

**Lt Kirsty Skinner AGC(ETS) at the CHACR Workshop on “Identifying, developing and managing talent” – 30 Nov 16.**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October we held a Young Officers’ Forum here at Robertson House to try and gather some of the frustrations that YOs currently face which may contribute to their decision to leave the Army.

I could stand up here and provide a verbal version of the document that was produced as a result of the Young Officer’s Forum but I don’t want to do that and I’ll explain why. When we conducted the Forum it was set with the intention of coming up with solutions to the frustrations faced by Young Officer’s; it was felt that we needed to provide solutions otherwise it would just be viewed as a day of whinging with no tangible output and therefore we would be dismissed completely.

I’m not taking anything away from the report itself, it’s a perfectly workable document and it highlights a number of the issues raised on the day. But having had time to reflect I can recognise that whilst we did try to provide some potential solutions, some of which are in line with what Army HQ are apparently doing, when reading it back there is no heart in it. The passion from the day itself and the themes discussed doesn’t come through.

By focusing on providing solutions, we became bias towards the issues that could be fixed more easily rather than addressing the bigger underlying issues that we didn’t necessarily know how to solve but they’re the issues that get people fired up. Focusing on results, data and solutions can detract from the human elements of an organisation. The value of the Army is in our people, yet they are difficult to quantify.

In an attempt to solutionise, we ended up with ideas such as incentivising those in more demanding roles; but money is a lazy solution. Some people may be motivated by money, but research suggests that the majority of millenials are not; they want to do work that has an impact. Which type of people do you want leading soldiers, those motivated by money, or those motivated by a desire to make a difference?

When you ask people why they are leaving, the first answer is usually, “because I can get paid more money to do a desk job somewhere else”, but when asked a few more questions almost all of them will mention that it’s the combination of being paid more and being listened to or recognised. Too often we hear people say, “The Army doesn’t care”. “They ask but they don’t really listen”. “They don’t really want to know what’s wrong”. People want to feel valued and they want to know that the Army cares. YOs don’t want to just be a manning number that fills an empty PID.

Perhaps we could be labelled the greedy generation because millenials want it all. We want to have an exciting and interesting career that allows us to gain an array of skills and travel around the world, but we want to choose where we live and be allowed to remain close to that area because of our family. We want a flexible career path but we also want job security and we want to do jobs that we are passionate about that allow us to have a positive impact on the organisation; there is an element of wanting it all.

People want a purpose. Part of that sense of purpose is being respected, valued and trusted by the organisation. We want to be included in the future development of the Army. We may not be privy to all of the information and we don't have the experience that you have, but does that mean we can't be included in discussions? There is a risk that by excluding YOs in the early years, an "us and them" mentality develops. If people feel that they are not relevant until they are wearing a crown on their chest, many talented individuals will leave before they reach that point.

When compared to some civilian industries where people in their 20s and early 30s are put on a fast track system or are even running their own companies, the 8-10 year wait for a new rank slide doesn't look so appealing. This is amplified when not only are talented people having to wait a set amount of time before they gain a voice that is listened to, but in the current climate, it seems they will receive that rank slide at the same time as their peers who have performed below them throughout their career. A perceived lack of meritocracy is a turn off for talent.

When I stood up at the RUSI conference the issue I was trying to raise was that we are losing people before they get to sub unit command, yet many of the incentive schemes or talent development opportunities seem to be aimed at people beyond ICSC. It's all well and good offering extra qualifications or placements in industry, but if a significant amount of talent has already left the system then is it actually improving the current situation? As far as we know the current schemes such as placements etc are aimed at Major and above. I have no doubt that there are valid explanations for these not being offered at a lower level, but the opinion amongst YOs is that it is probably out of fear that we would jump ship to the organisations we did placements with. If this isn't the case then the real reasons may need communicating to us. If it is the case then perhaps there are larger underlying issues that need to be considered. There may be a risk that some people will leave as a direct result of attending a placement, but there is also a chance that actually they will see that other large organisations don't get everything right either, and actually the Army is a pretty good deal. Sometimes we need to take that risk.

