Improving How the Air Force Develops High-Potential Officers

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Unlike industry where a company can bring in senior leaders at any time, USAF senior leaders are a product of more than 20 continuous years of deliberate career development. Therefore, young officers who are thought to have the potential for senior leadership must be identified early in their careers and vectored to the right opportunities. How these officers are identified, assessed, and developed is not well understood by most of the USAF.

Every officer's performance is continually assessed and documented to provide a means of stratification within squadrons, groups, wings, and so forth. Officer Performance Reports (OPR) and Training Reports (TR) track these assessments, the verbiage used, and awards achieved, and stratification among peers serve as a "reliable,

long-term, cumulative record of performance and promotion potential." Once an officer accumulates the requisite years of service to compete for the rank of major and above, a Promotion Recommendation Form (PRF) summarizes the highlights of that officer's career and communicates "performance-based potential."[1]

The term *potential* is an important distinction because the word is not synonymous with *performance*. In fact, high performance is often mistaken for high potential.[2] The difference between the two does not mean that performance and potential are mutually exclusive. While most high-potential (HiPo) employees are also high-performing, the opposite is not always true. Although it may seem an innocent mistake to confuse the two descriptions, Andre Lavoie, the chief executive officer of ClearCompany, stated that "not being able to distinguish between performance and potential will make it difficult for employers to identify, develop and retain talent."[3] Furthermore, Lavoie claims that there is a cost associated with not delineating between the two. According to the Korn-Ferry Institute, the cost of misidentifying a HiPo employee is three-fold.[4] First, misidentification leads to pushing employees into roles that they are not qualified for or do not desire, which in the USAF may jeopardize the mission and damage an officer's career. Second, misidentification leads to mediocre performance, which may lead to a decrease in organizational morale and an increase in employee turnover. Third, misidentification leads to employees losing faith in the human resources (HR) department (the Air Force Personnel Center for the USAF), which is the perceived owner of the organization's talent.[5]

The implications of successfully identifying potential can have positive strategic military effects as outlined in the *USAF Strategic Master Plan* (*SMP*), *Human Capital Annex* (*HCA*). The HCA is one of four annexes to the SMP that translates goals and objectives required to achieve USAF strategy into initiatives and priorities. Under the "Talent Management" section, the HCA states "the detailed, personal management of the small subset of Airmen who possess those ever-shifting skills, special experiences, and high potential will enable the strategic agility the Air Force of the future demands."[6] Although the USAF references the word *potential* in numerous documents, no characteristics or attributes are explicitly stated to aid personnel directorates in synchronizing their efforts to achieve the strategic guidance outlined in the HCA.

Consequently, the problem faced by the USAF is that there is an incomplete understanding of how to differentiate HiPo company grade officers (CGO). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to improve the way the USAF identifies, assesses, and develops HiPo officers. To that end, we drew upon multiple data sources, such as scholarly journals, magazine articles, talent management case studies, webinars, and textbooks to fully immerse the researchers in the case. Once immersed, we conducted semistructured interviews to assess the perceived or realized differences between an officer's performance and their future potential. What follows is a brief review of the literature, a discussion of our methodology, and our analysis, which leads to our seven recommendations for the USAF:

1. Establish a formal definition of HiPo officers.
2. Evaluate officers against institutional competencies.
3. Adopt a simple, executable model to evaluate potential.

4. Increase the roles and responsibilities given to CGOs.

5. Development teams (DT) must have the power to utilize the assignment process as a means to deliberately develop officers.

6. Replace below-the-zone (BPZ)/in-the-promotion zone (IPZ)/above-the-promotion zone (APZ) promotions with promotion windows.

7. Allow DT notes, vectors, and Airman Development Plan (ADP) comments in the management-level review (MLR) and Central Selection Board (CSB) process.

