

Innovative Warrior

Can the Marine Corps bridge the outlier and overachiever gap?

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“The only thing I ever learned from running cadence is that napalm sticks to kids.”¹

Humor aside, running cadence has an important place in Marine Corps training amongst many other treasured traditions. For example, every Marine, regardless of military occupational specialty (MOS), takes pride in mastering basic combat skills. The institutional values of honor, courage, and commitment are embodied by the Marine Corps and reflected in both the individual Marine and the organization as a whole. Nevertheless, adherence to other elements of organizational culture, such as rigid adherence to prescriptive checklists, becomes the primary focus for personnel evaluations, to the detriment of both the individual career progression and the Corps’ ability to retain many of our best and brightest.

Collective experience suggests that selection for promotion, command, and assignment to coveted billets is generally reserved for the most proficient box-checkers in the fleet: “Was he a company commander,” “What was his billet,” “How did he score on his PFT and CFT,” and “How well did he perform at resident school?” This check-the-box mentality has determined the careers of most Marines.² The problem is that this process leaves minimal room for the true innovators—call them intellectuals or insurrectionists—to push the boundaries of doctrine and to identify new areas for development, growth, and

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innovation to defeat and enemy that is constantly evolving and adapting.³ The purpose of innovation—that it is new, something outside the norm—immediately, although perhaps quite necessarily, places the Marine proponent at odds with the system. The Marine Corps, as an institution, is not built to handle this type of individual, even though he

may hold the greatest promise for the Corps’ future.

In August 2018, Congress passed the latest defense spending bill through which the Services will be afforded substantially greater latitude in effecting officer promotions.⁴ However, with its current move-up-or-move-out evaluation and promotion system, the Marine



Every Marine regardless of military occupational specialty, takes pride in mastering basic combat skills. (Photo by Sgt Ally Beiswanger.)

Corps' outside-the-box thinkers are often relegated to only a few tours during which they have the limited capacity to put their visions into practice. In a quote attributed to a former Commandant during a Service Academy graduation speech, it was said that military officers' careers fall into three categories: those who stick around because they love to serve; those who get out because they have other career aspirations; and those who desperately hang onto their careers because they have no other options. These authors suggest a fourth category: those who resign, or reach the end of active service (EAS),⁵ because they are disappointed to find that their efforts to improve their profession through new thought processes, methods, and techniques are at odds with a bureaucracy that is unwilling to change or accept those who seek to effect change.

However, the field is ripe for change; our current leadership is no stranger to the concept of innovation as a cultural revolution within the Corps.⁶ There have been directives in recent promotion precepts where the respective promotion boards consider characteristics of creative thinking and prudent risk-taking in evaluating individual officers.⁷ The need for innovation is not just a topic of interest for the Commandant;⁸ in fact, several *Gazette* issues include articles that focus on building an innovative and adaptive organization.⁹ For instance, Joshua Waddell's article titled, "Innovation: And other things that brief so well," espoused major structural reforms in force development.¹⁰ The Marine Corps Warfighting Lab (MCWL) staff recently published a reflective piece discussing the requirements for developing the Marine Corps' future as an "exponential organization."¹¹ The first item addressed by the MCWL is innovation:

[T]he application of innovation must be incentivized. Evaluation criteria must be provided to identify innovative ideas among our Marines. Such efforts should be included as a *future fitness report performance category*.¹²

When examining innovators as individuals, research conducted by

social scientists indicates that they do not fit the typical profile of Marines.¹³ In oft-cited research, mid- to senior-level military officers were found to fall predominantly (78 percent) into four personality categories¹⁴ under the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).¹⁵ These types are ISTJ, ESTJ, ENTJ and INTJ. All share the "T" (thinking) and "J" (judgment) preferences and are well known for the individuals' ability to accomplish tasks, follow the rules, provide purpose and direction, and motivate others.¹⁶ The same trend is found in the business world, with mid- to executive-level management trending heavily toward T (95 percent) and J (87 percent) preferences.¹⁷ While all these qualities are needed for good leadership, they have some common pitfalls. With a strong T preference, the individual holds objective criteria in higher esteem

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than personal judgments; conversely, this type of individual may have less consideration for people, personal needs, and may often fail to consider extenuating circumstances. An individual with a strong J preference may tend to be more planned and rigid. For an organization to be innovative, these necessary personality strengths are to implement ideas and provide structure and guidance.

But, what about the thought leaders?¹⁸ The underlying issue is that idea generation and creativity fundamentally rely on individuals—and not culture—to be fostered to maximum effect. Idea generation and creativity are found most profusely in a whole other set of personality types, namely ENTP, INTP, INFP, and ENFP, which all share the "N" (intuition) and "P" (perception) preferences.¹⁹ Despite the fact that N/P individuals are brimming with ideas and creativity, some negative aspect

are that they may lack the direction and staying power to follow through with their ideas. They may often lose momentum during the shift from creative conception to implementation. Additionally once their main ideas are birthed and their inspiration has waned, they may lack the motivation to return and fill in the gaps.²⁰ These individuals also tend to forgo extensive planning beforehand (something the military holds in high esteem, especially in the officer ranks). The failure or lack of motivation amongst N/P personality type to implement new ideas through to completion may significantly hurt their careers as military officers under the current promotion/reward structure.

