

# The Army Civilian Corps' Elusive Culture of Commitment

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**T**he *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) characterizes the twenty-first-century global security environment as increasingly volatile, complex, uncertain, and competitive, shaped by a decline in the long-standing rules-based international order, a resurgence of great power competition, and predatory economics. It further calls for the development of “a more lethal, resilient, and rapidly innovating Joint Force, combined with a robust constellation of allies and partners ... to provide the capabilities and agility required to prevail.”<sup>1</sup> To that end, the United States is increasingly focused on developing military capabilities that are designed to enable success in a complex and ambiguous operational environment.

Nested within the NDS objectives, the “Army People Strategy” (APS) describes the Army’s overarching vision to transform its talent management practices to attain the strategic outcome of a ready, professional, diverse, and integrated force.<sup>2</sup> The “Army People Strategy–Civilian Implementation Plan” (APS–CIP) operationalizes the overarching APS with respect to strategic civilian workforce transformation outcomes along four lines of effort (acquire, develop, employ, and retain civilian talent), each with specific objectives supporting total Army readiness.<sup>3</sup>

The APS identifies Army culture as a key cross-cutting enabler to achieving its strategic outcomes. A brief internet search of *organizational culture* yields myriad definitions, so for the purpose of this article and consistency with their other articles, the authors use the APS

definition: “Culture consists of the foundational values, beliefs, and behaviors that drive an organization’s social environment, and it plays a vital role in mission accomplishment.”<sup>4</sup> In a previous article, the authors posited the Army is challenged in its ability to realize enterprise-wide changes to enable a culture of commitment.<sup>5</sup> In this article, they now assert that the Army can mitigate that challenge by investing in programs that produce and employ what leadership expert John C. Maxwell characterizes as Level 5 “Pinnacle” civilian leaders who are empowered to promote a culture of commitment throughout the Army Civilian Corps (ACC) as a means to accomplish more efficiently and effectively the Army’s mission (see the figure).<sup>6</sup>

## What Is the Army Civilian Corps?

The Total Army consists of two distinct communities of practice: the profession of arms and the ACC.<sup>7</sup> Civilians have supported soldiers since 1775, initially in critical departments like quartermaster, ordnance, transportation, and medical.<sup>8</sup> Today the ACC numbers nearly 300,000, with members serving in over five hundred occupational series filling critical Department of Defense roles. DA civilians bring diversity of thought and experience based on education, training, and employment in the private sector and other government agencies, and the ACC is one of the largest, busiest, and most successful elements within the Department of Defense. DA civilians are an integral part of the Total Army team, working on a scale and with an impact



Civilian Education System Advanced Course students complete a floor puzzle that utilizes analytical thinking, problem-solving and teamwork at Rock Island Arsenal, Illinois, 12 February 2019. Students had to work together to complete the task in one hour. (Photo by Rhys Fullerlove, U.S. Army Sustainment Command Public Affairs)

not found anywhere else.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 operations in combat theaters.

## What Is an Organizational Culture of Commitment?

The concept of organizational culture stems from the term culture as defined by social anthropology.<sup>11</sup> Although the study of organizational culture has been

applied to the qualities of specific groups in social living arrangements like tribes or villages, the authors of most organizational culture studies assume some reference to Edgar Schein and the levels of organizational culture.<sup>12</sup> A culture can be characterized as invisible or visible, strong or weak, or productive or destructive—or a combination of one or more characteristics—and it is often confused with a corporate strategy. Kathryn Baker outlines in her work that many early proponents who studied organizational culture assumed that a strong culture was beneficial because it fostered motivation, commitment, identity, and solidarity that facilitated internal integration and coordination.<sup>13</sup> Moving forward, the authors correlate the APS vision of the desired ACC organizational

culture to Baker's characterization of the ideal strong corporate culture.

