Are All of These Assessments Really Worth My Time?

How Career-Long Assessments Drive Leader Self-Development and Talent Management

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The *Army People Strategy* (*APS*) shows the evolution of how the Army views its most important resource: people.[1] This strategy recognizes the unique productive capacities of each person as critical enablers of mission success rather than treating people as interchangeable parts. To enable this approach, the *APS* directs that the Army establish a culture of assessments to gauge individual capabilities with the goal of focusing developmental efforts and identifying talent.

Within this culture of assessments, the Army evaluates leaders on a range of capabilities, including leader effectiveness. In fact, leader effectiveness has been a major focus of the Army in the last decade in terms of research, assessment, and development. This focus comes from the Army's data-driven understanding that good leaders positively impact command climates (e.g., trust, cohesion, confidence, commitment, etc.) and unit readiness and can make up for deficits in other areas of combat power.[2] Thus, the Army's investment in assessing and improving leader competencies will benefit both leader and unit performance in warfighting and command climate.

This article describes how the culture of assessments outlined in the *APS* has been operationalized using a career-long model to assess and improve the effectiveness of Army leaders. This article explores two programs within that larger Army-wide effort. First, this strategy is implemented using developmental assessments in programs such as Athena—a progressive series of career-long assessments delivered during each phase of a leader's professional military education. Those assessments inform each leader's self-awareness and focus their development. Second, the *APS* is operationalized using predictive

Soldiers with Company A, 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), conduct cold and hot load training with support from Company A, 2nd Battalion, 10th Aviation Regiment, 10th Combat Aviation Brigade, 10th Mountain Division (LI), 22 July 2021 at Fort Drum, New York. (Photo by Spc. Josue Patricio, U.S. Army)

assessments through the Command Assessment Program (CAP)—a talent management program used to evaluate the readiness of candidates for command and key billet positions (*APS* Line of Effort 3, Employ). CAP builds on existing selection processes to help the Army make better data-driven decisions for selection. These assessment programs ensure that the Army has effective leaders and provide a developmental scaffold for leaders looking to advance in their careers and improve their ability to lead. The programs also reinforce the interconnection between leader development and talent management. As stated in Field Manual 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, "Talent management and leader development are linked but separate processes. The Army develops individuals to be effective leaders. Talent management is an administrative process that puts the right person in the right job."[3]

What the Army Knows About Leadership Effectiveness

Over the last several decades, Army research has found that leader effectiveness has strong connections with unit preparedness, morale, climate, and performance. Leadership, as a "multiplying and unifying element of combat power," can offset deficits in other areas of combat power.[4] A portion of that research, led by the Center for the Army Leadership, a directorate within the Mission Command Center of Excellence, has produced a strong understanding of what characteristics and behaviors distinguish effective from ineffective leaders. From this work emerged the Army's leadership requirements model (LRM)—a model of what an Army leader is (attributes—BE and KNOW) and what a leader does (competencies—DO).[5] Importantly, the research identified that the characteristics and behaviors important to leader

effectiveness differ depending on the leader's role and stage of progression. For example, thinking flexibly and adapting plans according to changing mission requirements have been identified as essential characteristics for battalion and brigade commanders.

The LRM's development uses a theory-based approach and continues to be updated and validated with empirical evidence (i.e., research). During initial model development, Army researchers identified well-supported leadership theories, competency models from other military branches, and subject-matter experts' predictions of future environments.[6] Army leadership experts (e.g., former brigade commanders, instructors at the School of Command Preparation, Army Research Institute scientists, and other researchers) then refined the initial model to those items that were the most accurate predictors for Army leadership performance. Multiple research studies verified that each of the resulting attributes and competencies was associated with overall leader effectiveness and likelihood of mission success.

