

THE ARMY'S NFL COMBINE: THE BATTALION COMMANDER ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Everett Spain | January 12, 2020



What is the best way to select the US Army's future battalion commanders? The Army Talent Management Task Force (ATMTF) has spent the past two years actively studying this critical question. In the fall of 2019, Army senior leaders directed that the highest rated officers from the recently concluded fiscal year (FY) 2021 lieutenant colonel command/key billet selection board participate in the Battalion Commander Assessment Program (BCAP), scheduled for several four-day periods across January–February 2020. The BCAP will refine the results of the traditional battalion command board by further assessing each officer's readiness for command and strategic potential to better determine who will be the primary selectees for command, who will be the alternates, and who should not command at all.

If done well, the BCAP will have three major effects on the Army. First, it will help identify toxic leaders and screen them from command. Second, it will allow for officers who are the most deserving of command, but did not make it to the top of the selection board results, to be placed into command. Finally, it will change the culture of the Army officer corps to one that deeply values the abilities most needed by tomorrow's strategic leaders, such as critical and

innovative thinking, effective oral and written communication, strategic temperament, and an authentic respect for subordinates and peers.

The BCAP is just one of several of the ATMTF's and Army G-1's ongoing and planned human-resource initiatives. Collectively, these programs make up what may be the [most comprehensive talent-management transformation](#) in the modern history of US government organizations.

The Importance of Getting It Right

The success or failure of the US Army has existential consequences for the survival of our nation and freedom around the globe. With the coming preeminence of technology, rapid urbanization, rise of nonstate actors, shifting alliances, and demographic shifts, the world is changing—often in ways we cannot predict—which will only require more from our Army.

Since leadership drives organizational success, we must ensure our Army's senior leaders are our best possible people to meet these challenges. And because the only participants eligible to become generals are colonels who have successfully navigated every step of the promotion ladder throughout their careers, we should do everything we can to promote and select officers with strategic potential. The selection for battalion command may be the key moment to do this, as battalion commanders are the Army's first centrally selected commanders and lead our foundational deployed task forces. Moreover, since close to 90 percent of general officers were former battalion commanders, the battalion command board is implicitly building the bench of our future generals.

The US Army has selected its battalion commanders in the exact same way since the 1980s, when a process was put in place to replace a nepotistic system where brigade commanders and general officers selected their own battalion commanders. The current system was created to facilitate meritocracy and fairness across the Army. In it, senior officers convene under the authority of the Secretary of the Army to review the performance records (primarily officer evaluation reports) of all eligible officers to choose the highest performers for command. This centralized selection board has generally served the Army well, choosing the officers who led the US Army to success in Panama, Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

Yet the current battalion command selection process has also shown signs of weaknesses. Army leader performance has had mixed reviews with Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Some toxic leaders still slip through the cracks and are put into command. Some great officers are not selected, perhaps due to conflicts with a senior rater or being a part of an overly competitive rating pool. And selection board members, as humans, are at risk of looking for the same experiences and knowledge, skills, and behaviors (or KSBs, attributes that combine to form [the way the Army conceptualizes talent](#)) that made them successful in the past instead of seeking the experiences and KSBs that are likely to be most needed in the future.

To optimally design the BCAP, the ATMTF sought out best practices from military, government, and private sources. Some of the Army organizations it closely collaborated with include the Army Research Institute, Center for the Army Profession and Learning, Asymmetric Warfare Group, Army War College, United States Military Academy (Department of Behavioral Sciences & Leadership and Office of Economic & Manpower Analysis), 75th Ranger Regiment, Human Resources Command, and others. The result is the four-day BCAP.

Proof of Concept

To test the BCAP, the ATMTF planned and hosted two iterative pilots in June and July 2019 at Fort Benning, Georgia. To test a manageable population, all twenty-seven of the infantry and armor branch alternates from the FY 2020 battalion command lists were invited to a participate. Twenty-three of them committed to attend one of the two pilots. The July pilot also included four primary selectees who willingly participated in the BCAP to simply serve as a comparison group to help the ATMTF calibrate the assessments.

Approximately six weeks prior to the scheduled date of the first pilot BCAP, the ATMTF asked Human Resources Command to identify current and former peers and subordinates of the participating officers. The ATMTF then reached out to those peers and subordinates and asked them to share feedback on each participant.

Shortly after arriving at Fort Benning, the candidates took an Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT), including height and weight check. Later, to observe them leading and working with others, the officers were organized in small groups to negotiate several lanes of Fort Benning's

Leader Reaction Course, where each candidate was closely observed while in both leadership and followership positions.