Consistent with the common views of organizational culture presented by Schein, John P. Kotter and James L. Heskett, Elizabeth A. Martinez et al., and Eric Flamholtz, the authors assert that a strong corporate culture manifests a relationship to financial performance in not-for-profit government organizations that are focused on mission accomplishment and public resource stewardship.<sup>14</sup> On the positive side of the argument, Flamholtz asserted, "Culture affects goal attainment. More specifically, companies with 'strong' cultures are more likely to achieve their goals than those with relatively 'weak' cultures."<sup>15</sup> Conversely, Kotter and Heskett indicated, "Corporate culture can have a significant impact on a firm's long-term economic performance ... performance degrading cultures have a negative financial impact."<sup>16</sup> One can see through various studies the linkages between organizational culture and economic outcomes; however, researchers also connect organizational culture, change management, and leadership with an organization's successes or failures—including its long-term viability. John Maxwell describes the characteristics of successful leaders in organizations and these characteristics of Maxwell's *5 Levels of Leadership* are consistent with the Army's leadership definition: "The activity of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization."<sup>17</sup> With goal attainment, a key characteristic of strong cultures, it is evident that the Army not only desires but also requires leaders of exceptional quality to effect positive change, achieve organizational missions, ensure lasting and auditable economic viability with respect to resource stewardship, and, of critical importance, model and inculcate organizational commitment as a component of overall organizational culture.

Organizational *commitment* is generally defined as the strength of the bonds developed by an individual employee with their employer or corporation. Sugato Lahiry defines organizational commitment as the psychological strength of an individual's attachment to the organization.<sup>18</sup> In a sense, organizational commitment is a representation of the employee's relationship with an organization. Therefore, the employee-employer bond can be strengthened or weakened according to the perceived strength of the employee's attachment

to the organization. If the employee perceives that the organization's conduct or performance diverges from their desires, or the employee perceives a lack of trust on the part of organizational management, the employee's commitment level will naturally suffer. Conversely, if the organization's bonds with the employee are strong, the employee feels a sense of commitment to increase productivity or effectiveness.

Using organizational development as a platform, organizational culture would be a key element in fostering changes in an organization. The employee's relationship strength is exhibited in (a) their willingness to stay with or contribute to the organization even under adverse conditions, (b) the improvement of their work productivity even in terms of credit to the organization instead of the individual, and (c) reduced

turnover. A strong organizational culture is assumed to generate heightened employee motivation to increase

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productivity, manifest extra effort to achieve results, and engender a tendency for employees to give of themselves for the greater good of the company. For example, a program manager has within their position description a requirement to advocate for the program. However, if the program becomes obsolete, should they continue to advocate for its continued existence—basically manifesting an attitude of “compliance with the status quo”—or should they model authentic commitment to the organization and advocate for the program’s elimination and resource redistribution, regardless of the personal or professional costs? In a culture of compliance, the program manager is more likely to continue advocating for the program as a means of satisfying their position description requirements and avoiding lower performance ratings.

A corporate culture of compliance has changed from a role of what a corporation should do as a good steward and member of the community to one of legal and financial risk aversion. In the Army, this culture manifests in a strict adherence to viewing regulations as “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not.” Organizational incentives, or culture, are more about maintaining checklists of regulatory, legal, or ethical obligations or metrics of success than rewards for innovation. This situation is routinely seen in the end of fiscal year spend-losing-something-in-the-next-allocation money management approach. Notwithstanding the Army’s desire for innovation and good stewardship and despite the Army’s internal audit processes, discussions and interviews with midlevel DA civilian managers reveal a greater emphasis on compliance than on innovation.

On the surface, there might appear to be a conflict between an organizational culture of commitment and one of compliance, but that is not the case. Rather, any confusion is a result of the perception of why we do the things we do. A culture of compliance drives leaders to deliver mission success as the standard for maintaining the individual status quo or for reward within the organization. However, employees with a culture of commitment seek to develop—through actions, incentives, and norms—leaders who are driven to do more for the intrinsic reward of leaving the organization better than they found it and delivering mission results regardless of individual accolades. One can view cultures of commitment and their leaders as ambiguous environmental innovators versus incentive effects and risk aversion

maintainers who operate in a calculated risk management matrix environment.

