

Needed: A Better Appraisal System for Better Leaders

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There has been a palpable decline in the standards of morals, ethics and values as observed by officers in the armed forces and the bond between officers and men has weakened. This could be because officers with the requisite qualities are not adequately groomed to rise to the level of battalion commanders. The present appraisal system is largely to blame, it being based on a single Annual Confidential Report. A further drawback is that only superior officers report on a ratee. Inputs for appraisal need to be drawn from multiple sources geared towards a '360 degree evaluation'. The appraisal system should enforce accountability in officers, facilitate their continuous improvement, reward competence and sincerity, recognize efficiency, and confirm an officer's suitability for the post. It should encourage both an officer's career development as well as self-development linked to organizational goals. The system must thus evaluate both mission accomplishment and organizational development.

There has been a palpable decline in the standards of morals, ethics and values being observed by officers of the armed forces. Corruption scandals make headlines on an almost weekly basis and several fights have been reported between officers and soldiers in Army units. One outcome has been the weakening of the strong bond between the officers and the men they command—a bond that is the bedrock of the officer–man relationship. In good armies all over the world, this bond is usually strong, as the following incident from the Korean War illustrates.

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General Matthew B. Ridgeway took over command of the United States (US) Eighth Army in Korea soon after it had been beaten back to the Pusan Perimeter. His first task was to firm up the defences and restore morale. While on an inspection tour late on a cold winter evening, the General stood by the side of a dark road as a group of tired Marines went by, carrying heavy loads. One young Marine, too laden to bend down, was tripping over the laces of his boot. In the semi-darkness, he called out to the stationary group: 'Hey, will one of you SOBs tie my boot?' General Ridgeway, the Commander of the Eighth Army, knelt in the Korean mud and tied the GI's boot laces.

He did not do so for show, but because of an innate impulse to help a fighting soldier, a man in trouble who needed help. It was a soldier-to-soldier bond—no more, no less. Soldiering is first and foremost a soldier-to-soldier bond, before it is anything else. Sadly, it is a bond that has become weak today, and one of the major reasons for this is that officers with the required qualities are not being groomed to rise to the level of battalion commanders. Worse, some of the good officers are not being promoted to higher rank because of the shortcomings in the appraisal system. Also, the malaise of sycophancy has taken deep root and is leading to cut-throat competition.

The present appraisal system is tried and tested and has been functioning well, but some weaknesses have crept in. It could be said that about 80 per cent of the promotions are of competent officers and most of their peers approve of those promotions. However, about 5–10 per cent undeserving cases also manage to get promoted. And about 5–10 per cent deserving cases get left out for various reasons. But perceptions matter, and the perception among a large number of officers is that the appraisal system is not optimally structured and that promotion boards are actually rejection boards.

WEAKNESSES IN THE APPRAISAL SYSTEM

First of all, the entire appraisal system is based on a single Annual Confidential Report (ACR) every year. Quite obviously, there is inadequate periodic feedback. The ratee is not given periodic performance counselling. He is not called by the initiation officer (IO) or the reviewing officer (RO) during the year and he is seldom told about the weaknesses that he needs to rectify. If we wish to graduate to transformational leadership, periodic feedback is of critical significance.

Another major drawback is that only superior officers report on a ratee. They may sometimes miss out on certain glaring characteristics which show the ratee in poor light. And, therefore, as the appraisal system is based on reporting by superior officers only, it is conceptually an inadequate system. General Walter Umer (Retd.) had said, 'Only the led know for certain, a leader's moral courage, consideration for others and commitment to the unit above self.'¹ A superior officer may not always be as well aware as peers and subordinates. Of course, the best superior officers would be also aware, but here we are talking of the average superior officer who writes the ACR. Multi-source appraisal would provide better evaluation.

The inputs for appraisal must be from multiple sources. This is called 360° evaluation. The emphasis is on judging individual performance. And individual performance is really a reflection of the immediate goals that have been set for the ratee. For example, in counter-insurgency operations, taking stock of a unit's 'kills', terrorists apprehended, and arms recovered is usually the basis for quantitative performance, but it does a lot of damage and harm to the overall aim of fighting insurgency.

The ability to develop and nurture the organization is not being adequately assessed. The system rewards mission accomplishment at the risk of undermining the growth of the organization. It is not realized that both are equally important. 9–9 leadership on the Blake and Mouton leadership grid stands for the highest regard for mission accomplishment and the greatest respect for the welfare of individuals under command as well as for the growth of the organization. This is not being currently assessed. Therefore, the present system encourages transactional leadership rather than transformational leadership. There is a technical reporting channel and that too has major shortcomings.

WHAT SHOULD THE SYSTEM DO?

