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Crisis of confidence

More leaders than ever say Army needs an about-face

By Michelle Tan

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Only 26 percent of active Army leaders from sergeant to colonel said they believe the Army is headed in the right direction to prepare for the challenges of the next 10 years, according to an annual survey on Army leadership.

Citing the Army's plans to shrink the force and political correctness among the key reasons, this marks an all-time low, down from 33 percent in 2010 and 38 percent in 2006.

Reserve-component leaders showed slightly more optimism than their active Army counterparts — 35 percent agreed the Army is headed in the right direction, while 30 percent disagreed. Even these numbers, though, show a decline. In 2010, 43 percent agreed and 25 percent disagreed.

"My personal opinion is [that's because of] the angst the Army is feeling, going through downsizing and the unknown fiscal environment," said Col. Thomas Guthrie, director of the Center for Army Leadership, which conducts the annual leadership survey.

At the same time, the 2011 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership, released July 30, also showed the quality of leadership in the Army continues to be strong.

The report lists key reasons leaders believe the Army is not headed in the right direction, including:

- An inability to retain quality leaders.
- A lack of discipline or the belief that the Army is too soft.
- Ineffective leaders at senior levels.
- Senior leaders' tendency to focus on the wrong priorities.
- Promotions or advancements for junior leaders are happening too soon.
- Insufficient resources, funding or technology.

In addition, 24 percent of respondents said the Army's plans to shrink the force will "significantly impact" the service's ability to respond to future conflicts. Also, several comments show that political correctness or the influence of politics in the Army is another reason the Army is not headed in the right direction, according to the report.

Respondents who provided these comments "generally cited the negative influence of government policy makers (outside the Army) as being detrimental to the future of the Army, and indicated that senior Army leaders themselves felt the need to 'politically correct solutions' to appease policy makers, or to 'play politics' within their own organizations," the report states.

This year's leadership survey was sent to a random sample of 116,742 soldiers and civilians in November. Of those, 20,415 participated — more than 16,800 of them soldiers E-5 through colonel — for a response rate of 17.8 percent.

Of the respondents, 15 percent were deployed at the time of the survey.

"The beauty and the beast of doing an annual survey is sometimes all we're doing is confirming and maybe denying some of the trends we're seeing," Guthrie said. "In my opinion, this year there's not that a-ha moment or something surprising. Overall ... the leadership, the activity of leading others, is being rated very strongly. The trust in leaders to put the mission and organization ahead of themselves is high." Leadership is the key to the Army profession, Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno said in a statement.

"It is very important for us to be introspective, and we are committed to continual self-assessment," he said. "The U.S. Army is a learning organization, and we use studies such as the annual survey of Army leadership to help assess where we are as an Army and review our leadership development strategies."

Staying in

Survey respondents indicated a commitment to the Army, and most signaled a strong intent to stay in uniform.

Thirty percent of active-duty leaders and 40 percent of reservecomponent leaders are eligible for retirement but choose to stay in uniform. This includes 58 percent of field grades and 61 percent of senior noncommissioned officers on active duty.

Of those who are not yet eligible for retirement, 63 percent on active duty and 76 percent in the reserve components said they plan to stay in the Army for more than 20 years or until they are eligible to retire.

Among active-duty captains, whose retention has long been an Army priority, the 2011 survey showed 40 percent of active-duty company grade officers, including 45 percent of captains, plan to stay in the Army for more than 20 years or until they are eligible to retire.

But there also is a lot of uncertainty within the ranks. A steady trend since 2009 shows 41 percent are undecided about staying beyond their current obligation or staying until retirement.

The 2011 survey also found 16 percent of active-duty company grade officers probably or definitely intend to leave the Army when they complete their current obligation.

Leadership

Sixty-five percent of Army leaders had favorable views of their superiors as leaders, while 68 percent had favorable views of their peers.

In addition, 76 percent of leaders with direct supervisory duties considered their subordinates to be effective leaders. Nine percent considered their peers to be ineffective; 7 percent considered their subordinates to be ineffective; while 16 percent perceived their immediate boss to be an ineffective leader.

According to the report, Army leaders were rated favorably for their ability to get results, prepare themselves and lead others, but continued to receive low ratings for their ability to develop others.

Respondents said 59 percent of leaders were effective at developing their subordinates, while only 45 percent were rated effective at creating or identifying opportunities for leader development.

In addition, 26 percent of Army leaders said they think their unit places a low priority on ongoing methods of leader development, while 32 percent of junior level leaders said they don't believe they have time to develop subordinates.

Developing others "continues to be, there's a four-year trend where we're flat-lining at a pretty marginal rate, where leaders are saying their leaders rate low in developing them," Guthrie said.

