



The Army's Newest 360 Degree Program A Half Step Forward

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“People who are terrible to their subordinates may be perfectly civil and respectful up the chain of command. For a more senior person to identify a toxic person in the chain of command actually is a little harder than it may appear on the surface.”

—Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates¹

An article published in the Army Times on Dec. 28, 2013, announced a plan by the Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Odierno, requiring battalion and brigade commanders across the Army to undergo the newest 360-degree assessment program, the Commander 360, starting at the beginning of fiscal year 2015.² This announcement comes at a time when national news inundates us daily with the details of the latest instance of individuals exhibiting bad leadership traits. Reliefs, removals, and quiet retirements are the norm following the discovery of ethical lapses and toxic work environments. However, these characteristics did not develop in these individuals overnight, nor did they result from a promotion. These behaviors existed in these people either before they entered service or they learned them early through emulation of poor examples. Why do we find it so difficult to eliminate these characteristics before we select the people with them for critical leadership assignments and promotion to the senior ranks?

The Army's most important asset is its Soldiers who collectively accomplish all of

the tasks needed to achieve mission success. The sons and daughters of Americans deserve the absolute best leaders that the Army can provide. Too often, we find that this is not the case. Too many times, soldiers get a bad or worse, a toxic, leader that does not inspire or foster their respect. These leaders utilize inappropriate strategies to obtain immediate results and mindless adherence to orders without concern for others or the long-term health of the Army. Their tactics include bullying others, mercilessly berating subordinates, or making unlawful, immoral, and unethical decisions to get their way. They selfishly ignore others ideas, micromanage events, hoard information, undermine peers, and work to look good to superiors. A bad leader may exhibit a few of these characteristics. Extreme and consistent use of these undesirable behaviors defines the toxic leader.³ A toxic leader is all about self. He destroys morale, inhibits initiative, and causes good people to resign. He can have high unit performance in the short term, but he does not build strong, resilient, and cohesive units nor

does he work to develop the next generation of Army leaders. Developing future leaders is one of the most important legacies for a leader at any level of any organization.

In a survey of 22,000 Army leaders, more than 80 percent indicated that they observed a toxic leader and about 20 percent reported directly working for one. Approximately 50 percent of those believed that the toxic, abusive leader would be promoted to higher levels of leadership.⁴ I have personally experienced more than my fair share of toxic and abusive leaders and watched, as most of them were promoted to the senior ranks. I have also watched many good people leave the Army because of those toxic bosses. The numbers found in the study should be higher because the sample does not include those that quit the Army. If 50 percent of our people do not trust the system to choose the best leaders for promotion and command, then the system must be broken.

The Multi Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) tool is the first 360-degree assessment tool developed and adopted for widespread use across the Army. When a leader decides to con-

duct an MSAF, he picks a set of subordinates, peers, and superiors to assess him, meeting an established minimum sampling to meet statistical requirements. The information returned by those selected is tabulated and a report produced for the person. If too few people answer the assessment, it is not statistically relevant. The assessed leader has the option to request a 'coach' to guide him through the report. He helps in determining positive and negative leadership behaviors while providing mentoring on how to overcome traits that are not conducive to good leadership.

The MSAF's intent is to assist in developing leadership ability by providing constructive criticism. However, the only people who develop from the MSAF are those that are receptive to feedback and willing to seek improvement. It is rare that a leader does not have some shortcoming within his or her leadership traits. A good leader recognizes this and seeks to identify the weaknesses to improve or at least mitigate them. Self-awareness and the ability to grow from that knowledge are positive leadership characteristics that the bad, toxic leader does

not usually possess. In this system, there are serious flaws, causing it to fail when applied to all Army leaders. First, the individual picks the assessors, which can lead to a skewed report based on a propensity to pick people that are liked and respected, who are more likely to give a positive review. Second, there is no effective enforcement that the individual completes an MSAF. The Army requires officers to conduct an MSAF every three years, which gets annotated on their officer evaluation reports (OER). However, data shows that since 2008, less than 50 percent of the Army's lieutenant colonels and colonels actually completed an MSAF.⁵ These leaders should be setting the example for their subordinates, yet they are failing miserably. Third, although a coach is useful, there is no one to help the person and guide them over an extended time. 360-degree evaluation use in the civilian sector shows that they do improve an organization as long as leaders enforce standards in administering and following-up the assessment.⁶ Although the MSAF is a start at developing better leaders, it falls short of solving the systemic problem of bad leaders entering the senior ranks.

The Commander 360 is an evolutionary step from the current MSAF that is specifically formulated for lieutenant colonels and colonels in command positions. It is designed to facilitate a commander's growth and efficacy, increase self-awareness, and to further engage the commander's supervisor in the officer's development process. The Commander 360 initiative mitigates the three previously mentioned flaws of the MSAF. The commander's rater chooses who will do the assessing. The rater also receives the assessment results and he must counsel the commander on them. He can then continue to mentor the commander on the assessment results throughout their

time together. Since the Commander 360 is a developmental tool, the rater is prohibited from using the information garnered from it in the commander's OER nor is he allowed to share any data with the assessed commander's senior rater.⁷ That is why the implementation of the Commander 360 is only a half step toward ensuring that only the best leaders are promoted into the senior ranks..

