



by Ray Ramos

“You suck, and here is why...” We all share a desire to know how we are performing. Kudos are great to hear, but what we really need to hear is how we can be better. In my own attempt to prepare for the Army’s Battalion Commander Assessment Program (BCAP), I asked a peer to provide me feedback. We spent the last year working closely in a two-star headquarters staff deployed to Afghanistan. Side by side, seven days a week, we grinded away at a difficult mission displaying both our best and worst qualities. In just a little over an hour, we fired hard questions and critiques at each other layered with examples throughout our time together. We used the time to criticize one another with honest candid feedback. This conversation was one of the most enlightening and eye-opening professional experiences of my career. It brought to light shortcomings I was unaware of and defined leader attributes I excelled in. Ultimately, this approach is not something that can be centralized by the Army but must be sought after as a leader and life-long learner.

The Army's new Commanders Assessment Program (CAP) process has taken a hearty swing at a more complete assessment of future Battalion and Brigade commanders. The process includes physical, psychological, cognitive, and communication assessments with the addition of a series of subordinate and peer evaluations known as the Army Commander Evaluation Tool (ACET). The ACET provides anonymous peer and subordinate feedback, which is reasonable; however, its anonymity lacks the personality and dialogue of face-to-face feedback. To develop a more holistic approach towards self-awareness, candidates must incorporate non-anonymous peer feedback. Peer-provided non-anonymous feedback is a more accurate, intimate, and vulnerable vision of the self that facilitates discourse. This sort of feedback teaches us to have hard conversations, to recognize our own emotions and actions, and to recognize the emotions of others. This builds our emotional intelligence and establishes a culture of skilled critical feedback for leaders and subordinates.

While the ACET is a giant leap in gaining that critical feedback, it's, unfortunately, one-directional and presents some structural biases. The ACET does not allow the person in question to have any dialogue with the person providing the feedback. It also relies on a loose network of associates that hopefully remember you, have supposedly worked closely with you, or by chance, noticed the voluntary survey request immersed in the throng of other survey requests in their digital inbox. In Adam Grant's book *Originals*, he explores the concepts of new original ideas and avoiding groupthink. As part of this study, he discovers that the most accurate forecasters of success were not the assessments by a manager or an expert critic but that of a peer. While this study was geared towards performance arts, it's not a stretch to overlay the concept in a military arena. We are all familiar with the blind spots a senior leader or subordinate may have for leaders within their ranks. Often it's our peers who see the reality of our performance and know our history. They know who among their cohort are the team players and "long ball hitters."

The Army's Talent Management Task Force has done an excellent job creating a system that is largely divorced of biases and ensures objectivity however, in this rigid approach there is a loss of the human touch and a gap in the assessment. If leaders are looking to truly become self-aware and improve their performance as commanders, they must purposely seek out face-to-face feedback from their peers. This is not, however, incumbent upon the Army's Talent Management Task Force to take on and would be nearly impossible to enforce or "grade." Leaders must take this upon themselves before CAP and as a lifelong practice. In Susan Scott's *Fierce Leadership* she bemoans anonymous feedback as colorless and lacking in life, joy, and humanity. Anonymous feedback does nothing to enrich relationships and is a dramatic loss of an opportunity to build relationships. This is especially important in our Army where people and relationships matter the most. Command climate surveys

and the Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback-360s (MSAF) are great initiatives but often fall flat and provide little qualitative feedback to the survey's recipient. They reduce ownership and agency while simultaneously hardwiring our leaders to avoid discomfort and hard conversations. As leaders, we cannot avoid the hard conversations but embrace them.

On a grander scale, the Army's new CAP is creating an environment to support a culture of quality feedback to our people. That said, we need to inculcate non-anonymous peer feedback in our day-to-day work so that the vision of ourselves is consistently seen and improved upon throughout our careers. The onus for this must be taken by the individual leader until it becomes part of a lifelong culture of improvement and emotional intelligence. I am proud of the Talent Management Task Force's approach however, it is on us as leaders to individually seek out peer-to-peer feedback and fill the gap created in anonymous criticism. We owe it to our subordinates, peers, leaders, and the Army. So seek out a peer, ask them why they think "you suck" and then thank them for sharing.

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