From the Inside Out

Achieving Long-Term Army Sustainability through Effective Command Climate

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About the Defense Project

The Defense Project seeks to increase the Belfer Center’s visibility and capacity to advance policy relevant knowledge in defense and international security areas and help prepare future leaders for service in those fields. The initiative links defense professionals with Belfer Center researchers, faculty, and Kennedy School students to facilitate better policymaking in the field and to enrich the education of fellows and students about security issues. The Defense Project achieves this through conducting seminars, discussions, and research to familiarize students and academics with the most critical national security issues currently facing the United States.

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Paratroopers assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion conduct a battalion run on Fort Bragg, NC, Aug. 5, 2022. Paratroopers received awards for work done both in Poland and in Garrison following the run. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Vincent Levelev)
Executive Summary

The American public is increasingly losing trust and confidence in the military and has a lower propensity to serve. This has significant implications for the safety and security of the nation. To overcome these issues, the Army must develop a long-term strategy to create a positive organizational culture. This requires senior leaders to focus on educating and training junior Army leaders on how to improve the organizational climate while also modernizing bureaucratic processes that frustrate soldiers and undermine morale. This paper examines the role of organizational climate in the current recruiting shortfall and why it has been overlooked. The authors argue that the Army is not prioritizing positive command climates and that Army leadership lacks the necessary expertise to address organizational climate. They also suggest that Army bureaucracy impedes sound leadership. The Army must identify and overcome these obstacles to create a more positive command climate. This includes researching how bureaucratic tendencies hinder organizational climate and addressing leadership skills that need improvement. Senior leaders must be equipped with the tools to recognize and solve climate problems. The Army’s Professional Development Model must be overhauled to prioritize relevant topics that address the challenges of today’s Army. These changes will make the Army a more attractive organization for potential recruits, leading to a stronger military force.
Introduction

In 2022, news on the U.S. military’s overall recruiting challenges was ubiquitous. As the largest military branch, the U.S. Army missed its recruiting goal by almost 20,000 soldiers -- the equivalent of four brigade combat teams.\(^1\) Over the next two years, projections indicate an anticipated loss of 38,000 recruits, or the equivalent of nearly eight brigade combat teams.\(^2\)

The Army’s recruiting challenge isn’t new and has been impacted by many factors. For example, the Army failed to meet its recruiting goal during the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in 2005. Yet, the Great Recession of 2008 made an Army income more competitive, and recruiting conditions improved.\(^3\) Various external factors have affected recruiting efforts in recent years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy, and, perhaps most notably, the fitness to serve of America’s youth population.\(^4\)

In 2021, only one in four young Americans met the qualifications for military service. The propensity to serve in the military declined as well, with only 11% of young adults between the ages of 16-21 saying they wanted to do so. An increasing number of Americans have lost trust and confidence in the U.S. military, with only a third of young adults under age 30 expressing high confidence in the military. The biggest reason given is partisan politics, followed by scandals within the military, military leadership, and the cost of maintaining the Army or the belief that it has wrong priorities.\(^5\) Moreover, in a recent survey interviewing about 600 respondents monthly for four months in 2022, young adults ages 16 to 28 do not see the Army as a safe workplace or a good career path. They have a general mistrust of the military with specific concerns about discrimination against women and minorities.\(^6\)

The U.S. Army’s inability to recruit the required number of soldiers could have significant short- and long-term consequences. One of the main consequences is its impact on national security and the safety of the United States.\(^7\) Ever-increasing threats to U.S. interests ensure the demand for a fully manned Army will continue. Failing to man the All-Volunteer Force that Americans have relied on for almost five decades will likely cause further strain on an already stressed force. With only 11% of qualified young adults wanting to join military service, the Army can
anticipate a significant decline in the quality of personnel who will join, and later, lead the Army.

The Army has consistently tried to improve recruiting outcomes through aggressive marketing and record-setting bonuses while influencing policies related to annual raises, benefit levels, and overall military pay levels. Although these financial strategies have had a varying impact over the years, they have done little to overcome challenges to the Army’s reputation, including the perception that the Army is not a safe workplace. A recent Government Accountability Office report stated that the “Department of Defense does not have sufficient plans, goals, and strategies to guide its recruitment and retention efforts.”

