

# Transformation at the Tactical Edge

*Mission Creep, Talent Alignment and  
the Future of the Junior Officer Corps*

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## Introduction

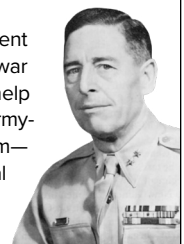
The Army Transformation Initiative (ATI) is a bold campaign by Army senior leaders to deliver critical warfighting capabilities, to optimize force structure and to eliminate waste and obsolete programs. ATI promises much, but will its lofty goals be successfully implemented at the tactical level, or will they end up as good ideas gathering dust in the company supply cage? And, in the meantime, what effect should they be having to improve the quality of life for our junior officers?

Let's imagine you're a junior officer today. You wake up at 0500—PT begins at 0630, but there's a pre-PT meeting at 0600, and you have to travel 30 minutes to your office. Your boss has already sent you five different messages via text since last night, so you're preparing for those discussions at 0600. You finish PT at 0800, quickly shower and eat breakfast at your desk, then log on at 0830 to check several dashboards and websites and make updates. You have a dozen unread emails, multiple missed Teams messages, and your boss is texting you to come into their office for the morning stand-up—the one at 0600 didn't count. You spend the day bouncing from the motor pool to check on maintenance, to the range to ensure your new Soldiers get qualified, to filling out an Excel spreadsheet in the S3's latest format, to developing a training plan for the NextGen C2 (Next Generation Command and Control) rollout—the contractor who introduced it merely gave you a five-minute briefing and left—to working with the career counselor and S1 to understand the formation change and when you'll get new Soldiers to replace the 19Ds lost due to the recent Army Structure (ARSTRUC).

Later that same day, you have your weekly training meeting, and then you find yourself needing to provide counseling for a few Soldiers whose time in the field, being away from home, has strained their marriages. They're trying to save their relationships and are looking to you for answers—but you're single and haven't had a long-term relationship yet. You talk to the 1st Sergeant to release your Soldiers—it's already 1600, and they need some time off before you conduct the upcoming Table VI next week. After sharing the

Junior officers are the connective tissue between institutional initiative and execution of formation.

In the interwar period of the 1930s, Major Edwin Forrest Harding was appointed editor of the *Infantry Journal*—an assignment that would begin a period of revitalization of scholarship across the Army. Almost a hundred years later, after the decades of war that began the 21st century, the Army has again found itself in need of such revitalization. To address this head-on and so to help the Army meet and overcome the next and future conflicts, The Harding Project was launched in 2023. As a part of this Army-wide effort, AUSA has partnered with Army University Press to host the LTG (Ret) James M. Dubik Writing Fellows Program—a voluntary, non-resident writing fellowship to encourage discourse that contributes to a community of military and national security professionals. *The Harding Papers* series exclusively publishes the work and scholarship of the Dubik Writing Fellows.



good news that they can head out, you return to your computer and catch up on dozens more emails from your company commander, the S3 and the XO, who are all pushing out taskings as quickly as possible to give everyone advance notice. Any free time you had this week is now double-booked, and you just learned that your platoon must attend a Next-Generation Squad Weapon range to certify on the new rifle. You catch up, pull your CAC and start your drive home—it's 1900, and you're exhausted. On the way, your company commander calls to discuss ensuring your platoon conducts a survey with a goal of 100 percent completion before the go-home criteria are met. Now you have to plan how to rotate squads through a computer station to complete the survey.

## Understanding the Reality for Today's Junior Officers

Our junior officers aren't inefficient or entitled; they're burned out due to poor workload discipline at the battalion and higher levels. Junior officers rely on troop-leading procedures and the eight-step training model to manage change in complex adaptive systems. Additionally, they are consistently short-staffed for battalion, brigade, division and installation duties. With junior officers leaving the Army at a worrying rate—something happening every day—the Army is losing its dedicated officers, men and women who signed up for service because they *want* to serve, not because life has given them no better options. To put it bluntly, today's canary in the coal mine is junior officer attrition.

We increasingly expect junior officers to be adaptable, quick learners who continually develop as they incorporate new systems, doctrine and unit demands. However, when field-grade leaders fail to eliminate previous requirements as they add new ones, we experience mission creep. When mission creep surpasses

the capacity of our junior officers and the formations they are meant to execute, the cohesion of those formations deteriorates, leaving less time for meaningful training and purposeful development. Leaders become managers, and the tendrils of counterproductive leadership begin to spread as junior officers and leaders seek new ways to accomplish the mission.

