

Reforming Commander Evaluations to Modernize Defense

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The transformation of the modern military instrument is not driven solely by the acquisition of next-generation platforms, integrated sensors, remotely piloted systems, or cyber capabilities. There is a quiet dimension, less visible than parades and armament programs, that ultimately determines an army's real combat capability: **the way its commanders are selected, assessed, and promoted**. For decades, many European military structures have continued to rely on **assessment and *career management* systems designed more than fifty years ago**, in an era defined by mass armies, compulsory conscription, and linear, predictable industrial warfare.

That model had its own internal coherence when the command chain's primary task was to manage large numbers of personnel in peacetime or execute codified orders within a rigid hierarchy. Today, by contrast, that paradigm risks becoming a structural constraint on operational readiness. The contemporary battlefield, characterized by **widespread lethality, constant information transparency, electronic warfare, and the need for**

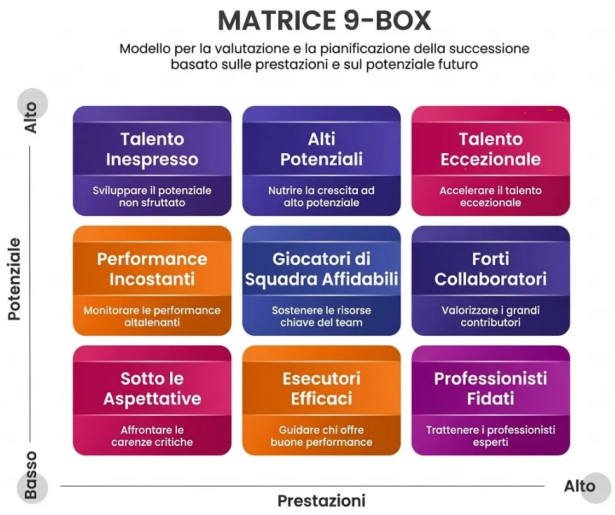
decentralized decision-making (*Mission Command*), cannot accommodate commanders selected merely for seniority, bureaucratic conformity, or their ability to please higher headquarters.

Yet, in many continental military systems, personnel evaluation reports continue to reflect **almost exclusively the top-down judgment of the reporting officer and reviewing officer**, within a legal-administrative framework that favors formal compliance, the absence of friction, and a linear career path. The result is a dangerous paradox: **a system designed to ensure administrative impartiality sometimes ends up rewarding those who take no risks**, those who do not disrupt the bureaucratic balance, or those who achieve immediate results by shifting the human and organizational burden onto their units.

The lesson from the U.S. corporate world: the "what" and the "how"

To break this inertia, major U.S. multinationals have developed rigorous **Talent Review and Succession Planning** methodologies over recent decades, designed to distinguish those who can manage the present from those who have the stature to lead complex organizations in the future. In the American corporate world, promotion to executive levels — from *Director* to *Vice President* — **is never based on a single opinion, however authoritative**.

The assessment considers **two distinct dimensions of equal importance**: the **what** (objective results, measured against verifiable targets such as *OKRs*) and the **how** (leadership style, integrity, the ability to develop subordinates and build trust across the organization). Through **anonymous 360-degree feedback** gathered from superiors, peers, and direct reports, as well as cross-calibration sessions based on the so-called **9-Box Grid**, companies systematically identify and exclude an individual who may be as brilliant with numbers as they are destructive to the organization: **the *Brilliant Jerk***, namely the executive capable of meeting short-term objectives while poisoning the internal climate, stifling subordinates' initiative, and burning through human capital.



Anglo-Saxon methods against *toxic leaders*: the example of the U.S. Army

The lesson from the corporate world has not remained confined to Silicon Valley or Wall Street boardrooms. In recent years, the leading Anglo-Saxon armed forces have recognized that battlefield survival depends on the moral and cognitive quality of leadership, directly importing and adapting these tools to neutralize so-called **toxic leaders**: **commanders who are relentlessly efficient in dealing upward, yet arrogant, humiliating, or destructive toward those below them**.

The most radical and effective example is that of the **U.S. Army**, which has overhauled the selection of battalion and brigade commanders by introducing the **BCAP** (*Battalion Commander Assessment Program*) and **CCAP** (*Colonel Command Assessment Program*), respectively. During four intensive days at Fort Knox, officer candidates for command are not assessed solely on their personnel records or the evaluation reports accumulated over the years, but undergo a **multidimensional assessment process built around four specific pillars**:

- **360° feedback from peers and subordinates:** even before testing begins, anonymous questionnaires collected from colleagues and personnel in previously commanded units are analyzed. Alongside the traditional **MSAF** (*Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback*) system, a **binding screening mechanism immediately brings to light any abuse of authority or toxic climates**.

- **Double-blind interviews (*Double-Blind Panel Interview*):** a panel of generals interviews the candidate **behind a curtain, without seeing their face or knowing their name, parent unit, or the decorations on their chest**, eliminating any bias based on branch, corps, or personal acquaintance.
- **Psychological assessment and cognitive testing:** operational psychologists subject officers to tests designed to measure **emotional intelligence, stability under pressure, ethics, and the ability to adapt to ambiguous scenarios (*Potential*)**, beyond past results alone (*Performance*).
- **Situational exercises and strategic writing:** candidates must tackle practical crisis-management exercises and produce written work under time constraints to demonstrate **analytical clarity and the ability to communicate clearly**.

