Talent Management
Six Constraints on Senior Officer Succession Planning

By Lt. Col. Michael J. Colarusso
U.S. Army retired
and
Lt. Col. David S. Lyle

In December 1941, an Army colonel was dispatched to Hawaii by Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall. His mission was to assess the operational and strategic situation in the wake of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor. Highly regarded for his intellectual acumen and strategic vision, the colonel was Marshall’s pick as the next Chief of War Plans, and a general’s star was already in his future. Departing for the Pacific, the colonel’s plane left from Mitchel Field, New York, but it crashed en route. There were no survivors.

The colonel was Charles W. Bundy, and his death seemed calamitous. How would Marshall replace this indispensable officer? Luckily, by 1941, the Chief possessed a solid inventory of talent in the Army’s senior field-grade officers, allowing him to quickly backfill Bundy’s place with an officer named Dwight D. Eisenhower. We know the rest of the story: Eisenhower impressed Marshall and rapidly advanced as a result. If not for that fateful plane crash, however, who knows? Perhaps “General of the Army Bundy” would be ensconced in America’s pantheon of military heroes and “I like Bundy” campaign buttons would be hot collectibles at flea markets.

The larger point is that an organization must always know the talents available in its leadership pipeline so it can get the right people in the right place at the right time. Bundy’s untimely passing provides an example of replacement planning—effectively mitigating the risk resulting from the untimely or unanticipated loss of a leader by replacing him or her with someone of comparable ability. Succession planning, however, is different and demands far more. As Dennis Carey, a leader in the field of corporate governance, says, “The common conception of succession planning … has to do with changing leadership at the top, but the bottom of the organization is where succession planning actually starts if organizations really wish to develop their own talent.”

In other words, succession planning ensures continuity of executive leadership by early cultivation of leaders through planned assessments and developmental activities. It looks much further down the talent pipeline than replacement planning. It places people into talent pools, creating a deeper and more diverse bench of talent. Succession planning increases the odds that future executives will be optimal as opposed to merely suitable. Until the Army creates an officer talent management environment running from commissioning to retirement, however, it cannot execute officer succession planning to best effect. Near-term improvements can be made to increase the odds of getting the right senior officers in the right jobs, but several constraints must first be eliminated.

1. Senior officer management is currently outside the portfolio of the Army’s chief human resources (HR) officer. As a broad body of human capital literature advises (and as several successful chief executive officers can attest), the chief of HR should be the second most important person in an organization, as he or she manages its most important resource—people. The question is, just who is the Army’s chief of HR? Ostensibly, it’s the G-1, but from a roles-and-accountabilities standpoint, the answer to that question is quite unclear.
Advocacy, Patronage Pay Off for General Officer Assignments

Getting your foot in the door for a good assignment as a general officer requires convincing the Army’s four-star generals you are the most qualified. It doesn’t hurt to have some influential backers, according to the Army War College report on how to improve talent management for senior officers.

The Army Chief of Staff is the final arbiter in making recommendations for assignment to the Secretary of the Army, but the decisions come based on discussions during quarterly conferences when the pool of candidates and the available jobs are part of the agenda.

“During the session, all general officer positions are discussed, and each of the four-stars recommends those they feel are best-qualified to fill pending vacancies,” according to Lt. Colonels Michael J. Colarusso, USA Ret., and David S. Lyle. They co-authored, Senior Officer Talent Management: Fostering Institutional Adaptability, published in February.

During the closed-door discussions, recommended officers are judged on several grounds, including their experience—especially in operational and command assignments—and whether their potential new boss considers them a good fit for the team. It is possible an officer could end up in line for several jobs.

“Several factors heavily influence selection outcomes,” Colarusso and Lyle say. “Having advocates among the four-star generals is extremely important to advancing. Advocacy is often based on generals’ firsthand experiences with those officers being considered.”

Outside clout can also boost chances of being recommended for a key assignment, they say. “The patronage of other key influences also helps, such as a cabinet rank official or undersecretary insisting that his or her last military advisor is ‘general officer material.’”

The Chief of Staff does not have the final word, nor does the Secretary of the Army. Nominations for all four-star positions and three-star positions in joint services jobs must come from the Secretary of Defense. General officer promotions require confirmation by the U.S. Senate.

—Staff Report

2. Senior officer assignment churn makes thoughtful succession planning nearly impossible. For example, the average tenure of the Army’s last five G-1s, charged with the management of almost 900,000 officers, warrant officers, soldiers and civilians, was less than two years. The current Chief of Staff of the Army will serve with five G-1s (actual or interim) during the most significant personnel drawdown since the 1990s. Senior officers, particularly in HR, need a strategic assignment time span if they’re going to generate strategic outcomes.

3. A reward culture is in operation and sometimes generates poor assignment outcomes. Successful division commanders are almost reflexively selected for three-star positions, even if the new job is an uncertain fit with their talents. While the Army has developed leaders with domain expertise in force management or public affairs, they usually do not become chiefs in those areas; those assignments appear reserved for “fast-tracking operators.” It’s not that Army leaders are thoughtlessly picking their protégés for jobs. They do the best they can with the talent information they have, but that information is relatively sparse. As a result, they have little choice but to select a proven performer, even if that officer is a potential mismatch for the next assignment.

