

Improving Retention within the Organization

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Improving Retention within the Organization

An organization's ability to acquire and retain talent is a vital function that facilitates the achievement of organizational goals. Increased opportunities for Soldiers in the civilian job market have challenged Army senior leaders to find ways to attract talented individuals and continue their service. Army leaders at all levels are responsible for setting conditions that promote cohesion and foster commitment. Embodying these tenants, which are rooted in trust, is essential to encourage Soldiers to remain a part of the team. However, senior leaders must consider each leadership level and how to implement changes to cultivate prime conditions that advocate retention methodically. Applying specific initiatives at various levels will contribute to military senior leaders improving retention within their respective organizations. Senior leaders can improve the retention of Soldiers within their organizations by enhancing leader development programs, incentivizing, and promoting continued service, and adequately utilizing talent management.

Enhance Leader Development Programs

Senior leaders improve retention by enhancing leader development programs at various echelons involving the unit, organizational, and strategic levels. However, the quality of the organization's leaders plays a monumental role of the units' retention program. A successful retention program can be directly linked to the quality of leadership embodied by all leaders, which includes commanders and noncommissioned officers.¹

Soldiers will actively seek out quality leaders for mentorship on different topics, which builds trust and cohesion within the unit. For instance, leaders can create initiatives, such as male or female mentorship programs, which will forge strong bonds between individuals. Over 27 percent of Soldiers leave the Army due to the effects of their service has on Family well-being.² Positive relationships foster confidence between personnel and provides a dynamic that allows individuals to learn and grow. These are key ingredients for increasing the efficacy of an organization's retention program. Leader education concurrently works to reinforce fundamental leadership skills and advance this success. The cornerstone of developing quality leadership skills in individuals is through development programs, notably at the unit level.

Unit Level

Senior leaders improve retention through robust leader development programs specifically adapted to Soldiers at the unit level. Unit level leadership typically occurs at the company echelon or below and involves face-to-face interactions to cultivate mentorship.³ For instance, the First Sergeant has direct influence over Soldiers within the company due to their ability to visually watch performance. The ability to directly observe a Soldier's performance allows leaders at this level to provide instantaneous constructive feedback. Having a close vantage point to view performance at this proximity supplies invaluable content to fuel an applicable leader development program at the unit level. Therefore, leader development programs conducted at the unit level must comprise of training that is relevant to Soldiers at this level.

Developing positive leadership skills in supervisors creates organizations that individuals want to be a part of. Leader development programs enhance a noncommissioned officer's (NCO's) ability to provide sound advice to their officer counterpart, while simultaneously making decisions to support the commander's intent.⁴ Company level officers would benefit more if their subordinate leaders received developmental training geared toward unit level operations. For example, junior NCOs should receive developmental training on Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Training*, June 2021, and the 8-step training model to better develop squad and team training. The company benefits from the NCOs being better trainers and increases the quality of training. These leader development program initiatives do not tie directly into the retention program; however, they produce adaptable and agile leaders capable of operating independently. Therefore, it can be assumed that enthusiasm for continued service strengthens the retention program and augments the leader development programs at the organizational level.

Organizational Level

Senior leaders improve retention through enhancing leader development programs at the organizational level. The major differences between the organizational level and direct level are that organizational leaders exercise leadership through subordinate leaders and hold the added responsibility to create a climate ideal for subordinate units.⁵ For example, the Command Sergeant Major exerts leadership through their First Sergeants, which cascades down to the first-line leaders within the organization. It is important to highlight the span of influence individuals have at this position, because of the potential impact they might have throughout the organization. Leaders at this level must be able to communicate their vision, while adequately managing short-term and long-term benefits.⁶ Therefore, organizational leaders must conduct training on creating cohesive teams, enhancing leadership competencies, and imparting retention program related concepts.

Organizational leaders cultivate a positive climate holistically by establishing effective teamwork among organization members, which manifests in retention success. Consequently, they must thoroughly understand their organization to create leader development programs that address knowledge gaps and correspond with retention principles to create strong teams. Team building is a credibly reliable approach to creating strong cohesiveness among organizational members and is implemented through multiple methods during training.⁷ For instance, conducting a team building exercise that stimulates dialogue and collaboration effectively generates conversation within the group. The exercise can connect with training on developing trust between subordinates, and then tie it with retention related information. The result is direct level leadership having an expanded view into organizational level practices and supporting a desired positive climate. Organizational leaders can also incorporate training solely focused on the retention program to educate leaders within the unit.

