The Impact of Subordinate Feedback in Officer Development

Assessments, Feedback, and Leadership

Maj. Carlos De Castro Pretelt, U.S. Army

Spc. Gage Paraschos scales a wooden barrier 15 May 2020 during the obstacle course event of the 1st Armored Division Best Warrior Competition at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photo by Pfc. Matthew Marcellus, U.S. Army)

The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army.

—Lt. Gen. John M. Schofield, U.S. Army

*Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.*

—John F. Kennedy

Army officers are promoted utilizing a system that measures numerous factors, including their achievements, future potential, and adherence to Army values.[1] Unfortunately, this type of assessment has two main shortcomings. First, due to its design, the system habitually only uses the feedback from one person, the rater, as the sole source of input on the evaluation of the individual. Second, the system has a substantial blind spot because it only focuses on measurable achievements and provides perfunctory checks on the methods and behaviors implemented to achieve them. The confluence of these systemic limitations, coupled with short-term rotations, has at times resulted in the promotion of individuals with dubious leadership skills, enabling the unchecked growth of a corrosive organizational climate.[2] Fortunately, this may be about to change. The Army's recent changes to how it evaluates field grade officers, and in particular, the selection for command positions, may finally provide enough incentive to incorporate subordinate feedback in the development of officers as a necessary requirement for the advancement of its best leaders.

Does Subordinate Feedback Matter?

Subordinate feedback and its overall value in the development of leaders has been a resurgent topic of
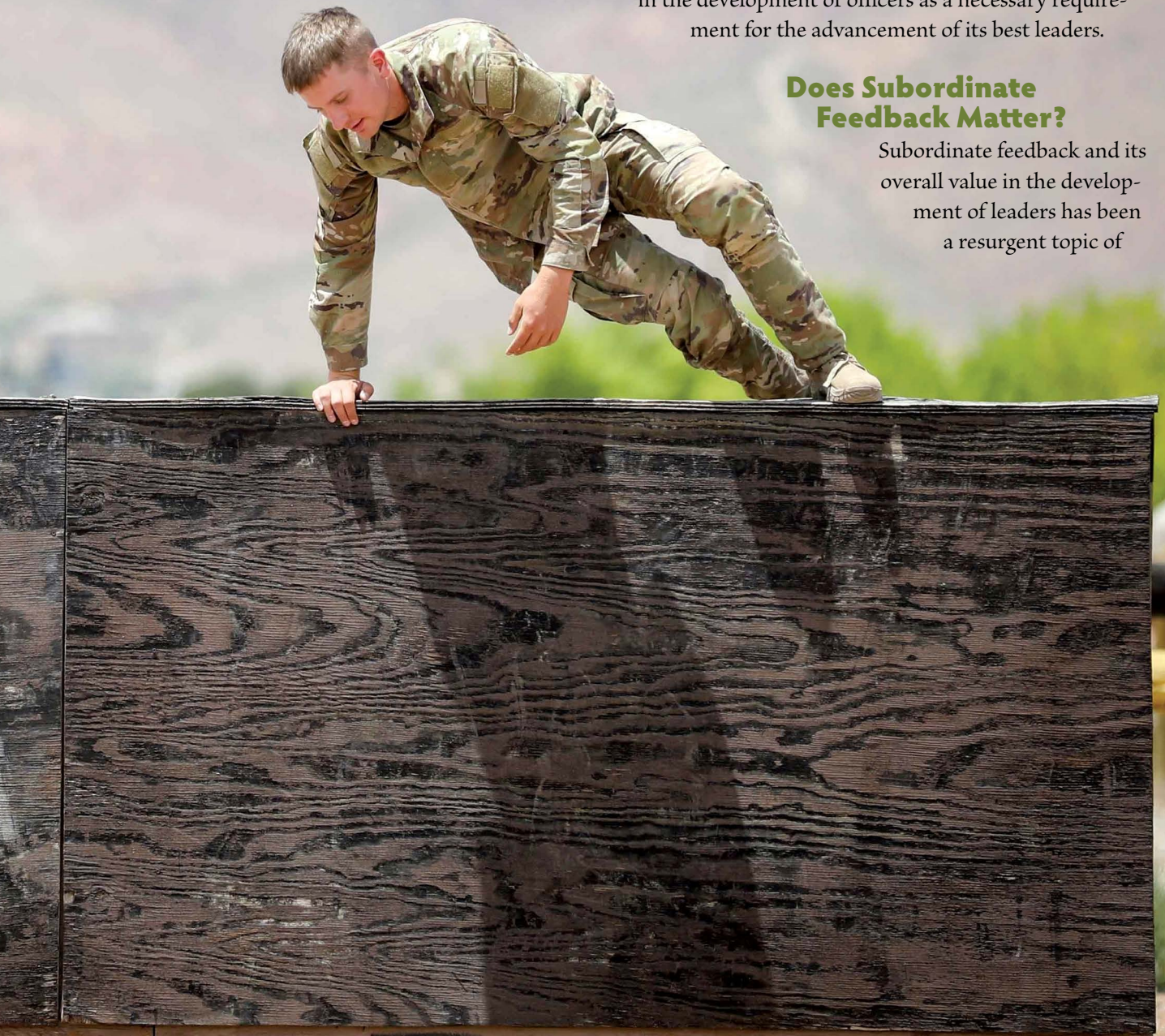
conversation dating back to at least 1998.[3] The notion of utilizing this type of feedback as a tool for the edification of leaders has been analyzed by both military and corporate scholars; it was even included in the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), whereby the Department of Defense was tasked with completing an assessment on the implementation of a multi-source feedback program as part of a performance evaluation report.[4] Yet, in spite of its enduring popularity, the idea has continually failed to take hold.