Now, picture the ideal junior officer: someone who designs and conducts tough, realistic training while taking time to teach, coach and mentor their Soldiers, thereby connecting with their unit and building a cohesive, lethal team. Ideal, yes. Realistic? Probably not.

Imagine such a leader being overwhelmed by all of these tasks, as so often happens. And does the Army meet this overwhelm with greater support? Unfortunately, all too often, we see the opposite. The Army reduces their billets in the orderly and training rooms, forcing these junior officers to take Soldiers out of their formations to help manage the workload. Alternatively, these leaders may increase this burden on their own schedules, causing them to spend more time away from their families.

The result is predictable: This disconnect between junior officers' responsibilities, task load and the support they receive from the unit or institution is accelerating burnout and leading to increased attrition after their initial active-duty service obligation ends.

When this misalignment happens, junior officers experience what this author calls the "Winters effect." Most junior officers enter the Army with the hope of leading platoons and companies and engaging in combat-related training, much like Dick Winters of Easy Company. Instead, they often find themselves in roles like Lewis Nixon or even Herbert Sobel—working as staff officers without a clear purpose, micro-managing an overworked unit that has lost its *esprit de corps*. As this cognitive dissonance increases, the likelihood of continuing in their roles decreases.

Today's junior officers aren't disengaged or entitled; they're burning out under compounding taskings that pull them away from the leadership and training roles they joined to perform.

What can we do to address this problem? The Army must invest in its junior officers by helping them connect their talents to Army pathways, providing intentional leader development and implementing a promotion system that rewards rather than punishes innovators and risk-takers. Early alignment reduces friction, improves trust and fosters long-term identity within the profession.

## Talent Alignment

The Army's current talent-based branching process helps increase job satisfaction earlier. However, many jobs in the Army may not match what a junior officer expects after Captains Career Course, or an officer may reconsider and decide on a different branch. To support this earlier career transition, the Army has expanded the Voluntary Transfer Incentive Program (VTIP) to the third year of service to more effectively align the talents and interests of these officers.

However, there is still a lot of work to do to destigmatize the choice of a junior officer who decides to VTIP. Being able to focus on encouraging this positive process, instead of having to waste efforts on the destigmatization, would be a vast improvement across the board. Too often, the Army Junior Officer Counsel (AJOC) hears about junior officers becoming evaluation targets for others who stay true to their battalion commander's branch; the fact of the matter is, we're too parochial in our branches and pay less attention than we should to the needs of the whole Army. In the face of this, our Army Transformation Initiative demands flexibility in the personnel system; while the Army has created policies to support this, now battalion-grade and field-grade leaders must embrace it. Otherwise, they will drive junior officers out of the Army.

To enable junior officers and commanders to see the available options, the Army must surge its ongoing efforts to expand the career-mapping tool being developed by the Directorate of Military Personnel Management. This tool allows junior officers to see multiple pathways ahead, enables commanders to visualize and understand where their leaders want to go in their careers and allows the Army to capture validated knowledge, skill and behaviors of the force.

## Intentional Leader Development—Because Mentorship Is Our Retention and Development Weapon System

Despite the Army's best efforts in Army Training Publication (ATP) 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback: Counseling-Coaching-Mentoring*, we, as field-grade and senior leaders, fail to grasp the nuances of all three of these roles. We also make excuses for not prioritizing them—we claim there's not enough time, resources or money—and so we find ways to justify our minimal efforts.

But in point of fact, there simply isn't a reason good enough to justify a lack of mentorship.

Since the 1970s, scientific literature has shown that mentorship is an organization's most effective tool for retention and development. Among all the skills discussed in ATP 6-22.1, mentorship is the one Army leaders understand the least—even though it is the most important developmental relationship. Identifying our high performers and focusing mentorship efforts on them allows the Army to identify and retain those officers we want to keep serving. Every junior officer deserves strong leadership, but our high performers are literally 400 percent more productive than their counterparts—yet these are the ones the Army overworks until they break and decide to leave.<sup>1</sup>

Mentorship is the Army's most underutilized retention weapon: Scientific literature since the 1970s confirms this, yet leaders routinely deprioritize it.