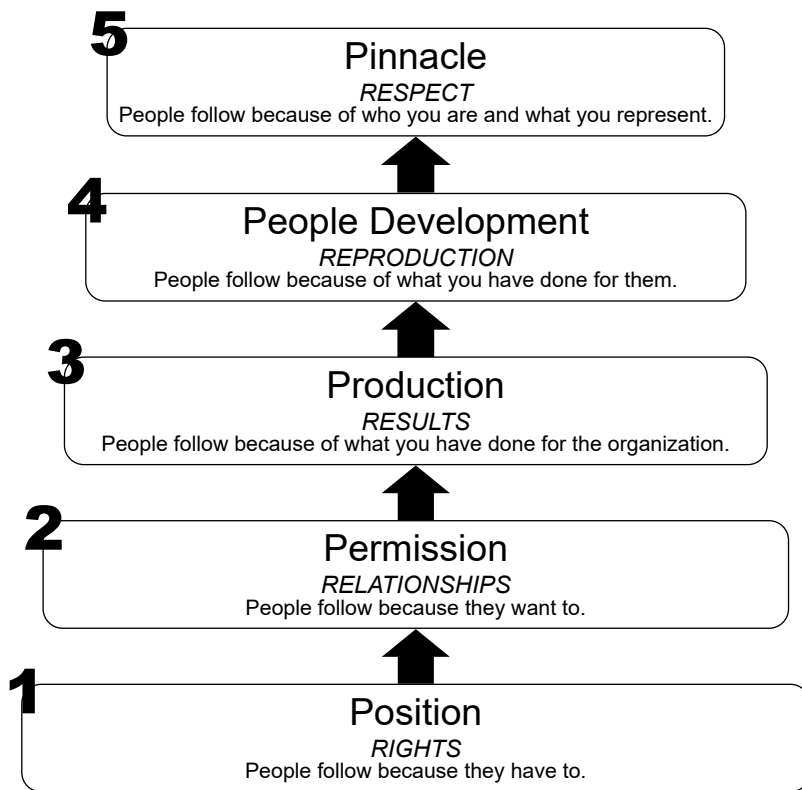
## Why Should the Army Invest in Level 5 DA Civilian Leaders?

To appreciate fully why the authors advocate for Level 5 DA civilian leaders, it is appropriate to ask, “Who are these leaders?” and “How can they be recognized?” Leader development training and education is a global, multibillion-dollar enterprise. With such an investment, one can conclude that leadership can be taught, learned, enhanced, honed, and generally developed in employees whether the person is an intrinsic leader, a natural leader, or one with potential. Leadership is especially important to our Army and those who lead the Army’s greatest asset, its people. Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, reads,

The ideal Army leader serves as a role model through strong intellect, physical presence, professional competence, and moral character. An Army leader is able and willing to act decisively, within superior leaders’ intent and purpose, and in the organization’s best interests. Army leaders recognize that organizations, built on mutual trust and confidence, accomplish missions.<sup>19</sup>

Maxwell described leadership as a journey of developing and establishing principles through this progression model (as shown in the figure).<sup>20</sup>

Maxwell described the first, or lowest level, of leadership as one of position, which is the place in most organizations where leadership normally begins. In a traditional organizational structure, a company consists of hierarchical leadership positions from frontline supervisor to chief executive officer. Level 1 leaders are granted authority according to their position and expectation to direct subordinates’ work. Subordinates follow the Level 1 leader out of compliance and recognition that the company has empowered the leader who develops or refines the concepts of adhering to regulations, policies, and organizational charts and norms. Leaders who rely solely on positional authority tend to generate the minimum subordinate productivity from those who operate from a perspective of compliance (with minimum expectations) rather than one of commitment (to something larger than self). At



(Figure adapted by authors; original by John C. Maxwell, *The Five Levels of Leadership: Proven Steps to Maximize Your Potential*)

**Figure. Maxwell's 5 Levels of Leadership**

the end of the day, there is nothing inherently wrong with operating out of compliance if standards are met and missions are accomplished; however, in that case, one just has to manage expectations about the organizational environment.

If Level 1 leadership is about position and compliance-based operations, Level 2 leadership is more about the relationship between the leader and the led. As the Level 1 leader grows and develops, they begin to understand that engaging with and understanding subordinates, treating them with dignity and respect, and developing authentic but professional relationships increases their influence. This increased influence translates into improved productivity and results in subordinates becoming more team oriented. At Level 2, subordinates are more engaged, are invested in the relationship, and voluntarily follow the leader. Level 2 leaders develop positive influence practices as they understand the return on their energy investment in workforce relationships. At this level, the leader begins developing an authentic sense of commitment to team

members by relying more on people skills versus positional authority.

Even as Level 2 leaders develop people skills focused on investing in and encouraging team members, the outcome for the organization remains with achieving results. Level 3 leaders gain and leverage technical credibility and leadership influence practices to enable teams to generate better than minimum results for the organization. In 2013, GovExec reported that the federal government loses \$65 billion annually through disengaged federal employee lost productivity.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a 2021 Gallup poll reported only 34 percent of employees were engaged and 16 percent were actively disengaged.<sup>22</sup> Although disengaged employees represent a drain on productivity, customer service, and profitability, *actively* disengaged employees are disgruntled, disloyal, affect workforce stability, and, if not appropriately addressed, can potentially harm a company's reputation. Level 3 leaders are focused on effectively getting things

done; they build influence through personal credibility, modeling a *leader-out-front* approach to encourage employees to achieve personal and team goals. They efficiently organize people, time, material, and other resources and, by doing so, help improve morale and reduce workforce turnover. Finally, Level 3 leaders become organizational change agents who solve problems by motivating the workforce to pursue effectively their clearly defined missions and objectives.

