



*Secretary of the Army Dr. Mark T. Esper and Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1, Lt. Gen. Thomas C. Seamands meet with senior leaders of the Human Resources Command to discuss talent management on April 6, 2018. (Photo by Master Sgt. Brian Hamilton)*



# More Than a Number:

*An Interview with Lt. Gen.  
Thomas Seamands*

■ By Arpi Dilanian and Matthew Howard

The deputy chief of staff, G-1, discusses the future of talent management and the impact it will have for logisticians across the Army.

Currently serving as the deputy chief of staff, G-1, Lt. Gen. Thomas Seamands is a people person through and through. He has had a distinguished career in personnel policy and management with prior assignments that include commanding general of the Human Resources Command (HRC) and assistant chief of staff, CJ-1, for Multinational Corps–Iraq. We sat down with him to discuss the future of talent management and the impact it will have on logisticians across the Army.

*How important is talent management to the Army?*

The chief of staff and the secretary of the Army’s number one priority is readiness, and talent management is the keystone and archway to readiness: getting the right person in the right place at the right time.

When I was a lieutenant, a non-commissioned officer (NCO) wisely told me, “Ignore your Soldiers and they’ll go away.” I really think that’s true. Investing time and effort to understand what’s important to Soldiers is essential to how we build readiness in the formations.

Both the chief [of staff of the Army] and secretary [of the Army] spend a lot more time on talent management than people realize. We stood up a task force to look at improving the way we manage talent, and the secretary meets with it twice a month. Every 15-minute block of his calendar is competed for, but he sees this effort as a major investment in the force to make sure the right policies and programs are in place.

The chief has done the same thing. He recently sat down with us to approve the slate of officers and sergeants major who will take command next summer. He took hours of his time because he wanted to understand each person—their skills, the impact they would have, and why they were the right person for the job.

Having leadership that is part of the solution makes talent management a

lot easier. The secretary encourages us to be creative and try new things. If they work, apply them across the force; if they don’t, stop and reinvest elsewhere. It’s a great incubator-type environment to look at things we do or don’t need to do for the population we’re supporting.

Soldiers coming in today have different expectations about how they’re managed, engaged, and treated in terms of feedback. Talent management goes across the entire spectrum, and getting it right is essential to having the Army we need in the future.

*At HRC, you led a road show with visits to 65 installations. What was some of the feedback you received?*

I really enjoyed the chance to brag about HRC and its 2,500 great Americans who wake up every morning to do the right thing for Soldiers and their families. But equally, if not more, important was talking to commanders and command sergeants major who look Soldiers in the eye every day.

We were in the middle of a drawdown at that time, so there was a fair amount of angst in the force. People weren’t shy about giving feedback, so we spent a lot of time studying and trying to make sure we got it right.

The first time we rolled out the officer drawdown, we monitored social media. One major identified to leave took issue, saying the Army got it wrong because he had been selected but was the quality we needed to lead in the future. The “Army” in this case was me, because I was the guy who put the drawdown together.

I think you get smarter by reading somebody who disagrees with you. So I read his blog; I didn’t necessarily agree with it, but I thought it was interesting. He had acknowledged a drunk driving conviction but didn’t consider it germane to his service.

A captain later wrote a rebuttal to that major, which said, “The Army didn’t separate you, you separated yourself; we are a profession based on

disciple, values, and standards, and quite frankly you violated those.”

At the end of his rebuttal, he said, “Besides, we are all subjected to the same idiotic and bureaucratic personnel policies.” Again, that was me. I sent the good captain a note saying I was the guy responsible for those policies, but how about being constructive with feedback? A couple days later he sent me a three-page response; his input helped shape the rest of the drawdown.

He became my pen pal. Whenever I was ready to launch a new policy, I’d send it to him and ask, “What do you and your peers think about it?” Having that connection with the field allows you to craft better policy, be sharper, and understand the second- and third-order effects of any decision.

I always tell my team that every time they see a number, it’s not just a number; it’s a person who has dreams, aspirations, and goals and who came into the Army to make a difference. So every time we make a decision, we have to understand the impacts. Whether it came from the road show or from my daughter—an Army lieutenant not afraid to tell me how things are going—getting feedback firsthand allowed me to go back and sharpen our policies and execution.

### *How is technology helping ensure we get people in the right spots?*

We’re really leveraging technology to manage our talent. We have a program for officers called the Assignment Interactive Module (AIM) 2.0, and we’ll eventually template something similar for Soldiers across the force. A lieutenant colonel and a GS-13 actually came up with the idea themselves and built the technology behind it. If we had contracted production out, it probably would have taken a year and cost a million dollars.

