

## “YOU’RE FIRED:” A DECISION FRAMEWORK FOR RETAINING OR REPLACING COMMANDERS

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**“YOU’RE FIRED:” A DECISION FRAMEWORK FOR RETAINING OR REPLACING  
COMMANDERS**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Institutional leaders take innumerable actions in the course of normal operations. These actions are underpinned by complex decision-making processes that often are not clearly articulated. Few acts are more profound for a leader than that of firing, or removing, a subordinate upon whom the leader relies. Militarily, the decision to remove a commander is even more important because the stakes are lives and fates of nations. This paper provides a framework for understanding the multifaceted decision-making process that leaders apply when deciding whether to retain or remove a commander. The framework defines the process from the end state: the leader concludes that the commander should be retained, either because he is desirable or acceptable, or the leader resolves that the commander must be removed or replaced due to low organizational effectiveness or poor leadership performance. This framework also accounts for internal and external influences on the decision-making process, including the timing, feasibility, acceptability, suitability, and risk of the decision in the larger social, political, military, and economic context.



## “YOU’RE FIRED:” A DECISION FRAMEWORK FOR RETAINING OR REPLACING COMMANDERS

The loyalties which center upon number one are enormous. If he trips, he must be sustained. If he makes mistakes, they must be covered. If he sleeps, he must not be wantonly disturbed. If he is no good he must be pole-axed. But this last extreme process cannot be carried out every day.<sup>1</sup>

—Sir Winston Churchill

“The general remedy for the want of success in a military commander is his removal.” General Robert E. Lee penned this line to Confederate President Jefferson Davis nearly a month after his loss at the Battle of Gettysburg in July of 1863. Lee concluded his letter with a request to be relieved of command.<sup>2</sup> Three days later, President Davis replied, “where am I to find that new commander who is to possess the greater ability which you believe to be required?”<sup>3</sup> One hundred forty-six years later in May 2009, President Barack Obama relieved the first wartime commander since General Douglas MacArthur, when he asked General David M. McKiernan, the top United States military officer in Afghanistan, to resign. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates explained the decision saying, “Today, we have a new policy set by our new President. We have a new strategy, a new mission and new ambassador. I believe that new military leadership is also needed.”<sup>4</sup>

Lee retained his post; McKiernan was replaced. Were the decisions appropriate? What are the justifications for relieving a commander? Churchill’s quote hints at the complex balance required to provide loyal support as commanders grow into responsibilities, while concurrently holding those commanders accountable. This paper provides a framework to analyze criteria and considerations that underlie leaders’ decisions to retain or replace (“fire”) commanders. Further, it can serve as a tool for

Leaders who are able to identify where subordinates reside within this framework to make better decisions and improve their communications and guidance. Likewise, a commander aware of his position within the framework can better comprehend the environment in which the leader is acting and shape his conduct to address his leader's concerns.

### A Theoretical Beginning

It is generally accepted that leadership contributes to key organizational outcomes.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, constructive leadership consistently and positively impacts team effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> The antithesis also holds true: poor leadership detracts from an organization's effectiveness. Effectiveness is comprised of many variables, both internal and external to the organization<sup>7</sup> and is an assessment of results.<sup>8</sup> Assessing organizational effectiveness is a difficult process involving many complex, interrelated factors.<sup>9</sup> Awareness of those factors is necessary when attempting to isolate any variable, including the leader's independent contribution to organizational effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

There are two critical purposes of leadership. A leader must help the group accomplish its task and sustain group function.<sup>11</sup> There is a balance between the two purposes. However, if forced to prioritize, task accomplishment takes precedent. Fundamentally, a group is formed to execute a task. The successful accomplishment of the task justifies the group's creation, even if the group is poorly maintained. The opposite does not hold true. A well-maintained group that fails to accomplish its reason for existence is ineffectual.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of whether leadership is viewed through a transactional or transformational lens, there are nonetheless, interactions among leaders and

followers.<sup>13</sup> Their relationships attain more complexity when the followers are also the heads of organizations that in turn serve the original leader. For instance, the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps is the autonomous leader of his organization yet a follower of the U.S. President. The President provides guidance and resources, via Congress, to support the Commandant. The Marine Corps executes its missions, the results of which impact the President's strategies and policies. The President's and Commandant's effectiveness are interactive. These complex individual and organizational interactions, and attendant concepts of organizational effectiveness, must be constantly and concurrently considered.

Whenever a commander is replaced, there are opportunity costs. The organization pays the costs in terms of effectiveness. The leader's decision calculus must account for the disruptive and destabilizing forces involved in commander succession. Changes to formal and informal organizational relationships may generate new ideas and infuse enthusiasm; however, they may damage morale, cohesiveness, and effectiveness.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, debate abounds concerning the time lag between commander replacement and the manifestation of positive impacts to organizational effectiveness. These factors may influence the feasibility, acceptability, and suitability of the commander's replacement or retention and the resultant risk and timing of the leader's decision.

#### Replace/Retain Commanders Model

To explore the above concepts, the following model provides a framework for a leader to replace or retain a commander in which the "Leader" represents anyone in a position of authority over a "Commander" in a hierarchical system. The Commander holds a position of authority at the top of an organizational structure, albeit subservient

to the Leader.<sup>15</sup> Relationships are interactive, and the framework to understand the one between the Leader and Commander is comprised of two axes.