Communication and engagement are key. YOs want more of a connection with senior leaders, whether that be direct chains of command, or the wider Army personalities. We like to know what's going on, hearing discussions amongst senior leaders gives us some context and something to aim for or look up to. It gives us direction, which we are then able to pass on to soldiers. At events such as the RUSI conference there were very few young officers present, why? Was it offered and they didn't take it up, or was the event and its benefits not publicised appropriately to that audience? I was lucky enough to attend and it was a really eye-opening experience for me, not just because all of this work has come as a result of asking a question there, but to hear the opinions of people I would never normally hear from like CGS, senior leaders from other militaries, people from industry and Michael Fallon. It was also my first attempt at networking which was slightly daunting based on the audience, and I had conversations across a spectrum. At one end I had conversations with Brigadiers and Colonels who both appeared genuinely interested in talking to me but at the other end I had conversations with 2 people that stick in my

memory. They looked at my rank slide immediately and then spent their time looking around for someone else to talk to. Now that might be because I'm boring or they genuinely weren't interested in what we were talking about, but it made me feel really self-conscious and like I might as well not bother. Small things can make such a big difference, and can really impact how someone feels both about themselves, but also about the organisation they're a part of.

Trust seems to be a recurring theme in current discussions. The comments from Young Officers and NCOs suggest that they do not feel supported by their CoC. They are being overloaded with tasks and therefore paperwork which detracts from their day-to-day jobs. There is a general feeling that they just want someone more senior to turn around and say no. No we can't take that on because we are already doing too much. No I won't bring the entire unit back from leave because it's not required. However, people don't feel that this will happen because leaders are too busy looking up and worrying about how they will be perceived for their next OJAR rather than realising that their subordinates are overworked, frustrated and unhappy in the workplace.

So when trying to identify talent, what are you judging it on? There is a risk that by utilising reports, we might miss the bigger picture and people can seem like someone they are not. Are you looking at performance outputs or are you getting a 360 picture of an individual? Are you looking for a set of competencies, and if so do those competencies represent a rounded individual with a blend of leadership and management features or does the list resemble competencies expected of a tactical commander?

Defining talent is difficult and deciding how to measure it is even more so. Therefore identifying it becomes difficult too. What makes someone more talented than someone else? I will leave that for later on. But in terms of the people you are looking for, the Army doctrine states that for future conflict we need agile thinkers who are able to think innovatively and creatively to outsmart the enemy. Yet our culture appears to reward those who 'play the game' and nod in the right places at meetings and dinner parties, whereas those who question are seen as trouble makers who are disloyal. The Army wants to create a culture of continuous improvement and lifelong learning but in order to improve we need to look at things critically; you can't continuously improve if you assume something is the best it can be already. So who is the most loyal to the future of the Army; the person who nods or the person who questions?

Conforming is easy, going against the grain is not. If we encourage a culture of conformity at the bottom then as those people progress up the ranks, we may be left with a cohort of individuals who a) can't think for themselves and b) who all come up with the same solutions. So when you are looking for talent, what is it you are actually looking for? Are you looking for someone with a different outlook or are you looking for the person who looks and sounds familiar?

Many of the people I've met who are leaving the Army are very bright, intelligent people who look at things with fresh eyes and can see how things could be better,

but they've become frustrated and tired of fighting the system. Too often we take critique as an attack on ourselves, particularly if it's against an idea that we created. We need people who question the status quo in order to be the best we can be. The people leaving out of frustration are the people we need to keep. They are the ones who care about the future of the Army. But at the grass roots level, it's felt that there is a risk that saying something challenging could jeopardise your career. There are also concerns that you won't be listened to because of your rank. As a result of writing an iBook about leading intelligent people, a fellow Lieutenant was told "how can you possibly have an opinion about leadership, you're only a Lt". This is why I proposed the British Army Intrapreneur's Network (BrAIN).

