



Leadership potential should be based on a person's comprehensive abilities; overemphasizing ACFT scores disenfranchises opportunities to lead.

The ACFT: Soldiers Over Scores

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In identifying and cultivating effective leaders, organizations often employ diverse metrics to assess success. In its commitment to evaluating and defining success in its personnel, the U.S. Army has historically placed significant emphasis on physical fitness assessment scores.

The Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) is the current physical fitness test that assesses Soldiers' performance using a scoring scale system based on their age and gender (U.S. Army, n.d.). While the ACFT serves as a valuable tool to measure Soldiers' physical performance, there is a growing recognition that the scoring system raises ethical concerns.

This article explores the need for a positive shift in the assessment approach to ensure quality Soldiers are fairly selected for promotion and leadership positions.

The Challenge and its Ramifications

Emphasis on ACFT scores inadvertently overshadows other critical qualities essential for effective leadership. The Army Leadership Requirements Model (ALRM) defines specific attributes and competencies, which align with Army operational needs and pertinence to individuals at all levels of leadership (Department of the Army, 2019a).

For example, individuals with strong character qualities make decisions that coincide with operational requirements and fulfill leader expectations regardless of what level they serve. To that point, physical fitness has little to do holistically when it comes to their leadership role within their organizations based on the ALRM.

Physical fitness is a factor of presence, which is an Army leader attribute (Department of the Army, 2019a). By aligning promotions and leadership selections

predominantly with ACFT scores, the Army risks undervaluing other attributes outlined in the ALRM.

Balancing Ethical Leadership and Physical Proficiency

Overemphasis on ACFT scores creates an ethical dilemma of prioritizing leadership qualities and physical fitness proficiency. The impact hinders deserving Soldier selection and fails to align with the diverse physical demands of combat roles.

Unfortunately, permanent profiles requiring an alternate ACFT event negatively impact those Soldiers and put them at a disadvantage from others who can perform all main events.

The current final ACFT score calculation process for individuals who take alternate events predisposes these Soldiers to have lower scores. The Army measures Soldiers on a pass-or-fail scale for alternate ACFT events and grants a 60 point maximum for passing the event (Department of the Army, 2019b). If Soldiers take two alternate events for the ACFT and achieve the maximum score for the other four events, they could realistically get only 520 points.

In fact, every published after-action review for senior enlisted promotion evaluation boards distinctively notes excellence in physical fitness as “extremely favorable” (Human Resources Command, n.d.).

Using ACFT scores as a weighty means of evaluating leadership potential, specifically in job Army specialties with lower physical demands, eliminates the opportunity to lead their organizations. It is necessary to identify the disparities between the ACFT and each job specialty’s physical requirements.

Addressing Disparities and Misalignments

The impact of overemphasizing ACFT scores extends beyond promotion, affecting Soldiers across various Military Occupational Specialties (MOS). An independent review revealed inconsistencies in passing rates, with certain MOSs facing disadvantages due to their specific physical requirements (RAND Corporation, 2022).

For example, an infantryman would in most cases have a higher ACFT score than a recruiter. In fact, the independent report concluded that Practical Nursing Specialists and Culinary Specialists assessed with a 72% overall ACFT pass rate, which falls at the bottom ten of all regular Army MOSs (RAND Corporation, 2022).

Additionally, the minimum thresholds for some



Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Hilson performs the ACFT rowing alternate event, March 6, 2020. The current process of calculating a final ACFT score for individuals who take alternate events predisposes these Soldiers to have lower scores. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Sgt. Alexandra Shea)

ACFT events contradict the established physical requirements for specific MOSs, creating an ethical dilemma for Soldiers who must meet conflicting standards. The Culinary Specialty requires individuals to vertically lift 25 pounds while wearing 80 pounds of gear, regardless of gender (MilSuite, 2023). However, the deadlift ACFT event requires males to vertically lift 140 pounds and females to lift 120 pounds to achieve a minimum score (United States Army, n.d.).

The weight needed to achieve a minimum score on the deadlift event for either gender far exceeds 25 pounds with 80 pounds of gear worn. Furthermore, Soldiers would have to vertically lift more than their MOS must physically do during combat operations to gain more than a minimum score. These factors negatively affect Soldier combat readiness and future leader selection throughout the force.

Root Cause Analysis

A critical examination of the ACFT scoring system exposes inconsistencies in the data collected during the diagnostic period. The Army collected evidence offering mixed and incompatible results to substantiate logical reasons for implementing some of the events, such as the plank, which has no clear correlation to combat performance (RAND Corporation, 2022).