The horizontal axis represents the Leader's decision to monitor or act based upon the Leader's perception of the Commander's performance. Assessing the situation, the Leader determines to continue to diagnose, analyze, or forecast problems (monitor) or take immediate action to solve a problem (act).<sup>16</sup> In this framework, a Leader deciding to act replaces, fires, relieves, or removes the Commander. Conversely, a monitoring Leader keeps, retains, or holds on to the current Commander. Monitoring includes examination of performance conditions (goals, structure, resources), performance processes (effort, knowledge, strategies), and outcomes, including the Leader's own satisfaction with them.<sup>17</sup> Though not easy, the Leader must interpret what influences interfere with the Commander's organizational accomplishment and minimize their constraining impact.<sup>18</sup>

The vertical axis measures the Leader's perception of organizational effectiveness. An organization exists to accomplish certain goals; the accomplishment of its goals defines its effectiveness.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the vertical axis reflects a Leader's perception of the effectiveness of the organization led by the Commander, with "high" representing the perception that an organization successfully accomplishes its assigned tasks and "low" representing the perception that an organization has failed to achieve the desired results.

Within an organization, special responsibility for effectiveness belongs to the Commander.<sup>20</sup> As the Commander leads the group, his performance is defined by his contribution to organizational goals and his ability to maintain that organization.<sup>21</sup> The

Leader assesses the Commander's performance subjectively based upon his values and the values of the organization that the Leader heads.<sup>22</sup> A Leader's most common measure of Commander performance is the Leader's perception of the extent to which the Commander's organization accomplishes its defined goals.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the Leader's assessment of organizational effectiveness is necessarily an evaluation of Commander performance.<sup>24</sup> Because "effectiveness is the bottom line and organizations cannot exist without it," organizational effectiveness is measured by the vertical axis as a proxy metric for Commander success.<sup>25</sup>

The intersection of the Leader-focused horizontal axis and the Commander-focused vertical axis creates four quadrants. Each quadrant reflects the Leader's perceptions of a Commander and related retention decisions. The quadrants are labeled: Replace, Resolve, Desire, and Accept. A Leader deciding to act would fire a Commander that resides in the Replace and Resolve quadrants. A monitoring Leader would Desire and Accept a retained Commander. Within the quadrants are descriptors (see Figure 1) that provide specificity to the framework.

*Desire.* Desire represents the most optimal relationship between the Leader and the Commander. The desire quadrant is the least contentious and easiest to understand. When the Commander and organization accomplish their assigned task, the Leader will simply monitor and the Commander retains his post. The Leader continues to monitor the performance of future assigned tasks and may give the Commander additional responsibilities in light of his success.

