The Marine Corps can utilize a human resources tool known as talent management in order to build amphibious operations capability throughout the operating forces. Talent management is used by the corporate world to build and sustain capability while retaining and promoting expertise throughout the organization.
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FUTURE WAR PAPER

TITLE:

Talent Management: Developing Amphibious Operations Expertise within the Marine Corps

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF OPERATIONAL STUDIES

AUTHOR:

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THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE SCHOOL OF ADVANCED WARFIGHTING OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT
The Marine Corps should develop and implement a “talent management” system that builds and sustains an amphibious “qualified” force. In order to be correctly postured to meet future threats, the Marine Corps must develop and maintain a deep-seated amphibious operations expertise in order to maintain its Title 10 obligations and insure its relevance into the future. As the Marine Corps “returns” to its amphibious roots, it has found that its resident amphibious operations expertise has eroded due to sustained combat operations ashore. The Marine Corps is faced with the challenge of developing and maintaining an institutional knowledge of amphibious warfare that will continue to serve as its professional niche well into the future. It faces a paradoxical problem: How to develop amphibious operations experts (specialists) while maintaining a generalist approach? There is little doubt that the Marine Corps’ generalist approach, the career path nearly every Marine follows as he weaves in and out of the operating forces and the supporting establishment, is effective. It ensures Marines are well rounded, with operational expertise and experience that spans the MAGTF and the Marine Corps. However, this generalist approach comes at a cost, individual and institutional expertise and knowledge is lost with every rotation of personnel. The MAGTF’s resident amphibious operations expertise must be rebuilt from the ground-up after every deployment rotation. Without the ability to manage the Marine Corps’ amphibious talent, amphibious operations will continue to be played in a “pick-up game” fashion that relies on “on the job training” and gambles with the success of the mission.

Talent Management

The Marine Corps is already familiar with talent management as it applies to manpower management. A widely accepted definition of talent management within the human resources (HR) community is as follows:
Talent management is the integrated process of ensuring that an organization has a continuous supply of highly productive individuals in the right job, at the right time. Rather than a one-time event, talent management is a continuous process that plans talent needs, builds an image to attract the very best, ensures that new hires are immediately productive, helps to retain the very best, and facilitates the continuous movement of talent to where it can have the most impact within the organization. The goal of the talent management process is to increase overall workforce productivity through the improved attraction, retention, and utilization of talent.¹

Talent management first came in vogue during the 1990’s following a report by McKinsey & Company, titled *The War for Talent: Organization and Leadership Practice*.² Within the last decade the U.S. Army has developed an intensive focus on talent management, specifically focused on retaining highly qualified individuals within their officer corps and their special forces communities. Although the Marine Corps practices a number of talent management tenets, very little has been written with regard to its implications and potential.

The Marine Corps has honed its talent management procedures through the use of recruiting incentives, MOS roadmaps, the PME continuum, MOS monitors and career counselors. Many MOS’s have some form of talent management embedded within the MOS. As a personnel management function, the Marine Corps has been effective within the HR arena. Monitors, promotion and command selection boards, and non-statutory boards all strive to find the best qualified Marines for their respective positions. However, these efforts are focused on the individual Marine, rather than developing and fostering a prescribed level of expertise or talent within a unit. Herein lays the untapped potential of a talent management system- merging individual talent management practices with a focused talent development program.
There is an opportunity to cultivate Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) commanders and staff members with desirable amphibious operations expertise through the use of professional military education opportunities, operational experience management, and career progression models that will enable the MAGTF to fight more effectively in the future. By developing an amphibious operations training and education continuum, the Marine Corps could implement an effective talent development initiative that would provide a foundation for operational concepts such as Ship to Objective Maneuver (STOM) and Operational Maneuver from the Sea. Future MAGTF commanders may be selected based on these factors and other amphibious qualifiers rather than the current “one size fits all” command selection boards.

The Right Talent

The Marine Corps should borrow established human resources practices from the corporate world, specifically, those known as “talent management”. These practices and processes could be transformed in order to meet the specific demands on the Marine Corps.

Talent management is the implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, retaining and utilizing people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs.²

Different companies may not define talent the same way. The belief in talent and its impact on the bottom line are at the heart of talent management. To be effective, the talent mindset must be embedded throughout the organization, starting with the CEO. Going beyond
succession planning for top leadership positions, companies that value talent have a deep appreciation for the contribution of individuals at all levels, now and for the future. In essence, talent is the vehicle to move the organization where it wants to be. This is where the Marine Corps can best benefit from these civilian human resource practices. By recognizing that amphibious expertise is not created overnight, but rather is cultivated throughout a career; the Marine Corps can utilize talent management as a way to increase its efficacy in these operations.

The Marine Corps could implement a similar process focused on the more narrow scope of developing amphibious operation expertise. The forthcoming proposal would insure the Marine Corps has the requisite amphibious planning and command experience from which to be able to respond to any contingency requiring these unique skill sets. The Marine Corps could effectively manage its amphibious operations talent throughout its total force by directing specific education and training, experience tracking, and command opportunities to build MAGTFs around the highly qualified operating forces.