Research studies repeatedly reinforce with strong evidence that the LRM can differentiate between effective and ineffective Army leaders. The strongest support for the LRM comes from the following research findings:

- Army leaders who more effectively use LRM competencies (as rated by their subordinates) perform better in their leadership roles (as rated by their superiors).[7]
- Army units with leaders who more effectively use LRM competencies are rated higher in command climate and unit preparedness.[8]
- Army leaders who more effectively use LRM competencies are also rated higher in overall leader effectiveness and leadership ability.[9]
- Units whose leaders more effectively use LRM competencies report higher trust within the unit, more use of mission command, more organizational citizenship behaviors, and higher overall leader effectiveness ratings.[10]
- Army leaders who more effectively use LRM competencies are less likely to demonstrate counterproductive leadership, which includes behaviors that violate Army values and prevent a climate conducive to mission accomplishment, such as careerism or blaming others to save themselves embarrassment.[11]

A series of assessments has been developed to measure the effectiveness on the LRM for both leader development and talent management purposes. These include the Leader 360, Leader 180, Unit 360, Army Commander Evaluation Tool (battalion and brigade levels), Army Leader Assessment Tool, and Enlisted Leader Assessment Tool. The use of these assessments over several years has allowed considerable data to be collected regarding their performance and usefulness. The assessments consistently demonstrate high reliability (e.g., consistency) and validity (e.g., they measure what they intend to), as evidenced by significant relationships with Army leadership outcomes.[12] Even with these positive findings, the assessments are continually monitored for opportunities to further improve their functioning.[13] The

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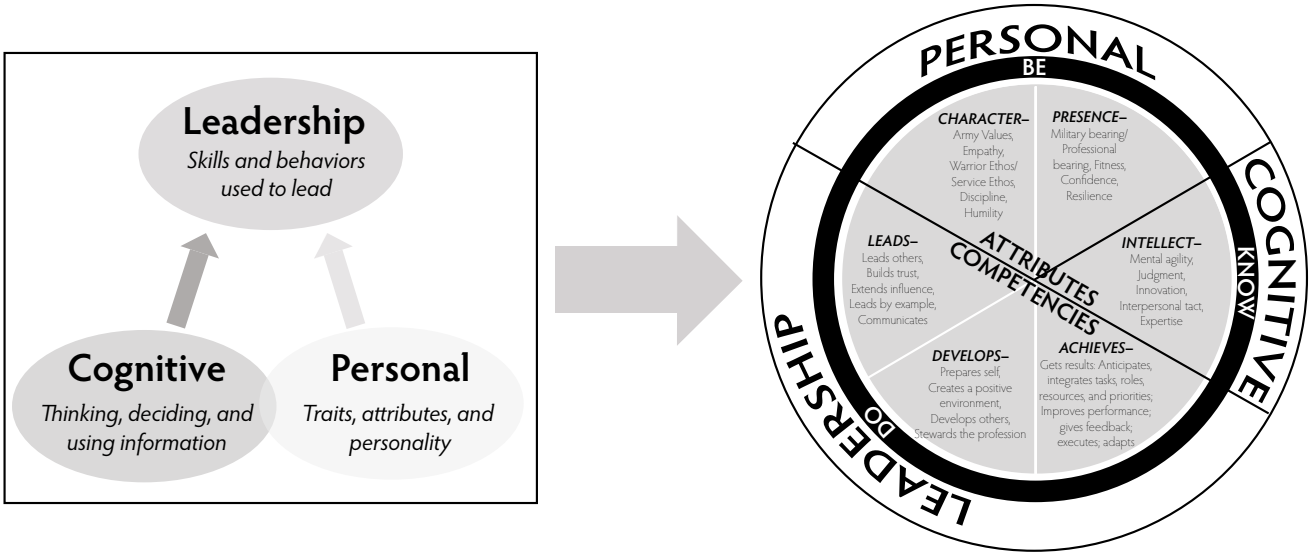


(Figure courtesy of internal Center for Army Leadership reports)

Figure 1. Three Domains of Athena Assessments Align with the Leadership Requirements Model Attributes and Competencies

end results are robust measurements of the LRM that can be used by the Army to assess individual leader capabilities for the goals outlined by the *APS*.

