
HINDSIGHT: BROADENING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGING YOUR CAREER

MAJ ERIC B. ALEXANDER

Editor's Note: *The goal of this article is to provide rising company-grade leaders with information to encourage them to make knowledgeable choices about their assignments. These choices are critical following captain-level key developmental (KD) assignments. The author does not speak for the U.S. Army Human Resources Command (HRC) and has never worked at that organization. Furthermore, he is only providing a personal account of his particular experience for the benefit of junior officers.*

One of GEN Raymond Odierno's expectations for the future of Army leadership is "to develop bold, adaptive, and broadened leaders."¹ This broadening process begins sooner than most may think. Many young maneuver, fires, and effects (MFE) officers are unprepared for post-company command assignments. This is not the fault of HRC, but of the officers themselves. It is their job to manage their own careers. Do not confuse this with "careerism," however. Careerism is just the opposite; it focuses on "gaming" the system to get what is wanted. Careerism is selfish and unbecoming an officer. Career management is about adaptive planning for a flexible future and remaining on track to meet the person's goals. Prudent officers have a plan and use that plan to manage uncertainty in the future. Officers should look at where they want to go, make a plan, and keep HRC informed as time passes. Career management is also about accepting deviations from the plan as conditions change. HRC is there to help, but officers are responsible for everything that happens or fails to happen in their career.

Anecdotal evidence shows that many officers are unaware of "broadening opportunities" until they are too late to compete. I was one such officer who was fortunate enough to call HRC at the right time to compete successfully. My experiences participating in a broadening opportunity convinced me of the need to spread the word to fellow officers so they could benefit from my lessons learned.

A decade of conflict and operating in ambiguous environments with host nation and coalition partners has provided our Soldiers and leaders with many experiences that fit some of the Chief of Staff of the Army's (CSA) leadership criteria. Serving as company-grade officers in combat and wartime environments has created bold and adaptive leaders. These experiences will be invaluable to developing future leaders once deployments begin to dwindle, but that is a topic for another article. The Army offers many opportunities to develop the third criteria in the CSA's vision of future Army leaders — "broadened."

The Army has three general types of assignments: operational, developmental, and broadening. Examples of operational assignments are serving as platoon leaders and company commanders. Examples of developmental assignments are serving as company executive officers, specialty platoon leaders, staff assignments, etc. The third type the Army calls "broadening" opportunities.² These opportunities expose officers to a variety of institutions, cultures,

and perspectives that are outside traditional Army assignments.³ It is very easy for an MFE officer to abdicate career decisions in the early years of their service. There are many reasons for this. MFE officers may not know how long they want to stay in the Army; they may feel that they have very little input into their early career decisions; or they may be relying on the relatively fixed timeline for promotion and assignments for junior officers to make the decisions easy. On the other hand, many young MFE officers feel that operational and developmental assignments better prepare them for promotion and success, or they think they would enjoy operational assignments more and do not seek other opportunities. For these and many other reasons, it is easy for smart, motivated young officers to arrive at the end of their first KD assignment without a plan.

Following company command, the variety of options open to young MFE leaders widens rapidly. For those who have not been active in managing and planning their careers, it can be bewildering and surprising. The tendency is to avoid the discomfort of ambiguity and go with the path of least resistance. This does the Army and the officer a disservice because it suboptimizes personnel assignments. The best advice is for officers to contact their branch managers regularly. This avoids ambiguity. However, if officers are in frequent touch with their branch then they are already managing their careers. Some officers are unaware of the opportunities available following KD assignments because they do not know to ask or they are not looking far enough forward to ask branch the right questions. For officers to whom this is new information, there is a wealth of opportunities available following company command if they have the foresight to plan. Many of the branches provide a timeline that shows windows for broadening and developmental assignments.⁴ There are 15 different broadening opportunities alone on the HRC website. Each of these broadening opportunities selects multiple officers each year and is open to a range of year groups (YG). Additionally, these assignments are above and beyond other branch-specific opportunities or advanced civil schooling (ACS).

Officers should research broadening opportunities six to 12 months before they take company command or begin their first KD assignment. There is no clear next assignment following KD time. It is essential to be prepared before the KD time is complete or they will find themselves wherever the Army needs them. This may not be where they best serve the Army, where they would like to be located, or doing what they enjoy. First, it takes time to read and digest all the military personnel (MILPER) messages to find opportunities of interest. It is also critical to assess how the opportunities will affect family situations and career timelines. Depending on when company-grade KD time is completed, it may not be advisable to take certain broadening opportunities because it could prevent officers from being competitive for promotion by delaying field-grade KD assignments. Those opportunities also may not support the officer's family balance. However, depending on the assignment, many broadening assignments provide an advanced

degree and support ample family time. In addition, they offer access to professors and key leaders that drive national and Army policy as well as set those officers' files apart from their peers. Some of these experiences also truncate the time required to complete the Command and General Staff Officer Course (CGSOC). All of these factors necessitate a discussion with the branch representative sooner rather than later.