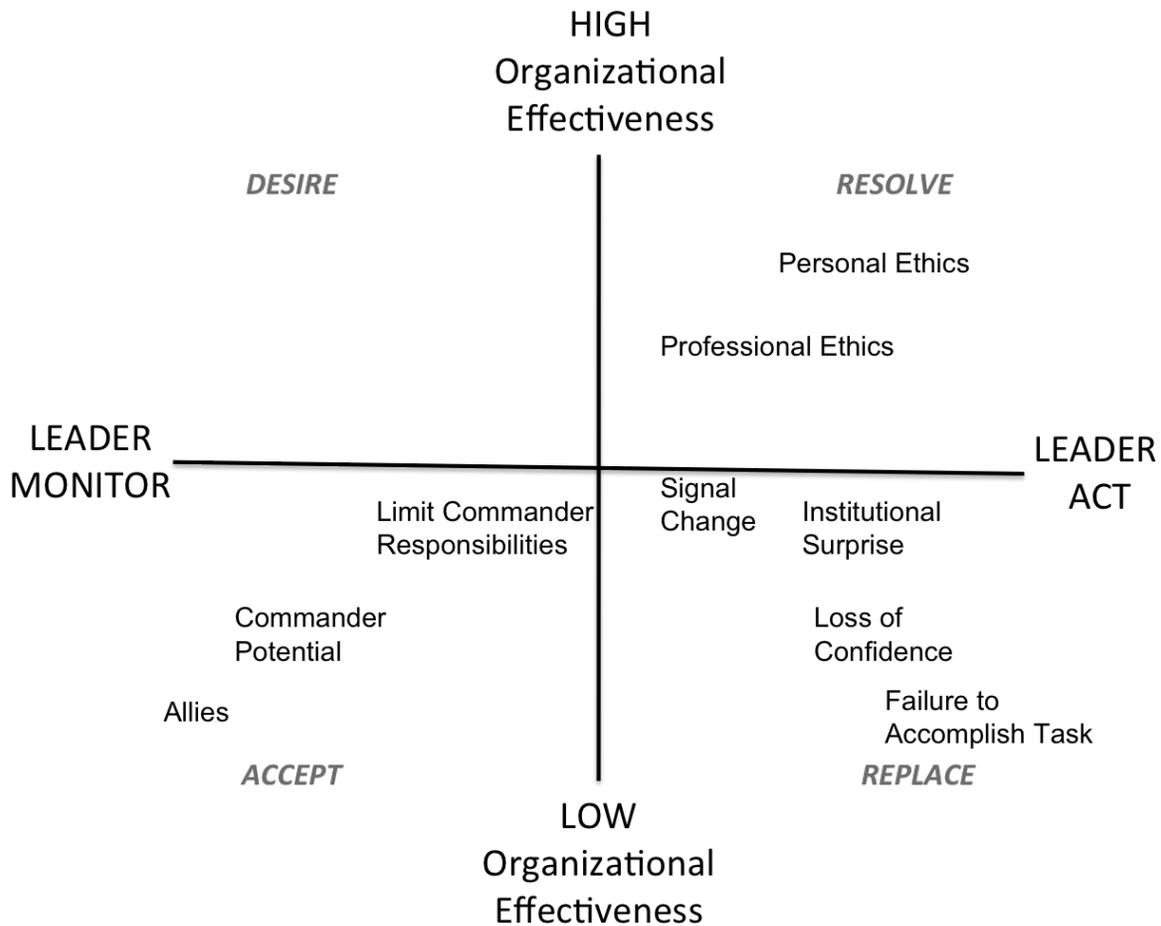


Figure 1. Retain/Replace Commander Framework (with descriptors identified within each quadrant)

General Ulysses S. Grant provides one of the greatest examples of a Commander recognized by a Leader as having achieved high organizational effectiveness at multiple levels of Command. Grant's performance, as determined by his units' success, was desired by Lincoln. As a result, Lincoln continued to promote Grant to higher levels of responsibility, calculating that Grant's performance would translate to higher levels of organizational effectiveness. From regimental to army command, in all cases, it did.<sup>26</sup> In spite of high casualty rates at Shiloh, rumors of drunkenness, and a chorus of demands for his removal, Grant achieved results.<sup>27</sup> Lincoln, desiring Grant's

Command performance, retained him and continued to expand his responsibilities saying, "I cannot spare this man, he fights."<sup>28</sup> By March 1864, Grant was promoted to general-in-chief of all Union armies.<sup>29</sup>

*Replace.* The Replace quadrant is the least optimal relationship between the Leader and Commander. The Leader perceives low organizational effectiveness that he attributes to poor Commander performance, which warrants the Leader replacing the Commander.

*Replace: Failure to Accomplish Mission.* In April 1861, the Confederate States of America began the Civil War in earnest by attacking Ft. Sumter. Less than four months later, Union Brigadier General Irvin McDowell, commanding troops around Washington D.C., was goaded by officials in Washington to advance.<sup>30</sup> His mission was to move forward, defeat his Southern opponent, and go "on to Richmond," the Confederate capital.<sup>31</sup> Against McDowell's better judgment, he advanced.<sup>32</sup> On July 21, 1861, an equally inexperienced Confederate force defeated McDowell's green army at the First Battle of Bull Run. The defeat became a rout.<sup>33</sup> The next day, Irvin McDowell was sacked.<sup>34</sup> The timeliness of McDowell's relief from command speaks to the cause-effect nature of his relief. The Union Army had failed to accomplish its mission. President Lincoln recognized the low organizational effectiveness and removed McDowell within 24 hours.

*Replace: Loss of Confidence.* Loss of confidence simply reflects a Leader's loss of faith in the Commander's ability to positively impact organizational effectiveness, which may result from a single event or from steady declining faith in a Commander.

In Fall, 1862, Major General Ambrose Burnside, was ordered to take command of the Army of the Potomac over his own protestations.<sup>35</sup> “Burnside may have lacked self-confidence, but the Lincoln administration initially had faith in him.”<sup>36</sup> His mission was the same as Irvin McDowell’s mission: Advance, defeat the Army of Northern Virginia, and seize Richmond. After reorganizing the army, Burnside complied with his orders.<sup>37</sup> The result was a crushing Union defeat at the Battle of Fredericksburg. The loss took with it the confidence of the Army of the Potomac’s officer corps. Lincoln recognized Burnside could not recover; as the Army had lost confidence in Burnside, so had Lincoln.

*Replace: Signal Change.* A Leader may replace a Commander to signal change. Seeking a new strategy in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan was relieved of command as the senior U.S. Commander. His replacement signaled a need for “fresh thinking” on efforts in Afghanistan and coincided with a newly elected President and new ambassador to the country.<sup>38</sup> Within the Framework, a Leader would assess organizational effectiveness as slightly low. In McKiernan’s case, lower effectiveness is reflected in comments made that the military, “can and must do better,” and that McKiernan’s leadership was, “not bold or nimble enough,” to break the current stalemate.<sup>39</sup>

*Replace: Institutional Surprise.* Failure to anticipate a calamity may cause a Leader to assign responsibility for the disaster to the Commander. The organization’s failure to foresee surprises, respond in a timely manner, and take appropriate ameliorative measures is perceived by the Leader as failure by the Commander. Accordingly, the Leader replaces the Commander.

Perhaps the greatest unforeseen American catastrophic event was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Although Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, Commander In Chief Pacific, prepared the fleet for war, neither he nor the majority of American senior commanders anticipated the attack.<sup>40</sup> Arguably, it was a collective failure. Yet ten days after “the day that would live in infamy,” Admiral Kimmel was relieved.<sup>41</sup> The attack signaled low organizational effectiveness among forces in the Pacific and reflected poorly on all levels of Leader and Commander performance. Nonetheless, Kimmel was in Command of the forces attacked and was replaced.

