A group of Basic Officer Leaders Course (BOLC-B) students collaborate 27 April 2020 before conducting a fire direction simulation at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Students who were going through BOLC-B and Captains Career Courses would then participate in Project Athena and complete individual assessments focused on communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills during their program of instruction. (Photo by Sgt. Amanda Hunt, U.S. Army)

# Project Athena

## Enabling Leader Self-Development

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One of the most storied accounts of leader development in the U.S. Army involves senior leaders during World War II. The paths of leaders like George C. Marshall, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and George S. Patton kept crossing in the decades before they would organize, plan, and conduct the campaigns that led to Allied victory. All three were affected by the advice and mentoring of Fox Conner, who retired in 1938 as a major general. Eisenhower in particular credited Conner with awakening a passion for studying doctrine, strategy, and tactics. Conner, when commanding Camp Gaillard, Panama, recruited Eisenhower to become his executive officer. Conner's mission was to modernize the defenses of the Canal Zone. As he did with Patton and Marshall, Conner took a professional interest in developing Eisenhower. Eisenhower, who was not known for his scholarly prowess in his Abilene, Kansas, schools or at West Point (he graduated 61st overall and 125th in discipline out of 164 cadets in his class), experienced "a sort of graduate school in military affairs and humanities" serving under Conner.[1] Eisenhower often accompanied Conner during horseback reconnaissance of potential troop emplacements and movement routes. On these excursions, they had an opportunity for in-depth discussions on far-ranging topics such as Carl von Clausewitz, Civil War history, soldiers and their conduct, coalition building, and cross-channel operations.[2] Conner impressed upon Eisenhower that he had the potential to have a major impact in the next war. Conner rekindled Eisenhower's interest in studying history and the benefits of purposeful study. With those interests and skills heightened, Eisenhower graduated first in his class of 245 at the Command and General Staff School on his way to becoming the supreme Allied commander during the invasion of Nazi-occupied Western Europe.[3]

Such dedication to leader development is needed now and for the years ahead with the return of great-power competition. The United States is in constant competition while modernizing to field a more lethal and intelligent fighting force in preparation for potential conflict. To prevail in large-scale combat operations, the U.S. Army must develop and field superior equipment, exercise proven and clever tactics, and leverage its advantage in leadership.

Today, the Army is at an inflection point where it is working aggressively through talent management initiatives to maintain that leader advantage. One set of initiatives focuses

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on self-development, whereby leaders can improve themselves in many ways. They can

- emulate what they observe the best leaders do,
- absorb lessons from the study of military history,
- engage in exchanges with their colleagues in arms,
- study books assigned in classes and from professional reading lists,
- seek stretch experiences and assignments,
- engage fully in the classroom, and
- serve dutifully across the various training and deployment assignments around the globe.

The Army highly values human development, whether in cadet preparation programs, demanding entrance standards, Army education, or individual and collective training programs. An Army officer can spend five times longer in professional training compared to what corporations require of their personnel.[4] Competitive investments in the development of human capital can help the Army maintain an edge over peer and near-peer threats.

## Self-Development and Feedback

Years of practical experience in leader development have shown that to move from existing abilities to an improved state, people have to receive feedback, pay attention to it, and act on it. Feedback is essential for change, whether it comes from an individual's own insight or it is provided by someone or something separate from the individual.

Feedback in its simplest form is information about performance or abilities. It indicates what one does or is capable of doing, what one does well, and directions for improvement. The Army has long recognized that feedback plays an important role in development. The leader development model used in 2002 in Field Manual 7-0, *Training the Force*, is one such example (see figure 1). Although the field manual itself has been superseded, the model is especially relevant because it shows how assessment and feedback apply to all leader development domains. Assessment from observation, instruction, training, performance evaluation, and testing are all sources of feedback.[5]

Self-development is another tool appropriate for enhancing human capital. When faced with diverse operational settings, leaders draw on intellectual capacity, critical and creative thinking abilities, and applicable expertise. Guided self-development will improve leaders' ability to prepare themselves and their subordinates for these challenges.

Self-development is the ultimate way to customize improvement to the needs of the individual. Individuals see the power in self-development, but many regret that there is not more time to engage in it.[6] Therefore, one's available time must be used as efficiently as possible, and one way to focus self-development needs is through assessment and feedback.