Where many Marines on the MBTI spectrum fit the "inspector" profile, heavy on order and discipline and light on the gray areas, innovators as "inventors" are more likely to disrupt the *status quo*. The MCWL's proposal, to make innovativeness an evaluation criteria on fitness reports, may actually counteract its stated purpose by making it another checklist item. If the MCWL's proposal is to carry real weight, this fitness report category must be reserved specifically for those who do not fall into the other categories but are still extremely valuable to the Corps because of their fresh perspective.²¹ For an example of how the fitness report changes could be reduced to tangible criteria, the Corps need look no further than within: as part of its better buying power initiative updates, the DOD laid out specific guidelines for evaluating acquisition managers' effectiveness at incentivizing innovation.²² The intention of this article is not to reiterate previously written themes of using personality assessments to change recruiting methods or to fit officers to particular MOSs; rather, it is to acknowledge that Marine officers fall along a spectrum of personality types. Thus, those who show themselves to be innovators should be given time and space to function as change agents within the Corps.

Besides fitness report changes, the MCWL proposed "the development of measures of competence beyond fitness reports" and potentially creating "a 360-degree evaluation rather than

the current performance evaluation process,” as well as “[pushing] innovation authority, wherever possible, down to the unit: battalions, squadrons, and perhaps lower levels.”²³ There are two proposals that will provide viable options to fulfill the MCWL’s objectives. One is to create a distinct career path for innovators. The other is to turn the Commandant’s individual-focused innovation initiatives into more robust, collaborative environments for innovators.

The Marine Corps needs to create a career path for innovators who want to hone their craft even though they may not particularly be interested in the traditional management-track promotion schedule. Currently, there are a couple possibilities for Marines to focus on developing their MOSs, at a tactical level, for a full career—but this is more by chance than design. A Marine could enlist, and after a few years, take the mustang/warrant officer route; if the timing works out, the Marine may retire as a captain or CWO3 before the system forces him either to conform or to move on. Another way is to develop MOS expertise for around a decade, resist the pressure to fulfill a “B” billet, and then become a school instructor where new ideas may be instilled in the next generations of Marines. For most new officers, however, the orders and promotion clock will not allow this sort of homesteading within their micro-profession of arms to develop as innovative warfighters.

Prior to the NDAA 2019 amendments, officers above the grade of O-4 could continue on active duty past the statutory retirement dates, under certain conditions; the new law lowers the grade to officers above O-2.²⁴ Additionally, NDAA 2019 permits the military departments to designate alternative competitive categories for promotion, as well as to increase the number of opportunities for promotion consideration for those competitive categories.²⁵ There is fear that the NDAA 2019 changes will encourage the Services to designate certain trendy MOSs as alternative competitive categories. For example, this means that all cyber warriors will now be cubbyholed into a separate pro-

motion category; however, the grunts, communicators, and pilots will all have to remain in the traditional structure. Under our proposal, new competitive categories should be based on an individual officer’s innovation potential, rather than the particular specialty they hold. One means of creating this type of innovator category will be to create a single additional MOS (AMOS) for innovators (such as hackers, drone pilots or tank commanders), through which they could continue to promote for pay purposes (perhaps to a lower terminal rank or at a more tempered pace than their counterparts), but remain in company-or-below levels of command. In doing so, the Corps will leverage these officers’ technical expertise while permitting them to remain as thought leaders within the Corps. This will further allow innovators to focus from the ground up, rather than force them to become institutionalized and to feed into the top-down planning and development cycle.

Next, the Marine Corps needs to transform the current innovation initiatives, such as the Commandant’s Innovation Challenges, into a much more robust program. The Goldwater-Nichols Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) requirements, mandated by statute,²⁶ are important

for development of junior and senior officers; however, their usefulness is somewhat diminished at the tactical levels. For those innovative officers who are not focused on 40-year careers, one example will be for the Marine Corps to allow for a certain percentage to participate in a functional think tank (whether “resident” or “distant”) for an equivalent period of time.²⁷ A second way will be for the monitor community to identify those officers with a strong penchant for innovation then move those officers to units destined to be experimental forces in future phases of MCWL experimental exercises, such as SEA DRAGON 2025.²⁸ Such an action will allow highly technically proficient, likeminded leaders to collaborate in a dynamic environment at the forefront of Marine Corps innovation. Over a 20-year career, these alternatives to traditional JPME could provide multiple opportunities for innovators to reconvene and consider approaches to old and new problems.

