



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and to further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. Leadership Insights are published periodically by the CAL to feed and shape the leadership debate within the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership. The views expressed in Leadership Insights are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official thinking of the British Army or the Ministry of Defence. Series Editor: Dr Linda Risso.

Meeting culture, not eating it

Leading but not (always) commanding

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Battalion Second-in-Command (Bn 2IC) is a funny job. It has 'command' in the title, but you are not the Commanding Officer (CO). They do command, you do control. In the field, you are the Chief of Staff (COS). However, it is back at Regimental Duty where it is all about leading soldiers and delivering military capability. You are the same rank as those commanding the sub-units, but you may also have six years more experience than they do, including experience in sub-unit command. You wear multiple hats in support of the CO and the Unit. It is a busy job. So why write a *Leadership Insight* after 25 months as an Infantry Bn 2IC? Because I contend that it is an important role where strategy meets culture, and Bn 2ICs can assist in the delivery of the crux of mission command: one, delivery of Commander's intent and direction; and two, enabling and supporting subordinates in achieving their tasks.

In his podcast [From the Green Notebook](#), Joe Byerly uses E.M. Forster's quote, 'how do I know what I think until I see what I say?'. Our ideas often become clearer only when we try to articulate them for others. By putting thoughts into words, we are forced to organise, test, and examine our ideas and made them clearer for others as well as for ourselves. With this in mind (and as a fan of *FTGN*) I spent two years capturing thoughts on my experiences as the 2IC, with a view to clarifying my thoughts to be able to eventually pass them on as food for thought for future 2ICs. A series of focused questions close the *Insight*, intended to encourage future 2ICs to think early about how they may approach the job and prepare for it properly, and how they may usefully apply the British Army's [Leader Competency Framework](#).

1. Culture still eats strategy for breakfast!

After sub-unit command, I wrote a piece published by *The Army Leader* in 2021 and reflected that 'culture *eats* strategy for breakfast'. Put simply you can have the best plans and ideas for your Sub-Unit, but if the culture is not right you are going to struggle to deliver them. Unsurprisingly, this issue scales up at the battalion level. The Army's Climate Assessment tool is a useful 'dip test' of Unit culture and allows CO's and their command teams to start the process of lifting rocks and considering where (or who) may need particular focus. We found it a useful tool. But culture is not just 'out there' in the sub-units to be viewed and managed from on top; it is the ideas, norms and social behaviours that typify a Unit. A unit's culture is intangible. It is not found in formal structures, policies, or mission statements, but in the shared assumptions, unwritten norms, and ways of doing things that shape everyday behaviour. Culture influences how people interpret events, make decisions, interact with one another, and define what is considered acceptable or unacceptable. Much of its power lies in the fact that it is rarely articulated explicitly; instead, it is transmitted through observation, experience, and socialisation. As a result, members of a unit often recognise its culture instinctively, even though they may struggle to describe it precisely. It is 'how we do things around here'. As the 2IC will often (on behalf of the CO) chair or run many of the routine processes and meetings around the battalion, there is a real opportunity to shape and drive a positive culture. By consistently demonstrating professional standards, supporting colleagues, calling out negative behaviours, and upholding shared values, the 2IC helps shape the unwritten norms that influence how the unit operates. This is often a slow steady process, and the effects can be measured only in small increments.

2. Command vs. control.

The 2IC is the *second* in command, and routinely does control, not command. Of course, the role of every 2IC, from Section upwards, is to be prepared to step up. However, at the battalion level I would contend that it is particularly important to routinely delineate between them for two reasons. First, command and control are fundamentally different things. Command is a practical responsibility invested in certain people i.e. the Commanding Officer. Put simply, some of the big decisions are not the 2IC's to make. Good COs, however, often consult their teams on non-urgent matters to harness their views and to build consensus. 2ICs do have a sphere of command, otherwise they would add no value; they do not need to bother the CO with every decision that crosses their desk. Discussing the sphere of command early with the CO is essential in providing clarity on the boundaries, reinforcing both trust and mutual respect. I knew 'my' thresholds, and the point at which I had to walk up the corridor and knock on the door.

The 2IC is also the Chief of Staff (COS). Once the CO has made their intent clear, the 2IC can add value by turning ideas into plans, putting meat on the bones with the staff. This may be conventionally through the combat estimate, or it could be taking loose command direction and working with the staff to flesh out a plan within available resources. This second point is perhaps the more important one. If the 2IC is unable to balance 'up and out' (with the CO and Brigade HQ), as well as overseeing 'down and in' (monitoring tasks, providing support and resource when required), the Unit invariably suffers with unnecessary fastballs and frustrations.

3. The interlocutor.

'Have you got five minutes?' People will bounce things off the 2IC, often prior going to the CO. This can be positive as it allows people to benefit from the experience and perspective of the 2IC, who often knows how the CO is thinking. An informal exchange with the 2IC can allow for constructive challenge and red teaming, enabling a more refined final product or brief. It can also reinforce the command/control split discussed above: the staff – and the Chief of Staff – support the commander better by delivering the best possible product. These exchanges can also generate trust and mutual respect, thus enhancing operational effectiveness when it really matters. As the 2IC, I would often benefit as much from these conversations as the visitor to my office. Whether it was deeper exposure to a topic or project, or the opportunity to see how others approach a problem, the value was often

mutual. However, the 2IC must avoid becoming a blocker. There are times when the 2IC either has no value to add, or the issue is above their decision threshold and therefore they should be frank and open about it and redirect the question as appropriate.

