Managing Talent before it Manages You

How Leaders Can Influence Performance at the Company Level

By Cpt. Daniel R. Reynolds & Cpt. Thomas E. Meyer

Talented leaders are increasingly fatigued by an organizational structure amounting to the strategy: "throw talent at the problem." Leader burn-out is often combated by a career progression structure that intermingles broadening assignments with tactical leadership roles, providing peaks and valleys of operational tempo. However, broadening assignments – with a few exceptions – are rarely available to an officer until eight years into service and at other times viewed as detrimental to a young officer's career if exploited prior to command. With most contracts being four or five years, our younger leaders are not experiencing these reprieves prior to their opportunity to transition out of service. Even if the officer continues serving – past his/her initial contract – for the experience of company/troop/battery command, they often face 18 to 24 months (and in some cases longer) on battalion/brigade staff prior to command. Leaning heavily on those who get the job done without reprieve or reward risks burning out our junior leaders. Change and innovation is stunted by a zero-defect environment where everything is a priority and the operational tempo is high. This type of environment has leaders leaning on "known quantities" versus spending the organizational effort – at risk of mistake – on developing those who need opportunities to develop.

Battalion and company-level leaders, invested in the success of the larger organization, need to build intentional and dynamic talent management processes. Talent management – at echelon – consists of conserving the talents and motivation of our best leaders through innovative and transparent methods of retention and reward, developing those on the cusp, and cutting those unable to meet organizational needs. This article outlines a path for talent management, identifies methods already achieving success, and recommends means to preserve our Army's finest leaders. The excerpts below are derived from the perspective of its authors – two Captains with a combined sixteen years of service in the United States Army. The officers and events discussed are based on real experiences. For the sake of professionalism, names and units have either been changed or omitted.

We recognize the challenges of personnel management and the limitations of our shared experiences. As such, our observations and recommendations are in relation to our scope. This article provides a framework for Company and Field Grade Officers to assume responsibility for the mentorship, development, and either retention or release of junior officers at the battalion-level and below. Our current rating system and means for identifying talent within our ranks is not without fault, but has proven effective. We are in the business of people and as such subjectivity in the evaluation process is natural. Our organization does an effective job of combining objective criteria and key development expectations with the subjective expectations of raters and senior raters. The "Conserve-Develop-Cut" methodology fits programs already in use across the Army, but its full implementation will provide consistency and transparency warranted during this time of transition.

Performance Conservation

The first, and perhaps most critical, aspect of this framework is performance conservation; focusing on retaining outstanding talent. Placing separation of substandard performers at the center of our strategy to meet personnel constraints neglects the key component: managing our talented personnel. We retain excellent leaders and soldiers who are called – by dedication to a higher purpose – to serve our nation. To say otherwise or to assert "all the good leaders are leaving" is inaccurate and unconstructive. However, noting where we can improve retention of leaders with demonstrated potential remains a critical component of our talent management and Human Dimension Strategy. The two highest reasons for leaders leaving the Army are "frustration with military bureau-

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cracy" and "family," significantly more prominent than other responses such as higher income (45%) and "pace of promotions" (22%).[1] The U.S. Army – more so than other organizations – must retain its best leaders because once they're gone, there's no equivalent replacement and we can't get them back.

