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## The Battalion Commander Effect

Everett Spain, Gautam Mukunda, and Archie Bates

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**ABSTRACT:** Statistical evidence suggests that Army battalion commanders are significant determinants of the retention of their lieutenants—especially high-potential lieutenants. Further, this so-called Battalion Commander Effect should be included in brigadier general promotion board assessments and used to inform officer professional military education curricula.

**A**n empirical analysis of 1,745 former US Army battalion commanders and the 36,032 lieutenants who served under their command provides statistical evidence for what many researchers have believed, anecdotally, for years: battalion commanders significantly influence their lieutenants' decision to stay in or leave the Army. Moreover, the analysis shows this effect is even stronger on high-potential lieutenants. Accordingly, battalion commanders should consider the effects of their leadership on the junior officers in their formations, and the Army should calculate and consider the battalion commander effect (BCE) when making appropriate talent management decisions for senior officers. Ultimately, measuring the BCE will enhance the Army's overall assessment of leader effectiveness, especially when used in conjunction with other newly emerging measures guiding Army talent management.

### Background

Consider two hypothetical newly commissioned lieutenants. At the completion of the same Basic Officer Leadership Course, Second Lieutenant Smith and Second Lieutenant Nguyen are assigned to different battalions on the same Army post. During their three years as lieutenants in their first operational units, both Smith and Nguyen serve under adequate yet unremarkable company commanders; however, they have very different experiences with respect to their battalion commanders. Smith's battalion commander is an outstanding officer who cares deeply about others and leads an exemplary personal life, much like the role model battalion commander described in the seminal article, "The Subordinates."<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Nguyen's battalion

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1. Dandridge Malone, "The Subordinates," *Army Magazine*, December 1985, 16–25.

commander frequently exhibits counterproductive leader behaviors and strained personal relationships.

During their three years as lieutenants in their first battalions, Smith and Nguyen demonstrate performance and potential—knowledge, skills, and behaviors—at or near the top of their peer groups. As they prepare to depart their first units, they receive orders to the Captains Career Course, the second level of Army officer professional military education, and are promoted to the rank of captain.

At this juncture, both officers face the most consequential professional decision since joining the Army—should they stay in the Army? As they evaluate their options, Smith and Nguyen might well reflect on the leadership and examples set by their battalion commanders. Knowing their battalion commanders are representative of other Army senior leaders, they might ask, “Do I want to continue serving under leaders like my battalion commander?” Knowing people grow more similar to those they spend time with, they might also ask, “Do I want to become (a person like) my battalion commander?”

Fast forward two years. Thankfully, Smith and a majority of the 20 lieutenants she served with in her first battalion chose to stay in the Army. She completed the Captains Career Course, joined another unit, and will soon assume company command. Most importantly, Smith remained in the talent pool from which Army senior leaders are drawn. Unfortunately, Nguyen and a majority of the 20 lieutenants he served with in his first battalion chose to leave the Army, and the Army lost their talents forever.

Although the Army’s top priority is its people, today’s Army does not reward Smith’s battalion commander for her retention or hold Nguyen’s battalion commander accountable for his loss. Consequently, the Army misses the opportunity to spread the positive behaviors of Smith’s battalion commander while Nguyen’s battalion commander remains on the fast track for promotions and will likely continue his or her counterproductive behaviors, including driving other top talent out of the Army. To avert such outcomes and better develop and select future senior leaders, the Army must begin to measure and seriously consider what we term the battalion commander effect.

### Remaining in the Army

Prior research has shown battalion commander quality can predict the performance of junior officers, but the impact of battalion commanders on

their junior officers' decisions to stay in the Army is less clear.<sup>2</sup> A wide array of research has shown many factors influence junior officer retention or attrition.<sup>3</sup> Some lieutenants stay in the Army due to guaranteed pay and benefits, the officer career education system, opportunities for diverse assignments, and frequent leadership roles. Lieutenants who leave cite factors such as dissatisfaction with long work hours and deployments, strains on personal life, frequent moves, seniority-based promotions, and competitive job opportunities in the civilian sector. Of note, most junior officers understand these structural factors before they decide to join the Army.

