exhibit low levels of openness and high levels of decisiveness, which benefit leaders at the tactical level but ultimately cripples those that reach the strategic level.²⁶ In effect, the gross overkill of prescriptive thinking is both born from and satisfies the pervasive personality type of the officer population while also reinforcing a rigid and convinced mindset that is antithetical to challenging certain ideas.

Cultural aspects of the Army experience skew the desired balance in development and subdue critical thinking abilities, ultimately placing barriers towards overcoming fatal strategic leadership flaws such as parochialism, biases, false assumptions, and cognitive dissonance. These deficiencies lead to enhanced tactical capability and rapid promotion but eventually render our senior leaders ineffective when faced with nonoperational and extremely complex problems. Even though culture does

play a large role in an officer's development, how the Army manages its officers lends further evidence of an inefficient leader development system.

Officer Management Practices at Play

It is safe to assert that several officer management practices present a different, but no-less-serious obstacle to the development of our strategic leaders. Assessments in 2014 found that only 46 percent of Active Component leaders rated the Army effective at supporting the development of individuals through personnel management practices such as evaluations, promotions, and assignment selection.²⁷ The results of these assessments mostly correlate with flaws in the officer management system pertaining to the Officer Evaluation Report (OER), utilization of broadening assignments, and counterproductive practices by officer mentors.

Anyone looking at the efficacy of officer management practices must begin with the most significant document in a career's paper trail and centerpiece to officer promotions and selections, the OER. Unlike enlisted leaders, officers never personally appear in front of promotion boards and selection panels. Boards and panels in charge of selecting officers for ranks and commands only conduct file reviews.²⁸ By far, the most important document in the file that determines the fate of the officer is the OER because board members spend the most time reviewing it and it gives them insight into the leader's level of performance and potential compared to other officers.²⁹ The tyranny of the OER in determining the success of an officer should not be underestimated, so evident flaws within its structure and use have critical consequences for the quality of strategic leaders and commanders that emerge.

The basic structure and focus areas within the OER cause the most disparity of outcome. Depending on the rank of the evaluated officer, the OERs have slightly

different configuration and evaluated areas; however, they all share the common focus areas of performance and potential of the individual. Herein lies the developmental problem. OER comments regarding performance generally relate to tangible accomplishments during an officer's rating period (e.g., number of exercises supported, best inspection in unit, successful deployment, etc.). Rating officials do not typically include examples of exhibited strategic leader attributes such as interpersonal skills, critical thinking, risk taking, or negotiation mainly because the OER limits supervisors' input and board members reviewing the OER do not prize those qualities during selections.³⁰ The Army also ties the hands of senior raters in addressing strategic leader competencies by limiting their input even further and forcing them to include officer numeration and a brief description of broad potential.³¹

These structural flaws in evaluations discourage supervisors and senior raters from citing potential strategic leadership qualities that go beyond the number of tactical tasks accomplished. This defect, in turn, encourages officers to focus on what they accomplish and ignore the strategic leader attribute of being reflective about themselves and their experiences as leaders.³² In essence, the danger of reinforcing accomplishments in this manner contributes to the development of an unwanted fixed mindset versus the more adaptable growth mindset. Someone with a fixed mindset believes their "abilities are predetermined and largely unchangeable," while a growth mindset is "the belief that one can cultivate and improve upon their abilities through practice and effort."³³ Constantly being recognized only for what one accomplishes causes the individual to develop a fear of failure and potentially avoid challenges. Conversely, being recognized for one's effort alleviates the fear of failure and promotes

resiliency in the face of difficult situations, like those that resoundingly persist at the strategic level.³⁴ Fixed mindsets encouraged through OER practices can cripple officers once they become strategic leaders because problems at that level are fluid and virtually unsolvable. Our leaders must mentally evolve throughout their careers to focus on getting processes right versus seeking a clear win, but current OER practices reinforce the performance outcome instead.