To address the above problems, the Army must have a long-term strategy to cultivate a positive organizational climate that transcends some of the unavoidable challenges to service and competes against civilian options for employment. This will require senior leaders to prioritize educating and training Army junior leaders on skills and techniques to improve the organizational climate, while modernizing the Army’s bureaucratic processes that frustrate soldiers, undermine a positive climate, and make the Army a less appealing choice when compared to modern workplace alternatives. This paper will proceed by investigating climate as a critical factor affecting the current recruiting shortfalls and hypothesizing why this factor is currently overlooked.
Organizational Climate

Climate and Reputation

An improved organizational climate would enhance the Army’s reputation, a critical factor in recruitment efforts. A 2021 study on the impact of an organization’s climate on its reputation shows a positive correlation between the two. As the environment improves, so does reputation.\(^\text{10}\) The proliferation of social media and easy access to news coverage ensures that the challenges and frustrations reflective of the Army command climate are no secret to the civilian population. In many cases, when soldiers share stories with friends and family, they unintentionally discourage Army service by publicizing a work environment/lifestyle that does not compete well with perceptions of civilian alternatives.\(^\text{11}\)

What It Is

The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Climate and Culture states, “organizational climate and organizational culture are two conceptually distinct yet recently overlapping constructs for understanding the ways employees experience their total work settings.”\(^\text{12}\) The Army defines culture as “a shared set of beliefs, values, norms, and symbols that unite a group.”\(^\text{13}\) The Army’s values are formally defined and communicated in the LDRSHIP acronym: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless-Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal-Courage. More relevant to this paper, and specific to our argument, is how the Army describes climate: “In contrast to culture, organizational climate refers to the perception and attitudes of soldiers and Army Civilians as they interact within the culture with their peers, subordinates, and leaders. Observed policies and practices often drive climate, reflecting the leader’s character. The greatest influence on an organization’s climate is the quality of its leadership.”\(^\text{14}\) While the Army regulation describes six characteristics of Army culture and climate, they are broad and challenging to quantify.\(^\text{15}\)
Research on organizational climate, its significance to organizational success, and the role of leadership in organizational climate are extensive. We proceed in this paper acknowledging that the Army already recognizes the value of a positive climate and well-developed leaders’ impact on creating such an environment. Instead, we seek to illuminate how the Army fails to educate and train skilled leaders in this critical area properly.

**Bureaucracy vs. Climate**

The Army’s bureaucracy, composed of various systems and software the Army uses to manage its people, equipment, and training, is impossible to enumerate. The locally developed systems used to overcome the inadequacies of formal Army systems, such as spreadsheets, ad-hoc databases, and Sharepoint file sharing, are overwhelming. The weaknesses of formal Army systems and their failure to modernize in ways consistent with contemporary user expectations have harmful effects on organizational climate and potentially contribute to the Army’s declining appeal to the modern workforce. Author Tim Kane identified that “…recent defense secretaries, Ash Carter and Robert Gates, made clear the existing personnel bureaucracy is arguably the top threat to readiness facing our armed forces.”16
Impediments for Change

Acknowledging that organizational climate and culture matter, it is concerning that the U.S. Army, steeped in the tradition of building leaders, has had trouble creating an attractive organizational climate and the type of culture needed to reduce harmful soldier-on-soldier behaviors such as sexual harassment and sexual assault.17

We submit three hypotheses as to why the Army struggles with this phenomenon. First, creating a positive organizational climate has not been a priority because of the institutional pressure to attain short-term goals. Second, current Army leaders are not sufficiently trained in the skills, practices, and characteristics that result in a positive organizational climate. Third, the reality of an unwieldy bureaucracy undermines the Army’s efforts to be a meaningful profession, as some leaders succumb to bureaucratic tendencies and metric-driven leadership because they are rewarded for such behaviors.