Literature Review

The researchers noticed significant, similar descriptions of a HiPo employee. Utilizing Nvivo's Word Cloud tool, we populated the program with various "high-potential" articles and reports focusing on specific characteristics describing HiPo employees. Scholarly articles were equally weighted, and multiple instances of the same word were ignored to avoid skewing the query. As shown in the figure, results highlighted an emphasis on an individual's drive, learning, agility, and leadership, which were also coincidental with Dr. Rob Silzer and Dr. Allen A. Church's findings in their 2010 corporate survey.[7] In the survey, organizations' top three HiPo identification factors were leadership competencies, past performance, and career aspiration. Other factors considered were adaptability, commitment, experiences, mobility, and learning ability.[8]

Figure. Common descriptors of high-performing individuals

While the factors of HiPos are valuable in increasing the prediction probability of a person's future potential, most people inquire: "potential for what?" The question is valid and is best explained by viewing potential in three different time frames: past-looking, near-term, and long-term. Past-looking definitions are best suited for static, nonrapidly changing environments as future roles are similar to past or current positions. Only 10 percent of organizations identify HiPos in this manner. Near-term potential involves looking one to two jobs in the future and matches a person with a function. Approximately 25 percent of companies define potential this way and categorize potential by level or strategic position.[9] Projecting long-term potential means identifying ambiguous future roles for HiPos and is associated with potential by breadth or by role.[10] Depending on the organization, one or all three definitions categorize different talent groups.

Silzer and Church discovered organizations cluster HiPo talent into four, "band-level" designations.[11] The purpose of categorizing this way ensures a company maintains an appropriate talent level throughout the organization while maximizing its strategic competitive advantage. The four levels are: top potential (senior-level potential), turn potential (next-level potential), grow potential (the same level but expanded), and mastery potential (same work, same level).

Senior executives play a significant role in an organization's HiPo solicitation and nomination process. Typically conducted on an annual basis, the process is top-down driven. Managers at all levels can nominate candidates based on the organizational definition and categorization of HiPos. As a nominee's "package" travels through the organizational hierarchy, higher-level managers assess, approve, or remove prospective HiPos, providing senior leaders a calibrated list of candidates. Additionally, organizations leverage advanced data collection technologies, capturing a candidate's background information, which bolsters a wide array of assessment tools.[12] Current tools in use are leadership competency surveys, 360-degree interviews, practical competency measures, career background interviews, cognitive ability tests, personality inventories, assessment centers, or individual assessments. Depending on the organization, collected data is either used to make initial HiPo decisions or serve as an assessment tool for individuals already accepted as a HiPo talent. If an organization uses the data for the latter, it is intended to facilitate an individual's development.

Once identified as a HiPo talent, organizations begin preparing individuals for future leadership roles through systematic development. Irrespective of the transparency of HiPo designation, senior leaders continuously review and discuss developmental opportunities for HiPo employees. Examples of deliberate development include but are not limited to formal leadership programs, access to coaches or mentors, in-depth executive assessments, career planning, distinctive work assignments (projects, task forces, or temporary assignments), or executive education courses.[13]

Although companies execute an exhaustive process for identifying HiPo talent, research shows 5–20 percent of initially labeled HiPos do not succeed during the developmental process.[14] This failure may be a result of misidentifying HiPo talent or a sign of an inefficient developmental process. In either case, the research is clear HiPo identification is an inexact science.

Air Force Pamphlet (AFPAM) 36-2506: *You and Your Promotions—The Air Force Officer Promotion Program* outlines and communicates the timeline, procedures, and criteria used for officer promotion. Additionally, the document serves as a baseline for the USAF talent management processes and practices that facilitate the service's ability to distinguish the performance and potential of its officers. The seven major distinguishing criteria for officer evaluations are job performance, leadership, professional qualities, breadth and depth of experience, job responsibility, academic and professional military education, and specific achievements. The USAF evaluates every officer's relative potential and refers to the grading process as the whole-person concept, which is now called "Whole Airman Factors."[15]

The USAF defines potential as "performance-based" and uses numerous forms to create a "cumulative record of performance and promotion potential based on that performance."[16] It is then fair to assess that USAF HiPo talent is categorized by record.[17] This type of talent categorization best suits organizations in nonrapidly changing environments, or when future roles are similar to the past positions; only a minority of organizations identify HiPos in this manner.[18] Moreover, categorizing talent "by record" is incongruent with the USAF's current strategic guidance.