4. Senior officers are more often chosen for the position than selected for the work. This is a failure to recognize the fact that changes in operating environment require corresponding changes in leadership traits, experience or expertise. Can the next Army G-2 or commanding general of U.S. Army Cyber Command handle China, North Korea or Iran? Is the new G-1 prepared to manage a drawdown? Will the future G-8 help the Army successfully navigate uncertain fiscal waters? Does the next G-3/5/7 possess the strategic vision to counter Russian revanchism? If not, does the Army possess officers who can? Does it know who and where they are?

5. The Army doesn’t look far enough down its talent bench. That is critical to succession planning. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer is a prime example of “looking down the bench.” In 1939, then-Capt. Wedemeyer was the only officer who had attended Germany’s Kriegsakademie, making him the Army’s foremost authority on German tactical operations and strategic thought. Later assigned to the Army’s War Plans Division, Wedemeyer authored the Rainbow Five plan outlining the rapid mobilization of American military and industrial power, accurately esti-

Lt. Col. Michael J. Colarusso, USA Ret., is a historian and senior researcher in the Army’s Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA), located at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Lt. Col. David S. Lyle is an associate professor of economics at the U.S. Military Academy and the director of OEMA.
mating the materiel, organization and equipment necessary to wage war, and laying out specific strategic guidelines for the defeat of Germany and then Japan. As a result, he was rapidly promoted over far senior officers because his talents matched the work demanded by the times.

The Army doesn’t sufficiently differentiate its officers. As a result, the senior leadership bench seems, by turns, too deep or too thin. The Department of the Army’s General Officer Management Office reports that selecting division commanders is tough for the Army’s senior leaders. There are usually several candidates for each vacancy, men (and in the future, women) who are excruciatingly difficult to separate from one another because they’ve traveled roughly identical career paths and possess similar career profiles. The Army has a surplus of land combat experts but not enough generals’ jobs for them.

Meanwhile, filling jobs requiring nonoperational expertise (roughly 80 percent of all colonel-and-above positions) is tough for a different reason: too few candidates. For example, Lt. Gen. Thomas P. Bostick was selected from a relatively shallow pool of three candidates for the position of deputy chief of staff of Army G-1. With barely a year in position, however, he was nominated as commanding general of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In one stroke, the nomination made the G-1 a lame duck and saddled him with the additional work of preparing for Senate confirmation as Chief of Engineers. No matter how talented and dedicated the general may be, turning him into a bird of passage after a year on the job had to reduce his efficacy as G-1. Certainly it must have disrupted his strategic HR visioning, particularly when senators demanded his strategic Corps of Engineers vision. Just as circumstances forced Bostick to look beyond the G-1, some of his HR and Army Staff teammates probably began looking beyond him. It’s simply human nature.

Was the Army’s talent bench so thin that one general really was the only choice for two jobs? It’s unlikely. As we’ve said, the issue is differentiation. The Army can’t see its people in high definition; other than command-centric, operational talent, it doesn’t know what it has. Then again, at the general-officer level, the talent bench may actually be that thin. When it comes to specialized jobs with strategic national security implications, the Army simply may not possess a sufficient supply of comptrollers, cyber warriors, civil engineers or human capital experts. These are the types of officers who often hit a career ceiling as lieutenant colonels or colonels and leave the service. That leakage in the talent pipeline is a significant problem, particularly when it comes to critical nonoperational assignments—the institutional or “business” side of the Army.

Improvements are Possible

Today’s senior officer management system is showing its age. Cobbled together over several generations and ripe with outdated practices, it operates largely on institutional muscle memory. Given this, what can be done in the near term to move toward talent-driven succession planning?

The Army must first commit to managing the talents of all ranks, recognizing that junior officers are the feedstock for future generals. To do this, the Army must initiate individual career planning by placing officers into unique talent pools from eight years of service forward, thus giving the Army a deeper bench of experts to draw from when unanticipated challenges arise. This requires a new information technology system to capture both individual talents and organizational talent demands, creating a robust talent market inside the Army. Last, and perhaps most importantly, the Army must allow officers with nonoperational expertise to reach the top of its leadership pyramid. While the Army is a land combat profession and is appropriately led by “operators,” it is also one of the largest, most complex enterprises in the world. Leading it effectively demands the support of multidisciplined staffs led by sufficiently expert and tenured senior officers.

Download the Book

This article is a chapter synopsis from Senior Officer Talent Management: Fostering Institutional Adaptability. Recently published by the U.S. Army War College Press, the book proposes a sweeping redesign of legacy officer management practices, integrating proven human capital theory and practice to create not just better senior officers but also an all-ranks officer talent management system. The book can be downloaded at www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs or at www.talent.army.mil.

The authors are members of the U.S. Army’s Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA). Founded by Gen. Maxwell R. Thurman, this Headquarters, Department of the Army asset is nested within the U.S. Military Academy’s Department of Social Sciences. The intellectual freedom and community of practice provided by this academic setting promote out-of-the-box thinking, allowing OEMA analysts to devise solutions to strategic challenges facing not just the Army and DoD but other government agencies as well.