Hypothesis 1: Army is mission-focused; driving a positive climate is not a priority

First, the Army is a mission-focused organization whose organizational climate and culture have yet to be adequately prioritized for action, defined for measurability, and trained for effective leader engagement.18 The Army has recognized, but not realized the connection between positive climate, culture, leadership, and mission accomplishment. It takes tremendous time and effort to change organizational culture dramatically.19

Second, the cyclical evaluation of leaders does not stimulate long-term work on climate; Army leader evaluations are measurable and short-term, whereas work on organizational culture is long-term and harder to measure. Since the Army runs on annual cycles for leadership evaluation, leaders seek quick wins that will be reflected on their evaluation reports rather than pursuing long-term goals that are difficult to quantify and will only be fully achieved long after the leader has departed.20 The Army, in short, inspires a culture in which some leaders gravitate towards metric-driven leadership to climb the career ladder rather than becoming transformational leaders.21
Third, Army strategic documents prioritize tactical and technical training and equipment modernization before organizational culture and leadership, evidenced in the Army’s 2018 Vision and Strategy. While the Army Chief of Staff recognizes people as his No. 1 priority to win; better incentives lie in hyper-focus on readiness metrics. Leaders work tirelessly to achieve quantifiable short-term gains that can be easily used as justification for recognition. In other words, quarterly mission readiness gains outweigh leader efforts to achieve the Army Chief’s priority.

This is evident even after devasting signals such as the tragic murder of Specialist Vanessa Guillén. Her death shed light on the horrific climate and culture at Fort Hood, Texas, and resulted in the firing of 14 senior leaders in 2020. Yet, evidence of substantial culture change has not followed. More broadly, rates for sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and workplace hostility in the military increased in 2021. It is not surprising that many youths may perceive the Army as an unsafe workplace.

From the military’s inception, leaders have been institutionalized to follow those ahead of them in their leadership, keeping a sharp eye on what’s easy to measure toward promotion. It’s a mindset that emphasizes keeping the higher headquarters and boss happy as the best path toward building the unit’s reputation and career. Those who can stay clear of trouble, possess charisma, and act as sycophants are likelier to keep their metrics pristine and rise within the organization. By reinforcing and sustaining existing bureaucratic methods, they are rewarded far more than by being transformational leaders.

Hypothesis 2. Current Army leaders are not familiar with and not trained for tasks related to organizational climate

The Army’s leadership development model must evolve with generational changes in how leaders are trained, evaluated, and educated. Younger workers, identified as Millennials and Gen Zs, have different expectations and perspectives about the workforce from workers in prior generations. As those differences become more pervasive, organization leaders will face unique challenges.

Army doctrine places the responsibility of developing and maintaining a positive command climate on army leadership teams at their echelon. However, current Army leader development does not account for command climate education,
training, and awareness at the echelon. It neglects the leadership competencies required today, instead focusing on the Army’s comfort zone: tactical and operational skillsets.

Army leader development resides in three domains: Institutional, Operational, and Self-Development. The institutional domain does not offer any formal curriculum on organizational climate, despite it being the formal military education administered and delivered by Army and Department of Defense schools. The operational domain of Army leader development centers on progressive duty assignments that prepare leaders through on-the-job training (OJT) and mentorship. In this domain, “Commanders and other senior leaders are particularly responsible for mentoring vital to the development of junior officers.” The self-development domain consists of “individual study, research, professional reading, practice, and self-assessment, [and] is accomplished via numerous means (studying, observing, and experiencing)” This domain puts the onus on the individual leader to identify their own ”curriculum” for improvement and possess the objectivity to identify their shortcomings. Self-development can be challenging due to the enormous daily bureaucratic weight Army leaders face.31

