

# Grooming the 21st-Century MAGTF Officer

A new age requires a new model

by Maj Matthew S. Hanks

**T**he Information Age demands officers who are capable of thriving, not simply surviving, in the future contested multi-domain environment. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps has an Industrial Age manpower model unfit for generating expert officers in the Information Age. The *Marine Corps Operating Concept (MOC)* stresses that “[a]ll leaders ... will need critical thinking skills to continually assess and navigate complex engagements” across all five domains with influence by military, civilian, and adversary belligerents.<sup>1</sup> As operations continue to decentralize and become more distributed in nature, the importance of these qualities at the lower level increases dramatically. The current officer manpower system efficiently sources officers through career pipelines specifically to groom candidates for O-5 level command. However, it ineffectively facilitates officer development per the demands of the current and future operating environments. Moreover, the current model restricts the Marine Corps from fully implementing its warfighting philosophy. To meet the intent of its maneuver warfighting philosophy, the aspirations of the *MOC* and the staffing requirements of the future, the Marine Corps should adopt a new officer career model that combines traditional staffing practices with evolutionary concepts.

A new officer career model should possess a promotion system with characteristics that exploit the talents and

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abilities of individual officers yet still adheres to a supply and demand concept. It should evolve from the up or out system, where the restrictions of time in grade, forces officers up with promotion or out if twice passed over for promotion.<sup>2</sup> Above all, it should provide an opportunity for officers to refuse promotion and remain in their current rank. The evolutionary process is up by

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desire or need, out by desire or dismissal. In other words, officers would stay at their rank until they volunteered for promotion (up by desire), or the Marine Corps had vacancies without sufficient competent volunteers for promotion (up by need). The resignation process remains the same (out by desire), as does the process for dismissal. An additional tool for the Marine Corps would be the non-punitive administrative reduction.

This tool would apply to officers who performed poorly at the current grade but performed exceptionally well at a lower grade. Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull created the Peter Principle, which argues that “in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence.”<sup>3</sup> The Marine Corps is indeed a hierarchy and is no exception to this principle, but its employees undertake positions of far greater consequence than the organizations Peter and Hull use as examples. Because maneuver warfare “puts a premium on certain particular human skills and traits,” the Marine Corps must employ a new and more effective model that puts the right leaders at the right place and prevents unfit leaders from gaining the wrong positions.<sup>4</sup>

A new model encourages the one-up-one-down practice for all billets, in which the personnel system fills all positions by one grade up or down from the specified grade. This would provide immeasurable flexibility in managing personnel and greatly enhance the ability of commanders to maintain unit integrity and effectiveness through continuity of key billets.

A new model should keep traditional processes such as promotion boards and command screening boards with one exception. The career augmentation board is unnecessarily redundant and an O-3 command screening board should replace it. Lieutenants must be selected for both career augmentation and captain promotion board to continue their careers. Moreover, because there are more officers than billets in some communities, and captains require an observed fitness report in those billets, captains end up with limited time to gain proficiency and unit cohesion. A new model eradicates the self-induced time sensitivity of key billets, which in turn enables the Marine Corps to deliberately select captains for the critical billets of company or battery command.

A new model would meet the intent of the Marine Corps maneuver warfare philosophy more effectively than the current system. The successful execution of maneuver warfare requires competency, cohesion, implicit communication, and trust. Continuity is essential to meet these requirements, but the current staffing cycle does not facilitate it. Although officers may be assigned to a unit for a three-year period, they will likely change billets, attend required professional military education schools, and/or execute individual augment assignments. By the time officers begin to understand their environments and develop trust with the members of their units, they find themselves transferred to different positions. Moreover, officer assignments within a unit typically overlap every eighteen months and essentially restart the development progress. With a new model, officers can remain in their rank as desired or as required and contribute to units with greater competency and effectiveness.

*MCDP 1* states that “trust is an essential trait among leaders ... [and] is a product of confidence and familiarity.”<sup>5</sup> Confidence is a direct result of training, education, and experience. Familiarity develops by building relationships over time. A new model suggests three years or two deployment cycles in a billet as enough time for personnel to gain and then employ experience in their posi-

tions and additionally provides the time necessary to build trust within the command. Trust is also essential for implicit communication, a “faster, more effective way to communicate than through the use of detailed, explicit instructions.”<sup>6</sup> Implicit communication is vital in complex and distributed operations outlined in subordinate concepts such as expeditionary advanced base operations and littoral operations in contested environments.

