

# Getting Better with Age

Why older leaders are better and why the Marine Corps needs more of them at the tactical level

by The CHALK Board

The complexity and irregularity of future conflicts are axiomatic facts and require no supporting evidence beyond a cursory study of past and present conflicts. The outcome of such conflicts often rests on the actions of young, inexperienced warriors whose vigor overshadows their judgment. The ideal fighting force is one with warriors who combine experience with youth, aggression with compassion, valor with discretion, and training with education. Warriors in such a force will be more effective on the battlefield, more resilient at home, and more likely to elect to remain in the profession of arms.

In order to strengthen individual resiliency, improve operational efficiency, and retain higher-quality personnel, the Marine Corps should replace the current “up-or-out” promotion system with one that allows Marines to promote based on aptitude and preference.

## Older Marines Among Junior Ranks Are Better and More Resilient Leaders

Neurologically, operationally, and psychologically, older warriors are better equipped to overcome the challenges they will confront on and off the battlefield.

The human brain develops in a back-to-front pattern in which the prefrontal cortex (the front portion of the brain that regulates behavior and aids in making complex decisions) is the last portion to form.<sup>1</sup> Scientists estimate it is not completely developed until the age of 25.<sup>2</sup> This fact has significant implications for Marines personally and professionally.



*Older, more experienced leaders might make Marine's decision to reenlist easier. (Photo by LCpl Richard Currier.)*

Whether processing complex hybrid-warfare scenarios or confronting post-traumatic stress, every Marine will encounter decisions with potentially catastrophic consequences. Complete neurological development will not eliminate poor decisions entirely, but it may be an important factor in reducing their frequency and their effects.

In 1965, GEN William Westmoreland, USA, characterized the irregular war in Vietnam as one in which “commanders must exercise restraint unnatural to war and judgment not often required of young men.” More than a half century later, irregular conflicts are no less complex, and the warriors who fight them are no more experienced.

Operationally, the strategic corporal in the 21st century (who is most likely below the age of 25) will lead Marines in environments characterized by advanced technology; primitive ideologies; overlapping friendly, threat, and neutral networks; embedded journalists; ambiguous strategy; and imprecise rules of engagement. In addition, he will be required to shoulder the mental and physical burdens associated with prolonged time in a combat zone. Consistently making good decisions in such an environment is a daunting challenge for even the most mentally agile and physically rugged leaders. For younger, inexperienced Marines, such complex environments can be incapacitating.

Older, more experienced Marines with developed and practiced decision-making abilities are better equipped to operate and lead in likely future conflicts.

In a post-operational context, older Marines deal with post-traumatic stress less often and with more success than their younger peers. Members of the Armed Forces below the age of 25 are seven times more likely to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress than their older contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from positively affecting performance and resilience, older Marines among the junior ranks are likely to improve conduct. Incidents of alcohol and drug abuse, hazing, and other examples of poor judgment are often the result of immaturity. Older peers would balance exuberance with experience at the fire team level.

Maturity, perspective, experience, and good judgment at the fire team level are essential to mission accomplishment, resilience, and conduct. Yet more than two-thirds of Marines on active duty are under the age of 25.<sup>4</sup> In order to more successfully navigate the complexities of domestic and international environments, the Marine Corps needs older and more experienced Marines in the junior ranks, but the Marine Corps' personnel management system effectively forces Marines to promote or leave the Marine Corps and, as a result, experience is a fleeting commodity.

### Older Marines among Junior Ranks Will Improve Retention

Since the advent of the all-volunteer force in 1974, the quality of the individual Marine has improved consistently. Retaining high-quality Marines has become an organizational priority. Commandant Gen Robert B. Neller's thoughts on this topic are succinct: "I don't take [success in recruiting] for granted. It's the retention piece that has become more and more difficult, particularly as we grow people in service skill sets that [industry] wants."<sup>5</sup>

Research in the field of contemporary organizational dynamics shows that the primary reason employees choose to remain with a company is the quality of the relationship they have with their immediate supervisor.<sup>6</sup> For most Marines,

this would be their fire team or squad leader. Recruiting talented people and assigning them to poor leaders has a predictably adverse effect on retention.<sup>7</sup>

But it is not just good leaders who compel people to stay with an organization. Talented people like to work with other talented people and will often base their decision to stay or leave on the talent level of their co-workers.<sup>8</sup>

Considering the advantage older leaders are likely to possess in both professional and personal areas, and the fact that retaining the best Marines is heavily dependent on the quality of the relationship they have with their immediate leaders, a force structure in which Marines are allowed to spend more years at the lower ranks is worth considering, especially since it is likely to appeal to Millennials, the generation of Americans with the largest representation in the Marine Corps.

