

Leadership—Our First Line of Defense

An argument for fully manning the Marine Corps

by LtCol Jason B. Berg

What would you say represents the biggest issue facing our Corps today? The scourge of sexual assault? The disgusting social media scandals? The increasing challenge of suicide prevention? Hint: they, and many more, are all tough issues we need to continue to address; we as a Marine Corps believe that effective leadership represents the essential catalyst to seek and implement solutions to these problems. If that is true, it would appear evident that the root challenge to implementing the solution is the missing manpower required to provide that critical leadership to the force.

The first question is whether we believe the Marine Corps is actually “missing” manpower. I believe the answer is yes; however, there are several reasons for this gap in manpower, and they are each both externally and internally driven. The first external driver is manning. As we all know, units start with a table of organization (T/O). Those units never see their full T/O or the manning and funding based on end strength, authorized strength, and staffing goals, and so begins the ability to do “more with less,” for which the Marine Corps is well known.

Manning—to a unit’s staffing goal—only works when the population exists. Frequently, units deal with “gapped billets” until Manpower & Reserve Affairs (M&RA) can locate a suitable member of the population. This brings us to the next challenge: that of the “one down” in rank fill. Although I was unable to locate it in policy or order, per practice, M&RA fills T/O billets “one up, one down.” In my experience, M&RA

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fills these billets by one or two down or, in some cases, leaves them gapped, as described earlier. The problem with this method is that it results in a scenario where the lance corporal in the sergeant’s billet does nothing to rectify the deficit in leadership. Given accelerated promotions, oftentimes a Marine will be one down but may only just be ready for that rank. However, this is a resourcing issue, not population mismanagement on M&RA’s part.

The next external subtraction to our leadership is globally sourced individual

augmentations (undoubtedly important for war efforts but a detractor nonetheless, as that manpower sources from somewhere as a zero-sum game), which usually consist of middle management (NCO to officer). Undoubtedly, most of us have felt the negative effects of the absence of a key leader in our unit as a result of this. The final external driver is the Fleet Assistance Program. Again, this is a necessary cost to manpower, as we all enjoy the benefits these personnel provide, including security and morale, welfare, and recreation programs; however, locally sourcing these augmentations from tenant units, to fill their primary roles and provide leadership, continues to remove manpower.

As far as internal drivers, we, as a Corps, created collateral billets for specialists to address particular issues in



We have all felt the negative effects of the absence of key leaders. (Photo by LCpl Keali De Los Santos.)

our units. Every unit now pulls Marines out of hide to serve as the substance abuse control officer (SACO), equal opportunity representative (EOR), uniform victim advocate (UVA), force fitness instructor (FFI), and deputy family readiness officer (DFRO), just to name a few. While many Marines find some of these collateral billets acceptable from an individual's work capacity point of view, many prove extremely time consuming and take away from that Marine's original task of providing leadership and MOS knowledge to his Marines. In no way am I saying that each of these billets represents an unnecessary function. The creation of specialists who educate and provide focus to the force contributes an excellent additive capability to address these complex issues we face. That said, why must units pull out of hide when that only exacerbates the problem? In order to do "more with more," the Marine Corps should increase each unit's T/O with a compensated structure to reflect our actual requirements, including those collateral billets required by HQMC.

In addition to these drivers of reduced leadership, two other factors exist that contribute to the problem. First, the Corps continues to modify its structure to match growing requirements. As such, units recognize the current state of insufficient manpower because of perceived gaps and write table of organization and equipment change requests (TOECRs) based on a force that has never been fully staffed. The Corps may find that a fully manned T/O stands sufficient to accomplish a unit's primary tasks as well as its collateral billets. The other factor worth mentioning here is that, based on events in the world, the Marine Corps has not seen a decrease in combatant commander force requirements. While the Corps may have anticipated a "peace dividend" from a drawdown in forces from Operations ENDURING FREEDOM/IRAQI FREEDOM, a resultant decrease in operations tempo has not materialized. Only a decrease in operations tempo, and in conduct challenges mentioned at the outset, would predicate a smaller force and allow the Corps to come down to current actual manning levels.



We have to staff to T/O. (Photo by LCpl Keali De Los Santos.)



