



By Joe Byerly

Over the course of my career, I've seen a number of raters and senior raters ask their subordinates (including me) to bring their five or even ten-year timelines to an initial or performance counseling session. I've always shown up with my homework in hand.

But as I look back on the last five years of my career, nothing on that timeline panned out the way I thought it would. Nothing. So are they valuable?

I don't know.

Here are a few of the problems I have with the idea of mapping out life so far into the

future. First, we often do so without taking our values into account. I've encountered too many officers who blindly walked a career not aligned with what they held as important, and by the time they realized it -it was too late. Also, as we gain experience we get a clearer idea of what we want to do, or at minimum, want to avoid. Through multiple assignments, I have a much clearer picture of what I'm good at, where I struggle, and the type of jobs that I enjoy. Finally, there are so many factors outside of our control that in some respects, make mapping out the future an exercise in futility.

The importance of values

When we think about values our minds tend to go to the mushy stuff, but this isn't the case at all. Simply put, our values are those things that are important to us. Some people put a lot of value in family, wanting to be there for milestones and not miss out on day to day life with their spouses and children. Others value being in charge and seek out positions where they can exercise leadership or take jobs that will set them up for future leadership roles. Finally, others value teaching and training, and they look for opportunities to do this -because that's where *they feel* they provide the most value.

The point here is that if we don't know and hold fast to our values, others will assume our values -typically mirroring theirs (which they may not have a clear grasp on either) and start making career decisions for us.

Also, our values change over time as we get older, start families, and get further along in our military careers. So, it's important that we sit down and reassess and prioritize them. It's also worth acknowledging that our values will come into occasional conflict with each other -and there is always a tradeoff. Our desire to be home with our families may clash with our desire to seek out leadership roles.

I've seen too many leaders make career plans not based on values, but based on what they

thought others wanted to hear. They moved along from assignment to assignment, never really being happy—always working towards a future goal. For many, they didn't achieve that goal. But hey....they stuck to the timeline.

Experience changes things

Another reason timelines aren't helpful is that we don't exactly know the preferences of our future selves. I had no idea as a cavalry troop commander in Mosul, Iraq that I would one day have a penchant for writing and enjoy working in the Special Operations community. Each new experience in the military provides us with information on what we like and dislike, our strengths and weaknesses, and a chance to evaluate our service against our values.

For this reason, I've always been amazed at conventional commanders who write off young-mid grade officers who choose to go functional area or want to leave their basic branch for Special Forces Assessment and Selection or other off the beaten path programs. Clearly, these officers have made a decision based on their experience, and we should support them, not be an obstacle to their continued service.

All the factors!

Sometimes life doesn't comply with a neat linear timeline of career milestones. Marriage, births of children, divorce, sickness, and injuries all have a vote. What we want as a single young officer may change with a spouse and two kids. Or, that battalion and brigade command may no longer be important when a child's illness consumes the family.

Life outside the military isn't the only factor that has a vote. The reality of a military career does too. Yes, our performance matters -but only to a point. [Timing, luck, and tribes](#) in the military affect our evaluations, thus shaping future assignments and selection for key positions. Sometimes, we have to take assignments that we never planned for and may pay a price for them. These are all things we don't have a lot of control over, and therefore can't

really foresee when scribbling down a career path on a piece of paper.

Should we not map out our future?

I know that I have spent the last 700 words arguing against creating a career timeline, however, there is some value in the exercise. It shows you where you might be in the future and therefore allows you to make decisions in the present that can help move towards personal or career goals.

A career timeline overlaid with your family's timeline can let you see where your kids will be in their lives and can help you determine if you want them to attend several high schools or stay rooted in one. As a respected leader, I know recently put it, "A timeline helps you understand when the options become mutually exclusive".

Finally, timelines are helpful in determining if the job you're about to accept will help you achieve your goals or if you have to take a career risk in accepting that next assignment.

An exercise that matters

A few years ago, my boss at the time did something that no other leader had ever done with me. He asked me to write down my 3-5 and 5-10 year goals, but only after I played his card game.

He handed me a 63 card deck of [True Growth Leadership value cards](#). Each card had a value and a definition of that value. He told me to select no more than five. For the next several weeks I racked and stacked the values, eventually choosing five. I wrote them down and carry them on a piece of paper in the back of a notebook that is always in my pocket.

It was once I determined my top five values, that I could look more clear-eyed at the goals. Since then, I've continually measured decisions against those five values and have found the exercise to be one of the most important things I have done in my military career.

It's worth mentioning that even though it's been helpful having my values in writing, it makes career decisions clearer not easier. There is still a bit of professional FOMO in saying no to some opportunities and family FOMO when I decided to take on challenges that required a considerable amount of time away from home. Also, there is a level of accompanying stress of standing my ground when talking to people who outrank me about my values, especially when their values are starkly different).

So, if you are reading this

Timelines are helpful only after you figure out what's important to you. And we should use timelines as an exercise to understand where we are headed, not as turn-by-turn Google Maps directions for our future. We should also be prepared to adjust as we gain more experience and life happens.

If you are a young officer, start thinking about the things in life that are valuable to you, and use that as your career compass. You will need to continually evaluate them and might be forced to prioritize them. And be prepared to stand firm when your leaders push back. Be ready to accept the consequences of your decisions -there's always a tradeoff.

If you are a leader and want to do career counseling with your subordinates, it's worth asking about their values before asking them for a timeline. If not, I guarantee you will find yourself mirroring your values on them. Also, remember that [all career advice is autobiographical](#) and they need to understand that a timeline is a paper drill and to help them evaluate decisions in the present. Their timelines will be influenced by timing, luck, and tribes and all of the other unforeseen events that life throws at us.

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