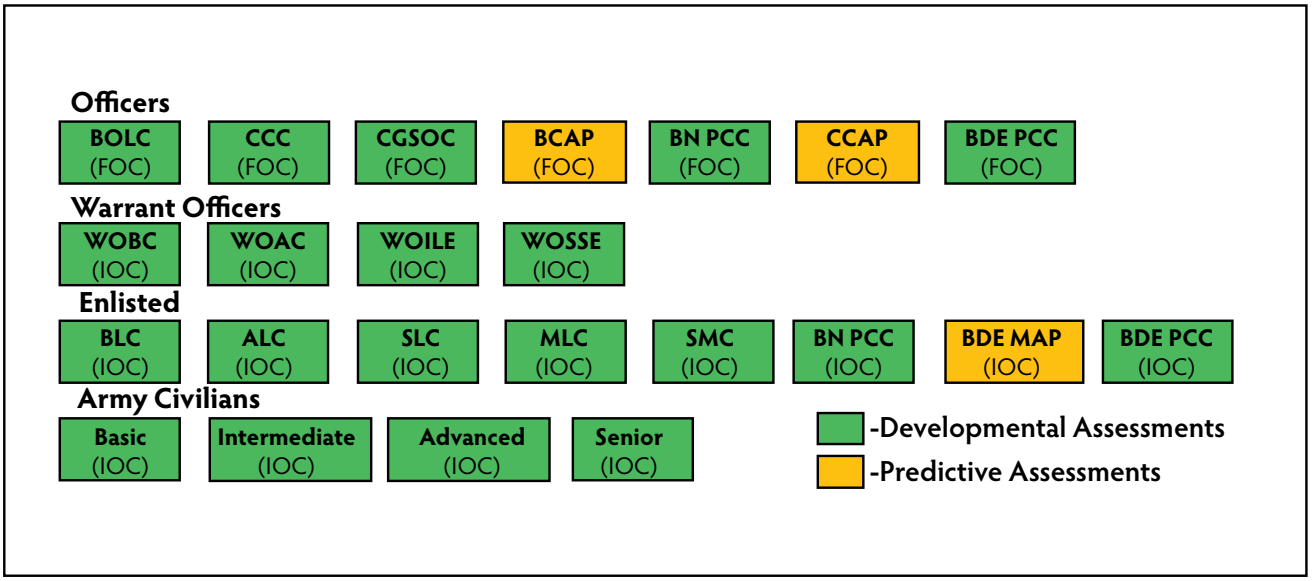
Career-Long Assessments: Athena—Leader Development

Athena is an Army-wide leader development program that increases self-awareness and focuses leader development. Athena assessments measure characteristics and behaviors in the LRM and then provide feedback and resources to individual leaders to support self-development. These assessments are developmental and are distinct from the Army's formal performance evaluation system.[14] In fact, the assessment results are only provided to the assessed leader. It is up to the assessed leader to share those results with superiors if the leader feels it would be helpful for development. The results are designed to improve the leader's self-awareness, encourage their self-development, and promote readiness for future positions of greater authority and responsibility.[15]

The Army started Athena in 2020 in support of efforts to develop a culture of assessments and because research and assessment data continuously show that self-aware leaders are more effective leaders. To this end, the professional military education (PME) curriculum and supporting assessments that comprise Athena provide Army leaders with feedback on warfighting, physical fitness, leadership, cognitive skills, and personal attributes to support leaders' self-awareness, self-development, leader effectiveness, and preparedness for future advancement in the Army. Leaders achieve these objectives by understanding assessment feedback; reflecting on their results; tailoring individual development plans; leveraging resources, feedback, and leader development programs; and applying the practices outlined in Field Manual 6-22 to grow and improve as a leader.

Assessments were selected to cover three domains: leadership behaviors, cognitive skills, and personal attributes (see figure 1). Together, these three domains provide coverage of all the attributes and competencies in the LRM. Cognitive and personal assessments aligned with LRM attribute categories of *character*, *presence*, and *intellect*. Leadership assessments cover the LRM's ten competencies.[16]

After taking these developmental assessments in PME, each leader receives individualized assessment feedback reports and is encouraged to discuss strengths and developmental needs with other leaders while incorporating their results into individual development plans (DA Form 7906) as part of a parallel coaching/counseling effort. The usefulness of the individual



(Figure by authors)

Figure 2. Progression through PME with Project Athena and CAP Assessment Opportunities Noted

results provided in each leader's feedback report depends on two important components. First, the individual must have provided honest and accurate answers to the assessments to provide the most accurate evaluation of their abilities and associated strengths and developmental needs. Second, the individual must be motivated to engage in the process of self-development. Self-development, a requirement of all Army leaders, is an active process and requires that the individual invest in the process of gaining awareness, learning, and growing.[17] A better understanding of how Athena is linked to leader effectiveness and preparedness for future leadership positions can lead to better engagement in this developmental process.

