

It's Time for a New Round of OER Reform

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IN 1997 THE ARMY inaugurated a new officer evaluation system and a redesigned Officer Evaluation Report (OER), Department of the Army Form 67-9. The popular previous version had been compromised by an insidious inflation during the 19 years of its existence, as more and more officers received above-average ratings.¹ Instead of reserving such ratings for the exceptional few, senior raters awarded top-block evaluations to nearly all officers as a matter of course. The records of average versus superior performers became increasingly hard to distinguish from each other, complicating the task of identifying officers best qualified for advancement.

The Army implemented the new OER to fix this. The main feature of the new document was a major curtailment of senior-rater discretion. Instead of the complete freedom that the previous system granted to senior raters, the new system limited the number of top-block ratings to 49 percent or fewer of the total.² Excess top block ratings (more than 49 percent) appear in the rated officer's records as "center of mass" (COM). The intent was to create a clear distinction among officers that was not present under the previous, inflated report.

Nearly a decade later, however, inflation—the bane of the old OER—has given way to a new pitfall, distortion. The distortion emanates from two sources. The first is the failure of many senior raters to base their evaluations on a well-developed senior-rater philosophy. This produces a reactive approach to OERs in which the main factor is neither performance nor potential, but the senior-rater's profile at the time he or she renders the report. Above Center of Mass (ACOM) reports are awarded almost on a first-come, first-served basis, depending on how close to the 49 percent cap the senior rater is.

The second distorting factor is a pervasive sense of entitlement. Senior raters often implicitly assume that every officer is entitled to his or her "fair share" of top block reports and to an equal shot at promotion. Senior raters frequently pass over those most qualified for ACOM reports in order to take care of less qualified officers facing impending selection boards.

Clearly, senior raters consider performance and potential when rendering ratings, but many are reluctant to make the tough call that decides which officers stand out from the rest. This is sometimes less pronounced in mature profiles large enough to accommodate ACOM reports for both those who deserve them and for those who merely need them. In the final analysis, however, senior raters seem strongly inclined to choose against the best qualified officers in favor of others based on a perceived need instead of merit.

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In short, senior raters frequently render reports on the basis of expedience.

The 1997 OER system may be more effective than its predecessor at identifying the best qualified officers, but distortion distracts from its effectiveness. This effectiveness can be bolstered, however, by changing senior-rater practices and by further reforming the OER system.

Senior raters can accomplish the first change within the framework of the system as it exists now. Every senior rater must adopt a rating philosophy that assumes that evaluation reports exist not to give every officer an equal chance at advancement, but to give the best qualified officers the greatest chance of advancement. This is a critical distinction. Individual officers are not entitled to an equal chance at promotion. Rather, they are entitled to a fair and equitable review of their qualifications as reflected in fair and accurate OERs, and to be promoted if they are found to be best qualified. A model senior-rater philosophy is depicted in the matrix below.

Under this rating method, the ranks of lieutenant colonel and colonel would be terminal grades at which officers might reasonably expect to culminate their careers. The ranks of second lieutenant through major would be developmental grades at which

officers would not be expected to culminate their careers; for these officers, potential for successful service at higher grades would be a requirement for retention in the force.

Improved senior rater practices alone are not enough, however. They will always feel pressure to render expedient ratings to accommodate the needs of particular officers regardless of actual performance and potential. Certain anomalies within the OER system itself aggravate this phenomenon. For example, current practices force senior raters to relegate some COM evaluations to officers despite superior performance and potential until the senior rater's profile has matured sufficiently to support ACOM evaluations.

Unfortunately, the current system requires senior raters to consider individual ratings in isolation rather than within the context of the rated population, encouraging a reactive cycle driven by the status of their profiles. Coupled with the entitlement mentality, this frequently results in unjust ratings that distort the image of the officer corps presented to selection boards. Systemic change is required.