4. Leadership and friendship.

In barracks and certainly on exercise and operations, the 2IC must lead the staff. Leadership will often fall into one of two modes: business-as-usual (BaU) and change management. In the BaU space, it is the 2IC's knowledge and experience that should underpin successful leadership. In barracks, that knowledge may be of processes, policies, or ways of working that more junior staff may have yet to experience. When deployed, the COS has a specific role in managing the HQ. In preparation for CAST (Command and Staff Training) and a subsequent overseas training event, I led an iterative development of the layout of our MAIN Command Post (CP). Whilst I had experience in this area, I was also conscious that several of the Battalion Headquarters staff captains had more recent experience of attending career courses that covered CP layouts. Proactively drawing on that knowledge was important as it enabled discussion and a fusion of good practices, and in doing so contributed to the development of the team by providing a psychologically safe forum for everyone to contribute. During my tenure, leadership through change was equally as important. Our unit experienced significant change in roles, location, and higher headquarters, leading to something of an identity crisis. Clear and effective communication was key throughout this period, both to give people space to voice their concerns, but also to repeat key messages and drive clarity into the journey.

In my experience, leading (through both BaU and change) was made easier when underpinned by friendship. Clearly there is not a requirement to like everyone you work with or lead, but I was fortunate enough in BHQ to be surrounded by exceptional Warrant Officers and Captains, some of whom I had soldiered alongside for years. This camaraderie and sense of connection generated trust and mutual respect, which was reinforced through shared experiences, both professional and social. I firmly believe the cycle was positively self-reinforcing, creating stronger bonds and a more effective team. Other Army authors, like WO1 Paul Kennedy in [Leadership Insight No. 64](#), have reached similar conclusions.

5. Clarity, foresight and continuity.

As a new 2IC I vowed early on to add value for the sub-unit commanders. From experience, I knew they would rightly be focusing down and in on their people, as well as delivering their specified tasks. After a month in the seat, I wrote to all the BHQ staff detailing how I wished us to work in support of both the sub-units and the CO. In doing so I aimed to set clear expectations, offer advice, and lay out our collective 'why' as a staff. Headquarters naturally have a further horizon, so the next area in which to add value was a logical plan underpinned by clear operational staff-work (OSW). Given the structural changes described above, this proved challenging at times, but we employed the basics of warning orders followed by an operation order or fragmentary order to allow people time to prepare. In a world where everyone has access to MS Teams and email, I argue it is more important than ever to plan, write and issue formal OSW to provide clear and unambiguous direction at a point in time (noting it will invariably evolve). Otherwise, people are constantly reacting to conversations and emails only. Informal 'Crown Clubs' (gatherings of the Field Officers) to chat through context and intent proved important to close assumption gaps; with hindsight I should have run more of these. With a personal desire to 'leave the jersey in a better place' (Kerr 2013) the 2IC can also add value by both improving working practices, and future-proofing them. I focused on our Standard Operating Instructions (SOIs), financial processes, and use of technology to underpin more efficient ways of working. I aimed to lock in a few marginal gains by driving education and training to normalise their use, and by finding ways to 'nudge' people to embrace them (Thaler and Sunstein 2022).

6. Constantly curious.

Whilst rank often brings with it experience, it does not make you the smartest person in the room. As the COS you are well-placed to make changes and help implement a positive

culture. The 2IC role provides opportunity to bring these observations together for both personal and professional benefit. By working with the various departments across the unit, I was exposed to different approaches and ways of working, often generated by some of our most junior soldiers and leaders; our MT department's use of QR codes, MS Forms and SharePoint lists to modernise the vehicle booking process immediately springs to mind. I saw several other areas where such an approach would be beneficial, and as 2IC was able to encourage adoption elsewhere. As 2IC, there is also opportunity to learn from both immediate superiors and subordinates. The CO will have a broader range of experiences than you, including advanced command and staff training; drawing on this and observing how they go about the business of unit command is of obvious benefit. Equally, my subordinate team in BHQ (the staff captains, Warrant Officers and SNCOs) were a particularly impressive group from whom I also learned plenty; the opportunity to learn and develop in the 2IC role is significant. I benefitted considerably and am immensely grateful to the team.

Conclusion.

During a battalion conceptual development week last year, I delivered a session to our JNCOs on the British Army's *Leader Competency Framework*. I found it a useful tool then to guide discussions, and it has proven useful again now as a framework to guide reflection at the end of my time as the Battalion 2IC. At that point, I contend that:

- Culture still eats strategy for breakfast...but the 2IC role can be where culture successfully **meets** strategy.
- The distinction between **command** and **control** is crucial, and a real benefit when done well.
- The 2IC can support the above by being a useful **interlocutor**. But know where your command sphere ends and the CO's begins.
- **Leadership** on the staff remains crucial. It does not have to be mutually exclusive from, and indeed benefits from **friendship**.
- The 2IC adds significant value by driving **clarity**, **foresight** and **continuity** into unit processes.
- The role provides yet another opportunity to learn and grow; remain **curious**.

Questions:

1. Have you stopped to consider the Leader Competency Framework in your current role? Are you living the values and behaviours?
2. What is the lived culture of your current organisation? How do people 'do business' around there?
3. If you are not in a command position, are you still leading where you can?

Resources:

[Leader Competency Framework \(2024\)](#), AC 72279.

[Army Leadership Doctrine \(2021\)](#), AC 72029.

[A British Army Followership Doctrine Note \(2023\)](#), AC 72029-1.

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Kennedy, Paul WO1. *Leadership Insight No.64 – Leading with Connection*, 2025.

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