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**Doing What Matters With Less**

“America is not at war. Marines are at war while America is at the mall.” This is the solemn refrain of Marines who have been in the thick of the fight for nearly 9 years. As an institution, however, the Marine Corps has no stones to cast. Despite this longest period of continuous warfare fought by an all-volunteer force, the Marine Corps as an institution stubbornly remains a peacetime garrison bureaucracy. Marines and Marine units have accomplished a litany of valiant feats and key innovations since 2001, yet the institution as a whole has refused to come to terms with the fact that war demands prioritization and that a decade of war demands a thorough clearing of the bureaucratic deadwood that has accumulated in the peacetime Marine Corps. The failure of the Marine Corps’ institutional leadership to streamline requirements and prioritize Marines’ efforts with an eye toward our sole reason for being (winning the Nation’s battles) detracts from combat readiness, negatively impacts safety, and drives combat-hardened Marines out of the Corps. As an institution, we have perverted our can-do culture and failed our Marines by imagining we can do more with less. As we near a decade of continuous combat operations, it is high time that we reevaluate our priorities, shed the load of inefficient and meaningless tasks, and shift our mindset from doing more with less, to doing what matters with less.

Multiple factors collude to pile our Marines high with an ever increasing “soldier’s load” of tasks. These range from meaningful administrative and pre-deployment training to bureaucratic busy work to outright time wasting. Because we have not had the moral courage to acknowledge that even Marines can’t do everything, we are breaking our Marines’ backs under the weight of countless, unprioritized commitments. The rhythm of prolonged combat forces a grinding cycle of training and deployment, while hard-won battlefield lessons have demanded additional training and education for all Marines. These commitments have been layered on top of an already busy peacetime routine, while information technology and a bureaucracy that rewards “good ideas” and preventatives that can be summarized in fitness report bullets have peppered Marines with even more requirements from all levels of the institution. New tasks come down via email or Marine administrative messages weekly, each an emergency. In this environment where everything is a priority, nothing is a priority, and life becomes a constant juggle of dropping one task to complete another. While we say we are not a zero-defect Service, the ease with which the term “failure of leadership” is tossed about means that Marines prioritize not on lines of combat readiness, mission accomplishment, or safety but by focusing on those tasks that are most likely to draw higher headquarters’ attention if not quickly completed.

Institutionally, every incident is answered with new levels of centrally directed and provided training, usually accompanied by tracking and reporting requirements. If not computer-based, training is all too often provided in mass briefings. Both venues are utter failures. Computer-based training is generally clicked through with the volume muted while busy Marines complete other work. Mass briefings are received by sullen audiences resentful of having their time wasted on topics they already know by rote. Recently, when an O-6 briefing an audience of over 1,000 Marines accidentally closed his Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, he was met with universal applause in an open (and perhaps deserved) show of disrespect. Marines are hostile to endless training requirements, but more importantly, they disrespect the centralized and impersonal approach to issues that should fundamentally be handled by small unit leadership. There is no personal approach to training and thus no buy-in when Marines are individually huddled in front of computers or passively sitting through a mass brief.

Small unit leaders, who are positioned to make a much greater impact, are unable to ply their trade as time and opportunities for them to lead, mentor, and counsel their Marines are whittled away. What senior leaders do not consider is how their failure to properly prioritize their requirements has handed small unit leaders the impossible mission of doing everything with less. This state of affairs has come about because structurally the Marine Corps has no incentive for efficient use of manpower. As a government institution, it has no profit motive driving efficiencies. The military is unique among government institutions in being an almost wholly salaried Service of individuals who can be ordered to work any hours a commander desires. There is no payroll penalty to inefficient use of manpower. Among the Services, the Marine Corps is unique in having a culture that exalts doing the impossible on minimal resources and penalizes negative feedback signals on the rare occasion when they are pushed up the chain of command, further compounding the problem. Over the past decade we have become extremely meticulous about tracking and optimizing the efficiency of equipment utilization, yet while we pay lip service to the toll of high operational tempo, we have done virtually nothing to optimize the utilization of our most precious resource—our Marines.

The growing accumulation of tasks owes itself to two key phenomena. First, information technology has made it far too easy for disconnected staff sections at echelons above reality to levy training and other requirements. “Good ideas” are quickly packaged electronically and rained down on thousands of Marines below with little thought given to the accumulated man-hour cost and the other priorities with which they compete. With the profusion of special staff sections and their alternate chains of tasking and reporting, commanders easily lose track of the requirements levied in their names. These requirements all too often come with a demand for rapid action and “by name” reporting of completion that can be tracked back up at the stratosphere. The ease with which such requirements are levied means that little cost-benefit analysis is done, and there is no appetite suppressant mechanism to prevent overtasking.

