

It's Time for a Staff Officer Career Track

Is command that important?

by Maj Nathan Wood

Officer development is largely focused on preparing Marines for command, and promotion decisions are chiefly based on the potential of Marine officers to serve as commanders. But only a small minority of officers are in command at any given time. Even fewer are destined to command battalion-sized or larger units. The truth is: most officers will serve as staffers for most of their careers. Good staff officers are rare and valuable. Yet, the Marine Corps does a poor job of identifying and using them, the term “staff officer” has an undeservedly negative connotation, and the organization forces every officer onto the command track—or out of the Service—even if their talents and interests lend themselves to staff work. How to fix it? Create a staff officer career track.

The Root of the Problem

Commanders are more important than staff officers. So, it makes sense for the Marine Corps to groom its best officers for command rather than for service on a staff. But some Marines believe not just that staff officers are less important than commanders, but that staff work itself is somehow dishonorable. It is almost a point of ritual for staff officers to trivialize their own work—after all, “[n]o little kid ever grew up wanting to be the best at briefing slides, brewing coffee, or writing operations orders.”¹

To some extent, this is just Marines doing what Marines do best: complaining. But it has a darker side. In an effort to encourage its strongest officers to become commanders, the Marine Corps has discouraged everyone else

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from embracing their staff roles. Since staff work is trivialized, Marines do not fully invest themselves in it.

Of course, not all staff roles are equally disparaged. An infantry battalion operations officer (OpsO), for example, still enjoys quite a bit of prestige. But that is primarily because the billet is a proving ground for future commanders. Staff roles that are not stepping stones to command lack the same stature. As one Army officer put it: “Time spent on staff, where officers spend the majority of their career, is

thankless, laborious work that is too often viewed as a block check between command positions.”²

The denigration of staff work has led the Marine Corps to treat nearly all staff roles the same. In the eyes of the organization, if you are not a commander, then you are a staff officer. It is the default; it requires no special screening or selection. As a result, just about any Marine with the right rank and MOS can fill any staff role. All staff officers are interchangeable and equally skilled. They are fungible.

But that is untrue—not all officers are equally suited for staff work. In fact, good staff officers are exceedingly rare. My experience in 2017 as the current operations officer for the 24th MEU Command Element opened my eyes



Has the Marine Corps emphasized the importance of command to the point that commanders are seen as “more important” than their staff officers? (Photo by LCpl Wesley Timm.)

to this bleak reality. Toward the end of the deployment, the MEU commander asked the OpsO and me to assemble a team to draft the post-deployment brief that he planned to present at the Pentagon. Sounds easy—it was not.

Every officer on that MEU was capable of churning out passable emails and slapping bullets on slides when it came to low-stakes, routine staff work. But when it came time to write papers and make briefs that the Commandant himself would read—about as high stakes as staff work gets—most Marines could not hack it. After scouring the ship, the OpsO and I finally found a few officers who could make decent slides and write and brief well. They proved invaluable.

The Marine Corps identifies its best leaders through command screening, but it has no equivalent process for staffers. Since the Marine Corps does not know who its best staff officers are, they are underutilized and the organization is unable to put the right Marine in the right job. That is inefficient. Additionally, there is no career path, at least formally, for strong officers who are suited for staff work and uninterested in high-level command. This one-size-fits-all approach unnecessarily squanders talent and needlessly disregards the interests of Marines. It is time for a better way.

What Is Staff Work?

Staff work is everything that supports a decision maker. The most familiar military staff roles are on a commander's functional staff (S-1, S-2, etc). Less familiar positions include aides, executive assistants, speechwriters, special projects officers, and members of advisory and action groups. Staff work is not unique to the military. Every organization has staffers who support decision makers. Members of Congress have staffs. CEOs have staffs. Xi Jinping has a staff.

Staff members research, write, brief, and plan. They analyze issues and develop options for decision. They lead meetings, provide recommendations, and staff documents: "They find and condense masses of information into manageable packets for review by and decisions from senior leaders."³

Staff officers play a critical role at every level of war, in both peace and

combat. They range from company grade officers on a battalion staff to some of the most senior officials in the DOD. There are key staff roles in both the operating forces and the supporting establishment. Staff officers support both commanders and decision makers (such as the Deputy Commandants in Headquarters Marine Corps). Being a staff officer does not necessarily mean riding a desk in the A-ring of the Pentagon. It can mean working on a laptop perched on a stack of MRE boxes in a bombed-out building while being shot at. Staff work is staff work, regardless of its circumstances.

What Makes a Good Staff Officer?

Good staff officers have much in common with good journalists, attorneys, and management consultants: they are able to immerse themselves in an unfamiliar subject, rapidly learn about it, identify the most salient issues, and present their findings and analysis clearly and efficiently—both orally and in writing. They pay attention to the smallest details, have a good eye and aesthetic sense, and are highly organized. These characteristics allow them to provide the best possible support to decision makers.⁴ Not every Marine officer is gifted with these qualities.

Since these skills are generally applicable to any topic, they transcend mere MOS proficiency and subject-matter expertise. They are equally valuable in both peace and war. A staff officer with these traits is the utility infielder—give him any task and it will be done right and on time.

Good staff officers are also strong leaders in their own right, a quality that is often overlooked. They must lead their staff sections. They often honcho working groups and planning teams. They must be skilled at building consensus and encouraging collaboration. They must be able to influence others, despite not being in charge.⁵

Staffers vs Commanders

It is true that some good staff officers may also make good commanders; the two pools of talent may overlap. Some Marines are good at everything. The

Marine Corps' School of Advanced Warfighting, for example, selects the best applicants and develops them to be both "lead planners *and* future commanders."⁶ Likewise, general officers have proven themselves, again and again, to be exceptional in a range of command and staff billets.

