

One Profession, Two Communities, and the Third Rail We Cannot Ignore

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A phrase often surfaces during political debate whereby something is called a “third rail.” It evokes images of subway car rails, two of

which are inert but the third is electrified, and the saying describes an issue to avoid if status quo maintenance of a particular environment is the goal.¹ When it comes to



people in the military—how they are acquired, developed and managed—however, the Army’s position is clear: the status quo will no longer suffice.²

Transformation Motivation

The Army’s motivation to transform its personnel management practices is found in the 2019 “Army People Strategy” (APS): “The Army must remain ready as the world’s premier combat force. That *readiness* (emphasis added) is strengthened by people who comprise the Total Army Force.”³ The APS then states the Army will “shift from simply distributing personnel” to an approach that “more deliberately manage[s] the talents that ... Soldiers and Civilians possess.”⁴ “The Army People Strategy-Civilian Implementation Plan” (APS-CIP) that operationalizes the APS strategic vision across the Army Civilian Corps (ACC) intends to enable that shift by “change[ing] our internal culture of civilian human resources management, ... [and] instilling a new philosophy that facilitates the ability of talented

Civilians to move into, between, and out of ... opportunities.”⁵ The means for accomplishing this is to “transform our dated approaches to civilian human resources management and replace them with approaches focused upon talent management.”⁶

Readiness Lens

If the Army leverages readiness to assess ACC transformation, it must ask itself what it is ready to do. An easy enough question for soldiers: “fight and win the Nation’s wars through prompt and sustained land combat, as part of the Joint Force.”⁷ For Army civilians though, it is not so simple; defining Army civilian readiness at the individual,

The third rail at the West Falls Church Metro stop 7 July 2005 in Washington, D.C. The electrified third rail is at the top of the image, under a white cover. The first and second rails are ordinary railroad rails that complete the electrical circuit through the trains but are grounded for safety. (Photo courtesy of Ancheta Wis via Wikimedia Commons)



organizational, and functional levels is actually a specified APS-CIP task. The Defense Department definition does not cleanly apply in this context.⁸ So, absent an approved definition at the time of this writing, the authors leverage the following: individual readiness is the multidimensional (education, training, certification, experience) data-driven measure of an individual's ability to perform his or her job to full-performance standards; organizational readiness is the multidimensional (manning and resourcing) assessment of its capability to meet its assigned missions; and ACC readiness is both the quantifiable and subjective determination of its capability to efficiently and effectively manage Secretary of the Army Title 10 functions.⁹ When it comes to the ACC, Army doctrine is clear: "Soldiers are the reason for their [Army civilians'] service."¹⁰ We trust the reader sees the readiness "connective tissue" between soldier-Army mission-ACC.

A Third Rail

That connection notwithstanding, *the Army is and will remain significantly challenged to realize its civilian workforce change strategy until it addresses a principal "third rail" that affects the spectrum of workforce management practices.* The third rail has many components so the word "culture" is used as an umbrella term. The authors feel strongly about this challenge because they are familiar with the ACC's predilection for avoiding what Harvard Law School lecturer Douglas Stone and his coauthors call "difficult conversations."¹¹

Environmental Context

Significant literature exists about organizational culture and climate, and definitions of each and their applications vary from macro-views to micro-views. For example, in their 2013 review of organizational culture and climate research, Schneider, Ehrhart and Macey declared, "There is not agreement on what culture is nor how it should be studied. For every definition of what

culture is, there is an important contrary view."¹² The APS definition of culture is useful: "The foundational values, beliefs, and behaviors that drive an organization's social environment, and it plays a vital role in mission accomplishment."¹³ Within culture, there is room to modernize an Industrial Age workforce management construct to achieve APS strategic outcomes and APS-CIP civilian talent management priorities.¹⁴