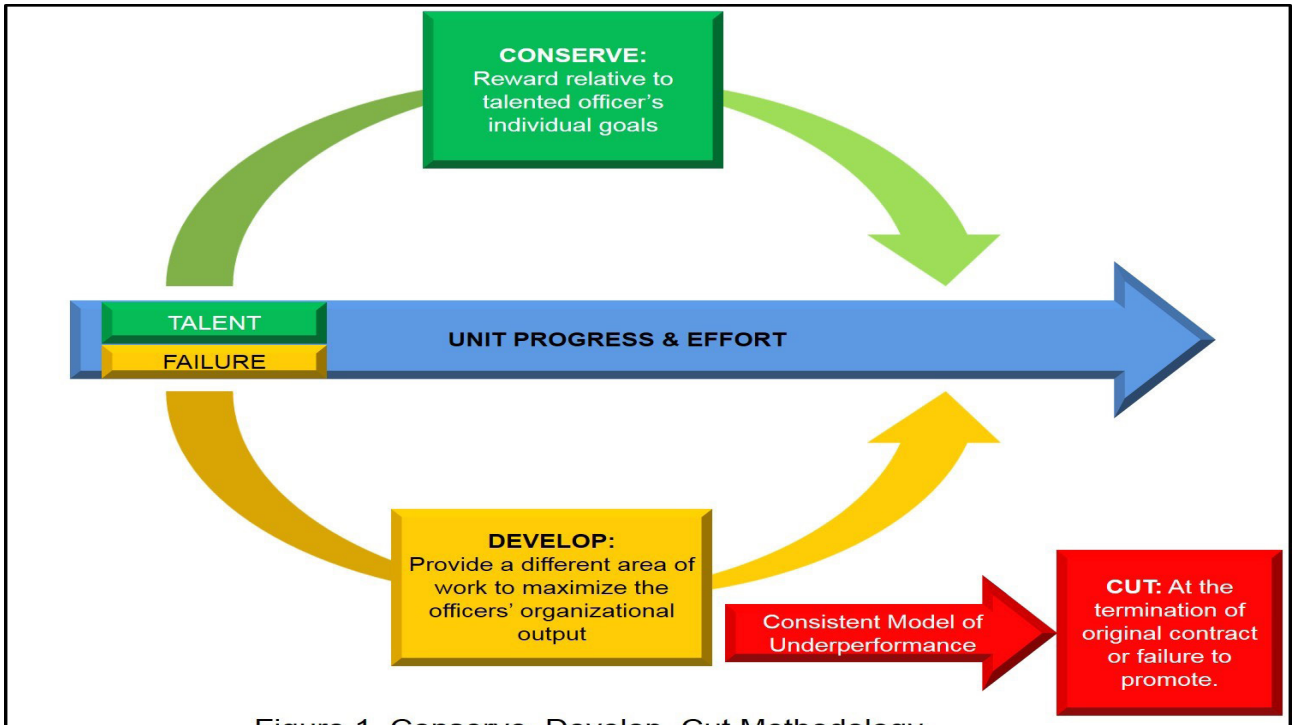
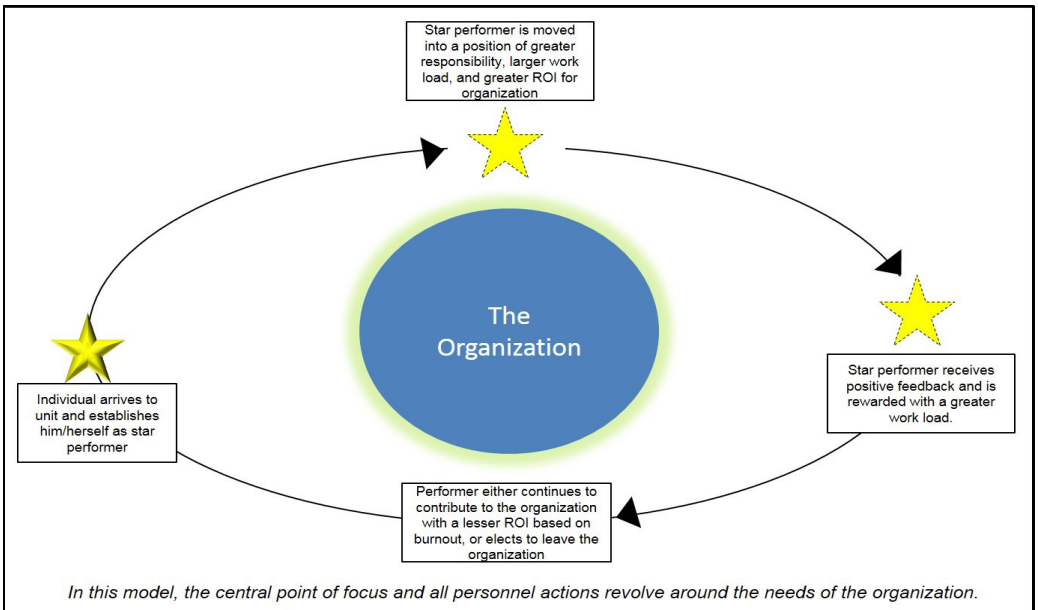