Over the course of the week the participants completed several nonphysical assessments designed to help assess readiness for battalion command and strategic potential. Some of the areas explored included cognitive ability, creative-thinking ability, written-communication ability, oral-communication ability, and strategic temperament. The participants also participated in several psychological evaluations and spent time one-on-one with operational psychologists, most of whom had significant experience screening personnel for military organizations with assessment and selection programs.

The culminating event for each participant was going before a blind panel interview, where the participant was separated from the panelists with a visual barrier designed to reduce potential biases of the panel members. The panelists, general officers and former or current brigade-level commanders, were all given the information about each participant's assessment and performance during the week, as well as the peer and subordinate feedback, but were intentionally not given any personally identifiable information about the participants, such as their officer evaluation reports, officer record briefs, previous assignments, or photos. Participants were instructed to do their best not to share any information that would identify them, such as specific names, units, duty stations, or deployment locations. The panel members started each interview with the assumption that the candidate had the background and ability to serve as a successful battalion commander, since each had already been board selected as an alternate for command. To help provide a more comprehensive perspective on each candidate's potential, the ATMTF asked several recent company commanders and command sergeants major to sit in on each candidate's panel interview and, following it, to share what they thought it would be like working for that candidate if he was a battalion commander.

For the first portion of the panel interview, the general officers asked the participants the same series of structured questions designed to highlight the officer as a person and leader. For the second portion of the interview, the panel asked questions to further explore the candidate's specific strengths or potential risks that were illuminated during the previous events of the

BCAP. At the conclusion of each interview, after receiving feedback from the recent company commanders and command sergeants major, each panel member individually submitted an evaluation of the candidate, including a determination of the candidate's readiness for command, or lack thereof.

The panel interview culminated the BCAP assessments. Following the panel interview and the cumulative scoring of the assessments, the participants were ranked in order-of-merit, by branch.

The Results

The results of the two pilot BCAPs were significant. Several participants failed the APFT or height and weight test, while others were very fit. Many displayed great teamwork and ability to inspire, while others displayed the potential for toxic leadership. Most showed they were thoughtful leaders, while some presented risks of being oppressive workaholics or overly passive. The recent company commanders and sergeants major said they would be honored to work for many of the participants and expressed deep caution about working for others. And perhaps most significantly, the participants demonstrated widely varying propensities to be the future strategic leaders needed to successfully lead the Army's formations in a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous (VUCA) and joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) operating environment. After final scoring, the average of the twenty-three participants moved eight spots (up or down) compared to his original ranking from the selection board. This implies that if the BCAP process was applied to an order-of-merit list that included a rank-ordered, combined list of what would have been formerly considered as primary and alternate selects, a significant number of alternates would become primaries, and a significant number of primaries would become alternates. As predicted, a small number of candidates were identified by the pilot BCAPs as officers who should not command at the battalion level.

During their in-person individual exit briefs, the pilot BCAP participants uniformly articulated that they felt it was an improved process of selection, even though they did not know how the results affected their individual position on the alternate command list. And almost all participants expressed how they believed that the BCAP process was developmental for them, especially the time they spent with the operational psychologists, the feedback provided by the

general officers, and the exit interview. Each of the panelists who participated also articulated a similar positive opinion of the process. Though this positive feedback is very encouraging, future iterations should also ask for anonymous written feedback. Even though the scoring is completed before the exit interviews, the candidates may not yet feel free to bring up constructive criticism without a perceived risk of hurting their chances for selection.

Risks and Challenges

Of course, implementing the BCAP Army-wide has risks. A foundational one is that the BCAP's success relies on the validity of the relevant data the BCAP provides. More specifically, are we confident that we can identify the KSBs that most robustly demonstrate readiness for battalion command and strategic potential? And, if we can accurately specify the important KSBs, how do we design assessments to reliably measure them? With an ever-changing world, both of these tasks—identifying the right KSBs and assessing potential commanders based on them—will need to be more of an ongoing, iterative, and disciplined process than a big decision at a single moment in time. Otherwise, we will soon just have another outdated selection system on our hands.

A related challenge is how to test the candidates for character. Who each officer “is” is at least as important as what the officer “knows” or “does.” This is especially true when considering our VUCA and JIIM future world. The peer and subordinate feedback currently serve as BCAP's largest window into a candidate's character, but there is still room to develop additional written or practical exercises to better assess the character identity of our officers vying for command.

