



By MAJ Terron Wharton

From January 2018 to June 2020, I served in key development positions as a battalion operations officer, battalion executive officer, and brigade executive officer. My key development time was the hardest I have ever worked in my life. Fortunately, I had great teammates, worked for wonderful bosses, had the opportunity to coach and mentor junior officers and NCOs, and formed lifelong bonds I will cherish for the rest of my life. Despite being part of a great team, stress took its toll, and by the end I was something of a wreck; my personal life was strained, I was mentally and physically exhausted, and, to add insult to injury, I had also gained about ten pounds.

Fortunately, my next assignment was one that advertised a much slower pace and exposure to parts of the Army I had never seen. Needless to say, I arrived excited. I would get to spend time with my family, refocus on my fitness, and get my life together while preparing for my future. However, myriad self-imposed expectations and a constant drive for excellence became destructive. I was still waking up at 0530 every day to go to the gym, do PT, and get to work early. Falling back on old habits, I once again found myself checking

emails and responding to every single text or call at all hours of the day.

Despite a desire to recover, I continued to run at the same pace I had for the last two and a half years. My drive never turned off. I continued to redline and found myself once again breaking down. I thought I had slowed down, but I never truly began the recovery process.

Merriam-Webster defines "[recover](#)" as "to bring back to normal position or condition," and The American Psychology Association defines "[recovery time](#)" as "the time required for a physiological process to return to a baseline state after it has been altered by the response to a stimulus." The common element in each definition is a change in state. The drive for excellence during a demanding period is counterproductive, or even harmful, during recovery. We must give ourselves permission to power down, throttle back, and take time to heal. Not giving ourselves permission to slow down can impede recovery, multiply the damage incurred during a high demand period, and cause lasting negative impacts to our physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual well-being.

In CADENCE!

"If the Soldier cannot recover properly from the acute training load...then the training load will accumulate and not be absorbed. The continued volume and intensity of the workload becomes chronic. This failure to properly progress the workload increases risk of underperformance..." [FM 7-22, pg 4-7, "Physiology"](#)

In 1908, psychologists Robert M. Yerkes and John Dillingham Dodson demonstrated an empirical relationship between stress and performance, known as the [Yerkes-Dodson Law](#). The law dictates that performance increases with physical and mental stress, but only to a point. When stress becomes too great, or endures for too long, performance begins to decrease. This relationship is often depicted by a [bell curve](#):

While not explicitly mentioned, the Yerkes-Dodson Law can be found throughout the new FM 7-22, *Holistic Health and Fitness*. FM 7-22 mentions recovery, or some variant of, 623 times. Clearly, the Army recognizes recovery is a requirement, and not just for physical fitness. In addition to physical recovery, FM 7-22 explicitly mentions mental, spiritual, nutrition, and sleep dimensions. However, despite encapsulating a recovery requirement in the Holistic Health and Fitness program, the OPTEMPO within many BCTs remains unsustainably high, impeding any progress made with the publication of the new doctrine.

EXERCISE!

“Soldiers’ roles and jobs change, complicating the requirements for sustained character and psychological training across a Soldier’s lifecycle. ...Therefore, commanders must consider this doctrine as providing best solutions and messaging for the collective mental health of the unit—procedures and tactics that allow Soldiers to prepare for, thrive in, and recover from the ordinary and extraordinary stressors that might degrade readiness.” FM 7-22, pg 9-1, “Mental Readiness”

FM 7-22 and other like programs are a much-needed step in the right direction, providing comprehensive doctrine and tangible steps individuals and leaders can take. However, they fail to address the cultural aspects at the root of the recovery problem. In my experience, some unit cultures, particularly divisional units, value work for the sake of work, not work for the sake of output. A Soldier who completes their assigned tasks on time, or even tasks beyond their assigned workload, but leaves at a reasonable hour is often seen as less committed or lazy. However, a Soldier who comes in early and stays late is seen as hard working and dedicated, despite producing little to no value for the organization.

When leaders tie value to input instead of output, they risk creating a culture where how hard and how long one works is equally, and sometimes more, important than what one produces. Worse, those cultures often also associate work length and effort to commitment and dedication to the organization. In these environments, it matters less what one does, as long as you do it for as long and as hard as you can. One of the most important things a person can do in these cultures is to be seen as “really getting after it”, regardless of what “it” is or whether “it” truly advances the organization or not.

This is not to say performance and output go unnoticed in these cases. Poor performers are eventually identified and rated accordingly. However, cultural norms allow average performers to “muscle through it” by putting in long hours, yet be viewed as equal to or more valued than the high performing individuals who complete their work on time while maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

These cultural norms manifest themselves at both operational and institutional levels. Many commanders consider it acceptable to text, call, or email about non-emergent work at night, over weekends, and during leave periods. This naturally creates pressure for subordinates to respond, regardless of the time of day. It is routine for Soldiers to avoid behavioral counseling or therapy because they fear admitting they need help will harm their career. Over my 15 year career, I have routinely observed Soldiers at all ranks lose leave because the high OPTEMPO consistently produces a pressing requirement. Finally, there is the phenomenon of “waiting on the word”, where Soldiers will wait around for hours until the commander leaves, despite not having any assigned tasks to accomplish, just in case the

boss needs something or has a question.