*Resolve.* In this complex quadrant, the Leader must resolve the cognitive dissonance between a perception of high organizational effectiveness and an assessment that the Commander must go. The Commander performance variable is key. Further, in spite of the primacy of a Leader’s desire for goal accomplishment, descriptors in this quadrant reflect a Commander’s failure to maintain the group by professional or personal ethics violations. The decision to attrite a Commander for ethics violations is as much a response to the Commander’s behavior as it is a mechanism to bolster professional/cultural norms.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the Leader’s decision signals all interested actors, like the public and media, that responsibility entails accountability and values are enforced.

*Resolve: Professional Ethics.* Major General George Patton was relieved at the conclusion of the allied invasion of Sicily, August 1942. Patton’s army acquitted itself well, and Patton’s performance demonstrated his drive and alacrity in leading the unit.<sup>43</sup> However, his performance was compromised when he berated and slapped a veteran suffering from shell shock.<sup>44</sup> General Eisenhower learned of Patton’s behavior and was

livid. Fearing social outrage and subsequent calls for Patton's permanent dismissal, Eisenhower wrote to Patton that he understood drastic measures to secure objectives, but it "does not excuse brutality, abuse of the sick, nor exhibition of uncontrollable temper in front of subordinates."<sup>45</sup> Eisenhower had to resolve the disconnect between the organizational effectiveness that Patton had achieved with his failure to uphold professional values.

*Resolve: Personal Ethics.* Leaders regularly replace Commanders, regardless of organizational effectiveness, for personal ethics violations. For example, in 2005, the Chief of Staff (COS) of the Army relieved one of the service's 11 four-star generals for having an extramarital affair.<sup>46</sup> General Kevin Byrnes, a successful 36-year veteran, had shown high organizational effectiveness leading Training and Doctrine Command.<sup>47</sup> The COS had to resolve the conflict between Byrnes' organizational effectiveness and his personal failure. Byrnes, although separated from his wife, was still married.<sup>48</sup> His relationship technically constituted adultery, a Uniform Code of Military Justice violation. Byrnes was removed for his actions, to show the public that the army was serious about integrity issues, and to enforce Army cultural norms and good order and discipline.

*Accept.* In this four-descriptor quadrant, a commander and organization are ineffective and a Leader decides to monitor rather than replace the commander.

*Accept: Limit Responsibilities.* Short of replacing a Commander, a Leader may decide to retain a Commander with modified responsibilities. A Leader may adopt this course in recognition of external factors impacting the Commander's organization or specific Commander strengths or limitations. He may limit a Commander's responsibilities in order to allow a Commander to focus on specific tasks or facilitate

professional development. These adjustments clarify roles, reinforce performance norms, and account for individual performance measures to improve the effectiveness of the Commander's team.<sup>49</sup> Finally, a Leader may adjust organizational structure to buy time to develop an acceptable/suitable replacement.

In November, 1861, President Lincoln replaced General Winfield Scott with thirty-four year old Major General George B. McClellan. McClellan was the youngest general-in-chief of the armies in U.S. history when he also assumed command of the Army of the Potomac. Lincoln immediately appreciated McClellan's obligations, noting, "this vast increase in responsibilities...will entail a vast labor upon you." McClellan replied, "I can do it all," but a mere five months later, with McClellan floundering in the Peninsula Campaign, Lincoln realized that he could not.<sup>50</sup> Assessing low organizational effectiveness in the overall Union effort and the Army of Potomac, Lincoln modified McClellan's responsibilities to enable him to focus his time, effort, and talent on raising the effectiveness of one organization, the Army of the Potomac. Lincoln relieved McClellan as general-in-chief.<sup>51</sup>

*Accept: Commander Potential.* A Leader may Accept a Commander's low organizational effectiveness if he sees potential for future success warranting the investment of time and resources. The amount of time that a Leader will tolerate for a Commander to adapt to his post is situation dependent. Regardless, the Leader and Commander must both know that Acceptance based on potential is fleeting.

General Eisenhower, Allied Commander for Operation Torch, was charged with ousting the Germans and Italians from North Africa.<sup>52</sup> He struggled. Battlefield losses; disgruntled allied relationships; and poor air, land, and intelligence coordination plagued

the campaign.<sup>53</sup> “Miserable” was the characterization of his first battle performance at Kasserine.<sup>54</sup> Eisenhower retained poor Commanders, failed to affect a unified effort, and feebly executed his leadership responsibilities.<sup>55</sup> Fortunately, Allied Leadership recognized that external conditions -- training shortcomings, poor equipment, and lack of combat experience throughout the U.S. Army -- hindered Eisenhower’s organizational effectiveness and were beyond his immediate sphere of influence.<sup>56</sup>

The Allies eventually achieved victory in North Africa, demonstrating improved effectiveness. It can also be said that the period in which Leadership would Accept low effectiveness under Eisenhower ended. His apprenticeship in high command at the cost of men, resources, and time, had passed.<sup>57</sup> In Eisenhower’s case, the Acceptance of his performance in North Africa was wise. His experience enhanced performance and guided the effective Allied effort in Sicily, Normandy, and Germany to successfully conclude World War II.