Additionally, interpersonal factors such as relationships with peers and subordinates are likely influential. People value serving with others who enjoy their company, share their values, and hold similar interests; these and other social factors influence this sense of belonging.<sup>4</sup> Lieutenants' direct bosses—company commanders—are likely influential, as research has shown that individuals stay in organizations when they have high-quality relationships with their immediate supervisors and actively exchange value with their leaders.<sup>5</sup> Still, other research has shown an employee's job satisfaction and overall performance increase when the employee sees his or her direct boss as an admirable role model.<sup>6</sup>

Recent remarks by the Chief of Staff of the Army suggest battalion commanders also affect junior officer retention and attrition: "That lieutenant colonel influences 500 or 600 people, whether they want to stay in the Army

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2. David S. Lyle and John Z. Smith, "The Effect of High-Performing Mentors on Junior Officer Promotion in the US Army," *Journal of Labor Economics* 32, no. 2 (April 2014): 229–58, <https://doi.org/10.1086/673372>.

3. Mark R. Lewis, "Army Transformation and the Junior Officer Exodus," *Armed Forces & Society* 31, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 63–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327x0403100104>; Susan Payne Carter et al., "Who's the Boss? The Effect of Strong Leadership on Employee Turnover," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 159 (March 2019): 323–43, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2018.12.028>; and The Army Training and Leader Development Panel, *Officer Study Report to the Army* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 30, 2003): OS-8, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a415810.pdf>.

4. Herminia Ibarra, "Provisional Selves: Experimenting with Image and Identity in Professional Adaptation," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (December 1999): 764–91, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667055>; George B. Graen, "Role-Making Processes within Complex Organizations," in *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, ed. Marvin D. Dunnette (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976), 1245; and George Graen and James F. Cashman, "A Role-Making Model of Leadership in Formal Organizations: A Developmental Approach," in *Leadership Frontiers*, eds. James G. Hunt and Lars L. Larson (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1975), 143–65.

5. Bernard M. Bass with Ruth Bass, *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 2008); Veronica M. Godshalk and John J. Sosik, "Mentoring and Leadership: Standing at the Crossroads of Theory, Research, and Practice," in *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. Belle Rose Ragins and Kathy E. Kram (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 150; Heather K. Spence Laschinger, Nancy Purdy, and Joan Almost, "The Impact of Leader-Member Exchange Quality, Empowerment, and Core Self-Evaluation on Nurse Manager's Job Satisfaction," *Journal of Nursing Administration* 37, no. 5 (May 2007): 221–29, <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NNA.0000269746.63007.08>; and K. Michele Kacmar et al., "The Interactive Effect of Leader-Member Exchange and Communication Frequency on Performance Ratings," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 88, no. 4 (2003): 764–72, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.4.764>.

6. Gregory A. Rich, "The Sales Manager as a Role Model: Effects on Trust, Job Satisfaction, and Performance of Salespeople," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 25 (September 1997): 319–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070397254004>.

or get out of the Army. It's a level of leadership that I think is the most important. . . . If you look at officers who may have gotten out [of the Army] early, you ask them how their battalion commander was, it was probably not who they wanted or inspired them to serve."<sup>7</sup> Yet apart from an abundance of anecdotal evidence, little was previously known about the impact of battalion commanders on junior officer retention and attrition.

Even though company commanders spend more time with lieutenants due to proximity, there are several reasons why battalion commanders may be more influential. Battalion commanders have the sole right to approve or deny promotion to first lieutenant. Additionally, the demographics of battalion commanders make them stand out. While a company commander usually leads 4 to 7 lieutenants, a battalion commander normally leads 14 to 35. Battalion commanders are approximately 15 years older than their lieutenants, 10 years older than their company commanders, and often referred to as the unit's "old man" or "old lady." Indeed, battalion commanders are at, or near, retirement age—the Army's equivalent of AT&T and General Motors "company men and women." And they are elite. While the Army practically guarantees officers company command, only 25 percent of officers who remain in service for 18 years will ultimately be selected for battalion command.

