





Growing the Army's Bench:

An Interview With Retired Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling

■ By Arpi Dilanian and Matthew Howard

Retired Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling discusses the importance of talent management for the Army today. Hertling was the first commander of initial military training and now develops leaders in the health care industry. (Photo by Samuel Curtis)

The first commander of initial military training discusses his military and civilian experiences with talent management.

Throughout his nearly four decades in the Army, retired Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling gained a reputation for his ability to connect with people at all levels. A distinguished commander and skilled trainer, his career was highlighted by Soldier-focused leadership, most notably as he led the 1st Armored Division during the surge in Iraq and during his tenure as commanding general of U.S. Army Europe (USA-REUR).

Today, he develops health care leaders as part of a Florida-based hospital system and serves as a military and national security analyst for CNN. He does this while continuing his study of leadership in pursuit of a doctoral degree. Here are his insights on the importance of talent management and what the future holds for the Army.

What do you consider to be the foundation of leadership within the talent management model?

Well, the Army has great doctrine on that. In Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22, Leadership, we are taught the three legs of the leadership stool. The first leg is what is taught in the schoolhouse—the attributes and competencies of leadership, the processes and systems of management, and the elements of different types of authority. The second leg is self-development—what each individual is responsible for regarding his or her own personal growth. The third leg is what we learn every day as we look around the operational environment.

There's a continuous focus on improvement in each of these areas so we can contribute to our organizations. We apply what we learn in the schoolhouse and during our spare time reading, writing, and analyzing, as well as what we learn daily in our jobs. All that is evaluated and becomes part of who we are and how we develop what the private sector calls the leadership development aspect of talent management. In many cases, we do it a lot better than the

private sector, and they could learn much from us.

In my doctoral program, it's been surprising that all the things we teach in the military—based on 250 years of experience—is fascinatingly aligned with leadership theory taught in the business space and civilian schoolhouses. But we have the ability to apply those lessons in the toughest environments and in very unique circumstances when we engage with our Soldiers.

If you go to Amazon.com and search for leadership books, you will find about 170,000 titles; I know because I've done it. It's the third-most written about subject behind religion and diet and exercise. If there are that many books on it, why aren't we better leaders? Considering some of the sexy titles and gimmicky approaches the private sector uses, I think our Army is the closest to getting it right.

You were responsible for integrating the training of thousands of Soldiers as the first commander of initial military training (IMT). What were some of the challenges you faced?

It was one of the most challenging jobs I had. I received my marching orders from my boss, Gen. Martin Dempsey, who was the Training and Doctrine Command commander. We are good friends and have always had a very open and candid relationship.

As I was preparing to take command, we had been at war in Iraq and Afghanistan for several years, and he told me he thought we needed to make some major changes. He said, "I don't know what the deep-seated challenges in IMT are ... but we need to fix them, look to the future of training before any challenges break us as an Army, and figure out how we need to adjust skills, values, and attributes for our Soldiers in the future."

That's great mission guidance! A few weeks later, we had a multiple-beer conversation at his kitchen table about the approach we needed to take. From a skills perspective, there was too much to train for the amount

of time we had in the training base.

Because of what we were learning in combat, our field commanders were driving more requirements to teach recruits this new skill or that new tactic. Everyone was trying to jam too much into initial training. We had to make some tough calls on what to eliminate and add to ensure our Soldiers were prepared to join their units, learn the skills for their unit's specific combat tasks, and then be ready to deploy.

Training values was also important but often fell off the plate because of other requirements. Values are what make our Army different and better, and they are a critical piece of bringing new Soldiers into our organization. Truthfully, we were not training our values. Our drill sergeants just said, "These are our values," without a lot of follow-on teaching, so we needed to improve our approach. We received a lot of help addressing that in the right ways, and I think that made a huge difference in polishing our people to meet the demands of our profession.

Another element centered on Soldier attributes—physical attributes, resiliency, and the emotional and psychological approach to what Soldiers are asked to do. Because of some societal weaknesses—a lack of physical education in schools, bad diets, and changing social and family structures—we had to pay particular attention to physical training because civilians joining the military were not as fit as they used to be.

We radically changed physical training with the Soldier Athlete Initiative and a new manual and provided healthier foods in our dining facilities with the Soldier Fueling Initiative. All of that added up to more fit, ready, and resilient Soldiers, and they are all really important programs.

Just like today, we had three generations changing these programs, each with different cultures. I was a baby boomer in command, we had a bunch of Gen Xers as drill sergeants, and all the new recruits were millen-

nials. That made for some interesting dynamics in the training base.

As I took on those responsibilities, I read a lot of books—getting back to that self-study piece of leadership. A particularly insightful one was *The Drillmaster of Valley Forge: The Baron de Steuben and the Making of the American Army* [by Paul D. Lockhart], so we updated Friedrich Von Steuben's famous Blue Book and started giving it to all new Soldiers.

