LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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'Absorb complexity, deliver simplicity'
Lessons from Operation RESCRIPT

By Lt WJ Stone RHA

> *"Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."*
> *John F. Kennedy, Presidential Inaugural Address, 20 January 1961*

As military leaders, we are trained to be a curious combination of the ultimate generalist and the extreme specialist. We change jobs every two years and hold a variety of roles in our careers, yet we have precise knowledge of weapons, tactics, and capabilities that most people will never hear of. For senior leaders, the transfer of skills between the military and non-military spheres is practised through continuous civil-military cooperation and exchanges of expertise. However, for junior leaders the wider applicability of our skills is often untested. Yet, junior leaders have the skills and knowledge to make an effective contribution as part of the Army's core business. Our training gives us a wealth of capabilities that can become essential in 'non-military emergencies' like planning, risk management, communication, decision-making, logistics, and teamwork.

The COVID-19 emergency has demonstrated the crucial contribution of junior leaders to support the nation's resilience. Under Op RESCRIPT, the Ministry of Defence's response to

the COVID-19 crisis, military personnel were deployed to bolster government capability in several areas.[1] Recently, I took part in a three-month Military Aid to the Civil Authority (MACA) deployment to a county council. After a briefing day and a canter through the structure of local government, their hierarchies and some of their lexicon, I was assigned to my local county council as a 'military planner' in the Excess Death Management team. I have distilled the lessons I learnt from this experience into the five points below.

1.   Back yourself

Culturally, military leaders are used to 'getting stuff done'. This means that in unfamiliar situations there is a comfort in being a 'doer'. The challenge is to ensure that our actions contribute effectively to the overall task. By trusting our training, we can turn generalist knowledge to our advantage and make a difference (Epstein, 2019).

The Excess Death Management team, to which I was assigned, was a hastily assembled group within the council. Nobody knew exactly what needed to be done and who ought to do it. In the initial confused phase, my instinct was to position myself at the coalface and 'to do': making phone calls, visiting sites, measuring venues. However, it soon became clear that while several team members were capable of doing these jobs, there were fewer who had the planning ability to assign people to task. Hence, I repositioned myself alongside the leadership team and identified the gaps, how to manage the uncertainty, and whom to contact for assistance. We initiated an RFI Tracker, clarified roles and responsibilities, synchronised tasks in space and time, and developed contingency plans. Anyone familiar with the Combat Estimate will recognise these planning stages and tools. My initial nervousness at not knowing everybody and not understanding the jargon soon evaporated as I realised how helpful my key skills – to absorb complexity and deliver simplicity – could be in that situation.

2.   More haste, less speed

In the first weeks of lockdown, local councils were frantically ensuring that their essential services could run and that their residents could remain safe. When I joined the team, a lot of activity was going on, but how it all tied together to achieve the council's aim was unclear. *Backing myself*, I helped the team leader develop a plan to ensure that everybody knew what they were doing, when and – crucially – why. I initiated regular meetings to catch up on progress, identify blockages and enable help across groups. Later, when it was clear that the plan was running effectively, we rearranged the team into a new 'operational' set-up that allowed groups to get on with their work while knowing how to request help or direction when needed.

In training, on exercise, and during operations the tempo is often raised, the circumstances are dynamic, and it feels like hasty action is needed. However, sometimes it can take more skill and confidence from a leader to slow things down and to take the time to assess the situation, rather than diving straight into the detail. This approach allows the leader to make the best use of everybody's time and efforts. By listening to expertise, articulating the core issues clearly, and encouraging an atmosphere of honest appraisal, the leader can cut through the noise and can address the core issues in a timely, decisive way.

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[1] "Over 5,000 armed forces deployed in support of the COVID-19 response in the biggest homeland operation in peacetime", MoD, 4 January 2021 (Accessed on 1 March 2021).

