



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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The Unflattering Mirror: Lessons in Junior Leadership on Non-Kinetic Operations

By Lt Michael Goode (INT CORPS)

I have spent the last six months looking into an unflattering mirror. As a Reservist officer, you get a glimpse of this mirror from time to time - sudden flashes of an image on a training night or weekend - but this long, unflinching and all-too-clear reflection was something new for me. The image I saw was the 'output' to my 'input', the 'effect' to my 'cause'; on this operation, it was the reflection of my actions and thinking as a leader - of what I did and did not do, and how I reached those decisions. That reflection informed my feedback loop as a leader.

The mirror's image has many sources including my own contemplation, the feedback of others and the team's performance. At times I have had to force myself to look into this mirror. Sometimes it has been hard to escape as I try to make sense of chains of events. Other times I have needed to search for it. During my deployment, I tried to put aside half an hour most days to reflect upon what happened and what needed to happen. Whilst these thoughts came and went, what I found most helpful was the image others held up to me.

Scope

This Insight has one primary message: seek out your unflattering mirror. If no feedback loop is forthcoming, find it. Find it through reflection, feedback and others' output. It has an implied secondary message, but assumption is the mother of all – well, you know the phrase – so I will spell it out: act on the things you see in that mirror. The image it reflects is almost entirely in your control. Do not disregard the things you observe as being merely a distortion of your real image, a fault of the mirror's. That is what the mirror shows; it is largely what others see as well, no matter how unfair you think the portrayal is.

The messages in this Insight are universal; we could all benefit from thinking about the mirror. However, I am conscious that I can only illustrate these messages through a narrative of the mirror's role in helping me make the shift from a civilian to military mindset on my first tour. This is why I have stressed 'non-kinetic' in the title; the tempo and nature of my operation meant that I think its specific lessons are limited for kinetic tours, or at least, I cannot speak authoritatively for how they apply to kinetic tours.

The handrails

Some Reservists are like actors, able to switch into character and relishing their new role. Others find themselves a blend of their uniformed and non-uniformed lives. Being more like the latter, the leadership training the Army gave me, together with my Reservist experience, served me well but did not all come to the front of my mind at once. Certain handrails which the Army had left me appeared sooner than others. The most important in my experience are our values: courage, discipline, respect for others, integrity, loyalty and selfless commitment (CDRILS). It became clear that some found these easier to live and breathe for a weekend at a time, rather than have as a core tenet of their character for an operational tour. Hold the CDRILS standard up to your actions. CDRILS must be integral to who you are and used as a measure to hold up to others too. It was only on this tour that I saw the true power of having a common language that could describe the values needed. Use CDRILS always. Help it inform your moral compass. Hear yourself using it to describe what needs to happen or to stop. When I came across tricky situations, CDRILS was the best tool to find the proven route. When I saw sub-standard behaviour, it was CDRILS that best enabled me to both identify and challenge it. Let CDRILS do the thinking and talking for you; cling on to these values as a handrail, the mirror will show you soon enough if you don't.

The second handrail was not formally taught but came with Reservist experience and needed time to be remembered. Be consistent. How consistent and clear have you really been? The best troops under your

command are the ones who can start to anticipate what you need or want; they understand the intent. Troops need to be able to read you. Consistency in your thought, and expression of thought, is key. Open up to them and communicate about what you expect to see and why, where your boundaries are etc. My mirror showed me that I was too inconsistent for too long, as I struggled to make sense of my new job and surroundings. Think about what you've said to them before, and how you've said it. Go in clear and stay clear.

The watch-outs

I caught myself struggling with my troops at times. I could not understand why we came to the realities of this operation from such different angles and how our attitudes and enthusiasm differed. This taught me two things to watch out for which I reflected upon often: 1) These are good and committed people, never ever think otherwise; 2) If something is not working, it is almost always because your direction is not good enough. Hold the mirror up, look closely at the direction you gave, knowing that there are committed people receiving it.

Keep a regular journal recording how your troops are performing, their strengths and development areas, and how they have responded to your leadership. This will help you understand what worked and what did not. Record when they fall below the mark you set for them so you can challenge them but also explore your own role in that failure. Use these journal-notes to counter any negative rumours you hear about your troops and to reinforce the positive image you have of them. Written evidence will always help and gives you a picture of development over time, or of persistent areas for improvement. During my tour, we were all so consumed by the daily battle rhythm that the written journal I kept proved invaluable as a tool. It allowed me to reflect before coaching troops; it helped them realise that I was noticing what they were doing; and it also helped me remember what development tools worked previously. Bring this journal into regular use, make it your aide-memoire to reflect on your troops and your ability to lead your troops.

Wearing two hats

Reservists train and mobilise to do a specific task but you will wear two hats: the job you trained for and your job as a leader. No one will tell you the right allocation of your time between those hats and, frankly, it will change all the time. Make your leadership hat your main effort, even if you are worried about doing a technical or high-profile role.

Hold a mirror up to how much time and effort you are giving each job and how you can optimise one to give more effort to the other. Forecast how that balance might need to change over the coming weeks.

Above all, do things for your troops; be someone who can protect them, who can make things better. At the start of my tour, I was happily bedding in. Complacently, I was under the false impression that my troops were doing the same. But, while I focused on the day job and thinking we were all enjoying the tour as much as I was, my troops experienced issues and difficulties. They did not raise these directly with me because they assumed firstly that I would struggle to empathise with their situation, secondly that I was too caught up in the day job to have time to do anything about their problems and thirdly that, even if I wished to, I was too junior to enact change. These misunderstandings took time to discover, unpack and put right. Establish what you can do for your troops and do it, building trust for them to come to you in the future. Use the mirror to ask yourself, what have you done for them? Who are they complaining to? What could you do to protect them? How can you work for them?

Summary

Mobilising for operations will always be a challenge for any Reservist. As a junior leader settling into your first operation, sooner or later you too will be confronted by the unflattering mirror of your actions and leadership style. Do not turn away from that mirror, look deeply into it and see the image it presents. Only then will you be able to harness that feedback loop to start developing as a leader and give more back to your troops and the Army. On a tour like mine, grab the handrails your training provides, remember the watch-outs about the nature of your troops and your direction, and always make your leadership hat your main effort. The mirror I looked into helped me work hard throughout my tour to make my image slightly less unflattering. Cherish your mirror, find a good cross section of angles from which to view it and take a good look at yourself.

Questions

- What role could this 'mirror' play in kinetic operations?
- How can you measure and track your actions to ensure that you are being consistent with those you lead?
- What other benefits might keeping a journal on your troops and your leadership of them offer?
- How could you use these experiences to improve your leadership as a Reservist?
- What do you see when you look into your mirror?

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