*Accept: Lack Suitable Replacement.* A Leader may have to Accept a Commander with low organizational effectiveness if there is no suitable replacement, as insinuated by the exchange of correspondence between Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis. General Lee, citing his failure at the Battle of Gettysburg (low organizational effectiveness) assessed his performance and proactively contributed to President Davis’s retention decision-making process. However, Lee must have known, as did Davis, that the assessment was not entirely candid. General Lee’s performance may have been low, but President Davis could not act, as there was not another general of Robert E. Lee’s actual or potential quality. Lack of a suitable replacement drove Davis to Accept and continue monitoring Lee’s leadership of the Army of Northern Virginia.

*Accept: Allies.* The presence of allies also can drive a Leader to determine that a Commander with low organizational effectiveness is acceptable. It may not necessarily be the Commander's performance but what the Commander represents that needs to be considered. It is the Leader's efforts to accomplish a higher task that drive the decision to accept an allied Commander whose performance, while tactically or operationally low, provides a strategic benefit such as the maintenance of a coalition. The Leader's organizational effectiveness is enhanced by this acceptance.

During World War II, the Allied command structure in Europe placed General Eisenhower in supreme command. Bernard Montgomery, a notable British general, served under Eisenhower. Montgomery's political, social, and national ties caused Eisenhower to keep him, despite his weak military showing in Sicily and sluggish counterattack at the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>58</sup> Eisenhower knew the strategic value of maintaining the prestige of a principle ally outweighed any operational benefit derived from his removal.

*Temporal Considerations.* Leaders execute their duties in a volatile, uncertain, changing, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment.<sup>59</sup> As conditions change, so too does the dynamic, analytic environment underlying the Framework. The Commander and the organization's efforts to accomplish their assigned tasks impact the environment, which creates an ever-changing analytic Framework. As a result, the Leader's assessment of an organization's effectiveness reflects a snapshot in time valid only so long as the environment underlying the Framework is valid. Consequently, a Leader's assessment of an organization and a Commander adapts. Therefore, a Commander may move from one quadrant to another.

Assume a Leader determines that a Commander and organization are ineffective. He replaces the Commander. It is doubtful that the new Commander instantly makes the organization more effective. However, the new Commander has the potential to succeed and begins in the Accept quadrant. Over time, as the organization accomplishes its tasks, the Leader assesses that they have moved from Accept to Desire. Likewise, lateral movement from Desire or Accept to Replace or Resolve is possible with falling effectiveness.

At the height of the Patton slapping controversy, Eisenhower recognized Patton's value acknowledging that "Patton is indispensable to the war effort."<sup>60</sup> Eisenhower Resolved the issue by replacing Patton, but only temporarily. Apologizing to his command, Patton reconciled his professional values and assuaged the public outrage. Given command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army awaiting the Normandy invasion, Patton moved from the Resolve to Accept quadrant. As 3<sup>rd</sup> Army spearheaded the breakout from the Normandy beachhead, Patton moved from Acceptable to Desired as his performance and 3<sup>rd</sup> Army's high effectiveness was identified as critical to the war's successful conclusion.

#### Leader's Decision to Replace a Commander

The decision to replace a Commander is complex. Everyone who has an interest that is affected or potentially impacted by the decision will judge it. First, the Leader must respond to those to whom he is directly accountable. Secondarily, he must account to the media, the public, and other actors both sympathetic to and in competition with the Leader's and Commander's organizational goals. The Leader must consider the logic of his decision in terms of feasibility, acceptability, suitability, and risk. Feasibility, acceptability, and suitability address the validity of the decision, what is

possible. Risk assesses the decision's probability of success or failure in the context of the environment and desired effects.<sup>61</sup>

*Feasible.* Feasibility describes the degree to which something is capable of being done.<sup>62</sup> For a Leader replacing a Commander, feasibility relates strongly to legitimacy, addressing what is lawful and conforming to accepted rules and standards.<sup>63</sup>

Hierarchical structures provide the Leader authority over the Commander and make the Commander accountable to the Leader. In this way, legitimacy is established. The Leader then has a right to replace or retain a Commander. The Commander is aware of the conditional status of his billet, and knows that his job security depends, to a large extent, upon the Leader's perception of his performance. The more ambiguous the law or custom supporting the chain of authority, the greater the question of feasibility (read: legitimacy) of a Leader firing a Commander.

*Acceptable.* Acceptability involves the credibility of the Leader's decision to replace or retain a commander. Acceptability accounts for the largest number of intangibles, including leadership experience and qualifications, "public and world opinion, the actions/reactions of allies, actors, and adversaries," and risk.<sup>64</sup> Because of the breadth of actors and inherent diversity of opinions, acceptability is the most vague, subjective validation criterion. At the same time, it is arguably the most important in terms of institutional and systemic adoption of the decision. The environment can shape and obscure the acceptability of a Leader's decision.

Although he successfully invaded and occupied Sicily in the summer of 1943, General Patton's slapping of a battle-fatigued soldier provided a feasible rationale for his relief when there were suitable replacements available.<sup>65</sup> However, the acceptability

of the decision was in question. Patton's behavior was unacceptable to the press and the public, but he achieved results that were winning the war. Eisenhower knew that the sooner the war ended, the more lives would be saved. Institutional wisdom held that, although the slapping incident was regrettable, the relative cost in lives to be lost in the future without Patton in command did not warrant the risk of his permanent removal.