Figure 1. Conserve, Develop, Cut Methodology

If Company and Field Grade leaders cannot change the bureaucracy and stress on family inherent with active military service, how do we help retain our best? The corporate sector is experiencing similar challenges, while not nearly as limited by organizational barriers as the U.S. Army. In a recent Harvard Business Review article, respondents expressed the need for "reinventing performance management":

> [...]More than half the executives questioned (58%) believe that their current performance management approach drives neither employee engagement nor high performance. They, and we, are in need of something nimbler, real-time, and more individualized— something squarely focused on fueling performance in the future rather than assessing it in the past.[2]

Rewarding based on the individual's agreed upon personal and professional goals will arguably maintain the highest possible percentage of our top talent. Performance conservation



In this model, the central point of focus and all personnel actions revolve around the needs of the organization.

Figure 2. Traditional Performance Reward Model

entails meeting top performers where they are. It's not unionizing officers or bending to the needs of the individual above the organization. Rather, it involves recognizing that individuals are the core of the organization.

Performance conservation marries demonstrated talent with developmental opportunities that foster growth rather than task-saturation. It means sharing the work-load and rewarding performance with rejuvenating opportunities. It requires understanding the importance of their individual goals and what they want out of their service to provide them the rewards appropriate to those individual goals. We, as an organization, can incorporate individual desires without negating the shared value of selfless-service. When we don't, service becomes making people cogs in a wheel of bureaucracy and leadership potential equates to threshold for pain. Organizations that demonstrate genuine care for subordinates who invest in the organization, yield the dividends of committed leaders.

Simply viewing job opportunities and Officer Evaluation Reports as the reward for performance appears short-sighted and leads to performance punishment. The "best developmental jobs" – Executive Officer, Specialty Platoon Leader, Combat Training Center Observer/Coach/Trainer, etc. – may not seem rewarding to every high performer. Are they important? Sure. Are they developmental for the officer and critical to sustain the force? Of course. By leaving it at that, we overlook the individual officer's perspective and personal needs/goals. Developing the best officer for the future Army means nothing if it is not sustainable. We need to move from performance punishment to performance conservation. We are at risk of losing that officer if we put them in the cookie cutter progression, stifling opportunities to branch out, innovate, and apply entrepreneurship to our service.

What does performance conservation look like at the battalion or company-level? Consider the following: a post-Maneuver Career Course Captain arrives to the unit and is slated as an Assistant Operations Officer in the Battalion S-3 shop. The officer is ultimately working toward taking a guidon and assuming command. As a top performer, the individual stands out and dedicates energy toward improving the battalion and brigade. With no commands available after twelve months in the queue, this dedicated leader is left in position. After 24-36 months on a battalion staff, the leader is burned out or disenfranchised prior to taking command. In some cases, the contractual obligation may expire and the officer may elect to leave. Some might say "good riddance" or "so what; we are downsizing." Even talented, motivated, and selfless officers can leave the Army if they lose hope – hope in the systems, the organization, and their ability to affect change within it. The greatest way to inspire hope in our young officers, increasingly asked to do more, is to match mentorship with ownership – relinquishing an element of control over one's career to the individual.