In the summer of 2020, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command and the Combined Arms Center implemented a new program of self-development that
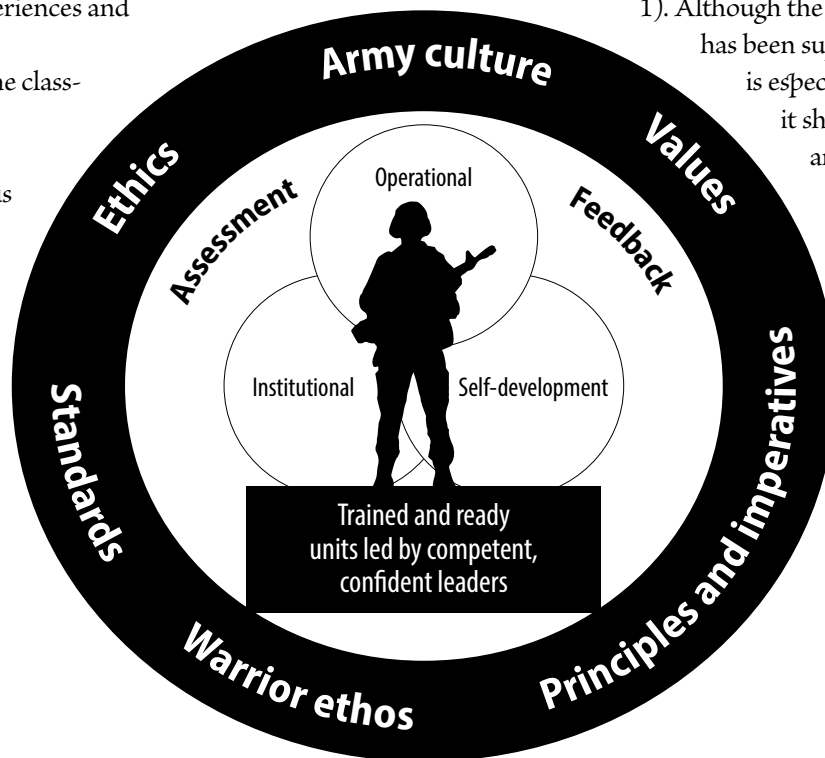


(Figure from Field Manual 7-0, *Training the Force*, October 2002 [obsolete])

### Figure 1. Army Training and Leader Development Model

seeks to reenergize the identification of leader basic strengths and developmental needs. The two main lines of effort in this program are assessment and improvement. A battery of standardized assessments was selected to coincide with each level of Army's profession-

strength and was known for inventing useful items leading to victory. Besides being divinely endowed with these characteristics, her strength came from dedication to wisdom. Just as Athena is known for helping other heroes, Project Athena is designed to

> " Project Athena is designed to enable self-awareness and self-development so individuals become more effective leaders, whether that comes out in competition during the brigade and battalion command assessment programs or for any follow-on assignment. "

al military education (PME) system. The standardized assessments give leaders an idea of their level on a skill or set of behaviors and how that level compares to others in the Army. The assessments were chosen by Mission Command Center of Excellence's Center for the Army Profession and Leadership (CAPL) with input from stakeholders in the officer corps, warrant officer corps, and noncommissioned officer corps, and from Army civilian leaders. These assessments complement the physical fitness and warfighting assessments that are already a part of existing course curriculums.

The second line of effort—improvement through self-development—is the responsibility of the individual. Assessment and improvement work hand in hand. Feedback from assessments informs the leader of his or her strengths and potential blind spots; interpretation of the feedback guides where to improve.

Multiple learning resources have been created or identified and matched to the areas assessed by each standardized measurement tool. These are readily available at no cost to the individual and can be used anytime, anywhere via web access. The Army calls this program Project Athena.

## Project Athena

Having a project name was important to provide a short handle to a multipart and already expanding program. The chosen label for the new self-development program, Project Athena, was selected because Greek mythology portrays Athena as a courageous goddess, respected for her clever and strategic approach to battle. She chose cunning over brute

help the soldiers of the U.S. Army to be disciplined in their development as warriors.

