

The EAS Marine

Corps culture and its effects on retention

by Capt Yosef E. Adiputra

“Who here is planning on getting out?” asked a senior Marine officer during a small scheduled gathering at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, NC. Silence consumed the air. Heads swiveled and eyes darted all across the room. I raised my hand high, feeling confident I could answer any question regarding my plan. I scanned the room, looking for signs of support, but I was alone. Instead of constructing my next response, my mind frantically raced with thoughts of not just confusion but of shame and disloyalty. Was I really the only person adamant on transitioning? Or was there a certain stigma associated with the EAS (expiration of active service) Marine that hindered the very thought of getting out?

The Marine Corps does a phenomenal job of creating an exclusive “members-only” culture, often referred to as the “Gun Club.” While civilian employers crave the ability to create such a culture, the Marine Corps has effortlessly developed organizational cohesion, or *esprit de corps*, without the support of civilian management consultants. Take a twenty-minute drive around the town surrounding a Marine Corps base, and you will inevitably find Eagle, Globe, and Anchor bumper stickers stamped across most vehicles. The Marine Corps achieves this through personal senses of patriotic duty, exciting promises of travel, outstanding leadership, and the ever-famous GI Bill, guaranteeing those who enlist a chance to transition out with free education and opportunities for employment. You would be hard-pressed to find similar displays of company pride with employees of Walmart, the second-largest employer in the U.S. (second only to the Federal Government).



What impact can this Marine's comments have on the Marine Corps and how we view our Marines? (Photo by LCpl Sean P. Cummins.)

The Marine Corps thus does an excellent job attracting outsiders to sign up. But underneath the surface, the issue of retention and force strength has always been paramount in the eyes of the upper echelons of Marine leadership and Congress. Numerous proposals attempt to increase retention through higher incentive bonuses, better marketing campaigns, and even enacting a retirement plan that mimics the civilian 401K plan. However, these solutions are short term. In a 2010 study, researchers found that happiness increases with income, but only up to the \$75,000 annual salary.¹ The correct adage is not “Money can't buy happiness” but

rather “Money can only buy so much happiness. After that, we need to find something else.”

So, if money isn't the heart of the issue, could there be something embedded in the culture of the EAS Marine that contributes to our retention? Let's view this issue through the lens of our majority, or “working class,” which includes of our junior ranks from private to lance corporal/corporal.

After three and a half years of honorable service (for the majority of enlisted Marines), a Marine will have endured the rigors of field exercises, shop inspections, field days, working parties, and deployments. After this time, the fork in the road begins to present itself: either EAS from the current contract and use the GI Bill to pursue post-military goals, or remain with the Corps for an additional four years. It is a process that every Marine knows and understands, whether from a leadership perspective

>Capt Adiputra is the XO, H&S Battery, 2d Low Altitude Air Defense Battalion.

or a junior Marine's. But a strange yet common phenomenon begins to occur after that Marine makes his decision to depart. Those leaders who developed and mentored that EAS Marine will slowly begin to drift away from him. This sentiment can often turn into scorn and disdain, as leadership associates that Marine with such characteristics as laziness, selfishness, and detachment because of his decision to leave. The inspiration and encouragement that was once provided to that Marine is replaced with relentless orders to stand duty, serve as an "extra body" for field exercises, and perform a steady stream of menial tasks in an attempt to squeeze every last minute of his contract out of him. Over time, this antagonism begins to flow back up the chain of command, particularly to the immediate leaders such as the platoon commander or platoon sergeant, on an even more aggressive scale. And in a New York minute, a toxic climate is

born, permeating through every line of rank in the unit.

The counterargument to this is that a Marine who has made his decision to EAS will often have the full blessing of his leadership to pursue a proper transition by attending transition

Over time, this antagonism begins to flow back up the chain of command ...

readiness seminars, conducting job interviews, and developing employment opportunities. While there is certainly some merit to this claim, in reality, stories of Marines attending these seminars the month before EAS or participating in month-long field

exercises in their transition season are all too common.

Our inability to sympathize with Marines transitioning out has helped to create the veteran employment dilemmas that we often see today. The neglect we show Marines who transition will eventually resonate among companies and platoons, as horror stories from seasoned Marines are passed down to more junior Marines.

The very exclusivity that attracted Marines to join the Corps will be the same one that shuns them from their leadership after they make the decision to leave. Sometimes, we simply don't have the time to worry about the development of our EAS Marines. While there is certainly no short-term benefit in helping those who are surely leaving the organization, there is an unquestionable long-term effect in the overall organizational culture. If leaders continue the culture of disregard toward their departing members, Marines will

Female Marines

In 1918, Opha May Johnson became the first woman to serve in the Marine Corps.

100 years later...

We celebrate the accomplishments and legacy of all female Marines.

To learn more about the history of women in the Marine Corps visit :

https://www.mca-marines.org/women_Marines_100

MARINE CORPS
ASSOCIATION & FOUNDATION
EST. 1919

view this as a breakdown of leadership trust, and newly arrived Marines will have a biased, preconceived notion that the officers and SNCOs run a playbook inspired by self-interest and eventual alienation.

If you join any group of conversing Marines around a smoke pit, you will undoubtedly hear of the fallacies of the “Marine Corps system.” While the arguments seem endless, many professed problems ultimately point toward one simple solution. During my personal tour as a platoon commander, I mentored scores of Marines who all had different aspirations in either their military career or their personal lives. In one particular anecdote, a corporal reluctantly expressed his desire to EAS during a private conversation in my office. To his surprise, I spent additional time with him in preparing his résumé, researching career goals, and improving his professional credentials. This simple act of compassion radiated across the platoon, and Marines began seeing themselves as valuable assets of the unit instead of contracted government workers. This shift in perception of the Marine Corps leadership convinced not only that corporal but also nearly 40 percent of my deployment platoon to reenlist. Opponents of this investment will point to the folly of focusing our efforts and hours on those who will not provide long-term value, but a Marine who is valued on a more holistic basis



This is their last deployment. What's next for them? (Photo by LCpl Tojyea Matally.)

warfare continues to evolve, and as the needs of the Marine Corps require a more diverse skill set, we must match these needs with an equally impressive system of managing our skillful workers and the intellectual capital they may provide. Google uses the title “People Operations” to describe their human resources department, which has turned the global leader into the shining city upon a hill by which other companies measure employee climate and loyalty. By viewing our employees with more worth than a “table of organization and equipment number,” we can improve

The leaders of the Marine Corps need to re-evaluate their own people operations, which should treat Marines of all career stages (recruit, transitioning, or careerist) not simply as government property or commodity numbers but rather as the most treasured resources of an elite warfighting organization. Warren Buffet famously said that “someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.” For the Marine Corps, this proverbial shade is not only the personal and professional well-being of an individual Marine but also the lasting impacts that he will make on the institution and on the battlefield.

By viewing our employees with more worth than a “table of organization and equipment number,” we can improve not only the quality of the force but, over the long term, the retention as well.

will feel a better sense of personal responsibility and pride. This, of course, translates into better work quality, a better employee climate, and a stronger devotion to the institution.

To transform the way we view human resources, we may spend a few extra hours on our management tasks for seemingly trivial gains. But as modern

not only the quality of the force but, over the long term, the retention as well. While I absolutely agree that the Marine Corps is rooted in very different operational goals than those of Google, I refuse to believe that its system of management cannot be modernized with the same resolve and importance as our weapons and equipment.

Note

1. Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton, “High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being,” *National Center for Biotechnology Information*, (Online: September 21 2010), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>.

