



Gen. Christopher T. Donahue (seated), commanding general of US Army Europe and Africa, speaks with senior leaders of III Corps and the 36th Engineer Brigade on 17 February 2026 during a visit to Fort Hood, Texas. Donahue met with command teams to discuss training, readiness, and leader development efforts across the installation. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Neu, US Army)

Sustaining Senior Leaders Beyond the Rank

Identity, Meaning, and Purpose as a Deliberate Investment

Col. Laura Weimer, PhD, US Army

If you are a senior military leader—or on a path toward senior leadership—you may have experienced a quiet tension. You are committed

to the mission, highly capable, and still serving with integrity, yet your energy feels thinner, and the trade-offs and costs to your health, family, and emotional

well-being feel more personal. With the relentless operational tempo, increasing complexity, midlife transitions, and incentive structures that seem to discount family structure, you may feel burned out or unsettled by career choices that no longer feel fully honest or aligned with who you are becoming or want to be. In a profession that prizes endurance and selfless service, it is easy to assume that fatigue, disconnection, or diminished fulfillment are simply the cost of leadership. But it increasingly feels less like selfless service and more like sustained self-neglect. Many leaders quietly wonder whether the “loneliness at the top” and constant hard rowing are unavoidable—or whether something essential has gone unexamined or underdeveloped along the way.

I originally wrote this article while a student at the US Army War College, inspired by research, reflection, and candid conversations with peers and senior leaders navigating this exact tension. To complement what we know about the value of developing resilience, work-life integration, and mindfulness, I suggest leaders must deliberately understand and cultivate their identity, meaning, and purpose (IMP) to sustain both long-term service and personal well-being. The IMP framework invites leaders—regardless of tenure—to reflect on who they are beyond rank and role, how they make sense of life’s events, and how purpose can guide their decisions—emphasizing personal agency and internal control as a means to not only endure senior leadership, but to thrive with coherence, authenticity, and fulfillment. This worthwhile and deliberate investment will strengthen not only our leaders, but the people and institutions they serve. This article describes the challenges leaders face in extended service and midlife, defines IMP in a leadership context, and offers practical steps for strengthening well-being through its development.

And I’ve made up my mind, I ain’t wasting no more time.
—Whitesnake, “Here I Go Again”¹

Challenges to Professional Endurance

Senior leaders bear an increasing burden of responsibility as they progress to higher echelons and larger organizations where the significance of their decisions

grows. Senior leaders’ responsibility for training, leader placement, legal and disciplinary adjudication, and risk management have profound and lasting impacts on members of their units as well as their families; real-time social media and full access can often exacerbate these pressures. While commanders carry specific legal and personal responsibilities, command sergeants major and senior staff officers also feel the weight of outcomes from their assessments and advice.

Leaders also experience resource depletion from sustained demands. While senior leaders generally have greater control of resources—and receive external support such as military aides, drivers, and executive assistants—greater demands often offset these benefits. Longer hours, isolation from peers, and minimal mentorship or feedback can all deplete internal resources while subordinates, superiors, civilian community members, and political leaders often expect near perfection and resilience without appreciating the complex requirements and implications. Over decades of service, these demands frequently extend into personal and family life through repeated deployments, permanent changes of station, and short-duration assignments that increase time spent away from home (i.e., geographical bachelor). Family members may perceive untapped control over career decisions, particularly as older children or spouses seek stability or pursue their own professional paths.

Finally, senior leaders face increased unpredictability and scrutiny when

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competing for promotion and senior roles, concurrent with becoming eligible for retirement and weighing potential benefits of a civilian profession. Some may feel pressure and expectations to continue serving in specific roles laid out for them. Simultaneously, the decision about when to retire comes with significant considerations about postmilitary work, which can feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable. For decades, they have served selflessly and been evaluated and promoted based on understood and rewarded criteria. They must learn how to translate their skills and experiences along with seeking clarity around how to spend their time in a fulfilling way.