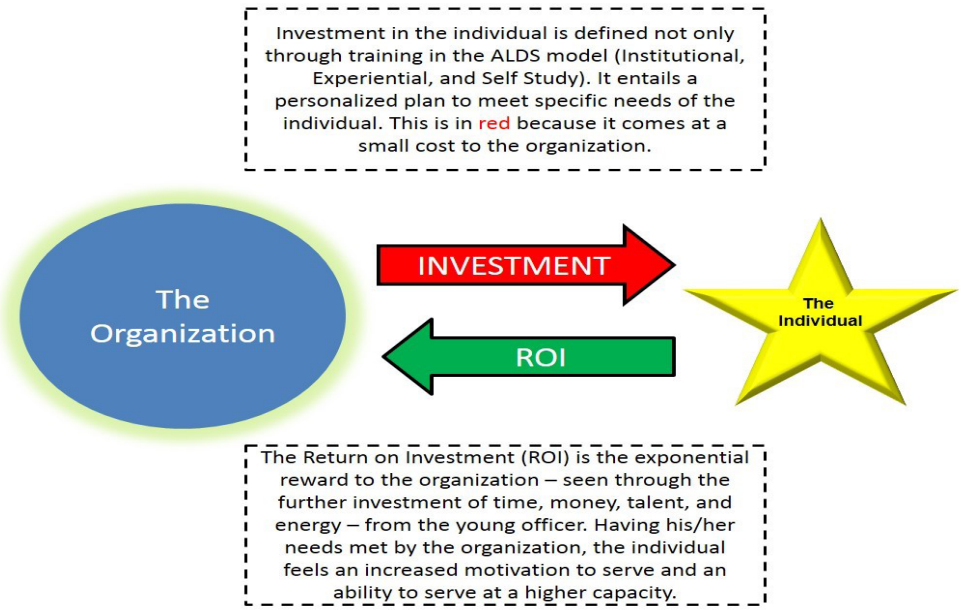


Figure 3. Performance Conservation Model

Instead of keeping this talented officer in the same position, other options exist. What if, through engaged leadership and counseling, superiors knew the individual's wanted to go to Pathfinder School or seek an opportunity to do a Christian missionary trip to Africa? The organization could survive the loss of one talented officer for two to three weeks to allow the individual to take the leave or go TDY to accomplish a personal goal. (If the organization cannot afford to lose that one officer, they need to read a compilation of entirely different articles and books focused on learning organizations, decentralization, and management to fix the issue of creating information silos and building redundancy to avoid single points of failure.) Afforded an opportunity to pursue a personal goal not directly serving the larger organization, the talented young officer would return rejuvenated and ready to reinvest in the organization.

The next step, if it is possible, is to move this individual into a different position. The Battalion Logistics Officer is a post-career course slot by MTOE. Move this officer into a different position within the battalion to challenge him or her in a different area of development. Or, be willing to move the leader outside the battalion. When the wait for command approaches 36 months, afford the individual the option to interview for a position at corps or division levels like serving as the Commanding General's Speech Writer. This is not to say every officer would want this opportunity, but having the discussion and being invested in the junior officer's development – meeting the individual where he or she is – will pay dividends in the long run.

The struggle above is becoming increasingly more prevalent with a combination of large post-career course cohorts and a more shallow pool of command positions to offer. If not carefully managed at the company, battalion, and – in the case of company/troop/battery commands – brigade-level; we clog the system and lose talent for the sake of maintaining a rigid structure. This struggle goes hand-in-hand with another common pitfall of poor talent management to be discussed in more detail below: an unwillingness to identify those who have promoted beyond their talent.

Viewing mentorship and leadership as a collaborative relationship where cooperation is in both parties' interest helps us to understand performance conservation. It is about taking care of people; understanding by helping the individual now, the individual will continue to help the whole later.[3]

Persistent Development

While performance conservation plays a critical role in retaining the very best, there is a large pool of quality leaders who are not part of the top-tier population. Their respectable performance and current levels of talent do not put them in the category of deserving the conservation methodology. Instead, they require – and deserve – engaged leadership through persistent development. Leaders that fall under persistent development can be described as smart, competent, physical, and capable. The Army, like any successful organization, is comprised of people — with that comes the requirement for emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. There are times an excellent officer will work for a supervisor who doesn't appreciate their specific attributes or doesn't know how to manage their specific abilities. In some units, a young officer can be quickly written-off and permanently labeled a non-factor until a new group of leadership arrives with a fresh perspective.

One example we observed was from a talented officer – 1st. Lt. Fledgling. 1st Lt. Fledgling was physically fit, confident, and dedicated to his profession. Unfortunately, his position as the Battalion Chemical Officer was underutilized and often over looked. Due to his occupation, 1st. Lt. Fledgling also served in numerous other capacities to include the Unit Status Report Manager, Web Knowledge Base Manager, and Tactical Operations Center (TOC) Battle Captain while deployed to the National Training Center (NTC). When serving in the stressful role of TOC Battle Captain, 1st Lt. Fledgling worked diligently only to be temporally relieved. His grounds for dismissal weren't based on his own abilities, rather a combination of more experienced officers failing to train him and giving him room to fail.