The primary tool senior leaders use to guide young leaders through the operational and self-development domains of leadership development is quarterly counseling and annual evaluations.32 This process contributes to the Army leadership development challenges.33 Organizational climate theory and the behaviors and techniques to improve command climate are excluded from the evaluation process, and, Army leaders were promoted and selected for leadership positions primarily based on those annual evaluations. The nature of a yearly evaluation also facilitates leader focus on subjective short-term gains that fall within the evaluation period versus the organization’s long-term goals, as mentioned previously. The Army has recognized the system’s shortcomings, and several command assessment programs have been instituted to alleviate the deficiencies of the Army’s selection process. The evaluation system has remained unchanged since 2013.34 It remains unclear if the Army’s new assessment programs, such as the Battalion Commander Assessment Program (BCAP), are working, given a recent wave of senior leader terminations who lost their positions based upon counterproductive leadership qualities.35 However, transforming the Army evaluation system would go a long way in reinforcing the prioritization of establishing and maintaining healthy command climates.
Time is also a contributing factor. Development in the operational and self-development domains requires that leaders have time beyond the necessary demands to satisfy their existing duty requirements and beyond the needs required to sustain a healthy work-life balance. In their 2015 study, Dr. Leonard Wong and Dr. Stephen J. Gerras identified a “pernicious phenomenon emerging from a culture that demands more from the profession’s members than is possible.” They recommend that the Army exercise restraint in the propagation of requirements and compliance checks. If the Army does not formalize training on organizational climate in the institutional domain, it must consider how to design and prioritize opportunities in remaining domains amidst a ‘propagation of requirements’ that frees leaders up to pursue development.

The institutional domain of the Army’s leadership development program is Professional Military Education (PME). Its intended purpose is to provide soldiers and leaders with the attributes and competencies to be influential leaders. Traditionally, the Army could focus solely on defeating conventional enemy forces; however, that is no longer the reality. Army leaders are faced with increased requirements such as developing partner forces and supporting civil functions while navigating through leadership challenges that come with societal and cultural shifts, such as the politicization of the military, gender, and racial identities, media disinformation, social media, and mental health-related issues.

The institutional domain has not sufficiently addressed organizational climate and the leader skills necessary to address contemporary climate issues in the formal curriculum. PME has inadequately addressed these new challenges, nor delivered organizationally effective results to correct the climate shortcomings that contribute to the challenges previously presented. It does not effectively educate junior leaders in the praxis skills needed to sustain an enduring positive organizational climate. In most cases, PME is led by or taught by retired military officers with similar perspectives who mostly have experience in the military which, in turn, limits diversity of thought.
Hypothesis 3. Bureaucracy as a Contradiction

The U.S. Army is one of the most significant and longstanding institutions preserving its bureaucratic tradition. Bureaucracy is an integral part of a large organization like the Army, and when successful, it can maintain and protect a sense of mission. Yet, the Army as a profession continues to be dwarfed by cumbersome, entrenched bureaucratic systems, which have led to inefficiencies and a general lack of effectiveness.

A 2017 study from the Bipartisan Policy Center asserts that the armed forces can enjoy higher morale and greater skills if they revise the counterproductive personnel bureaucracy that ineffectively manages talent and inefficiently supports soldier/family needs. The study proposes 39 reforms to achieve “an American society more fully engaged with the opportunities to contribute to U.S. national security efforts [that] will leverage its vast reservoir of talent to help solve the military’s challenges—many of them increasingly requiring technical or other technical specialized knowledge and skills.” The implementation of IPPS-A and the Defense Health Agency exemplify several of these proposals. However, the actions are taking too long, and the impact of their delayed implementation is evident.

A contradiction exists that is pitting sound leadership against a massive Army bureaucracy. Simply put, many Army leaders may not know how or understand the need to shift from its bureaucratic tendencies to the behavior of a military professional. For example, the Army 2018 strategy lists Deploy, Fight, and Win as the first part of the Army's vision to build a more lethal and effective fighting force. All units must be trained and proficient in their deployability, regardless of location. However, the bureaucratic burden on the units does not allow them the required training time. There are countless unnecessary (and inefficient) procedures and duplications throughout the Army, leaving leaders without the time or capacity to focus on Army as a profession. They are consistently pressured to drive metric-driven results and to survive; they can't help but succumb to bureaucracy. Moreover, it can be perceived as easier to perpetuate bureaucratic processes rather than leading an organization as transformational leaders.
Conclusion

As one of the largest bureaucratic organizations in the world, the U.S. Army must have a clear vision to build positive command climates across all formations deliberately.44

Before taking action, we need to understand the current impediments to change. With this objective in mind, we have formulated three hypotheses that require further research. If we do not develop a deep understanding of obstacles to change, remedial actions run the risk of failing. Just as important as taking action is removing impediments to change - ranging from the army leaders’ reluctance to embrace the organizational climate as one of their priorities to unfamiliarity with the leadership skills needed to improve the climate. We must prioritize deliberate research into where the Army’s bureaucratic tendencies stand in the way of an enhanced organizational climate.

