

# Merit Reconsidered

The cost of valuing seniority over potential

by Maj Daniel C. Walker

In two previous articles published in the February 2019 *Gazette*, I argued that the Marine Corps must take significant action to ensure the best officers fill vital billets across the institution. Specifically, I proposed that we must increase merit as a basis for officer promotions and establish a new process for separating the lowest-performing officers. After publication, I engaged in numerous informal conversations about these ideas. Although much of the feedback that I received was positive, some expressed skepticism or outright disagreement with these recommendations.

Those differing opinions largely mirror the institution's current hesitation to *fully* embrace the potential of below-zone (BZ) promotions while supporting an implicit tenure for field grade officers. After much thought and reflection, I believe that the disagreement with my proposals is fundamentally rooted in a different valuation of seniority and the perceived experience associated with it. The fundamental problem remains that despite existing authorities and a significant cost in the status quo, our institution continues to stifle the potential of BZ officer promotions and more aggressive officer separation policies, all largely because of this idea of *experience*.

Significant latitude currently exists for the Marine Corps to increase BZ promotions and separate underperforming officers. Though one of my previous proposals argued for a new performance separation board, a less-aggressive variant could be immediately implemented—the selective early retirement board (SERB). Under current statutory authority, this board convenes to consider early retirement for those officers who have served at least one year of active duty in the grade currently held, whose name is not on a promotion list, and

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who are not eligible for retirement. The board may target officers in a particular grade, competitive category, year group, or specialty. The total number of officers selected for early discharge may not be more than 30 percent of the number of officers considered.<sup>1</sup> Such a tool has been used before and can again increase the quality of our institution's officer corps through the separation of those lowest performing officers.<sup>2</sup>

As the lowest performing officers are separated from service, those highest performing younger officers can then be promoted to leadership positions. Here too, the Service already has the authorities under the Defense Officer Personnel

Management Act (DOPMA) to do just that. Currently, DOPMA authorizes up to ten percent of officers selected for promotion come from the BZ, with the Secretary of Defense holding the authority to extend this to fifteen percent. Despite this authority and potential, however, only one officer has been selected from the BZ to field grade rank over the past eight years (FY13-FY20).

Despite the recent record of exceedingly few BZ selections, good candidates for BZ promotion abound. By any metric—performance as marked on fitness reports, achievements as outlined in higher-level personal awards, or time in higher-visibility, more critical billets—*some* candidates from the BZ routinely have more competitive attributes than *some* officers selected from the in-zone population. Yet, an organizational culture continues to discourage “deep-selecting” officers, often because they do not have “enough” experience



**DOPMA authorizes the Services to select up to ten percent of its officers from the BZ. (Photo by LCpl Phuchung Nguyen.)**

despite an assessment through direct observation that argues otherwise. According to a 2013 study,

During the last ten years that led up to the promotions, the accelerated promotion block was checked 144 times for Captains, 131 times for Majors, and 117 times for Lieutenant Colonels. In the same time frame only 5 Majors, 1 Lieutenant Colonel, and 0 Colonels were selected below-zone.<sup>3</sup>

This is one indication that many boardrooms are unwilling to effect BZ promotions despite the highest possible recommendation from candidates' reporting seniors who sees that they *do* have "enough" experience to succeed in the next higher grade.

To many, the current tendency not to promote from the BZ and infrequently separate field grade officers seems like the more conservative approach that avoids cost as compared to bold change. Indeed, anytime a new policy is proposed, critics immediately note all of the problems with a new system; I repeatedly encountered this objection with my previous articles. However, such criticism fails to note the cost of maintaining the status quo.

The current system that shelters poorer performing officers until retirement eligibility while not fully accepting the benefits of BZ promotions already exacts a significant cost on our institution. As LtCol Aaron Marx noted in his 2014 research,

There is hesitation to incorporate progressive and aggressive measures for promotion and retention because it could 'break faith' with lieutenant colonels and colonels. However, faith is already being broken, just not with the most senior officers.<sup>4</sup>

Every policy, he notes, has explicit and implicit costs. The question is: are we willing to deliberately examine them and then make an informed decision about those costs?

The current Marine Corps officer retention and promotion paradigm is founded on highly valuing experience. In some cases, however, experience is not as clearly defined and valuable as one may think. This is primarily because it is not necessarily correlated to time in grade (TIG); it could include

negative experience; and some experience may actually stifle future performance.

First, TIG does not necessarily equate to true experience. This is partially demonstrated by the fact that not all billets are created equal—some jobs require Commandant-level input, others have a service-level board process, and still others are considered "key billet in grade" by monitors. Additionally, a given unit's life cycle and operational tempo may provide more "experience" than a similar tour in an adjacent unit. By this logic, less time in a more important billet may provide more experience than much longer in a less critical one. Because of all these reasons, not all TIG confers the same valuable experience on a given officer.

Second, if we only look at TIG, we may not realize that some experience could be negative experience perhaps tied to outdated processes, stale leadership styles, or even old institutional paradigms. The British Army's Crimean War and Boer War experience is a case study in the costs of bad experience. The British Crimean War involvement, which was marked by old smoothbore rifles, was actually counterproductive to Britain's initial efforts in the Boer War. In that conflict, the British military faced significant technological improvements, such as weapons that could kill at much higher volumes and at greater ranges. Had it not been for those leaders bound to old paradigms, that military would have more quickly adapted to the realities of a new war.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, and in a similar vein, experience itself does not speak to potential or performance—officers must have the ability to apply experience to future situations. "Positive Transfer," which describes the phenomenon of using experience or learning to a future situation, should be the more valuable trait that our organization seeks, not simply an accumulation of experience born of passive exposure to various situations. In a wide-ranging survey of previous military failures, Dr. Norman Dixon notes that "an inability to profit from past experience" is a key characteristic of military incompetence and failure.<sup>6</sup> Such is the danger of blindly viewing

time as experience, and experience as always positive.

