



Sgt. 1st Class Vang Yang grades a candidate during the Army Combat Fitness Test portion of the Command Assessment Program at Fort Knox, Kentucky, on 29 October 2023. (Photo by Daniela Vestal, U.S. Army)

The Army's Command Assessment Program

The Doctrinal Foundation

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The Army's Command Assessment Program (CAP) facilitates the selection of battalion and brigade commanders, brigade command sergeants major, and medical service corps and acquisition corps professionals through its conduct of a ten-point, in-depth assessment process. There are several differences in the CAP programs tailored to the specific leader population assessed, so this article will focus on the Army competitive category officer population.¹ This multipoint assessment informs the Job Performance Panel (JPP) that incorporates CAP results in its review of an officer's performance file. The CAP scorecard allows the candidate-officer to put "points on the board" in five assessed areas that complement the officer's past performance as reflected in their evaluation reports and reviewed by the JPP.² The principal aim of CAP is to present a more holistic view of an officer's performance and potential as the Army selects commanders that will lead formations of hundreds and thousands of soldiers. CAP also serves to reinforce the application of Army leadership doctrine across all portions of the Army. The Army's leadership requirements model (see figure) and observed leadership behaviors, as stated in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, and Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, are the doctrinal and practical foundations of CAP's assessments.³ CAP also supports the warfighting and training doctrine across the Army. Though CAP currently focuses on the selection of commanders and key leaders, it also serves as the vanguard of a new approach in assessing Army leaders.

Origins of the Command Assessment Program

In the winter of 2019, then-Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. James C. McConville challenged Army leaders to develop a better way to screen and select Army battalion commanders. He remarked that the Centralized Selection List (CSL) board process relied on a file review of candidates' evaluation reports "lasting a matter of minutes" to render the decision on an officer's suitability for command.⁴

At face value, this rapid scrutiny, driven by the need to expeditiously review thousands of files, appears inadequate to make such a consequential decision that selects commanders to lead large, complex organizations. The materials reviewed by board members are also



(Figure from Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*)

Figure. Army Leadership Requirements Model

limited in scope and present a narrow view of an officer's performance and potential. Though assessed performance over a rating period (usually twelve months or more) is important and remains a significant portion of command selection, it is reliant on the perspective of two people, the rater and senior rater, and narrowly focuses on achievement as measures of performance and future potential. This focus on *achieves* as the principal basis of evaluation ignores an officer's longer-term impact on the organization and its people, specifically in *how* the officer achieves. CAP seeks to rectify these blind spots by examining an officer's knowledge, skills, and attributes from multiple perspectives.

Doctrinal Foundations

ADP 6-22 describes the Army leadership requirements model (ALRM). The model establishes "what a leader is (attributes—BE and KNOW) and what a leader does (competencies—DO)."⁵ The attributes of a leader are character, presence, and intellect. The competencies are leads, develops, and achieves. The Officer Evaluation Report is an effective instrument to assess results and is a direct measure of "achieves" on the ALRM. The Officer Evaluation Report also provides insights and observations on an officer's "character,"



“presence,” and “develops” competencies. It provides only a partial examination of an officer’s “leads” competency and only indirectly evaluates the attribute of “intellect.” This is where CAP comes in. The key, distinctive value of CAP is that it provides an objective assessment of the whole person vice solely a subjective evaluation on an officer’s ability to achieve results. A 2021 article in *Military Review*, titled “Understanding Assessments and their Relevance to the Future Success of the U.S. Army,” clarifies the distinction between assessments and evaluations:

There are key differences between assessments and evaluations ... Evaluations provide snapshots of performances that are mostly subjective, whereas assessments provide objective data on an officer’s knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSBs). Assessments provide a standardized lens through which to compare individuals of the same rank across the Army; evaluations compare individuals within a constrained population dictated by the echelon and criteria of the senior rater.⁶

Through a comprehensive assessment process, CAP provides more and relevant insights into the attributes

Participants work together to negotiate one of several obstacles at the Alex Field Leader Reaction Course on day three of the Army’s talent management initiative, the Battalion Commander Assessment Program, at Fort Knox, Kentucky, on 23 January 2020. (Photo by Eric Pilgrim, U.S. Army)

and competencies of future commanders. Specifically, CAP directly assesses an officer’s “intellect” and observes components of leader attributes not necessarily visible to the rater and senior rater. It also provides indirect assessments of “character,” “presence,” “develops,” and “achieves.” Structured exercises, task-oriented events, and validated assessment tools allow for direct behavior observations. Structured interviews and candidate-professed actions allow for an indirect behavior observation. Together, these direct and indirect observations provide a multidimensional and comprehensive understanding of a candidate.