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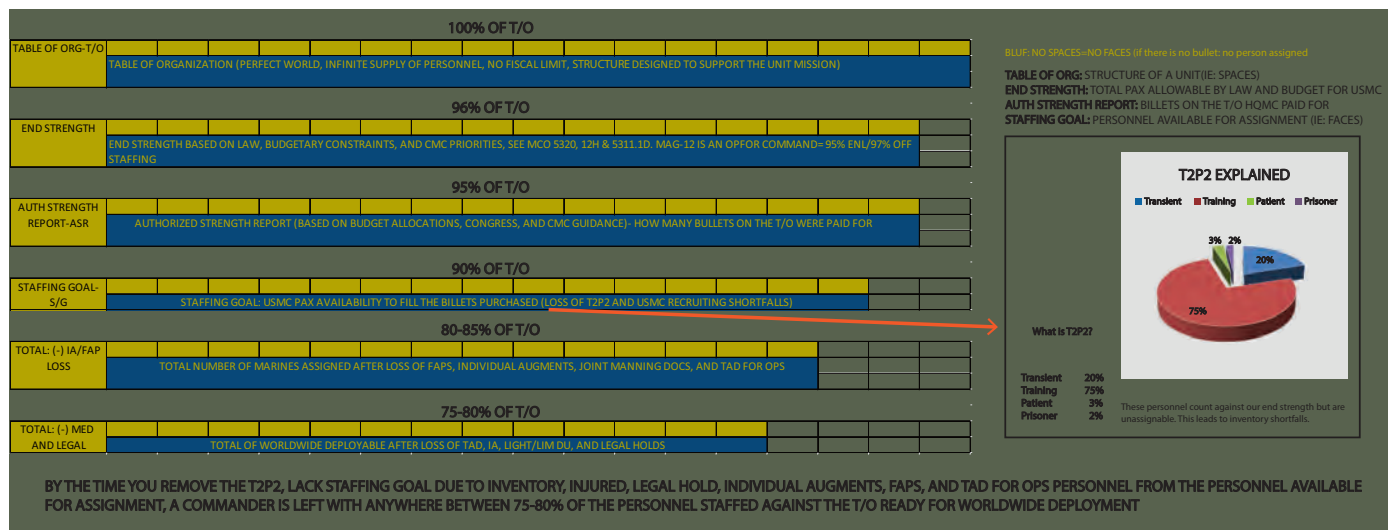


Figure 1.

So, how should the Corps define the implications of these challenges? Is manpower level an actual problem? Several manifestations exist from our inability to provide sufficient manpower. First, a continued increase in all forms of requirements and a decreased or status quo manning level stretches the force and creates the gaps in leadership mentioned previously. A lack of manning manifests itself as a primary inhibitor to creating cohesive teams—teams that watch out for each other and help solve (or at least identify) each other's problems. Additionally, removing a portion of the mid-grade leadership creates a dynamic where command teams provide less one-on-one time between small unit leaders and their Marines and Sailors (a bad ratio of leader to led). Further exacerbating the issue, units overcome these shortfalls in mid-grade leadership by promoting from within, which creates dynamics where junior personnel move into billets where they may be unprepared for the increased responsibility or mantle of leadership.

Finding solutions to this difficult problem, given current budgetary restraints, will certainly prove the largest challenge to the force. We must first admit that the current system proves insufficient and untenable in the long term. Then, we must truly believe that solving current Corps-wide issues requires leadership and that sufficient manpower provides that leadership. Once we col-

lectively recognize the obvious, albeit difficult, situation, we must continue to retain the best and brightest. On the surface, the Corps appears to do a fairly good job of that—with selections to higher rank, bonuses, etc. However, if this is true, how does the Corps explain MOSs that are manned with only near 50 percent of required manning levels? The Corps must continue to work hard at managing MOS populations so that the resource talent pool to work toward a solution exists.

Next, the Corps must staff to the T/O, not to the authorized strength report or staffing goal, as shown in Figure 1. While it is useful to identify and define the problem, the Corps cannot treat Figure 1 as if it represents a "status quo" and best attainable situation. Then, the Corps needs to allocate the appropriate amount of money to military personnel to make our force work. Next, the Corps should assign chargeable billet identification codes (BICs) to those collateral billets (if we think SACOs, DFROs, FFIs, EORs, and SAPRs are that important) and create chargeable BICs in each unit to do that task. While this solution requires an increase in authorized end-strength, we must acknowledge the requirement and move on. Finally, we must allow several years to pass and see if the proposed solution works, and only then should we accept TOECRs as needed. Certainly, we must weigh the cost of a

fully funded T/O against the cost of associated mishaps, rotations because of mental health, tour curtailment, and humanitarian transfers, not to mention the immediately felt cost of decreased readiness.

Fully funding the T/O and collateral billets is a difficult and expensive solution, but the benefits stand evident. The benefits start with a decreased ratio of small unit leader to led, providing that critical leadership to get after our Corps' largest problem. There is an added benefit of providing the resources to do more with more. This also allows specialty collateral billets to truly specialize without creating a gap somewhere else in the structure, which then allows Marines assigned to those BICs to truly concentrate on that specialty and serve as force multipliers executing their intended purpose. If we are unable to increase top-line expenditures to meet required manning levels, hard budget choices commensurate with a zero-sum game will emerge. Undoubtedly, reductions in other areas in order to enable this proposed solution will create their own problems. However, if we truly believe that our Marines and Sailors represent our most precious resource, shouldn't we believe they are worth the investment?

