



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## COVID-19 on operations

### A Platoon Commander's Perspective

by Lt Thomas Redman (4 SCOTS)

When I deployed on Op TORAL 10 in April 2020 to Kabul, Afghanistan, in command of a task line of fourteen soldiers, I did not think that my greatest leadership challenge would be leading them whilst in quarantine. Of course, we were not a unique case. Across theatre, there were several individuals and small groups going into quarantine. However, we were the only case in which the entire task line was in isolation together. The prolonged quarantine posed a new challenge to me as a commander. This Insight offers a summary of my personal experience and reflections.

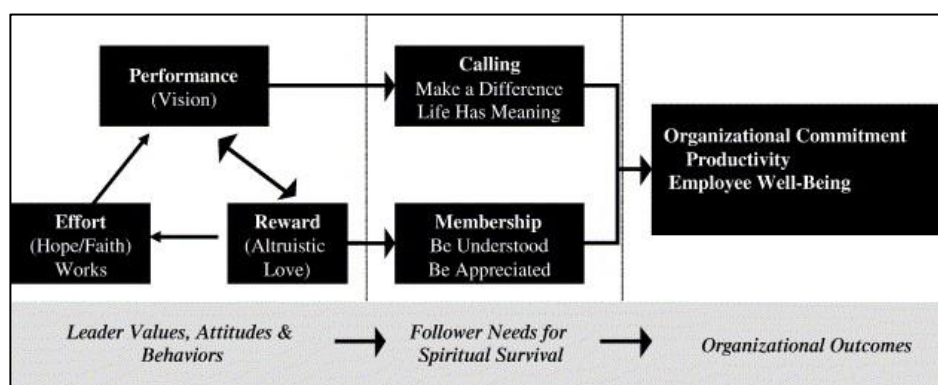
#### **The road to extended quarantine**

Upon our arrival, my task line and I were put in quarantine because a member of our team tested positive for COVID-19. Life in isolation was basic: we were confined to a basement corridor with a small outdoor area; meals were brought to us; and we had some limited gym equipment. At the end of the quarantine, the team practically skipped to the medical testing facility excited at the prospect of starting their mission. Unfortunately, it was not to be. Two people tested positive. We returned to

isolation. At this point, the group was unsettled, and tensions started to grow. Even though we had sought to remain distant from one another, the virus had spread further. Eventually, four people in our task line tested positive and had to return to the United Kingdom to ensure they were in the best place to receive medical treatment should their condition deteriorate. Morale was low and several team members were visibly restless. Their physical and mental health were taking a hit. It was my responsibility to prevent soldiers from retreating into themselves and to keep them attuned to the mission.

### Realisation of responsibility

Coping with prolonged confinement and the fear of contagion posed clear challenges: lethargy, depression, physical and mental atrophy. The situation necessitated a new leadership approach. I thought back to our motto at Sandhurst, 'Serve to Lead,' which chimes with what has become known as 'Spiritual Leadership Theory'. Often considered an offshoot of transformational leadership, spiritual leadership aims to create a shared value system for both leaders and followers to empower individuals and teams. This approach ultimately fosters higher levels of organisational commitment, productivity, and well-being (Dent et al. 2005. Reave 2005). The core idea of the spiritual leadership approach is to connect leaders and followers through the basic human need for spiritual wellbeing, which is achieved through a sense of common purpose and belonging. It aims to create a common vision that binds individuals together in a joint sense of calling, which in turn fosters higher levels of commitment, trust and performance. Researchers have applied the spiritual leadership approach to a newly formed attack helicopter squadron at Fort Hood, Texas. The authors demonstrated how the spiritual leadership approach can create an intrinsically highly motivated and learning organisation (Fry et al. 2005). Their research is represented by the diagram below:



Source: Fry, L. W., Vitucci, S., Cedillo, M., (2005), p. 838.

It was clear to me that some of the categories identified in this study could be applied to our team. Since the beginning of isolation, there had been a clear change in the team's feelings of reward and calling: they were not doing the job they had been deployed to do and they had lost their sense of purpose. This affected their mental well-being and sense of worth.