Alongside ill-constructed OERs rests poor utilization of broadening assignments as developmental opportunities for officers. While local supervisors influence officer evaluations, Human Resources Command (HRC) has the responsibility to manage broadening assignments. Army regulation defines broadening as

The purposeful expansion of an individual's capabilities and understanding that are gained through experiences with internal and external organizational cultures and environments and which generally fall into four assignment categories: functional/institutional, academic and civilian enterprise, unified action partner assignments, and strategic enablers.³⁵

Broadening assignments expand an officer's experience and introduce new ways of thinking to ensure the development of multifunctional skills. This technique works and many private companies achieve impressive results by using similar initiatives to elevate the thinking capacity of their leaders. Executives at General Electric participate in programs that immerse them in underdeveloped countries with the purpose of exposing them to unique experiences in order to "promote reflection and self-awareness" as a developmental tool.³⁶ As a result, broadening offsets parochialism and a myopic mindset for those bound to lead in unpredictable environments by opening their mental approach to addressing challenges. Unfortunately, officer management practices have diluted the utilization of these important experiences, which in turn impact the type of leaders that emerge.

Unfortunately, trends for mind-opening broadening opportunities have been decreasing for many Army generals since the beginning of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁷ The most obvious conclusion for this shortfall is simply that assignments supporting ongoing operations in the two major conflicts took priority. As presented earlier, operational assignments also dominate the landscape over broadening assignments for cultural reasons as witnessed through official Army directives. Manning guidance issued after the announcement of troop withdrawals in Iraq and Afghanistan still prioritize operational manning and only mention broadening opportunities for officers as an objective vice a directed manning requirement.³⁸ These official documents send a clear signal that broadening assignments are secondary options. Looking at results from the most recent Fiscal Year 18 Battalion Command selection board shows that alarming trends exist towards rewarding operational versus broadening assignments. Between the 127 selected as principals from the Infantry, Armor, and Aviation branches, the officers averaged roughly 29 months of Key and Developmental (KD) time in an operational position while 64 percent of the selectees also served as a Brigade Operations or Executive Officer.³⁹ The demonstrated amount of time in these types of positions significantly decreases the amount of time a high-potential Major has to successfully serve in a post-KD broadening assignment, including joint opportunities, before assuming battalion command. These few data points alone give insight to an enduring aversion by the Army to prioritize these mentally enriching assignments, and the developmental effects they bring, for the officers most likely to reach pinnacle levels as a strategic leader.

Even though HRC stands alone as the primary executor of officer assignments such as broadening and joint opportunities, mentors have a significant role in managing an officer's career. A mentor is "someone who agrees to share their skills, knowledge, expertise, and professional contacts," while also helping one "set career goals, resolve difficult problems, and make sound career decisions."⁴⁰ Officers will use mentors to seek guidance and wisdom for career assignment paths that will eventually land them in the highest, strategic-level positions. This level of responsibility gives mentors a great amount of influence over the proper development of an officer. Yet, many instances show that officers reject mentors entirely or choose mentors that perpetuate and reinforce misguided career paths that ultimately put talented officers at a disadvantage at higher levels of leadership.

Not all officers subscribe to the idea of having a mentor to assist them in their development or career management. Surveys conducted in 2014 determined that only 57 percent of company grade officers and 56 percent field grade officers reported actually having a mentor.⁴¹ Unlike supervisors or coaches who rate their supervised officer, an officer protégé typically seeks out and chooses a mentor based on trust and experience level. Therefore, this large minority of non-mentored officers maneuver through their career alone or with help solely from changing supervisors and HRC assignment managers. As a result, unilateral management techniques and inexperience cause officers to miss developmental opportunities or veer off track over a long career, while also jeopardizing their full potential to serve at the strategic level.