Project Athena is designed to enable self-awareness and self-development so individuals become more effective leaders, whether that comes out in competition during the brigade and battalion command assessment programs or for any follow-on assignment. Soldiers deserve leaders who are self-aware and humble enough to know where they can improve. In turn, soldiers follow self-aware and humble leaders who are committed to self-improvement.

**The project rollout**. Project Athena was developed to motivate and focus self-development for individuals. The standardized assessments measure leadership, cognitive abilities, communication skills, mental toughness, and interpersonal skills. These assessments improve self-awareness, guide self-development, and facilitate leader development in the operational force. The rollout of assessments began in the Maneuver Captain Career Course and all Basic Officer Leaders Courses-Branch in July 2020. The program expanded to include all Captains Career Courses in January 2021 and into the Command and General Staff Officers' Course in April 2021. Assessments have already started to be phased into classes in the noncommissioned officer professional development system and in the Warrant Officer Education System, and will be phased into the Civilian Education System starting in October 2021. Expansion across all Army cohorts are to be completed by the end of September 2022. Inclusion of U.S. Army Reserve and Army National Guard courses are planned for fiscal years 2022 and 2023.

Soldiers take an exam 31 July 2018 at the Fort Knox Education Center at Fort Knox, Kentucky. (Photo by Master Sgt. Brian Hamilton, U.S. Army)

**Athena assessments**. Athena has multiple parts consisting of commercial and Army-developed assessments, fact sheets, proctor training, feedback reports, interpretation guides, coaching guides, individual development plans, self-development tools, learning resource lists, institutional reports, and program evaluations. Sample feedback reports and assessment fact sheets convey information to anyone who wants to know more about the assessments and what they reveal to the individual.

Athena assessments are designed to guide a soldier's lifelong self-development and personal improvement. They are not "predictive" in nature; rather, they are designed for the benefit of the individual, not the institution. What each assessment covers varies based on the individual's level of PME. The assessments fall into categories of *personal*, attributes that tend not to be very malleable; *cognition*, which is a term covering all modes of thinking and mental activity; and *leadership*, which includes competencies identified in Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*.[7] There is no upper limit to how good anyone can be in any of these categories.

CAPL selected or designed the assessments and makes them available to Army schools. Trained proctors at the schools administer the series of assessments. Proctored assessments provide a consistent message explaining the purpose of the assessments and facilitating access to the various vendor sites and the Army site used to deliver the assessments.

Assessed areas were selected based on factors that senior leaders observed to be important across a leader's career and what studies and doctrine validate as important traits and behaviors for any Army leader.[8] The assessed areas focus on the capabilities of leaders to make critical decisions, communicate those decisions, set the right climate for teamwork, and learn. Each Army school across the PME continuum will continue to emphasize and assess warfighting and physical fitness in the ways most valuable to their specific branch, military occupational specialty, or echelon of leadership.

Athena assessments apply to Army leaders regardless of their position or assignment. The choice of assessments

and the procedures for administration of assessments are standardized so that a score for a second lieutenant in Fort Benning, Georgia, will have the same meaning as a score for a master sergeant assessed in Fort Bliss, Texas. Project Athena assessments rely on either commercial or U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command systems for presentation and collection. Schools can administer the assessments as long as there is a secure internet connection and test access codes have been provided to their proctors by CAPL. With their common access cards, students can access their personal feedback reports upon completion or at any later time.

**Assessment sources**. Selected assessments were chosen based on their ability to provide feedback on areas of interest to the Army. The commercial assessments were required to be scientifically valid, which means they had to truly measure what they claimed to measure. Commercial assessments with a prior history of use in the military were preferred to commercial assessments without. Some commercial assessments required a prepaid license that was arranged on behalf of all schools through a central procurement source. Other assessments that required no commercial license were chosen based on the area that they assess. Permission to use these assessments was arranged by CAPL on behalf of the schools that administer the assessments. A third set of assessments originated in the Army or were newly developed by CAPL scientists for Project Athena.