Despite the claim that “moral and mental forces exert a greater influence on the nature and the outcome of war,” much of the Marine Corps structure focuses on the physical forces.<sup>7</sup> A new promotion system should prioritize the

The *MOC* describes its aspirations as “[m]aneuver warfare in every dimension; combined arms in all domains,” and further articulates five critical tasks required for success.<sup>10</sup> Out of the five tasks, “Critical Task 6.5: Exploit the Competence of the Individual Marine” is the most relevant to this argument but lacks critical thought, for it essentially says we need to do better in our current system. The highest echelons of the Marine Corps can tell subordinates to do better all they want, but real results will only come with a new personnel structure. The Marine Corps can realize Critical Task 6.5 only with a change to structure. To develop leaders, enable cultural learning, develop Ma-

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development of strong moral and mental leaders because maneuver warfare, which “places a premium on individual judgment and action,” requires a more educated and experienced breed of officers that the current system does not produce as the norm.<sup>8</sup>

The current system has a linear career path that includes both command and staff billets up through the O-5 level, and although efficient, it is counter to our doctrine. *MCDP 1* states that

[w]e 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.<sup>9</sup>

The Marine Corps currently does this, but not until the O-5 level. A new model directly reflects *MCDP 1* and in effect replaces the current structured linear career progression model with a flexible and competency-based selection process for ranks and billets starting at the O-3 level.

rines for complexity, train and educate Marines for integrated naval operations, and manage talent, the Marine Corps must adopt a new model that generates the necessary time required to meet those standards. Moreover, the *MOC* and future operating environment indicate a future conflict to be extremely complex and distributed. This requires leaders and units at the lowest levels to be competent and cohesive. To achieve this, units must work together over time and develop interpersonal relationships, greater trust, and more effective implicit communication, all of which equate to a greater generation of tempo against our adversaries. A new model would more effectively generate the conditions necessary to meet the aspirations of the *MOC*.

Retention represents a major obstacle for staffing management, and it will likely continue as a challenge in the future. To overcome this, a new model could generate greater job satisfaction by empowering the officer to choose his or her career path rather than follow a pre-established one. Giving officers this freedom is an effective method to retain talent.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, when an

officer pursues his goals, the Marine Corps inadvertently accomplishes its goals of retention. This is a mindset transition that equalizes the emphasis on the wants of people and the needs of the organization. Many Marines did not join the Marine Corps for money; however, the Marine Corps currently uses financial incentives as a means for retention.<sup>12</sup> This is costly and ineffective for it ignores a predominant incentive that would keep talent within the ranks: job satisfaction. The future operating environment requires highly competent and highly skilled officers who take time to develop fully. Not every officer should be a commander; yet, the current structure forces officers through a rigid pipeline designed to generate

evaluation plan outlined by divisions, wings, and groups. The Marine Corps needs talented leaders who think critically in uncertain environments, leaders capable of training their Marines and sailors through their own experiences and judgment, and leaders educated for the unknowns that training alone simply cannot provide.

To succeed in future endeavors, the Marine Corps must develop its force to match the complex problems associated with the 21st century battlefield. Its primary guidelines for force development should be *MCDP 1*, the authoritative basis for how the Marine Corps fights and prepares to fight.<sup>15</sup> The second influencer of force development design should be the *MOC*, the Marine Corps

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the best possible resume for O-5 command. In turn, special skills atrophy, and officers arbitrarily become jacks of all trades and masters of none.<sup>13</sup> A new model would provide an option for the officer to choose a command pipeline or remain competent in assigned skills.

Some may argue that this could bring back the Navy's "waiting for dead men's shoes" dilemma, where promotion is stagnant and only occurs when people above die or get out.<sup>14</sup> The personnel model of yesteryear lacked what a new model offers: flexibility and options. The Marine Corps gains flexibility with evolutionary concepts such as the "up by desire or need, out by desire or dismissal," command screening boards starting at the O-3 level, and administrative reductions in rank.

Others may further argue that there is no need to fix a model that is not broken. However, the Marine Corps has not faced a serious challenge to test the model in decades. Operations over the last twenty years have produced a training continuum that leaves little for junior officers to think. In large part, they simply follow the training effectiveness

operational guidebook for the future. The *MOC* emphasizes competence as "an essential ingredient of mission success."<sup>16</sup> Officers and their respective units require time to become experts to achieve the tenets of *MCDP 1* and the tasks of the *MOC*. Time is a resource the current staffing model does not afford well, but a new model would improve upon it. Moreover, the Marine Corps is a human enterprise and must capitalize on an officer staffing model that gives officers control over their careers. By-products of this would most certainly be increased job satisfaction. The adoption of a new officer career model is the significant change necessary for the Marine Corps to meet the intent of its maneuver warfighting philosophy, the aspirations of the *MOC*, and the staffing requirements of the future. If the Marine Corps retains its Industrial-Age officer-career system, it will not produce the officers needed for success in the Information Age and on the 21st-century battlefield.

### Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Operating Concept* (Washington, DC: 2016).
2. Commandant of the Marine Corps, *MCO P1400.31C, Marine Corps Promotion Manual, Volume 1, Officer Promotions*, (Washington, DC: 2009).
3. Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle* (London, Great Britain: William Morrow and Co Inc., 1971).
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, June 1997).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *Marine Corps Operating Concept*.
11. Tim Kane, *Bleeding Talent* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press LLC, 2012).
12. Cpl Dylan Chagnon, "New Bonuses To Keep Quality Marines," *Marines.mil*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.marines.mil/News/News-Display/Article/1590242/new-bonuses-to-keep-quality-marines>.
13. *Bleeding Talent*.
14. Allan R. Millet, *In Many a Strife: General Gerald C. Thomas and the U.S. Marine Corps 1917-1956* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1993).
15. *MCDP 1*.
16. *Marine Corps Operating Concept*.



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