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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.*

Leadership and Followership in a Dispersed Force

By SSgt Sam Leachman (RAMC)

"Delegate to the level of discomfort, and when you reach that level, you have got to delegate some more."
Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith[1]

While deployed on Op RESCRIPT within the Medical Support Force as part of a Military Aid to Civil Authorities (MACA) task, I worked in COVID-19 Critical Care units across London during the second wave of the pandemic. When I arrived at Woolwich Barracks for an induction by the 1st Battalion The Royal Anglian Regiment, the Commanding Officer asked us to go into this task with three principles in mind: Service, Professionalism and Humility. This motto guided us forward throughout Op RESCRIPT.

As I wore my scrubs and the required personal protective equipment, I was stripped of the visual recognition of my rank and of my military identity. The military hierarchical structure I had always known had disappeared. Our organisation was dispersed as we worked in mixed units along NHS staff. We became a network of military colleagues across the hospital, united by a common purpose. The civilian leadership within the NHS Critical Care Unit was not familiar with the Army's rank structure and objectively it did not need to engage with it at such a hectic time. The result was that I found myself in an unfamiliar position, within a hybrid multi-organisational team with a flat hierarchical

[1] Centre for Army Leadership Podcast, Episode 4 (Special Edition), 26 Dec 20.

structure where I, and many of my colleagues, had less authority but more responsibility.

During Op RESCRIPT, I reflected upon my role and responsibilities and I reminded myself of some key concepts I learnt during my time in the Army. What follows is a synthesis of the theories and ideas that guided me at the time and which I hope may be helpful to others as they examine their own role as leaders and as followers.

The Strategic Corporal: Empowering Junior Leaders

The nature of the MACA deployment during the pandemic was the first of its kind. In the dispersed structure, senior military leaders lacked the usual control over the Army Medical Services (AMS) teams within the Critical Care units. We were given an unprecedented level of trust and delegated authority to represent the AMS and the British Army at a pivotal time. We did not take this task lightly. We were aware of our responsibilities and of the repercussions that our performance might have on the wider strategy of both the NHS and the British Army. It reminded me of General Krulak's 'Strategic Corporal' theory, which has been used to describe how the actions of a corporal at the tactical level can have wider strategic effects (Krulak 1999).

The 'Strategic Corporal' represents all junior leaders who are trained to correctly identify the approach, strategy, and amount of force that each operational scenario requires so to be able to achieve given tactical goals while at the same time supporting the overarching strategic objectives. A 'Strategic Corporal' identifies with their organisation's ethos, understands their operating environment and what is required of them, and knows how to respond effectively (Annis 2020).

This description echoes the definition of a follower in the Army Leadership Doctrine (2021): 'An effective follower is a proactive, self-reliant, self-disciplined and intelligent team player, who consistently strives to support others in the pursuit of shared goals. Followers are professional, willing to take calculated risks, and think independently within the given intent. They are also honest, reliable and courageous, willing to offer constructive challenge. They are committed to their team and the organisation, inspired by a shared sense of purpose.'

From Resources to Partners

During Op RESCRIPT, leadership became more dispersed. It was often exercised remotely via digital platforms. Delegation, trust, and empowerment at team level increased dramatically in a 'distributed command' pattern (Army Field Manual 2017). This situation reminded me of the account by US Army General (Retd) Stanley McChrystal in his *Team of Teams* (2015). McChrystal recalls that his Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) gained an edge in the fight against Al-Qaida in Iraq when they moved beyond the traditional command and control structures and became a 'team of teams'. This was done by fostering a shared consciousness and empowered execution across units.[2] This new approach enabled the rapid sharing of information and

[2] See also Centre for Army Leadership Podcast, Episode 10, 18 Mar 21 and Gen McChrystal's talk at the CAL Remote Leadership Conference, 11 Mar 21, available on Defence Connect.

resources across the organisation as well as with government agencies and international allies. It also promoted decentralised command, personal initiative, and increased speed of execution.