With this system, each officer has the opportunity to input information not readily available in their officer record brief. If a parent was in the

Department of State and they had lived in Indonesia for five years, or they were an engineer with a thesis in hydrology, that would not be on their record. AIM allows officers to input things they’re proud of and their accomplishments and certifications.

A unit can then go in and hire them. If a unit at Fort Riley has a mission to go to Africa, the unit can scrub the system to find officers with relevant experience. A commander there says, “I need your skill set for a mission we have, and you need a company command,” so AIM really serves as that meeting place. Officers match their information to various jobs, and then units get Soldiers who are a better fit. We did our last requisition cycle completely with the AIM process, and it worked pretty well.

Our big crown jewel that’s coming on board is the Integrated Pay and Personnel System—Army (IPPS—A), and it’s going to be a game-changer. The National Guard, which we’re bringing online this year, currently has 54 different pay and personnel systems; those will all collapse into one. The reserve and active components have two completely different systems, so if you have guardsmen in your formation, you likely can’t fix their pay and personnel problems today. When IPPS—A is fielded, you’ll be able to.

In the Enlisted Personnel Management Directorate at HRC, the average NCO manages 2,500 of their peers for assignments. If you’ve ever tried doing 2,500 of anything, it’s hard to be familiar with any one in particular. IPPS—A will help with that. Over the last two years, we’ve automated our evaluation systems so now you can go in and data mine to sharpen the focus of assignments.

IPPS—A will also be user-friendly. Soldiers will have an app on their phones so they can manage things like applying for leave much more easily. And for talent management, AIM will fold into IPPS—A as well. We have a long way to go when it comes to technology, but we’re excited about what’s happening already.

### *From a personnel perspective, how are we preparing for a multi-domain environment?*

In the past 100 years, there were two inflection points that changed how officers were managed: one in 1947 after World War II, and the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act [DOPMA] in 1980. We are now farther away [today] from 1980 than 1980 was from 1947, and a lot has changed. Should we treat a cyber Soldier the same way we treat an infantry Soldier? Maybe, maybe not.

Our task force is conducting a thorough review of every aspect of DOPMA. It was a one-size-fits-all model and fixed a lot of problems we had prior to 1980, but now we need to figure out what is essential to keep and what needs to be updated.

We’ve created an information dominance category that allows cyber officers to compete against each other, rather than against infantrymen or military intelligence Soldiers. This allows us to give specific requirements, build the talent, and encourage getting advanced degrees to be more competitive.

We’re treating that information dominance category almost like a petri dish. What will allow them to thrive and meet the requirements the Army has for its cyber force? We’ll take some of those ideas and move them on to other categories to give us the talent force we need in the future.

### *How are senior warrant officers and senior NCOs being managed?*

Warrant officers are managed in two different tracks. There’s a technical track, which includes logistics and sustainment warrant officers, and there’s an aviation track. Grades W-2 through W-5 are all commissioned officers, so we treat them similarly. With the AIM pilot, they will be managed like the rest of the commissioned officers in terms of recog-

nizing their skills and abilities for assignments.

With senior NCOs, we work very closely with the sergeant major of the Army (SMA). For a long time, I think we neglected the professional military education of NCOs; we were deploying at a very rapid rate and didn't have time to pause. But as SMA [Daniel A.] Dailey came on board, we instituted a program called STEPs, which is Select, Train, Educate, and Promote. In other words, you can't get promoted unless you have the education and training.

We've actually denied promotions, in some cases, for NCOs who haven't completed their self-development professional military education. Doing so incentivizes professional education and self-improvement so that NCOs will be more competitive and prepared for increased responsibility at the next level. And I think the Army really owes our great NCOs that kind of investment in them.

***Can you discuss the Army's progress on reducing the number of non-deployable Soldiers?***

A Department of Defense policy recently came out mandating separation if you've been non-deployable for 12 consecutive months, either through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System process, retirement, resignation, or a normal expiration of term of service. We are a contact sport; people get hurt. But we need people to be able to play home and away games.

So we've got to have unemotional discussions with non-deployable Soldiers and get them the medical care they need and opportunities to get better. If they can't become deployable, we'll have a different discussion so they have a smooth takeoff post-Army because we want everybody to be set up for success.

Aside from reducing the number of non-deployables, as the secre-

tary of defense's policy aims to do, the flip side is increasing deployable Soldiers. One way we're getting after this is through the holistic health pilot, which puts sports medicine, dieticians, and trainers at the unit level.

