

Beyond leading boots on the ground

By [Col. Charles D. Allen](#), Published: November 9

This piece is part of an [On Leadership](#) roundtable on fixes that could help attract, develop and retain better military leaders.

Senior military leaders are sometimes asked, “What keeps you awake at night?” A simple answer is the prospect of failure of the U.S. military to execute successfully the tasks the nation requires of it.

Successive service chiefs of staff have lamented the lack of senior leaders who understand how to sustain the force of today while preparing to meet the demands of the future. We need to develop officers as adept at advising on national policy and long-range military strategy as they are at leading boots on the ground. This is a point even more salient now in the face of inevitable and daunting fiscal reductions as well as ambiguous mission requirements. As a professional force, the military needs to assess whether it is properly developing its officers to be successful at these most senior levels.

A recent Army survey found that 65 percent of active-duty general officers rated personnel management as one of the Army’s worst-performing functions. From this, it’s not hard to infer that “human capital” management—with its core component, leader development—needs to be fixed.

Yet changing the “rules of the game” will meet resistance from the military bureaucracy and from those officers who were successful through the current systems. For the Army, cultures of *muddy boots*, *anti-intellectualism* and *egalitarianism* hinder the effective development of senior leaders. The *muddy boots* culture rewards troop time, rarely permits off-track assignments and results in a narrow experience base. The *anti-intellectualism* culture shows itself in the focus on warfighting competence and the disdain for intellectual pursuits, whether for self-development or toward professional military and civilian education. And the *egalitarian* culture, while essential to providing opportunity for all members, sometimes gets in the way of supporting the further development of high performers who show potential for senior leadership. I expect that similar cultural impediments exist in the other armed services, especially following a decade of deployments.

The collective U.S. military services have achieved hard-won successes over the past decade, which have provided tremendous tactical and operational experience for their officers. Nevertheless, as executive coach Marshall Goldsmith sagely quipped, “What got you here, won’t get you there”—which is to say, in this case, that some military leaders have not enjoyed similar successes at the strategic level.

Previous Secretaries of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Robert Gates have pointedly wondered about the strategic acumen of senior military leaders. This has been especially true at the political-military interface where, across our two most recent presidential administrations, three senior commanders were

relieved of their responsibilities, all related to Afghanistan. A deputy commander was also relieved just this past week. Additionally, a number of senior officers in key advisory positions have noted their own inability to engage effectively in the development of national policy and supporting military strategies.

This gets to the heart of the matter: How does the military ensure highly competent and talented leaders for its units? It needs senior leaders who are both valued by civilian leaders for their sound strategic advice and effective at managing the organizations that man, equip and train the military force. I agree with scholars Noel Tichy and Warren Bennis that the most critical competency of a senior leader is judgment—about people and strategy and crisis response. And it is our military leaders' judgments and rendered advice to senior civilians that may have the longest-ranging effects on whether our military excels at meeting the challenges of tomorrow.

Developing this leadership bench is a career-long effort that should begin before officers even enter the services. Unlike the corporate or political world, the nation cannot simply hire mid- or senior-level officers for lateral entry into the profession. They must be developed from the beginning of their service, and this development will be more effective if the military accesses officers with the right attributes from the start. This requires the armed services to establish criteria that are just as clear and rigorous for selecting individuals to attend Officer Candidate School and Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs as for selecting those to attend the service academies like West Point. Training and education during these pre-commissioning institutions lay the foundation for the qualities sought in leaders for future assignments.

The military must develop officers who not only can lead on the battlefield, but can also lead critical institutional strategies for the future. Without a doubt, tactical experience and direct leadership skills will remain essential requirements for officers. But we need to build on those skills by challenging the existing cultures and by instituting leader development programs that require advanced military and civilian education along with non-traditional assignments. That's how we'll create officers with the full range of relevant skills needed for successful senior leadership.

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