Counter perspectives are not without merit. Indeed, if our institution's officer corps is fundamentally sound, why try to fix it? Similar arguments that are made in support of the status quo include: increasing officer separations requires separating some officers who still contribute to the institution, even if they are not the best; the Marine Corps' performance assessments are not precise enough to forecast which officers will succeed in future roles; and the Marine Corps is incapable of successfully executing SERBS or other separation boards.

Also implicit in these arguments is a belief that seniority is so valuable that the status quo should be maintained. This view has been previously noted in a civilian context as well,

Seniority represents several benefits: these employees have a deep understanding of the company's culture, vision and goals. More importantly, they have the benefit of experience on their side, which is a critical attribute especially when it comes to selection for higher leadership positions. It is often assumed that a more seasoned, experienced individual is more suitable to lead a team.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these benefits, three costs of over-valuing seniority are notable.

First, the current system encourages a "slide and glide" mentality among a small minority of our officers. On the promotion side, with little chance of a BZ promotion and high in-zone selection rates for major, lieutenant colonel, and colonel, there is little *promotion* incentive to out-perform one's peers. Those that have already been promoted to their terminal rank quickly realize that, barring some egregious act, they can maintain marginally effective performance until a twenty-plus year retirement, if desired. Consider majors promoted at the twelve-year mark: they could coast for eight full years until retirement while contributing the bare minimum expected by our institution.

Second, in an age marked by accelerating technological transformation, there is a cost to being tied to outmoded paradigms. Though the best leaders can

break free from old habits through study and reflection, the institution should at least recognize a possible weakness in the mindset of valuing experience without proper context. We need fresh thinking in every billet at every grade. One way to do this is through accelerating the promotion of younger officers who themselves have the required experience to succeed.

Third, the current system does not fully recognize the full potential of officer promotion boards themselves. We should demand that boards not only select the average officers from in zone, but also precisely determine those very best from the BZ. It is during these promotion boards—a time with a captive audience of the best senior officers—that we can demand they use the resources available to them to choose the very best for accelerated promotion and the very worst for separation. It is these same boards that not only have significant clarity on what talent the institution needs at the current moment but also have the ability to clearly compare officers within a cohort. Anything less than demanding this from promotion boards is not fully using its potential.

With the recent publication of the *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (CPG), hope for such initiatives is in sight. This CPG recognizes that our current model is not optimized,

Our manpower model is based primarily on time and experience, not talent or performance or potential future performance. While performance is factored into promotion selection, it is narrowed to a slim cohort, roughly based on year groups—an antiquated model.<sup>8</sup>

To revitalize our institution's talent management means radical movement toward separating the weaker officers while promoting those younger, more capable ones ahead of schedule. To do this will require a change in process, paperwork, and people.

As mentioned above, processes are already available to separate those lower performing officers, this can be done by either my previously proposed personnel separation boards or SERBS. Once the lowest-performing officers are separated,

room is created for BZ promotions to fill some of that open space. Of those who are selected, in-zone reordering is vital to ensuring that the best of a selected list are promoted before those who have barely made it.<sup>9</sup> The service has already demonstrated significant progress on this during the FY 2021 officer promotion boards.

Paperwork, specifically fitness report and master brief sheets, must also support such a move toward merit and away from seniority. All references to date of rank and TIG should be removed from fitness reports and master brief sheets. Previous performance and future potential data should stand on its own. Additionally, Marine Corps officer-promotion policy (*MCO PI400.31C W/CH I*) must be revised to allow for masking

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zone segregation to everyone within a boardroom except administrative assistants or recorders. This change will ensure DOPMA requirements are met in only selecting up to ten percent of BZ candidates, but also not bias voting board members with considerations of TIG or zone populations.

Of all these recommendations, people will matter most to ensure change. Board presidents must voice support for a high number of “premier briefings” in accordance with current policy.<sup>10</sup> Outside of the boardroom, reporting seniors and reviewing officers have as much, or more, responsibility. The frequent Section I comments of “promote ahead of peers” should only be written if a reporting senior will be consistent and actually mark Marines for accelerated promotion. However, when deserving, leaders should not feel an institutional resistance to submit an accelerated promotion report. This will not only send the required signal to future promotion

boards, but will also align with the intent of current fitness report instruction.

In conclusion, our current officer promotion and retention policies are in need of continued overhaul. The recent CPG has properly identified the problem: chiefly that the current processes are outdated and not optimized to support the future fight. All that is needed now is the resolve to be bold in changing the status quo. The time is now.

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Notes

1. U.S. Congress, *Title 10 U.S. Code, paragraph 638(a)*, (Washington, DC: 1986).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 546/14, Convening of the FY 15 SERB*, (Washington, DC: 2014).
3. Maj Benjamin J. DeBardleben, “Marine Corps Promotion System: Rewarding Merit or Seniority?,” (Quantico, VA: Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, 2013).
4. LtCol Aaron Marx, *Rethinking Marine Corps Officer Promotion and Retention*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2016).
5. Norman Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016).
6. Ibid.
7. Pallavi Jha, “Merit vs. Seniority: Picking the Right Employees to Promote,” *Huffington Post*, (June 2016), available at <https://www.huffingtonpost.in>.
8. Gen David H. Berger, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
9. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 245/19, Merit-Based Promotion List Reorder*, (Washington, DC: 2019).
10. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO PI400.31C w/Change I, Marine Corps Promotion Manual*, (Washington, DC: 2012).