In 2015, Gen Mark A. Welsh III, then the USAF Chief of Staff, emphasized two strategic imperatives: agility and inclusiveness. He stated, "we must commit to changing those things that stand between us and our ability to rapidly adapt."[19] Moreover, the *Air Force's SMP/HCA* parlayed this sentiment into its "Talent Management" section. One deliverable was for the USAF to "ensure an institutional HR system capable of rapidly recognizing and adapting to the changing environment."[20] This statement insinuates certain changes must occur for the USAF to identify its "small subset of Airmen who possess those ever-shifting skills, special experiences, and high potential."[21] Currently, the only conduits for capturing potential are through the OPR, PRF, TR, and Letter of Evaluation documents, as well as vetting through DTs, MLRs, and CSBs.

One major component embedded in OPRs and PRFs is the extensive use of stratifications differentiating officers among each other. Accompanying the stratification is the push line, whereby the rater communicates an officer's potential for future leadership roles. However, the rater's assessment of future potential is restricted due to limits on the rater's competency to judge requirements for service at higher levels beyond the rater's own experience, notwithstanding the limited scope of communicating potential, the lack of a numerical figure, introduction of a percentage, or numerator greater than one indicates a lesser caliber of an officer. Additionally, there is an implied distribution of stratified officers. Nevertheless, it is arduous to determine where the numerical tiering occurs. Furthermore, the second and third-level stratifications are confusing. What is the difference between "one of my best officers" and "top 10% in the wing?" It seems to imply that "one of my best officers" is less than 10 percent of top officers, but greater than an "outstanding" officer.

The USAF also describes 8 institutional competencies (IC) and 25 subcompetencies.[22] ICs are "the foundation for developing professional military education programs," and those programs "allow Airmen to understand and *possibly* demonstrate the desired IC proficiencies."[23] Additionally, ICs are intended to "create the appropriate strategies, policies, and processes required to prepare all Airmen with the

necessary leadership expertise to accomplish assigned airpower missions."[24] Furthermore, the explicitly stated purpose of ICs is to "set behavioral standards of leadership for all levels," and ICs are "observable, measurable patterns of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics needed to perform institutional of occupational functions successfully."[25] Observations and measurements are divided into five distinct levels: basic, intermediate, proficient, skilled, and advanced. Each measurement corresponds to various pay grades and applies to both enlisted and officer personnel, as well as civil servants. In many instances, there is an expectation for enlisted, officer, and civil servants to demonstrate the same level of proficiency. In any case, it stands to reason these competencies are intended for inclusion in an officer's performance evaluation to gauge their developmental progress as well as assess their future potential.

Methodology

An intrinsic case study design was used to better understand the characteristics or attributes of a HiPo CGO and how the USAF can better identify, assess, and develop them. Emerging themes, from senior leader interviews, served as the units of analysis for this article. As themes emerged, the researchers coded and tracked the data with Nvivo qualitative research software.

We invited 18 USAF senior leaders to participate in the study, and 14 senior leaders accepted (77.7-percent response rate). These 14 senior leaders had an average of 28 years of service and had DT, MLR, or CSB experience, as well as multiple command tours. In total, ten general officers and four colonels with flying, maintenance, special operations, or cyber experience were interviewed to gain their perspectives on HiPo officers.

We conducted semistructured interviews in person, over the phone, and via email. The medium used was entirely dependent on the participant, their location, and their schedule. The semistructured format is well suited for situations where a researcher may only get one opportunity to interview an individual.[26] Furthermore, Dr. H. Russell Bernard, an anthropology professor at the University of Florida, states "semi-structured interviewing works very well in projects where you are dealing with high-level bureaucrats and elite members of a community—people who are accustomed to the efficient use of their time."[27] We requested each participant's permission to record the interview, and all agreed.

At the conclusion of each interview, we created a denaturalized transcript of the audio file, reviewed notes, and wrote an interview summary to capture themes or keywords and phrases. Denaturalized transcription captures a verbatim depiction of speech, but is not concerned with every utterance.[28] Naturalized transcription, by comparison, analyzes the idiosyncrasies of speech patterns, body movements, and other nonverbal activity which sociologists Dr. Ian Hutchby and Dr. Robin Wooffitt refer to as talk-in-interaction.[29] Therefore, denaturalized transcription was deemed sufficient in capturing the substance, essence, and meaning of the participant's thoughts.