*[My battalion commander] cared about his lieutenants. He asked us, "What are your career goals, what do you want to do next, what can we do to keep you in?"*  
*—Former lieutenant*

Therefore, from the junior officers' perspective, battalion commanders are carefully positioned partners in the Army enterprise, and the Army considers them to be models of the organization's values. As the Chief of Staff of the Army recently noted, battalion commanders' organizational authority, influence over command climate, and extensive experience give them an "out-sized ability to shape the future service of the soldiers they lead."<sup>8</sup>

Since battalion commanders have significant influence on their lieutenants' career outcomes and are conspicuous examples of what the Army develops and rewards in its leaders, this study hypothesized that battalion commanders would,

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7. Christopher Woody, "The US Army Is Thinking about the Threat of Nuclear War Again and Wants to Make Sure It Has the Right People to Deal with It," *Business Insider*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/army-revamps-personnel-management-amid-turn-to-great-power-competition-2020-1>.

8. James C. McConville and J. P. McGee, "Battalion Commanders Are the Seed Corn of the Army," *War on the Rocks*, December 23, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/battalion-commanders-are-the-seed-corn-of-the-army/>.

on average, significantly affect their lieutenants' decisions to stay in or leave the Army. The study aimed to estimate and understand the BCE of these leaders, which would enable the Army to improve its senior officer talent management—both individually and collectively.

## Research Methods

The researchers conducted a statistical analysis designed to test the hypothesis that battalion commanders influence their lieutenants' future decisions to remain in or leave the Army. The study team accessed the Army's officer personnel database, with permission of the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis, Department of the Army G-1. Since 1991, the Army has logged a monthly database entry for each of its officers, including active-duty status, rank, assigned unit (specific battalion, recorded by its six-digit unit identification code), demographics, and some military school qualifications.

To limit variance in the analysis, the study included only traditional deployable battalions of the 1990s and early 2000s. Current and historical organizational documents were used to identify the name and six-digit unit identification code for each active-duty battalion. Next, the Army's electronic personnel database was used to identify the lieutenant colonel assigned to each of these battalions during each month. Finally, the database was searched for second and first lieutenants who served in the same unit during one or more of the same months as one or more of the previously identified battalion commanders.

The study did not include aviation battalions (due to the longer service obligation), battalions that were moving home locations due to Base Realignment and Closure actions, or battalion commanders who supervised fewer than 10 or more than 60 lieutenants. In total, the study's dataset included 265 deployable battalions, 1,745 battalion commanders, and the 36,032 lieutenants who served under them.

The study then defined the retention point that best signifies a lieutenant staying in the Army past his or her initial obligation. Depending on commissioning source, new lieutenants have three-year (Officer Candidate School [OCS] and Reserve Officer Training Corps [ROTC] nonscholarship), four-year (ROTC scholarship), or five-year (United States Military Academy [USMA]) active-duty service obligations. When junior officers decide to separate from the Army at the end of their obligation, they may not leave immediately; instead they often wait until an optimal transitional point, such as one coinciding with a graduate school start date, a significant family/life event, or a civilian job offer. Yet almost all officers who intend to separate from the Army early in their career do so before assuming company command, which typically happens during an 18-month

period between the fifth and eighth year of an officer's active-duty service. To account for the varying active-duty service obligations and idiosyncratic decision timing against the additional time commitment of company command, the study defined the retention point as the end of an officer's sixth year of service, since very few officers would have completed company command by that time.

The study then employed a multivariable regression statistical model to test the hypothesis that battalion commanders affect their lieutenants' decisions to remain in or leave the Army. The dependent variable was defined as a lieutenant remaining in the Army past the sixth year of service, and the first explanatory variable was defined as the battalion commander under whom the lieutenant served. Although every junior officer's retention decision is individual and influenced by many factors, the sheer size of the dataset produced a high degree of confidence in the results, particularly once the regression included control variables like the lieutenant's year group (which accounts for strength of economy and Army-wide trends), branch, duty location (post), commissioning source, gender, race/ethnicity, age, undergraduate institution quality, marital and child status, and graduation from Airborne, Air Assault, or Ranger Schools.