Level 4 leaders take the company to the next level through effective workforce investments. They develop their followers into leaders who drive decision-making and mission accomplishment down to lower levels, thereby enabling more efficient processes and procedures in which the organization's work is actually accomplished. Maxwell characterized Level 4 leaders as reproductive by nature. They reproduce themselves by enabling subordinates to develop other leaders who engage the workforce, build authentic work relationships, increase team and organizational commitment, and, ultimately, generate increased production and profitability.

Where Level 3 leaders are *organizational* change agents, Level 4 leaders are personnel change agents, and they are not easy to come by. Organization-wide Level 4

all, appreciate that when you develop a leader, you gain not only that individual's trust and confidence but also that of their followers.

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leader development is a direct outcome of the deliberate investment in its people, leaders, and organizational support structure. They require a management support structure that is characterized by clear intent, autonomy, and authority to execute (some might say a mission command-based environment), and the personnel, budget, and resources required to execute the mission. Level 4 leaders invest time, energy, and money into growing others as leaders. By modeling key attributes and competencies, they live model organizational commitment, and, by extension, they challenge others to do the same.

An organization that is staffed with Level 4 leaders is agile, effective, and innovative. Given the challenges with developing Level 4 leaders, it's not surprising that Maxwell stated that Level 5 leadership is the most difficult to attain. Whereas many can be trained, educated, and developed into Level 4 leaders, Level 5 leadership requires a higher level of natural talent, dedicated effort, skill, and intentionality. Leading at Level 5 requires leading through the other four levels. Leaders understand the need to grow followers who share their commitment for success, can lead from the front, and are willing to empower subordinate leaders to execute missions without micromanagement. Level 5 leadership is characterized by mission command principles with which leaders at all levels are empowered to act with disciplined initiative within the commander's intent. Level 5 leaders work for organizational success for their own personal or professional credit; for an authentic Level 5 leader, the success is about the organization and its people, not themselves. Level 5 leaders strive to leave a positive legacy and a successor who can create and sustain an agile organization; who not only understands but also believes in the organization's vision; who can energize Level 3 producers; and above

### **Why Are Level 5 DA Civilian Leaders and ACC Organizations That Embody a Culture of Commitment So Difficult to Find?**

In our opinion, it all comes down to the tension between leader production versus leader utilization. Although the Army has demonstrated proficiency in producing ACC leaders, their utilization falls short, ultimately resulting in organizational inefficiencies and ineffectiveness. We assert that there are significant discrepancies in the selection, development, and assignment processes for Level 5 ACC leaders compared to their military counterparts, and we advocate for a more deliberate and effective utilization of committed ACC leaders.

We acknowledge that the Army has a long history of training leaders and understands how to produce them; however, we suggest that it doesn't routinely execute those processes effectively with respect to ACC leader selection, development, and assignment. If you are inclined to stipulate that the DA civilian's leader production approach is good enough, then the relative scarcity of exceptional ACC-led organizations that are both efficient and effective would seem to indicate that the ways that we use those leaders is failing. We characterize that shortcoming as an enterprise-level disconnect between an ACC leader's *production* and effective *utilization* of that individual's commitment.

In a recent survey of DA civilian leaders that we conducted, the majority of respondents believed that the Army has embraced a substantial resource commitment to civilian leader development, surpassing benchmarks set by private industry. Moreover, the active pursuit and funding of opportunities for DA civilians offers choices for personal and professional growth,

aligning with the principles of Level 5 leadership. Additionally, a majority of the respondents acknowledged that the Army Civilian Leader Development

several Army War College classmates were selected by a centrally managed board to lead larger organizations or to assume a key developmental assignment, while he

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Program (CLDP) incorporates a wealth of knowledge in the courses and a proactive commitment to lifelong learning and self-development.