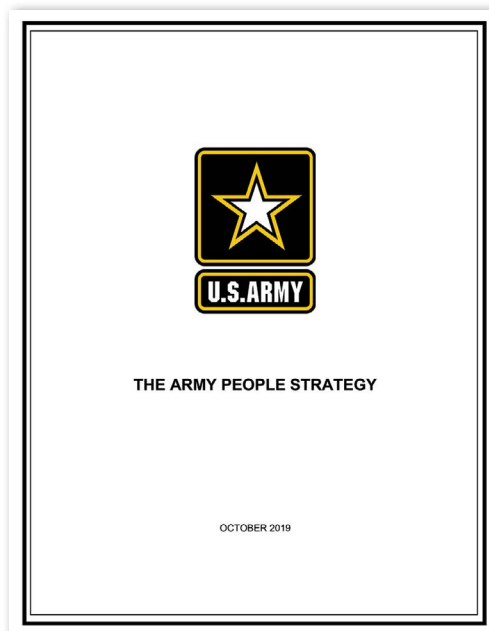
The "Total Army" consists of two distinct communities of practice: the Profession of Arms and the Army Civilian Corps.¹⁵ Civilians have supported soldiers since 1775, initially in critical departments like quartermaster, ordnance, transportation and medical.¹⁶ Today the ACC numbers approximately 330,000 with members serving in over five hundred occupational series across thirty-two unique career fields. Each individual brings diversity of thought and experience based on education, training, and employment in the private sector and other government agencies.¹⁷ Today's ACC is engaged in a host of functions never envisioned in the late eighteenth

century, representing a significant component of the nation's Total Army People Enterprise.¹⁸ ACC members provide leadership, stability, and continuity across the generating force, enabling soldiers to focus on warfighting. Additionally, ACC members deploy overseas as part of the expeditionary civilian workforce to support Army operational efforts in combat theaters.

