



Embracing Change: Reflections From the Chief of Engineers

By Lieutenant General Arthur E. Williams

Since I expect to retire soon—after more than 33 years in the Army—the editor of *ENGINEER* asked me to write an article that speaks directly to Army engineers, both military and civilian. “Kind of a heart-to-heart chat over a cup of coffee,” she said, to discuss issues I consider important and to pass on advice based on my Army experiences. I gladly accepted the offer, so let me give it a shot.

Pride and Enjoyment

As I reflect on what I’ve enjoyed about my career, the common thread is the satisfaction of working with great people. I’ve enjoyed their professionalism, selfless service, dedication, and caring. I’ve enjoyed watching them develop individually and as teams. I’ve enjoyed celebrating their accomplishments in producing services and executing tough missions.

I’m extremely proud of the engineer family, which includes the active and reserve components, military personnel and civilians, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), the U.S. Army Engineer Center and Fort Leonard Wood, engineer troop units, the public works teams, and those people working engineer actions on Army joint and combined staffs. Regardless of what part of the engineer family a person hails from, each is important to the success of the

overall mission.

If I had to leave just one piece of advice with the Army engineer family, I’d tell you to continue to be the professionals you’ve always been; continue to be dedicated to providing quality, selfless service to the nation; and take time to have some fun along the way!

Mentoring

Although I’ve never been the recipient of a formal mentoring program, there were many people whose leadership styles I watched during the years. And I learned a lot from each of them. In most cases, the people I respected were not aware that I was watching them.

One person I admired in particular was Major General Ernie Edgar, who was my battalion commander in Vietnam. As he approached retirement, I told him, “Whether you realize it or not, Ernie, you’ve been my mentor for many years.” Major General Edgar replied, “Although you didn’t realize it, I was trying to be a good mentor for you.”

I’ve also learned a great deal from our noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps. No other army comes close to having an NCO corps as strong as ours. Although I’ve had the honor of serving with many outstanding NCOs, I’d like to mention two of them. One I served with at the beginning of my career and the other in my current (and final) active duty assignment.

When I was a captain, the Army sent me straight from Germany to Vietnam. In Germany I had been a company commander, and when I joined the 87th Engineer Battalion in Vietnam, I asked to be a company commander again. My request was approved, and I was assigned to Bravo Company.

The Bravo Company first sergeant was Lindsey Bowers, and he was a model NCO. From him, I learned the importance of being technically competent, setting and maintaining high standards, and looking out for the welfare of soldiers. He retired as a command sergeant major. We’ve kept in touch, and he’s been to all my promotion ceremonies since I became a brigadier general. He also attended the change-of-command ceremony when I became Chief of Engineers.

As I close out my Army career, I’ve had the pleasure of working for almost four years with Command Sergeant Major James Skellion, the USACE Command Sergeant Major and the Sergeant Major of our Engineer Regiment. He’s another model NCO and a leader for others to emulate. Each day, Command Sergeant Major Skellion reinforced the lessons Lindsey Bowers taught me many years ago. I have the utmost admiration and respect for Command Sergeant Major Skellion. Our Army is strong today because of leaders like Command Sergeants Major Bowers and Skellion.

Advice to Leaders

I have always been grateful to those who guided me during my career, and I'd like to pass on a few lessons I've learned along the way. There are four principles that I believe are vital for leaders in the formative years of their careers.

The first is training. You must get all the training that's expected of you to do the job. If you're an officer in a troop unit, you need to seek out your strong NCOs and listen to them. As I said earlier, our Army has a superb NCO corps, and they are an invaluable learning resource for young officers.

Next, leaders need to be flexible. Don't stay in a comfort zone—try different jobs and new challenges. You also must be willing to move. Moving has always been a way of life for soldiers, and civilian advancement within the Corps is increasingly tied to being willing to move. Whatever job you are assigned, do the very best you can, and do not be overly concerned about making an honest mistake.

Third, as Lindsey Bowers taught me, leaders must set and maintain high standards. This applies not only to your subordinates but also to yourself.

Finally, leaders must take care of the people entrusted to them. Whether you're a platoon leader, a resident engineer, or a staff officer, you are responsible for the lives of people. It is your responsibility to make sure they are trained to do their job and your responsibility to look out for their welfare.

