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TOWARD A SUPERIOR PROMOTION SYSTEM

I read “Toward a Superior Promotion System” (July–August 2012) with interest and applaud Maj Kyle Byard, Ben Malisow, and Col Martin France for taking on one of the traditional “third-rail” issues in our Air Force. I’m old enough to have lived through most of the article’s examples (except the Continental Army part), so from that perspective I offer the following comments.

I wish the authors had attacked the Officer Evaluation System and the promotion system in separate articles. I spent some time on the recently concluded Military Leadership Diversity Commission, which took a long look at promotions across the services. We concluded that the promotion process worked, free of bias, because of (or in spite of) the products used to make the determination. However, the commission did recognize inherent flaws in the evaluation system(s), some of which the authors discuss. Given that bias, I offer a few observations on evaluations.

I am somewhat critical of the authors’ starting point. It seemed to me that they focused on the individual officer and on creation of a very objective system to the exclusion of some of our old but important concepts. For example, building the Air Force team to carry out our mission in support of the country requires an evaluation system that acknowledges/enhances the importance of teamwork, provides individuals a chance to bloom where they are planted, yet remains unequivocal in performance assessment. Coupling this with the fact that we really do poorly at predicting what will be important 20–30 years down the road renders shortsighted any Officer Evaluation System that clearly values some “current” career fields above all others. Said another way, it pretty much guarantees the ascendance of us pilots to the critical senior leadership positions. That was helpful in my career advancement, but I’m

not convinced it is the model for a future that may shift the focus to personnel associated with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; remotely piloted vehicles; or mess kit repair—all of whom may wither on the vine until someone decides they are the new “combat pilots.”

In the nuts and bolts of determining scores (“performance” x “position”), Major Byard, Mr. Malisow, and Colonel France are absolutely right about the central tendency of a “2” for performance (based upon the “1, 2, and 3” for “below, standard, and above,” respectively). If we accept that, then despite what we might like, the assignment process takes center stage. Several questions arise regarding the pilots, maintainers, and even budgeteers looking to boost their score by going to Kunsan Air Base. Who will choose? Will they be allowed to extend since their promotion board is coming up? Will the Air Force award “fractional points” for air and space expeditionary force deployments (suppose it is outside the primary career field)? And so forth.

The article speaks to the value of a six-month reporting cycle and awarding points for training/education, but there are issues with this proposal. I was commissioned in 1969, yet I received only one controlled report (thank goodness it was a “1”). Given the oddities of time spent in training, days of supervision, and changes in rating officials, it probably turned out fortuitously, but it happened—and I’m sure I was not the only one. My point is that this is a workload on the rater and the administrative system. They will seek to circumvent the system, and ratees will try to “game” the system, perhaps even coming to understand that good performance is enhanced, not penalized, by a smaller number of reports. Experience also tells me that a three-year hiatus for an Air Force Academy instructor to earn a PhD is problematic. Certainly if he or she becomes department head or permanent professor, then it was all good. However, Colonel France can probably comment on how many don’t make that particular cut. The problem is that big Air Force has never been able to value this level of educational investment, and I don’t think the article’s recommendations fix it. By the way, will “correspondence” courses receive the same value as “in-residence”



attendance? In the same manner, we show similar “devaluing” through the years for those assignments that draw from all career fields—for example, Air Force Academy air officers commanding, recruiters, and even Air Education and Training Command instructor pilots, to name a few. The Marine Corps makes a not-so-subtle acknowledgement of the importance of recruiting by having a separate promotion category for enlisted recruiters, designed to draw the best and brightest.

Finally, the article doesn’t spend enough time on the rater and the difficulty of telling folks they are average. The rater’s inability to look the ratee in the eye and deliver the bad news was part and parcel of the demise of the “controlled” officer effectiveness report. I wouldn’t go so far as to call it an integrity issue, but in my view we have flunked the tough-love test, and I don’t believe that what the authors suggest will fix it. They need to treat and evaluate the other services. Those of us who have experience in the joint arena and who served as raters have seen their systems—and they deserve a look. The Army resolves the “who contributes most to the mission” inequality by creating separate promotion categories. That service evidently knows how many leaders it needs to grow through “combat arms” and how many through “logistics/transportation,” so it doesn’t create the false choice by having them compete against each other in the promotion process. Yet, the Army still acknowledges their contribution to the team and rewards outstanding performance and potential. Perhaps something similar resolves the conflict we see among acquisition personnel, budget analysts, maintenance people, and pilots. Of course, one of the strong points of the Army’s system is that it “grades” the raters. Those raters who seem unable to deliver the full spectrum of ratings lose some punch/credibility. Thanks for the opportunity to comment.

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TOWARD A SUPERIOR PROMOTION SYSTEM: THE AUTHORS REPLY

We would like to thank General Hopper for his critique of our article. We have received feedback from several people who raised questions and offered comments similar to his. We have attempted to address and summarize these as well as provide brief thoughts about them below. Please remember that the article is the presentation of a concept—not an operating instruction. Although the devil may be in the details, the absence of a checklist for every situation does not justify tolerating the current system when more effective alternatives are available and should be studied for possible implementation.