This model enabled the study to measure each battalion commander's unique predictive effect on the retention decision of the average lieutenant who served under him or her. The empirical results were as expected: some battalion commanders have a positive influence, some have a negative influence, and others have a negligible influence. Yet we wanted to test whether battalion commanders, on average, influenced their junior officers' retention and attrition in a significant way. The study, therefore, applied a more-complex regression analysis that measured the average effect of all 1,745 battalion commanders in predicting their 36,032 junior officers' decisions to stay or go. The results revealed—with a 99.9 percent confidence level—a significant battalion commander effect on the Army's retention of lieutenants.

*[My battalion commander] was degrading. The best lieutenants in the battalion got out. They could not stand his oppressive and demeaning behavior. By and large, most lieutenants got out.*

—Former lieutenant

To further test for this effect, the researchers ran a series of additional regressions to compare the explanatory power of the battalion commander to the explanatory power of the study's 13 control variables. The results showed that the identity of the battalion commander explained at least 22 percent and 58 percent

more of the lieutenants' retention decisions than any of the control variables, in terms of main effects and incremental effects, respectively (measured with the *adjusted R<sup>2</sup>* statistic). This finding infers that the battalion commander may be the most impactful factor in a typical lieutenant's decision to stay or go.

But other leaders in the formation matter as well. Lieutenants' platoon sergeants, company commanders, and field-grade officers likely also exert influence on retention decisions. The study's empirical design, like Army culture, implicitly holds battalion commanders responsible for the entire leadership culture in their units. Consequently, the study conducted additional empirical tests to see if other characteristics of the battalion, such as the other leaders who influence the lieutenants and the traditions and culture not influenced by the battalion commander, were more influential in explaining the retention pattern of its lieutenants than the battalion commanders.

To test this finding for fixed effects of the battalion (influence from the battalion not related to the battalion commander), the study added a battalion dummy variable to the regression as an additional explanatory variable. Yet the study still found that the battalion commanders' variable remained statistically significant while the battalion dummy variable did not. The analysis, therefore, indicates battalion commanders, on average, may have more influence on the Army's retention of lieutenants than other battalion-level effects, such as other leaders in the battalion.

Next, the study considered nuances from different types of battalion commanders and lieutenants. Since a lieutenant can serve under several battalion commanders, the study tested the relative influence of each battalion commander and found the battalion commander under whom the junior officer served the longest was more predictive than the order (first, second, or third) of the commander. This finding is logical due to the likely increase in interaction and observation in these relationships.<sup>9</sup> The study then tested if the BCE was different for officers from the three major commissioning sources. By running three additional regressions, each regression conditional on the lieutenants being commissioned by USMA, ROTC, or OCS, the study found an interesting distinction. On average, the battalion commander effect is significant for ROTC and USMA lieutenants, but not for OCS lieutenants.

This variance could result from the fact many OCS officers are prior enlisted soldiers with experience serving under several battalion commanders, and who are therefore more resilient under various qualities of leadership. Also, since OCS officers are, on average, closer to retirement age than their ROTC and

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9. Robert F. Bornstein, "Exposure and Affect: Overview and Meta-Analysis of Research, 1968-1987," *Psychological Bulletin* 106, no. 2 (1989): 265-89, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.106.2.265>.



USMA peers, they have higher incentives to stay in the Army, and their retention decision would correspondingly be less influenced by the identity of their battalion commander.

Since the study previously matched each battalion commander with his or her junior officers, each junior officer's total length of service under each battalion commander can be measured. Also, the study assumed a junior officer who served under a battalion commander for a shorter period was less affected than one who served under the same battalion commander for a longer period. Accordingly, the study weighted the value of each junior officer retention decision in proportion to the number of months the lieutenant served under that battalion commander. Statistically, the study measured the BCE as the percentage of a battalion commander's junior officers who remained in the Army long enough to command a company, weighted by the number of months each junior officer served under the battalion commander.

$$BCE_j = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n M_i * [1(\text{if } LT \text{ retained past 6 years}), 0(\text{if not})]}{\sum_{i=1}^n M_i}$$

*M* = months serving under battalion commander *j*  
*i* = LT who served under battalion commander *j*

Figure 1. The battalion commander effect equation

Running this equation (figure 1) on each of the 1,745 battalion commanders, the study found the average (mean, or  $\mu$ ) battalion commander had a BCE of 59 percent with a standard deviation ( $\sigma$ ) of 13 percent. That is, the average battalion commander in the study retained 59 percent of his or her lieutenants, and most battalion commanders retained between 46 percent and 72 percent (each one standard deviation from the mean) of their lieutenants. The range of the battalion commanders' BCE was striking. Some battalion commanders had a BCE of less than 20 percent while some were over 90 percent. If the study assumes the sample of 1,745 battalion commanders is representative of Army battalion commanders in general, then the 500-plus battalion commanders with a BCE of less than 46 percent or greater than 72 percent are unusual.