**Assessment feedback**. Feedback reports are available to individuals soon after they complete an assessment. The feedback reports provide the summary of the results of the assessment and help the individual interpret what the results mean, what can be done with the results, and where to go to learn more about the assessed areas. Feedback reports can only be retrieved by the individual to whom the assessment report relates. Use and release of the feedback is controlled by the assessed individual. This point is central to the developmental purpose of Project Athena. The results cannot be accessed for administrative decisions or actions. This is especially important since many of the assessments require self-reporting. Protecting access to the results encourages the individual to be truthful without fear that something they report about their personal tendencies could be used by someone else. All of the assessments intend to stimulate reflection and awareness, even more so than providing a specific score. Other measures require the student to demonstrate his or her knowledge or skill in reading, writing, or critical thinking. The feedback results are as accurate as the degree of effort that the assessed leader puts into the assessment.

## Preparing for Assessment

Personnel are challenged to ask themselves three questions when preparing to be assessed:
- Are you as good as you want to be or need to be?
- Are you willing to be completely honest with yourself while taking these assessments?
- Are you willing to put in the work to be as good as you have to be to lead our soldiers?

Among Eisenhower's various accounts of testing, every indication was that he took them seriously and put the work in to improve himself. He prepared diligently

## Project Athena

Project Athena provides tools for self-assessments and guidance on formulating self-development programs for military officers, noncommissioned officers, warrant officers, and Army civilians. Access the Project Athena website hosted by the Center for the Army Profession and Leadership at https://capl.army.mil/athena/#/.
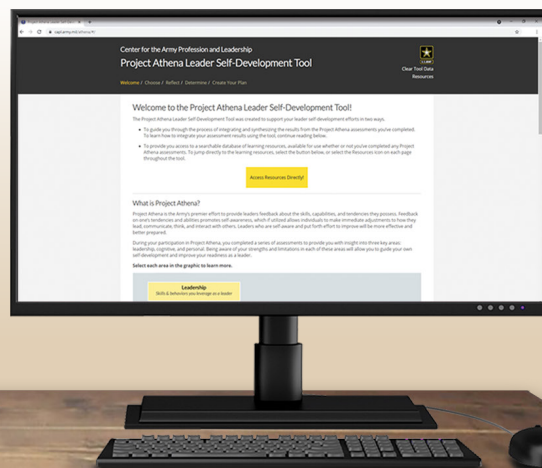
for the initial screening exams for military academies and for the official entrance exam.

Ike had put himself through a preparatory regimen for the Navy that remarkably resembled the one he would use for Leavenworth. He and a friend had requested and received tests from the Naval Academy and studied

individuals should first make a mental note of what they would like to do better or differently. Feedback should lead to improved self-awareness, revealing something that was previously hidden about themselves. Sometimes the feedback confirms what the soldier already suspected and adds more insight. The improved attention should generate an immediate intent to be different—more effective

> Students who are honest with themselves and aware of their strengths and limitations can work on improving themselves. The reward will be in gaining self-awareness, addressing areas for improvement, and finding ways to apply strengths.

them assiduously in preparation for the naval examination. Fortunately for Ike, the Navy tests were similar to those he used for the later West Point entrance exam. Ike's former high school teachers also assisted by tutoring him in selected subjects. He was determined to make a good showing in all subjects.[9]

As for his low standing on discipline at West Point, Eisenhower wrote he did not think of himself as "a scholar whose position would depend on the knowledge he had acquired in school or as a military figure whose professional career might be seriously affected by his academic or disciplinary records."[10] Serving with Fox Conner taught him the value of disciplined study and self-development. At his Leavenworth course, he initially scored below his peers in the first set of graded exercises. He applied himself there too and put in additional effort, soon excelling in the hands-on preparatory school method and ended up as the honor graduate.[11]

Like Eisenhower, students who are honest with themselves and aware of their strengths and limitations can work on improving themselves. The reward will be in gaining self-awareness, addressing areas for improvement, and finding ways to apply strengths.

## Interpreting and Applying Feedback

There are several assessments in Athena that each student has access to, and a tool is provided to the individual to help combine the feedback into meaningful actions to take. Upon receiving and interpreting feedback,

in terms of attitude, thinking, or action. Sometimes feedback raises questions that the leader then seeks answers to. In these cases, the individual takes action to study more about a characteristic, how it is relevant to them, and how it is manifested in themselves.