Since it is just another, though improved, development tool, the Commander 360 evaluation will have little impact on solving the Army's problem of senior leader ethical, character, and leadership failures. The Army has already identified that there is a systemic problem of toxic leaders. The Commander 360 could allow the Army to better identify who they are. However, this does not fix the problem. Under a Commander 360, the only attempt to fix the problem is for the rater to provide counseling and tutelage. There is no mechanism that applies consequences, because the senior rater is forbidden to know the results.

ADP 6-22: Army Leadership lists six requirements for a successful leader. Three are attributes: character, presence, and intellect. Three are competencies: leads, develops, and achieves.⁸ A good leader has an effective balance of these leadership requirements. Bad and toxic leaders are out of balance. Unfortunately, military culture traditionally skews toward the mission accomplishment and personal presence requirements of leaders. This plays to the strengths of the toxic leader. Performance, the most objective trait to evaluate, becomes the predominant factor in determining a leader's future potential particularly if the senior rater is not knowledgeable of how the leader achieves his successes. A Commander 360 for evaluation would assist to counterbalance these discrepancies.

Our current promotion system regards successful command at the battalion and brigade levels as the signatory assignment determining who will enter strategic leadership. As long as this remains true, the senior raters of these leaders must have the most inclusive information available about them. It is the senior rater assessment of the individual's potential as it relates to their present peer group that counts the most for promotion. We require our commanders to analyze operational information and then make sound life and death decisions, particularly over the past twelve years in Afghanistan and Iraq. Why do we not trust their judgment when using information derived from subordinates when evaluating leaders? The logic exemplified by "I will trust you with my life but not my career," is inherently rotten and is indicative of the ethical problems in the force.

One argument consistently heard against a 360 evaluation is that a single disgruntled subordinate can purposely provide answers with malice to produce poor results. The resulting false report could unjustly end a good leader's career. A single evaluation with significant divergence from the average should be thrown out, and depending on the circumstances, investigated further. Additionally, it is incumbent on the rater (or senior rater) to use the results as a data point, not a final grade, concerning command climate. Poor results should be followed-up with some "battlefield circulation" by the supervisors to confirm or question the evaluation data.

Another common argument is that commanders will make decisions for the express purpose of having his subordinates like him. Subordinates can easily identify a commander who exercises "liker-ship" and will not respect him because of it, particularly the non-commissioned officers and warrant

officers. Respect and trust, the root of command, can lead to being liked. Being liked however, does not necessarily lead to respect and trust. An incessant need to be liked is a negative trait. This can be determined by asking straight forward, yes/no, questions. For example: Do I respect this leader? Would I trust this leader to make best decisions in dangerous situations that could lead to my death? Does this leader care more about his image than he does about the unit? Ultimately, the only people that should fear a 360 review are bad and toxic leaders.

Our Army's strategic leaders give a consistent message every time a case of toxic leadership or failure of personal ethics plays in the media. For example, in a March 2013 interview, Gen. Odierno stated that it is a necessity that Army officers are held to a higher standard of conduct and be accountable for their conduct. He also said that 360-degree evaluations have to be utilized, as one of many tools, to root out toxic leaders.⁹ However, general perceptions are that the Army's overt actions do not match the message. The tools we are implementing will not achieve the messaged effect. It is possible that Gen. Odierno purposely decided to take incremental steps. Small changes introduced over time are more likely to achieve sustained cultural change. Big changes, particularly if the organization believes they impinge upon their cultural identity, require more personal effort from the leader to impose the change. The resulting disruption and push-back that could result would divert attention away from other priority issues such as the current budget. An example of this is the institutional outrage that occurred following Gen. Shinseki's decision in 2001 to change the Army headgear from soft cap to beret. This was eventually repealed in 2011.

Change is needed to better improve Army leaders and the Army's leadership in the long term. To achieve this, the Army should maintain the MSAF in its current form for junior leaders both officer and enlisted. Mid-career leaders should use a modified MSAF procedure that adopts the rater and counseling requirements from the Commander 360. The Commander 360 allows subordinate assessments from officers, enlisted, and civilians. However, it should also require certain minimum participation from each group, appro-

priate to unit composition, to get the best results. Most importantly, turn the Commander 360 into a developmental and evaluation tool by giving the senior rater access to the results for his use in evaluating promotion potential and then hold senior leaders accountable for their ratings of officers that lead to the promotion of toxic leaders. This will improve the selection of Army commander and senior leaders. It will also lead to personal self-correction or mitigation of bad behaviors before they become destructive due to the real pos-

sibility of consequences for exhibiting those unwanted traits. These recommended changes, with the addition of the newly implemented general officer 360 assessment, would build a much more cohesive and comprehensive methodology for improving Army leadership at all levels.

The Commander 360 is a good tool. I participated in the initial pilot program and found it to be an improvement over the MSAF. Adjustments resulting from the second pilot should make it even better. The

required interaction between the commander and his rater is a necessary component for leadership development. That is the half step. We need to take the full step with the program. Senior raters must have the information to evaluate their subordinates effectively so that they can do a better job at selecting our senior leaders. This will also help deter poor behavior while increasing individual leadership development. The sooner we get started in an open and transparent manner, the sooner we will see results. ■

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Endnotes

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