



(Photo by Sgt. Reed Knutson, AFN Stuttgart)

First Lt. Scott Adamson scales up a bamboo ladder 8 September 2011 after inspecting work performed on a project in Qarghah'i District, Laghman Province, Afghanistan. Adamson, along with his fellow engineers attached to the Laghman Provincial Reconstruction Team, made their rounds and conducted quality assurance checks on three projects while also meeting to discuss construction plans for a fourth proposed project in the district.

Identifying and Retaining the Army's Best Midgrade Officers

Brig. Gen. Ronald Kirklin, U.S. Army

Within the next several years, dynamic environmental and generational factors colliding within the ranks of the U.S. Army will place demands on our leadership every bit as challenging as the last 14 years of combat.¹ Under these difficult circumstances, the need to identify and retain the best midgrade officers remains foundational to the Army's

success. The critical tasks linked to the necessity to adapt retention strategy will fall largely on brigade and battalion commanders, together with the burden of managing the Army's talent into the future.

The situation is uniquely challenging today as compared to the Army's past experience because generational differences, according to some, have created a cultural



(Department of Defense photo by Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Molly A. Burgess)

Gen. Ann E. Dunwoody smiles as Gen. George W. Casey, Chief of Staff of the Army, along with Craig Brotchie, her husband, pin on her new rank during her promotion ceremony 18 November 2008 at the Pentagon as she becomes the nation's first female soldier to be promoted to the military's top rank. Inset: During Desert Storm, (then) Maj. Ann Dunwoody served as a division parachute officer with the 82nd Airborne Division and was identified early as an officer with great potential.

divide between older senior commanders and younger midgrade officers that is difficult to reconcile. If this is so, the institution and its senior commanders will need to modify their traditional approach to managing midlevel officers to bridge the gap between generations in order to ensure the force retains the best talent.

The key to managing officers from the *millennial generation* (people reaching adulthood around the year 2000 or later) will be establishing a positive command climate attuned to future mission requirements. To accomplish this, commanders must adjust their mentorship style and content to provide positive vision and direction to junior leaders, while coaching them on the availability and value of broadening assignments to prepare them for the future as well as enhance their perspectives in current assignments. Additionally, the Army must concurrently adapt its human resources systems to enable brigade and battalion commanders to administer new talent-management venues to support this kind of holistic process.

To achieve the necessary internal cultural change, the Army has already begun to overhaul its human resource systems to identify quality leaders. This overhaul includes a new officer evaluation report, a multisource assessment feedback tool, and restructured promotion timelines.² However, if declining promotion rates from the postwar military drawdown reduce opportunities for advancement, and candid performance evaluations contain unwelcome criticism, promising talent not properly incentivized may behave just as their millennial civilian peers frequently do—by readily seeking employment elsewhere.³

Retaining the best of the Army's millennial leaders will have to start with battalion and brigade commanders tailoring a positive command climate that appeals to millennial sensibilities and values. Midgrade officers' sense of self-worth, together with optimism that a career in the military will offer good opportunities for success, heavily influences their career decisions. Cultivating this type of optimism begins with a

command climate in which all members of the organization feel appreciated and valued for their contributions. Brigade and battalion commanders may find a special challenge in managing midgrade officers with extensive deployment experience and multiple combat tours. Such midlevel officers will expect the same kind of command receptivity and recognition for their contributions they experienced when leading soldiers in combat, where many made life-and-death decisions on a daily basis.

Additionally, in creating the right command environment for now and in the future, commanders must appeal to midgrade officers' sense of purpose and adventure by striking a balance between training and family time. Not unlike their predecessors of previous generations, midgrade Army leaders expect hard, rigorous, and meaningful training. They understand the necessity for the hardship and sacrifice of family separation during wartime. However, they are likely to be much less tolerant than previous generations of what they consider make-work reasons for family separation in a garrison army that is no longer fighting a war.⁴ This is not a criticism of midgrade officers' commitment to duty. It is to say the balance between their professional and family obligations will be weighed and judged by a different calculus than previous generations of officers because of the multiplicity of opportunities in the private sector for talented individuals together with changes in overall societal social expectations as well as the time demanding nature of the modern operational environment.⁵