### Retaining High-Potential Lieutenants

This project's previous analysis calculated the battalion commander effect with the underlying assumption that all lieutenants have equal potential. But

this assumption is erroneous. Since the new *Army People Strategy* recognizes each person's unique combination of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and preferences, the BCE could be customized to better reflect a comprehensive talent management approach.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, some lieutenants are higher performing and likely have more potential, while others do not display the minimal knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to serve as effective company commanders. Since previous research has found lieutenants with higher ability respond differently to leader influence, examining how well a battalion commander's lieutenant retention pattern matches the actual potential of his or her junior officers could produce greater insights.<sup>11</sup>

To accomplish this goal, the Army could measure and use a version of the battalion commander effect that accounts for high-potential (HIPO) lieutenants—the BCE<sub>HIPO</sub>. Assuming an officer evaluation report is an accurate (valid) classification of a lieutenant's potential, each lieutenant's report profile, now available electronically, could be coded as a high-, moderate-, or low-potential officer. For example, if at least 66.7 percent of a lieutenant's evaluation reports were rated "most qualified" by their senior raters, he or she could be coded as high-potential. If 66.6 to 33.3 percent of the reports were "most qualified," he or she could be coded as moderate-potential. If 33.2 percent or fewer of the evaluation reports were "most qualified," he or she could be coded as low-potential.

After each junior officer was coded as high-, moderate-, or low-potential, the BCE formula could be changed to give the battalion commander positive credit if each lieutenant's retention decision was most advantageous to the Army (if a high- or moderate-potential junior officer retains or if a low-potential junior officer leaves) and no credit if that decision was least advantageous to the Army (if a high- or moderate-potential junior officer departs or if a low-potential junior officer remains in the Army). In other words, if all of a battalion commander's high- and moderate-potential lieutenants chose to stay in the Army, and all of his or her low-potential lieutenants departed the Army before company command, the battalion commander would have a BCE<sub>HIPO</sub> rating of 100 percent.

Other ways to code lieutenants as HIPO might include factors such as performance in the basic and career officer courses, order of merit at their commissioning sources (such as distinguished military graduate designations), or the quality of their undergraduate institutions. Since the Army is

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10. Ryan D. McCarthy, James C. McConville, and Michael A. Grinston, *The Army People Strategy* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, October 2019).

11. Carter et al., "Who's the Boss?"

generally better off when all junior officers *want* to stay on active duty, an additional way to calculate the  $BCE_{HIPO}$  would be to give battalion commanders credit for *all* junior officers who stay, but give more weight to the high-potential junior officers than the moderate- or lower-potential ones. Since high-potential lieutenants are likely to find more attractive options in the civilian workforce (and thus are more likely to decide to stay in the Army because they *want* to), the study hypothesizes battalion commanders have even more influence on their high-potential lieutenants' retention decisions than on those of moderate-potential or low-potential lieutenants.

To test this hypothesis empirically, lieutenants were coded as HIPOs using available data: those who graduated from USMA, from an ROTC program at a highly competitive undergraduate institution, or as a distinguished military graduate of their ROTC or OCS cohort. In all, 12,239 (37.9 percent) of the 36,032 lieutenants were classified as high-potential officers. Running the regression equation again for only HIPO lieutenants, the study found the identity of the battalion commander explains more of the variance in high-potential lieutenants' retention decisions than it does for average and non-HIPO lieutenants.