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing, continuous endeavor conducted throughout the research process.[30] Unlike quantitative research, the researcher collects and

analyzes data simultaneously. The iterative process aids the researcher in organizing their findings for the final report. We used Dr. John W. Creswell's data analysis spiral as a guide to flow through interview data.[31] The data analysis spiral contains the following steps: organize, peruse, classify, and synthesize.

To classify the data, we used codes (that is, tags or labels) for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes are usually "attached to chunks of varying size—words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs."[32] Codes help answer several questions such as what is happening, what does this say, and what is the participant conveying? We started with four major coding categories: high-performance officer indicators, HiPo officer indicators, personnel management system processes, and process improvement ideas. These codes were directly related to the central and investigative questions. As the study progressed, we used Nvivo's qualitative research software to track and manage codes. Finally, we implemented Tesch's eight-step coding process to discover emerging themes systematically.[33]

As recommended by Creswell, to ensure reliability and validity of our study we implemented two strategies: triangulation and member checking.[34] Triangulation involves analyzing different data sources to justify themes. During the data analysis phase, we cross-referenced with private industry HiPo employee studies. The purpose of comparing the two was to uncover similar themes in industry. The intent was to link ideas, discover implemented enterprise solutions and how they may relate to the research study. Member checking is a process where the researcher solicits participants' feedback on the interpretations and credibility of the findings. At the conclusion of the study, we conducted follow-up interviews, discussed major themes, and provided an opportunity for participants to analyze the findings critically. The participant comments served as another check on the viability of the researcher's interpretations.[35]

Data Analysis

The primary research data comprised of senior leader interviews with an exhaustive literature review serving as the secondary data source. In total, the researcher referenced or cited 175 scholarly articles, textbooks, and talent management case studies. The literature review enabled the researcher to orient, compare, and help analyze interview data. The 14 interviews totaled more than 12 hours of audio, which equated to 193 pages of transcripts. The medium used for interviews varied with the preponderance conducted via telephone. In all cases, the conversations were recorded using Apple's Voice Memo application or the TapeACall application. Once completed, all audio files were transcribed using denaturalized techniques and Wreally Transcribe software. The researcher concluded the interview process when "data saturation" was achieved.

After all the interviews, the researchers generated 15 codes. Utilizing Nvivo's word frequency query, word cloud, and word tree function, we identified four broad categories and nine subcategories. The four categories were HiPo Indicators, High-Performance Indicators, Perceived Issues, and Recommendations. The eight subcategories were organizational perspectives, categories of potential, HiPo nomination,

HiPo assessment, HiPo development, board issues, system problems, and process problems. As with other HiPo talent case studies, there was an overlap in how participants defined an officer's performance versus their potential. The major task was parsing the difference between the two definitions. Our analysis uncovered the top three HiPo indicators, the USAF's perspective of HiPo officers, and how the participants nominate, assess, and develop HiPo officers.

The top three indicators of HiPo talent, as described by interview participants, were sustained performance, continuous learning, and demonstrative leadership skills. Sustained performance was identified as a major indicator of an officer's future performance as the promotion system is designed to reward such behaviors. A sustained performance methodology is best suited for static, nonrapidly changing environments as future roles are similar to the past or current positions.[36] Furthermore, one senior leader identified this as a problem. While "officers can perform well at one level, that does not indicate they will be successful in future roles."

Continuous learning was another HiPo identifier mentioned by participants. In some instances, participants stated HiPo officers were "life-long learners" while others described them as "inquisitive, reflective, or continuously seeking feedback." The commonality among all the responses was that HiPo officers are not satisfied with their current state. They are always trying to better themselves and others. The focus beyond individual needs and desires embodies the third HiPo indicator which is leadership. All participants mentioned highly-developed leadership skills as a HiPo officer indicator. When combined, these HiPo officer indicators closely resemble industry standards. By comparison, the top indications of HiPo talent in the private sector are drive, learning, agility, and leadership. This discovery indicates that industry best practices may provide pragmatic solutions in the USAF's HiPo officer identification process.

