



Combating the effects of turnover: Military lessons learned from project teams rebuilding Iraq

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Abstract The literature concerning turnover has traditionally been composed of studies and analyses which assume that turnover rates are malleable, and can be reduced. We take the opposite position and contend that turnover rates for certain organizations are not variable, but rather remain fixed. Is it possible, then, to reduce the deleterious effects of turnover without reducing the actual churn of individuals? To answer this question, we draw from experiences of the U.S. military during Operation Iraqi Freedom, in order to learn from its methods of dealing with high personnel turnover during the management of projects. Specifically, we offer four best practices that reduce the negative effects of turnover, while allowing the rate itself to remain constant. These best practices aim toward sharing the knowledge and mental models critical for sustained operations, to insulate the organization against the departure of key personnel. Herein, we demonstrate how efficient operations can be maintained amidst high churn rates.

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For many organizations facing high rates of employee turnover, strategies for increasing employee retention may not be practical because employees leave for reasons beyond the control of management. . . . In this situation, managers need to consider strategies that can minimize or buffer the organization from the negative consequences that often follow from turnover. ~ Richard Mowday (1984, p. 365)

1. Learning about turnover from military experiences

High turnover among military personnel is expected in war zones. The United States military frequently rotates people in and out of combat arenas not only because of the dangers involved, but also because of the forced separations from family and friends that such service requires. This creates a natural tension, though, as the military must continue effective organizational operations amidst exceptionally high turnover rates. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) represents one theatre via which we can study this tension, and learn how the military works to mitigate the effects of turnover in an effort to sustain

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organizational effectiveness. Herein, we examine how the U.S. military has dealt with the massive turnover of its personnel in infrastructure reconstruction project teams working in Iraq under OIF. It is our hope that other organizations might learn from the tactics employed by the U.S. military to mitigate the deleterious effects that can emanate from high rates of personnel turnover.

The phenomenon of 'turnover' has received much attention in the management literature, with over 100 articles published (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986). Although some turnover is considered functional (Dalton & Todor, 1979, 1982), most research highlights myriad negative aspects such as the cost of hiring and training replacements or disruptions to operations and productivity (Staw, 1980; Steel, Griffeth, & Hom, 2002). As regards project teams and their work, elevated turnover has been linked to poor performance (Parker & Skitmore, 2005; Vegt, Bunderson, & Kuipers, 2010). To help organizations cope with these negative aspects, scholars have devoted much time and effort to studying the antecedents or causes leading to turnover. This approach inherently assumes turnover is a variable that can be manipulated. But what if this assumption is not valid for all organizations, as the introductory quote by Richard Mowday suggests?

We approach the problem of turnover from a different angle: assuming the rate of turnover is a fixed variable, and as such, one that certain organizations cannot reduce (Dalton, Krackhardt, & Porter, 1981; Mowday, 1984). We then ask: Is it possible to mitigate the unwanted effects of turnover on the organization, without reducing the actual churn of individuals? The contribution of our study lies in that we offer an effective alternative to dealing with the disruptive effects of turnover. Rather than try to reduce turnover rates themselves, we focus on reducing the deleterious effects of turnover, while allowing the rate to remain constant. We offer concrete tactical strategies employed at the ground level, every day, by the U.S. military to combat the damaging effects of personnel turnover. In this study, we employ a participant-observer methodology (cf. Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991) where we draw on the first-hand observations and experiences of the first two authors during their tenure in OIF. From February 2008 to February 2010, the first two authors served tours of duty in Iraq; both worked as not only members of project teams, but also supervisors of project teams. During this time span, they observed over 45 personnel managing more than 450 projects valued at over \$1.5 billion.

Unfortunately, high personnel turnover is not a problem confined to the military. As such, our

observations apply to organizations in several industries that are consistently plagued with high turnover rates and involuntary rotations in project teams. The data highlight vast turnover in industries such as hospitality (31.1%), services (18.9%), banking and finance (18.6%), and healthcare (18.2%), with significant levels—upwards of 39%—being involuntary (Bares, 2009). Moreover, the involuntary turnover experienced by the military among deployed project management teams is similar to that experienced by project teams in professional service firms (e.g., consulting, auditing, design, advertising/marketing), healthcare (e.g., surgical teams, patient treatment teams), and the airlines (e.g., cockpit and cabin crews). Workers in these organizations frequently rotate from one project or team to the next and must adjust to the nuances and culture of each new situation. In the sections that follow, we first describe the context of project management and turnover in the U.S. military to situate our discussion. Then, we integrate extant management theory on mental models with findings concerning turnover to propose a theoretical rationale for how to combat its deleterious effects. Finally, we populate this theoretical model with tactical strategies and examples from the U.S. military to demonstrate how it maintains effective operations in project teams, despite high turnover.

2. The problem: Dealing with high turnover while managing projects

Operation Iraqi Freedom began in 2003 and ended in 2010 (Obama, 2010). To help rebuild the nation of Iraq, the United States invested considerable manpower and resources into OIF. As of August 2010, the U.S. deployed over 750,000 personnel (Dale, 2009) and appropriated over \$49 billion (Tarnoff, 2009) to support the initiative. Given the relatively nascent and inexperienced stature of the Iraqi government, most monies appropriated for Iraqi reconstruction needed to be executed by U.S. entities. The United States military accepted the responsibility of carrying out project management in a war zone. The high turnover characteristic of contingency environments can negatively impact the U.S. military in terms of project execution, as empirical evidence shows that the more project management personnel turn over, the more performance is disrupted (Argote, Insko, Yovetich, & Romero, 1995; Parker & Skitmore, 2005). We focus our analysis on those members of the military serving in construction project management offices, as these organizations were the ones directly charged with overseeing the

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