Those officers that do participate in the mentorship process face different challenges to their development. In general, mentors offer many more years of seniority

and experience which greatly benefit junior officers. The vast difference in experience should be the most advantageous part in the relationship.⁴² However, a mentor's guiding compass entails experiences that assisted in their path to success years before, but may not be the most contemporary path for an officer today. Mentors can unwittingly perpetuate poor choices of assignments because those types of assignments fit an outdated career model. In particular, successful commanders fall victim to this misguided advice. Historically, mentors have counseled the most successful commanders to seek more difficult positions in large, operational commands and headquarters as optimal preparation for future promotion and command, simply because that path worked for them.⁴³ In addition, senior officers have a tendency to bring junior officers along with them to new assignments because these subordinates have proven loyal, competent, and trustworthy in the past. This technique potentially benefits the senior officer and the units they serve, but it can severely obstruct the junior officer from new experiences and ways of thinking that are beneficial to their development portfolio.⁴⁴ Senior officers acting as mentors will insist on pulling their highest-potential subordinates with them to jobs and assignments that may not be the best fit for the career path of the aspiring officer. In the end, mentors and, more broadly, officer management practices have drastic effects on where an officer gains experience and how well that experience associates them with strategic competencies.

A Flawed Professional Military Education System (PME)

Just as officers rely on the officer management system to provide them with the best duty positions for development, they also rely on the Army's PME programs to prepare them for future challenges. According to Eliot Cohen during Congressional testimony, "These educational programs have been optimal for shaping tacticians and

well-rounded military officers, but delinquent in generating the deep thinkers that sustain the military profession in the long run.”⁴⁵ The sentiment in this statement violates the two-pronged purpose of PME: train for certainty in order to master one’s skills; and educate for uncertainty in order to attain critical thinking skills that assist in unanticipated and unpredictable situations.⁴⁶ Professional Military Education dominates the institutional domain and has an equal part in an officer’s development, but its effectiveness rating over the past decade has been dismal. Only 62 percent of company and field grade officers surveyed feel that the institutional domain has been effective in their development or helpful in improving their leadership capabilities.⁴⁷ Such low confidence relates to significant flaws enmeshed within a PME system that adversely affects the intellectual progress of our future strategic leaders.

To begin, the PME system lacks the intellectual diversity needed to challenge students that are being primed to enter the strategic environment. The Army itself creates an environment that inhibits divergence, which naturally extends into its academic institutions. Conformity and similarity engross every leader consistently throughout their Army career. Because of uniform standards, everyone dresses alike. Due to tract housing, officers reside in nearly identical government quarters. Most military communities, often geographically isolated, lack cultural variety compared to civilian neighborhoods. With the implementation of Army Values, everyone adheres to a shared set of beliefs. Assignments often reunite the same work colleagues because of redundant location options. Even though a leader will move potentially dozens of times in a career, the units they serve resemble one another in almost every way due to standardization in the Army. With such resounding similarity in the information,

alternatives, and payoffs presented in everyday life, officers begin synchronizing behavior in all aspects of lifestyle, to include patterns of thought.⁴⁸

Having such an identical lifestyle and environment is not necessarily a bad thing for operational and family readiness, but it drastically undermines intellectual diversity in a PME setting. Like-minded students who come from the same professional background or defense establishment predominantly make up seminar composition at PME schools. The current structure keeps officers intellectually isolated and unable to escape military paradigms and enhance their critical and creative thinking ability by interacting with people who truly think differently.⁴⁹ Even though the schools attempt to diversify the seminars by integrating military officers from different services and government civilians, the composition lacks the necessary peer ratios that would otherwise expose students to adequate whole-of-government perspectives.⁵⁰ Professional Military Education becomes a meeting place for generally likeminded individuals to reinforce comfortable concepts and, therefore, serves as a mechanism for institutional groupthink. Student intellectual diversity is negligible in a purely military education program compared to a university that consists of students from various backgrounds, values, political persuasions, and education, and who have alternative experiences and viewpoints.⁵¹

Educational expertise and tenures of PME military instructors also have a hand in perpetuating the gap of intellectual diversity among students. The selection process for instructors lacks sufficient discernment and relies mostly on the normal personnel management system rather than a process that identifies proper subject matter expertise for the instructor position in mind.⁵² Without the considerate and thorough selection of military instructors, unmotivated personnel viewing these positions as

detrimental to promotion or even incapable personnel can make their way into the PME system, virtually eliminating the impetus for challenging student thinking. Conversely, high-quality military instructors that challenge their students to broaden their mental capacity have limited time as PME instructors because the Army requires them to move in accordance with normal permanent change of station timespans.⁵³ Acquiring unqualified instructors and losing qualified instructors in a matter of a few years presents a major challenge with faculty management and contributes to the lessening of intellectual diversity among PME students.

