

Zero-Defects and the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act

The need for a flexible personnel management system

by Capt Jesse Moyles

Scores of Marine officers are obsessed with delivering the right answers, best statistics, and fewest problems regardless of the cost to combat readiness and professional development of subordinates.¹ In 1980, the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) was enacted to give the United States a youthful and vibrant officer corps capable of waging large-scale attrition warfare.² While DOPMA has been successful in its original charter, key provisions have incentivized a zero-defects mentality that stifles initiative and places Marines at odds with their warfighting philosophy. After four decades of personnel management under DOPMA, risk-averse officers who abrogate decisions, focus on short-term success, and take exhaustive administrative measures to cover their bases have become commonplace. To counter the zero-defects epidemic, the Marine Corps must move away from DOPMA and adopt a flexible personnel management system that leverages individual abilities and disincentivizes aversion to risk.

As Gen Krulak described in 1997, the zero-defects mentality is a misunderstanding of the relationship between responsibility and accountability and has debilitating consequences for maneuver doctrine.³ In his 1999 thesis, *The Hidden Cost of Downsizing*, Army LTC Robert Kissel defines zero-defects as,

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thought processes and actions, both overt and suggestive, in which a leader goes to great lengths to ensure the total absence of defects, mistakes, or flaws within his command to the point that he centralizes all decisions at his level, minimizing or overshadowing subordinates' control.⁴

Under this style of leadership, generations of officers have been raised with limited opportunities to assess and take risk in the accomplishment of a military objective—the backbone of maneuver doctrine.⁵ What's more is that some commanders even go as far as believing they are helping or protecting subordinates by micromanaging or abrogating decisions to higher levels.⁶ While it is true that zero-defects leadership can produce good short-term results and make subordinates more competitive for their next promotion, over time it suffocates initiative, fosters acts of omission, and normalizes behavior incompatible with maneuver warfare.⁷

Though zero-defects transcends all aspects of Marine Corps leadership culture, some of the most obvious examples involve policies concerning liberty

safety. Marine Corps safety culture was formalized in October 2000, when Gen Jones proclaimed that avoidable accidents could be eliminated “through the concentrated application of leadership” and that “conditions, practices, and habits posing a threat to the safety of Marines must be sought out, attacked, and eliminated by leaders.”⁸ Since then, a number of similar safety initiatives have been implemented by Defense Department leadership and continue today with the Commandant's Safety Action Campaign which charges Marines to “reduce the number of mishap fatalities by 50 percent by the end of Fiscal Year 2019.”⁹ While these safety initiatives are important, timely, and commendable, they have exacerbated the zero-defects epidemic by giving Marines a statistically improbable task and holding their leadership ability as ransom.

Despite the desperate efforts of countless frustrated commanders, Marine Corps safety initiatives have made no significant difference in the overall number of preventable accidents.¹⁰ What safety initiatives have done, however, is force commanders to “do something” in order to mitigate damage to their careers when, inevitably, something goes wrong.¹¹ Common examples of “do something” behavior include pushing liberty decisions to higher authority as well as implementing risk management worksheets, checklists, an-

cillary training, safety briefs, and other administrative backstops for otherwise routine life events. Though commanders know such measures are unlikely to make any meaningful difference, they are unwilling “to take chances on any measures that might improve the situation, on the off chance that they will be in trouble themselves should something go awry.”¹² And, given the limited tolerance for mistakes or “leadership failures” in Marine Corps officer personnel management, this degree of risk aversion should come as no surprise.

Zero-defects is pervasive in today’s Marine Corps because personnel management under DOPMA tends to retain individuals who embrace it while overlooking those who do not. Take, for example, the net effect of DOPMA’s reduction in force authority during the post-Cold War drawdown. In order to handle the 40 percent reduction in manpower from 1989–1999, Services tightened standards for promotions and established retention and selective early retirement boards.¹³ Knowing that the bar for promotion and retention had risen, fitness reports became inflated and boards were left sifting through small details in personnel records to determine who would stay and who would go.¹⁴ As competition intensified, a sense of perfection emerged along with careerist officers who understood that the best bet for retention was to limit exposure to risk.¹⁵ Many of those officers succeeded in being retained and, over the last 30 years, have developed generations of subordinates with similar modes of operation.

On top of the damage done during the 1990s reduction in force, DOPMA’s “up-or-out” promotions coupled with voluntary retirement at twenty years continue to force field-grade officers to embrace zero-defects as a matter of survival. On average, Marine officers promote to major at a rate of 75 percent and 11 years of service.¹⁶ For those selected, promotion brings them only a few years and one promotion away from a retirement pension and benefits worth upwards of a couple million dollars.¹⁷ The desire for majors to promote to lieutenant colonel and become eligible for retirement is reflected in the

relatively small number of officers who voluntarily separate between thirteen and sixteen years.¹⁸ At this point in an officer’s career, voluntary separation comes with virtually no financial incentives, and involuntary separation is worth only a fraction of the value of a full retirement. Therefore, with only 68 percent of majors promoting to lieutenant colonel, there is tremendous financial pressure to present an unblemished record to the board.¹⁹

Finally, adhering to DOPMA gradeables has resulted in limited command time and commanders who are oriented on short-term success. Because Marine Corps personnel management maintains that positions held are more important than experience garnered, promotion boards favor Marines who “successfully” hold key billets at key times and penalize those who do not. This requirement forces Marines to rotate through units at unnaturally high rates and commanders to become managers looking for the best short-term results. Marines who succeed in achieving the best immediate results receive awards, promotions, and good reports, while those who experience mistakes or whose achievements are not realized until after they are gone are overlooked.²⁰ As LtCol Kissel put it,