The Assessment Process

CAP conducts ten assessments over a five-day period that add up to 17.5 contact hours for each candidate. These assessments fall into one of three event categories: screening, informing, and scored. If an

Table. Command Assessment Program Assessments

Assessment	Type of Event	ALRM Assessed	Method
Observed Behavior Exercise	Informing	Intellect, Leads	Direct
Psychometric	Scored	All Attributes and Competencies	Direct
Verbal Communication	Scored	Presence	Direct
Written Communication	Scored	Intellect	Direct
Army Combat Fitness Test	Scored/Screen	Presence	Direct
Army Body Composition	Screen	Presence	Direct
Psychological Assessment	Inform	Character	Indirect
Peer Feedback*	Inform/Scored	Leads	Indirect
Subordinate Feedback*	Inform/Scored	Leads	Indirect
Army Comprehensive Talent Interview (ACTI)*	Scored/Screen	Leads, Develops, Achieves, Presence	Indirect

*Peer feedback, subordinate feedback, and ACTI assessments produce a composite leadership spectrum score.

(Table by author)

officer fails to meet the standard on a screening event, the officer receives a “Not Yet Certified for Command” determination and is unable to compete before the JPP for command selection. Informing events provide observations and data to members of the assessments team and the Army Comprehensive Talent Interview (ACTI) panel, which consists of general officers and sitting or former brigade commanders. Scored events provide objective performance data that compares candidate performance to historic populations and quantifies it in a series of percentile scores directly reflected in the CAP scorecard presented to the JPP. The table depicts the totality of CAP assessments, their categories, portion of the ALRM assessed, and method. CAP assessments, taken together with an officer’s performance as reflected in evaluation reports and assessed in the JPP, help produce a comprehensive and complementary profile of the officer.

CAP’s greatest contribution to the assessment process is identifying potentially “hidden” attributes by measuring intellect, behavior, and personality, as well as identifying counterproductive and ineffective leadership. The battery of psychometric assessments employs several different instruments to measure cognitive

capacity, emotional intelligence, conscientiousness, self-awareness, and other behavioral traits. Day-to-day rater and senior rater observations of officers cannot measure the full depth of an individual officer’s intelligence and mental capacity. Though not completely hidden, assessing intellect through casual observation is highly subjective and contextual.

Determining an individual leader’s contributions is frequently difficult to parse out from the unit’s performance. In fact, early CAP results indicate that mention of individual intellect (or intelligence) on a subjective evaluation is often not based on fact and is difficult to isolate based on singular observations. Similarly, evaluations measure leadership from the subjective perspective of the rater and senior rater and never directly from the led or peers. Augmenting psychometric assessments with work samples like peer and subordinate feedback and the CAP on-site, observed behavior exercises helps pull off the “mask” to provide greater insight on true leader identities.

The Lasting Impact of Leaders

Army leaders, and particularly members of command teams, have lasting impacts on their

organizations that go well beyond the two years of their command tenure. Their behaviors in command establish a climate and culture, either good or bad, that will continue to affect the organization and the soldiers within it for some time after their departure. Army doctrine acknowledges that leaders must employ a range of techniques that range between driving compliance and generating commitment. Based on the situation, mission, and readiness of the organization, leaders must vary their techniques.⁷ Soldiers will respond to different techniques in varying ways. These soldiers and subordinate leaders have a vested interest in assessing these leaders and avoiding the deleterious effects of poor leadership and preventing it from infecting other organizations. Subordinates and peers experience the application of leadership; superiors usually only see and are concerned with results. Being “subjected to” rather than seeing the “results of” can be two very different perspectives in experiencing leadership. In organizations solely bent on achieving results, toxicity or counterproductive leadership is often invisible to those above the toxic leader. Peer and subordinate feedback are essential to “seeing” the whole person. Use of these metrics provided by subordinates and peers lead to the propagation of one of the greatest myths associated with the CAP process; namely, “getting CAP-ped.”

Some officers invited to CAP believe the only way to attain positive subordinate and peer feedback is to perform one’s duties as if competing in a popularity contest and avoid holding subordinates accountable. Failure to “win” this contest will lead to negative comments on provided peer and subordinate assessments. This is the “CAP-ped” myth. The facts do not substantiate this perception. Even the very best officers receive critical feedback on their peer and subordinate reports. Army doctrine is clear in asserting that leaders must balance compliance and commitment in motivating teams to accomplish the mission.⁸ Every good leader knows they must accomplish the mission without breaking the organization and its people. In assessing this aspect of candidate performance, the ACTI panel members balance negative peer and subordinate feedback against the context of the action and the role played by the officer in each situation. The ACTI’s principal orientation is rooting out counterproductive and ineffective leadership *trends*.