If the timeline supports a desired broadening assignment, officers should examine eligibility requirements next. Each opportunity is unique in prerequisites for year group, grade point average, Graduate Record Examination (GRE), and more. The GRE requires substantial preparation. Furthermore, if the exam is taken in haste resulting in a low score, retesting may be an option, but the Educational Testing Service keeps GRE scores on file. So, even if a higher score is achieved on the retest, graduate schools receive all of the officer's scores, which could affect acceptance. Therefore, officers need to make sure they identify if the GRE is required early enough to allow sufficient preparation time. Also, keep in mind that GRE results are only valid for five years from the test date. During this entire process, it is essential for officers to communicate with their branch representatives about their plans. HRC is a resource for officers to ensure they understand where they stand and what they need to do to compete for these opportunities.

Once officers decide to compete for one of these assignments, then they need to begin assembling their packets and submit them before the deadline in the MILPER message. This is more complicated than it sounds. First, the officer needs to see if any waivers are needed for the eligibility requirements. This can be a tedious process so the officer will need time to get the proper paperwork for submission. Second, many of these opportunities require multiple letters of recommendation usually from a colonel or above. This may even involve writing draft letters and submitting them to the recommender for refinement. This all takes time if the officer wants to receive the types of letters that are needed for selection. Next, the officer needs to work on any writing requirements for the application. Many of the opportunities require writing samples on various topics specified in the MILPER message. They are usually personal, and the word limit is low, requiring brevity. Writing about themselves makes many people uncomfortable and requires serious effort to produce a good product. I went through seven drafts each before submission of two 500-word essays. In addition to all of these requirements, the officer usually needs to provide official copies of undergraduate transcripts to include in the application packet. These take time to arrive so planning is critical. Finally, once a packet is submitted, it goes before a selection board. I have no knowledge of the HRC selection board process and therefore will not speculate.

I am currently in a broadening assignment and can attest to the need for thorough preparation. I scrambled to compile all the required inputs to meet the selection board deadlines. Despite the effort required, the rewards of the broadening assignment outweigh the work to obtain it. The ability to focus on our profession through the lens of an academic environment that is not part of the military education system is a very liberating feeling. Other unique points of view will challenge ideas and probe the deeper questions with fewer preconceptions. These academic opportunities synergize powerfully with the combat experiences that many officers have already

obtained. Utilization in positions that leverage officers' talents and expand their horizons follows the academic portion of the program. The most exciting part about most of these opportunities is that officers can return to operational assignments more recharged and competitive than ever.

Coming out of company command into a world of seemingly unlimited possibilities is daunting and overwhelming. MFE junior officer assignments are very linear and do not require significant officer involvement to remain on track. That allows many officers to neglect planning their careers because they can succeed early on without much management. The key is to have the foresight to think ahead so that when the time comes and the choices are much less clear officers are prepared to manage their careers. Broadening assignments are not the only opportunities after KD time and they may not be every officer's idea of a desirable assignment. It is still important to look into these assignments to confirm or deny the preconceptions of desirability. It is also important to have multiple options available in both developmental and broadening opportunities in case officers are unable to pursue their preferred courses.

As leaders, officers need to do the research and invest in their careers, even if they are thinking about leaving the Army. The time will pass rapidly from lieutenant to captain, and before long the officer is looking at promotion to major. That is not the time to realize that career progression requires management. In hindsight, I was fortunate to have been able to take advantage of this opportunity. Reliance on "luck" rather than a conscious effort to plan to take advantage of the opportunities that the Army provides to its leaders is not a good course of action. Broadening assignments serve to benefit officers, but more importantly, they strengthen our Army for an uncertain future.

Notes

¹ "Marching Orders: 38th Chief of Staff, U.S. Army," U.S. Army Chaplain Corps website, accessed 28 May 2013, <http://www.chapnet.army.mil/pdf/38th%20CSA%20Marching%20Orders%20%28January%202012%29.pdf>.

² "Broadening Opportunity Programs," HRC website, accessed 26 May 2013, https://www.hrc.army.mil/officer/broadening%20opportunity%20programs_building%20a%20cohort%20of%20leaders%20that%20allow%20the%20army%20to%20succeed%20at%20all%20levels%20in%20all%20environments.

³ Henry A. Leonard, "Something Old, Something New: Army Leader Development in a Dynamic Environment," Vol. 281. Rand Corporation, 2006, xviii.

⁴ "Infantry Officer Timeline," HRC Infantry Branch website, accessed 26 May 2013, https://www.hrc.army.mil/site/protect/branches/officer/mfe/infantry/attach/infantry_officer_timeline.pdf.

MAJ Eric B. Alexander is an Infantry officer who is currently serving as an action officer with Headquarters, Department of the Army, G8 Quadrennial Defense Review, Washington, D.C. His previous assignments include serving as a platoon leader, Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Fort Campbell, Ky.; executive officer, Charlie Company, 1st Squadron, 61st Cavalry, 506th Regimental Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, OIF and Fort Campbell; commander, Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry, 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, OIF and Fort Carson, Colo.; commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2-8 Infantry, Fort Carson; and action officer for Korea, The Joint Staff - J5, Northeast Asia Division, Washington, D.C. MAJ Alexander has a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Drexel University and a master's degree in public policy management from Georgetown University.