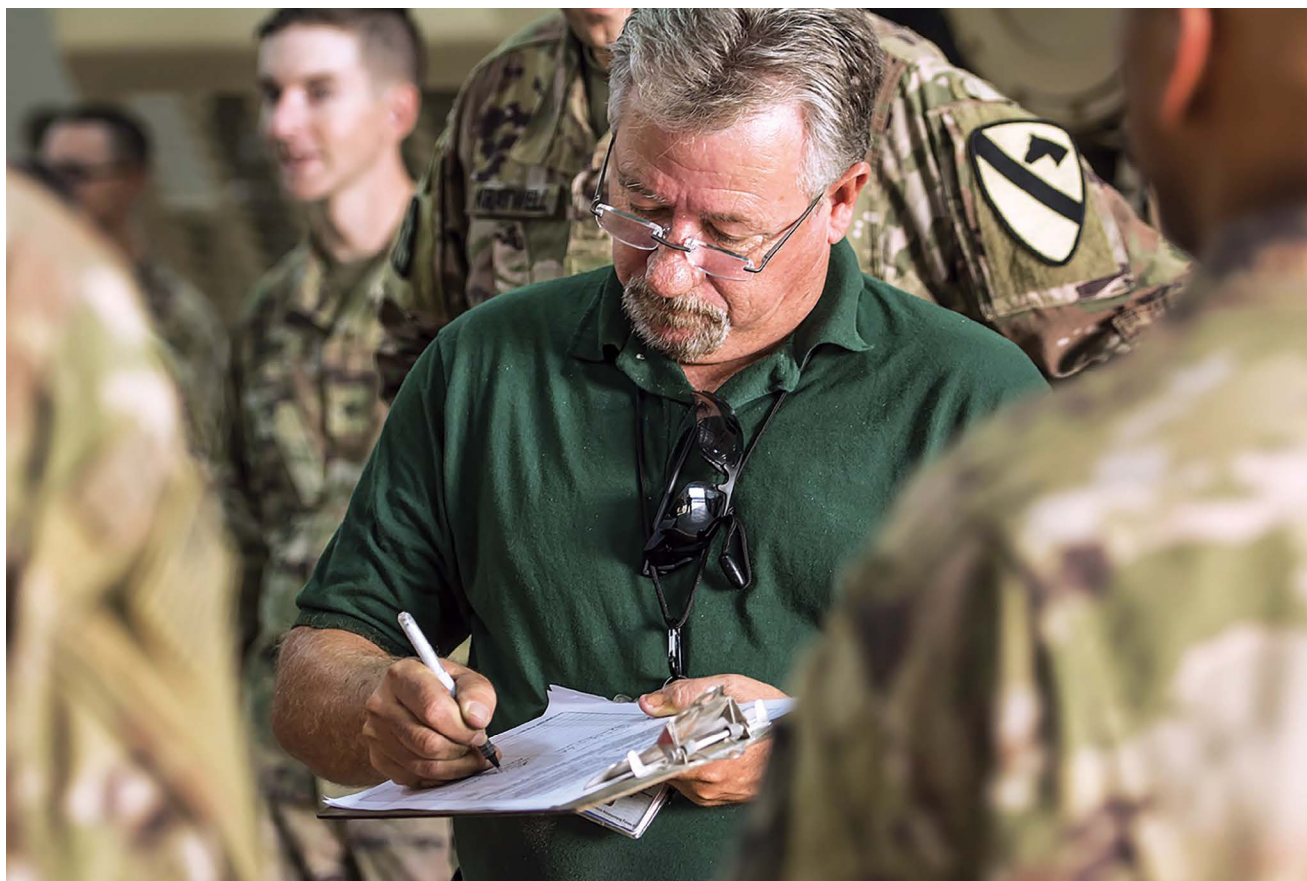
Third Rail Components

Disaggregating this third rail results in components called "friction between the two Army profession communities of practice," "friction internal to the ACC," and "friction generated by legacy ACC talent management practices."

Component #1: The first "rail" component, "friction between the two Army profession communities of practice," reveals itself in how the profession of arms



To view *The Army People Strategy*, visit https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/the_army_people_strategy_2019_10_11_signed_final.pdf.



(i.e., soldiers) perceives ACC effectiveness and efficiency; how the ACC perceives the profession of arms; and the differences between the two communities' management philosophies. While perceptions vary according to an individual's environment, biases, and backgrounds, recent interviews of military and civilian leaders revealed notable underlying trends.¹⁹ From 2010 to 2012, the Army conducted a learning campaign to understand the profession of arms and the professional soldier and then subsequently expanded the effort to examine the role of the ACC in the profession.

Although the Army expanded the study scope, several former and current senior officers interviewed stated the study did not seriously consider the ACC; instead, it tried to shoehorn the uniformed component, the component's families, and the ACC into a "one-size-fits-all" box.²⁰ Written declarations like "Army culture is the system of shared meaning held by its Soldiers, the shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize the larger institution over time" implicitly excluded the ACC, despite approximately 55 percent retired military comprising the membership.²¹

Mike Pogue, U.S. Army Tank-Automotive and Armaments Command logistics assistance representative, 401st Army Field Support Brigade, signs an inspection checklist 14 September 2018 after a joint preventative maintenance checks and services inspection with soldiers assigned to the 154th Composite Truck Company-Heavy, 524th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, on a newly rebuilt Heavy Equipment Transporter System (HETS) truck equipped with C-kit belly-plate armor, or "golden HET," at an Army Prepositioned Stocks-5 warehouse at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait. (Photo by Justin Graff, 401st Army Field Support Brigade Public Affairs)

One senior officer correlated this study to legacy perceptions, for example, that the ACC represented an occupation that is not composed of certified experts who continually learn to maintain individual proficiency, as opposed to the American professional soldier who is an expert and volunteer, bonded with comrades by means of a shared identity and culture of sacrifice and service to the Nation. He directly linked this perceived distinction to the military evaluation system provision requirement that a uniformed member appear in the rating chain of any soldier who is rated or senior rated by an ACC member.²² Another interviewee, a former senior officer turned



