

# Restricted and Restrained

Applying talent management to the restricted officer community

by Capt Jason R. Tyx

In January 2014, a group of sergeants and staff noncommissioned officers shuffled into a large classroom at The Basic School (TBS). After taking their seats, one of the school's first sergeants strode to the front of the classroom, introduced himself, and clicked past the title slide. At that point, the class transformed into square pegs, thus beginning their journeys to awkwardly fit into the round hole that is the Marine officer.

Nearly 300 Marines, with experience ranging from 8 to more than 16 years, sat stunned as the first sergeant began explaining to the class the very basics of what constituted service "A," "B," and "C" uniforms for a Marine. Green blouse, khaki tie, long-sleeved khaki shirt, one-eighth of an inch.

Suddenly aware of his audience, the first sergeant sheepishly began to speed through the slides, pausing occasionally to deliver the relevant information to the Warrant Officer Basic Course students. The information had little value, but the message was clear.

This was hardly the first time that these Marines, only days away from making the transition from enlisted to officer, would be reminded that they were an afterthought—both at TBS and in the officer corps at large. The Marine Corps has consistently ignored restricted officer growth, choosing instead to force these highly specialized officers into the sidecar of unrestricted officer development. As the Marine Corps prepares for a transition to a more modernized approach to personnel, assignments, and professional development, it cannot afford to ignore the unique capabilities and corresponding needs of its restricted officer community.

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In November 2021, the Commandant of the Marine Corps released *Talent Management*.<sup>1</sup> Once its goals are realized, this watershed document will signal a wholesale change in the way the Marine Corps conducts its human resource management. Outlining a vision of substantial overhaul to enlisted and officer recruiting, retention, assignments, and career progression, *Talent Management* is silent on one key element of the Marine Corps population: restricted officers.

## **Talent Management is silent on ... restricted officers.**

The restricted officer community consists of warrant officers in the grades of warrant officer through chief warrant officer 5 and limited duty officers in the grades of captain through lieutenant colonel. Aside from their vastly different backgrounds, the primary difference between restricted and unrestricted officers is that restricted officers may only be assigned to restricted officer billets within their respective MOSs.<sup>2</sup>

After their transition and graduation from Warrant Officer Basic Course,

many warrant officers attend a follow-on MOS school while some do not. Thus ends the Marine Corps' intentional investment in the professional development of Marines to whom it entrusts many critical people and programs. While professional military education for officers—which includes Expeditionary Warfare School and Command and Staff College—offers some value to restricted officers, the opportunities for personal and professional development are few and far between.

Unrestricted officers find themselves skipping through a meadow of endless opportunity: joint billets, foreign schools, graduate education, special duty assignments, lateral moves, and many others. This is made possible because the unrestricted officer population far exceeds the needs of the FMF and supporting establishment. It is not the intent of this article to advocate for restricted officer lateral moves, placement on the drill field, or other similar outcomes. However, there is no program of any kind that allows restricted officers to attend resident graduate-level education in their technical specialties or to broaden their expertise through a tour in a billet related to, but not designated for, their primary MOS.

First, it is necessary to note that a college degree of any kind is not a requirement to become a warrant officer. It is, nonetheless, widely known that a

degree with a major related to the applicant's occupational field will make an enlisted Marine more competitive for selection. Further, many restricted officers do possess undergraduate and graduate degrees. By allowing these officers opportunities to pursue advanced education at venues such as Naval Postgraduate School, the Marine Corps would be making a tangible investment in their development.

While restricted officers can enroll in Naval Postgraduate School distance learning graduate programs, these programs require a significant investment of time on the part of the officer concerned.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, many unrestricted officers can simply attend the school and complete an advanced degree as a part of their career progression. If the Marine Corps wants its technical specialists to maintain currency and relevance within rapidly evolving competencies, it needs to commit resources to its lifelong training and educational development.

This could be accomplished with a small increase in restricted officer populations. By creating an excess restricted officer structure, these officers would be able to conduct a career-broadening or education tour. The current manpower model is comprised of a one-for-one, vacancy-based selection system that offers no flexibility in terms of assignments outside of a very strict window. While it would be foolish to assign an aviation maintenance warrant officer as a regimental gunner, opportunities do exist. A personnel officer could attend Naval Postgraduate School to earn a Master of Business Administration degree while an intelligence, communications, or meteorological and oceanographic restricted officer could rotate through an assignment as a space operations officer.

The coming changes offer the perfect opportunity to address restricted officer development. It also gives a chance to address another fundamental flaw in the existing manpower model: promotion inequity. The one-for-one, promote-to-vacancy model is archaic and does not ensure that the top-performing officers are promoted and retained. This is at loggerheads with the objectives laid out for enlisted and unrestricted officers in *Talent Management*.

The current restricted officer promotion system is simple and makes sense on its face. When an officer retires, that opens a spot for officers of junior rank and within the same MOS to fill the vacancy. However, given the extremely small population of many restricted officer communities, the outcomes are frequently suboptimal. After promotion to CWO2, which is noncompetitive, many CWOs are able to be promoted one, two, or even three more times without any competition on the selection board—often immediately upon reaching the minimum time in grade for advancement. In small fields, an enlisted career path that results in applying for the warrant officer program further along in one's service can mean being completely boxed out of the higher ranks by those who have less total time in service. Meanwhile talented, competitive officers in other MOSs are being passed over for promotion or stuck waiting for vacancies to open up. This applies equally to the LDO ranks.

One method to address this inequity is by implementing a new model, similar to unrestricted officers, that creates universal promotion systems for the CWO and LDO populations. By doing so, the Marine Corps can ensure a steady, equitable promotion flow for all restricted officers regardless of the community's population.

It is uncommon for one CWO to work directly for another, so the specific rank on the collar of the officer assigned to a given billet is not of significant consequence in this case. For example, if a community were short by one CWO5, the senior CWO4 (likely the odd officer out) would occupy that billet. The lack of CWO5 insignia would not change the experience, competence, or professional knowledge of the officer concerned. Conversely, an overage in another field would merely result in a billet being occupied by a more senior officer. This is particularly effective in the case of CWOs, all of whom are company-grade officers and all of whom would be able to compete for deserved promotions with their peers on a steady and predictable timeline. As warrant officer and LDO captain ranks are filled by accession boards and not

promotion boards, the overall health of each occupational field would not be impacted by changes to the promotion system.

By creating universal competition for promotion, the Marine Corps can eliminate the situations it currently sees wherein restricted officers—because of a lack of competition—need only meet the *fully qualified* standard for promotion as opposed to the *best-qualified* standard levied on many of their peers.<sup>4</sup> In the context of promotion selection, competition breeds strength. The restricted officer corps would be stronger, and the likelihood of retaining many of the most deserving officers—who may not have had promotion opportunities commensurate with their talent—would be greater.

With two simple changes, the Marine Corps can remove the restraints from the restricted. By investing in the most specialized and technically proficient officers in its ranks, more qualified, educated, and ready leaders can be identified, grown, developed, and retained. The timing could not be better for the Marine Corps to invest in its restricted population.

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Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Talent Management*, (Washington, DC: November 2021).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1300.8, Personnel Assignment Policy*, (Washington, DC: May 2021).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 162/22, Academic Year 2021–2022 Naval Postgraduate School Distance Learning Opportunities*, (Washington, DC: April 2022).
4. Acting Secretary of the Navy, *Precept Convening the Fiscal Year 2022 USMC Chief Warrant Officer Promotion Selection Boards*, (Washington, DC: August 2021).