Second, at lower levels of the chain of command, the Marine Corps’ culture and promotion system prevent the sort of feedback that is needed to signal the absurdity of the situation. Can-do culture, a near-zero-defects promotion system, and a dangerous trend of groupthink, reinforced by the echo chamber that Marines live in, all prevent Marine leaders from saying “enough is enough.” At the lower levels of the chain of command, the absurdity of the current climate is clear, yet leaders show a lack of the moral courage required to demand a better way.

In a world where everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. Worse, Marines begin to make up their own priorities in the absence of guidance. Key personnel, the busiest Marines in the unit, strive to juggle all balls, accomplishing the requirements expected of their Marines, then comforting themselves with the thought, “If we can find time to do it, then so can our Marines.” Yet our Marines may not be able to juggle tasks as swiftly and efficiently. They also may have other tasks, layered on by subordinate leaders, adding to their load. Unable to do all things well, Marines make up their own priorities. The commander knows what is important and what is not, but the signals the institution is sending to his Marines are ambiguous at best. Often the most trivial of tasks in the grand scheme of our true mission are tracked by “hit lists,” yet the institutional leadership does not get a list of what Marines forgo in order to get these trivial tasks done. They don’t get the list of the Marines who skip lunch, put off medical appointments, cut corners on maintenance or training practices, fail to thoroughly inspect the work of others, or spend extra time at work rather than with their families. This list seems benign, but these things, among others, are the real and direct results of misguided leadership, and each of them is impacting the lives of our Marines. Together they directly contribute to decreased personnel and material readiness at best and suicides, motor vehicle accidents, and ground and aviation mishaps at worst. Marine leaders soul searching for ways to reduce these misfortunes should start with deep introspection as to whether they have lived up to their moral obligations to care for their Marines, even if that means telling superiors far removed from the realities of daily life at the unit level that they simply cannot accomplish all of their tasks and must drop some to focus on what matters. Senior leadership must embrace a new ethos of doing what matters with less.

The Marine Corps speaks to the promotion of moral courage, but beyond the shallow willingness to criticize uniform infractions and haircuts, moral cowardice is the way to avoid negative recognition and climb the ranks while those who truly care about doing what matters begin to look for the exit. If the Marine Corps is serious about operational excellence and improving safety, it must return to the true tenets of its institutional culture. This is no small matter and requires the involvement of institutional leadership at all levels. First, “doing more with less” is short for “doing more than others would with less.” In reality, it means doing what matters to the Marine Corps in its role as the Nation’s expeditionary force with less. To excel at doing what matters, we must acknowledge what does not matter, or at least does not matter as much. Second, in doing what matters with less, the Corps must return to its professed tenets by trusting and empowering junior leaders.

Redundant reports should be eliminated, inefficient training streamlined, and wasteful administrative burdens reduced. Could information assurance training be conducted in a less gratingly wasteful way? Once we have our nuclear, biological, and chemical and rifle range briefs memorized, can we test out and proceed directly to the practical application perhaps? Better yet, can we use that time for more advanced training? How many hours are wasted annually shuffling paperwork through 10 wickets to get a signature that should not be required on a naval format letter that required three revisions to ensure the format was correct and the signature block was positioned perfectly? The opportunities are legion, but a shift must occur in mindset for them to become apparent.

In many cases, load shedding of unnecessary tasks will involve culling superficialities for which the Corps has a deep institutional fondness. There is an element of institutional pride and unit cohesion in the appearance issue, but the focus on superficialities often comes at an expense to substance. Consider the over 800 man-hours invested in preparation for a battalion-level change of command. A unit may be thought to be unprofessional if it forewent the “troop and stomp” for a simpler ceremony, but would it not be much more substantively professional if it spent that 800 man-hours training for its primary mission? Although the thought is certainly a bridge too far, would Marines be better off if they spent less time at the barber shop and more time in professional study, combat conditioning, or with their families? Did anyone tell Chesty Puller he was not a motivated Marine because he did not have a high and tight? In another instance, consider the time wasting that goes on around the Corps during the weekly field day. How many clean windows are dutifully wiped down? How many floors could be buffed monthly instead of weekly? Beyond the time issue, undue focus on superficialities erodes Marines’ confidence that the institution cares about what truly matters.

Finally, we must entrust our junior leaders to do those things that do matter. If there is training to be done, provide small unit leaders with training aids and let them run it. Let these leaders lead. They cannot do any worse in motivating their Marines to succeed than a computer or the speaker at the front of the auditorium. Given properly prioritized missions and the time to accomplish them, these Marines will need no hit lists to make it happen.