These principles apply to senior leaders as well, but I would add a few thoughts for them. Senior leaders need to recognize that change is necessary and will continue. They need to embrace change and be a champion of change where change is appropriate. I am not talking about change for the sake of change; I am talking about change that improves an organization's ability to execute its mission.

Senior leaders must have a broad perspective on what the Corps and the Army are about—particularly in these challenging times. Senior leaders need to deal with current issues, but probably their most important

task is to lead their organization into the future.

As part of their future focus, senior leaders need to prepare for their next assignment. The preparation for future assignments is not for self-serving purposes. Instead, it is based on the fundamental issue of what professional development needs to occur now to be ready to better serve the Corps and the Army in the future.

In this regard, engineers need to pursue joint assignments. Some people avoid joint assignments. I consider this a mistake because joint assignments will not go away. If anything, they'll probably increase. I can't imagine the Corps or the Army ever executing an operation that is not at least joint and probably combined.

Senior leaders also must know how to harness available and emerging technology and know how to leverage technology to increase efficiency and effectiveness. We live in a world which produces reams of instant data. Senior leaders must know what data to tap into, how to quickly sort it, and how to use that data effectively to make faster and better decisions.

Finally, a must for everyone—but especially for senior leaders—is the ability to communicate ideas both verbally and in writing. No matter how talented an individual is, the inability to effectively communicate undermines his effectiveness.

Civilians in Military Operations

Earlier I mentioned the issue of change. One that we are beginning to see is the trend toward more civilians in areas of operations. This includes both Department of Defense civilians and private contractors. Our recent experiences in Somalia, Rwanda, and Haiti and our ongoing operations in Bosnia illustrate the increasing presence of civilians in military operations. I'm sure this trend will continue, and we'll probably see an ever-increasing level of support that civilians provide.

Combining military and civilian capabilities requires a team effort and a positive approach. You must commit

yourself to integrating civilians into planning efforts from the beginning. Trust is the key and good, two-way communication is needed to build the requisite trust between military personnel and civilians.

Given the size of today's Army, we can't go it alone with strictly military forces. We never have in the past; we've always had civilians supporting military operations in various ways. Granted, we've not had as many civilians involved in military operations in the past, but civilians have always been there. So we need to embrace the trend toward greater civilianization of military operations and figure out how to make it work. Civilians are a positive addition to our military endeavors and essential to successfully accomplishing our missions.

One last thought on this subject. Military-civilian operations are nothing new for the Corps of Engineers, so this is an area where we can share our experience for the benefit of the Army and the nation.

Disaster Operations

I have always been proud of how the Corps of Engineers, both military and civilian, responds to disasters year after year. Whether it's a flood, an earthquake, or a hurricane, we always get more volunteers than we can use to assist in disaster relief. These volunteers respond with all the expertise and professionalism you'd expect, but what's really noticeable is their caring attitude and personal dedication to helping the victims.

Over the years, I've seen the results of many disasters first-hand. In every instance, I cannot begin to express how proud I have been of the Corps team. In the last four years, for example, the Corps played a major role in the aftermath of hurricanes Andrew, Iniki, Opal, and Marilyn. The Corps took part in the recovery from the Los Angeles earthquake and the record Midwest floods of 1993 and 1994. And it provided technical assistance in the wake of the tragic bombings of the World Trade Center and the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

It is impossible to predict when or

where the next disaster will occur, but the fact that our people provide superb service to the nation during disasters is part of the reason the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) frequently calls on the Corps.

Of course, there's also a statutory reason for why FEMA calls on us. Under the Stafford Act, FEMA is responsible for the Federal Response Plan. The Corps is one of 26 federal agencies in that act with disaster-assistance responsibilities. But when FEMA calls on the Corps during disasters, they know our people will be responsive and get the job done!

Stability and Support Operations

Our response to disasters also shows why USACE is ideally suited to render assistance in stability and support operations—the new term for operations other than war. Our command has a wide range of capabilities, and some are unique capabilities not found in industry or other federal agencies. These capabilities run the gamut from engineering, to real estate expertise, to contracting, to project management, and to many others.

In the past four years, this com-

mand provided outstanding service to stability and support operations in Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, and currently in Bosnia. Some of those operations were humanitarian, some were peacekeeping, and some were nation-assistance. In addition, USACE did work for 91 other countries during the past 12 months, and our people were on the ground in 70 of those countries. This is another example of the responsive, quality service that we can provide the nation across the operational continuum from peace, to stability and support operations, to war.

