

How Can I Influence Retention?

Thoughts for career planners and commanders

by MSgt Nicholas J. Greuel

If we are informed, we are aware that the Fiscal Year 2023 retention season is already in our sights. If we are wise, we know that retention efforts for any given year do not begin when the reenlistment submission window opens in July. If we really get it, we understand that retention, like chow, is continuous. And, like chow, it is important. If we do not retain enough Marines, the Marine Corps will logically cease to exist. If we do not retain the best Marines, the quality of the Marine Corps will diminish. As a result, the Corps is always asking itself how to influence retention.

As a career planner, perhaps the most common question I hear from commanders is, “What can we do to increase retention?” The question refers to the percentage of eligible Marines who have reenlisted during the current fiscal year. The most common answers are, as a rule, short-sighted, as they focus only on the current year. For most Marines who have decided not to request reenlistment, their decision has already been made. A last-minute attempt to change their minds has little chance of success. We do not significantly influence retention by one-time morale-building events. We do not strongly influence retention with lump-sum incentives of money, time, or privileges. We do not meaningfully influence retention by talking to our Marines about their futures for the first time when they fall into the particular fiscal year’s retention cohort. While the Marine Corps continues to address what *it* needs to do about retention, I need to ask myself what *my* role is. My influence on retention is about guaranteeing that the Marine Corps is, and remains, a place

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To address these important obligations, I need to understand what the Marine Corps is to an individual Marine. The answer: the unit to which that Marine belongs. Of course, the best branch of the military is larger than just the fire team/section, larger than the squad/shop, larger than the platoon, the company, or the battalion/squadron. However, what Marines *feel* about the Marine Corps is what they see and do every day in their own personal areas of operation. Even after serving with units from all areas of the MAGTF all over the world, I still find myself evaluating my feelings about the entire Marine Corps based mostly on the command climate and daily operations at whichever unit I am currently serving. Having interviewed thousands of enlisted Marines as a career planner

for more than a decade, I know they tend to do the same thing.

Understanding that the Marine Corps—in the eyes of my Marines—is their unit and understanding that it is part of my role as a leader to influence retention in that unit, it follows that I must ensure my Marines understand their own purpose. If I hand my new Marines a copy of our unit’s mission statement, I may be starting in the best way. But, alone, this may be the least impactful way to accomplish my goal. Explaining the mission in a way that the Marines can comprehend, analyze, and synthesize into their own paradigm goes one step further. A guided discussion over the way the Marines’ section/shop/platoon/company contributes to that mission and specifically how the Marines are integral to that contribution has an even greater impact. But even all these sound like one-time-only efforts. Even if the Marines are convinced on their first day of how valuable they are to the team and how important their role is in accomplishing the mission, they will quickly forget if they are never reminded again. More importantly, they will forget if they do not experience the truths they were taught as they sweat and bleed over the mission day after day. They need to be reminded during and after the grueling field exercise how their unit has improved their skills, learned from their mistakes, and been transformed into a more capable force.

They need to be reminded when their section is working longer than all the others how this extra effort made all the difference and will not be forgotten tomorrow when a new task threatens their liberty and sanity with no hope of tangible reward. They need to be reminded when their ideas were not only heard and validated but utilized and credit was given where credit was due. If we take even a moment to consider ideas like these or discuss them with peers and senior leaders, we can come up with infinitely more. The difficulty is not so much in knowing the right answers but in the challenge of executing them with consistency and determination. Fortunately, when my Marines see that kind of consistency and determination in me, it fuels their own eagerness to accomplish their tasks and encourages their own sense of enthusiasm, nurturing a desire to stick with this organization when questions about a retention decision are brought to light.

I must foster a sense of enthusiasm in my Marines and in my workplace. The implied task is to ask myself whether or not *I* am fulfilled at work. Do I have a spirit of enthusiasm? If not, I need to put my own oxygen mask on before I can help my Marines with their own. If I lack *esprit de corps*, maybe some self-reflection can help me overcome the root of the issue. If my own leaders are stifling a positive environment, maybe I can have a serious, tactful conversation with them. If I am at a loss for creative ideas about creating a happy place to work, maybe I can gain some knowledge from books on leadership and human resources management (several of which are always recommended in the Commandant's Professional Reading Program).

The source of my personal obstacles can vary, but each one features a path to overcome. Once I have at least begun to climb those obstacles, I can start working on improving my sphere of influence. I can come to work with a smile on my face and greet my Marines with one. I can rejoice with their successes—both professional and personal. When they accomplish a task, I can show emotions that express my pride

in their work (which bolsters their own self-esteem). When I overhear—or they tell me—that something is going well at home or they received some good news, I can put myself in their shoes and express my joy for them just as if it were my own because I have made it my own. It is genuine. When I see a downcast look on someone's face, I can take the time to find out more, to listen when they just need someone to hear them, and to offer potential solutions when they are seeking advice. All these daily interactions remind my Marines that they have a leader who cares for

tion I have served. When I address my young children, I physically come down to their level—see them eye-to-eye, and actively listen to understand their problems. If my children are having problems with a relationship, it physically hurts me inside. If they are facing harassment of some kind, it brings sincere sorrow to my heart. If they are battling against some perceived injustice, it kindles anger in my mind. My success in helping them very literally impacts my own physical and emotional state. It becomes a no-fail mission to see them through their trouble. I may have to

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them, is in the same fight along with them, and is invested in their own sense of satisfaction and happiness. That is the kind of place I want to work myself. That is the kind of environment Marines want to retain for themselves.

My daily interactions that address my Marines' personal difficulties and triumphs are just the beginning. I must take care of my Marines as though they were my own sons and daughters. Do their problems really matter to me, or are they just distractions from my more important concerns? If I find myself feeling this way, I need to remember that it is the Marines who accomplish the mission. I enable them to accomplish it by taking care of them. Therefore, mission accomplishment is contingent upon the well-being of my Marines. That means they must see that there is nothing more important to me than their well-being. A selfish leader is not one I want to follow; a leader whom I know has my back in any situation, I will follow anywhere.

As a father, I know that my children's discontent can disrupt the entire household. A constant, unaddressed discontent will only increase the discord until the crescendo becomes unbearable. I have seen this unfortunate occurrence in Marine Corps units in every loca-

counsel them, push them, or even carry them at times, but it is always worth it. I need this same attitude when my Marines are in need. This level of genuine care, exhibited rather than just spoken, goes miles in combating so many of the unsolvable problems the Marine Corps faces, and makes all the difference in an individual Marine's decision to stick around.

The Marine Corps will probably never stop asking how it can better influence retention. Therefore, we leaders of Marines are wise to ask ourselves what we can do to improve retention within our own circles of influence. My role in retention is making the Marine Corps a place Marines want to be every day by ensuring my Marines understand their role and purpose, creating a fulfilling work environment full of enthusiasm, and taking care of my Marines as though they were my own children. If every leader did that for their Marines without fail, we might imagine a perfect Marine Corps. If I, alone, do that for my Marines, I contribute to a better one—a Marine Corps where my Marines want to be.