ACC member, related how, after briefing a visiting general officer, he left personally and professionally frustrated, saying, “Yesterday I was a former battalion commander; today I’m a second-class citizen.”²³

Another friction point concerns how soldiers enjoy a professional identity based on shared culture, camaraderie, and experience but perceive ACC members as motivated primarily by something other than altruism. As one interviewee characterized it, “Many uniformed members may feel that because they endure more hardship (time in the field, time at work, deployments, [or] physical training standards), these hardships distinguish their role from those of Civilians. Not only are they different, but I argue that many [Soldiers] believe that their ‘hardship’ incurs more ‘honor’ on their work and person.”²⁴ The same interviewee observed how age might be a factor associated with this component: “A lot of the friction emanates from the difference in age demographics of the two communities ... age plays a significant role in how these two communities view each other and interact with predictable sources of friction where a younger uniformed member has supervisory duties over older [Army] Civilians.”²⁵

J. L. McDonald, a heavy equipment repairer with the Department of the Army, applies leverage with a pry bar 14 March 2017 as Pvt. Kristopher P. Cole works to attach a chain to the rear access door of a Stryker armored vehicle at the Tank-Automotive and Armaments Command Fleet Management Expansion, Combat Systems Division at Fort Benning, Georgia. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Brian A. Barbour, Arizona Army National Guard)

Conversely, ACC interviewees trended toward a perception that the uniformed component had neither time nor interest “to learn this [institutional Army] job; I’m just here to punch a ticket and get back to the warrior stuff.”²⁶ There are also perceptions held by both communities that the ACC does not endorse members adopting a personal continuous learning regimen, choosing instead the “we have always done it that way” approach. One senior officer noted his ACC workforce members routinely declined professional or leader development opportunities because they “already had that T-shirt;” consequently, he characterized them as “behind the times” and “non-value added.”²⁷ This viewpoint survives because the ACC is divided, one foot gingerly resting in the military/Army profession, the other firmly planted

in business/government operations. Unsurprisingly, the foregoing perceptions also create friction with respect to how the ACC views itself.

Component #2: The second “rail” component, “friction internal to the ACC,” reveals itself in a number of ways. One manifestation occurs between ACC managers and the multitude of unions that support Army operations; as of this writing, there were 225 collective bargaining agreements in force between the Department of the Army and as many as twenty-one distinct unions.²⁸ The following reflects a trend surfaced during interviews and conversations with (unofficial) uniformed and ACC component representatives and unfortunately reinforces the point: “The (ACC) can’t transform its management practices because the Union(s) won’t change their mindset(s).” When senior managers do not effectively engage unions, misperceptions and the resulting stress cause unnecessary complications.

One supervisory Army civilian interviewee described frustration while trying to meet a new mission because a subordinate Army civilian, whose position description required he “remain current with existing technology,” had neither the required skill nor the willingness to attain it. The supervisor requested labor management relations staff assistance with generating an Army civilian’s performance improvement plan. Unfortunately, the supervisor’s frustration only increased when the staff representative expressed unwillingness to assist because of the “very strong union defense and loss of previous similar grievance actions at that installation.”²⁹ ACC members must understand the underpinnings of ACC-union relationships sufficiently to engage in meaningful partnership.

A second internal friction element exists between Army civilian professionals and Department of Defense contractors. Defense industrial complex contractors exist to service non-inherently governmental or temporary mission capability gaps. Because the complex is a prime military experience recruiter, contractors are frequently viewed as headhunters offering a better compensation package than what is available to an ACC member performing a similar job. One former Army officer-turned-contractor said once he became a contractor, uniformed and Army civilian counterparts viewed him as “a lower-life form” despite previously serving in the same organization while in uniform and as an ACC member.³⁰

Component #3: When considering the third “rail” component, “friction generated by legacy ACC talent management practices,” talent management is defined

as the process of attracting, developing, integrating, and retaining cycle or acquire, develop, employ, retain cycle in the APS-CIP human capital lifecycle.³¹ A brief review of recent ACC talent management efforts, specifically the civilian workforce transformation initiative, will prove helpful.