Recent initiatives by the Army, such as the Colonels Command Assessment Program (CCAP) and the Battalion Commander Assessment Program (BCAP), suggest there may be significant benefits to further exploring subordinate feedback and illustrate the Army's drive to use more nontraditional sources of information in the assessment of its officers.[5] Those officers who participate in the BCAP and CCAP are evaluated by panels of experts, subordinates, and peers on a number of observed metrics, including adverse personality traits that could prove detrimental in a unit.[6] This recent advance in the assessment of future leaders is groundbreaking because it could serve as the strongest argument yet in support of the integration of subordinate feedback as a necessary part of an officer's development plan. By creating a direct linkage between career advancement and the development of certain key personality traits, the BCAP and the CCAP may have finally created an impetus for officers to understand how they are perceived by subordinates.

Maj. Carlos De Castro Pretelt, U.S. Army, is a foreign area officer serving as the deputy Army section chief at the Office of Defense Coordination in Mexico City. He holds a Bachelor of Science in social psychology from Park University, a Master of Management from the University of Phoenix, and a Master of International Policy and Practice from George Washington University.

The Limits of Single-Source Evaluations

The current officer evaluation system and its various iterations throughout the years have been a consistent target for critics. Most of the negative comments are focused on its lack of objectivity, the limits of the block check system, its inability to differentiate performance versus effort, and the imbued potential for favoritism.[7] In particular, the evaluation system has been accused of forcing raters to overlook constructive criticism and risk taking, instead focusing on promoting the appearance of an officer with zero demerits who lives in perpetual organizational stasis.[8] It is worth noting that these shortcomings do not denote malice by the rater, but rather illustrate a fault in the overall information-gathering mechanisms of the system. Due to its habitual use of the rater as the singular source of data, the system forces its user to make educated guesses about areas where he or she may not have firsthand knowledge, enabling internal biases which negatively impact the objectivity of the system.[9] This results in an incomplete assessment that hinders self-development, prevents the documentation of constructive criticism, and creates an inflated estimate of performance.