A Leader's credibility is often at stake in the decision to replace or retain a Commander. A Leader may feel pressure from the public, the media, his party, and allies to continue to monitor or to act. For instance, within the Accept quadrant, a Leader who is monitoring a struggling Commander bears the burden of being negligent if the cost in time and resources does not merit the acceptance of lower effectiveness or fails to contribute to future success in a timely manner. Personal Leadership experience may also complicate credibility. Does having former military service help or hinder a strategic Leader removing a Commander? Does previous experience deciding to replace a Commander facilitate or hamper future decisions?

President Lincoln's martial background was modest.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, he took his responsibility as Commander-in-Chief seriously. Lincoln studied military strategy to improve his knowledge, and arguably confidence in his own judgment to better evaluate policy, strategy, and Commanders.<sup>67</sup> He fretted over Commander's reliefs and their political, military, and media implications.<sup>68</sup> Lincoln's judgment, focus upon his own organizational effectiveness and goals, and experience contributed to the clarity with which he viewed Commander performance and his credibility as a Leader capable of relieving Commanders. An experienced Lincoln, who removed multiple Army Commanders, is contrasted with the young Allied Leader, General Eisenhower.

Eisenhower struggled with the decision to relieve poor Commanders in North Africa.<sup>69</sup> However, Eisenhower's Leadership growth during Operation Torch taught him to be "tougher, even ruthless, with subordinates."<sup>70</sup> This perspective contributed much to his confidence, judgment, and credibility to act with celerity in the replacement of underperforming Commanders throughout the rest of World War II.

*Suitable.* The Leader's decision must answer the following suitability questions. Does the replacement or retention of a Commander improve organizational effectiveness? Alternatively, is there another Commander with the ability to improve organizational effectiveness while accommodating transition costs that warrants Leadership's support? In March of 1862, Lincoln met with members of the Committee on the Conduct of the War, who clamored for McClellan's removal. "Anyone" should replace him, they offered. Lincoln responded, "anybody will do for you, but not for me. I must have somebody."<sup>71</sup> At the time, Lincoln did not have confidence in any substitute for McClellan.<sup>72</sup>

*Risk.* The probability of success or failure and their incumbent costs represent the risks inherent in a Leader's decision to Accept or retain the current Commander. Replacing a Commander may not improve organizational effectiveness, and if it does, it will take time before the Commander's performance contributes to the organization's effectiveness.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, if the Leader Accepts the Commander, even temporarily, he saves the opportunity costs fundamental to changing the Commander.<sup>74</sup> In the Davis/Lee example, Davis realized the Confederacy was in peril and could ill afford the time required to change commanders, even if one was available.

## Additional Considerations

Within the Retain/Replace Commander Framework, descriptors are defined by primary causal factors, such as mission failure. However, in most cases, it is reasonable to expect many of the descriptors apply. For instance, mission failure may inflate a growing loss of confidence in a Commander, and the decision to replace him is made to signal a change.

A Leader, like a Commander, is responsible for all that his organization does and fails to do. Leaders are obligated to mentor junior Commanders. For long-term organizational effectiveness, Commanders must ascend to Leadership. Formal and informal obligations for Leaders to mentor Commanders are most obvious within hierarchies, less so crossing institutional and occupational specialties. For instance, military Leaders mentor junior Commanders regularly, but there are fewer expectations that Leaders in the executive branch of civilian government will mentor military Commanders.

Because of opportunity costs associated with replacing a Commander, a Leader may continue to monitor effectiveness and modify the organization. Increasing staff size with proven subordinates and providing more resources may constructively allow the Leader to avoid the opportunity costs of replacing a Commander yet improve organizational effectiveness. In this case, a Commander may reside in the “replace” quadrant, but through the Leader’s ability to modify the environment, the Commander is retained as Accepted or even Desired.

Many variables impact organizational effectiveness. As the organizational size, dispersion, tasks, and responsibilities grow, so does the interactive complexity of the variables affecting the organization. The volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous

nature of the environment obfuscates the degree to which the organization can be assessed. The Leader's dilemma is to see through the fog to assess effectiveness within the nature of the system.

### Challenges to the Replace the Commander Framework

Some assumptions within the Retain/Replace Framework are debatable. For instance, in light of the many variables that contribute to effectiveness, coupling Commander performance exclusively to organization effectiveness is arguable.<sup>75</sup> Further, placement of descriptors within quadrants may not be as definitive as the Framework suggests. For instance, Loss of Confidence may reside in the Resolve vice the Replace quadrant. Additionally, leadership is about relationships and those are personality driven. The Framework cannot account for every nuance of personal and organizational relations. Nonetheless, the Framework provides a starting point to inform analysis.

The Retain/Replace Commander Framework is more relevant at the highest levels of leadership. Its application at lower hierarchical levels also is valid, with some necessary qualifications. The lower on the hierarchical scale, the greater the need for Leaders to Accept Commanders in order to mentor them. At the lowest levels, learning is taking place almost exclusively (e.g. corporals training lance corporals). Furthermore, at the lowest levels, there is less "replace/retain" decision making authority, and junior Leaders have fewer opportunities to reduce responsibilities while monitoring performance.