### Millennials in the Marine Corps: What Matters, What Doesn't

The population of Millennials in the American workplace will increase to one third by 2020. In the Marine Corps, Millennials already make up 100 percent of Marines serving their first term. By understanding their values and providing the right incentives, the Marine Corps can better harness the strengths of Millennials and retain them. Since this group is the most studied generation in history, there are several things we know and should apply.<sup>9</sup>

First, Millennials typically want to be appreciated based on the qualities that make them unique.<sup>10</sup> Their desire for personal affirmation is one thing that distinguishes them from previous generations. Studies show that half of Millennials consider leaving their current job because of a lack of appreciation.<sup>11</sup> The impersonal up-or-out approach to promotions in the Marine Corps contrasts with the Millennial desire to be treated based on unique skills and demonstrates that the Marine Corps' talent management philosophy has fallen out of step with the spirit of the times.

Second, Millennials are less likely to demonstrate the level of brand loyalty seen in previous generations. Even employees at Google and Amazon, ranked

2nd and 22nd respectively on the list of Fortune 500 companies where Millennials most want to work,<sup>12</sup> remain with those companies for just one year.<sup>13</sup> Millennial commitment to a brand is based on a sense of purpose within that organization. Without a fulfilling job where one perceives he is valued, he sees no reason to stay. Moreover, Millennials are confident that if they lost their main source of income tomorrow, they could easily find equal or better work within three months.<sup>14</sup> A continued excessive reliance on brand loyalty is not likely to facilitate quality retention in the Marine Corps.

The emphasis the Marine Corps places on promotions and pride of belonging is incongruent with the priorities and characteristics of Millennials, who are less likely to be concerned with promotion or membership in an organization. Millennials have little interest in hierarchy and are not particularly impressed by the titles and positions within the traditional pyramid structure.<sup>15</sup> A study conducted at the University of North Carolina shows that only five percent of Millennials in a representative sample group viewed professional responsibility as important; instead they cited meaningful work as the most desirable job factor.<sup>16</sup>

For Millennials, achieving higher rank is not as appealing if it comes at the expense of the sense of purpose and satisfaction they experience at lower ranks and positions. The implications of this phenomenon are especially ominous in the more technical occupations in the Marine Corps, where exorbitant amounts of time and money are invested in training younger Marines on more advanced and ever-changing technologies. Within a year or two of receiving this training, they are promoted into new positions more reliant on leadership qualities than technical skills. As a result, the Marine Corps is continually training new Marines and relying on the youngest and least experienced to operate and maintain its complex systems.

### Current Practices of Law Enforcement Organizations

The effectiveness of retaining more experienced personnel at lower positions

has been demonstrated for decades in law enforcement agencies throughout the United States and even to a limited degree within the Marine Corps in specialized programs.

The DOD and the Marine Corps have acknowledged the need for older, more experienced professionals in current conflicts. In 2009, the Marine Corps directed law enforcement professionals (LEP) to be embedded in deployed Marine Corps units.<sup>17</sup> This program followed a 2006 DOD study that called for the development of a civil police capability to aid in counterinsurgency warfare.<sup>18</sup> The idea behind these programs was that Marines could benefit from the experience of a professional who spent years at the street level fighting crime because policing large cities in America is a delicate balance between gaining and maintaining the trust of the local population and fighting crimes often perpetrated by an organized network of criminals similar to the enemy in counterinsurgency conflicts.

The expertise required of civilian police officers to interact with hostile populations, enforce local laws, and exploit crime scenes is not gained from police academies but rather years of street-level experience.

New York City, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles police departments do not compel officers to promote or leave. In fact, an officer can spend twenty-plus years as the equivalent of a lance corporal. These departments have yielded three benefits from this model. It allows people to thrive where they feel most comfortable, it guarantees the value of experience is not lost at the lowest level, and it ensures that those who do promote possess ample experience to support those they are leading.

The LEP program was designed to draw down in numbers as Marines gained experience from multiple combat deployments. Theoretically, Marines with previous deployments would fill in the role of the LEP and teach the younger generations of Marines “community policing” and “crime mapping” skills along with the ability to recognize when “things just don’t look right.”<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, as a result of the Marine Corps’ up-or-out system, this street-level



**Older Marines are more resilient leaders.** (Photo by LCpl Keali De Los Santos.)

expertise has left the street and ended up in an office or—worse—out of the organization entirely.

### Current Practices of Military Organizations

Retaining older, more experienced personnel among the junior levels of an organization has been proven to be an effective method not only among prominent law enforcement organizations in the United States but also among militaries across the world.

Several Western militaries, including Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom utilize personnel structures that offer indefinite reenlistment options for career soldiers without requiring them to promote.