In 2009, an Army Research Institute survey found that 88 percent of the interviewed officers believed themselves to be in the top 25 percent of their respective peer groups.[10] While somewhat comical, this disparity sadly illustrates the main concern about the current evaluation system. Officers are not receiving enough constructive criticism on past performances, thus enabling an inflated sense of achievement that prohibits them from accurately assessing themselves. Had these individuals been evaluated under a system promoting pointed, constructive criticism, perhaps their self-assessments would have been more accurate. Research has shown that subordinate feedback can help ratees have an improved understanding of their performance because it is not solely focused on achievements but on the impact of their actions on their subordinates.[11] At the same time, the feedback can be used as a recurrent azimuth check to ensure officers develop constructive personality traits in preparation for their assessment during the BCAP and the CCAP.

Prior Attempts at Multi-Source Feedback

The now defunct Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) program remains as one of the best-known initiatives the Army has implemented to gather subordinate, peer, and superior feedback with the goal of guiding the self-development of officers. When executed correctly, the multi-source feedback was supposed to

Candidates attempt to traverse an obstacle at the Leader Reaction Course 23 January 2020 during the Battalion Commander Assessment Program at Fort Knox, Kentucky. The Battalion Commander Assessment Program is designed to determine fitness for command and strategic leadership potential. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Daniel Schroeder, U.S. Army)

provide an accurate assessment of an individual's performance to help guide their self-development.[12]

Unfortunately, a key aspect of the Army's MSAF program is that it was more of an optional self-development initiative. Among its greatest flaws, the system enabled only the rated officer to choose which individuals could give feedback, resulting in favoritism and the suppression of those who would have negative, albeit potentially constructive, opinions of the ratee.[13] To further exacerbate this issue, the final tally of the survey was only viewable by the rated officer, ensuring that any negative comments on the performance of the officer remained out of reach by his or her rater. With no forcing mechanism to ensure the rated officer incorporated any constructive criticism toward his or her professional development, the MSAF program became a perfunctory check. Unable to demonstrate its value against time and personnel costs, the MSAF program was eventually halted in 2018.[14]

Reincorporating Subordinate Feedback

To avoid some of the pitfalls associated with prior efforts to incorporate multi-source feedback and enhance the officer evaluation system, it is critical to begin by establishing the right parameters and structure for the system. The goal of incorporating subordinate feedback as a developmental tool is not to serve as a platform to vent frustrations about an officer but as a venue to formally communicate a cause for concern that may prevent that person's advancement. The intent is for the leader to become better acquainted with some of his or her potentially noncollaborative personality traits so that he or she may address these challenges well before assessment at the BCAP or the CCAP. The proposed feedback should be used mainly as a developmental tool but may also influence the evaluation the officer receives. To achieve this, the survey should be crafted based on the following suggestions to ensure it is relevant, anonymous, expedient, and accountable to subordinates and superiors alike.

The first challenge is accurately selecting who provides the feedback. To address the selection bias found in the prior MSAF program, only immediate subordinates should have the option to provide an assessment of their rater. This ensures that the individuals

down the survey into five measurable areas, the audience is provided with context and avoids overlooking any potentially concerning behavior. In addition, each question should have a text box requiring the subordinate to write a specific narrative of the behavior in question.

> " Concerned individuals may point out that officers with a small number of subordinates may not have a large enough sample size to receive an accurate assessment of their performance. "

answering the questions have firsthand knowledge of the officer's performance. Concerned individuals may point out that officers with a small number of subordinates may not have a large enough sample size to receive an accurate assessment of their performance; however, the goal of the survey is not to serve as a personality test but as a way to identify prominent traits that may hinder promotion.