The 2011 learning campaign referenced above fielded three research questions: What does it mean for the Army to be a Profession of Arms?; What does it mean to be a professional soldier?; and After nine years of war, how are we as individual professionals and as a profession meeting these aspirations?³² Due to deployed force stressors, the study understandably focused on the uniformed component to identify ethical-behavior-lapse causality, and insert education and training mitigation measures into Army professional military education and skills certification systems. It did not, however, examine the impacts generated of the prolonged conflict on the ACC’s role in the design, generation, support, and application of

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land combat power. To address that research shortfall, in 2010, the Army chartered the Civilian Workforce Transformation Task Force.

The Civilian Workforce Transformation Task Force was designed to address deficiencies in hiring actions, management of civilians, training and development, and sustainment of the workforce.³³ The Army inferred that ACC development would produce leaders with knowledge, skills, and abilities equivalent to the uniformed component, and in a similar manner. Additionally, a perception developed that an Army civilian's education, training, and development could be tracked and managed, and she or he could earn promotion up to and including entry into the senior executive service.

Regrettably, the perceived reality is that neither the Army Enterprise Talent Management nor Senior Enterprise Talent Management programs function as talent feeder systems by which ACC members can prepare for, and from which be routinely selected to higher-level leadership positions. Instead, it appears that when recruiting for senior Army civilian vacancies, the Army prefers to hire transitioning soldiers, or hire from outside the ACC or Army entirely, versus leveraging professional development programs envisioned to grow a "bench" of committed and skilled Army civilians. Anecdotal evidence trending in interviews reveals a transitioning Colonel Senior Service College (SSC) graduate ranks higher than an ACC member who is also an SSC graduate.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, one finds a perception that ACC members don't possess the skills to effectively lead in the ACC, or that only external applicants can solve challenges.

Additionally, more than a few ACC members are quick to observe that a transitioning senior officer with SSC credit is routinely perceived to be a better applicant than an Army civilian with years of supervisory experience, high-profile professional development program completion, and applicable skills certifications. Similar observations can be made about Army senior executive service workforce management, where hiring actions appear to run counter to aspirational talent management policies, lending credibility to the perception the ACC does not possess the knowledge, skills, abilities, or behaviors to develop enterprise-level leaders.³⁵

Talent Management

According to some literature, talent management goes beyond just considering every organization team member

to looking at how an employee who possesses multiple (specialty) skills, self-motivation, excellent core working knowledge, and general skills (communication, creative outlook, and leadership) may be considered as a talented resource.³⁶ That perspective supports the idea each team member should be afforded the opportunity to develop a career map with access to training, education, and development as a means to participate in open and fair employment competition. Title 5 of the U.S. Code, also known as the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (hereinafter Title 5 USC), operationalizes that philosophy.³⁷

Title 5 USC established the Merit System Principles, incorporating acquisition of talent, training and education, and retention and separation of federal civilians.³⁸ Title 5 USC further authorizes federal agencies to experiment "with new and different personnel management concepts in controlled situations to achieve more efficient" government human resources management. The APS-CIP acknowledges that Title 5 USC governs the human resources framework but also states the Army must change the internal culture of human resources management to prioritize results by instilling a philosophy that facilitates talented civilians the opportunities for job satisfaction and meaningful employment consistent with Army mission.³⁹ Unfortunately, laborious ACC career development planning processes de-incentivize efforts to capitalize on the most talented civilian resources and quash talent management agility.

Readiness would benefit from a holistic system designed to provide the right Army civilian in the right job at the right time while enabling those civilians to "move between career programs, commands, and components of Army service to suit the ..." preference of the individual and needs of the Army.⁴⁰ But to fully appreciate the magnitude of the task, one must understand the *competition* for civilian talent, the *conflict* generated by existing policies, and the *change* required to better enable readiness.