By offering three- and five-year contracts for entry-level personnel with the option to recommit every two years,<sup>20</sup> the Italians are able to identify those with desirable characteristics and offer them a position as career soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Those reaching career soldier status can remain in service for life because there are no requirements for promotion.<sup>22</sup> Career soldier service members are highly regarded, and their experience is well respected.

The Canadians, like the Italians, prioritize retention over promotion and offer entry contracts for up to

nine years depending on the specialty. Twenty-five year contracts are available to select personnel at the completion of their initial contract.<sup>23</sup> Once attaining the rank of corporal, members of the Canadian Forces are permitted to spend the remainder of their careers at that rank, will receive incremental step increases in pay, and are not forced to compete for promotion.

The monthly base pay rate of a corporal in the Canadian Armed Forces at the highest pay level ranges from \$4,544 to \$5,475 depending on MOS. By comparison, those figures are nearly identical to the basic monthly compensation of a Marine first sergeant/master sergeant with more than fourteen years of service and a Marine sergeant major/master gunnery sergeant with more than sixteen years of service, respectively.

### Adapting

The Marine Corps should implement a revised personnel structure in which Marines are allowed to opt out of promotion beyond the rank of sergeant without penalty. The system would include the following features:

- Marines who desire to remain at the NCO level of their profession would be allowed to do so for their entire twenty-year career.
- Marines could elect to compete for promotion at any time in their career.

- Pay scales would be adjusted to incrementally increase compensation for career NCOs based on time in service.
- Physical readiness and professional proficiency would still be required for all Marines.
- Changes in geographical duty assignments would still occur with the same frequency as the current system.
- Reenlistments would still be competitive at the end of each term.
- Marines who desire to compete for promotion would follow the same career paths currently in place.

This model would profit the Marine Corps in several key areas. Among the many organizational benefits are:

- Better decision making and leadership at the tactical level.
- Increased resiliency.
- Better retention.
- Improved preservation of knowledge and experience in operational units.
- Less organizational turnover.

### Challenges and Objections

The proposal presented in this article is bold and will require significant organizational changes that will be neither quick nor convenient. However, the benefits of this proposal far outweigh the challenges of implementing it. Therefore, objections to this proposal should be framed in response to the details of the proposal itself rather than the challenges associated with its implementation.

One may object to the idea of Marines spending a career at the squad level because it will drain them physically and mentally. This objection ignores the experiences of special forces throughout the DOD where operators work at the lowest organizational level late into their early 40s. Experience is not negatively correlated to mental or physical health. Further, the system we propose in this article enables Marines to promote above the squad level in accordance with their evolving professional ambition and capabilities.

A second objection may be that if Marines are able to remain at the NCO level throughout their career and still receive incremental pay raises, there will be no incentive to compete for promotion beyond the rank of sergeant. This is

specious. In the system proposed in this article, the largest paychecks will still be received by the most senior ranks. Further, based on data collected on the Millennial generation, money is not the primary professional incentive for Marines. It is more likely that a Marine's decision to seek promotion will be based on his perception of where his personal skills will be put to best use. Some will want to make sure the

deeper roots in the history of the Marine Corps than the tradition of adapting to change.

Conflicts have changed, the newest generation of Americans has changed, and the motivation for staying in the Marine Corps has changed. The Marine Corps must respond accordingly.

The model proposed in this article offers a Marine Corps with better, more experienced leadership at the tactical

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## ... how much it will cost to retain career NCOs rather than adhere to the up-or-out system.

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proverbial trains run on time, while others will be more content maintaining individual train cars. The Marine Corps' personnel management system should accommodate both types.

Another objection may center on the ultimate cost, specifically, how much it will cost to retain career NCOs rather than adhere to the up-or-out system. This objection is a legitimate one. Our response is twofold. First, it is not certain that our proposal would necessarily cost more money. Second, if our proposal *does* cost more money, the expense is justified by the tangible and intangible benefits it is likely to produce.

Financially speaking, many costly aircraft mishaps could be avoided by more experienced maintainers, and the life cycle of high end vehicles and equipment could be extended if they were operated by more experienced technicians.

From an intangible standpoint, damage to the Marine Corps image could be avoided by the presence of older, more mature Marines at the lowest levels of the organization. Most importantly, more experienced Marines making decisions at the tactical level of operations would contribute to the preservation of our most precious resource of all: human life.

### Conclusion

The Marine Corps values its traditions and rightly so. No tradition has

level of combat; stronger, more resilient, and more mature Marines among the more junior ranks; and higher rates of quality Marines remaining in the Marine Corps beyond their first term. This is more than the change the newest generation wants; this is the change the Marine Corps needs.

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