The second challenge is selecting who will receive the results of the survey. To decrease any chances of retribution against subordinates, the results of the survey should be anonymous and only accessible by the officer's rater. This would also help address one of the main limitations of the current evaluation system, and it would decrease any inclination toward personal biases by providing raters with an additional source of information. Additionally, by ensuring that only the officer's rater has access to the results, the survey places the responsibility for addressing these officer traits on the rater, directly addressing the lack of enforcement from the prior MSAF program, which often resulted in officers habitually ignoring any negative feedback they received.[15]

The third challenge is to develop a short survey accurate enough to capture the most salient points of the feedback. To achieve this, the survey should have no more than ten questions aimed at briefly assessing the levels of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and emotional stability of the rated officer. The assessment of these personality traits is based on the "Big Five" factor model of personality, which has received significant attention as a tool to evaluate latent personality barriers to leadership improvement.[16] By breaking

The fourth and last challenge focuses on the overall recurrence of the feedback. Invitations to complete the survey should be sent digitally on a quarterly basis. The invitation should be sent via an automated system or by the officer's rater, utilizing an approved template. Subordinates would only have to fill out the survey if they observed any alarming behavior which may hinder promotion. This would help meet two objectives. First, by soliciting subordinate feedback every quarter, subordinates have an opportunity to provide more timely, accurate assessments. Second, the officer's rater could incorporate the received feedback as a developmental tool in quarterly counseling. The completion of the survey by subordinates would remain optional to help reduce personnel requirements and ensure the survey is only being used to report truly detrimental behavior.

To ascertain the structural validity and overall value of the proposed survey, the initiative should be initially tested as a pilot program. One suggestion is to begin at the field grade officer level. This will ensure that respondents have the maturity and experience to effectively voice constructive, valid, actionable, credible, and reliable concerns of behavior that could negatively impact the advancement of their superiors. If the pilot is successful, the initiative could be expanded to include company grade officers and first sergeants, providing those in leadership positions with even more time to work on their self-assessments before they are evaluated for positions of increased responsibility. As an additional benefit, the information from the surveys could even be added to a future assignments marketplace, creating a personality profile that helps place leaders in duty positions more closely aligned with their personal idiosyncrasies.

Participants prepare to take a computer-based psychometric assessment 12 September 2020 during the Army's first Colonels Command Assessment Program at Fort Knox, Kentucky. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Daniel Schroeder, U.S. Army)

Observations, Counterarguments, and Limits of the Initiative

Throughout the various readings, it was regularly mentioned that subordinate feedback should only be utilized for personal development instead of promotion.[17] The proposed program aims to follow this mantra while increasing its accountability by placing the rater as the receiver of all feedback. This will facilitate the creation of an officer development plan but could also impact the promotion potential if the rater believes his or her subordinate failed to reach the goals of the plan. Additionally, the proposed program does not address potential implications that may surge if the rated officer does not believe the information provided by his or her subordinates is accurate enough. Since the survey responses are anonymous, it would be difficult to know who provided any information. In these instances, the rater may have to apply more art than science during the counseling process to determine the validity of the comments.

An additional concern is the rater's ability to effectively help the subordinate curtail the behavior in question. Without specific training on this program, supervisors would be left to develop their own approaches, which may impact the program's overall effectiveness. Lastly, there could be some pushback against this initiative because it may share some superficial similarities to the Inspector General and Command Climate programs. The main difference is that under this proposed initiative, every field grade officer in a unit would receive feedback, not just those in command. Additionally, the information gathered from this initiative should never replace or be in conflict with the other programs. Their goals are objectively different.

Conclusion

Recent changes to how the Army evaluates an officer's potential for promotion have served to highlight some shortcomings of the current evaluation system, intensifying the need to provide future

leaders with the tools to address negative personality traits. Unfortunately, the limits of the current officer evaluation system preclude it from accurately evaluating these subjective traits. Incorporating subordinate feedback into an officer's development plan via quarterly counseling would provide raters with much needed information to accurately assess their officers while providing the rated officer with a better understanding of how he or she is perceived. This would help create better officers who can appreciate the limits of their awareness and develop solutions for future situations they are likely to find challenging.[18] ∎

Notes

Epigraph. J. Phoenix, "Schofield's Definition of Discipline," West Point Association of Graduates, 10 June 2020, accessed 18 November 2020, https://www.westpointaog.org/page.aspx?pid=4329.