No Easy Task

Whenever the uniformed component experiences a strength reduction, ACC end-strength is put at risk, and inevitably global competition for talent increases the value of hard-earned ACC skills. This competition reveals perceived and actual conflict with existing policies like Merit System Principles as the United States endeavors to build a workforce representing all society segments, managed with practices characterized by selection and



advancement determined solely on the basis of ability, knowledge, and skills, after fair and open competition. While the intent to do so is embedded in Army policies and goals, perceptions exist that generate conflict. For example, some external candidates may perceive deliberate exclusion from fair competition if relocation costs are not included in the compensation package, making it appear that internal candidates who do not require relocation support represent a “more attractive” hiring option.

That perception introduces another dynamic to this notion of legacy talent management practice friction: prohibited personnel practices. Prohibited personnel practices occur when policies discriminate “for” or “against” an Army civilian or applicant in an effort to achieve workforce goals. But in a professional development environment where funding decisions based on weighting civilian programs in terms of contributions to mission accomplishment ultimately determine resourcing levels, it is not difficult to envision a culture where a perception of “haves and have nots” takes root and thrives. None of the foregoing friction elements are good for “Army business,” especially when that business is readiness.

Northern Regional Medical Command civilian staff members recite the Army Civilian Corps Creed 26 April 2012 during the region’s civilian award ceremony at Wood Theater, Fort Belvoir, Virginia. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

A Way Forward: Challenges to Opportunities

Army leaders are conditioned to look for opportunity in every challenge, so reframing the third rail perspective results in new components: “improving communities-of-practice perceptions,” “exploring a ‘one ACC-one team’ mindset,” and “balancing transactional practices with transformational aspirations.”

New Component #1: *Improving communities-of-practice perceptions.* As long as both communities cling to traditional perceptions of each other’s value, there will be no progress. But if we choose to move the needle at individual and local levels, we can reasonably expect to realize some measure of relationship improvement. We challenge both communities to own the “professional” moniker, act accordingly, and partner to push boundaries encumbering



Carol Burton (left), director of the Civilian Human Resources Agency, is presented a Senior Executive Service (SES) flag by Lt. Gen. Thomas Seaman, deputy Army chief of staff, G1, 30 January 2019 during an SES pinning and induction ceremony at the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

mission accomplishment and organizational effectiveness. The readiness return on investment in this area is well worth the effort.

New Component #2: *Exploring a “One ACC-One Team” mindset.* Soldiers cannot rely on the ACC to perform efficiently and effectively if it perpetuates organizational in-fighting. The ACC can either settle for minimal readiness contributions, or it can set aside the informal but widely acknowledged caste-system mentality and recognize that all elements working to support the Army deserve to be treated as value-added team members. The authors believe the readiness return on investment will pay off in improved organizational efficiencies, effectiveness and climate.

New Component #3: *Balancing transactional practices with transformational aspirations.* So much of ACC culture is tied to existing business rules; as noted above, however, Title 5 USC allows for talent management practice experimentation in controlled situations. The multi-domain operations environment provides opportunities to modernize the Army’s human resource management culture but to enjoy greater flexibility across the Acquire, Develop, Employ, and Retain lines of effort, the Army must take action.

The Army would benefit by publishing transparency statistics that reveal external and internal ACC selection rate percentages. This would help mitigate adverse perceptions, increase application rates from across the

Army, and decrease grievance complaints submitted to the Merit Systems Protection Board. A system similar to the Senior Enterprise Talent Management Graduate Placement Program might improve internal-to-agency recruiting actions (though in one author's opinion the Graduate Placement Program system needs serious restructuring to ensure compliance with Army civilian professional and management utilization statements). A future ACC personnel management might leverage a construct similar to the Army Talent Alignment Process—the decentralized, regulated, market-style hiring system that currently aligns Army officers with jobs based on preferences and is expanding into the senior enlisted ranks. It is reportedly working well; in the cycle ending December 2019, 50 percent of the more than fourteen thousand officers participating in the process received their first-choice assignment, and the commands assist by competing for the talent.⁴¹

For a truly effective transformation, the ACC requires a searchable enterprise database—a common operating picture—that maintains record of and displays individual Army civilian professional education, training, and development statuses. Fielding a comprehensive database like this is critical to enabling the ACC to see itself and contribute to readiness.

