

Competitive vs Compulsory PME

Putting the PME onus where it belongs

by SgtMaj William Singleton, USMCR

Given the demands of the warfighting profession and a genuine need for professional and competent leaders, the Marine Corps would benefit from modifying its PME programs and promotion system in such a way that they place an even greater emphasis on career-long learning in the profession of arms. In this article, I will detail some noted flaws in our current PME and promotion systems and some potential solutions to improve the professional level and quality of Marines being promoted through the ranks.

Why PME?

The profession of arms is just that, a profession. Among other definitions of the word, Merriam-Webster's dictionary describes a profession as "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation."¹ Marines begin their long and intensive academic and physical preparation in boot camp or at OCS and continue it throughout their entire time in the Corps. What Marines do for their individual jobs and for the Nation as a whole, most certainly require specialized knowledge. Being a competent and capable warrior requires specialized knowledge in the conduct of military operations on the macro level and specialized knowledge in the individual role assigned to a Marine as part of the MAGTF on the micro level. Therefore, as persons engaged in the principal call-

"The most important responsibility in our Corps is leading Marines. If we expect Marines to lead and if we expect Marines to follow, we must provide the education of the heart and of the mind to win on the battlefield and in the barracks, in war and in peace."

—MCWP 6-11, Leading Marines

ing of the warrior profession, Marines most certainly qualify as professionals. Great Marine leaders such as Gens Alfred M. Gray and Charles C. Krulak have long espoused the virtues of professional study and behavior; with this in mind and as part of a Marine's long, intensive, and continuous preparation,

professional military education (PME) is a foundational part of the make-up of Marines and what they do. *Marine Corps Order (MCO) 1553.4B, Professional Military Education (PME)* states that PME is "designed to equip Marines with the analytical skills necessary to exercise sound military judgment in

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Staff NCOs have a new car. (Photo by Sgt Tony Simmons.)

contemporary operations,” and that “[participation] in this program is an institutional expectation.”²

PME, particularly the resident version, also does some other beneficial things for the Corps and its Marines. Almost without fail, PME returns re-invigorated, remotivated, and rededicated Marines to the ranks from which they came. Providing the periodic professional booster shot of PME for a Marine makes for a sound and wise investment on the part of the organization, especially where it concerns Marines who may serve a long number of years. PME exposes Marines to Marines from other MOSs who have different ways of thinking and doing business. This is usually the first and sometimes only exposure junior Marines get to the Marine Corps world outside of their own little grid square, and it preps them for roles of greater responsibility and diversity, as well as develops their mental flexibility and adaptability. The aforementioned *PME* cites the commander’s desired end state as a “professional cadre of Marine leaders instilled with, and openly embracing, the significant contribution that career-long education opportunities contribute to their excellence in the profession of arms exemplified in sound military decision making leading to improved warfighting acumen.”³ PME adds tools to the leadership toolbox of those who attend. This is the primary reason why we have PME and why the Marine Corps has instituted it throughout the entire rank structure.

Current PME/promotion system

Under the current system, Marines from the rank of lance corporal on up attain promotion eligibility only after completing the non-resident and resident/seminar course for their present rank. Unfortunately, the PME that Marines are required to complete is focused on providing leadership tools for the rank that they already hold, not the next rank that they are trying to attain:

Skill progression and leadership transformation will ensure that corporals and sergeants are capable of applying tactical and technical skills appropriate to their levels of responsibility. Staff sergeant applications will focus on

operational and organizational cognitive skills, while gunnery sergeants will be focused on operational-level perspectives. Utilizing this approach ensures that the curriculum is targeted to those skills necessary for Marines to operate in the Marine air ground task force appropriate to their levels of responsibility.⁴

This means that a Marine begins serving as a leader in a rank before they even become eligible to complete the non-resident/resident PME that the Marine Corps says is instrumental for their success in that rank. Because no timeline exists for when a Marine must complete either non-resident or resident PME, simply that they do so for promotion eligibility, the organization can end up with a Marine serving in a rank for an extensive period of time before completing PME.