Additionally, since the midgrade Army officer's experience has likely been focused at the tactical level and direct small-team leadership in a dynamic, fast moving environment, this limited aperture produces anxiety when he or she looks to a future dominated by staff assignments that appear to demand boring bureaucratic indirect leadership skills and tedious process-management staff duties. Many may visualize that the five years that characteristically follow their post-company-level assignments in Army career development, mainly as staff officers, will be neither fun nor rewarding. To overcome such trepidation, brigade and battalion commanders must encourage midlevel officers to move beyond this myopic view, providing them a broader perspective with a more positive vision of the future. To meet the challenge, commanders can help midgrade

officers develop broader, more positive outlooks by assigning them increased responsibility and looking for opportunities to include them in high-level collaboration, supported by more sophisticated methods of mentorship.⁶

With regard to the latter, our midgrade millennial leaders will require a different, more customized type of mentorship than previous generations. Final officer evaluation report counseling cannot be the start or end point for identification and retention of talent. Millennial officers will require intensive mentorship from senior leaders who they trust to provide trusted career and life counseling.⁷ To this end, commanders must provide



(Photo courtesy of Program Executive Office Aviation)

Brig. Gen. Robert L. Marion, Program Executive Officer Aviation, at Redstone Arsenal, Alabama, speaks with a class attending training with the Defense Acquisition University, 5 February 2014. Marion said that following his training with industry assignment with Lockheed Martin, and upon his subsequent return to the Army, he was able to "to fully see the impact of what I had learned."

immediate and intermediate enabling feedback to build trust and foster confidence.

Unfortunately, such mentorship has not been a prevalent feature in development of the current Army, as reported in the 2012 *Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings*.⁸ Yet, mentorship will increasingly become a type of critical support that our brigade and battalion commanders must provide in order to retain and develop midgrade talent. Such mentorship is effective when it is characterized by a trusting leader who carefully explains to the mentored individual the idiosyncrasies of the Army professional development model juxtaposed against the midgrade officer's personal situation, and facilitates informed planning to meet the mentored individual's career objectives.

To support the process, mentors should use the *Army Leader Development Strategy*, the *Army Career Tracker*, and DA Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, as they counsel midgrade officers on career progression.⁹

Obviously, commanders must invest the time to become familiar with these critical documents to accurately provide professional mentorship in accordance with branch-designated benchmarks for qualification.

Perhaps the most important thing a mentor can do to encourage broadening assignments is to instill confidence in midgrade officers that a break from tactical assignments can actually enhance their careers. To support mentoring officers in giving such confident assurances, the Army must ensure that promotion board instructions specify that officers being considered are not to be penalized for broadening assignments considered outside their traditional career paths.

Additionally, in managing broadening assignments, the Army should strengthen personnel administration mechanisms to ensure midgrade officers who excel at the tactical level and are the most deserving of broadening experience outside their main career tracks are those the system singles out for selection.

This is essential for the broadening concept to actually work. In contrast, at present, many of the most



(U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class David M. Votroubek)

Capt. Kevin Mercer, officer in charge, 205th Corps Training Team, observes as an Afghan national army trainer adjusts the front sight of an M-16 rifle 23 January 2008 in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Mercer and his team were on hand to observe as the trainers qualified with M-16s. Once the weapons were assigned to Afghan soldiers, the Afghan trainers were on hand to provide guidance for operating the new equipment.



(Photo courtesy of 401st Army Field Support Brigade PAO)

Maj. Jerry R. Mize, the deputy director of Acquisitions, Logistics, and Technology Directorate with the 402nd Army Field Support Brigade, listens in January 2014 as he and Martin Utzig discuss the possibility of enabling technologies from industry partners while at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. Mize said assignment with Training with Industry (TWI) provided him with valuable insights into the rapid fielding of products to forward-deployed soldiers. TWI is a 10- to 12-month rotational opportunity for officers and noncommissioned officers to work and train full time at top civilian companies.

potentially enriching post-company-command broadening assignments for top officers, such as advanced schooling and fellowships at civilian academic institutions, and training with industry, are offered mainly to the officers who happen to apply for them, and not necessarily to the best officers in the eligible year-group population.¹⁰

Consequently, the Army must use a different way of selecting people for academic fellowships and for the Army's Training with Industry Program. We must implement a competitive broadening selection process that has the same rigor we apply to preparing battalion and brigade command central selection lists.

This should include establishing, as necessary, lower-level selection boards to leverage commander-driven talent identification for further development. To support the talent selection and development processes, selection boards must identify the premier post-company-command broadening assignments and give them to the best midgrade officers.¹¹ Boards can use the quantified and refined evaluation reports prepared by our brigade and battalion commanders to identify the best midgrade officers.