The majority of participants stated stratifications were a means of communicating an officer's potential. Stratifications reside on the fifth and ninth line of an OPR, as well as the bottom line of a PRF. Just as various psychological, communication, and advertising studies indicate last impressions dramatically influence evaluations, so, too, is the placement of stratifications on these official documents.[37] In most instances, participants stated stratifications served as both a current performance and future potential for performance indicator. However, a few participants reported they believed stratifications to be an indicator of only current performance. In any case, when asked how they evaluated records while working on a DT, MLR, or CSB, stratifications were mentioned as a way of differentiating the promotion potential, in all instances. Several of the participants explicitly tempered stratifications with the officers "full body of work."

As commanders, the participants stated their intention of pushing HiPo officers to different jobs or assignments as a means of communicating their potential. In some instances, the other jobs were in the form of challenging projects which received "higher visibility" from senior leaders. A few of the participants stated the purpose of these actions was to highlight the officer's potential based on their knowledge of how the system works. While pushing officers into closer proximity of senior leaders is a way of communicating an officer's potential, the also act serves as a means of assessment. Just as stated in the HiPo assessment process, senior

leaders use "stretch" assignments to challenge officers outside of their core competency. The purpose of a "stretch" assignment is to take HiPo employees out of their normal day-to-day activities and make them accountable for something more strategic in nature.[38]

Beyond stretch assignments, the majority of participants stated coaching, mentoring, and senior leader feedback was a means to develop HiPo officers. Although some may argue coaching, mentoring, and feedback should not be reserved solely for a select group of individuals, multiple studies and articles recommend deliberately investing more resources towards these efforts.[39] The key term, both from previous studies and participants, was the perceived and realized value of deliberately conducting all three activities commensurate with an officer's or employee's talent level.

Most participants stated the boarding process was extremely efficient given the volume of records requiring review. However, 10 of the 14 participants identified several issues with the system or process. One senior leader claimed the most difficult portion of a board was the amount of "homework required, before arrival." In this instance, the participant was discussing a DT and believed that some of the work accomplished on-site should be achieved beforehand. Additionally, several participants mentioned the difference in scoring outcomes when contrasting a DT to a CSB. Although the "population size and makeup the officer is competing with is different, there are times where the scores between the groups are significantly different."

It is important to note that the DT, MLR, and CSB boards do not share scores or information among each other. The only way for DTs to notice a scoring discrepancy is by analyzing promotion results and comparing them to their vector. As an example, if a DT issues an officer a Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) vector, they are signaling two things. First, the officer is among the top tier of their community and, second, the officer should be considered for a JCS job opportunity. However, if the CSB does not promote or the officer is not selected for an intermediate developmental education (IDE) opportunity, the DT knows there is a delta between their score and the CSB. This problem may be identified in the reverse order as well. Assume an officer was promoted and was a school select the previous year. The proceeding DT knows this individual did not receive a strong vector and when scoring the records, determined the officer was outside of the top 20 percent of their functional area. In both instances, the DT must reconcile the difference.

There is a tendency to promote familiarity and preference over objective criteria of the service's needs for the future. To be clear, we are not suggesting board members ignore Secretary of the Air Force or commander guidance deliberately when scoring records. We posit that there is a possibility that board members bring their values into the process which is in line with interview responses and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory. LMX theory describes the give-and-take relationship between leaders and their subordinates.[40] In-group members share common value systems while out-group members have little in common with the leader. Research also reveals work units are differentiated through LMX relationships approximately 90 percent of the time. Therefore, the researcher's finding is not uncommon, should be expected, and was reaffirmed in another participant's similar sentiment.

Another senior leader believed "a person's real strength and leadership are not found in a paper record, which is clearly where the rubber meets the road." As the

paper record contains numerous accomplishments during an officer's career, the current system views the accumulation of accomplishments as an analogous metric for talent. Several referred to certain accomplishments as "career milestones." Half of the participants explicitly identified Squadron Officer School (SOS) Distinguished Graduate (DG) as one of these milestones while the other half referenced all awards received from training or development programs as such. While the preponderance of the participants agreed that DG awards were indicative of demonstrating "excellent performance, relative to their peers," 5 of the 14 participants claimed SOS DG was disproportionately weighted.