The ultimate aim of an appraisal system must be to lead to self-development that is consistent with organizational goals. The system must encourage an individual to develop himself further. The appraisal system should make officers accountable, facilitate continuous improvement, reward competence as well as sincerity, recognize efficiency, and confirm an officer's suitability for the post. This is not happening in the present system. Sometimes, people have to be reverted from appointments that have been assigned to them, particularly in places like

the Military Operations Directorate, if they are not found to be up to the mark.

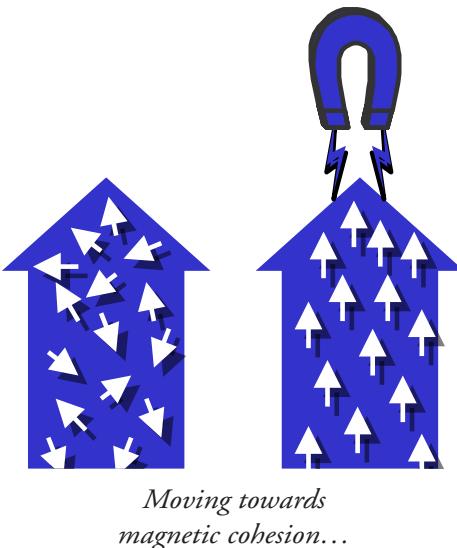


Figure 1 Is His Team Aligned?

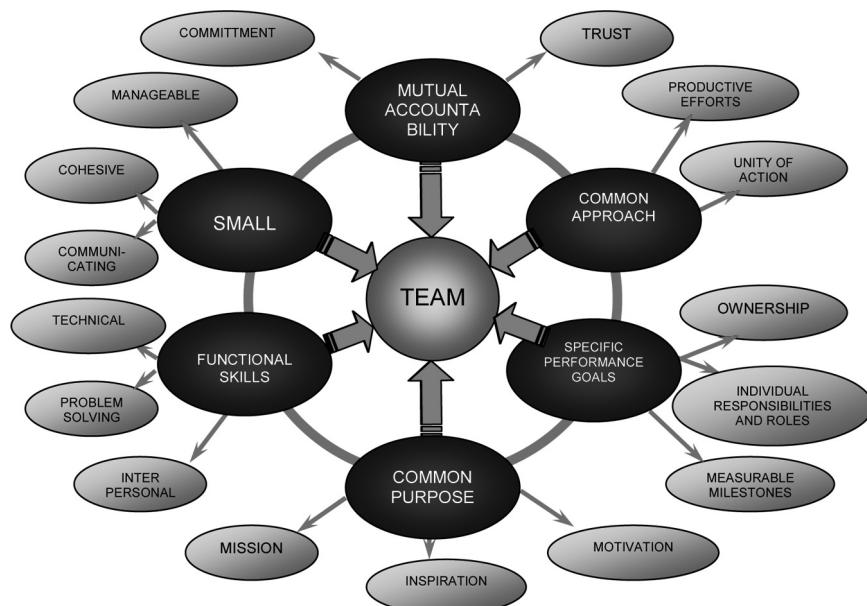


Figure 2 Team Spirit—Common Goals

The system should aim towards developing a team (see Figure 1). It should seek to assess whether an officer encourages teamwork, team spirit and team formation. It must also assess whether he encourages a move towards a magnetic cohesion in his subordinates, rather than disjointed functioning—with people pointing in different directions and working towards ends that do not contribute to a common goal. In an organisation like the army, teamwork is the key to success (Figure 2).

PRESENT ANNUAL CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

The present system of ACRs merits review. It has essentially three major parts.

1. *Personal Qualities:* The first part is the assessment of personal qualities and these are: physical attributes; drive; determination and decisiveness; dependability; moral courage; integrity; loyalty; ingenuity and initiative; maturity; tenacity; and communication skills. All of them are valid; all of them are relevant. However, integrity is rated from 1 to 9. What does it mean? That sometimes an officer exhibits integrity and sometimes he does not? This needs to be reviewed. Either an officer has integrity or he does not.
2. *Demonstrated Performance:* The next part is the assessment of demonstrated performance. The key parameters are: knowledge of own arm and other arms and services; effectiveness in training; ability to motivate; effectiveness in administration; equipment management; and dedication to the organization.
3. *Potential for Promotion:* Potential for promotion is the third part that is covered in terms of quantitative rating. The points covered under this head are: foresight and planning; delegation; vision and conceptual ability; tolerance for ambiguity; and professional competence to handle higher appointments.

The present system does not have a component of self-assessment. In the banking sector, the first part in the confidential report is: ‘What were the goals set for you during the year and how much have you achieved?’ The ratee is required to report on the goals set and his achievements. This is a good system, which the Army must study.