With deeper understanding of a characteristic and the level of that characteristic in oneself, a natural pairing forms between current and desired levels. People who internalize a desire to improve continuously act to minimize the distance between their current state and how they believe they can be. Resetting a new image of oneself and taking conscious action to move in the desired direction leads to self-improvement. In some cases, assessment feedback will identify a strength that individuals can continue to apply and use to grow in their capabilities. In other cases, a shortcoming is identified from feedback and the steps to overcome it are so clear that the way to improve is also natural and automatic. For example, if feedback from a Leader 360 assessment indicates that subordinates do not feel they receive clear guidance, the leader can be more deliberate in providing guidance and seek confirmation that their guidance is understood. In still other cases, more careful reflection and planning are useful to accomplish the desired change. Self-awareness and self-development are not always a clear-cut process; however, across the variety of states and goals, assessment has a central and constant role to inform the depth and breadth of what is possible.

Project Athena recognizes that students already receive counseling on their academic and physical fitness performance from their small group leaders, instructors,

or advisors while in school. To help make the counseling more comprehensive, students can and should become mindful of their own Athena results and reflect and incorporate those into intentions they have for change. They can bring questions formed from the assessments to the counseling session, bring their own goals, or offer their feedback reports for the counselor to review. The student can summarize assessment findings or share insights with the counselor that the assessments have triggered. To help faculty, Project Athena provides coaching products to support counseling. A coaching guide, coaching card, and coaching video give guidelines on how to coach and counsel. Compared to discrete warfighting or supporting skills, the coaching for personal qualities, leadership abilities, and critical thinking takes a more exploratory approach. Leaders seeking to improve in these areas will need to commit time to discovering their abilities through questions, challenge, and self-reflection. The academic counselors can help this process of exploration by helping students better see themselves.

## Leader Development Improvement Guide

The top resource for students, counselors, and leaders affected by Project Athena is the Army's *Leader Development Improvement Guide*.[12] Information similar to the guide is also in Field Manual 6-22, *Leader Development*, along with self-development guidance.[13] The guide is organized according to the behaviors identified in the leadership requirements model (see figure 2, page 14) . For each behavior, a table is provided that lists strengths, needs, causes, feedback, study, and practice. Strength and need indicators provide ways to self-assess based on one's own behaviors. These points can be used in addition to or instead of formal, standardized assessments like Project Athena provides. Once these are identified, individuals will want to consider the underlying causes of their actions.

With greater self-awareness, there are three subsequent actions for improvement. First, when greater insight is needed about one's behavior, the guide provides suggestions for garnering additional feedback to confirm or deepen understanding. Second, when more knowledge is needed about a specific skill or behavior, suggestions are provided on what to study to improve in that skill. The third is when there is sufficient self-understanding about a target behavior and there is enough understanding about why and how to perform the behavior but more

practice is needed. These three development actions can be taken in any combination, and an individual can go back and forth between the actions. This model assumes that learning is incremental and that self-understanding requires periodic reflection to improve one's abilities.

## Athena and Individual Development Plans

Army schools help students prepare for continued growth after course graduation with a requirement for each student to develop an individual development plan (IDP). A review and discussion of the IDPs is a part of the end-of-course performance counseling process. For Athena, IDPs provide a specific way to continue momentum started by the assessment and reflection process. They lay out objectives, steps to take, and resources of import, and they provide adjacent space to make notes on progress toward goals. As leaders plan to pursue their interests and achieve their goals, the IDP can help identify a path to success, using or adjusting leaders' strengths to replace weaknesses or to supplant their shortcomings. IDPs provide a contract of sorts for what the individual is committing to do. The IDP will be carried to each individual's next unit of assignment and shared with a rater, senior rater, or mentor to inform and support future leader development efforts. IDPs are not equally effective for everyone. It may not be an enormous help for the most intellectually curious and natural lifelong learners. For some, motivations to improve are stronger and more dynamic and rapid than what is recorded on a form.

