
Army Retention of “Broad” Officers and NCOs

By Captain Eric S. Minor

Due to the diverse and complex nature of the contemporary operational environment, junior Army leaders must be able to seamlessly transition from the role of “tactical warrior” to that of “strategic thinker.” In short, they must be “broad” leaders (formerly referred to as “pentathletes”). As a result of the combined contemporary operational environment, multiple deployments, and increased responsibilities faced by these Soldiers, the Army has something it has never had before—highly educated, diverse, adaptive, combat-experienced junior leaders. Although the importance of retaining these valuable leaders is recognized, Army retention methods are flawed and in desperate need of repair.

The modern Army is similar to a socialist society where everyone is compensated at the same rate regardless of performance, merit, or potential. Unfortunately, this approach eliminates competition and the desire to succeed. Worse yet, it promotes mediocrity.

The United States’ competitive, capitalist society is one of the reasons it is such a world superpower. Competition for goods and services results in superior products and a more efficient system. The Army should operate on the same principle—allowing more competition among junior officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs), rewarding those who strive for excellence and weeding out those who do not.

Broad warrior leaders want to be recognized for individual efforts based on performance, merit, and potential. They wish to stand out from their peers, earn rewards for their hard work, and maintain stability in their personal lives. Monetary bonuses alone—especially those dispensed through blanket policies that reward the masses—are not enough. And neither are the assignments, evaluation systems, awards, or promotions that are currently in place.

As a solution, I suggest—

- **Eliminating officer and NCO promotions based on timelines.** Promotions should be based on performance, merit, and potential. Soldiers who meet prerequisite standards and exhibit excellent performance should be promoted ahead of their peers who do not. Using a promotion system that is restricted to timelines is similar to denying an outstanding baseball player the opportunity to play in the major league simply because he has not met some mandatory timeline in the minor league. Why hinder obvious talent? The business world does not subscribe to that philosophy, and neither should the Army.
- **Rewarding those who continue to sacrifice and take on challenging positions and assignments.** Because all junior officers and NCOs get promoted and paid at the same rate, there is currently no incentive to pursue challenging assignments or positions. Soldiers who accept these challenges should be rewarded with preferred assignments or more frequent promotions. Soldiers who fill positions above their pay grade should be paid at the rate associated with the higher grade.
- **Offering an NCO degree completion program.** A degree completion program similar to the one offered to officers should be available to NCOs, allowing them to retain active-duty benefits and pay while attending school full time. In return, the NCOs would be required to remain in the Army for a

minimum period of time following graduation. This program would allow NCOs to spend more time with their families, increase retention in the enlisted ranks, and provide the Army with a more educated NCO Corps.

- **Presenting awards based on performance rather than rank or position.** Currently, a staff officer or NCO who diligently works long hours in a low-profile position or in a position with limited leadership responsibility can expect to receive the Army Commendation Medal—the same award that other Soldiers from the same unit are likely to receive upon performing only average work. Adding an award between the Army Commendation Medal and the Meritorious Service Medal could serve to differentiate the performance of Soldiers of the same rank and position.
- **Reinstating a check-block system for performance evaluations.** A system that distinguishes outstanding junior officers from their peers would allow top performers to be rewarded.
- **Assigning leadership positions (commands) based on performance and potential rather than on year group or seniority.** Again, competition results in superior products and a more efficient system; therefore, the current officer and NCO career paths should be reformed by rewarding top performers rather than mediocre masses.
- **Eliminating the award of \$30,000 officer bonuses to military police based solely on year group and rank.** This approach does not encourage retention of the best officers; it simply perpetuates mediocrity. The bonus, which should be awarded based on performance, merit, and potential, could be determined objectively by reviewing officer evaluation reports, physical training scores, weapon qualification results, and operational experience.
- **Establishing cooperative degree programs for NCOs attending Noncommissioned Officer Education System schools.** There are currently many cooperative degree programs available in specific branch-related fields of the Officer Education System. This should be replicated at the NCO level. At a minimum, the Military Police Corps should establish a cooperative degree program to ensure that NCOs have every opportunity to earn a college level degree.
- **Granting military transition team assignment incentives only to officers and NCOs who volunteered for assignments—not to those who were selected by the Department of the Army based on dwell time.** Under the current system, Soldiers who did not wish to deploy are rewarded, while those who volunteered for multiple deployments receive less precedence. This proposed change would result in more choice assignments for deserving Soldiers who are not on a military transition team.
- **Offering additional military, military occupational specialty, and branch-specific training.** Junior leaders could then be required to remain in the Army for a specified period of time following completion of the training.

In summary, many young warrior leaders have served their country, fulfilled their duty, and see no hope for a reduction in the current operational tempo. They have nothing more to prove and want nothing more than recognition for their achievements and some stability in their lives. Incentives should be offered to entice these Soldiers to remain in the Army. These incentives could include breaks in deployments, time off to seek self-improvement through civilian or military education, and rewards for those who produce at a level above and beyond the standard.

Will the Army continue if these broad leaders leave its ranks? Yes—it always does. However, the cost of losing these talented warriors now will be realized when future Soldiers are led by senior officers and NCOs who only met the minimum standard.

Captain Minor is the commander of the 463d Military Police Company, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Lindenwood University, St. Charles, Missouri, and a master's degree in business and organizational security from Webster University.