Often times at the NTC, we expect results the first time and are quick to relieve leaders who are not

getting the job done. This mentality gives birth to two dangerous outputs. Firstly, setting conditions for a zero-defect Army will force soldiers to focus more on not getting fired than being innovative and aggressive. Secondly, allowing soldiers to fail in training often results in the most valuable lessons learned. Denying this opportunity is depriving soldiers and the unit of a much needed learning experience. Mistakes are invaluable to the innovative process; failure will come when pushing a unit and individuals to improve.[4] These mistakes and failures need occur in training; not combat.

The story of young 1st Lt. Fledgling has a happy ending. While temporarily replaced as the TOC Battle Captain, he received the development needed to improve and was also given an opportunity to redeem himself with a substantial training event supporting the Special Olympics of Washington. As the officer in charge, 1st Lt. Fledgling's organizational skills allowed him to exceed all expectations for the event. His performance resulted in praise from both the civilian coordinators and military leaders at the battalion, brigade, and division-levels. 1st. Lt. Fledgling was then selected above all other battalion chemical officers across the brigade to serve as the Brigade Chemical Officer. He earned this position through his body of work and solid reputation.

As a result of allowing a large bureaucracy to control the placement of soldiers and leaders with little understanding of their individual strengths, many talented professionals are labeled as sub-performers simply because they are in an occupational specialty not congruent with their individual talents and passion. No soldier or officer wants to feel discarded; they then leave the organization instead of finding their niche and moving on in their career to better the larger organization. Instead of accepting defeat from initial setbacks and welcoming initial mediocrity, 1st Lt. Fledgling overcame through personal will and coaching/mentorship from other more experienced officers in the battalion. Had he been written off, the Army would have overlooked a talented young officer.

The only way to undermine a pervasive 'no-fail' mentality is by taking overt and deliberate steps to prepare subordinates and provide equity of opportunity to succeed. This means investing in personnel who may not be your best by giving them the additional training and development through opportunity to succeed. Constant reliance on top-performers neglects those who could grow into more effective young leaders through mentorship. Deliberately forcing equal development opportunities will help conserve talent, develop talent, and – as we show in the next section – identify those who have reached or surpassed their potential.

Consistent Underperformance is Consistently Cut

1st. Lt. Flop was a low performer from day-one in the unit. He arrived as a senior 1st. Lt., passed over for Captain, having served as a Platoon Leader and Executive Officer in Korea. Upon arriving at his next duty station, he reported to an infantry battalion and was assigned as the Current Operations Officer (CUOPs) to fill a capability gap in the operations section. While in Korea, 1st Lt. Flop received a general letter of reprimand for missing curfew. As an officer in the infantry community, he did not display the physical strength, initiative, and strong personality traits of other officers in the section. During this time, although it was clear he was not meeting the standard, he rarely received formal counseling by his rater, senior rater, or the two captains who served as planners with him. His leaders – victims of a high operational tempo and no-fail, priority saturated, environment – took the easier route of pushing him to the side and bypassing his failures to ensure mission accomplishment.

After three months as the CUOPs – consistently underperforming and displaying a lack of initiative – Flop was replaced by a captain inbound to serve on staff prior to taking a command. Had 1st Lt. Flop performed excellently or not, the incoming captain would have likely replaced him. However, had he performed to expectation he would have likely become an assistant planner, perhaps received an opportunity to do a second Company Executive Officer assignment, or received assignment to another position of importance – such as the Unit Movement Officer.

Instead, he shifted one seat down to serve as the assistant to the CUOPS, due to lack of performance, and

suffered even more neglect than before. His roles and responsibilities remained undefined, and tasks he received were not completed, leaving the captain to whom he reported to bypass him altogether – as others had before him. He was largely left to his own devices, and as a man of little initiative took kindly to his lack of responsibility.

This is one of the harsh realities of staff and a problem of sphere of influence/ span of control. While 1st Lt. Flop was in low standing, it doesn't mean that he didn't possess other intangibles useful to the organization. He was smart, helpful, and a team player. When given a task, he would attempt to execute to the best of his ability. Maybe Flop didn't have a future in the Army, but when written off so quickly it's impossible to know.