## Resources for Improvement

The most important direct support that Project Athena provides is identifying resources for personal improvement. In the first few months of Project Athena, lists of self-development materials were assembled for each of the assessed constructs and amassed into a list of some five hundred available materials. The materials include self-development courses, books and audiobooks, videos, job aids, briefs, and interactive multimedia instruction modules. The pool of assembled resources cover more than fifty assessment constructs. The resources are available through web access and developed for the Army or are available through arrangement with the military. A tool is also available to help pinpoint resources from the set of five hundred that align with Project Athena assessment outcomes. The self-development tool gets updated

as more resources are identified. This tool and the learning resources provide an opportunity for leaders at all levels to deepen their knowledge of and broaden their abilities around the areas assessed in Project Athena. However, this vast body of collected materials provides an opportunity that only brings value if individuals take the time to invest in themselves using the improved self-awareness that the assessments offer.

## Conclusion

*If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception, it is a prevailing attitude.*

—Colin Powell[14]

Project Athena is a unique program in the Army because it helps individuals invest in themselves. There is no access to the assessment results for personnel administration and no impact on annual performance evaluation, academic evaluation, promotions, or assignments. The individual leaders own their results and control where their results go, or if they choose anyone to see them. Even though the information would be interesting to schools and small group leaders, the most valuable impact that the results have is for the individual. Many of the assessments depend on self-report of behaviors, tendencies, and beliefs. If confidentiality is not absolute, individuals will look at themselves as they want to be seen instead of how they actually are, and they will let those desired qualities color their assessment responses.

Another reason the results are confidential is because they indicate a temporary state. For example, upon knowing a result about themselves, leaders can decide to change immediately, and as the leader grows, the results will no longer be characterized by the assessment score taken in the past.

There is a way to maintain confidentiality of results while providing schools and the Army an idea of
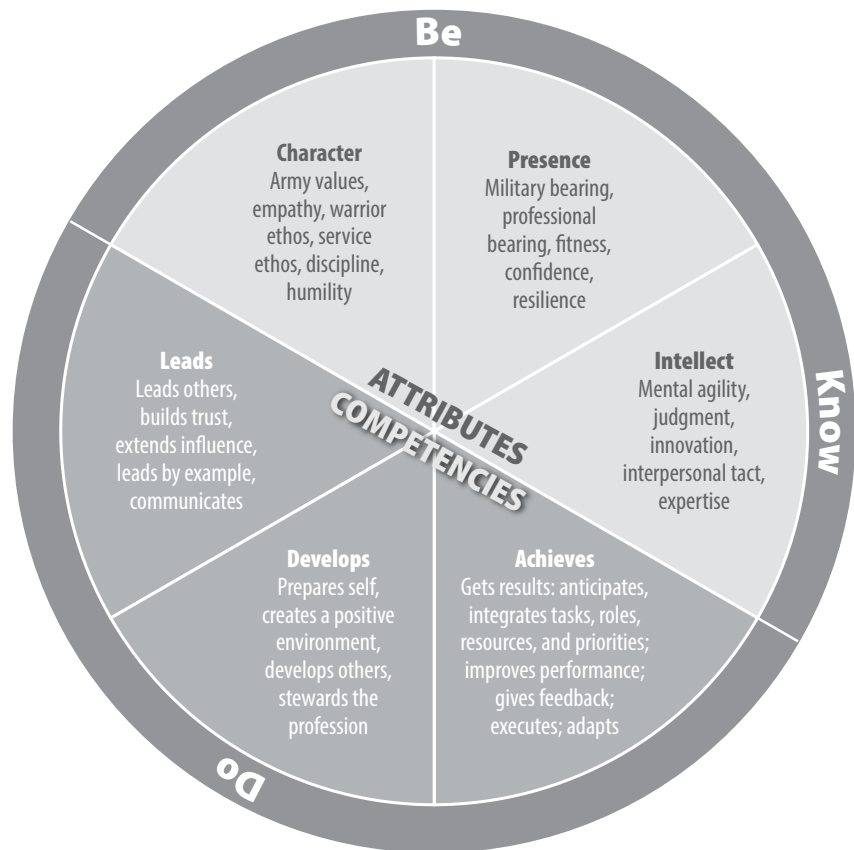


(Figure from Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, July 2019)

## Figure 2. Army Leadership Requirements Model

trends across multiple leaders. Aggregate reports, also called institutional reports, are produced by analysts within CAPL. These show what a collection of scores looks like. Aggregate reports on student scores and tendencies can be used to help Army schools better understand student strengths and weaknesses, identify overall trends, and restructure courses accordingly. The aggregation of results follows carefully defined rules about removing all individual identifiers and using minimum samples to protect classes and identities of individuals. Reports across schools help identify patterns of strengths and developmental needs at different career points and comparisons to other groups. The aggregate data also informs the administrators of which assessments are useful or where some could be decommissioned, replaced by another, or moved to another

important area. For example, if 90 percent of leaders are assessed as highly dependable and most of the remainder are moderately so, the time could be better spent on assessing and developing other areas than duty.

