



Retired Gen. Johnnie Wilson Discusses Talent Management

■ By Arpi Dilanian and Taiwo Akiwowo

Spc. Patrick Mayo, 118th Maintenance Company, 224th Sustainment Brigade, plots his map coordinates during the land navigation event of the California Army National Guard Best Warrior Competition in November 2016 at Camp San Luis Obispo, California. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Eddie Siguenza)



As he rose through the ranks, from a 17-year-old private to a four-star general, retired Gen. Johnnie E. Wilson earned a reputation as a gifted sustainment leader who knew how to manage talent. We sat down with him to get his impressions on how the Army manages talent, to learn leadership lessons from his 38-year career that culminated with him being the commanding general of Army Materiel Command, and to find out what he tells future Army recruits.

What kind of challenges did you face in managing talent?

Throughout the force, we always had a tremendous amount of talent, just as the Army does today. My biggest challenge was to identify, out of that huge pool, the individuals who would perform best in the myriad of positions in our authorizations document.

I would spend a considerable amount of time going to our operational divisions to receive briefings,

FEATURES

A former commanding general of the Army Materiel Command and a Vietnam-era sustainer provides his insights on talent management.

not just from the senior leaders but their subordinates as well. This allowed me to assess talent resident within my organizations. Face-to-face discussion often revealed skills not captured in personnel files. During my quarterly discussions, I always would have commanders determine who the talented people were that we needed to put in specific positions or deploy to a combat zone area.

Should talent management play a big role in building readiness?

People are readiness. We could have the best tanks and aircraft in the world, but if we do not have the qualified people to man, sustain, and deploy them, we will not be ready. The chief [of staff of the Army], the secretary of the Army, and all the major commanders have a real commitment to maintaining readiness at the highest levels. As such, they will not deploy a unit unless it's at a C1 or C2 readiness level. That's really the only way to do it.

What does the Army need to do to make the new talent management program work?

Under the leadership of Lt. Gen. James McConville, the personnel community has done an awesome job putting together such a comprehensive program. This 21st century talent management program will allow us to capture all skill sets, military and civilian.

The most important component is the integrated personnel and pay system, which will serve the total force. The Army will be able to view all the talent resident throughout the force, and our Soldiers will have a first-class system to help manage their careers.

Prior to deploying the software system, the Army needs to ensure all requirements are identified and satisfied. Further, leadership has to be engaged at all levels for this to work, and we need an educational campaign to ensure everyone is aware throughout

the force of this upcoming program.

What role should sustainment leaders play?

Leaders need to be closely engaged at the appropriate levels to ensure success. They have to find a way throughout the course of a busy week to conduct face-to-face counseling and performance evaluations. Also, leaders have to find out from their Soldiers what it is that they want to be or to do in five to 10 years. They have to know who they have in the pipeline to support the varied logistics requirements.

In today's environment, our leaders are extremely busy; however, I cannot think of anything more important than development of our talented subordinates. It is invaluable. It is our key to our success.

Are there lessons the Army can learn from industry on talent management?

Absolutely. In the corporate sector, managers frequently conduct face-to-face counseling of individuals. And they may have a 360-degree performance evaluation system, so employees hear not only from their superiors but also from peers and subordinates. That seems to work exceptionally well because if they have toxic leaders they find out early on. You cannot wait until a leader loses control of his or her organization because then, out of fear, the people around them will not come forward and say, "Boss, would you like to relook this decision?"

When I was on active duty—whether I worked eight, 14, or 16 hours a day—if I could, I would break away and take a couple hours and go to the motor pool or to the warehouse just to stop in and visit with the troops. It was well worth it; it made my immediate subordinates a little nervous, but believe me, just the sheer fact that I took the time to go and speak with the troops—you don't know what that means.

I suspect some would go home in the evening and say to the family, "The



Retired Gen. Johnnie E. Wilson believes that developing talented subordinates is the key to success. (Photo by Samuel Curtis)

general came in, and sat down, and we had this conversation.” I may not have always agreed with their suggestions, but the mere fact that I was able to hear from different levels, that was the greatest strength for me.

You served in Vietnam when there was a draft. Can you discuss talent management issues of that time?

During my tour in Vietnam from October 1969 to October 1970, I served as an assistant brigade supply officer and as a company commander. So being at that level, and with the operation that we had, I did not manage talent. The Army provided the required individuals; however, I internally managed those assigned to my organization.

I happened to be in the 82nd Airborne [Division] when the 173rd Airborne [Brigade] required a number of combat replacements. As a result, many of us volunteered to deploy and backfill the 173rd. The Army took care of resourcing talent required for deployment.

During my tour, we may have had more than 500,000 Soldiers on the ground, and in my view, the Army did

a marvelous job in terms of identifying the right requirements, the right people, and making sure that we deployed on time to Vietnam.

In your hometown of Lorain, Ohio, there is a middle school named after you. What do you tell the students when you visit, and are you trying to recruit?

Of course, I am always recruiting talent. Of all the activities that my wife Helen and I participate in each year, going back to the middle school is one of the best. I was so surprised and honored, when they named it after me.

I always tell the kids, “You want to be a good American, you want to live by the golden rule, and you need to know the difference between right and wrong.”

I tell them to pay attention to their teachers. These teachers teach not for fame or fortune, they teach because they care for the children. I also tell them to pay attention to what they put on social media because sometimes, as youngsters, they put something on there and five years later they are being interviewed to go to school, or for employment, and they will re-

gret those earlier comments.

It’s amazing how smart these students are. Some of them tell me, “Sir, I’m going to be a general. I’m going to be the chief of police.” I say, “Fine, I want you to do all of that, but have a plan on how you will get there. Then send me an email and let me know how you are doing.”

Is there a parallel between the way you advise the middle schoolers and the way the Army grows talent?

Yes. It is important that our young Soldiers have good character and pay attention to their supervisors. Further, supervisors are there to take good care of them. They would not give an order that they, themselves, would not take.

They need to understand that their opportunities are limitless. I am the second of 12 kids raised in the public projects. We did not have much, but we had each other, and we believed the sky was our limit—an understanding that drove my success.

When I pick up the paper, I am always disappointed when the Army has one or two individuals who, for some reason, get themselves into trouble and they have to be removed from a leadership role. But I also know that 99 percent of Army leaders treat Soldiers like they are their own children.

I often advise young Soldiers that you’ll have some tough days, but the key is that if you get knocked down and fall on your back, get up and just keep moving. Be proud of the fact that you are an American Soldier.

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