It is important for CAP candidates to understand that the ACTI panel knows a lot about each candidate’s leadership style and history from the many assessment instruments that CAP administers to candidates. Before a candidate enters the interview room, panel members study a summary of *all* the assessment data. At the conclusion of the study period, the panel operational psychologist provides a verbal overview of the candidate that ties psychometric assessment data to the job sample data, including an overview of how the candidate performed on the observed behavior exercise, physical fitness test, written communication assessment, and peer and subordinate assessments. The psychologist points to converging or diverging data points to contextualize *how* the candidate leads and achieves results. The detailed process of providing context to a candidate’s performance is intended to reduce bias and ensure the panel views the entire candidate and is not reliant on anonymous feedback. The panel, through the operational psychologist, develops questions designed to get the candidate to give context to times when they may have had leadership challenges. Candidates who can explain what they have learned from challenging leadership experiences often experience positive findings from the ACTI panel. It is important for candidates to understand that all the questions are designed for them to tell their leadership story and exhibit

self-awareness of how they lead and achieve results. The panel assesses

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the leadership range of the candidate and how often he or she must rely on directive approaches.

Counterproductive leaders make it a habit of exhibiting abusive, self-serving, erratic, ineffective, incompetent and corrupt behaviors.⁹ Though ineffective leadership is a subcategory of counterproductive leadership, the panel assesses ineffective leadership through the lens of FM 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, that highlights patterns of “needs indicators” across the ALRM.¹⁰ CAP adheres to and applies Army doctrine. Panel members understand that every leader has challenging times when they must make hard decisions that many people may not like. Leaders who will not make hard decisions or enforce standards for fear of “getting CAP-ped” are at significant risk of being voted “Not Yet Certified for Command” for ineffective leadership.

Warfighting—“Wait! What? We Screen Out Patton and MacArthur?”

CAP not only supports leadership doctrine, but it also intrinsically supports Army warfighting doctrine and culture. Another persistent and unfounded myth about CAP is that its stringent focus on positive leadership dimensions screens out “tactical geniuses” who may be unconventional leaders. This position presupposes that the Army must endure abusive leaders if it hopes to succeed. This perspective is neither founded in historical experience nor rooted in doctrine. FM 3-0, *Operations*, identifies leadership as “the most essential dynamic of combat power ... It is the multiplying and unifying dynamic of combat power, and it represents the qualitative difference between units.”¹¹ Though CAP’s assessments are not based on the tactical and technical components of warfighting, they undeniably reach to the foundations of creating combat ready units—namely, effective leadership skills. It all begins with the leader and his or her ability to display character, intellect, and presence, and effectively lead, achieve, and develop soldiers and units to mission accomplishment. CAP provides insights into all these elements and complements observations made by the chain of command; it reinforces the ability of the officer to acquire the requisite job-performance, domain knowledge through the Army’s professional military education system. CAP supports warfighters by providing a “deliberate investment in the abilities of individual

leaders, teams, and units is foundational to prosecuting those operations successfully across the competition continuum.”¹² Army leadership applies to all parts of the Army and must be adapted to meet the requirements of the mission and the needs of its people. Army leadership is designed to accomplish the mission as set by our senior leaders. In this light, CAP is foundational to meeting the Army’s and Department of Defense’s (DOD) priorities.

The enduring DOD and Army priorities center on warfighting capability and capacity and the efforts required to gain and maintain a position of relative advantage over potential adversaries. The DOD’s and Army’s focus will always be on deterring our Nation’s adversaries and winning our Nation’s wars. CAP’s outcomes support these priorities and focus areas by assessing and developing the individual leaders to lead effectively under stress and great adversity. CAP psychometric assessments reveal an individual’s mental capacity to identify and think through challenging problems. They also provide insights on emotional stability and aptitude to effectively interact with the people and groups around them. These are essential capabilities for a leader to possess in making sense of an increasingly complex and connected battlefield. CAP’s observed behavior exercises and individualized assessments help reveal a leader’s ability to think creatively in time-constrained situations, communicate effectively using multiple means, and build teams from diverse backgrounds and level of experience. Though not in a field environment or within a tactical scenario, CAP can observe and assess those skills required of leaders regardless of environment or situation.

Expertise is an attribute of “intellect” within the ALRM that describes Army leaders who acquire the technical, tactical, joint, cultural, and geopolitical knowledge that are essential elements of leading warfighting formations.¹³ The leaders assessed at CAP arrive as products of the Army’s larger educational and developmental system that relies on institutional (formal education), operational (on-the-job training) and self-development domains to inculcate the required domain knowledge based on that leader’s branch or functional area. This is a tested and effective system that provides a “CAP certified” leader the technical skills to succeed, thus assessing technical and tactical expertise is not a focus area at CAP.