One approach would be to transform the management of senior-rater profiles. The current method, under which a senior rater has a single profile which he or she must manage over the course of a career,

MODEL SENIOR RATER PHILOSOPHY

Company-Grade Officers (2LT, 1LT, CPT)	Field-Grade Officers (MAJ, LTC, COL)
ACOM: Clearly superior performance at current grade and superior potential for future success at field-grade level.	ACOM: Superior performance at current grade and superior potential for future success at the colonel level (for majors and lieutenant colonels) or at the general officer level (for colonels).
COM: Successful at current grade and good potential for success at the next higher grade.	COM: Successful at current grade and good potential for success at the next higher grade (for majors), or for continued success at the current grade (for lieutenant colonels or colonels).
BCOM, retain: Marginally successful performance at current grade, marginal potential for success at the next higher grade, and/or significant lapse in judgment not involving malfeasance.	BCOM, retain: Marginally successful at current grade, poor potential for success at next higher rank, and/or significant lapse in judgment not involving malfeasance.
BCOM, do not retain: Inadequate performance at current grade, poor potential for success at next higher grade, and/or malfeasance or misconduct.	BCOM, do not retain: Failure at current rank, poor potential for success at the next higher grade, and/or malfeasance or misconduct.

Legend: ACOM, above center of mass; COM, center of mass; BCOM, below center of mass.

should be replaced with a profiling system based on annual cohorts. Under a cohort system, rather than rendering reports throughout the year as they come due, senior raters would complete OERs based on annual cohort cycles.

A senior rater's annual cohort cycle would begin when he assumes a new duty position. Senior raters would complete the narrative portion of each OER when due just as they do now, but would decide the box-check portion of all ratings in a single cohort on the first anniversary of having assumed the duty position. Senior raters reassigned before this anniversary would complete all ratings at the time of reassignment.

This cycle would repeat each year during the senior rater's tenure in the position. The profile would automatically restart on the completion of each cohort cycle, so each senior rater would have a series of annual profiles instead of the single career-long profile he must use today.

Most rules governing OERs would remain intact under the cohort system, including rules governing rater and senior-rater eligibility. The senior rater would rate all officers with rating periods ending during the cohort cycle, provided he is eligible to do so under current rules. Raters would render reports for their subordinates when due under the rules in place now. The senior rater would draft the narrative portion of the OER immediately, as is the case under the current system.

The completed OER, with rater and senior-rater comments— but temporarily *sans* the senior-rater profile—would be submitted and filed in the rated officer's records just as now, except that it would be filed as an interim report, pending profiling of the cohort. Instead of an ACOM, COM, or BCOM rating, this portion of the interim report would state "cohort not yet profiled." The interim report would then be available in the officer's record for promotion and selection boards should they convene before the end of the cohort.

Assignment of ACOM, COM, or BCOM ratings would be deferred until the end of the cohort cycle, at which time the senior rater would choose one of these ratings for all officers at the same time. An exception would be made, however, for BCOM reports. Senior raters rendering BCOM reports would have the option of profiling the report immediately to give the rated officer the maximum

opportunity to improve his or her performance during subsequent rating periods, rather than deferring that portion of the OER to the end of the cohort cycle. The senior rater's profile would not be based on the number of reports he previously rendered as is the case now, but rather on the number of officers rated during the cohort cycle.

Profiling would be managed electronically. At the end of the cohort period, the senior rater would assign ACOM, COM, or BCOM ratings, retaining the current constraint limiting ACOM reports to 49 percent or fewer of the total. The senior rater would profile and re-sign the OER electronically and forward it via e-mail to the rated officer, who would then electronically re-sign the profiled document. The profiled OER would then replace the unprofiled OER in the officer's record. This paperless profiling system allows execution of the process no matter where the rater, senior rater, and rated officer are located and no matter what their status, even if they are reassigned, deployed, or released from active duty before the end of the cohort cycle.

Transitioning to a cohort profiling system would benefit the officer corps in several ways. Ratings would provide a more valid assessment of each officer because all officers rated during the same cohort cycle would have served in closer proximity to one another in time, space, and circumstances. Forcing senior raters to consider all subordinate officers at the same time and in the same context would reduce the reactive, haphazard handling of senior-rater evaluations so common today. Finally, this approach would reduce the incidence of superior-performing officers receiving COM reports simply because their senior rater has a small or immature profile, or because they joined the unit later than less qualified but already rated officers.

The 1997 OER reform was an important achievement, but should be regarded as an interim reform. Building a truly effective officer evaluation system will require even more, and farther reaching, reform. **MR**

NOTES

1. Connie L. Reeves, *Department of the Army Historical Summary Fiscal Year 1996* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1997), 21.

2. Officer evaluations are governed by Army Regulation (AR) 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System*, 15 May 2006. See also Department of the Army Pamphlet 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System*, 15 May 2006.