A third key challenge for successfully implementing the BCAP is balancing the competing needs of transparency and security. The more the ATMTF can share about the BCAP with the force and BCAP participants, the more trust will be facilitated and the more effective the BCAP will become. At the same time, the participants, cadre, and panelists must be sure not to share the confidential parts of the BCAP (such as the specific questions in the instruments). This is to ensure future participants are assessed as accurately as possible without anyone having an unfair advantage. Instruments and surveys will need to be regularly updated so as not to become compromised.

A fourth challenge is that the confidentiality of the selection board's initial order-of-merit ranking of the candidates (which was previously known as the combined primary and alternate lists) will need to remain tightly controlled, even with regards to the Army's most senior officers. If those lists are compromised, officers the board initially ranked near the top could be incentivized to avoid coming to the BCAP, and their senior-officer mentors could reinforce this information edge by certifying them as "too indispensable" to whatever is going on in their unit at the time to take the time to participate in the BCAP. Unfortunately, the most recent command list that is sourcing the BCAP participants is already leaking. Just a few months ago, in early October 2019, a mentee of mine was called by a captain, who worked for a high ranking general, who informed my mentee that he was on the primary tactical command list (which has not been released). This leaked information could be problematic.

A fifth challenge is ensuring fairness. In accordance with the chief of staff of the Army's priority of building and leveraging an inclusive force, the ATMTF is sensitive to creating a BCAP that does not unfairly advantage or disadvantage any demographic group. In the pilot BCAPs, officers from historically underrepresented ethnic minority groups, on average, experienced similar or more positive outcomes than majority group participants. Even though this is encouraging, the ATMTF is looking at additional methods to monitor and ensure fairness across demographic groups with the BCAPs going forward.

A sixth challenge is in the scale and consistency of implementation. Transitioning from fifteen or fewer officers in each of the BCAP pilots to assessing more than eight hundred officers over three and a half continuous weeks just six months later is a tall order, but the senior Army leaders have directed that it be resourced and executed to the highest standard. In early December, the ATMTF, with several Army commands providing additional manpower and expertise, conducted a full BCAP walk-through for several senior Army leaders at Fort Knox. The ATMTF is currently conducting final dress rehearsals and stress testing the BCAP process.

A final challenge is in the overall value-proposition of implementing BCAP in addition to the existing selection board process. Is the moderate reordering of the command list worth the significant effort and time to lead the BCAP? Some will argue that the extra effort is worth it

simply because it will likely prevent toxic and unqualified leaders from receiving battalion command. Just one of those can significantly damage an Army unit and its people—ask someone who has served under a toxic or incompetent leader. An even stronger argument is that the BCAP will be worth it due to the subsequent culture change it will cause across our officer corps. Perhaps in the future the Army could develop synergies by integrating the battalion command board, the BCAP, and pre-command courses into a combined event.

The ATMTF is actively working on assessing and addressing each of these and additional challenges, including updating the planned January-February BCAP with the numerous lessons learned from the summer 2019 pilots. In the longer term, since the ATMTF is not designed to be an execution force, Army senior leaders directed the ATMTF work with TRADOC to transition the propensity of out-year BCAPs (post-2020) to the US Army Cadet Command.

A Parallel Focus on Leader Development

Knowing that a fully implemented BCAP will capture the attention of the eight hundred highest-quality officers across each year group, the BCAP should not miss the opportunity to deliberately develop those same participants. One example of this was formalized during the second pilot iteration. After hosting the panel interview and submitting their individual evaluations of a candidate, the general officers went into developmental mode. They openly discussed each candidate with the intent of collectively identifying three of the candidate's notable leadership strengths and three opportunities for improvement. With this developmental focus, the BCAP team shared these six areas with each participant during his individual exit brief. To further incentivize development and to acknowledge the reality that officers should and can learn and grow, participants who are not identified as primary command selectees in a BCAP will likely be allowed to again compete in the following year's BCAP.

Looking deeper into the developmental lens, additional opportunities exist. Perhaps after the BCAP, the newly reordered primary selectees and the highest two to three alternate selectees should be assigned Army-funded professional coaches for a period of six months to work on expanding the selectees' strengths and improving their weaknesses. And with the Army's acknowledgement of the stress on senior leaders and need to build the resiliency of the force, all

of these officers could be sent to participate in a two-week comprehensive health assessment (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual).

Active compassion will also be important. The day the BCAP results are announced, and for some time afterwards, Army leaders at all levels should go out of their way to support and validate those identified as alternates. Due to their increased investment into the selection process, many of the BCAP participants will develop an even increased desire to command. Some alternates will take the news in stride. Others will be deeply frustrated and confused. Many spouses will rightfully share in these emotions. Army leaders and peers should be ready to validate these tremendous officers and continue to actively invest in their development.