Similar to many young lieutenants who find themselves on staff, he was rated by the Operations Officer and senior rated by the Battalion Commander. Had he, and the other lieutenants in the Operations Section, been rated by the Assistant Operations Officer (a post-Career Course Captain to whom they reported), it might relieve stress on the evaluation system, increase ownership of the young officer by the captain to whom he reported, and possibly improve the level of mentorship and involvement the captain invested in the lieutenant.

This is one example that plays out in all sections and even in some of the larger companies, especially headquarters companies. When an individual (BN S3) is directly responsible for rating so many subordinates, the time and energy expended on any given officer is greatly reduced. It's also an unfortunate cancer often found on staff that leaders forget to lead first and instead focus more on execution.

Staff is a difficult environment – though not an impossible one – in which to develop young officers due to competing requirements. To further exacerbate the matter, staff lieutenants are generally in transition and sometimes carry with them a poor reputation from their previous assignment. Another symptom of the problem on a staff is project ownership and management. When a single staff officer is assigned as the project proponent rather than the Office of Primary Responsibility (OPR), the complete ownership of mission accomplishment falls on that staff officer. This breeds a hesitation to delegate tasks and thus a lack of development and mentorship. As mentioned earlier, senior commanders are concerned with the bottom line and expect operations to work right the first time with minimal issues.

Flop's case clearly depicts an individual who needed to be cut from the Army. The money, time, and resources wasted on an individual who was clearly unable or unwilling to accomplish the easiest of tasks was counter-productive. In many cases, individuals like 1st Lt. Flop aren't clearly informed of their failures through consistent individual counseling and most importantly annual Officer Evaluation Reports. This allows them to skate by with lukewarm reports ensuring they are afforded the opportunity to continue to serve after being passed over for their first look to captain. Clear and consisted communication to the individual soldier and HQDA ensures when their first look for Captain arises they are not only passed over, but separated. Doing so saves the organization countless time wasted and prevents the Army/ tax-payer from funding an individual who provides little to no ROI to the unit.

This scenario plays out in most units and is not limited to the Lieutenant-cohorts. It is present at every level of leadership – graduating from the rank-congruent level of the institutional domain does not mean automatic opportunity to serve in the next higher key development billet. As an organization, we cannot be adverse to limiting personnel who aren't capable of performing at the next level. This does not mean neglecting our call to develop leaders, but it does mean certain leadership opportunities are privileges to be earned through demonstrated performance and potential rather than rights easily given. Failing to identify those who do not make the cut is a disservice to those earning the position and more importantly, a disservice to those soldiers yearning to be led well.

We need to stop accepting consistent underperformance. Leaders look at promotion lists and wonder "how did <insert name> promote?" The answer is simple; we as leaders failed to identify or codify, in simplest terms, their consistent underperformance and failures in evaluations, conversations with Branch Managers, and the other myriad of inputs to the higher bureaucracy that determines retention and promotion. We need to avoid

underutilization of the lower performers causing leader neglect. This creates an organizational culture of both receiving a free meal for those who are given less because of their performance and a culture where performance punishment reigns.