The current cohort of Army leaders needs to be equipped to implement the change required to drive the Army in a new direction.45 Senior leaders have replaced authentic leadership with more systems to tackle the People problem.46 Messaging from the top has yet to unify the Army around improving organizational climate. With leadership from the top, change is likely to succeed.47 However, Army leadership doesn’t effectively recognize its climate problems or show the willingness to admit them.48

It is essential to acknowledge that changing an institution possessing a long history of bureaucracy with a particular organizational culture is a monumental task. There must be a fundamental shift in how uniformed and civilian Army leaders view recruiting and retention challenges. They must commit to a long-term strategy for change, recognizing that they may not be around to see it through.

Leaders must be adaptive, creative, and self-aware. The Army must develop leaders with critical thinking abilities who can avoid groupthink. To do this, the Army must overhaul the current Professional Development Model in ways that prioritize learning in the topics relevant to today’s Army. For example, the Army should employ diverse professors from various disciplines like organizational and social psychology and other fields to prepare current and future leaders for the complex
environments of the 21st century. Evaluation and counseling should be designed to guide mentors in honing leadership traits that will succeed with the new generation of a soldier.49

Although such processes may also be time-consuming and, at times, exhausting, the results can directly impact America's national security. Only then will it enable an Army culture to be transformed into an attractive organization to potential recruits. With this investment, there will be more quality soldiers leading the Army and building a stronger military force.


8 Asch, Navigating Current and Emerging Army Recruiting Challenges.


11 Loryana Vie, Eric Trivette, and Adam Lathrop, “Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey” (Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, HQs, Department of the Army & People Analytics, Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army (M&RA), June 2021).

12 Benjamin Schneider and Karen M. Barbera, “The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Climate and Culture,” in The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Climate and Culture, ed. Benjamin Schneider and Karen M. Barbera (Oxford University Press, 2014), 0, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199860715.013.0001.correlates, and consequences from both academic and practice vantage points. A brief historical overview of both constructs is presented and then traditional industrial-organizational psychology (I/O

13 AR 600-100 Army Profession and Leadership Policy (U.S. Department of the Army, 2017).

14 AR 600-100 Army Profession and Leadership Policy (U.S. Department of the Army, 2017).

15 A RAND Corporation review of Army literature on culture and climate found that Army definitions were too general and lacked sufficient depth to effectively support their study of approaches to institutional change in the Army. The study recommends that the Army adopt a definition of climate that would “Align policies with the practices, competencies, and perceptions of organizational members.” A comprehensive description of organizational climate, including characteristics, will enhance the Army’s ability to design training and education to develop the knowledge and skills leaders will allow a thriving climate.


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20 “The Performance Management Revolution,” Harvord Business Review, October 1, 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/10/the-performance-management-revolution. Traditional performance appraisals have been abandoned by more than a third of U.S. companies. The annual review’s biggest limitation, the authors argue, is its emphasis on holding employees accountable for what they did last year, at the expense of improving performance now and in the future. That’s why many organizations are moving to more-frequent, development-focused conversations between managers and employees. The authors explain how performance management has evolved over the decades and why current thinking has shifted.


22 “The Army’s Vision and Strategy | The United States Army.”


27 “Army Sees Safety, Not ‘Wokeness,’ as Top Recruiting Obstacle.”


31 DA PAM 600-3 Officer Professional Development and Career Management (U.S. Department of the Army, 2019).

32 DA PAM 600-3.


34 FM 6-22 Developing Leaders (U.S. Department of the Army, 2022).


38 Wong and Gerras, Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession.


41 Snider, “Will Army 2025 Be a Military Profession?”


44 Snider, “Will Army 2025 Be a Military Profession?”


47 Snider, "Will Army 2025 Be a Military Profession?"
48 “The Army People Strategy.”
49 Organizational Culture and Leadership, Fourth Edition, accessed February 27, 2023,
50 Capt Lindsay Gabow, "The Army Doesn’t Know Why Junior Officers Are Leaving,” Army Times, February 24, 2023,