Over time, accumulation of responsibility, isolation, and sustained demand can culminate in burnout—a psychological state that results from exhaustion, cynicism, and a diminished sense of effectiveness.² Burnout reflects the depletion of internal resources from extended exposure to stressors perceived as unpredictable, uncontrollable, or both.³ This chronic stress from decades of leadership and increased responsibility can build slowly in the midst of high performance. Eventually minor daily hassles such as household repairs, travel delays, or interpersonal disagreements can trigger excessive stress. A lack of relief is detrimental to physical and psychological health and well-being, as well as decision-making, engagement, motivation, and emotional response to professional setbacks.⁴

Compounding Challenges from Midlife

The added complexity of senior leadership is its overlap with midlife. For senior leaders, additional stress comes from the layering of physiological aging, role transitions, changing perspectives, and the unique military context just described. This often intensifies the risk and impact of burnout introduced by prolonged professional demands.

A significant aspect of midlife is the transition of roles, most often driven by circumstance and stages of life rather than by choice (see studies on life course).⁵ Many leaders take on caregiving roles for aging parents or become de facto leaders of a family's generation when parents or other relatives pass away. Children enter adulthood, altering family dynamics and marriages, while spouses may pursue new careers or grapple with

resentment over paths not taken. The timing may see the maturing of a first marriage or the early stages of a second marriage. Those leaders who never married or had kids may feel regret over life decisions postponed in favor of professional advancement. These shifts require psychological disengagement from familiar roles and adoption of new ones, often overloading internal resources and leading to compartmentalization, frustration, and strain within relationships.⁶

Age-related physiological decline can further challenge senior leaders who have long identified with and been recognized by exceptional physical fitness and intellect. The experience of natural decline—for example, a second knee surgery or chronic pain that sidelines them from the activities that were central to their early career identities—can be disorienting and discouraging, albeit common and natural.

Lastly, senior leaders in midlife often reevaluate priorities, goals, abilities, and contributions as they anticipate an eventual conclusion of their military career. Some recognize that their passions and interests at work differ from the path laid out for them by mentors or career managers, and the realization that they are approaching their professional peak can be unsettling—particularly for those who strongly identify with accomplishment and recognition.⁷ They question who they will be when they take off the uniform for the last time. Most feel immense pride in their individual and unit achievements and hold onto the excitement and importance of their service to the Nation and each other.

Defining Identity, Meaning, and Purpose in a Leadership Context

Literature and research around identity, meaning, and purpose in the fields of psychology and management provide insight into how they can be developed and leveraged by senior leaders to prevent or minimize burnout and foster well-being concurrent with professional endurance.⁸

One's identity consists of thoughts, beliefs, values, goals, and expectations that are internal to a person and in response to their external environment. It provides a cognitive organization of one's experiences, establishes expectations for how to behave, and helps them anticipate how others will respond to their actions—all tied to who they are. Adolescents and young adults naturally



look to others—parents, mentors, or peers—to determine who they should be.⁹ Early in a professional or leadership role, people often mimic others they see as successful or in line with how they want to live.¹⁰ The military is an example of a strong culture that socializes new members with clear expectations and shared values to unify individuals and teams beyond their own beliefs. Over time and through influential experiences, people’s identities—in terms of their relationships, hobbies, and other aspects of their lifestyle—solidify and become less prone to external influence.

Meaning is “the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one’s being and existence.”¹¹ People pursue an understanding of the connection and coherence between different events in their lives while acknowledging the complexity of developing their sense of self over time.¹² Similarly, individuals pursue meaning in their tasks or roles at work. People can shape their job experience (or career) cognitively or physically and obtain a greater sense of purpose or meaning by changing how they define themselves at work.

Purpose can be described as the essence of who you are, or who you are meant to be. Early in their lives and careers, individuals may struggle to

Then-Maj. Gen. James Lisenhower (*right*) passes the 1st Armored Division colors to Lt. Gen. Sean Bernabe, then III Corps commanding general, as Maj. Gen. Curtis Taylor stands by to receive them during the 1st Armored Division (1AD) change of command ceremony on 11 July 2024 at Fort Bliss, Texas. Lisenhower is now the commanding general of the Combined Arms Command at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and Taylor is preparing the 1AD headquarters to assume the Task Force Southern Border mission. 1AD Command Sgt. Maj. James Light will become the command sergeant major of III Armored Corps in 2026, and Bernabe retired in December 2025 with over thirty-three years in service. (Photo by Cpl. David Poleski, US Army)

understand or articulate the purpose of their work or lives.¹³ Robert Kegan’s theory of adult development suggests those in early adulthood may find purpose primarily in social confirmation and comparison with others or societal expectations.¹⁴ As they mature psychologically, people develop the ability to find purpose in what brings them happiness, what aligns with their personally defined values, and what circumstances they find themselves in. The motivation to serve something bigger than themselves is a common motivator for joining the military and continuing to serve, while faith practices also provide a strong sense of service and way of living.

