
Developing an Engineer Leader Technical Competency Strategy:

Accessing, Developing, Employing, and Retaining Talent

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The Engineer Leader Technical Competency (ELTC) Strategy must embody a holistic approach that accesses, develops, employs, and retains talent matched to engineer objectives. Military career paths, with their associated rank structure and progression, inhibit entry of talent from the civilian sector. Consequently, the Engineer Regiment can only develop, employ, and retain the talent that it initially accesses.

Where the Regiment lacks scope to selectively retain and advance talented leaders, it will incur higher costs for leader development and risks associated with unfit talent. Perhaps even more central to the ELTC Strategy, efforts must begin to match competency requirements to individual competencies. In so doing, the Regiment will move beyond assignment management and into talent management. By placing the right leader in the right job at the right time, the Regiment stands to reap benefits not only with operational efficiency but also in its ability to access, retain, and develop talent. Thus, accessions, development, employment, and retention of talent are interdependent processes that must be addressed holistically.

To create an ELTC Strategy, senior leaders must agree upon their strategic objectives. A review of recent officer accessions guidance reveals that only quantities were discussed; guidance omitted accession objectives with regard to officer competencies, abilities, or aptitudes. Even though objectives for such qualities are not explicitly set out in official accessions policy, they have gained increased prominence as leader development imperatives. More specifically, senior leaders have expressed qualitative requirements using such terms as “pentathlete” or “adaptive” leaders. The originators of the pentathlete term envisioned leaders who embody a range of competencies beyond those narrowly associated with combat operations.

By expressing the need for leaders with increased technical competencies and aptitudes for rapid learning and adaptation, senior leaders are in fact articulating the objectives for an ELTC Strategy. In essence, those who have skills beyond traditional combat objectives—the ability to quickly discern patterns of activity within new situations and conceive alternatives to address situations for which they have never been specifically trained—are exactly the demands of senior Army leaders. To allow requirements for specific competencies to evolve over time, we simply refer to these requisite skills as “talent.”

Central to underpinning an all-encompassing strategy, the Regiment must build adaptability into its talent management organizations and processes. In other words, rather than relying solely upon a leader’s capacity to adapt, the Regiment must embrace organizational adaptability. Such an approach provides

greater depth in technical engineering competencies. For example, a strategy with the objective of producing adaptive individuals without an adaptable organizational structure is likely to result in personnel who are an inch deep and a mile wide. Few individuals have the aptitude to achieve expertise in multiple fields. However, by allowing engineers to specialize in a few areas of expertise and by building adaptable organizations that can employ the right talent to the right job at the right time, the Regiment can achieve a pentathlete capability but with much greater depth in competencies.

This is not to say that the Army does not also need adaptable leaders. Rather, the object of the ELTC Strategy should be a distribution of talent and a management system that can employ talent effectively.

Specifically for the officer corps, a focus on talent management reinforces development and retention programs in at least two ways. First, developmental assignments improve officer competencies gained during precommissioning education, postcommissioning institutional training, and advanced civil education. Second, achieving a close match between officer interests, competencies, and utilization directly improves officer career satisfaction and success, which sets the conditions to garner extended service among high-potential leaders. Thus, increased capacity to employ officer talent should serve as the capstone to access, develop, and retain high-potential, high-performance leaders.

Given the foregoing, an effective ELTC Strategy will recognize the interdependency of accessing, developing, employing, and retaining talent. The strategy must acknowledge the need for organizational adaptability to foster and benefit from depth in leaders’ competencies. Finally, to make the strategy timeless, it must allow the attributes that define talent over time. In so doing, the strategy will leverage resources, policies, and organizations to achieve the objective of employing the right talent in the right job at the right time to meet future requirements. 

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