Of approximately 100,000 Soldiers who are non-deployable across the Army, 80 percent are non-deployable for medical reasons, and many are sports or physical training injuries. If we can teach Soldiers and leaders how to properly work out to avoid getting hurt, it will keep them deployable.

***What are your thoughts on mentorships, broadening assignments, and taking the hard jobs?***

I always encourage taking the hard jobs because it shows a proven performance, and the fact that somebody gives you a hard job shows you have potential. In today's Army,



*Lt. Gen. Thomas Seamands discusses the future of talent management and the impact it will have on the Army's logisticians. (Photo by Matthew Howard)*

we promote based on potential, not necessarily performance.

Regardless of whatever job you're in, do the best job you can. As a young captain assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division, the job they had planned for me was not very glamorous; the assignment officer even apologized to me. But I said, "It's at Fort Bragg and in the 82nd Airborne Division, right? That's all that matters; give me any job and I'll do the best I can." If you have that kind of attitude, you'll be successful.

We also have a lot of great broadening opportunities: the new security force assistance brigades (SFABs), observer-coach/trainers at the combat training centers (CTCs), schooling opportunities, and working in Congress, on the Joint Staff, or for the secretary of defense. People often take broadening opportunities as just graduate school, but it goes way beyond that.

Gen. [James] McConville, my predecessor and the current vice chief of staff [of the Army], has an expression that really captures it. Once you've finished your key developmental assignments—company command as a captain, executive officer or S-3 as a major, and battalion command as a lieutenant colonel—you enter what he calls the "wonder years." It's an opportunity to do something off the beaten path, an opportunity to improve yourself.

While at HRC, I talked a lot about broadening opportunities. My fear was I was selling it, but we didn't have anything to back it up. So we did a deep dive on several boards and found that officers who did a broadening-type opportunity were picked equal to the rest of the Army average. The Army is recognizing that if you go off to get your graduate degree, teach at West Point, or train at a combat training center, that's good and those are things we want to have.

In terms of mentorship, it is key. There's a responsibility on all leaders to reach out and mentor people. There's a formal component, where

you sit down and do officer evaluation report counseling on things they're doing well or need to improve upon. But there's also informal mentoring. If I walk back from a meeting with one of my officers or NCOs and we're talking about how a briefing went and how to improve, that's mentoring too.

The most powerful officer evaluation report counseling I had was in battalion command. The deputy commanding general for the division asked me for one piece of paper listing what my three strengths were and why, my three weaknesses and my plan to fix them, and where I wanted myself and my unit to be in three to five years. It sounds easy.

I run for my mental floss, and I probably ran hundreds of miles trying to come up with my answers. If you know what your weaknesses are, why aren't you already fixing them? How do you talk about your strengths without bragging? And you really have to take time to pause to figure out where you want to be in the future.

I still employ that technique today as part of my counseling. It gives Soldiers an opportunity to think back on what they want to do and how they're going to be better people.

### *Can you expand on the SFABs in particular?*

SFABs will be a game-changer. It's an opportunity to tailor the advise and assist mission but still have the entire brigade ready.

Everyone in them is a volunteer. They've completed whatever key or developmental job they had and volunteered because they wanted to be part of the SFAB. We're putting specific language in the promotion boards to make sure it's understood what an SFAB is and why it's important. And we think we'll see a pretty substantial promotion rate from that group, both on the officer and the enlisted sides.

We'll also manage that talent. On the backside of their three-year tour

with the SFAB, Soldiers will be able to have some influence on their next assignments. And if an officer comes on and is selected for the War College board, or an NCO for the Sergeants Major Academy, we won't necessarily hold them for a three-year assignment because we want them to take the SFAB experience, get their education, then go back out and use that for their next assignment.

### *What is the biggest piece of advice you can give young Soldiers today?*

Cherish every moment. You stepped up; never forget that fact. We have almost 330 million Americans across our country, and less than 1 percent of them will do what you are doing.

You have an opportunity to be part of the premier leadership experience in our nation. We will take a citizen from any walk of life and any part of the country, train them, and teach them what it means to be a leader. For NCOs, you have the opportunity to lead our national treasure: Soldiers. And for officers, you have the opportunity to lead and effect change across our nation and the world.

Soldiers typically serve about 48 months when they do their enlistment. But whether you serve 48 months or 30 years, enjoy each and every day. The fact of the matter is it's not when or how long you serve; it's the dash in between those two dates and what you do during that time. If you make the most of every day, you'll be a much better citizen and a much better leader when you leave to go back to your communities.

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