A future USMC Manning model that places increased emphasis on experience and success in previous billets could be used to put the right Marines in the right jobs. For instance, Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), and Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) commanders may be selected along the lines of having completed previous successful tours as commanders or primary staff members of units that have deployed as part of an amphibious MAGTF. Professional Military Education (PME) and specialized training and certifications could be used to complement the selection process, adding an emphasis to joint PME and experience. This solution could be implemented immediately, but in order to grow the experienced force required for this model to endure, it would have to start with
company grade officers. As company grade officers attend Career Level School and subsequent command or staff billets, those who succeed in amphibious related billets would continue to be part of the maturing population with amphibious operations experience from which O-3 through O-6 billets are selected.

In order to posture the Marine Corps to meet future demands for amphibious expertise, it must have a comprehensive campaign that maximizes the utility of training, education, and personnel management. There are scores of manpower progression models that track and predict quantities of officers and enlisted Marines for promotion, retention, and separation. These models account for the needs of the force given variables for possible environments and budgets. These manpower models, however, are out of synch with the requirement to gain efficiency and develop and sustain talent in any respective field.

Developing and sustaining a highly qualified cadre of amphibious operations qualified personnel begins with the deliberate assignment of the Marine Corps' top leaders to these key positions. A young lieutenant may be haphazardly assigned to a battalion that is scheduled to deploy with a MEU, but it is up to manpower to ensure that his experience continues to be built upon throughout his career. Demonstration of superior performance with amphibious units is one indicator of future potential in positions of greater responsibility within this arena. This operational experience should be combined with educational and training opportunities to complement future capabilities.

Typically, personnel who are assigned to units deploying with MEUs go through deliberate training during the six-month pre-deployment training period. The training offered
usually starts with basic skills and gains in complexity as the unit becomes better at operating together. The commanders and primary staff members are usually learning the techniques, tactics, and procedures along with the Marines of whom they are in charge of. This model can be liked to building the airplane as you are flying it, and often results in less than optimal performance. Furthermore, the experience that is gained during a 12-month rotation with a MEU atrophies and disintegrates upon dissolution of the task force. Marines execute their orders and move on with their careers, leaving remaining personnel in the MEU to rebuild its capabilities anew.

A manpower system that tracks and generates capability and experience could have the benefit of reducing the time required to train and deploy MEUs. No longer would the MEU be compositio of units that are relatively inexperienced in the area of amphibious operations. These units, along with their commanders and primary staff members, will have spent the majority of their careers honing their amphibious expertise. If this system were implemented, the Marine Corps could have fully qualified and capable commanders and primary staff members at every level of the MEU, from the most junior to the most senior Marine, 25 years from now. Applying this system retroactively could further reduce the projected ready date of 25 years.

Command screening boards have traditionally selected the most highly qualified officers for command. These boards typically evaluate fitness reports from previous units and assign Marines a numerical value, or a GPA, by which they are graded and ranked. Informally, the board may look at the specifics of previous assignments when looking to the future, but often the selection process is plug and play, with officers being seen as generally interchangeable. While
this approach may be seen as career broadening, it comes at the cost of gaining efficiency and maximizing the potential experience of the available officer pool.

This specialized approach could have the effect of reducing the pool of available talent and overlooking superior commanders and staff officers because they may not have had the opportunity to deploy with a MEU or in support of another amphibious operation. The establishment of recognized PME and other training opportunities that fulfill requirements for amphibious experience could mitigate this effect. Although formal PME does include some facets of amphibious planning, it is usually minimal and of insufficient depth to be of use in this circumstance. Specialized courses, akin to what is available to deploying units could further enhance amphibious operations expertise throughout the Marine Corps. Marines could self-select to train and become qualified in amphibious operations via various resident and non-resident institutions.

A lot of energy is currently going into establishing the MEBs as relevant organizations, to include achieving closer integration with Navy counterparts. Recently, 2MEB was stood up as a fully staffed headquarters rather than being composited “out of hide” from II MEF. Although they are far from a decision, MARFORPAC and PACFLT are looking at combining the staffs into a single Naval component staff; MARCENT and NAVCENT are considering it as well. In other words, a well thought out concept for aligning talent management with building amphibious warfare skills would complement innovations being considered in the operating forces. Implementing the talent management system proposed here can further reinforce these institutional moves.
The use of talent management concepts within the Marine Corps will greatly enhance the strengths of the Marine Corps as well as those of the individual Marines. Properly implemented, this system could develop the Marine Corps' amphibious capabilities in parallel with the emerging concept of Air-Sea Battle. The United States' pivot, or re-posture, to the Pacific will increase opportunities to develop amphibious expertise within the Marine Corps as well as to work with those of other services and nations. The Department of Defense will continue to look towards the Marine Corps when it comes to developing practicable doctrine and force deployment concepts. The amphibious operations capability must not atrophy under budget strains and operational tempo. As the German Army demonstrated prior to World War I and in the interim period between the wars, education, training, and organization are essential ingredients in developing capability within a financially austere environment. Effective talent management is the way to get the most bang for the buck.
Endnotes


Bibliography