This framework is germane regardless of where upon the spectrum of activity (peace to war) the Commander and the organization are operating because it represents a snapshot in time. However, some of the contributing concepts may be

affected. For instance, the amount of time and resources that a Leader deems acceptable to train a Commander may decrease as the pressure on the Leader for overall results rises. Militarily, because Commander decisions can constitute the difference between life and death, and the fortunes of a nation in war, the chaotic battlefield provides a distinctive looking glass to evaluate Commander performance and organizational effectiveness.<sup>76</sup> A Leader has the harsh feedback of battlefield victory or defeat to assess Commanders. Furthermore, a Leader may more heavily consider replacing a Commander knowing the risk and opportunity costs inherent to Commander succession. In peacetime, the cost for replacing a Commander is the opportunity cost of time; whereas in war, it may equate to lives. A Leader's acceptance of poorly performing allied Commanders may grow in wartime to maintain a coalition vital to greater strategic goals. Finally, the feasibility, suitability, and acceptability standards for Leader decision-making can become more stark or blurred depending upon the organizational effectiveness and perceived performance of the Leader to those whom he is accountable.

There are additional peacetime considerations that make it more difficult for Leaders to assess if Commanders are toxic or weak, such as those executing well-established training and deployment cycles. The relatively lethargic training field does not provide the fiery furnace of combat to refine high performers from the dross of those deficient in leadership skills.

### Conclusion

A Leader's decision to retain or replace a Commander is not a simple one. Before Leaders face the hard decision to retain or replace a Commander, the Retention/Replace Framework can serve as a tool. Knowing where in the Framework

the Commander resides provides the Leader valuable insights to sharpen criticism and expand mentoring guidance. Likewise, conscientious and self-critical Commanders can assess where upon the Framework they currently are located and shape their actions and communications to improve effectiveness and facilitate an accurate Leader assessment of their performance.

Faced with effectiveness or performance observations that demand a Leader consider a Commander's future fate, the Framework provides a structure to consider the issue. Acknowledging that Leader's must balance the tasks of mentoring junior Commanders and enforcing accountability, the Framework informs the environment, considerations, impacts, and risks that will underlie the Leader's ultimate decision to retain or replace the Commander.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Langworth, *Churchill by Himself: The Definitive Collection of Quotations* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 483.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, eds, *The Wartime Papers of R.E. Lee* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), 589.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard J. Fullenkamp, U.S. Army War College Strategic Leader Staff Ride: An Overview of the Gettysburg Campaign with Selected Correspondence (Carlisle Barracks: U.S Army War College, 2009), 35.

<sup>4</sup> CBS News World, "U.S. Commander in Afghanistan Ousted: Gen David McKiernan Asked to Resign As U.S. Begins New Phase In Battle With Taliban" May 11, 2009 (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/05/11/world/main500621.shtml>) (accessed November 24, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> David V. Day and Robert G. Lord, "Executive Leadership and Organizational Performance: Suggestions for a New Theory and Methodology," *Journal of Management* 14, no. 3 (1988).

<sup>6</sup> Susan E. Kogler Hill, "Team Leadership," in *Leadership Theory and Practice*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. ed. Peter G. Northouse (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2004), 214.

<sup>7</sup> Walter C. Borman, "Job Behavior, Performance, and Effectiveness," *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Vol 2. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. eds. Marvin D. Dunnette and Leaetta M. Hough (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1990), 276.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>9</sup> J. Richard Hackman, Richard E. Walton, "Leading Groups in Organizations," in *Designing Effective Work Groups*, eds. Paul S. Goodman and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986), 87.

<sup>10</sup> Hill, "Team Leadership," 233.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>12</sup> Marshal Sashkin and William E. Rosenbach, "A New Vision of Leadership" in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. eds. Robert L. Taylor and William E. Rosenbach (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 50. Individuals exhibiting both behaviors of task accomplishment and interpersonal relations were identified by their peers as leaders. Those who engaged in high levels of task-related activity but only average relationship-centered behavior were sometimes still designated as leaders. Finally, peers rarely viewed those who only engaged in high-levels of relationship building behavior as leaders

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 52. James MacGregor Burns first distinguished the differences between transactional and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership is based upon economic quid pro quo transactions between leaders and followers that mutually satisfies the leader's and the followers' self-interests. Transformational leadership engages followers to achieve something significant while being morally uplifting and concerned with the collective interests of the group as opposed to their own self-interests.

<sup>14</sup> Robert C. Giambatista, W. Glenn Row, Suhaib Riaz, "Nothing Succeeds Like Succession: A Critical Review of Leader Succession Literature Since 1994," *The Leadership Quarterly* 16, (2005): 964.

<sup>15</sup> While the connotations associated with the terms Leader and Commander insinuate a civil-military relationship such as the President to a general, or an entirely military command context, the model is applicable to all hierarchical relationships. The designations Leader and Commander can reflect inter or an intra-business, governmental, and military relationship as long as a legitimate authority structure exists.

<sup>16</sup> Hill, "Team Leadership," 206.

<sup>17</sup> Hackman, "Leading Groups in Organizations," 104.

<sup>18</sup> Hill, "Team Leadership," 216.