In sum, the MCWL is correct in identifying a need for rethinking the evaluation system for the individual Marine who holds unlimited potential precisely because he questions the belt-fed solutions. The Marine Corps will do well to help the innovators flourish by allowing them to work in a natural state



NDAA 2019 permits the military departments to designate alternative competitive categories for promotion. (Photo by Cpl Manuel Serrano.)

for their creativity while leveraging the cultural shift toward innovation in the Marine Corps, to see the creative output through to implementation. The two paths outlined above—opening alternative career paths based on individual potential or broadening opportunities for collaboration—may be a way of institutionalizing not just innovation as a concept, but innovators as the Marine Corps' future.

Notes

1. Anonymous quote in reference to a popular cadence.

2. While much of this piece discusses room for improvement in the officer ranks, the same may be said of SNCOs—who may have to execute orders to the drill field or recruiting duty in order to progress.

3. A 2005 course offered at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology discussed three theories of military innovation: (1) development from within; (2) development initiated by civilian leadership intervention; and (3) development spurred by inter-Service competition. See Posen, Barry and Harvey Sapolsky, *17.462 Innovation in Military Organizations*, (Online: Fall 2005), Massachusetts Institute of Technology: MIT OpenCourseWare, available at <https://ocw.mit.edu>; License: Creative Commons BY-NC-SA. As is discussed further below, current Marine Corps leadership has focused on generating innovation from within.

4. *John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019*, H.R. 115-232, 115th Congress, (2018).

5. These authors focus exclusively on the active component; the “continuum of service” concept proposed by Retired LTG Dennis McCarthy, USA, could be a way of integrating Reservists into the Marine Corps' innovation program. See LTG Dennis McCarthy, “A Continuum of Service,” *Armed Forces Journal* (Online: September 2008), available at <http://armed-forcesjournal.com>.

6. Lance M. Bacon, “Commandant Looks to ‘Disruptive Thinkers’ to Fix Corps’ Problems,” *Marine Corps Times*, (Online: March 2016), available at <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com>.

7. For example, see SECNAV letter of 4 August 16. Precept Concerning the Fiscal Year 2018 U.S. Marine Corps Major Promotion Selection

Board, Captain Continuation Selection Board, Financial Management Major Promotion Selection Board and Financial Management Captain Continuation Selection Board, (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, August 2016)

8. The Commandant’s Innovation Challenge, now in its third year, was first announced on 14 September 2016 in *MARADMIN 481/16*.

9. See e.g., Christopher Wood, “Marine Corps Innovation: The Need for a Reawakening,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: November 2015); Kevin Huang, “Flipping the Board on Innovation: From top to bottom, technological to tactical,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 2017).

10. Joshua Waddell, “Innovation: And Other Things that Brief so Well,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (Quantico, VA; February 2017).

11. Staff, Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, “Is the Marine Corps Ready to Become an Exponential Organization?,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: February 2018).

12. Staff, MCWL, note 10 *supra* p. 20.

13. Much of the research focuses on management-level leaders, and so is officer centered.

14. Jane M. Moraski, “Leadership: The Personality Factor,” (thesis, U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2001), available at <http://www.dtic.mil>.

15. The MBTI, a popular personality assessment tool, categorizes personalities into 16 possible types, organizing four individual attitudes or orientations (Extraversion, Introversion, Judging and Perceiving) across four mental functions (Sensing, Intuition, Thinking and Feeling). See The Myers and Briggs Foundation, “Type Dynamics” webpage, available at <http://www.myersbriggs.org>.

16. The Extrovert and Introvert preferences relate to the individual’s focus on the internal or external world; the Sensing and iNtuition categories relate to the individual’s information processing preferences. The Myers and Briggs Foundation, “MBTI Basics,” (Online), available at <http://www.myersbriggs.org>.

17. Otto Kroeger and Janet M. Thuesen, *Type Talk at Work*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 2002).

18. As the venerated *Warfighting* publication reminds us, differences across the human element require a flexible approach: “No degree

of technological development or scientific calculation will diminish the human dimension in war. Any doctrine which attempts to reduce warfare to ratios of forces, weapons, and equipment neglects the impact of the human will on the conduct of war and is therefore inherently flawed.” *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997).

19. A.J. Drenth, “1 The Creative Life: Insights for INTP, INFP, ENTP, & ENFP Types,” *Personality Junkie*, (Online), available at <https://personalityjunkie.com>.

20. See generally A.J. Drenth, note 17 *supra*, (Online), available at <https://personalityjunkie.com>.

21. A natural risk could be the human tendency to compassionately characterize those who are deficient in other areas as “innovators,” but that risk is inherent in every evaluation where ranking Marines amongst their peers is required.

22. Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Memorandum of 9 April 2015, *Implementation Directive for Better Buying Power 3.0—Achieving Dominant Capabilities through Excellence and Innovation*, (Washington, DC: April 2015).

23. Staff, MCWL, note 10 *supra* p. 20-21.

24. NDAA 2019, note 4 *supra*, Sec. 506.

25. NDAA 2019, note 4 *supra*, Sec. 507.

26. See generally 10 U.S.C. §§ 2151-2156.

27. One means would be to increase opportunities to participate in academic or professional fellowships.

28. Headquarters Marine Corps, *ALMAR 024/16, SEA DRAGON 2025* (Washington, DC: August 2016).