According to McChrystal (2015), to achieve 'shared consciousness' it is necessary to remove the need-to-know attitude that is typical of all armies and to ensure that intent is well communicated and understood across the organisation. Shared consciousness allows modern armies to operate at peak performance and to maintain a competitive edge, whether in the fight against an adversary, during a global pandemic, or in the retention of their talent. Ultimately, this is mission command in its purest form (ALD 2021).

Shared consciousness allows followers to see themselves as 'partners' rather than simply as a 'resource'. Ira Chaleff (2009) defines partners as high support/high challenge, which means that followers offer vigorous support, and they are also willing to question the leader. 'Resources', on the other hand, are low support/low challenge, which means that followers do what is required of them but they do not go beyond the minimum that is expected. Followers who see themselves as partners identify success as a reciprocal endeavour of both leaders and followers. They see the success of the team and of each of its members as their own success. This approach is an essential precondition for the creation of high-performing teams.

The Spider and the Starfish

Shared consciousness goes hand in hand with a decentralised command structure and it empowers all members of the team. Brafman and Beckstrom (2006) compare centralised and decentralised organisations. They use the image of the 'spider' to explain the nature of a centralised organisation: if you cut its head off, the organisation dies. A starfish on the other hand represents a decentralised organisation, which has the ability to survive when it loses a leg. 'Decentralised' however does not mean 'leaderless'. A shared consciousness and empowered execution create a system where all followers understand intent and can offer the chain of command valuable real-time information to be used for effective decision-making. A dispersed force can still operate within the given intent but with a competitive edge (McChrystal 2015).

Yet, this is not always easy for modern armies to achieve shared consciousness and decentralisation. In his CAL Podcast, Gen. McCrystal (2020) explains the difference between complicated versus complex systems and the paradox of trying to apply complicated solutions to complex problems when in Command of JSOC. McChrystal speaks about his 'dream team' of elite units within JSOC and the difficulties of getting those groups to collaborate.

On Op RESCRIPT, there were many 'dream teams' within the British Army, Civil Service and the NHS, learning lessons on how to collaborate in a complex situation. However, these teams often worked in silos and did not share their experience and information with other teams. This affected wider collaboration and often led to duplications and waste of time and resources. Following the example of McChrystal's JSOC, it would have been helpful to prioritise effective communication across teams with a view to creating

an operation-wide shared consciousness to allow all followers to see themselves as 'partners' and to fully support their leaders.

Conclusion

On Op RESCRIPT, we approached our new role with three principles in mind: Service, Professionalism and Humility. We volunteered for unglamorous tasks without hesitation. We maintained a proactive and positive mindset regardless of our rank so that junior teammates would replicate, and senior team-mates and peers would use us as a measure for performance accountability. Followership became the catalyst for military teams from different units to form high-performing teams constantly looking for opportunities to make the lives of the Critical Care Nurses and their patients more bearable. We knew what was expected of us, we were fully aware of our role and felt empowered to take initiative.

Op RESCRIPT shows that there are indeed situations in which the British Army would benefit from adopting a decentralised posture to enhance its effectiveness and resilience. This approach would ultimately lead to the creation of high-performance teams. The key is to create a shared consciousness based on trust, clear communication, and mutual understanding across all teams and to enhance the quality of followers as well as of leaders. As British Army Sergeant Major, WO1 Paton said in a recent CAL Podcast episode: 'Our people deserve outstanding leaders, but our leaders also deserve outstanding followership.'[3]

Questions

1) How should the Army's hierarchical structure adapt during a multi-organisation peace-time operation?
2) How did digital technology affect the flow of information during the pandemic and what challenges did it pose to leaders and followers?
3) Why does shared consciousness lead to high-performing teams?
4) How can followership be improved with a dispersed chain of command?

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Centre for Army Leadership Podcast:

Episode 4, CGS General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, (Special Edition), 26 Dec 20.
Episode 10, Gen. (Retd) Stanley McChrystal, 18 Mar 21.
Episode 16, WO1 Gavin Paton and SMA Michael Grinston, 8 Jul 21.

[3] Centre for Army Leadership Podcast, Episode 16, 8 Jul 21.