Although formal training awards constitute one significant discriminator in an officer's records, stratifications on OPRs and PRFs were another issue raised by participants. One cannot overemphasize the value and importance of stratifications. From a commander's perspective, an officer stratification indicates potential. However, one participant rhetorically asked, "Do you think stratifications mean the same thing to all commanders?" The participant went on to say "determining how thinly we slice the stratification is an important distinction." The "thinness" of a stratification describes the specificity of a relevant peer group (for example, "number 1 of 10 2008 instructor-pilot captains" versus "number 1 of 10 captains"). This last statement alludes to the lack of codified or universal way of crafting an officer stratification, which may lead to issues in the boarding process.

Recommendations

The results of this study offer insight into how the USAF delineates an officer's current performance from their future potential. Additionally, the findings illuminate the scope and depth the USAF defines talent at the strategic, operational, and individual level. Based on the literature review and interview data, we provide seven recommendations to improve how the USAF identifies, assesses, and develops HiPo officers.

1. Establish a formal definition of high-potential officers.

This definition must capture the "ever-shifting skills, special experiences, and high potential, which enable the strategic agility the Air Force of the future demands."[41] AFI 36-2406 states potential is "performance-based" and uses numerous forms to create a "cumulative record of performance and promotion potential based on that performance."[42] Air Force Reserve Command Instruction 36-2640 uses the acronym "HP" to mean "high-potential" and says an individual has met a command screening board or on the key personnel list.[43] Headquarters Air Force Air Staff guidance outlines indicators of potential as being a DG from a commissioning source, formal training program, PME, IDE, SDE, high-level OPR stratification, BPZ selection, and other objective criteria. However, all of these areas may not be valid indicators of potential. In fact, research and private industry agree that drive, ability to learn, leadership, and other leadership competencies and skills, are the top signs of HiPo employees. The researcher found the senior leaders interviewed agreed with this conclusion. Consequently, questions left outstanding are what skills

should the USAF measure and how should they measure them? These questions lead to our second recommendation.

2. Evaluate officers against institutional competencies in AFMAN 36-2647.

The purpose of institutional competencies is to "set behavioral standards of leadership for all levels," and to do that they must be "observable, measurable patterns of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics needed to perform institutional and occupational functions successfully."[44] Therefore, these criteria require inculcation into every officer's records. Some may argue this recommendation is too cumbersome and difficult to manage given the current documentation used to evaluate officers—which may be true. However, assuming institutional competencies properly align with the HCA, it is crucial that the USAF act on this recommendation.

3. Adopt a simple, executable model to evaluate the potential of all company grade officers.

Organizations considered to have "best practices" in the field of talent management, use models to identify and assess their employees' potential. Models are available to gauge an employee's future potential. They measure the probability an individual can successfully take on greater roles and responsibilities, in both breadth and depth, as leaders in their organization. These models are an excellent template to use for deliberately and methodically identifying and assessing HiPo CGOs.

4. Increase the roles and responsibilities given to company grade officers.

If the purpose of a HiPo officer program is to identify future leaders, then the assessment process must include leadership challenges that truly test the capability of an officer. These "tests" must be monitored and tracked beyond a stratification or push line. The literature does not include any instances where companies distilled the performance of an individual, or their potential to perform in the future, into one singular number relative to their peers. In fact, the best talent management companies use multiple sources to identify and assess HiPo employees. These sources include an objective assessment of budget management, project impact on business performance, as well as peer, subordinate, and supervisor feedback. The USAF must achieve this level of fidelity of an officer's capability to accurately assess their potential for future leadership roles. The information captured must then be monitored and maintained by a central talent management entity. Currently, force development offices are best aligned to serve this function while DTs are best suited to carry out the annual assessment and development of the HiPo talent pool. Unfortunately, DTs lack the authority to be as effective as intended, which leads to the fifth recommendation.

5. Developmental teams must have the power to utilize the assignment process as a means to deliberately develop officers.