Another means of tracking the utility and value of assessments comes from formal program evaluation surveys and focus groups, where cadre and students answer questions about their experiences with the project. Course managers and program administrators also provide their observations and requests through their chains of command. Project Athena is a dynamic, growing program that is updated and refined over time.

The goal of Project Athena is to help Army leaders become the best version of themselves. The path starts by providing standardized assessments to augment existing assessments from which all Army leaders can learn more about their personal strengths and weaknesses and ways of responding to challenging or adverse situations. With greater self-awareness, leaders know more about what they can improve on and when to make those improvements in the near-term and across their career. The challenge is not always to get better at a skill but to be more

aware of how to use the talents that an individual has, when to be more thorough (e.g., critical thinking checks), when to rely on intuition, when to apply a strength, when to use a strength in one area to compensate for a weakness in another, or when to seek support from teammates.

Forward-looking research needs to be conducted to further develop assessments that provide the greatest developmental feedback in the areas of human behavior most responsible for effective leadership. The proof of Project Athena is in how well its assessments translate to creating more effective leaders. All soldiers deserve leaders who are self-aware and humble enough to know where they can improve or when they could use help from others. Soldiers deserve leaders who have come far enough in their personal and professional journeys to be effective before they accept the mantle of a command or leadership position.

Project Athena is reminiscent of the Army's 1980s slogan "Be all you can be." Project Athena looks to provide greater self-awareness of some basic abilities and to guide leaders' improvement to become the best leader that each can possibly be. ∎

## Notes

1. Mark C. Bender, *Watershed at Leavenworth: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Command and General Staff School* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1990), 12; Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 187.

2. Carter L. Price, "Major General Fox Conner: 'The Indispensable Man,'" *Army War College Review* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 18.

3. "Army Years," The Eisenhowers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, accessed 14 March 2021, https://www.eisenhower-library.gov/eisenhowers/army-years; Bender, *Watershed at Leavenworth*, 47, 50.

4. Lorri Frefeld, "2019 Training Industry Report," *Training* (website), 6 November 2019, accessed 14 March 2021, https://trainingmag.com/2019-training-industry-report/. An Army officer can spend from two-to-three or more years in professional education settings attending the Basic Officer Leaders Course, the Captains Career Course, the Command and General Staff Officers' Course, and various other branch or functional area courses. The 2019 Training Industry Report states that corporate employees received 42.1 hours of training per year on average. Two years of training over a twenty-year career would be five times the corporate average.

5. Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Training the Force* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002 [obsolete]).

6. Ryan P. Riley et al., *2016 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Military Leader Findings*, Technical Report 2017-01 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Leadership [CAL], 2017).

7. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2019).

8. The Center for Army Profession and Leadership maintains validation on the Army leadership requirements model described in ADP 6-22. The original validation was documented in Jeffrey Horey et al., *A Criterion-Related Validation Study of the Army Core Leader Competency Model,* Technical Report 1199 (Arlington, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2007). The annual CASAL studies such as Riley et al., *2016 CASAL*, provide additional validation. Follow-up collections and analyses such as an undocumented 2018 study of leadership requirements for large-scale combat operations and 2016 and 2018 analyses of best predictive models also provide insight.

9. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 105.

10. Ibid., 12.

11. Bender, *Watershed at Leavenworth*, 44, 53.

12. CAL, *Leader Development Improvement Guide (LDIG)* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CAL, February 2018), accessed 25 March 2021, https://rdl.train.army.mil/catalog-ws/view/100.ATSC/4F980832-1E35-4C5B-9DD8-D39849111457-1519242707165/MSAFxLDIGxOY1xx-Finalxx180131.pdf.

13. FM 6-22, *Leader Development* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2015), 1-4.

14. Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 198.