Thriving Through IMP: Coherence, Direction, and Engagement

Despite the cumulative impacts of prolonged and increasing responsibility and accompanying midlife transitions, leaders have an opportunity to strengthen their own resilience, rather than becoming bitter, sacrificing their personal well-being, or prematurely culminating their professional service. Deliberately cultivating elements of one's identity, meaning, and purpose—personally and with external support—can directly protect and replenish resources, reduce burnout, and enable professional endurance for each leader in their own way.

Expanding and investing in one's *identity*—through activities, hobbies, or community engagement—can enhance competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which are all core elements of resilience (e.g., self-determination theory).¹⁵ Having a multifaceted identity allows leaders to lean on different parts of their lives for coherence, fulfillment, and stress relief rather than relying solely on the military or any relationship to unrealistically fulfill every need. It requires intentionality to diversify relationships and activities beyond familiarity and proximity, seeking out people who see and appreciate different aspects of a leader's life, activities, and profession. Exploring creative outlets can also directly contribute to well-being and renewed energy. Former Prime Minister Winston Churchill notably relied upon painting on the front lines in brigade command and again throughout his leadership during World War II; he claimed it as one of his greatest sources of strength and decompression.¹⁶

Reflecting on experiences and connecting them to a larger narrative helps leaders make sense of challenges, sustain motivation, navigate uncertainty, and reduce stress.¹⁷ Gaining appreciation for and understanding past events can build confidence as leaders navigate new challenges and unexpected turns. In responding to the challenges of senior leadership and midlife, leaders draw from their sense of meaning to aid in recovery, reframe challenges, and garner strength to endure and thrive. Some draw on a particular philosophy or faith as a lens through which to make sense of past events and generate hope in future steps. Leaders who reframe tasks or roles can gain control in defining their career trajectory, redirecting from disappointment, or overcoming burnout.

Clarifying what drives them—their purpose beyond rank or role—enables leaders to make decisions, set priorities, and remain engaged over a long tenure of service.

By the nature of the military profession and its responsibilities, senior leaders will face periods of discouragement and doubt. They are expected to provide a sense of purpose for their units but must also acknowledge and leverage purpose for themselves, particularly when external missions or expectations no longer sustain their motivation. Leaders must focus on the skills, effects, or outcomes that energize them personally when they lack motivation or face pivotal decisions. When operating out of their comfort zone or in a new (or undesired) role, they can lead with confidence, grounded in their purpose rather than comparison. When making career decisions, leaders can seek deliberate alignment and application of their purpose to particular roles and mission sets.

Relationships can explicitly aid leaders in crafting and refining insights about their identity, their driving purpose, and the meaning they discern from life events. Trusted friends, mentors, or coaches can help leaders recognize patterns in where they are most effective, energized, and authentic. Honest and constructive feedback can enable leaders to navigate difficult personal and professional decisions without regret.

Investing intentionally in IMP will create the greatest positive impact on a leader's resilience, engagement, and well-being. Below are some practical ways leaders can cultivate their IMP.

1. Conduct an inventory of the events, experiences, or observations that have contributed most to your leadership identity—the values, beliefs, priorities, goals, and expectations you leverage as you lead. Use this to appreciate your developmental journey and build confidence in finding meaning in current or future roles.
2. Journal about when and where you feel the most energized: think about the people you are around, certain geographical characteristics, how your time is allocated, and your level of agency. Identify opportunities in your schedule (small windows or long periods of time) when you can plan to be in those spaces or conduct those activities.
3. Reflect regularly—through journaling or in conversation—about where you add value to your organization. What unique skills, experiences, and relationships of yours contribute to the organization's success and the personal and professional development of others? Remind yourself of those contributions to sustain your engagement.

4. Map out your next two to three potential career steps. Evaluate why you want (or do not want) to perform each role (look beyond what others say you should do). When assigned to a new role, outline what meaningful purpose you can pursue within the role, even if not explicit in the duty description.