At the institutional level, the issue manifests in how assignments are viewed and managed. I've seen many raise an eyebrow when an individual seeks a job that isn't viewed as "hard charging." Instead, the expectation is that careerists who want to advance and eventually command must seek the hard jobs and "keep rowing." Human Resources Command considers these high pressure nominative or competitive broadening assignments [career enhancing](#), meaning that they increase one's chance for promotion or CSL selection.

Based on this, why would someone who wants to promote and command select slower paced broadening jobs to round out the professional skill set and allow them and their family to recover when the Army has already told them that choice does not make them the most competitive? As a result, many Soldiers, especially those on track for early promotion or with high potential for CSL selection, will move from serving two years in high stress, key development billets to equally high pressure nominative or competitive broadening billets to maximize promotion and selection chances.

Ask yourself a question: when is the last time you took a four-day pass? Why do so many leaders overvalue work for the sake of work or disparage those who require recovery? Why do career managers often discourage people from picking jobs where they can rehabilitate an injury, be home every night for dinner, and build memories with their families? Resting our muscles after lifting weights enables muscle tissue growth, in turn allowing us to lift more the next time. Similarly, resting our minds, bodies, and families after a hard push in a key development billet enables us, and our families, to push hard again in the next big job.

HALT!

"Recovery: The period of four to eight weeks when the Soldier begins to prepare for the primary mission. It is characterized by low workloads and general adaptation and recuperation.", FM 7-22, pg Glossary-8

Recovery is a physiological necessity. This is an immutable fact that both high performers and the institutional Army recognize on an intellectual level. Still, both struggle with recovery, conceptually and in implementation. Fixing this problem requires action at the individual, unit, and Army levels; it also requires senior leaders to lead from the front in execution.

We can take three steps to improve the recovery process. First, we must give ourselves **PERMISSION** to recover. We must acknowledge it is permissible to perform below peak

output all the time, and throttling down is both healthy and necessary. Second, we must recognize recovery is a process that takes **TIME**. These issues cannot be fixed over a long weekend. The length of the recovery period is tied to the length and intensity of the high demand period. Finally, we must be **DELIBERATE** about our recovery. We must budget time and resources for recovery the same as we would a training exercise. Like training, we must also avoid things that distract or pull us away from our recovery efforts.

At the cultural level we must shift how we view recovery. The Army's Holistic Health and Fitness program is an amazing start and does a lot to cement recovery concepts into our doctrine. However, it requires leaders at every level to embrace it and put it into practice in tangible ways. First, [effectively managing organizational capacity](#) increases efficiency and enables routine working hours. Working late nights and weekends may be required to accomplish some missions, but those should be the exception, not the expectation.

Second, senior leaders at all levels must change their messaging and lead by example. How can they expect subordinates to truly recover if they are not willing to stop sending emails on the weekend, leave the office on time, unplug and actually take leave, or see a doctor when sick or injured? If board guidance and selection continue to weight high pressure operational assignments over broad experience, then what incentive is there to change the mold? Senior leaders must live the reforms for them to take root. Leaders at all levels must make it clear that long work hours, lost leave, and weekend emails are not a badge of honor, nor will they be viewed in a positive light.

In addition, we must embrace a concept of active recovery while in high stress, high demand jobs. When I was a battalion operations officer, my commander made a point to leave the office at 1730 each day. Even better, he chased everyone out, including myself, the command sergeant major, battalion executive officer, company commanders, and first sergeants. Making a habit to leave on time, being present for the little league game, or turning off the phone for date night are examples of "recovery in contact" that allow for some respite while enabling continued performance in a high demand job.

Finally, our culture must re-examine how it views assignments. Slower paced assignments should not be derogatively viewed as "taking a knee," but rather rounding out areas in an individual's professional development. Instead of pushing Soldiers from one high-pressure assignment to another, branch managers and senior leaders should encourage a greater diversity in assignments, not just in the operating force, but the generating force as well. Not only does the slower pace allow the individual and the family to recover, but the breadth of experience will benefit the Soldier in their next critical assignment.

RECOVER!

Recovery can be uncomfortable. Over my 15-year career, the Army has trained and conditioned me to go farther, push harder, and move faster in everything I do. There was a metric for everything and if you didn't perform better than before there was more work to do until you did. Trying to break this mindset is hard. In fact, forcing yourself to slow down and recover in many ways is more difficult than simply continuing to push the pace. However, we must remember one unalterable fact: what got you here, will not get you there. Maintaining the habits that made you successful in a high demand job will not make you successful while executing recovery.

Recovery is necessary. Recovery is a process. Recovery is healthy. While it may feel uncomfortable to power down, do less, and not push to our limits, we must realize this is a mental trap. Our personal growth happens as we consolidate gains, reflect, and rest during our recovery periods. By changing how we view recovery and taking a more deliberate approach in its execution, we can maximize our recovery, capitalize on our growth, and be ready to perform at our peak when called to do so.

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