Just as importantly, care must be taken that selection for broadening opportunities does not become a

promotional fork in the career path for top performing officers at the tactical level, as now sometimes happens with battalion-level command selections. Mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that talented officers who complete a broadening assignment are rapidly reintegrated into their main career tracks with appropriate operational- and strategic-level assignments to ensure they stay competitive.

Additionally, the personnel system must ensure that those who do not make the initial cut for a broadening assignment are able to make themselves competitive for future promotion through other avenues. This means a clear path must be made available for officers with initiative who need more intensive self-development, as outlined and facilitated by their mentors.

As a result, selections for broadening assignments would be made based on officers' early tactical performance, while at the same time the institutional process would leave the door open for other officers with somewhat less stellar initial achievement to continue developing and qualifying for further advancement.

The future of the Army, including its ability to meet the demands of future conflicts, depends on having a strong and robust group of midgrade officers. Battalion and brigade commanders must set the structural and cultural conditions within the profession to retain the best talent.

Increased access to premier broadening assignments, customized and compassionate

mentorship, and engaged leaders adapting to strategic changes will make the difference. However, breaking out of an entrenched mindset to adopt a fresh perspective and adapting established systems accordingly may be among the biggest challenges facing the Army's senior leaders as they attempt to fulfill their obligations to remain good stewards of the profession. ■

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Notes

1. Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, *The M-factor: How the Millennial Generation is Rocking the Workplace* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010). This book discusses the behaviors of millennial generation individuals when they face slower and lower promotion rates, and other changes such as those the Army will experience due to the drawdown.

2. Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA Pam) 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 3 December 2014). This pamphlet changed promotion to captain from three to four years' time in service and promotion to major from ten to eleven years.

3. Jeanne Meister, "Job Hopping Is the 'New Normal' for Millennials: Three Ways to Prevent a Human Resource Nightmare," *Forbes* online (14 August 2012), <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2012/08/14/job-hopping-is-the-new-normal-for-millennials-three-ways-to-prevent-a-human-resource-nightmare/> (accessed 26 February 2015). This article states, "Ninety-one percent of millennials (born between 1977 and 1997) expect to stay in a job for less than three years, according to the Future Workplace "Multiple Generations @ Work" survey of 1,189 employees and 150 managers. That means they would have 15–20 jobs over the course of their working lives!" See also, Lancaster and Stillman, who dedicate a subchapter to the millennial retention problem.

4. Mady Wechsler Segal, "The Military and the Family as Greedy Institutions," *Armed Forces & Society* 13(1) (Fall 1986): 9-38. This article discusses how both institutions demand a high level of commitment, loyalty, and time from individuals and are, therefore, "greedy" institutions. Also, it provides the following statistics in support of this argument: 51 percent of wives thought their marriage was negatively affected by their husband's career, and 47 percent saw this tension as emotional conflict.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Lancaster and Stillman, 71-73. In the subchapter "Rewards," authors discuss how collaboration with high-ranking executives can be reward in itself and the millennial demand for customization and constant communication requires intensive mentorship.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Ryan Riley, et al., *2012 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey Of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings*, Technical Report 2013-1, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Leadership, 2012). This study lists survey results showing the following: Smaller percentages of leaders reported frequently or very frequently learning from superiors (44 percent), engaging in formal leader development programs within the unit (35 percent), and receiving mentoring from someone outside their chain of command (33 percent). Receiving developmental counseling from one's immediate superior was reported to occur least often, (e.g., 26 percent frequently/very frequently, and 55 percent rarely/occasionally).

9. U.S. Army, *Army Leader Development Strategy (ALDS) 2013* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2013), <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CAL/repository/ALDS5June%202013Record.pdf> (accessed 19 March 2015); DA Pam 600-3; Army Career Tracker website, <https://actnow.army.mil> (accessed 19 March 2015). The Army Career Tracker is an online career and leader development tool designed to assist soldiers and their leaders develop an individual development plan, short- and long-term goals, and timelines for attaining those goals.

10. Army Regulation 621-1, *Training of Military Personnel at Civilian Institutions* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 28 August 2007), http://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/pdf/r621_1.pdf (accessed 26 February 2015). This regulation outlines the application process for advanced civil schooling and training with industry, where a candidate must submit DA Form 1618 to compete for these opportunities. Reliance on self-nomination does not draw in the Army's best officers.

11. DA Pam 600-3.