Most of the questions and comments involved very specific and limited situations:

- *How will the system value awards and decorations?* The current officer system does not directly consider awards. Whatever the officer did that merited the award will be reflected in his or her performance rating. To include the award itself in the rating process would amount to double-counting the actions that justified the award.
- *How does the system value in-residence versus correspondence training?* If the experience of in-residence training adds significant, definable value, then the score should be adjusted accordingly.
- *We need more data before we change the current system.* This suggestion is disingenuous since the system has been carefully honed to avoid leaving a trail of analyzable data. Almost all of the officers evaluated received the highest rating on all of their performance reports, and their performance is described in deliberately misleading code words. There is no objective way to quantify grading differences within the current promotion system—for example, between the use of the adjectives *great* and *awesome*.
- *Objections to the present system are anecdotal and come from disgruntled officers who were not promoted.* The Air Force has funded numerous surveys and studies that consistently identify the evaluation and

promotion systems as a primary source of discontent in the officer corps. Because the current process deliberately avoids defining standards or outcomes, only anecdotal evidence is available. The authors have observed that an overwhelming majority of officers have such anecdotes.

- *We do poorly at predicting what will be important 20–30 years down the road. Any Officer Evaluation System that clearly values some “current” career fields above all others is shortsighted.* The proposed system rewards people who seek higher-valued positions and perform well in them. Since we don’t know what the specific technical requirements will be in the future force, these people would seem to be the types of officers we need.
- *How does the system properly appraise PhDs? The Air Force has never been able to value this level of educational investment, and I don’t think your recommendations fix the problem.* If the service’s leaders believe that they have a significant need for full-time PhD candidates, then they can place a high value on the position and let qualified people compete for it. If rating PhD program assignments highly is hard to justify, then that raises more fundamental questions.

We received several questions and comments such as the following ones, essentially saying, “It’s hard to define what we value, so leave the system as it is.”

- *We have conducted several panel reviews of the evaluation and promotion systems and found that they work fine.* Self-assessments of the system, performed by people who have been most successful in that system, suffer from significant credibility issues. Imagine the headline *Royal Family Assesses Monarchy, Finds That It Is Working Well.*
- *How would you address the phenomenon of certain officers earning a “halo” whereby the force of past success propels them toward lucrative assignments and a default top rating?* The performance rating will be for the period of evaluation only, justified by definable achieve-

ments within that period. “In the top 10 percent of all officers I supervise” is not a definable performance achievement.

- *How will performance reports handle six-month periods when duties are split between jobs?* In this situation, numerical ratings work very well. Among many other possible solutions, the value of the positions and the performance rating can be weighted by the portion of the evaluation period and averaged.
- *Would the commissioning source be considered?* If the officer's commissioning source has provided a qualitative advantage, then that advantage should be apparent in his or her performance and will be captured there.
- *You don't spend enough time on the rater and the difficulty of telling folks they are average. The rater's inability to look the ratee in the eye-ball and deliver the bad news was part and parcel of the demise of the “controlled” officer effectiveness report.* This is a significant and deeply troubling problem but not an issue concerning the mechanics of the rating system.

Several people who left comments mentioned this last concern, which involves a puzzling question. The current system requires that supervisors give periodic feedback to their subordinates, in private and without keeping a permanent written record of it. If the actual quality of performance is difficult for supervisors to articulate and traumatic for their subordinates to hear, then shouldn't these expected effects on morale occur after these mandatory feedback sessions? Or are supervisors required to conduct them so that they deliberately mislead subordinates?

Almost all of these concerns already exist in the current evaluation system, and existing procedures address them. Those procedures may either be adapted to the numerical ratings or improved.

Two frequently repeated themes seemed to bear more weight in concerns about a metric-driven system:

- *Requiring semiannual evaluations would impose a crushing administrative burden on the system.* Compare marking the box for “3” and

adding the justification “This officer’s performance was rated as ‘Excellent’ during the operational readiness inspection” to counting “white spaces,” parsing the proper number of exclamation points, sorting action verbs, composing “push” and “stratification” statements, and being extra careful not to describe the officer as “outstanding” or “superior.” Searching the web for “Air Force Performance Report Writing Guide” will yield 5,260,000 responses. The current system is staggeringly burdensome on raters, reviewers, and administrative support, all in the service of producing a deliberately abstruse document. Two simple, clear reports will be less burdensome than the present one.

Fundamentally, the primary concern with our proposal appears to be the notion that

- *Promotion is a subjective process based upon the judgment of senior officers, who must evaluate qualities that cannot be quantified*—a frequent criticism of performance metrics for officers. However, the promotion board now applies quantitative scores to officers and ranks them for promotion. A high level of discomfort seems to accompany performing this ranking in a standardized and transparent manner. Reliance on undefined “gut feelings” and “I know an outstanding officer when I see one” instincts maintains continuity in the leadership culture but also may lead to groupthink, stifle innovation, and make the institution stagnant and vulnerable to changes in the environment. However, if the gut feeling of the senior rater is the best possible standard for promotion, then we should formally acknowledge that fact instead of going to such complicated lengths to present the façade of an objective evaluation process.

It is hard to avoid recognizing that the system of officer effectiveness reports was first implemented in 1974, at the end of the traumatic war in Vietnam and at a time when the military leadership felt removed from a popular culture in turmoil. The changing roles of minorities and women as well as the often strident opposition to the military in



many arenas may have influenced the formulation of an evaluation system that openly disdained the quantitative rating of performance and relied upon the subjective judgment of senior officers regarding who had the “right qualities” for promotion, with no substantial definition of what those qualities might be. As we said in the article, “The unique language of performance reports may have an origin but not a purpose” (p. 32).

Behind many of the concerns raised by this article lurk serious questions regarding the integrity and forthrightness of the officer corps, qualities that once marked the military in popular perception but which have diminished over the decades since Vietnam. Considering the alternative language of the Officer Performance Report system, we are reminded of Shakespeare’s description of a besotted comrade: “He was wont to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier; and now is he turned orthography; his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes” (*Much Ado about Nothing*, 2.3).

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