Extended IMP Value: Positive Leader Impact and Resilience in Large-Scale Combat Operations

Beyond the tangible benefits for a leader's engagement and well-being, deliberately investing and calling upon IMP as a senior leader strengthens their subordinates and organization as they navigate their own lives and careers, and as they face uncertainty, intensity, and loss within future large-scale combat operations.

As a leader, deliberate investment in IMP adds value to subordinates and the organization itself. Leaders can share lessons learned and skills from their careers and invest in the development of their subordinates' IMP factors during day-to-day activities, counseling conversations, high-intensity training events, and in welcoming or bidding farewell to teammates. They can model taking opportunities to expand perspective and skills through nontraditional leadership roles or internships, returning refreshed, recharged, and strengthened with new insights about themselves and their work. They can contribute to the success of the organization by being present and engaged if and when they start to navigate the transition from military to civilian life. And they can maintain a coherent sense of self as they envision and explore their future beyond the uniform.

Senior leader resilience is also critical in deployed or combat environments and in building collective resilience for a team or organization. The broader perspective and understanding of strategic implications may not soften the emotional impact of losing soldiers, whether in combat, training accidents, or other situations. As the military prepares for large-scale combat operations, the likelihood of soldier and unit loss increases significantly, and leaders must prepare to lead through tragedy on a large scale. In combat and loss, a well-developed IMP allows leaders to remain grounded in their identity, frame sacrifice with meaning, and continue leading with confidence despite tragedy.

Conclusion

If parts of this article felt uncomfortably familiar, it is because many senior leaders carry this internal tension quietly and alone. Personal relevance may not be immediate or loud to everyone, however. Its importance comes from hedging against erosion and recognizing inflection points when clarity must outweigh endurance. We all desire not having to choose between serving with excellence or feeling whole and energized. A quiet relief can come from recognizing this tension and naming the opportunity to invest differently. Amid the cumulative burdens of leadership, continued challenges, and potential disappointments, we have individual agency to mitigate the costs to our professional endurance, personal well-being, and operational effectiveness. Rather than gutting it out or wishing for increased resilience, IMP is a way to invest differently, to replenish what your responsibilities will otherwise continue to deplete.

Particularly in a time- and resource-constrained state, how can we integrate and sustain this investment rather than surge for a moment on this good intention? What does thriving look like? IMP does not offer a checklist of what decision to make or path to follow; rather, it offers a method of discovering why you (specifically) navigate each turn, how you can build an enduring strength, and what elements of your identity you can incorporate into your daily life and significant decisions toward a more coherent and confident direction. Thriving could look like a sense of clarity and confidence in serving where and how you are impactful, making deliberate choices in how you spend your time and feeling energized from your relationships and activities, and having a genuine and thoughtful answer to why you desire your next professional role.

Our path of responsibility will present decisions that rarely have simple options or guaranteed outcomes. Expectations or pressures from family, society, or our organization sometime create more confusion than clarity. Pain and frustration in this human endeavor will still exist. As you navigate decisions, trade-offs, and crossroads, you can find yourself grieving the path not taken while still knowing you made the right decision. You may experience uncertainty but also feel a great sense of coherence and personal alignment that gives you confidence and strength each day, month, and year. Thriving through senior leadership is not about perfection; it is about you as a leader understanding

yourself, investing in your purpose, and leveraging your identity and meaning to navigate each decision, sustain a lifetime of service, and thrive holistically—personally, professionally, and beyond the uniform.

This is not a call for self-indulgent reflection; it highlights instead an operationally relevant obligation to strengthen your personal and professional potential. The challenge is worthwhile and the payoff profound:

leaders who intentionally cultivate their IMP sustain their energy, maintain authentic engagement, and model resilience and purpose for those around them. Demonstrate the strength of your leadership and your legacy by not neglecting yourself. A cohort of senior leaders who collectively recognize and act on this obligation will be a timeless source of strength and endurance the institution can neither create nor exhaust. ■

Notes

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6. Hobfoll, "Conservation of Resources Theory"; Blake E. Ashforth and Fred Mael, "Social Identity Theory and the Organization," *Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1 (1989): 20–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/258189>.
7. Arthur C. Brooks, *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life* (Penguin, 2022).
8. Portions of this literature review were adapted from the author's previous work: Laura Weimer, "The Dynamic Nature of Leader Identity Development" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2023), <https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37375531>.
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