Epigraph. John F. Kennedy, "Remarks Prepared for Delivery at the Trade Mart in Dallas, TX, 22 November 1963," John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed 19 November 2020, https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/dallas-tx-trade-mart-undelivered-19631122.

1. Army Regulation (AR) 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2019), accessed 18 November 2020, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN14342_AR623-3_FINAL.pdf.

2. Timothy Reese, *Transforming the Officer Evaluation System: Using a 360-Degree Feedback Model* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2002), 5, accessed 18 November 2020, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA401643.pdf.

3. Walter F. Ulmer, "Military Leadership into the 21st Century: Another 'Bridge Too Far'?," *Parameters* 40, no. 4 (Spring 1998; repr., Winter 2010): 135–55, accessed 2 November 2020, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2562&context=parameters.

4. Chaitra Hardison et al., *360-Degree Assessments: Are They the Right Tool for the U.S. Military?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), ix, accessed 18 November 2020, https://www.rand.org/t/RR998.

5. Fort Knox PAO, "Fort Knox to Host Army's New Colonel Selection Program," Army.mil, 16 June 2020, accessed 18 November 2020, https://www.army.mil/article/236521/fort_knox_to_host_armys_new_colonel_selection_program#:~:text=The%20new%20program%2C%20called%20the,fitness%20for%20command%20and%20potential; Vincent Enriquez, "I Took Part in The Army's New Battalion Commander Assessment Program: Here's What I Learned," Modern War Institute at West Point, updated 7 February 2020, accessed 18 November 2020, https://mwi.usma.edu/took-part-armys-new-battalion-commander-assessment-program-heres-learned/.

6. Everett Spain, "The Army's NFL Combine: The Battalion Commander Assessment Program," Modern War Institute at West Point, 12 January 2020, accessed 18 November 2020, https://mwi.usma.edu/armys-nfl-combine-battalion-commander-assessment-program/.

7. David J. Tier, "Loss of Confidence: The Failure of the Army's Officer Evaluation and Promotion System and How to Fix It," Small Wars Journal, 30 August 2015, accessed 18 November 2020, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/loss-of-confidence-the-failure-of-the-army%E2%80%99s-officer-evaluation-and-promotion-system-and-ho.

8. Reese, *Transforming the Officer Evaluation System*, 4.

9. Lee A. Evans and G. Lee Robinson, "Evaluating Our Evaluations: Recognizing and Countering Performance Evaluation Pitfalls," *Military Review* 100, no. 1 (January-February 2020): 89.

10. U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Army Personnel Survey Office, "2009 Survey on Officer Careers" (Washington DC: Army Research Institute, 16 September 2009).

11. Chinwe Esimai, "Great Leadership Starts with Self-Awareness," *Forbes* (website), 15 February 2018, accessed 18 November 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/ellevate/2018/02/15/self-awareness-being-more-of-what-makes-you-great/#340b778040dd.

12. Hardison et al., *360-Degree Assessments*, 25.

13. Ibid., 10.

14. Mark T. Esper, memorandum for Principal Officials of Headquarters, "Prioritizing Efforts—Readiness and Lethality (Update 8)," 4 June 2018, accessed 18 November 2020, https://partner-mco-archive.s3.amazonaws.com/client_files/1528236317.pdf.

15. Hardison et al., *360-Degree Assessments*, 10.

16. Ginka Toegel et al., "How to Become a Better Leader," *MIT Sloan Management Review* 53, no. 3 (Spring 2012): 51–59.

17. Hardison et al., *360-Degree Assessments*, ix.

18. Tasha Eurich, "What Self-Awareness Really Is (and How to Cultivate It)," *Harvard Business Review* (website), 4 January 2018, accessed 18 November 2020, https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it.