Another book was about Gen. John J. Pershing's approach to building the force during World War I. During that period, the Army had to generate a force of 1.5 million Soldiers in a very short time, and there were all kinds of questions about what they should do in the training base. Pershing wrote a letter from France to the commander of training in the states with a great line about their shared responsibilities: "Teach new Soldiers how to salute and how to shoot, and I'll do the rest over here!"

There must be a continuum of training and talent development within our military. Operational commanders will say, "That's the responsibility of the schoolhouse." And schoolhouses will reply, "We don't have enough time; you guys need to do some of it." There has to be coordination in our approach to training and talent development for turning the apprentice into a tradesman and eventually into a craftsman.

As commanding general of USAREUR, how important was actively managing talent for building readiness?

In any large organization, talent management and development are critically important. I'll always remember my time as a newly promoted brigadier general attending the Strategic Leader Development Course. Today, new brigadiers call it the "charm school," but it was the first time we were able to hear from all of the Army's senior leaders in one place.

In my class, Gen. Eric Shinseki,

the chief of staff of the Army, came in first and congratulated us on reaching the level of general officer. He thanked us and our families for our contributions to the Army and the nation's security and discussed the demands of being a general officer.

We were all puffed up about who we had become, but at the end of his pitch, he changed the subject. There were 31 of us in the room, and he told us he could put all of us in a plane, crash it in the middle of the Atlantic, and replace us in a nanosecond because the Army bench was that good.

He was sending a message: don't get full of yourself, because you can be replaced. He told us that our most important job was to grow the bench for the rest of the Army, grow our own replacements, and keep our organization strong by selecting the best. That made a huge impression on me. Whatever job I took as a general officer, I attempted to make talent management the first priority.

USAREUR had several different missions: engaging and developing the forces of 49 other countries, being prepared for several operational contingencies, and conducting training requirements and deployments for missions in the Middle East. In traveling around and engaging with Soldiers, I had to do what the Army said to do and look two levels down. As the theater commander, I attempted to spend as much time as I could with the brigade-level commanders of about 20 brigades and 10 garrisons.

All of these men and women were the best of their branches. I owed it to them and the Army not only to develop them but also to make subjective decisions about which of them should be the generals of tomorrow. That's a tough responsibility.

Ensuring those officers were doing the same for their subordinate officers and noncommissioned officers was also critical. The toughest requirement for any strategic leader in a large organization is to learn your people, and there's no excuse for not doing so. You have to know

your folks well enough to help them polish their strengths and overcome their weaknesses. It takes personal and organizational energy and making use of what Robert E. Lee once called “snippets of time.”

I also had to continue to develop myself. I had a bevy of young folks who helped me to “see myself.” I had sergeants who taught me the intricacies

and different service and job requirements based on a progression of learning so we can be promoted and take on increasing responsibilities. That’s not the same for many organizations in the private sector.

The private sector also doesn’t have the training or education resources we have. Most corporate organizations have not established a school-

not getting what they want for an assignment, school, or command. But we serve in a profession. And a profession under the transformational leadership theory has different requirements than a business under a transactional leadership promotion system, hierarchy, and operational model.

How important is mentorship to talent management, and what role did it play throughout your career?

True mentoring is developing a relationship with someone who is out to help you grow. Mentors are not dictating how you interact with people or run an organization; they are giving you candid advice based on their experience. The story of Mentor in Greek mythology tells it all; his job was to teach Telemachus while his dad went off to war. So it’s all about helping someone grow in the ways of the world and the methods of the profession.

I had multiple mentors during my career. When I was a captain, my mentor was a lieutenant colonel who later rose to the rank of brigadier general and showed me how to lead. Another was Gen. Fred Franks who spent an extraordinary amount of time with me when I was a major.

While I was commander of IMT, a command sergeant major mentored me in things I would never have known about had she not stepped forward to help. Coincidentally, I had just read a great book entitled *Athena Rising*, which discussed how males should take more time to mentor females in organizations. So the ability to trust someone, learn from them, and know that they’re there to help you become a better person is everything in leader development.

Can you share any talent management techniques that leaders can learn from today?

I learned one technique from a boss at the National Training Cen-

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tries of information technology. I attempted to get up-and-coming staff officers and receive reverse mentoring from Soldiers. One Soldier I selected as an aide helped me tremendously in understanding the challenges of women in the Army.

It’s really amazing. As a brand new second lieutenant, I had a tank platoon of 19 guys in Europe, and 37 years later I was commanding the forces in that theater. The Army’s training, development, and leadership model helps all of us make those continuous transitions. It prepares us for increasingly tougher missions, leading larger numbers of people, dealing with a variety of different bosses, and requirements to learn other cultures.

I was a tanker, but eventually I had to learn how the air defense and artillery culture worked. I had to learn about the tribal cultures of the infantrymen and special operations forces and even find out about the Hittites we call logisticians. I think our doctrine and the way we do business prepares us pretty well for all of that, and it sure does make it fun and challenging.

How does the Army differ from industry in the way it manages talent?