However, while the very best or highest-ranking Marines may be good at everything, that is hardly true of everyone else. Some Marines have a knack for command. Others have a knack for staff work. Indeed, the very traits that make a Marine a good staff officer may make him less effective in command. Good staff officers sweat the small stuff. Good commanders often do not and tend to wear the crown lightly. As *Warfighting* puts it:

We should recognize that all Marines of a given grade and occupational specialty are not interchangeable and should assign people to billets based on specific ability and temperament. This includes recognizing those who are best suited to command assignments and those who are best suited to staff assignments—without penalizing one or the other by so recognizing.⁷

Whether a Marine has a knack for command or staff work is not the only question. Just as important is what the Marine prefers. Not every officer wants to be a senior decision maker. Many would prefer to contribute in a staff role.

Fixing It

Despite the obstacles, some officers have been able to carve out careers as staffers. Over time, they develop a reputation as an effective staff officer and are assigned to increasingly demanding staff roles. They eventually find themselves in staff billets commensurate with their abilities from which they can make the greatest possible contribution to the organization. The problem is that this happens only informally. It is inefficient, ad hoc, and unreliable. While some Marines might be lucky enough to stumble into a career that makes the most of their talents and interests as a staffer, many are not.

A staff officer career track would recognize the varying interests and talents of Marine officers and offer an

alternative to the command track. It would result in greater efficiency by making the best use of strong staffers. It would reduce the pressure Marines feel to pursue command and make it easier for good staff officers to plan their careers. It would also enhance the prestige of staff work; rather than being seen as the graveyard for those who were not good enough for command, service as a staff officer would be seen as a worthwhile end in its own right. This would benefit both Marines and the Marine Corps.

Establishing a Staff Officer Career Track

Here are some steps the Marine Corps could take to establish a staff officer career track:

Identify the best staff officers. The Marine Corps would first need to identify and track its best staffers. One way would be to create a new secondary MOS: “Staff Officer.” Perhaps Marines could apply for the MOS or be nominated for it by their commanders. Maybe the top graduates of Marine Corps Command and Staff College (and other intermediate-level schools) could earn the MOS upon graduation. Just as the 0505 MOS—which marks graduates of SAW and other advanced intermediate level schools (A-ILS)—identifies the organization’s best planners (and, perhaps, future commanders), the Staff Officer MOS would identify the Marine Corps’ best staffers.

Create a model for staff officer development and promotion. Marines on the command track are expected to check certain boxes on their way up the ranks. Future battalion commanders are expected to have served as company commanders and OpsOs, and it would not hurt to have commanded a recruiting station or to have served as an instructor at TBS (or to be an A-ILS grad). Commanders who deviate from this well-trodden path are the exceptions that prove the rule. A staff officer career track would turn this model on its head. No longer would Marines have to spend a prescribed amount of time in command in order to be competitive for promotion and desirable assignments; rather, the concept of key billets could

be expanded to include staff jobs that would prepare Marines on the staffer career track for future staff roles of greater importance. This would give the strongest staff officers the opportunity to build a career around their strengths and interests and compete for promotion based on their potential to serve as staffers rather than commanders. It is not a radical change; this sorting happens already, albeit informally. But there is much to be gained by approaching it systematically.

The timing is critical. Officers need a broad base of experience, in both command and staff billets, before they will be capable of making an informed decision to pursue a career as a staff officer. For that reason, the decision to pursue a command or staff career track should be made at the time captains are promoted to majors. That would ensure most officers approach the decision having spent time as a company commander and in at least one staff role. They will be fully aware of what they are good at and what they like to do.

Put good staff officers in key billets. Once the best staff officers have been tagged with the Staff Officer MOS, key billets could be coded for it so that the most important decision makers can be guaranteed to have at least a few exceptional staffers supporting them. Like 0505s, the best staff officers, placed in the right roles, could have an outsized impact on the organization. The idea is *not* to lock staffers in the Pentagon and keep them there in a closed loop until retirement—far from it. There are important staff billets at every level of warfare, in both the operating forces and supporting establishment. Anywhere there is a decision maker or commander, there is a need for good staff work.

Risks

There are real risks to creating a staff officer career track. If not done right, it could create separate officer cultures that steadily drift apart. Rather than having the intended effect of elevating the prestige of staff work, it could entrench staff officers as permanent second-class citizens and will challenge the “every Marine a rifleman” ethos that the Marine Corps holds dear.

However, those risks are worth the potential rewards. As effective as the Marine Corps’ generalist approach to officer development has been, there is a clear trend—in every profession, not just the military—toward specialization. Specialization allows Marines to do more of what they do best and are most interested in. It is efficient. The Marine Corps benefits when Marines spend their time doing the things they are best at doing. Specialization can certainly be taken too far, but creating a mid-career alternative to the standard command track is a modest, low-risk tweak to the status quo.

Conclusion

The Marine Corps—rightly—invests tremendous effort in selecting its best leaders through the command screening process. Yet, it has no equivalent process to track and employ its most skilled staff officers. As a result, good staff officers are undervalued and underutilized. This is inefficient and unnecessary, especially in an era of increasing specialization. A staff officer career track could help fix that.

Notes

1. Nate Stratton, “7 Ways to Fail as a Staff Officer,” *The Military Leader*, (n.d.), available at <https://www.themilitaryleader.com>.
2. Ibid.
3. Joint Staff, *Joint Officer Handbook: Staffing and Action Guide*, (Washington, DC: August 2010).
4. Ibid.
5. LtCol Donald Thieme, “Staff Officer Leadership: Not Everyone Gets a Command,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: April 2009).
6. School of Advanced Warfighting Mission Statement is available at www.usmcu.edu.
7. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