"Developing leaders is what we do," he said. "We have to figure out a way to scratch the itch of the leaders, so we're taking a hard look at how we can improve unit leaders', unit commanders' development programs that can help us get on an upward trend." One challenge the Army faces is leaders have varying views on what it means to develop others, Guthrie said.

Some view it as a single event, such as an officer or NCO professional development session. Others may view it as personal, one-on-one counseling or coaching with their commander.

"It's a continuous process, it never ends, so every day is a day you can be developing others," Guthrie said. "It's the combination of education, training and experience that develops you."

Toxic superiors

The survey shows one in five leaders were perceived as toxic, which is described in the report as leaders who promote themselves at the expense of their underlings and usually do so without considering long-term ramifications to their subordinates, unit or the Army profession.

The findings were similar in the 2010 survey.

Perceptions of toxic leadership were more frequently found among junior leaders and were less pronounced at senior levels.

Junior NCOs were more likely to be perceived as demonstrating behaviors frequently associated See **LEADERS next page**

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LEADERS From **previous page** with toxic leadership. For example, staff sergeants and sergeants first class were rated least positively by their subordinates, while lieutenant colonels, colonels and general officers were less often viewed by their direct report subordinates as exhibiting negative leadership behaviors or actions, according to the report.

Of all toxic leadership indicators, selfishness or "careerism" is a pivotal behavior demonstrated by these leaders. These leaders also tended to ignore constructive criticism and set misplaced priorities.

The 2011 survey, for the first time, assessed respondents' opinions on the Army's personnel management system, which revealed that more than half of active-duty leaders felt the personnel system did not identify ineffective leaders. Only 20 percent agreed that the system effectively catches ineffective leaders and assigns them accordingly.

In addition to a system that does not effectively discriminate between levels of performance, according to the report, the manpower demands of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to "leaders being promoted in order to fulfill necessary leadership requirements, and as a result, many junior and midgrade leaders were advanced in rank regardless of their performance or input from evaluation reports." Some of these issues likely will be alleviated in the near future, Guthrie said, as the Army works to revamp its officer evaluation report and tightens up its promotion selection rates as part of the downsizing of the active force.

"By virtue of the Army going through downsizing, you're going to see promotion rates go down," Guthrie said. "Frankly, leaders need to provide honest feedback [in officer and NCO evaluations]. Not everybody can be in the top 10 percent."

Discipline

Most senior leaders, 78 percent, believe company-level leaders effectively maintained discipline in their units while deployed, compared with 64 percent while in garrison.

A larger percentage of junior NCOs reported unit discipline problems compared with other rank cohorts.

Problems occur, according to the report, when standards are relaxed; leaders are inexperienced, immature or ineffective; or when fraternization occurs. On the flip side, discipline problems declined when positive leadership principles were followed and standards were enforced.

The Army must continue to emphasize that leadership and discipline apply whether soldiers are at home or deployed, especially as the Army transitions after more than a decade of war and back-to-back deployments, Guthrie said.

"The notion that we have leadership in combat and it's vastly different from the leadership we demand in garrison is a faulty notion," he said. "Leadership is leadership regardless of what we're doing."

Preparing for war

Another area in which leaders can improve, according to the report, is in the preparation and training that leaders receive before deployments.

Ratings by Army leaders who deployed within the past 36 months show that 62 percent are satisfied or very satisfied with the preparation they received, and 61 percent gave high ratings to the collective training they received before deploying.

However, company grade officers and junior NCOs — those who are most often on the front lines and going on missions and patrols outside the wire — indicated greater percentages of dissatisfaction and rated collective training to be less effective than the other rank groups.

Junior leaders are typically less positive in general, Guthrie said, but leaders can't tell from the survey data why a higher percentage of them say they are dissatisfied.

"Perhaps it is because of the greater threat to lives that junior leaders generally experience in combat missions that makes them feel less confident about their training," Guthrie said. "Perhaps the training at below company level is more difficult to represent realistically compared to training above company level."

What's next

Guthrie said he wants to work on ways to help commanders and leaders better develop others.

This could include: ■ Building a small cadre of experts who can advise brigade and battalion commanders.

■ Developing a pocket guide for small-unit leaders on leadership responsibility and tips on how to develop their subordinates.

■ Requiring brigade-level commanders to execute a unit-level 360 Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback event, which provides leaders with evaluations from their subordinates, peers and superiors.

Overall, Guthrie said he is pleased that Army leadership — "the activity of leading others" — is strong across the service.

"The trust in our leaders to do what's right as opposed to looking out for themselves is strong," he said. "But there is a disconnect. Army leaders are saying they're not being developed by their senior leaders, and we've got to figure out ways to tackle that." □