All the qualities assessed in the present appraisal system carry the same weightage. The ability to communicate surely cannot rate at the

same level as professional competence. So, we need to introduce a system in which appropriate weightage is assigned to the qualities being judged.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is time to make some changes in the present appraisal system so as to refine it and make it more suitable for organizational effectiveness. These changes are discussed next.

360° Appraisal System

To correctly judge the character, performance and potential of any individual, feedback should be incorporated from all concerned—superiors, peers and subordinates. To create a positive atmosphere and provide honest inputs for self-improvement for each individual, there is a requirement to have regular discussions of performance of the ratee. This is known as the 360° appraisal system and has proven advantages. It helps in identification of strengths for the development of a ratee's career and identification of weaknesses for his training and self-development or self-actualization. A well-designed performance appraisal system leads to increased motivation levels. The 360° system will not be easy to implement, but it is worth trying out. The benefits will be evident over a secular time frame.

What Should be Assessed?

More emphasis should be laid on the following qualities (see Figure 3):

1. *Professional Competence:* knowledge and application, achievement of targets and other quantifiable results.

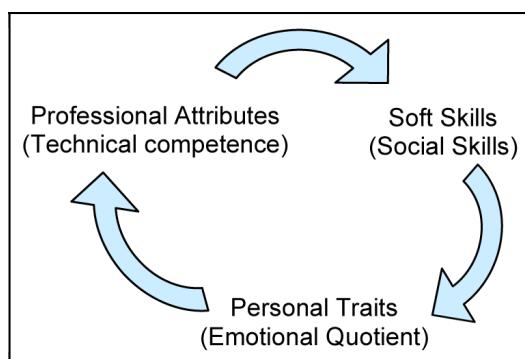


Figure 3 Key Qualities²

2. *Soft Skills*: leadership and goal clarity, relationship management and communication skills.
3. *Personal Traits*: honesty, integrity, sincerity, morality, ethical standing, etc.

Assign Appropriate Weightage

Each of the qualities and parameters assessed should be given a weightage in the order of importance. Also, appropriate weightage should be assigned to the inputs received from various assessors. This is one particular set of weightage that could be considered:

1. Reporting by superiors: 60–70 per cent weightage.
2. Reporting by peers: 10–15 per cent (but only when the officer is serving in a peer network that is at the functional level, for example, company commanders are a peer group).
3. Reporting by subordinates: 10–15 per cent.
4. Suitable weightage for self-appraisal too.
5. To reporting by customers: 5–10 per cent (in the case of services). For example, if somebody is heading a supply depot, the infantry battalion, the artillery regiment—the users dependent on the supply depot—must also be able to say whether they are satisfied with the services being provided.

Appraisal Interview

Finally, it is extremely important to conduct an appraisal interview, which should be methodical and detailed. A commanding officer, by and large, calls an officer in and tells him to sign his ACR. The officer takes, maybe, 30 seconds, signs it like a good soldier, pretends not to read or even glance at the quantitative rating and he is out, and the next officer is in. That is not a proper appraisal interview. A genuine appraisal interview should do the following: ask for self-assessment; invite participation; express appreciation; express criticism in a positive manner; seek to change behaviour, not the person; focus on solving problems; be supportive; establish goals; and follow up on day-to-day basis.

We live in an era of strategic uncertainty. We need to devise an appraisal system that avoids the promotion of undeserving cases, even if it be by a margin of 5–10 per cent, to ensure that the corresponding number of deserving candidates do not lose out on their promotion. It must also encourage organizational development as well as an officer's

career development. We must evaluate both mission accomplishment and organizational development. We also need to encourage self-development. We can do this only through the introduction of a 360° system for evaluation and assessment, which should go on the year round.

However, the appraisal system must not curb an officer's zest for life. As Field Marshal Manekshaw said: 'The man who neither drinks, nor smokes, nor dances, nor philanders, who preaches and occasionally practices temperance, piety and celibacy, is either a Saint or a Mahatma—or, more likely, a humbug. But, he will certainly not make a leader.'

NOTES

1. Thompson, Mark, 'Evaluating Army Officers, Top to Bottom', *Time*, 22 September 2011, available at <http://nation.time.com/2011/09/22/evaluating-army-officers-top-to-bottom/>, accessed on 25 February 2013.
2. Matthew, Sibichen K., 'Performance Appraisal System: An Action Plan', available at <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/19733280/Performance-Appraisal-System-An-Action-Plan-Dr-Sibichen-K-Mathew-IRS-pas-dar-sibichen-4-08-My-presentation-is-based-on-the-following-%E2%80%A2-Performance-ap>, accessed on 18 February 2013.