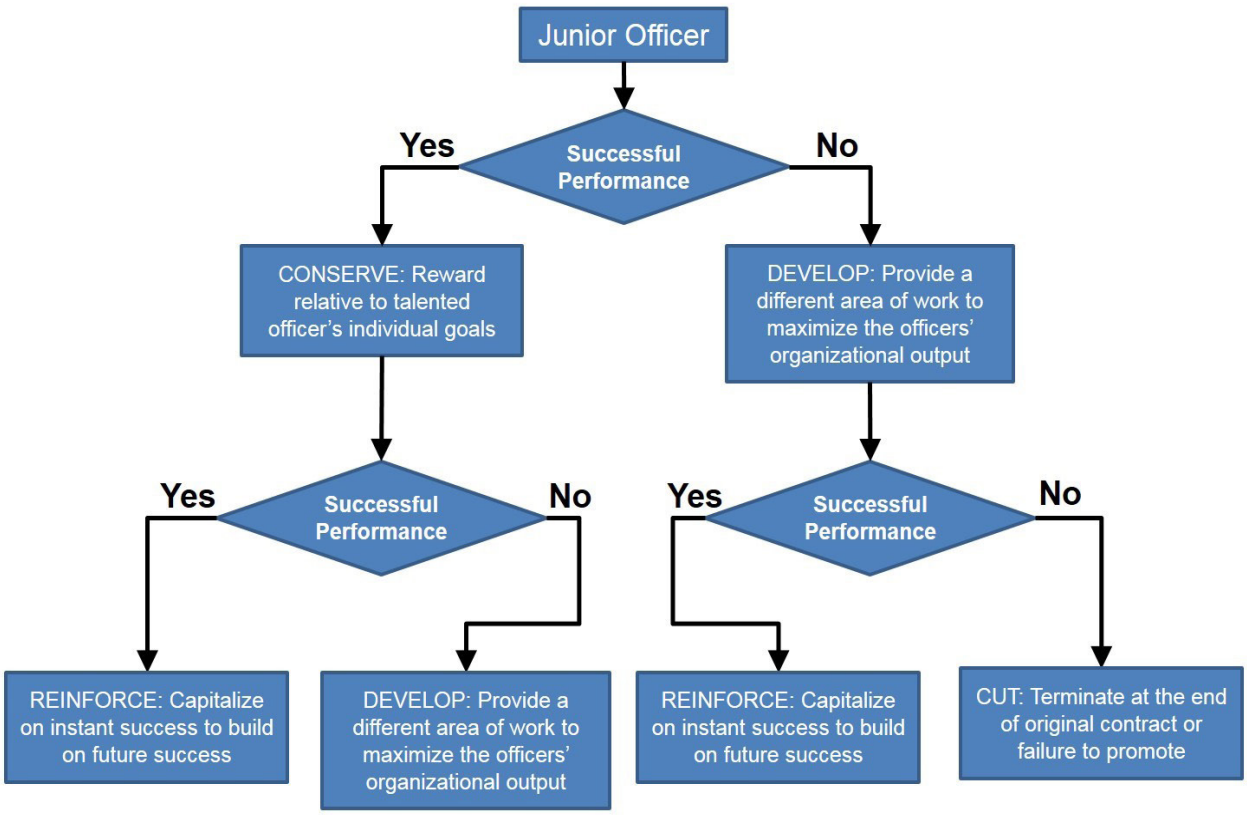


Figure 4. Talent Management Flow Chat

Conclusion

There is no easy answer to the challenges we face as leaders. Our leaders are effectively identifying talent, and distinguishing between the "Fledglings" and the "Flops" through means of objective expectations set across the Army and within individual formations. We cannot, nor are we advocating for, change the rating system. Our focus needs to be at the level at which we have control. Leaders across our formations need to implement the "Conserve-Develop-Cut" methodology within deliberate and strategic talent management systems.

An effective talent management system starts with individual counseling and engagement, understanding each individual soldier/leader for who they are, their strengths/weaknesses, and their long-term goals. This understanding needs to be deliberately communicated, collected, and aggregated at echelon for senior raters to make educated and informed decisions about talent management. A deliberate system involves a product to aggregate individual soldier/leader information, performance evaluations, and a forum/board that meets as required (monthly/quarterly). These forums create a dialogue between leaders about the needs and development of individual soldiers/leaders. We cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all mentality when managing talent.

The responsibility to effectively manage and communicate talent across our force starts with us (company and battalion-level leaders). Relinquishing the full responsibility of determining where we invest efforts – for the

purposes of developing human capital – to the higher bureaucracies of the Army, we surrender the right to criticize the outcome. Programs such as the Officer Separation Board (OSB) are necessary, but we cannot mistake them as a cure to a cancer induced by poor personnel and talent management. They are a treatment of the symptom – quick promotions and an over-strength Army following a time of war. The "Conserve-Develop-Cut" methodology provides a model for, and charge to, company and field grade officers to provide the feedback and inputs at the ground level that will reinforce strides made by the larger Army in talent identification and management. This methodology entails hard work and creates more responsibility for leaders. To be stewards of our profession and mentors of the next generation of leaders, we need to focus our energies toward determining who we choose to keep in our ranks.

We fight and face conflict, both in training and deployed abroad, as Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld famously said: with the army we have – not the army we want. The time to determine who is on that team is now. Company and field grade officers need to do more to conserve talent, develop those lacking it, and cut those who consistently underperform.

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