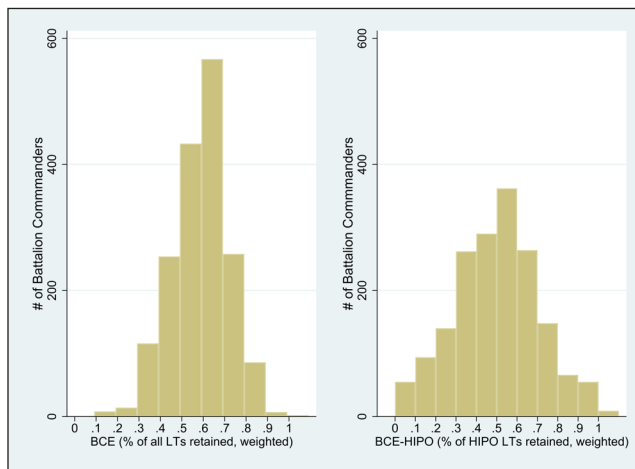


Figure 2. Battalion commander effect distribution (BCE and  $BCE_{HIPO}$ ,  $n=1,745$ )

Additionally,  $BCE_{HIPO}$  has a wider distribution than BCE (figure 2), which would be expected if the  $BCE_{HIPO}$  is stronger. For example, just one battalion commander had a BCE of less than 10 percent, but 55 battalion commanders had a  $BCE_{HIPO}$  of less than 10 percent. Ultimately, the evidence strongly suggests battalion commanders have even more influence over their high-potential lieutenants' decisions to stay or go. Measuring  $BCE_{HIPO}$ , therefore, may be even more important to effective Army talent management.

## Senior Officer Talent Management

### Developing Future Battalion Commanders

By making the battalion commander effect official, the Army could clearly signal to all officers that it places great weight on their ability to develop subordinates, which will likely catalyze positive, thoughtful leader behavior in battalion commanders across the service. The mere awareness that their BCE is being calculated and potentially viewed by senior leaders would shape the behavior of future and current battalion commanders, or at least increase those commanders' awareness of their responsibility to nourish future leaders.

### Developing Former Battalion Commanders

The BCE provides a wide range of options and contexts to reinforce and spread positive leadership behaviors while also identifying and reducing counterproductive ones. For example, when a former battalion commander presents a very high or very low BCE (perhaps beyond one standard deviation from the mean), the Army should check his or her Army Commander Evaluation Tool (ACET) results, an existing 21-question peer and subordinate evaluation administered by the US Army Combined Arms Center's School for Command Preparation.

Battalion commanders with a high BCE, strong positive ACET feedback, and high organizational performance are likely the best in the Army. They should be publicly acknowledged, rewarded, and presented as role models for others. Officers with low a BCE and negative ACET feedback likely have deep challenges, but may still have potential. They could be put into a four- to six-month special leadership development program, with goals to become self-aware of counterproductive behaviors such as toxicity or apathy. Such mentorship programs could be led by a retired general officer with a high BCE and high organizational performance. Upon completion, officers who do not demonstrate significant behavioral changes could be thanked for their service and asked to submit their retirements. Those who show increased self-awareness and positive behavioral changes could be encouraged to remain on active duty. Only those who demonstrate transformational behavioral change should be given the opportunity to compete for a future command.

### Informing Selection for Senior Officer Talent Management

Additional relevant information leads to better talent management decisions; consequently, the Army has created several new programs designed to better match

its officer talent with the talent profile required, such as the talent marketplace.<sup>12</sup> Further, the Army has started gathering more information about the skills of its officers, such as their communication ability, strategic potential, and mental and physical fitness, during its new command assessment programs.

Due to the career timelines of the most junior lieutenants in a battalion, the Army must wait up to five-and-a-half years after battalion commanders depart their commands before it can calculate their full BCE and BCE<sub>HIPO</sub>. Considering this lag, the Army could examine ACETs and climate surveys from officers' time in command to provide similar feedback to the senior service (war) college selection board, colonels promotion board, and colonels command assessment program (CCAP, which already considers ACETs).

To better inform these colonel-level selection boards and program, the Army should calculate an interim BCE and BCE<sub>HIPO</sub> each year after a battalion commander departs command. This data should be considered by the CCAP, within the context of it still being incomplete. Certainly, each former battalion commander's full BCE and BCE<sub>HIPO</sub> should be calculated and strongly considered by what is perhaps the Army's most important leader selection event—the brigadier general selection board.