Train as You Fight

Just as certified leaders serve as the foundation for combat effectiveness, they also lie at the heart of Army training. Certified leaders are essential to executing the Army's training methodology. The first two steps of the Army's eight-step training model, "plan the training event" and "train and certify leaders," focus on leader actions.¹⁴ After identifying and allocating the right resources, Step 2 of the model directs,

Train and certify leaders. Certification requirements are established and leaders and trainers are certified to lead and conduct the training. Certified personnel must have detailed knowledge of the training subject matter and have performed the task to standard themselves.¹⁵

ADP 7-0, *Training*, identifies unit commanders and senior leaders as critical to the process of ensuring effective training and they accomplish this through leadership, presence, and guidance.¹⁶ Command Sgt. Maj. T. J. Holland, in a 2024 article titled "Decoding Lethality: Measuring What Matters," notes that Army formations are struggling to adapt to the increased cognitive demands of the modern battlefield. Holland identifies that physical and materiel measurements of unit performance are useful but inadequate. According to Holland, the Army must adapt its training approach to meet these new demands and legacy approaches may no longer suffice. He notes,

Effective training is crucial for enhancing lethality. Training programs must be designed to develop not only physical skills but also psychological resilience, tactical acumen, and situational awareness. This requires a holistic

approach that integrates traditional training methods with advanced technologies and support.¹⁷

As Army training starts with Army leadership, certifying leaders with the right capabilities is where any training program must begin. CAP's focus on the all-around perspective of Army leaders not only ensures Army battalions and brigades are led by leaders with the physical, intellectual, and emotional capacity to drive effective training, it also provides a model for reinvigorating Army training programs.

"World-Class, Fair and Consistent"

The CAP mantra is "world-class, fair, and consistent."¹⁸ Establishing an assessment process firmly on the foundation of Army doctrine is an effective start to meeting all three criteria. Doctrine is a collection of accepted and effective best practices that establishes the lexicon for effective communication and the basis for shared understanding. It also sets the standard for soldiers and leaders to follow. Our Army's leadership doctrine is very clear on expectations and provides essential guidance on how to create effective organizations fixed on accomplishing the mission while protecting their people, our true combat power, to fight today, tonight, and tomorrow. Training and warfighting doctrine is inextricably linked to good leadership. Good leaders are essential to generating combat power and fielding competent and capable warfighting formations. A standard that is not enforced or properly modeled is not a true standard. The Army's Command Assessment Program not only validates the Army's leadership standard but also serves to inspire adherence to that standard for many years to come. ■

Notes

1. The Army competitive category officer population comprises most Command Assessment Program (CAP) candidates. The system for this population is the most advanced and mature. The other populations, specifically Army medical officer, acquisitions professionals, and command sergeants major, are moving toward this advanced model, but describing every nuance of each program can easily confuse the reader. In each population's entire Centralized Selection List system, the CAP portion and assessments remains the same. The systemic differences with other populations mostly encompass only invitation procedures and past performance scoring procedures.

2. CAP provides assessment scores in the areas of verbal communication, written communication, Army Combat Fitness Test, CAP Strategic Assessment score, and Leadership Strength Spectrum score. Candidates receive a tiered score based on decile ranking, comparing performance to scored performance of previous cohorts. The Job Performance Panel provides a performance score that considers an officer's full performance file of evaluations and other personnel records to round out the inputs to create a Centralized Selection List Order of Merit List. All scores are weighted. An officer's performance score is the most heavily weighted component in determining the Order of Merit List score.

3. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2019), 1-15, 8-7–8-8; Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Developing Leaders* (U.S. GPO, 2022), 1-3–1-4.
4. Todd South, "The Army Kicks Off a New Way to Pick Critical Commanders," *Army Times*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/01/23/the-army-kicks-off-a-new-way-to-pick-critical-commanders/>
5. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-15.
6. Anthony Bianchi, "Understanding Assessments and Their Relevance to the Future Success of the U.S. Army," *Military Review* 101, no. 3 (May-June 2021): 134.
7. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 5-3.
8. *Ibid.*, 5-2.
9. *Ibid.*, 8-7–8-8.
10. FM 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, 4-26.
11. FM 3-0, *Operations* (U.S. GPO, 2022), 2-4.
12. *Ibid.*, 8-13.
13. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 4-3–4-4.
14. FM 7-0, *Training* (U.S. GPO, 2021), 3-9.
15. *Ibid.*
16. ADP 7-0, *Training* (U.S. GPO, 2024), 5.
17. T. J. Holland, "Decoding Lethality: Measuring What Matters," *Military Review* Online Exclusive, 4 October 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2024-OLE/Decoding-Lethality>.
18. U.S. Army Command Assessment Program, accessed 20 December 2024, <https://usarmycap.experience.crmforce.mil/s/>.