Integrating retention training into the organizational level leader development program is vital to enhancing a unit's retention program and educating subordinate leaders. Not only is it a requirement for the units' career counselor to provide training to subordinate retention personnel, but career counselors train leaders on the retention program.⁸ It is important that organizational leaders and their career counselors collaborate on topics that would be relevant to the organization, and that would have the greatest efficacy on retention. For example, career counselors can conduct training on the enlisted promotion

system and how these considerations may affect their ability to reenlist, or what options might be available. Leveraging the career counselor's expert technical knowledge helps organizational leaders to cultivate a positive climate that emphasizes an individual's personal and professional growth. Understanding the influence these practices have on a Soldier's decision to reenlist help senior leaders improve retention by enhancing leader development programs at the strategic level.

Strategic Level

Senior leaders improve retention through enhancing leader development in programs at the strategic level. Decisions made at the strategic level have huge implications and a wider impact than at the organizational level. At the strategic level, leaders influence thousands of organizational members through methods, such as policy and directives, to shape their enterprise for present and future requirements.⁹ For example, strategic leaders might include added training for Soldiers throughout their command in a certain military occupational specialty (MOS) to develop a crucial capability for forthcoming operations. This demands that strategic leaders exude a heightened sense of foresight and intuition to realize current needs to deliver future readiness. Training at this level must align with long-term strategic approaches and potentially involve many different stakeholders to produce the desired results.¹⁰ For example, launching online based training, such as through the Army Learning Management System (ALMS), might require external entities to aid in developing and supporting the platform. Collaboration with external entities helps to support operationalizing these goals throughout the enterprise. Keeping this in mind, strategic leaders can integrate retention concepts into their long-term initiatives through leader development program policies.

Senior leaders at the strategic level have an intricate role in integrating retention training into long-term initiatives and reinforcing it through leader development programs. Strategic leaders, including commanders of Army commands, must ensure career counselors are part of subordinate units' task organization and distribute sufficient resources to support quality training.¹¹ Assuring that strategic leaders assign a career counselor to every battalion-level or higher unit would be a huge advantage for the enterprise to mitigate turnover. It would support the organizational level leader's ability to use them in their leader development programs, which would greatly influence direct level leaders' performance. Strategic leaders shape the culture within their commands through instilled values, which impacts organizational performance.¹² However, strategic level leaders must support resourcing career counselors. Resources will enhance their ability to connect with subordinate leaders and add value to their leader development programs. These resources include access to several human resource systems and other technological tools to boost the quality of training that career counselors can provide to their organization. Therefore, leader development programs for leaders have a substantial influence on the retention program and a Soldiers desire for continued service.

Incentivize and Promote Continued Service

Improving retention requires senior leaders to incentivize and promote continued service at the direct, organizational, and strategic leadership levels. An organization's ability to stimulate practices that increase an individual's motivation directly impacts its retention program's effectiveness, which influences organizational performance and reduces turnover by over one percent.¹³ Methods of increasing motivation to promote continued

service can include tangible rewards, public acknowledgement, or an increase in benefits. Incentives help the commander's ability to exceed their retention mission categories.¹⁴ Dedication to incorporating these methods proves considerably effective within the organization. However, implementation must correspond with functions indicative of each echelon of leadership.

Direct Leadership Level

At the direct leadership level, leaders can improve retention through rewards and publicized ceremonies. The Army retention program currently requires each commander to have their own independent retention incentive policy and mandates that officers verbally administer the oath of reenlistment to Soldiers.¹⁵ For instance, retention policy letters can have initiatives, such as time off or exemptions from internal duty-type rosters. However, these policy letters must include things company commanders can realistically support. Failure to honor these incentives will erode the Soldiers' trust. Furthermore, public display of reenlistment ceremonies greatly assists with direct level retention programs and inspires individuals throughout the organizational level.

Organizational Leadership Level

At the organizational leadership level, leaders improve retention through equal personal and professional development incentives. Equity theory illustrates the correlation between inputs individuals made into an organization, such as their effort or competencies, and the resulted outcome (Ramlall, 2004).¹⁶ For example, there would be conflict if an overperformer was awarded an accolade of less merit than somebody who underperformed in an organization. The overperformer would perceive this as a disproportioned reward system. Fairness and equality within an organization is pivotal to creating a healthy climate. Fairness and morale are reasons that account for over 42% of Soldiers that chose to leave the Army.¹⁷ It is imperative that quality performance is rewarded, while maintaining an atmosphere that allows underperformers to realign their efforts and improve behaviors.