## Effecting Change Today

### *The Four C's of Dynamic Mentorship*

You can improve your mentoring relationships today by implementing the four C's of dynamic mentorship:<sup>2</sup>

1. **Clarity:** Understand and define the purpose, roles and boundaries of a mentoring relationship, and clarify the mentee's goals. Do not impose your career timeline on them.
2. **Curiosity:** Stay silent, ask questions, and let the mentee guide the relationship's direction.
3. **Challenge:** As your understanding of your mentee grows, design developmental experiences that support their growth.
4. **Co-Elevate:** Grow with your mentee. As they develop and earn their way into your network, it's your duty as a mentor to introduce them to people who can support their journey.

Talent alignment, intentional mentorship and career-mapping tools exist in policy—but field-grade leaders must actually embrace them.

### *A New Promotion System*

Our current promotion system discourages innovation and promotes conformity rather than allowing officers to take risks, be creative and expand their opportunities. In Fiscal Years 2018 and 2019, Congress enacted a series of laws to update the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) of 1980. One of these laws was the creation of the Alternative Promotion Authority (APA). APAs allow services to shift from the below-the-zone, primary-zone and above-the-zone evaluations to multiple primary-zone considerations. There is no penalty if you are selected on look 4 instead of look 1, which enables the Army to promote the right leaders for emerging missions, facilitates career field flexibility, provides time for training in these new areas and rewards high performers.

### *(Re)-Setting the Foundation*

However, all of this is ineffective if the Army does not refocus junior officers' attention on being both expert professionals *and* effective Soldiers. Junior officers must understand that officers have dual roles. We learn our weapon systems, stay physically fit and excel at warrior tasks and battle drills, all while being experts in our craft—whether that is Infantry, Aviation, Signal, Intelligence or another field.

The push for transformation can shift focus away from our lethality and expertise, sometimes forcing junior officers to choose between them because they cannot excel at both. Or, they try to do both, resulting in mediocrity in multiple arenas instead of proficiency in one arena. Ultimately, this lowers their standards of excellence and confuses their professional identities.

Ultimately, junior officers must lead formations, manage risk and enable mission success. We are not warrant officers, who are technical experts, nor are we noncommissioned officers, who are small-unit leaders and warfighters. Instead, we must balance both by preparing for command while on staff and being exceptional commanders when in charge. If this path does not appeal to certain junior officers, we need to identify alternative pathways for them, such as becoming warrant officers or transferring to a Functional Area in which they can focus on technical expertise.

## Looking Forward

The future of the junior officer corps is the future of the Army. We're already seeing leading indicators of a shrinking pool of junior officers to promote into the field-grade ranks. Without immediate action, we face a fractured officer corps that is poised to fail our Soldiers in the next conflict.

To prevent this from happening, we must:

1. Reduce mission creep at the division, brigade and battalion levels. If you're adding a new task to a subordinate unit, take one off.
2. Fast-track the implementation of the career-mapping tool to facilitate talent pathways and alignment.
3. Expand alternative promotion authorities and VTIP permeability to enable officers to develop, take risks and innovate throughout their careers without fear of punishment for not making the next rank.
4. Reaffirm that junior officers cannot choose between command and staff—they must be both experts in their branch and lethal leaders.
5. Build a mentoring culture and invest in junior officer development programs such as the Army Junior Officer Counsel and the Center for Junior Officers, as these programs lift some of the burden off of field-grade officers.

## Conclusion

Army transformation must prioritize people over platforms, in this arena as it has done in others. Junior officers are the key leverage point for this transformation because they connect initiative and formation. Improving junior officer development through talent alignment, clear career paths, intentional leadership growth, mentoring cultures and a modernized promotion system, while reaffirming that officers are lethal leaders and experts in their branches, must be a priority. If these changes are made and made well, junior officers can lead Army transformation rather than becoming one of its casualties.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ruth Gotian, “High Achievers Are the Most Neglected Employees,” *Psychology Today*, 15 December 2025, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/optimizing-success/202512/high-achievers-are-the-most-neglected-employees>.
- <sup>2</sup> Major Christopher Slininger, “Winning the Talent War: Creating a Culture of Mentorship,” *Military Review*, February 2026, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2026-OLE/Talent-War/>.

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