Although DTs must identify "the education, training, and experiences appropriate for officers," the only outputs they provide are assignment vectors and career feedback.[45] The Air Force Personnel Center is the only organization with authority to generate assignments. DTs must be able to pair their developmental strategies with officer assignments. Moreover, the movement of personnel in industry does not happen serendipitously—especially for someone singled out as a HiPo. The assignment and development of a HiPo is a very deliberate process. Employees move to locations where the job experience is intended to prepare them for future roles in the organization. Furthermore, the USAF should consider deliberately placing CGOs with mentors that can facilitate further professional development.

6. Replace BPZ/IPZ/APZ promotions with promotion windows.

Presently, BPZ boards do not follow a similar construct as IPZ and APZ boards. The "Definitely Promote" (DP) allocation rate is 10 percent for BPZ promotions to lieutenant colonel and 15 percent to colonel. Comparatively, IPZ and APZ "DP" rates are 40 and 20 percent, respectively.[46] These DP allotment caps are intended to ensure only "the most qualified records are endorsed" and provide a greater chance that "a significant number of officers receiving "Promote" recommendations" are promoted as well.[47] Although the USAF can promote to their allotted "DP" rate, they seldom do so.[48] Furthermore, the BPZ records scoring is dissimilar to the IPZ and APZ process. First, BPZ scoring starts with an up/down, yes or no vote, which determines which records are considered "Exceptionally Well Qualified."[49] Then, the board scores only those records.

While there are processes in place to calibrate BPZ selects with IPZ selects, a few senior leaders mentioned, with one directly stating, the process was "purely a square-filling exercise." The participant went on to say BPZ boards "look for the markers that stand out (that is, PME DG, what school an individual attended, and the amount of number one stratifications received). These boards look at past career milestones or achievements as analogs for promotion criteria, whereas the IPZ board at least attempts to determine an individual's ability to serve in the next grade." The leader who was interviewed understood the quota system, but he did not understand why the process was different. Likewise, we postulate that HiPo talent or promotion potential is indifferent to year groups.

As such, the researcher proposes an alternative to the current promotion construct by creating promotion windows which look similar to the BPZ timeline but alters the quota system and mentality. The main difference between the two methods is that anyone who is eligible for promotion to lieutenant colonel or colonel would see the same board and be vetted the same exact way. This modification allows for equitability and transparency in the process.

7. Allow developmental team notes, vectors, and Airman Developmental Plan comments in management-level review and Central Selection Board process.

DTs have much more flexibility and latitude when reviewing officer records. According to the senior leaders interviewed, the amount of time spent on each record varies from board to board. However, DTs typically spend eight minutes on a record, while MLRs and CSBs spend two minutes or less per record. Additionally, DTs are allowed to discuss individuals openly and are not bound to the rigid scoring process the MLR and CSB must follow. The reason for this difference is attributable to their respective outputs. An MLR board allocates additional DP recommendations, which provides a demonstrable positive effect on promotion rates, while the CSB promotes individuals. By comparison, DTs offer assignment vectors and feedback, with no formal authority. Still, DTs view the same records, develop a similar rank-ordered officer list, but have the luxury of reviewing an officer's ADP as well. When combined with the functional experience of their career field, the rich data source provides a more robust means to assess the potential of an officer. Why would we not use this information when determining who to promote?

Some may argue this would provide an undue influence on subsequent boards. Our counterpoint is how does the DT support for promotion differ from an MLR DP recommendation? In the end, it is just information, and each board must independently evaluate the future potential of an officer to serve in greater roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, DTs are best situated to know and understand the officers they evaluate. Therefore, we recommend the results of DTs be packaged and included for MLRs and CSBs to consider. A few ideas offered for consideration are providing: percentiles of officer's standing within their respective community, outplacement vectors, DT notes on individuals, or a DT rank-ordered officer list, which is intended to serve as a comparative analysis tool after a board convenes.

Summary

The USAF faces several challenges in the coming years—whether it is the retention of personnel or fiscal constraints. The current operating environment dictates a fresh look at the various ways the USAF conducts business. Therefore, it is imperative that the USAF effectively identify, assess, and develop its top talent to succeed in future military conflicts. While it seems this article's focus is strictly on top-tier talent, the criteria used to assess applies to all Airmen. Currently, the USAF's definition of talent is not clear. Its personnel system requires simplicity and transparency. By capitalizing on the outlined recommendations, the USAF can leverage its greatest asset—its people. ✪

Notes

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