LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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The Leader's Dilemma

Followership in a Hierarchy

By Maj R Habbershaw (RLC)

During my time in the Army, I have experienced many examples of what I would consider to be excellent leadership, and this is certainly the norm. Occasionally, however, I have been exposed to what I would describe as poor leadership. Interestingly, I have also witnessed colleagues vehemently disagree on the qualities of their leader: what to one was welcomed oversight, advice, and guidance, was to the other overbearing interference and the application of the 'long screwdriver'. I have found these contradictory experiences intriguing, not least because they highlighted the potential for my own leadership to be viewed in differing ways by my subordinates. This has brought me to ponder why and how, as Army leaders strive to adhere to the same Army Leadership Doctrine and Code, a leader's actions could be viewed so differently. I have surmised that the subjectivity of leadership is such that followers will have a set of behaviours and preconceptions against which they will assess their leader and make their own judgement. This process will in turn define how they will behave as followers. At the same time, it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that leadership in the Army is nested within a hierarchical rank structure. The evaluation of leadership is not just

performed by followers. Superior reporting officers also assess the leadership abilities of their subordinates. Army leaders must therefore continuously engage with their followers as well as with their superiors. Hence, it is essential to examine the role that followership plays in leadership as well as the influence the Army's hierarchical structure has on it.[1]

Followership

While there is a rich body of literature that focuses on leadership, less research has been carried out on followership (Muchiri et al. 2011). Yet, followership is an essential factor in defining leadership. It is accepted that for leadership to take place there must be followers (Bolman and Deal, 1991) and – perhaps more critically – that the follower must be influenced to the point where they will act. If there is no action, there is no leadership (Conger and Kanungo, 1987). This notion of the follower's response being a key factor in assessing effective leadership is of great value to the leader as it gives immediate, tangible feedback on their performance. It provides them with the opportunity to identify shortcomings and to adapt accordingly. However, because the Army's hierarchical structure dictates that action will happen regardless of whether leadership is perceived to have occurred or not, the Army leader operates in an environment where follower action is not necessarily dependent on them as leaders but rather on the follower's adherence to the rules and regulations. With no tangible feedback to measure their leadership against, the Army leader is potentially unsighted on the perceptions of their followers. The lack of immediate, tangible feedback makes it difficult for the Army leader to determine if success has been achieved because of their leadership or despite it.

Hierarchy

The situation is further compounded by the subjectivity of leadership, which makes it possible for two followers witnessing the same behaviours to draw contrasting views on the qualities of their leader (Schyns and Schilling, 2011). For the Army leader, this subjectivity is further complicated by the unique proximal relationship between lower ranked followers and higher-ranking superiors. As argued by Ashforth and Mael (1989), the rank structure dictates that an appointed leader is also automatically a follower, when compared with the next higher rank. This creates a situation where the Army leader is faced with meeting the expectations of those below them and of those above them. This requirement to both lead and follow is exacerbated by a promotion system that requires only the immediate superior to make recommendations on the leader's suitability for advancement; it hinges upon the relationship between the superior and individual, and is centred on their unique linear leader-follower relationship. This system – for the time being at least - misses the opportunity to assess the individual's unidirectional leader-follower relationships. The individual is assessed on their ability as a leader from only their follower-perspective. It lacks a feedback mechanism such as

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[1] This Insight is a distillation of an academic study on the ambiguity of leadership within the hierarchical rank structure of the British Army that I carried out for my MSc dissertation. Habbershaw, R. (2020). *The ambiguity of leadership within the hierarchical rank structure of the British Army: Does it exist and what does this mean for Army leaders?* MSc. University of Lincoln.

180/360-degree reporting that empowers followers and allows them to become active participants in leadership development – something that has been deemed critical by Howell and Sharmir (2005).

As Grint (2000) has argued, leadership is in the eye of the beholder: it is possible for those assessing the Army leader, be they subordinates or reporting officers, to apply a range of different criteria. Furthermore, these criteria can change over time depending on the length of time spent in an organisation, with those serving longer having a greater understanding of the organisation's values and principles (Trevino et al. 2008). In support of this notion, Brown et al. (2005) describe how cognitive moral development causes ethical reasoning to become more sophisticated over time as people transition from decision-making based on fear of punishment to decisions focused on the expectations of significant others, and finally to decisions rooted in values and principles irrespective of the majority's opinion. It is suggested that this engagement with higher moral thought is linked to engagement in real-life experiences from which fundamental lessons are learned. This notion of leadership development by learning, which is endorsed by Adair (2011), is implemented by the Army through the formal delivery of leadership training for soldiers and officers at various career points. Furthermore, experience gained from taking on more leadership responsibility may also expose the leader to traits that were not previously significant to them (McNamara and Moss, 1993). This exposure to new leadership concepts coupled with more extensive practical experience could alter the lens through which leadership is viewed. Consequently, depending on the stage of their training and career development, the views of followers and of their superiors may not be aligned.

The leader's dilemma

As a result, a more experienced reporting officer may have different criteria for assessing leadership than more junior subordinate followers. This is evidenced by Pucic (2015), who notes that follower expectations are most demanding, and leaders are 'marked the hardest' by followers at the lower levels. Therefore, it could be plausible that in their attempt to meet the expectations of those below them, leaders fail to meet those of the people above them or vice-versa. Consequently, the Army leader may think they have to decide if it is the perception of those below them that they deem critical or that of their immediate superiors. Given this tension, there is the potential for the leader to prioritise career advancement and conform to the perceptions of those above them at the expenses of those they are appointed to lead. When set in the context of a structure that only relies on the superior's assessment to make recommendations for promotion, this could create a climate that encourages some leaders to prioritise looking up rather than looking down. Although, contrary to Army Leadership Doctrine and Code, it is noteworthy that as Army leaders are purported to always act in a manner they consider to be leadership (Grint 2000), the leader may not have the self-awareness to fully evaluate their actions.

Conclusion

Examining leadership from a follower's perspective has highlighted the complex nature of leadership in the Army. It is clear that in prioritising mission success, the hierarchical structure mitigates against

follower perceptions of poor leadership. However, with no feedback mechanism for followers, there is the danger of interpreting success achieved due to people following orders as a measure of effective leadership. The Army leader may incorrectly conclude that they are exhibiting leadership that complies with their followers' expectations and subsequently learn false lessons. Consequently, they are likely to continue to act in the same manner, each time believing success is due to their leadership. The reporting officer may also deduce that success is a consequence of leadership and make recommendations for further advancement that strengthens the leader's belief, when in reality those who are being led do not hold the same view. Although the current promotion system presents the leader with the 'option' of seeking feedback from their followers, this creates a sub-optimal two-tier system where some leaders are being assessed by their followers, yet others are not. Therefore, with so much ambiguity, for a leader to truly develop and for the Army to select the best leaders for future generations there is a case to be made for those actually being led, the follower, to be formally consulted and for their experience to be taken into account.

Questions:

1. Can you think of a time in which your own assessment of your leader was different from that of your colleagues? What was the reason for this difference?

2. Can you think of a time when you and your colleagues agreed that your leader was 'poor'? Why did you all feel this way? What did you do about it? What would you like to have done about it?

3. Should leaders consult their subordinates on their perceptions of them as a leader? And what are the risks of doing so?

4. Should a subordinate's view of the leadership they have received be a factor in the reporting process of the leader?

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