In addition to lacking intellectual diversity, PME courses lack depth and applicability in the curricula at each level. To be clear, the curricula at the PME schools generally have pertinent topics and concepts that enhance leaders' knowledge; however, a shortfall exists in how quickly evolving concepts get implemented into the program. For instance, "other than some adjustments to accommodate counterinsurgency doctrine, the PME provided by military institutions in the past decade has largely remained constant in spite of rapid changes and evolving threats in the world."⁵⁴ To exacerbate this problem, most of the students attending PME courses since 9/11 have wide-ranging deployment experience and real world application of the topics covered. Course content is often inferior to the level of a student's practical experience and does little to prepare them for immediate follow-on assignments and future strategic assignments.⁵⁵ Likewise, the academic programs that Army officers experience in PME can be characterized as survey-level curriculum, which offers limited exposure to professional topics and prevents a level of mastery needed for proper development of

lifetime practitioners.⁵⁶ Even if the depth of the courses and diversity of students met higher standards, the efficacy of the Army's PME schools presents a different test.

Like all academic institutions, the Army's PME programs must have legitimate oversight, certification, and accountability in order to maintain competitive efficacy of student education. As an institution, the Army historically fails to measure up to its civilian academic counterparts by having less than a quarter of its PME programs accredited by authorized organizations under the Department of Education.⁵⁷ This inequity causes future strategic leaders to migrate through a more recognizably substandard academic pipeline than their civilian counterparts destined for the same strategic field. As a mitigation effort, the Army created The Army University to better integrate all PME schools under one governing body, provide synchronization of progressive learning objectives throughout an officer's career, and establish regional accreditation standards for Army education programs.⁵⁸ Although a significant step forward, The Army University has yet to yield the regional accreditation it desires for many of its tenant programs, leaving them devoid of the comparable oversight measures seen at other universities.

In a related fashion, officers do not receive a master's degree through the PME system until they reach the United States Army War College after serving for 20 years. The granting of a master's degree typically associates with academic rigor and legitimizes a student's expertise in a particular field of study, yet the Army excludes these opportunities earlier in an officer's career. Since Training and Doctrine Command, an internal Army executive agent, is the accrediting organization for the core program of Intermediate Level Education (ILE) within the PME system, mid-grade officers do not

graduate with a master's degree, even though the students study graduate-level concepts.⁵⁹ Waiting until an officer is a Colonel for such a level of academic rigor only disadvantages Army officers from gaining advanced knowledge for application throughout their career development and puts them at a disadvantage compared to civilian strategic leaders in the national security field. Without civilian-accredited master's degree programs mandated in the early part of an officer's career, the Army must trust internal assessment procedures as to whether its PME programs are functioning properly. Unfortunately, evidence shows that standards among graders at schools like Command and General Staff vary and lack consistent criteria for determining efficacy of the instruction.⁶⁰ With no external accrediting agency or internal mechanism to assess how well graduates grasp the concepts, the full potential of PME is not being met.

The final evidence underscoring the inefficiency of the Army officer PME system rests with underwhelming general officer continuing education. By definition, all ranks of general officer fall under the category of strategic leader, making them the end product for the leader development model. However, officers encounter a steep drop-off of PME once they pin on stars. As a simple measure, officers complete 32 combined months of mandated PME as tactical leaders in their first 20 years followed by roughly 8 combined months as strategic leaders in the next 10-20 years.⁶¹ The Army even plans on dropping the 8-month requirement further to just 6 weeks in total due to course restructuring.⁶² Also, courses that general officers attend only familiarize them with practical strategic concepts rather than immerse them into analysis of the kinds of complex situations they will face. The Army simply stops educating its officers effectively once they reach the

strategic rank of general, when those officers need it the most. According to a previous Army War College report, “Other professions such as physicians, lawyers, and professional engineers have requirements for continuing education, but the Army has very little beyond orientation courses” for its most senior leaders like general officers.⁶³ General officers can count on their attendance at one of the Senior Service Colleges being the last, extensive experience within a PME program littered with flaws.

