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by Terron Wharton

It is no secret the Army is having recruiting and retention challenges. The Army's primary response has been a tried and true one: [money](#). Big bonuses to sign up and re-up are proven methods that have worked in the past.

However, despite the [\\$1.8 billion](#) the Army budgeted for 2023 recruiting and retention efforts, [exit surveys](#) show that [many reasons for leaving](#) are not solvable by big checks. In short, soldiers may join for the money and benefits, but they do not stay for them. Instead, soldiers say the sense of purpose, the ability to realize their potential, and the shared camaraderie [keep them in uniform](#). Simply put, people like feeling they are a part of

something. Instead of focusing on financially incentivizing retention, professionals should focus on inspiring commitment through engaged, inspirational leadership.

While some soldiers who join are driven primarily by patriotism and the desire to serve, that is not true for all, or even most. The Army knows this, which is why large portions of the Army's [website](#) talks about [incentives and benefits](#). Personally, I joined for two reasons: I wanted out of my hometown and I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself. However, to be completely honest, the first was far more important at the time. Getting out meant going to college, which was something I could not afford without a scholarship...but if I went to the United States Military Academy or received a full ROTC scholarship, I would not pay a dime. The 17-year-old me who took an oath was focused on one thing: free school.

After 18 years of service, my reasons for staying are not the reasons I joined. While the pay and benefits are good there are certainly easier ways to make a living, and most do not involve waking up and exercising before the sun is up, eating food from a pouch, or sweating in the blistering heat at the National Training Center. The reason I stay is because I find service deeply rewarding. The sense of belonging, feeling my service has meaning, and meaningful relationships with comrades, mentors, and proteges keep me putting the uniform on every day. The Army may have given me an education, but it also gave me purpose, lifelong bonds, and a sense of belonging. So, how did I go from focusing on the money to focusing on being part of something bigger than myself?

During my early years I worked for an incredible mentor who took the time to teach me about officership and what it truly means to be a professional. I met him at a pivotal point in my life. I was experiencing both personal and professional difficulties. I was on the verge of getting out of the Army. While I had initially wanted to serve for a career, I found myself questioning those choices. The leaders I worked for were not role models, and they did not offer anything to aspire to. Was this what the Army was about?

Fortunately, MAJ Christopher Coglianesse took me under his wing and showed me something different. He did more than simply teach our craft, he taught me what our profession meant. No question was too big or too small. Even though I was not a professional yet, he expected me to perform and behave like one, and he treated me as such. There was no coddling. When I inevitably fell short through youth, inexperience, or my own immaturity, he never crushed or belittled me. Instead, he used my shortcomings as opportunities to teach me and, little by little, I grew into the professional he saw in me when I did not see it myself.

While it seems simple, two things made his approach significant. First, he invested his time. We are eternally busy, and our time is our most precious gift. None of his instructions was

formal, but imparted over meals, between patrols, and down time in the office. In addition, mentorship is a long term commitment, and COL(R) Coglianesse continues to mentor me to this day, despite being recently retired. Second, he lived what he taught. He expected nothing he did not do himself. Every day, he modeled what it meant to be a professional officer.

His personal investment and daily example changed my perspective. THIS is what it meant to be an Army officer, not what I had seen before. His example was something I wanted to be, and if this is what it meant to be an Army officer, then it was something I could believe in and commit to. When I finally committed to a career, it was not because of the financial incentives like pay, education benefits, or retirement, but because I believed in what our profession stood for, a belief that grew from my daily interactions with an engaging, inspirational leader.

The role and impact senior officers have on junior officer retention is well known. In fact, researchers have a name for it: [the Battalion Commander Effect](#). While the study focuses on using the battalion commander effect as a tool for developing, shaping, and selecting future battalion commanders, it has very serious retention implications. Published in 2021, the study examined over 1,700 former Army battalion commanders, and the 36,000 lieutenants they led, and found that battalion commanders are “[significant determinants](#) of the retention of their lieutenants—especially high-potential lieutenants.”

The Army also recognizes the Battalion Commander Effect. None other than [GEN James McConville](#), former Chief of Staff of the Army, said:

Battalion commanders are arguably the most consequential leaders in the Army. Their experience, placement, and influence give them an out-sized ability to shape the future service of the soldiers they lead. They train and develop our young soldiers, non-commissioned officers, and officers and have more impact on their decisions to continue serving (or not) than any other leadership position.

To address the problem of counterproductive battalion-level leadership, the Army created an entire program to [holistically assess potential battalion commanders](#): the Battalion Commander Assessment Program, or BCAP. A significant goal of BCAP is [uncovering toxic and counterproductive](#) behaviors through a combination of psychological screening, survey feedback from peers and subordinates, and an interview panel conducted by senior officers. I have gone through BCAP and I can personally attest to the deep level of scrutiny.

The Army's focus on battalion commanders is not misplaced, but battalion commanders are

not the only leaders who can turn off, or inspire, a young servicemember to our profession. Leaders at any echelon can positively influence their subordinates to continue serving. My mentor was not my battalion commander at the time. Neither was the next officer who had a positive influence on my career. However, both were field grade officers, meaning they had taken the step to fully commit to the profession of arms, and both served for the sake of service.

Our junior service members do not necessarily serve for the sake of service. While that is an aspect, incentives remain the larger motivator. Incentives alone do not create [long term commitment](#) and change. Intrinsic motivation is far more powerful than extrinsic motivation. However, incentives are not useless. Instead, they create time and space to build the intrinsic motivation structures which become the foundation for long term commitment.

The solution to our challenge may not be easy, but it is deceptively simple. If junior members are incentive driven and professionals are service driven, then the solution to retention is not greater or more varied incentives. The solution comes from professionals making the personal investment to inspire junior members to commit to serving for service's sake. The Army's greatest tools are not bonuses, grad school, or duty station of choice. The greatest tool is a leader's time, attention, and personal example. My mentor's investment in me and the model he lived is what inspired me to remain, not the [captain retention bonus](#).

Fellow professionals, the Army's senior leadership will not solve the retention challenge. The solution will come from us—the squad leader teaching the specialist what schools to go to while they both man a staff duty desk; the battalion commander who helps the new lieutenant chart a career path to achieve their personal and professional goals; the colonel who lives the Army values, treats their subordinates with dignity and respect, and inspires a captain to want to be like them someday. Engaged, inspirational leadership, not bonus checks, will solve our recruiting and retention issues.

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