Transactional management practices have their place in an Army that must remain auditable. The routine query, “Why have we always done X this way—and can we agree on a more effective approach, even if it requires heavy lifting to change the Title 5 USC framework or labor agreements” is encouraged. There is a healthier friction balance to be struck between transactional workforce management practices and transformational aspirations; perhaps asking if the Industrial Age practices that served well in the past will prove as effective in the Information Age is useful. If the answer is no, recommendations are required so the ACC can meet its readiness obligations.

Conclusion

We acknowledge the truth of Harvard Business School Professor John Kotter's observation that “change sticks only when it becomes ‘the way we do things around here,’ when it seeps into the very bloodstream of the work unit or corporate body.”⁴² Kotter cautions this effort requires *sufficient time* “to ensure that the next generation of management really does personify the new approach.”⁴³ David Novak, past chairman and CEO of YUM! Brands

(parent company of Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell), reminds us that “[a] great culture doesn't just happen. It must be built deliberately. It's the job of every single person in the organization to create a positive culture and make it a big idea; it's the leader's job to make sure everyone understands that and believes in it.”⁴⁴

This will be legitimately hard work—but if everyone collectively adopts the “Stockdale Paradox” (a term coined by former Stanford Business School professor Jim Collins in honor of Vietnam prisoner of war and Medal of Honor recipient Vice Adm. James Stockdale), whereby change agents “maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, AND at the same time have the discipline to confront the brutal facts of your current reality,” we can effect change.⁴⁵ We don't have to convince everyone, only enough Army professionals to reach a cultural tipping point, described by journalist Malcolm Gladwell as “the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point” that contains within it the possibility of sudden change.⁴⁶

The cultural third rail components discussed here represent critical issues requiring immediate and authentic engagement. At some point deliberate action(s) will be in order, but first the Army must see itself accurately, then describe what it wants to look like moving forward. This is best done from the bottom-up via live discussion that augments and clarifies higher-echelon policy and mandates. Determine what prevents anyone from establishing his or her desired culture end state; choose to be a transformation catalyst—start an authentic engagement and take advantage of a tremendous opportunity to model character, presence, and intellect. There are many more aspects of this environment waiting to be analyzed. Consider the following two examples: How should we define and operationalize—without penalty—“advancement” for ACC professionals content to serve in the same field/grade for an entire career? Should the Office of Personnel Management revise the existing portfolio of series classifications to better serve Defense Department readiness requirements?

In summary, we advocate for a perspective change that will enable the ACC to embrace a culture of “commitment” as it partners with the profession of arms in pursuit of Army readiness. As for the emphasis on personal engagements, Stone and colleagues phrased it best when they said “the ability to handle difficult conversations well is a prerequisite to organizational change and adaptation.”⁴⁷ ■

Notes

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9. 10 U.S.C. § 3013 (2011).
10. ADP 1, *The Army*, vi.
11. Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Neen, *Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Penguin, 1999), xii, xvii-xviii. "The ability to manage difficult conversations effectively is foundational ... to achieving almost any significant change." This book "explores what it is that makes conversations difficult, why we avoid them, and why we often handle them badly." Skills espoused by the authors are "needed to take a serious disagreement ... and transform it from a drag on competitiveness into an engine for change."
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14. For strategic outcomes, see "The Army People Strategy," 5-6; for civilian talent management priorities, see "The Army People Strategy-Civilian Implementation Plan," 7-9.
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18. "The Army People Strategy," 13.
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22. Anonymous Interviewee #18 (retired lieutenant colonel/active Army Civilian Corps [ACC] member), in discussion with Knolton, November 2020.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
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47. Stone, Patton, and Neen, *Difficult Conversations*, xi.