<sup>19</sup> John P. Campbell, "Modeling the Performance Prediction Problem in Industrial and Organizational Psychology," *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Vol 1. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. eds. Marvin D. Dunnette and Leaetta M. Hough (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1990), 704.

<sup>20</sup> Hill, "Team Leadership," 207.

<sup>21</sup> John H. Campbell, et al., "A Theory of Performance," *Personnel Selection in Organizations*, eds. Neal Schmitt, Walter C. Borman and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993), 38.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, "Modeling Performance Prediction," 705.

<sup>23</sup> Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Borman, "Job Behavior, Performance, Effectiveness," 276.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell, "Theory of Performance," 41.

<sup>26</sup> Wilmer L. Jones, *Generals in Blue and Gray: Volume 1 Lincoln's Generals* (West Port: Praeger Publishing, 2004), 172. From commanding a regiment in June of 1861, Grant's successive successes at Forts Henry and Donaldson, led to his command of an army at Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga in the fall of 1863.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen R. Taffe, *Commanding The Army of the Potomac* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 145.

<sup>30</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, Curt Johnson, and David L. Bongard, *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military Biography* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 468.

<sup>31</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry Freedom* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1988), 339.

<sup>32</sup> Taffe, *Commanding The Army*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> McPherson, *Battle Cry Freedom*, 344.

<sup>34</sup> Taffe, *Commanding The Army*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, *Generals in Blue*, 151. Twice previously, Burnside had turned down the offer to command the Army of the Potomac because he did not feel qualified for it.

<sup>36</sup> Taffe, *Commanding The Army*, 62.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Ann Scott Tyson, "Gates Replaces Top General in Afghanistan," May 12, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2009/05/11/ST2009051103732.html?sid=ST2009051103732> (accessed November 23, 2009)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Gordon W. Prange, Donald M. Goldstein, Katherine V. Dillon, *Pearl Harbor: The Verdict of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1986), 422.

<sup>41</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, Curt Johnson, and David L. Bongard, *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military Biography* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 403.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen J. Gerras, Leonard Wong, Charles D. Allen, "Organizational Culture: Applying a Hybrid Model to the U.S. Army," *U.S Army War College Strategic Leadership: Selected Readings* (2009), 312.

<sup>43</sup> Dupuy, *Harper Encyclopedia Military Biography*, 578.

<sup>44</sup> Patton was in his own words trying "to put some fight back into him."

<sup>45</sup> H. Essame, *Patton: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 112.

<sup>46</sup> Josh White, "4-Star General Relieved Of Duty: Rare Move Follows Allegations of an Extramarital Affair," August 10, 2005, I <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/09/AR2005080900515.html> (accessed February 7, 2010)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> David Moniz, "Fired General Refused to Avoid Woman, Army Says," August 16, 2005 [http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-08-16-general-dismissed\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-08-16-general-dismissed_x.htm) (accessed February 7, 2010)

<sup>49</sup> Hackman, "Leading Groups," 87.

<sup>50</sup> James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 51.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 79. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Lincoln assumed general-in-chief responsibilities temporarily

<sup>52</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Solider, General of the Army, President-Elect 1890-1952* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 182-183. General Eisenhower had been chosen as the Allied Commander for the invasion of North Africa on July 25, 1942.

<sup>53</sup> Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2002), 400.

<sup>54</sup> Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Solider, General*, 231.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>56</sup> Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2002), 399.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of General Dwight D. Eisenhower*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970), 572-576. Eisenhower believed the

German Army had reached its culminating point in the Battle of the Bulge and expected Montgomery to attack on 1 January, 1944. Montgomery did not attack and complained of command relationships and his desire to be given overall command of the land battle. It was not until he was convinced that Eisenhower would not budge on authorities, relationships and plans that he launched his uncoordinated counterattack two days late.

<sup>59</sup> Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, *Strategic Leadership Primer* (Carlisle: United States Army War College, 2004), 12.

<sup>60</sup> David Andrew Smith, *George S. Patton: A Biography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003), 90.

<sup>61</sup> Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (U.S. Army War College, 2006), 70.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Agnes, ed. *Webster's New World Dictionary and Thesaurus* (New York: Macmillan Inc, 1996), 226.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>64</sup> Yarger, *Strategic Theory*, 70.

<sup>65</sup> Battle fatigue was a generic condition that in modern times we associate with post traumatic stress.

<sup>66</sup> McPherson, *Tried by War*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 76, 78, 139, 141.

<sup>69</sup> Ambrose, *Supreme Commander*, 175.

<sup>70</sup> Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 533.

<sup>71</sup> McPherson, *Tried by War*, 76.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>73</sup> Giambatista, "Nothing Succeeds Like Succession," 979.

<sup>74</sup> W. Glenn Rowe et al., "Leader Succession and Organizational Performance: Integrating the Common-Sense, Ritual Scapegoating, and Vicious-Circle succession Theories," *The Leadership Quarterly* 16, (2005): 201. For example, studies show that changing hockey managers mid-season does not improve organizational effectiveness.

<sup>75</sup> Steven N. Jones, *Improving Accountability for Effective Command Climate: A Strategic Imperative*, Strategy Research Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, April 7, 2003), 7.

<sup>76</sup> Leonard Wong, Paul Bliese, Dennis McGurk, "Military Leadership: A Context Specific Review," *The Leadership Quarterly* 14 (2003), 660.