3.   **Remote C2**

Working remotely is difficult. Leading remotely is even more challenging. Communicating, working, sharing and delegating online disrupts our leadership behaviour. My experience on Op RESCRIPT allowed me to develop new practices. In the local authority where I worked, there were many who were used to it and had developed their own best practices. I am happy to share what I learnt by observing them.

- **Be digitally disciplined**. Being able to work from anywhere does not mean being able to work at any time. Some platforms allow you to set a status displaying your working hours, and I also saw email signatures with messages stating, 'Just because I might send emails late at night does not mean I expect you to'. Working remotely should not be an excuse to overburden people.

- **Keep in touch**. Downreps are vital. Let everybody know what is going on, when they can expect a new task, and how they can get in touch with you if they have questions or need help. It is easy to feel isolated when you are physically dislocated from the rest of your team. As a leader, you must not forget about each individual team member. Checking in with them if they seem to be facing professional or personal difficulties is more important than ever. However, do not fall into the trap of taking up everyone else's time with constant meetings.

- **Set an agenda**. Set meetings for a purpose and be sure to remove them when they cease to serve that purpose. Each meeting must have an agenda that shows topics to be discussed and the responsibilities of each team member, including on what they need to report and what they need to achieve. A clear agenda reassures people that the meeting is worth their time and attention.

- **Measure your output**. When working remotely, it is easy to get wrapped up in creating documents and diagrams that have no physical output. The relative comfort of working from home ought not to distract from the importance of measurable outputs and clear tasks: whether armoury checks, stock-taking or site visits.

- **Express yourself**. Working remotely demands clarity of writing over clarity of speech. Amidst a deluge of emails, all communication must be clear, short and effective. Bullet points and tables can be helpful to organise information which is easily absorbed visually. Military email formats provide a useful handrail (e.g. BLUF, headings, spacings).

4.   **Shared Understanding**

Op RESCRIPT was not just an exercise in working remotely. There was the real prospect of COVID-19 affecting the team due to infection or need for isolation. Reflecting on the risk of losing centres of knowledge at short notice, I set up a Resilience Tool to prepare for quick and effective handovers should a team member suddenly be unable to carry out their duties. The Resilience Tool recorded details of everybody's role, their key contacts, their projects, meetings and where to find information. Remote working should not mean working in a silo. It is essential to keep the team updated about what each member is working on and with whom. Key documents must be saved online, be accessible by the entire team, and must be kept up to date.

5.   **Listen**

Do not let *backing yourself* get in the way of learning. While I recognised that my skills could be useful, I was also aware that I was working with people who had spent years in their respective sectors and had accumulated a wealth of knowledge and experience. I constantly asked questions not just about specifics but also about methodologies, strategies and how others viewed issues. There is always something to learn from how others work, and military leaders should be relentless in their pursuit of better working practices. At the end of each week, I would take a short time to collate all the hastily scribbled notes about what did and did not work that week and distil them into concise recommendations for the future. I created a list of effective tools and strategies that I could take back to regimental duty and learn from my experiences – of which this Insight is the product.

Conclusion

Working on Op RESCRIPT was a great privilege. I had the opportunity to work with a diverse team and to pit myself against new challenges. I learnt many lessons as a result. The points mentioned in this Insight are not revolutionary in the context of leadership and working theory, but they do reflect the process of learning from diverse experiences. While at the time, these lessons seemed relevant only to the task in hand, I have since found them invaluable and have applied them to several other tasks in my role. My hope in sharing them is that they will help other leaders and teams to adapt to the challenges of working in new and unfamiliar environments.

Questions

 1. What approaches, methods or tools can you bring to an unfamiliar situation?

 2. Is 'work for work's sake' going on? How can you focus people's efforts to ensure that everybody's time is being maximised?

 3. Does everybody know what they are doing? Do people know how and when to reach you with any questions?

 4. How quickly could you hand over your role, if required? Are you hiding or guarding any information that you should share?

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