It's intended to be a network of passionate, innovative and diverse individuals who question the status quo in a constructive manner. GEMS may be an innovation capture method but it is focused on solutions; it is not a system for creating a culture change. Individual people can make a difference in their units by making small changes in how they treat people. This is intrapreneurship – it's about creating change from within. Not only could BrAIN offer a forum for individuals to share their ideas but it may also be a pool for you to tap into to test ideas or new systems or to gather thoughts from. We will not sit formally within the hierarchy and it will remain owned and organised by junior officers, however it is vital that we are supported by senior leaders in order to demonstrate to those involved that we have a genuine purpose and can potentially make changes in the future. I am not going to test the people that want to be a member and deem whether they are talented or not, but this network will be entirely voluntary, so anyone who is involved in it is motivated and wants to be a part of the Army's future development. Brig Bill Wright has been extremely supportive of the BrAIN idea and has very kindly provided his own detailed response to the report from the CHACR forum. He has also passed on responses from other department heads regarding specific issues. This has already had a significant impact on the feeling within the YO cohort. Just being listened to has made us feel valued and as if we are important – I cannot emphasise enough what that has done for morale, so thank you to those who have been supportive already.

Before I conclude I just want to highlight a few points raised by my peers on JOLP last week when looking at the programme for today.

When it comes to identifying talent. What is it you are looking for? Are there places for people who don't necessarily fit the mould? Some YO's are concerned that their skill set will not be recognised if they're judged based on their performance on courses such as JOTAC or CWC. Which raises another question; which level are you trying to identify it at? If starting at Maj upwards, are we going to miss the talented Lt's and Capt's, who could have made excellent Lt Col's if they had stayed in long enough?

Supporting the most talented. Mentoring suggests that the information always needs to be passed down. Is there a place for reverse mentoring or shadow boards similar to what BAE do? What about coaching? For providing a voice they like the BrAIN as it's outside of the CoC which has its benefits. It has already spread quite widely through word of mouth and people know that it's coming into fruition, although some

are still sceptical about how much support we will actually receive from senior leaders.

Rewarding Talent. Do you want people to stay in the Army for financial incentives? Opportunities for development may arguably be more desirable than remuneration in some instances. This also has a greater impact on recruitment –many organisations are allowing their best people to go outside and do other things because they spread good messages about the company. In one particular conversation last week with a bright young Lt from the Artillery he said he was going to see out his 3 year commission because he felt the Army didn't care. When I asked him whether he would recommend others to join the Army, he said, "If they had something about them and they were actually an intelligent switched on person, I would tell them not to join the Army because they will be wasted". Is that the message we really want to send?

I want to finish with a couple of points. People are the key in any organisation and we cannot afford to narrow our focus on the easy short-term wins. You cannot use a plaster to stop an arterial bleed. Find what the root cause is and at least acknowledge it even if it cannot be fixed easily. Be open and honest in communications with us where possible, it will foster trust and encourage greater respect.

Please engage with us, allow us to see into your worlds and perhaps let us participate where we can. We don't expect all of the answers to come from Army HQ, but do you? Allowing us to see some humility from Army HQ, might create a more open dialogue and also make people less fearful of being posted there. We know that everyone is very busy, so please consider using us to get a diverse working group together to tackle issues. BrAIN could be used for this purpose in some instances so please consider it. There is an entire Army of people (literally) that may be able to come up with fresh, new ideas. I'm not saying that every member of the Army wants to be involved but there are more of us out there than might be clear on first look – some are in hiding as the biggest cynics in the units.

Engagement is key, people need to feel valued and need to feel that what they are doing is worthwhile. When holding events like this – could it have a more open audience? Many of my peers would have liked to come to this event, even if they had already attended the YOs' version. There are clearly benefits from conducting separate forums but if there are opportunities to invite YOs to events usually aimed at more senior members, please let us know.

I am also entirely aware that sometimes YO's are our own worst enemies. Some people will not speak up or be seen to try something new out of fear of being regarded as "a screamer" or being isolated from their peer group. I have seen first hand that actually your peer group can be the biggest barrier. So I am not coming at this with rose tinted spectacles. I know change isn't easy and I know that some people are happy with the status quo and just want to be left alone. But what and who is it you are really looking for? Who do you want driving the organisation?

My final point. Right at the beginning of organising the YO conference, I attended a meeting here in smart civilian attire and was waiting in the corridor when I met a Colonel by the drinks machine (I will add he was not from CHACR). He asked what I was doing here and I mentioned I was doing an event with CHACR about talent and then a few moments later he asked where I was from and I said "Oh I'm a Lt in the ETS" and he closed up immediately. So my final point, see the person behind the rank slide; we all have our own interests, experiences and perspectives and you never know, we might surprise you.

Thank you.