However, several senior civilian leader respondents commented that, despite those programmatic strengths, a more deliberate consideration appears to unravel challenges that underscore the need for targeted investments.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the hit-or-miss nature of the CLDP, contingent on individual participation, raises concerns about the consistency of leadership development outcomes.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, a majority of the respondents offered criticisms about the effectiveness of specific courses such as the Supervisory Leader Development Course, which point toward the need to invest continuously in curriculum development, delivery, and graduate assessment efforts. Many respondents opined that, although the Army has made significant progress in developing civilian leaders, a discrepancy remains between the emphasis (degree and type) it places on how and why it develops leaders in both Army communities of practice (i.e., the profession of arms [soldiers] and the ACC). To illustrate this observation, one respondent commented that “the Army considers resident training as an imperative for the uniform [*sic*] leaders yet online training is sufficient for civilian leaders.”<sup>25</sup>

Recent developments in the CLDP include a number of developmental or experiential opportunities designed for further development of an individual’s executive core qualifications; however, the opportunities are not aligned to specific key and developmental assignments that produce follow-on strategic utilization as is implemented by the uniformed personnel management system. One survey respondent shared that

was relegated to seeking his own postgraduate assignment on USAJOBS or via a central selection board that made assignment recommendations not based upon Army key position requirements but rather on a list of open positions posted to USAJOBS by commands.<sup>26</sup> Survey responses made clear that the two most immediate CLDP participation detractors are a lack of clarity on post-training assignment availability/selection and the perceived lack of senior leader value placed on CLDP graduates when projecting/recruiting Level 5 billet requirements. We believe that if the Army implemented targeted CLDP improvements—particularly at the Level 5 ACC leader echelon—combined with steadfast commitment to leadership development and utilization, it could better field a cadre of ACC leaders characterized by humility, will, and an unwavering dedication to advancing both individual and collective success within its civilian ranks.

We acknowledge and respect the legally binding nature of the federal government’s merit system principles and prohibited personnel practices. Having said that, after several years of formal data collection efforts like the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and informal collection efforts like the authors’ most recent survey, it is becoming more apparent that it is time for the enterprise to take a hard look at addressing the ACC talent management elephant in the room. To be clear, we are suggesting it is time to commit to designing and implementing senior DA civilian, talent management practices similar to those that have proven effective for the profession of arms and corporate America. Two ACC workforce management process components would transform senior ACC talent management:

first, replace local selection for Level 5 assignments with centralized selection at an appropriate command echelon; and second, develop a process whereby Levels 3 and 4 DA civilian leaders can contractually commit to being considered for and ultimately integrated into a comprehensive talent development pipeline comprised of technical training, leadership education, leader developmental assignments, and executive core qualifications development without the process being perceived as violating any merit system principles or prohibited personnel practices until such time as the associated principles and practices are revised or eliminated. We think both ideas warrant inclusion in the next APS–CIP version or a stand-alone DASA-sanctioned research operational planning team.

The authors assert that they underscore in this article the critical importance of fostering a culture of commitment within the ACC as an essential component of our national defense strategy, and that perhaps the most effective way to achieve that end state is to improve the way that the Army develops and employs Level 5 DA civilian leaders. The ACC and its diverse talent pool and expansive skill sets are an indispensable component of the Total Army, contributing significantly to mission readiness and operational success. As the Army moves further into the twenty-first century, ACC members will be increasingly called upon to demonstrate an authentic commitment—a profound dedication if you will—to an organization’s values,

beliefs, and shared goals. A culture of commitment within the ACC fosters innovation, promotes leadership at all levels, and drives excellence in performance.

As we have explored in this article, the journey to cultivate an organizational culture of commitment begins with effective leadership. Level 5 leaders who prioritize organizational success over personal recognition are instrumental in creating an environment in which commitment thrives. These leaders not only develop themselves but also nurture the growth of future leaders, thereby ensuring a legacy of excellence. The implications of such a culture are far-reaching. Studies have consistently demonstrated the correlation between a strong organizational culture, mission accomplishment, and financial performance. Furthermore, a culture of commitment empowers individuals to go above and beyond, resulting in increased productivity, reduced turnover, and an unwavering commitment to the organization’s long-term success. We strongly believe that the imperative for the Army to invest in ACC development in general, and Level 5 DA civilian leaders, in particular, cannot be overstated. The dedication and excellence of the ACC is pivotal to Total Army readiness. By investing more effectively in and utilizing Level 5 DA civilian leaders, combined with deliberate efforts to nurture an enterprise culture that values commitment above compliance, we can improve the ACC’s potential to achieve the APS–CIP’s strategic outcome of a “ready, professional, diverse, and integrated force.”<sup>27</sup> ■

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