Col. Nicholas Gist, director of the Department of Physical Education, suggests MOS physical demands are immaterial, and that being physically active five to six days a week would assist Soldiers to achieve maximum ACFT performance (Bartelt, 2020). This reasonably supports the root cause of influenced biases on ACFT

scores, which negatively affects promotions and incorrect leader placement.

Furthermore, the report challenged the Army's rationale that holding all MOS' to the same physical standard was effective, which is based on the potential consequences to personnel management (RAND Corporation, 2022). The scoring system's failure to align with combat effectiveness further exacerbates the ethical concerns surrounding leadership selection.

Elements of the Army's current promotion process dampen the chance for individuals with lower ACFT scores to serve in critical positions, which are otherwise irrelevant to an organization's success.

Physical Fitness accounts for only 15% of the total promotion points available for Soldiers seeking advancement to sergeant and staff sergeant (Department of the Army, 2019b). Therefore, emphasis on physical fitness scores causes an incorrect placement of future individual talent in organizational leadership roles.

There are noticeable inequalities within senior enlisted promotions. During the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 sergeant first class Evaluation Board, 41.2% of career counselors selected as Most Qualified (MQ) had an Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) score of 270 points or higher, while only 17.6% were on a permanent profile (U.S. Army Recruiting and Retention College, 2023).

The fact is that the ACFT replaced the APFT as the official test to measure physical fitness. However, the Army established that higher physical fitness scores correlate to a higher propensity for promotion potential, which reinforces adverse impacts derived from the root causes.



Removing ACFT data from a Soldiers' board files will promote equal opportunity within the Army in the same manner that the removal of other demographic information, such as gender and race, played toward promotions. (U.S Army photo by Sgt. Leo Jenkins)

Proposed Ethical Solutions

There are two recommended solutions to help address these concerns, which align with the Army's ethical decision-making process. It is important to make decisions using ethical reasoning to ensure leaders reach ethically sound decisions to achieve a desired outcome.

The Army uses three ethical lenses to identify potential ethical dilemmas or validate ethical considerations within available courses of action, such as rules, outcomes, and virtues (Department of the Army, 2020).

For instance, leaders use ethical lenses to determine if a recommendation contradicts with virtues established within the Army Values or if the outcome results in ethical obscurity, preventing the best course of action. It is essential to apply ethical lenses to the two recommended changes.

First, a gender-neutral ACFT based on MOS-specific physical demands, using a pass-or-fail measurement would ensure fairness and align with Army's values.

Continuing with the current scoring system will heavily affect physically undemanding MOSs, women, and older Soldiers based on lower pass rates (RAND Corporation, 2022).

Making these changes produces an ethically sound outcome that aligns with current MOS physical demands, regardless of gender, with the physical demands they would realistically endure during combat operations.

The current version of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which has support from various senators, includes adjusted standards for specific combat arms specialties and would require the Army to implement a gender-neutral standard for other MOSs



Soldiers performing the plank event during the Army Combat Fitness Test at Fort McCoy, WI.

(Nieberg, 2023). These changes would also help paint a more accurate picture of the unit's combat effectiveness for commanders.

Second, removing the ACFT score from promotion boards would promote a more comprehensive candidate evaluation, aligning with the Army's People First Strategy and fostering a positive organizational culture.

Removing ACFT data from Soldiers' board files would promote equal opportunity within the Army in the same manner that the removal of other demographic information, such as gender and race, played toward promotions. The promotion board panel members' role is to evaluate individuals' qualification for promotion based on the scope of assignments, estimated potential, maturity, awards, education, moral standards, character, and general physical condition (Human Resources Command, 2023).

Leaders can simply determine an individual's "general physical condition" with a pass or fail rating and do not require a quantified numeric score. They can then assess areas that directly affect organizational success and promote excellence in those areas through individual selection results, which still align with the ethical lenses.

Conclusion

This article explored the need for a positive shift to ensure quality Soldiers are fairly selected for promotion and leadership positions. It examined the challenge and ramifications of aligning promotions and leadership selections with ACFT scores, balancing ethical leadership and physical proficiency, addressing disparities and misalignments, root cause analysis, and proposed two ethical solutions.

While the ACFT measures Soldiers' physical performance, its current scoring system raises ethical concerns that overshadow other critical qualities essential for effective leadership.

In its commitment to evaluating and defining success in its personnel, the U.S. Army should adopt a gender-neutral ACFT based on MOS-specific physical demands that uses a pass-or-fail measurement and should remove the ACFT score from promotion boards to promote a more comprehensive candidate evaluation and foster a positive organizational culture. ■

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