

We Are Not Inventory

Talent management for next-generation warfare

by LtCol Gregory DeMarco

Our newest Commandant correctly diagnosed our talent management system as outdated,¹ making it difficult for our Corps to retain the best Marines necessary to confront our battlefield peers. This should worry because, as our previous Commandant said, “There’s a war coming.”² As Marines, we are expected to adapt to and overcome our enemy; however, we have unnecessarily put ourselves into a manpower box of our own making—a box that our enemy will happily exploit—and that we will pay for with the lives of our Marines if we do not solve it. Luckily, while many marketplace tools and incentives along with Congressional actions can help us solve these problems, there is one legal, simple, and cheap solution available to us right now that we can implement immediately and that is completely under our control. Words mean things, and the words we use should be chosen deliberately. Year after year, I have faithfully attended enlisted and officer manpower briefs and understand the many reasons why we see manpower gaps in our units. Yet, in each brief I have wondered, “Are our words the root of some of our behavior and manpower problems?” If we are all just inventory, why should we not expect behavior problems? If we are simple replaceable cogs and widgets, should we expect to retain our top talent? What difference will it make if we change the words we use?

Most of us, regardless of how many PowerPoint slides we have consumed about the value of the individual Marine, understand deep down that Marines take care of Marines. However, within our institution, we are little more

>LtCol DeMarco is currently the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-5 at Marine Corps Forces Korea. He has previously commanded Marine Wing Headquarters Squadron-2, flew the EA-6B Prowler in Iraq and Afghanistan, is a Foreign Area Officer, and a former enlisted artilleryman. In addition to several staff billets, LtCol DeMarco has served with the 1st, 2d, and 3d MarDivs, as well as with the 1st and 2d MAWs.

than a six-digit alphanumeric code: a two-digit rank and four-digit MOS. According to the *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*,

Our manpower system was designed in the industrial era to produce mass, not quality. We assumed that quantity of personnel was the most important element of the system, and that workers (Marines) are all essentially interchangeable.³

These six-digit numbers are very easy for our headquarters to work with, make assignments, or track. Nearly every assignment, either on the unit table of organization, as an individual augment, or report, derives from manning documents or rosters that track some status of a series of these six-digit numbers.

geant billet). The administrators and monitors balance thousands of competing requirements in their never-ending shell game called the orders-writing process and demonstrate on a daily basis the flexible-problem-solving-mission-accomplishment approach we expect of Marines. Still, the system still operates primarily on the premise that each of us are a six-digit number—nothing more, nothing less.

As my six-digit number changed since my enlistment in 1991 (eventually making it to an E4-0811), I have seen assignments with 1st, 2d, and 3d MarDivs, along with my flying tours in the MAWs. All the while, to the institution, I have always been inventory—a cog in the Marine Corps’ machine. It

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Occasionally, additional attributes are added (e.g., “Post-Command,” or “German Speaker”), which narrows the available pool of candidates. Similarly, at times, sourcing rules occasionally permit the “one-up, one-down” rule, meaning that the billet can be filled by a Marine whose rank is either one higher or one lower than the requirement (e.g., a staff sergeant, gunnery sergeant, or a master sergeant can fill a gunnery ser-

has never been the institution that kept me wearing green and coming to work; the jokes about the Marine Corps you hear today were common back then too. Instead, it was the people. The Marines I have worked with—the honest and less honest, the moral and morally challenged, the hard working and the ones who taught me everywhere they like to hide on board a ship—they have been the reason I stayed in the Corps, and it

is likely the same with most of us who have been around for a while. To them, I have never been inventory. I have been around long enough to understand that the institution will never love you, and we should not expect it to. However, when we—publicly or privately—refer to our Marines as “inventory,” what effect does it have downstream when attempting to retain the most talented? I posit that the best do not want to be treated as inventory, no matter the financial bonus tied to a contract. Additionally, we should not forget that Marines are smart—simply removing the word inventory from a few public briefs while retaining the concept behind a firewall will fail. Certainly, the material will get out, but regardless, the Marines will sniff it out; one constant throughout each generation of Marine I have met is they recognize hypocrisy when they see it.

If we are only inventory, negative incentives (non-judicial punishments or courts martial, for example) might prevent someone from taking illegal actions. However, if you want me to be my best, to believe in slogans such as “honor, courage, commitment,” or even “to be a professional,” what does it say when the Corps calls me an interchangeable six-digit component? As a squadron commander, if I state that I need three more E3/E4 0111s, I telegraph that I do not care about their quality—they are all interchangeable. How much more damaging is it for the Service to say that we “purchased your billet” or that we need to increase the “production” of 75xx’s (aviators going through the “pipeline”)? No one wants to think of themselves to have been purchased as an item on the shelf nor a product in the factory pipeline. I do not subscribe to the school that thinks everyone is special by any means, but I prefer to think of myself as human and not a widget (at least since SeniorDrillInstructorStaffSergeantPilakowski—it was all one word back then—graduated me from recruit to Marine).

Certainly, our manpower model needs a method to forecast recruitment or to target incentives and, therefore, will always require reliable statistics. However, the greatest difficulty resides in making adjustments to our systems in



Are Marines simply “inventory,” the output of industrial-age mass production, or something more? (Photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class David Cox.)

reconfiguring our computer programs, reports, manning documents, and interfaces with the joint community. While noble goals, I realize that these may require costly solutions.

Nevertheless, it is time for a thorough overhaul of our language, and this is freely available to us right now. First, develop consistent language originating from the Commandant that emphasizes the value of the Marine. Next, purge all briefs and references to terminology such as inventory, purchased billets, pipelines, and the like. Finally, charge all commanders to implement these changes throughout our commands. Changing our language, while free, will prove quite difficult unfortunately—entrenched habits die hard. Nevertheless, overtime, our language will change to reflect the will of our leadership. As an additional measure, we should take advantage of a Secretary of Defense fellowship or two and study how human resources tackles this problem in private industry and at major universities. Our problem is not unique to us: they both recruit and seek to retain top talent just like we do, they constantly try to increase employee (or student) buy-in (or spirit), and they develop their employees or have students in a study track.

We are not inventory—we are Marines. If we start from this premise, it

may prove much easier to retain top talent and to “not accept mediocrity within the force.”⁴ If we call our Marines professionals, we should not thoughtlessly treat them like widgets. There are many aspects to our manpower and talent-management systems that stand to be reviewed, but I suggest we start with the cheap, simple, and legal one—our language—to help our institution achieve our Commandant’s vision of, “Demanding superior performance and enforcing high standards.”⁵

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
2. Quoted in Amy B. Wang, “Top General Tells Marines to Be Prepared For a Big Fight,” *Washington Post*, (December 2017), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.
3. *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*.
4. *Ibid*.
5. *Ibid*.