### Shaping Institutional-Level Leader Development

The battalion commander effect is also a potentially powerful tool for improving Army leadership training and development. The Army should further analyze the ACETs and climate surveys of officers with very high and very low BCEs to identify the specific leader behaviors shown to be consistent with their scores. These behaviors could then be taught as evidence-driven examples of best and counterproductive leadership practices at pre-command courses and all officer education schools. To further reinforce the message, the Army could establish an annual battalion commander-level award informed by the BCE or BCE<sub>HIPO</sub>, similar to the Army's current General Douglas MacArthur Leadership Award given to outstanding company-grade officers.

Additionally, calculating the battalion commander effect for each battalion commander will allow the Army to see the developmental routes—schools, assignments, interventions—that tend to produce battalion commanders with high and low BCEs with corresponding organizational performance. By examining these patterns, the Army could redesign its officer assignment system to maximize developmental paths that yield high BCE, high organizational performance officers.

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12. Gautam Mukunda, *Indispensable: When Leaders Really Matter* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

## Limitations

While the battalion commander effect should be considered in senior officer talent management decisions, it should not be the sole information source about an officer's past leadership or potential. Several contextual factors are needed to interpret its meaning properly. First, it is easy to imagine a battalion commander who practices "likership" more than quality leadership, resulting in a high BCE when positive leadership such as "tough love" was absent. Second, a counterproductive—toxic or ineffective—battalion commander's negative effect could be mitigated by a group of high-quality field- and company-grade officers and NCOs, with the battalion commander ending up with a high BCE for which he or she is not responsible.

Third, a battalion may have had a commander who was a very effective and thoughtful leader, yet the battalion experienced an extremely difficult deployment, or its lieutenants had to make their retention decisions during a particularly strong economy with high-paying civilian job opportunities. Finally, one could imagine a battalion commander who receives a cohort of lieutenants who are of unusually high or low quality or predisposed to want to stay in or leave the Army. Therefore, the battalion commander effect is just one of several important measures of leadership effectiveness, including 360-degree feedback, command climate surveys, reenlistment rates for junior enlisted personnel, unit conduct, and unit performance at centralized training events.

## Conclusion

The Army needs quality leadership, and it expects its officers to provide that leadership consistently within the constraints of the institution. As the Army looks for ways to retain talent, the battalion commander effect should play a role. While officer evaluation reports capture supervisors' perceptions of their subordinates' leadership performance and potential, the BCE is an objective measure of leader effectiveness by utilizing subordinates' decisions to vote with their feet. In essence, the battalion commander effect provides support for the notion that "people do not quit organizations; they quit leaders."<sup>13</sup>

When taken in context, the battalion commander effect is an important way to identify the presence of counterproductive leader behaviors in a way performance evaluations may not. Officers who are effective at managing the perceptions of their

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13. Grace E. Mills, "Transformational Leadership and Employee Retention: An Exploratory Investigation of the Four Characteristics" (doctoral diss., Capella University, 2007), 1.

seniors while abusing or disregarding their juniors will likely ace official evaluation reports, but they will be held accountable by the BCE.

Ultimately, the battalion commander effect is a new measure of leadership effectiveness that should be calculated and considered, within context, when making senior officer talent management decisions. In doing so, the Army will improve its brigadier general selection process, better understand the developmental experiences that produce officers who inspire retention, and send an unmistakable message to current and future battalion commanders that they will be held accountable for the retention or attrition of its most critical asset, its young talent, and especially its high-potential lieutenants. Additionally, since leadership in a military context has many similarities to leadership in civilian settings, a modified BCE could inform the selection of the first tenured-level supervisors in other contexts, such as not-for-profit senior directors, law firm partners, corporate general managers, and consulting and banking executives.

In the words of retired Army Lieutenant General Walter F. Ulmer Jr., the former III Corps commander and former president and CEO of the Center for Creative Leadership, “battalion commanders—even more powerfully than division commanders—craft the organizational climates that motivate or discourage lieutenants . . . and everybody else.”<sup>14</sup> The BCE can measure that aspect of leadership objectively, powerfully, and reliably, giving the Army a new tool to help create an organizational climate that will maximize both its current and future effectiveness.

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14. Walter Ulmer, personal communication with the authors, March 25, 2020.