Contributions to the Nation

Throughout my career, I've seen the many significant contributions the Corps of Engineers has made to the nation. These contributions are the result of our superb people.

Our engineer troops are diversified, talented, and experienced. We can put together a team that can handle whatever might be needed. We truly have a world-class organization that is called on time and again to handle tough missions, and the

Army's engineers have clearly and consistently demonstrated their value to the nation.

The engineer troop units (active duty, reserves, and National Guard) are a vital part of our team. These engineer soldiers are well-trained, highly motivated, and professional. Right now many of these soldiers are in Bosnia. As the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) moved into Bosnia, we watched engineer bridging operations on the Sava River via CNN. It was a challenging mission, and I was extremely proud of our soldiers as they went about accomplishing their mission.

Perhaps the best testimonial to the quality of the Army's engineer soldiers came from local Bosnians as they watched the Sava bridging operations. The people who live in the area were amazed; first, that anyone would attempt to bridge the Sava in winter; and second, that we would attempt it during flood conditions. Their consensus was that "only the American Army could accomplish such a feat."

Army engineers got the job done under difficult conditions, including cold weather, mud, floods, and a time constraint with the whole world watching. These soldiers were under tremendous pressure, but they were well-trained, they were superbly led, they followed their doctrine, and they accomplished the mission. You find that throughout the Army's engineer units.

Reserves and National Guard

Speaking of the reserves and National Guard, they comprise about 72 percent of our total engineer strength. Consequently, they are a vital part of our total engineer force, and I need to focus attention on reserve component issues. Brigadier General Anthony R. Kropp, Assistant Chief of Engineers for Reserve Affairs, is helping me do that. When Brigadier General Kropp came on board in September 1995, I charged him to be another set of eyes and ears for me, and he has done an excellent job.



Photo courtesy Far East District

A Corps of Engineers emergency worker assists at the scene of a collapsed department store in Korea last year.



An M1 tank crosses a bridge built by engineers across the Sava River in Bosnia.

He recently hosted a conference for the commanders of the major engineer reserve component commands. The feedback I received from the conference was excellent. I'm sure the conference's output will benefit our Army as we continue to wrestle with the myriad of issues confronting our reserve component engineer forces.

Restructuring

My greatest challenge as the USACE commander has been restructuring the command. It has been a long, frustrating, and emotional process—especially frustrating because we don't control all the variables involved.

Restructuring has weighed heavily on everybody in the command. But I have great confidence in the people of USACE. I know that through their professionalism, dedication, and selfless sense of service, they will deal with restructuring while continuing to provide the responsive engineering services this nation expects.

From my firsthand experience in restructuring during the last six years, I offer the following advice:

First, everyone must realize that restructuring is a continuous process and will probably be with us for quite a while. As I said earlier, we

live in an era of continuous change, so we need to embrace it and make it work for us.

Whatever we do in the restructuring arena, we must maintain a clear focus on our customers. We're not in business to sustain ourselves; we're here to provide service to others. Improving an already superb record of customer service must be our number one priority and the touchstone for all our restructuring efforts.

Coupled with customer focus is mission execution. We must be concerned about how long a project takes, the quality of our product, our cost of doing business, our performance indicators and standards, and whether we're living up to them.

Our intent in restructuring is to enhance both customer service and mission execution. We're not only looking at our organizational structure but also reducing our costs of doing business and reviewing our business processes. Many process changes have already taken place, and others are anticipated.

There have already been some significant organizational changes. We've reduced our divisions from 13 to 11, and we're working on plans to further reduce them to eight. We've reduced our work force from about

41,800 to about 39,300 during the past four years, and further reductions will be required.

Taking everything into consideration, I think we've done a great job so far in restructuring, but much work remains to be done. Our ultimate restructuring goals are to make sure that we emerge with an effective organization and with quality people who can execute the missions entrusted to us.

In Good Hands

Engineers, both military and civilian, have been a vital part of America's Army for more than 200 years. Their contributions are indelibly recorded in our nation's history. During almost four years as Chief of Engineers, I've seen our engineer family continue that legacy of superb, selfless service. I'm proud to have been part of the Corps family for more than 33 years, and I have no doubt that our future is in good hands.

Essayons! Hoo-Ah!

Lieutenant General Williams has served as Chief of Engineers since 1992.