The current PME system, as it relates to achieving its stated objectives and as it relates to promotions, is flawed. One flaw is the use of promotion as a forcing function for PME completion. The current setup encourages Marines without the personal initiative or desire to do so, to only complete non-resident/resident PME when it will benefit them. This stands in direct opposition to the leadership traits of knowledge and unselfishness; the leadership principles of setting the example, being technically and tactically proficient, and seeking self-improvement; and the concept of servant-leadership as has been defined by Robert K. Greenleaf.⁵ The violation of the tenets of servant-leadership can be seen as particularly heinous on the Marine’s and the organization’s part. Young men and women, as well as their families and Nation, entrust themselves to the Marine Corps and the leaders it puts in charge of them. All the aforementioned people trust that the Corps will do its best to ensure that these young men and women are well trained, equipped, and led. If the Marine Corps believes that the study of the profession of arms and PME holds enough importance to require it for promotion to higher rank, and it has specifically structured PME courses to impart leadership tools for a Marine to use in their current rank, why then

does the Corps wait until a Marine has already attained and started serving in a rank before it deems them eligible to complete the PME for that rank? Additionally, why does the Corps allow a Marine to serve for extended periods of time in rank and only be compelled to complete their non-resident/resident PME for that rank when they want to get promoted to the next? In most other professions, one must study, master, and demonstrate competency at the desired professional level that they wish to attain before having the professional recognition of that level bestowed upon them. The Corps stands in contrast to this as a professional organization that bestows professional recognition first, in the form of promotion to a rank, and then expects the person to later on obtain the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) of that rank of their own volition. Notably, the Corps has seemingly recognized the misguidedness of doing business this way in several other instances. For example, the Corps changed its policy over the past several years to require that newly promoted first sergeants attend the first session of the First Sergeants Course held after their promotion; similar rules apply for newly selected commanding officers and sergeants majors where it concerns the Cornerstone Course.

Putting the responsibility on the leaders of PME-delinquent Marines to force those Marines to attend PME represents another flaw of the current system. The current system does this by calling upon two absolute obligations of a leader. One of these obligations a leader has is to the followers of the subordinate leaders that are put in charge. The fourth paragraph of the first chapter of *MCO P1400.32D, Marine Corps Promotion Manual*, states that it is a commander’s responsibility to “ensure that a Marine is not promoted unless the individual can be expected to assume the responsibilities and perform the duties of that grade in a creditable and satisfactory manner.”⁶ If PME makes for a better leader and a higher echelon leader wants to do right by the followers of a PME delinquent Marine who has been placed in a leadership position simply by their advancement to a higher

rank, then duty requires that the higher echelon leader push that delinquent Marine towards completion of their rank appropriate PME. The other obligation that a leader has in this case is to take any and all actions that may benefit the organization. The Corps' personnel requirements never stop. In order to have a viable number of promotable Marines, the Corps must have an associated amount of PME complete Marines. Therefore, to support the Corps in accomplishing its mission, a leader has an obligation to do their best to ensure that a healthy pool of promotion eligible candidates exists. The unfortunate twist to this obligation is that the end result of being PME complete can be seen as only benefitting the Marine, particularly in cases where it required forcing the Marine into completing it.

Needed Change

I propose three potential courses of action (COA) to fix the flaws in the current PME system as it relates to promotion.

COA #1: Require Marines to complete both their non-resident and resident PME for the next rank before being considered PME complete and eligible for promotion.

According to MCO P1400.32D, "Promotion is not a reward for past

performance but more importantly it is an expectation of future performance."⁷ With this COA, corporals, for instance, would be required to complete the sergeants non-resident and resident courses before being PME complete and promotion eligible. This COA would serve to put the onus on Marines to show that they desire and deserve promotion as demonstrated by their efforts to obtain and absorb the KSAs of the next rank. Making a Marine demonstrate their desire for increased leadership responsibilities before promotion, would by default, make PME completion a competitive measure, vice the compulsory event that it currently is. This COA would also have the added benefit of less organizational disruption because of the inherent possibility of rank reductions in COAs #2 and #3.

COA #2: Require Marines to complete the non-resident PME for the next rank before being considered PME complete for their current rank. Then require promoted Marines to attend the very next iteration of the resident or seminar course being held for their promoted rank or be reduced back to their previous rank upon failure to do so.

This COA, while not achieving all the benefits of COA #1, would certainly fix the major flaws of the current sys-

tem by putting the onus on the Marine to prove that they desire to lead at the promoted rank and recognize that they have a responsibility to their subordinates to make themselves the best leaders that they can be. This COA would also ensure that a Marine has at least been equipped with the next rank's non-resident course KSAs before being promoted. It would also guarantee that the Marine has the next rank's resident course prerequisite already completed so that they can attend the first available resident course after promotion. Finally, it would mandate resident course attendance at the earliest date rather than leave it to the individual Marine or their unit's discretion, eliminating the possibility of individual or organizational delay. This COA has an advantage over COA #3 for all these reasons.

COA #3: Require Marines to enroll in their promoted grade's non-resident course immediately upon promotion and complete the course within a specified time period from their date of rank or be reduced back to their previous rank upon failure to do so. Then require those Marines to attend the very next iteration of the resident or seminar course for their rank or be reduced back to their previous rank upon failure to do so.