Strategic Leadership Level

Improving retention at the strategic level requires leaders to reform current monetary compensation benefits to mitigate immense human capital costs. Employee turnover in private sector companies accounts for much of their direct and indirect costs, which has significant economic consequences.¹⁸ Therefore, it is more sensible fiscally to invest more resources in current employees, than in new employees. Strategic leaders can create policies that align with the enterprise's long-term goals, and monetarily compensate individuals who possess or pursue those qualifications. For example, a retention bonus specifically offered to Soldiers who have a college degree would compensate an individual for their education and champion the initiative to create an educated force. Other types of annual bonuses or retention bonuses could be created to align with organizational goals and aid in keeping talented Soldiers in the Army. This would motivate the workforce by producing a willingness to work hard through committed behavior and attributes.¹⁹ These characteristics would then perfectly align with the methodology and practice of talent management within the Army.

Utilize Talent Management

Senior leaders within the Army must adequately utilize talent management at the direct, organizational, and strategic levels. Talent management in the Army is much more than leaders giving important tasks to their high-performing subordinates to complete accurately. The basis of talent management is facilitating an organization's ability to attract and retain talent through programs that align with their holistic goals and strategies.²⁰ For example, an organization can invest in allowing their personnel to attend specific professional development courses. Corporate leaders offer these training courses to entice individuals to stay on the team and to enhance the organizations' ability to achieve specified long-term strategic goals. Properly leveraging these opportunities not only assist organizations to acquire talent, but it improves their retention program to sustain a talented workforce.

The Army takes a similar stance on how talent management harmonizes with leader development. The Army defines talent management as a career-long process that focuses on training, education, and experience that Soldiers gain within the operational domain.²¹ The method of how each level supports talent management will affect the quality of their retention program. Over 21% of Soldiers left the Army in 2023, because of lack of fulfillment at work and inability to affect their next position.²² How leaders exercise talent management at each level differs vastly from one another. The direct level is the foundation where proper talent management use by leaders becomes paramount.

Direct Level

All leaders within the Army must adequately utilize talent management at the direct level by resourcing individuals with skills that enable them to expertly solve simple problems. Building confidence and teaching goal setting skills helps to enhance critical thinking patterns and sustain behaviors that work towards achieving meaningful objectives.²³ Early development of junior Soldiers' critical thinking, such as applying skills in practical exercises, will enable them to focus more on generating solutions and boost performance. Empowering these group of Soldiers will result in more talented individuals that can be adaptive and dynamic in other roles, which will then lead to increased retainability and unit success. However, organizational level implementation must consider other factors to effectively exercise talent management.

Organizational Level

Senior leaders adequately utilize talent management at the organizational level through two strategies. They must carefully analyze individual placement into specific work roles, and concurrently offer broadening opportunities that enhance personal and professional development. Self-development opportunities, such as training or career enhancing projects, improve retaining talent.²⁴ For example, affording subordinate leaders in staff sections the opportunity to attend additional MOS specific training will help career development, address skill gaps, and increase productivity within the organization. Moreover, leaders must match individuals to work roles that fit their abilities, potential, experience, and passion. Leveraging these principles will help retention at the organizational level and provide strategic level leaders with a blueprint to conceptualize associated initiatives.

Strategic Level

Army senior leaders must adequately use talent management at the strategic level by reconciling current talent with long-term strategic goals. The Army operationalizes talent management at the strategic level through an Order of Merit (OML) based promotion system that rewards high-quality leaders with promotions based on manning requirements.²⁵ However, the current system has a clear disconnect between how leaders develop overperformers and underperformers. The results from evaluation boards supply no individualized constructive feedback, as to what an underperformer needs to do to be competitive. Only generalized issues of Soldier records are identified by board members and provided to Soldiers in memorandum format with vague and ambiguous comments. Improving talent management must include constructive feedback, coaching programs, and data points (McKinsey & Company, 2023). This starts with providing individualized comments to Soldiers that are quantifiable after centralized promotion evaluation boards.²⁶ These elements will increase retention from a strategic perspective by enabling individuals to self-evaluate areas they can improve on based on quantifiable information. Overall, these initiatives have substantial implications for the retention programs at all levels. It requires leaders to take into consideration the indirect effects these initiatives have within their organizations, and their ability to retain Soldiers.

Conclusion

It is important for all senior leaders to enhance leader development programs, incentivize and promote continued service, and adequately utilize talent management to improve retention within their organizations. Leaders must heavily invest in initiatives that set conditions to promote a climate and culture of commitment amongst Soldiers within their unit. How these initiatives are operationalized will affect the retention program in considerable fashion. However, proper application will build trust, which is an essential component for Soldiers to willingly remain part of the Army team. An organization's ability to achieve its goals is contingent upon a successful retention program.

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