Another study that shaped my thinking at the time was carried out at Commando Training Centre Lympstone. Using the transformational leadership model, the researchers set out to gather evidence on the correlation between a leader's behaviour and the recruits' attitude to training. The study found that 'fostering acceptance of group goals, inspirational motivation, [an] appropriate role model, individual consideration and contingent reward significantly discriminated between pass and failure rates.' (Hardy et al, 2010). The study demonstrates that a recruit's self-confidence, resilience, and satisfaction are crucial parts of their personal and professional development. The evidenced produced by this study informed the development of the Army Leadership Code (2015) and is reflected in the Army Leadership Behaviours (LEADERS). The question is: how do we instil these values in those we are charged to serve? This led me to identify three fundamental points.

1. **It is not about being served; it is about serving others.** By serving others, leaders earn the respect necessary to lead effectively. Only leaders who can show that they care for the growth of their team and who are not afraid to empower them, can gain the trust of their subordinates and their willingness to follow. This is true for all leaders but it was particularly evident during our prolonged isolation as my team risked losing their sense of purpose, which would have jeopardised our future ability to achieve our task. It was essential that I, as their leader, connected with each one of them. I prepared cups of tea and coffee for the everybody; I was the first to mop the floor or clean the bathroom; I sat with whomever in my team wanted to talk about personal issues; I was open about my own frustrations and concerns. My soldiers learnt I was there for them and that I was aware of their personal situations, concerns, and frustrations. This approach alleviated the difficulty of quarantine and increase my soldiers' sense of worth and belonging.
2. **It is not about position; it is about example.** Effective leadership means empowering people and guiding them by example. According to the Army Leadership Doctrine, 'dedicated leaders with a strong work ethic and selfless attitude will inspire those around them to be similarly committed to the team [...] leaders who lead by example develop individuals by coaching and mentoring, build team by raising standards and building respect and trust' must set the example, engage with their people, and nurture and mentor those around them' (ALD 2016).

Prolonged isolation posed unique challenges to me as a leader because of the physical constraints and frustrations linked to the quarantine conditions as well as because of the loss of our collective sense of purpose. There was a real risk that the mental and physical health of the team would be affected in the long term. It was essential to find new ways to stimulate and motivate the team. First, I made sure that we conducted daily personal training sessions and regularly tuned into virtual PT sessions. Second, I asked everybody to prepare short daily lessons on a topic of their choice: some focused on Afghanistan and the coalition's mission, others discussed a subject of their personal interest. All these lessons offered us the opportunity to grow as a team: we got to know each other and we learnt more about the mission and the context in which we were due to operate.

3. **It is not about rivalry; it is about unity.** While in quarantine, we realised more than ever that we were in it together. The Maori have a saying, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.' In isolation, the fear of contagion and the temptation to blame one another for our predicament risked undermining the team's unity and jeopardising our ability to achieve our mission once we were out of quarantine. Equally, isolation and loss of focus pushed individuals to feel disheartened and frustrated. It was vital not to let them slide into depression. To keep the team united and motivated, I spoke with all the team members individually as often as I could to build a vision of what the team would achieve upon the end of quarantine and to make sure that everyone felt part of it. When delivering briefings, I focused on why we were in Afghanistan and what we were planned to achieve. I also reminded the group of why we were in quarantine: to protect the force. Following the spiritual leadership model, I focus on the 'why', which helped us regain a sense of purpose and of belonging.

## **Conclusion**

Quarantine allowed me the time to carry out deep personal reflections on how to become an effective leader. When I think back at the time when I started my officer training at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, I see that at the time I thought that becoming an officer would primarily be a matter of learning military basics and improving my physical fitness. However, the challenge is not to master the basic principles of management, but to gain the trust and loyalty of our subordinates. Leadership requires the careful evaluation of the context in which the leader operates, a deep knowledge of the personalities within the team, and an assessment of the task at hand. Ultimately, leadership is an art, not a science. It requires constant attention and recalibration. What excites me is that by listening, being attentive to the needs of others, and by exuding passion in our trade, we can transform the lives of those under our command and inspire them.

## **Questions:**

1. How and to what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic led to a re-appraisal of how we lead?
2. How can spiritual leadership improve Army leadership?
3. What tools can we adopt *today* to better appraise our own leadership?

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