This COA, while not achieving all the benefits of COA #1 or #2, would still address the most important flaw for the concerned leader in the current system. It would ensure that a Marine gets the desired KSAs of the rank to which appointed as early as possible in the time that he or she will serve in that rank.

Potential Issues

It can be foreseen that some issues may arise from the proposed COAs. For one, there's the potential problem of limited resident course seats; particularly for the large population of corporals and sergeants. This is even more significant with COA #1 as it would push a lengthier PME course down to the even larger population group of lance corporals. However, this has already been somewhat mitigated by the institution of seminar programs to supplement resident education. A focusing of



Instruction at the Staff Academy includes battle studies and staff rides—a significant investment in adult learning methods. (Photo by Sgt. Melissa Karnath.)

Marine Corps University brain power on developing further enabling ideas, such as possibly changing to a blended online/resident format for the lengthier active duty courses, could further reduce any friction. Additionally, limited seat availability would only contribute to making PME attendance more competitive. Competition has always been integral to human development and growth. Marines love to compete and people generally place more value on achievements that they have to strive for. Requiring a basic grasp of competencies necessary at the next level of a profession represents a tried and proven method of ensuring and maintaining professionalism among a profession's members. We can look to the Navy's petty officer and chief selectee courses for a related example. The Navy requires that their Sailors complete the next ranks course upon selection but before they are actually promoted. Finally, the use of other promotion metrics may be required to screen Marines for the opportunity to attend resident PME and become promotion eligible. The Navy provides an example in this case as well, requiring advancement exams for E4–E7 promotions.

Another major consideration would be the possibility of much smaller pools of promotion-eligible Marines. Two counterarguments exist for this consideration. First, if the Corps desires for the best and brightest of its members to move up and move on to positions of greater responsibility, then a shortfall of the numerical amount of these individuals there are should not be a deciding factor in how you go about getting these select people. The Corps has always been and will continue exist as the smallest of the Services. However, throughout history, it has repeatedly had outsized combat success, which is directly attributable to the quality of its people and the leadership that they have exhibited. Limiting the number of opportunities for advancement will likely assist with getting the best and brightest, conversely, increasing or having a predetermined number of advancements has no active effect on whether you get any of the best and brightest. Second, the Corps has always prided itself on

its traditionally low ratio of officer to enlisted as well as SNCOs to NCOs and non-rates. The Corps has also prided itself on the amount of leadership authority and responsibility carried at even the most junior ranks. The logical rationale for having a requirement for a specific number of Marines of a certain rank in a specific MOS is an expected level of MOS and leadership competency at each rank. However, the development of a Marine's MOS and leadership competency is more a matter of gaining time and experience rather than gaining rank. So, where it concerns the metrics of MOS/leadership competency, logic would follow that a senior corporal in no less competent in those areas than a newly minted sergeant. While these two arguments bring up multiple other issues such as the association of ranks with certain billets and possibly having to modify the current up or out policy, it does nullify the argument of minimum promotion quotas. Marine Corps infantry may present the best example of this. Promotion in the infantry has historically been slower than the rest of the Service. However, because junior Marines are well aware of the competitiveness and selectiveness that advancement in the infantry represents, even the lowest level infantry leader garners outsized respect compared to Marines of the same rank in other MOSs.

Conclusion

The warfighting profession has only grown more demanding over the past half-century. "The future battlefields on which Marines fight will be increasingly hostile, lethal, and chaotic. Our success will hinge, as it always has, on the leadership of our junior Marines. We must ensure that they are prepared to lead."⁸ Modern and future times require greater technical, tactical, and strategic acumen at even lower-unit levels and amongst every rank. The Marine Corps has been telling Marines for a long time now in word and design that PME is a necessary and critical component of being a professional warrior. If that is the case, then PME should be no more optional than any other mission critical training that Marines require. In

his book *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz states, "But amongst uncivilized people we never find a really great General, and very seldom what we can properly call a military genius, because that requires a development of the intelligent powers."⁹ If the Marine Corps believes in the indispensable nature of PME for a Marine's success, then it has a duty to the leaders, peers, and followers of those Marines to ensure that they are as optimally equipped for the duties of their rank, or if it chooses to keep the current system of promoting and then providing PME, then it owes those same people a mechanism that ensures Marines get to their rank appropriate PME in an expeditious manner upon being promoted.

Notes

1. Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Profession," available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com>.
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps, Order 1553.4B, Professional Military Education (PME)*, (Washington, DC: January 2008).
3. Ibid.
4. Douglas E. Patton, "Enlisted PME Transformation," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 2006).
5. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant As Leader*, (Atlanta, GA: The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 1970).
6. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO P1400.32D Marine Corps Promotion Manual*, (Washington, DC: June 2012).
7. Ibid.
8. Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal," *Marines Magazine*, (January 1999).
9. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1918).