We are a hierarchical organization. We have processes and procedures

house where they can teach these things. Some have, but they pale in comparison to the Army. And most do not put the same emphasis on getting it right—the timing or the board process. They attempt to do talent management by combining efficiency reports with less than adequate, subjective evaluations.

I was recently asked to develop a leadership course for physicians of a hospital system; the organization had been attempting to put one in place for six years. I introduced a board to select the attendees, and you would’ve thought I had brought tablets down from the mount! That we actually looked at different people, saw qualifications beyond what was in their curriculum vitae, selected them, and chose an alternate list was such a magnificent thing for them.

I’m not knocking on the hospital system; most organizations try really hard to get it right. But I’ll admit that I’m biased because I think the military has a leg up on most private-sector organizations. We are transformational in terms of what is the best for the organization, not necessarily what is the best for the individual.

There are a lot of young officers who think the Army doesn’t manage talent in the best way possible. Many feel that way because they’re

ter when it was my first time having a large group of people I had to evaluate. He suggested I sit down within the first two or three days of taking command and tell them how I was going to evaluate them as future leaders in the profession, some of which would be based on gut feeling. Most individuals don't like to hear that; it's hard to adjust to that kind of criteria.

I told them that sometimes a call would be based not only on how well or how poorly they performed, but also on how I felt about their character, presence, intellect, and ability to generate trust. Those are things you can't put a checklist against. Sometimes you get the wrong impression of someone, but you have to make that hard call anyway because that's what you get paid to do.

You can only choose so many people to rise in a hierarchical organization, and not everyone can be the top-block officer. But if you let people know beforehand, the eventual discussions you will have to have will be a little less contentious. I took to heart—and I hope anyone who's ever worked with or for me would say this—a continual emphasis on face-to-face meetings. It gave folks a feel for how I felt about them.

I also took away a lesson from Gen. Dempsey when I was his assistant division commander in the 1st Armored Division in 2003. When I reported, he handed me a piece of paper and said, "Here's what I see as your responsibilities."

It wasn't 10 pages; it was one page. I still have that paper and did the same with my own subordinates during initial formal counseling sessions when I commanded the 1st Armored Division and USAREUR. I've used that technique in the private sector, too, with amazing results.

I always told new brigade commanders that the first year in their command they needed to learn their job; the second year they needed to try and learn mine. In effect, watch me, see what you would do like me, see what you would do

differently, and keep notes in that little green notebook we all carry around. Someday, when you're king or queen, you'll use or avoid some of these same things.

I also tell folks there is potential for miscommunication within organizations because people enjoy spending a lot of time with people they like and less time with those they don't. A good leader has to ensure they spend their time equally with all people to establish strong bonds.

When I took command of Multi-National Division-North in Iraq, I had to get to know 30,000 U.S. Soldiers, 10,000 allied soldiers (from countries like Georgia, Ukraine, Poland, and Germany), and 60,000 Iraqi soldiers and policemen who all worked for or under me. I made it my goal to get to all 79 forward operating bases throughout Iraq in my first 90 days.

Even though my team did its best to assist, I didn't make it. It took me about 120 days and it was exhausting. But it helped me to determine how operations should run and, just as importantly, how to evaluate the Soldiers and commanders under my charge. I was the one evaluating them in the career position that would probably mean the most for their future, so I felt responsible from a talent management perspective to get it right.

What future challenges will the military face in managing talent?

Over the next 20 to 30 years, the Army will face dynamics we can't even anticipate now. The young private entering basic training today and the young second lieutenant reporting to his or her first unit will experience and be responsible for things they can't imagine. History tells us that.

When I reported to West Point in 1971, Vietnam was still raging, and we thought we would all graduate and go off to that war. That didn't happen. Instead, in 1975, I went

to USAREUR—what we called the Imperial Army of the Rhine—where there were a quarter of a million U.S. Soldiers serving in a Cold War Army.

We later fought in places we weren't anticipating—operations in Grenada, Just Cause in Panama, and Desert Storm. And at the end of my career, I was a three-star general off tanks and walking through villages in Iraq with a rifle in what would be a long war of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.

What will happen to the kids entering today? They know there's a terrorism threat, an increasing threat on the Korean peninsula, and an expanding Russian threat. They're also going to fight information and cyber campaigns, the likes of which very few are prepared to fight, and who knows what else. Disease? Weapons of mass destruction? Are any of those going to be the wars they fight? Beats me.

No matter the war or enemy, America demands that its Army defends against it. So what are the leadership and talent management challenges associated with that?

I go back to what our doctrinal manual says: leaders are individuals of character with strong values who believe in certain things and communicate in the right way with empathy and humility. Those things don't change. But leadership doesn't just happen. Someone has to mentor you, train you, teach you, counsel you, and coach you to grow to meet those challenges.

Arpi Dilanian is a strategic analyst in the Army G-4's Logistics Initiatives Group. She holds a bachelor's degree from American University and a master's degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Matthew Howard is a strategic analyst in the Army G-4's Logistics Initiatives Group. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Georgetown University.