Athena supports leader development by providing assessments to enhance developmental insight and planning as leaders progress throughout their careers. The program also serves to improve leader effectiveness in the Army and prepare leaders to succeed when they attend CAP. Therefore, when an officer is eligible to participate in the Battalion Command Assessment Program as a lieutenant colonel, they will have completed three iterations of developmental assessments as a part of Athena given during PME as they progress through their career. Beginning with the Basic Officer Leader Course, officers progress to the Captains Career Course, and then to the Command and General Staff Officers Course (see figure 2). Similarly, when a noncommissioned officer is eligible to participate in the Sergeant Major Assessment Program, they will have completed four assessment iterations of Athena. The noncommissioned officer begins with the Basic Leader Course, then progresses to the Advanced Leader Course, and the Senior Leader Course, and finally to the Master Leader Course. The usefulness of Athena and the assessment reports depends on how well the individual leader engages with the feedback, utilizes self-reflection, and actively conducts self-development activities.

Command Assessment Program—Talent Management

The Command Assessment Program is a chief of staff of the Army program led by the Army Talent Management Task Force. CAP is a multiday selection process that uses assessments that measure LRM attributes and competencies to support data-driven talent management decisions by the Army. CAP evaluates candidates for brigade command sergeant major positions (Sergeant Major Assessment Program), battalion command and lieutenant colonel key billet positions (Battalion Command Assessment Program), and brigade command and colonel key billet positions

(Colonels Command Assessment Program). The process determines command readiness of potential leaders through a variety of measures, including an Army combat fitness test, writing evaluation, cognitive assessments, psychological interview, observed behavior exercise, multisource leadership assessments, and a comprehensive talent interview. This process culminates with a panel of senior leaders who independently score the candidate's verbal communication and vote on the candidate's readiness for command (certified/not yet certified for command) based on the candidate's overall performance. During every iteration of CAP since its inception, the most significant reasons leaders are found "Not Yet Certified for Command" have been for developmental needs in the leadership domain, including a lack of self-awareness, concerns with leader effectiveness, and high levels of counterproductive leadership behaviors.

In contrast to the Athena assessments, which have a developmental purpose, the purpose of CAP is predictive and for talent management, supporting *APS* Line of Effort 3, Employ. The *APS* describes the need for a talent management system that recognizes the unique knowledge, skills, and behaviors possessed by individual Army leaders and allows the Army to employ each to maximum effect. This strategic system recognizes that all Army lieutenant colonels or colonels are not interchangeable and identifies the candidates who possess the character and behavioral strengths that are imperative for success in command and key billet positions.

Army senior leaders and subject-matter experts developed CAP as a means of improving and modernizing the selection process for command and key billet positions. Assessments were chosen based on their relationship to command success by Army leadership research and best practices from government, corporate, academic, and nonprofit organizations. With each CAP iteration, the process and assessments are refined based on feedback and validation efforts to ensure its continued improvement.

The predictive assessments included in the CAP process align with the LRM and the developmental assessments utilized in Athena (see table). For example, multisource leadership assessments are designed to assess effectiveness on several LRM attributes and competencies. Thus, peers may be asked to assess candidate leaders' fair and consistent treatment of others as a measure of their ability to *create a positive environment*. Additionally, the written exam and interview measure *communication*, cognitive tests measure *intellect*, and the observed behavior exercise measures the ability to *get results*. In fact, all the competencies and attributes in the LRM are measured as part of the CAP program and factor into decisions about readiness for command.

The CAP supports leader development as well. Since 2021, candidates found certified for command received a feedback report that included insights from their CAP performance such as feedback on self-awareness, leadership effectiveness, and counterproductive leadership tendencies, as well as their physical fitness, and written and verbal communication skills. This feedback was expanded to all candidates in 2022. This feedback is meant to guide self-development and provide trends and resources for improvement in areas identified as developmental needs.