A Way Ahead

Applying comprehensive modifications to the Army’s Leader Development System would increase the effectiveness of its officers throughout their careers and, more importantly, once they reach the highest levels of leadership. The most crucial recommendation is that current senior ranking officers acknowledge that Army officers have been shortchanged by a flawed development system. Recognizing the problem would provide the right energy for integrated solutions to flourish. Structurally, HRC and Senior Leader Division should merge efforts with The Army University in a leadership “Center of Excellence” framework. Officer management and leader development are inextricably linked and continuing to compartmentalize them defeats the objective of producing our best leaders. The remaining recommendations involve measures to help balance and improve the Leader Development Model and those elements that influence it.

Successful completion of a broadening assignment and earning an Army-sponsored Master’s Degree should be required to compete for battalion command. Additionally, the Army should structure officer self-development to ensure officers not only expend effort in this critical domain, but that the focus is comprehensive and preparatory for gaining the right future skills. These adjustments would assist in the

much-needed change in operational culture. Officer management adjustments should begin with restructuring the OER to account for more intangible strategic skills such as how much prudent risk the officer takes, interpersonal skills they display, and examples of critical thinking and self-awareness improvement. At the same time, promotion boards should be directed to equally consider these strategic traits along with senior rater remarks about potential. The Army also needs to incorporate academic competency measures into the promotion and selection process. Integrating Academic Evaluation Reports and graduate-level grades more vigorously in the process or conducting pre-promotion board exams would serve as forcing functions for officers to break the operational tether and seek out academic opportunities instead.

PME requires major improvements to enhance the institutional development domain. First of all, the Army should strengthen the ILE curriculum and award Master's Degrees for all resident students. By the time an officer reaches ILE with roughly 10 years of service, one can make a viable assumption that they aspire to serve a full career, so enhancing the rigor of the school is a worthwhile investment. For ILE and the Army War College, give the top quarter of students the option to participate in an apprenticeship program with civilian companies and government agencies outside of the military during the electives period of school. A program like this allows immediate practice and exposure of lessons learned. Last, increase the length of service and number of civilian and high-potential Army professors at ILE and the U.S. Army War College so that student exposure to challenging and diverse thinking becomes paramount throughout their academic experience.

Finally, the Army should include better continuing education for general officers. The Army Strategic Education Program is the first step, but the piloted program greatly curtails general officers' education. Expand the program to at least 6 months for each general officer rank, forcing them to inflate their knowledge of the environment to come. This approach would supersede the current education model and allow for more in-depth study in preparation for the demands they will soon face. Similarly, including mandatory fellowships for all newly-promoted brigadier generals would jump start their mental transitions and could be the final gateway in breaking from deep-rooted tactical tendencies.

Conclusion

United States Army generals do not reach the highest potential possible over the course of their career. Do not misunderstand; general officers today reflect some of the most adaptive, dedicated, and experienced tactical leaders that the Army has ever produced. However, their development as strategic leaders is the product of a system wrought with flaws in military education, inefficient officer management practices, and cultural barriers. Today's senior leaders have to be more dynamic than their predecessors from the past century, but the leader development system fails to prepare them for an unimaginable strategic environment that has increased in complexity, ambiguity, and speed in just a few decades. As a result, the development system forces officers to focus on achieving the most senior rank versus the highest competency needed by the senior rank. Applying Steven Covey's message from the start of this paper, Army officers have as much desire to climb the ladder of success as ever before; however, the Army has yet to reinforce the ladder they climb and ensure it is, in fact, leaning against the wall of strategic competence. The stakes are just too high for the

next generation of officers and the Army institution as a whole to not overcome these blatant gaps.

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