

Greener Pastures: Can the Implementation of Self-determination Theory Improve the Army Talent Management System?



by Catherine Cline

Joining any military requires some intrinsic motivation to commit to selfless service. However, the Army has a growing disparity in the retention of mid-grade officers and [for various reasons](#), loses almost half its officers by the ten-year mark. Ironically, many of these departing officers are considered the top talent of their peer groups. So why are individuals halfway to a federal retirement leaving the service for greener pastures? When and how did they lose that intrinsic motivation to serve in the force? This article will address this trend and suggest that the application of self-determination theory could correct that disparity.

Upon the creation of the Office of Personnel Management System, the 25th Chief of the Staff of the Army, General William C. Westmoreland, wanted to redirect the Army away from the deeply rooted command culture and segment it into two distinct career paths. These paths would take officers into either a command or staff track. Both tracks are essential for the Army and would have distinctive career checkmarks for positions and promotions. However, [this concept met strong resistance](#) from the force, and Westmoreland ultimately dropped the idea and retained the status quo of the command-centric climate.

Fifty years of the current talent management system execution and abundant studies reflecting officer career dissatisfaction suggest that the command-centric, one-size-fits-all career track is inadequate. A more modern and flexible talent management system is needed to manage the breadth and depth of staff and leadership human capital to ensure a force capable of conducting large-scale combat operations in complex and multidomain

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environments.

[Numerous surveys of former Army officers](#) conclude that autonomy and poor leadership are the leading causes of attrition. The issue of autonomy [focuses on a lack of input](#) in an officer's career and a one-size-fits-all career model. Another [common theme](#) was that the best officers had left the force by that midcareer benchmark. Yes, the Army has made strides to improve by weeding out toxic officers but future focus should be vested in retaining the *best* officers.

Both show a trend of the Army forcing square pegs into a round hole.

The Army has long struggled with the concept and makeup of leadership. In the war on talent, the Army has recognized the possibility that only some individuals have the capacity to lead.

The notion of *can leadership be taught* has existed for decades.

Many have studied the concept, and while some suggest that leadership can be learned, a significant number have concluded that leadership cannot be taught. There is even [some research that suggests](#) genetic factors contribute to innate leadership abilities and traits.

The counterargument is that leadership can be learned, not taught. There are natural limitations to leadership education and training programs. However, suppose leadership can be taught in formal instruction and expanded through leadership development programs. In that case, the most current Army leadership development programs require a more holistic approach, suggesting that the focus on ethics development, interpersonal skills, and practical skills is [insufficient to develop](#) future Army leaders.

Over the years, the Army has produced surveys to gauge if leadership can be taught or is an innate characteristic. The fiscal year 2022 [Annual Survey of Army Leadership from the Center for the Army Profession and Leadership](#) asked recipients to agree or disagree with the statement: "most of the leadership ability a person has they were born with, and training is unlikely to change that." This author [argues](#) that leadership is an innate personality characteristic further enhanced with developed skills. "Having the right number of officers is a necessary but not sufficient condition: the quality of officers retained must also be the benchmark."

The Army should consider adaptation of self-determination theory to bridge the gap in human capital leaving the force—especially the alarming rate of top-talent mid-grade

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officers leaving.

Created by Dr. Richard Ryan and Dr. Edward Deci, [self-determination theory](#) is a theory of human motivation considering innate psychological needs and personal growth tendencies. Self-determination theory frames the three core needs of all humans as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. All three consider how humans relate to their surroundings, including connection to their position and others in their environment.

Self-determination theory [has six regulatory categories](#). First, non-regulation is when an individual will not attempt a task due to a lack of motivation; this is considered amotivation. Second, external regulation is when an individual completes a task based on a reward or punishment from external forces. Third, introjected regulation is when an individual completes a task because it boosts their ego. Fourth is identified regulation which is when an individual will execute a task because it provides a level of achievement and makes them feel better. The second, third, and fourth regulation categories are all motivated externally. Fifth, integrated regulation is when an individual completes a task because they believe it is right to do so. Lastly is intrinsic regulation. Intrinsic motivation is when an individual completes a task because of the personal satisfaction granted upon completion. All who serve start their career in this category.

How can the Army get all Soldiers back into that intrinsic motivation category?

Most who leave the service had either [amotivation or extrinsic motivation](#). Amotivation has left the individual with an impersonal motivation factor, based on their disinterest in continuing service, because of a lack of control. Extrinsic motivation has external motivation factors. Typically based on the benefits from or of external input they're not receiving in their current function. Those inputs could be in the shape of rewards, self-gratification of the ego, or reinforcement of self-importance.

The Army [spends an average](#) of \$75k on the training and education of mid-grade officers. To retain that financial and time investment in human capital, the Army needs to move individuals in the amotivation and extrinsic categories into the intrinsic category. In the intrinsic category, interest, enjoyment, and satisfaction occur for that individual. To do this, the Army must focus on [the three core needs](#) of every human: competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

Competence is the ability to do well in a position. Everyone wants to succeed. Placing officers [based on developed skills](#) will afford officers the ability to be competent in their roles. This benefits the individual as well as the organization.

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Relatedness refers to the innate need to feel connected to others. We are all social creatures, which require a sense of belonging to the people in our environment. Competence in a role gives [individuals](#) an automatic bond to the mission and those supporting it.

Lastly is autonomy, which refers to an individual's need for [control in their own life](#). The Army providing that career control will aid in an officer's feeling of competence and relatedness. Again, another aspect of self-determination theory that benefits all parties involved.

Self-determination theory providing autonomy is not an excuse for officers to float between only desirable positions. Rather autonomy is provided in the dual track paths, allowing leaders to lead and staff to fulfill vital staff roles. These dual tracks provide better human capital management but do still require specific key development billets for each track to grow officers for future positions. For example, being an executive or operations officer is considered critical key development for future commands. Therefore, those -and other key developmental positions- are still part of an officer's development within their specified track.

Providing career autonomy in dual-track paths and utilizing officers in positions they will thrive in will provide competence and relatedness. Suppose the Army focuses its talent management strategy on viewing talent as human capital and providing that human capital with the three core human needs. In that case, there is likely to be an increase in retention. The second-order effects would be retaining true top talent and, therefore, not needing to promote those toxic leaders to meet manning requirements in the first place. Third-order effects are putting competent officers in front of the formation and enhancing the environment for enlisted Soldiers. In turn, improving the retention of top enlisted talent—multiple birds with one stone.

The Army has a growing officer career dissatisfaction trend within its ranks and needs to reverse the attrition bleed of mid-grade officers. Adopting the dual track career paths and applying self determination theory has the potential to curb the trend of top talent leaving the force and improve Army human capital management.

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