Impact on Army Culture

It is clear that the BCAP will fine-tune who gets command and who does not, likely in overall positive ways. Much more importantly, it will send unmistakable signals to the Army officer corps that certain knowledge, skills, and behaviors, such as written and oral communication skills, propensity for critical and innovative thinking, physical fitness, and peer and subordinate perspectives are important to the Army. The ATMTF has wisely made the decision to share as many of the assessment scoring rubrics as possible with the force. This will likely result in brigade and battalion commanders organizing professional-development opportunities for their officers on effective writing, building high-performance but caring cultures, catalyzing innovation, public speaking, critical thinking, etc. Also, as goal-oriented people, field-grade officers will now be incentivized to actively prepare for the BCAP, hoping to increase their chances of selection, by maintaining their fitness and building their strategic abilities. And our Army will be better off for it, because the knowledge, skills, and behaviors our officers will be incentivized to practice will be the same knowledge, skills, and behaviors our Army leaders of the future will most need.

Some of this is culture change is already happening. As of early January 2020, approximately 70 percent of the BCAP cadre's request for over ten thousand peer and subordinate feedback surveys on the eight hundred projected BCAP 2020 participants have already been answered. When compared to the response rate for most Army surveys, which the BCAP

director of assessments has noted is typically around 11–13 percent, this is an incredible signal of the strong desire of peers and subordinates to be an active part of the Army’s decision of to whom to grant the privilege of command. And as we get closer to the first full cohort’s BCAP participation, this percentage of respondents is only increasing. Additionally, almost all BCAP 2020 invitees have confirmed their pending attendance, so the fear of officers attempting to game the system by finding reasons to not attend the BCAP seems generally unfounded. On the contrary, this initial signal indicates that both the projected participants and their senior-officer sponsors are embracing and participating in the change in the way the Army selects battalion commanders. Of course, what will be more telling is the reaction of the participants (and their senior-officer sponsors) to who the BCAP determines will be designated alternates for command.

Looking Ahead

If the BCAP significantly improves the selection of battalion commanders, should the Army implement a similar process for other key selections, such as selections for sergeant major and command sergeant major, brigade command, and brigadier general? Army senior leaders are currently considering these options, and the ATMTF is in the initial stages of planning for a potential colonels’ commander assessment program.

The BCAP is just a part of one of the most comprehensive talent-management transformations in the modern history of large government organizations. Some of the other initiatives the ATMTF and Army G-1 are exploring (with several already employed and others in or nearing the pilot stage) include incentivizing the retention of high-quality officers, encouraging cadets and officer candidates to pursue STEM degrees, merit-based promotions, brevet promotions tied to select jobs, directly commissioning specially talented civilians as O-4s/O-5s/O-6s, assignments driven through a talent marketplace (Army Talent Alignment Process, AIM 2.0), improving joint service and industry outreach, integrating the analysis of big data into talent management, allowing for temporary promotions for officers who enter certain high-need positions, providing graduate-school readiness testing early in officer careers, and delegating authorities for officer management to lower levels (such as officer separations). While developing each of these future programs, the ATMTF is dedicated to minimizing the negative effects of the officer corps’

culture of egalitarianism while maintaining the dignity and innate value of each individual officer as a person and leader.

If we were to take ten current Army leaders at any level and ask them about the value and urgency of pursuing each of the above ideas, we would find ten different opinions. As they should, many would point out potential challenges with implementing each one. Others will say that the Army is moving too fast. But few will argue that the collective intent of these policies—to significantly improve how the Army manages its talent—is off target. When looking through MIT organizational theorist Edgar Schein’s framework for changing culture, we are reminded that the more levers an organization can simultaneously pull to influence change, the higher its chance of success. In short, changing many things at once increases a bureaucracy’s likelihood of enabling lasting organization change, while incremental changes typically have little effect.

At its core, the ATMTF is pushing the bounds of traditional Army culture by challenging the promotion process that selected the Army’s current general officers. Students of organizational change will tell you that is a suicidal mission. But, to their credit, the Army’s most senior leaders have, at best, been highly supportive of these efforts towards reforming the Army’s talent management processes, and, at worst, not been overly resistant to its potential. This cognitive dissonance might only be explained by recognizing that the Army’s current promotion and selection system has at least one key characteristic that the BCAP should strive to maintain—that it selects leaders with enough humility to support a process that, if implemented years ago, may not have selected them. And like selfless parents wanting their children to be better, yet different, versions of themselves, most of our Army’s senior officers are embracing the Army’s ongoing talent management transformation, knowing that even though it is not perfect, it is well worth implementing and continuing to improve.

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