The 9-Box Grid in the British and Australian models

The armed forces of the **United Kingdom** and **Australia** have moved in the same direction, explicitly adopting the terminology and tools of major multinational corporations to prevent technical excellence in a mid-level assignment from automatically leading to senior command.

The British Ministry of Defence and the **Australian Defence Force (ADF)** have incorporated the logic of the **9-Box Grid** and the **clear distinction between *Performance* and *Potential*** into their personnel-management processes and promotion boards (*Promotion Boards*). In the Australian system, for example, achieved results are assessed against **three rigorous potential criteria**: cognitive ability (*Ability*), genuine motivation for service (*Aspiration*), and adherence to ethical and institutional values (*Engagement*).

Under these models, if an officer achieves outstanding operational results but displays poor emotional intelligence, an inability to delegate, or bullying behavior, **they are not advanced toward complex command assignments**: they are kept within their current scope or directed toward specialist roles, preventing toxic leadership from harming entire operational units.

Comparative framework: traditional model vs. modern Anglo-Saxon model

Area of analysis	Traditional model (legacy of conscription)	Anglo-Saxon model (US Army, UK, Australia)
Source of assessment	**Exclusively top-down** (Evaluator and Reviewer).	**360° multi-source** (superiors, peers, and subordinates).
Primary criterion	**Formal compliance, seniority**, and performance at the current rank.	**Combination of *Performance* (results) and *Potential* (future outlook)**.
Impartiality of judgment	Based on a paper review of historical personnel files.	**Assessment centers, psychologists, and double-blind interviews** (*BCAP/CCAP*).
Management of *Toxic Leaders*	Often rewarded if they deliver immediate results upward.	**Identified and stopped** through anonymous bottom-up feedback.
Management of *Non-Leaders*	Favored by risk avoidance and bureaucratic tranquility.	**Penalized** through scrutiny of their initiative and development of junior leaders.

The debate in Italy: General Masiello's call and the threat of the *non-leader*

This reflection also directly affects the debate underway within the senior ranks of the Esercito Italiano. The Capo di Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, **Generale di Corpo d'Armata Carmine Masiello**, has repeatedly raised the issue of leadership quality as a decisive factor for the land force in his addresses to units, training institutions, and future commanders. Masiello has stressed that **technology alone cannot replace the soldier, and that the true strength of a military organization lies in the moral credibility of those who lead men and women in uniform**: commanders capable of setting the example, caring for their personnel, taking responsibility without retreating behind procedural excuses, and encouraging initiative—even accepting mistakes in training—in order to develop junior leaders.

The Capo di SME's call strikes home, but it makes the next step unavoidable: **if authentic leadership is to become the cornerstone of the Army of the future, it must be equipped with objective tools to measure and assess it**. It is not enough to urge commanders to be exemplary leaders if the promotion system still fails to distinguish between

the **authentic leader**, the **toxic leader**, and the **non-leader**.

While the *toxic leader* is the one who crushes subordinates to build a career on the appearance of immediate results, the **non-leader** represents an equally insidious pathology, often generated by bureaucratic systems that are half a century old. **The *non-leader* is the commander who does not make decisions for fear of making mistakes, who turns command into mere bureaucratic paperwork, who avoids engaging with the troops, who does not genuinely train in order to avoid risks, and who mistakes bureaucratic peace for operational effectiveness.** In peacetime, the *non-leader* rarely incurs formal disciplinary issues and may even accumulate outstanding evaluations; **in war, or during high-intensity crises, he becomes a source of paralysis and a fatal vulnerability for his own personnel**.

How to assess leadership without undermining military discipline

Assessing leadership in a modern, fair, and credible way does not mean turning barracks into union meetings or replacing a commander's authority with a popularity vote. On the contrary, it means **restoring command's true ethical and professional responsibility through four concrete measures**:

1. **Separate performance from potential:** a modern evaluation report must clearly distinguish between what an officer or noncommissioned officer has achieved in the current assignment and their actual suitability to assume more complex responsibilities, moving beyond automatic mechanisms tied solely to seniority.
2. **Introduce structured multi-source feedback tools:** following the model of the American BCAP, the anonymous, weighted opinions of peers and subordinates — **reviewed exclusively by qualified boards and occupational psychologists** — help determine whether discipline within the unit stems from authority and example or from fear and harassment.
3. **Reward decisiveness and the development of subordinates:** commanders' evaluation criteria should explicitly take into account the quality of actual training conducted, the

ability to delegate safely, and the number of subordinates professionally developed, **penalizing the defensive inertia typical of the *non-leader***.

4. **Strengthen collective decision-making and the assessments of promotion boards:** supplement document reviews with situational exercises, emotional intelligence evaluations, and assessments of cross-functional skills for key command and senior leadership roles.

Conclusion

The Italian Army and the Armed Forces have already demonstrated, in the most complex operational theaters of the past thirty years, that they possess an extraordinary human asset. To honor that asset and prepare it for today’s geopolitical and technological challenges, the time has come to finally move beyond the evaluation framework inherited from the twentieth century. **Recognizing, stopping, and correcting *toxic leaders* and *non-leaders* is not an exercise in management engineering: it is an act of justice toward those who serve in uniform and the first, indispensable guarantee of operational effectiveness in defense of the nation.**