The Relationship between Athena and CAP

Athena and CAP are complementary facets of the *APS* culture of assessments serving different roles in this strategic plan. Both programs remain grounded in the Army's LRM. Athena serves to develop the Army's talent. It identifies training and development opportunities and seeks to close gaps by focusing self-development and more directed learning. Athena results belong to the individual leader and do not impact advancement decisions or career trajectory. CAP is part of the Army's talent management process used to identify individuals most likely to be successful in command and key billet positions. It identifies strengths and developmental needs relative to the attributes and competencies required of command and key billet positions. CAP results belong to the Army and do impact selection decisions and individual leaders' career trajectory.

As the purpose of Athena is for Army leaders to become more aware of their strengths and developmental needs, the increased awareness to focus growth should have downstream effects on a leader's success throughout their careers and in CAP. The foundation of the LRM across the developmental assessments used in Athena and the predictive assessments used in CAP is deliberate. The LRM serves as the connective framework, providing clarity on what the Army expects of leaders across a career and supporting the long-term

Table. Connections among Leadership Requirements Model, Athena, and Command Assessment Program Assessment

Assessment Category	LRM Attribute/Competency Accessed	Included in Athena	Included in CAP
Multi-Source Leadership Assessments	*All LRM Competencies*	X	X
Reading/Writing Competence	*Communicates*	X	X
Cognitive Assessments	*Intellect*	X	X
Disposition/Self-Awareness	*Character, Presence, Intellect*	X	X
Observed Behavior Exercise	*Leads Others, Gets Results, Presence*		X
Comprehensive Talent Interview	*BCAP: Develops Others, Creates a Positive Environment, and Extends Influence* *CCAP: Leads Others, Creates a Positive Environment, and Extends Influence*		X
Army Combat Fitness Test	*Presence*		X

(Table by authors)

goal of the *APS* culture of assessments. Likewise, the individual development plan (DA Form 7906), informed by all forms of feedback including the results from their developmental assessments in PME, serves as the tool to guide self-development and improve leader effectiveness leading up to CAP.

Importance of Leader Development to the Army Mission

Athena and CAP represent significant investments to develop and select Army leaders who are self-aware of their capabilities and motivated and committed to take action to improve. This investment in people has direct implications for the Army's overall mission to deploy, fight, and win the Nation's wars. The conditions of multidomain operations and large-scale combat operations environments will challenge both our leaders and unit climates, requiring effective leaders who can lead to their full potential. Army research shows that when leaders are rated effective, unit climates are rated more positively and units are rated as better prepared.[18] As stated in Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Operations*, leaders at every level are a multiplying and unifying dynamic of combat power, mitigating gaps in other warfighting functions.[19] Thus, the Army's investment in improving leader competencies will directly benefit readiness to perform the Army's primary warfighting mission.

Leader effectiveness also has downstream effects on climate and counterproductive leadership. Army research shows that effective leaders impact unit readiness through positive command climates—a key prevention strategy for reducing harmful behaviors as shown by other research in the area. Similarly, leaders who display more competencies from the LRM display less counterproductive leadership. By educating Army leaders on expected leader behaviors, Athena aims to decrease these harmful, counterproductive leader behaviors and thereby improve climates and readiness.

Athena and CAP are intentional and concerted Army-wide efforts to inculcate the *APS* culture of assessments and development. Decades of research have identified the characteristics (attributes) and behaviors (competencies) that are inherent in effective leadership

and have enabled the development of assessment tools to measure them. Athena assessments provide multiple opportunities for leaders to better understand their strengths and developmental needs as they relate to these leader characteristics and behaviors. This process provides Army leaders with a plethora of information to develop themselves in a way that increases mission readiness and prepares them for positions of greater responsibility. CAP is a talent management process that ensures that the Army is choosing the most qualified individuals for command and key billet positions based on the same characteristics and behaviors highlighted by Athena assessments. When combined, these leader development and talent management initiatives position the Army to fully capitalize on its competitive advantage: its people. ■

Notes

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