Our entire system is programmed to reward flawless execution, however achieved, versus development of systemic programs or long-term objectives, when achieved through methods involving risk or mistakes.²¹

The first step in blunting the zero-defects epidemic is replacing the personnel management policies that have incentivized it over the last several decades. Marine Corps personnel management under DOPMA must gradually be replaced with a flexible system that better balances short and long-term needs of individuals and the institution. The most critical effort in affecting this change is replacing DOPMA’s “up or out” with some variation of “up or stay.” In such a system, Marines who possess and maintain the requisite qualifications for a particular billet could potentially hold it multiple times while those who are qualified and ready for promotion or reassignment could have the opportu-

nity to move on.²² Such a system could also incorporate a process wherein eligible Marines apply for available positions and are selected by the gaining command in conjunction with Marine Corps officer assignments branch. The 2018 National Defense Authorization Act has already granted some flexibility to this end, and the Navy intends to test it on flight instructors who do not want to leave the cockpit for an administrative position.²³

By implementing a system with flexible career options, the Marine Corps will maximize the number of leaders in well-suited billets while increasing tour lengths and alleviating promotion pressure for mid-career officers. With time, such a system will cultivate leaders who are more inclined to tolerate, or even facilitate, the mistakes necessary to develop aggressive maneuverists—a leadership style desperately needed in the dispersed and decentralized battlefield of the 21st century. Furthermore, longer tour lengths will significantly enhance the overall institutional health of the Marine Corps as leaders are forced to account for the long-term consequences of their leadership. With these measures in place, over time the underlying career-oriented impetus that drives zero-defects will dissipate, and a Marine Corps that practices the doctrine it espouses will finally emerge.

Opponents of a flexible system will argue that it is too difficult to manage, the force will grow too old, and that zero-defects will persist as one source of competition is replaced with another. However, the 2006 RAND study *Challenging Time in DOPMA Flexibility and Contemporary Military Officer Management* by Schirmer et al., suggests that implementing a flexible system may not be as complicated as some would think.²⁴ While a flexible system will be more difficult to manage, additional costs in human resources will be offset by retaining Marines who, under the current system, would separate.²⁵ This does mean that the officer corps will grow older, but this is hardly a bad thing in 21st century. In fact, the Commandant is already considering ways to mature the force and a flexible system would only further those

initiatives.²⁶ Finally, as to whether zero-defects would persist as competition changes from one form to another, this is unlikely because in a flexible system there is no requirement to move up the chain. Following the accession process, an officer could remain in a billet long as they remain qualified and the commander is interested in retaining them. While there will certainly be healthy competition to move up the ranks, the consequences for not promoting will not be catastrophic.

In conclusion, the zero-defects mentality is an unintended consequence of an antiquated personnel management system 40 years in the making. Instead of cultivating leaders who are invested in long-term success and allow subordinates to take prudent risk in the accomplishment of an objective, Marine Corps personnel management under DOPMA has fostered a culture of risk aversion wherein avoiding mistakes takes precedence over developing effective people and effective units. The only way to purge zero-defects from Marine Corps leadership culture is to attack the root cause. DOPMA must be replaced with a flexible personnel management system that harnesses the full potential of individuals and places the right Marine, in the right job, at the right time. By adopting a flexible personnel management system, the zero-defects mentality, like DOPMA, will become a thing of the past.

Notes

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3. Charles C. Krulak, "Responsibility, Accountability, And the Zero-Defects Mentality," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 1997).

4. "The Hidden Cost of Downsizing."

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

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9. Teague A. Pastel, "Marine Corps Leadership: Empowering or Limiting the Strategic Corporal?," (thesis, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2008); Lisa Ecola, Rebecca L. Collins, and Eilisa Eiseman, *Understanding and Reducing Off-Duty Vehicle Crashes Among Military Personnel*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010); and Commandant of the Marine Corps, *ALMAR 016/18, Commandant's Safety Action Campaign*, (Washington, DC: May 2018).

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11. Carleton D. Forsling, "Liberty Safety," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: March 2010).

12. Ibid.

13. "The Hidden Cost of Downsizing."

14. Ibid.

15. Leonard Wong, "Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps," (monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, 2000).

16. Aaron Marx, *Rethinking Marine Corps Officer Promotion and Retention*, (policy paper, Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, August 2014).

17. Department of Defense, "Final Pay Calculator," *Military Compensation*, available at <https://militarypay.defense.gov/>

18. Barnard Rostker, et al., *The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980: A Retrospective Assessment*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1993).

19. *Rethinking Marine Corps Officer Promotion and Retention*.

20. "The Hidden Cost of Downsizing."

21. Ibid.

22. Peter Schirmer, et al., *Challenging Time in DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Military Officer Management*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006).

23. Mark D. Faram, "Congress, Navy Revolutionize Officer Promotions," *Navy Times*, (August 2018), available at <https://www.navytimes.com>.

24. *Challenging Time in DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Military Officer Management*.

25. Ibid.

26. Gidget Fuentes, "Neller: Future Marine Corps Could be an 'Older, More Experienced' Force," *USNI News*, (February 2018), available at <https://news.usni.org>.

