

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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The Disruptive Leader*

Bernard Montgomery as a Company Commander

by Professor Lloyd Clark (CAL Director of Research)

By the age of 37, Bernard Montgomery had become used to his unpopularity. Although his many military talents were admired, 'Monty' was an officer who garnered professional admiration rather than personal appreciation. Wherever Monty went he created success, but his achievements were commonly accompanied by turbulence and upset. Thus, while his confidential reports noted his 'great abilities as a leader', 'outstanding military knowledge', and ability to 'solve complex problems', they also commented on his 'lack of humility' and 'an undesirable aloofness'.

While Montgomery's many attributes – including his moral and physical courage, decisiveness, and calmness under pressure – contributed to his many accomplishments. Yet his significant leadership weaknesses, most notably his communication skills and ability to empathize, made him a less potent leader. In October 1914, while his platoon was fighting in Belgium, one of his soldiers wrote that 'although making us real soldiers' Monty was 'a hard task master who we don't like'. Six years later, one of Montgomery's Camberley Staff College instructors described him 'extremely capable', but also 'a bloody menace'. Then, in 1922, Montgomery was relieved from his duties as brigade

* The content of this CAL Leadership Insight is based on the upcoming book by Lloyd Clark, *The Commanders – The Leadership Journeys of George Patton, Bernard Montgomery and Erwin Rommel* (Atlantic Books: London, 2022).

major by the commander who valued his subordinate's 'many abilities' but felt that he had 'overstepped his authority once too often.'

Being sacked was the price that Montgomery was willing to pay to lead change in what he called a 'lazy Army', but that was because he still had a great deal to learn about avoiding unnecessary conflict with colleagues. Nevertheless, arriving in Kent at Shoreham barracks during March 1925 to take command of 'A' Company, 1/Royal Warwickshire Battalion, Captain Bernard Montgomery DSO soon found that he had ample opportunity to make a positive difference *and* to improve his leadership.

Montgomery brought to his appointment a detailed six-month training programme that he was ready to implement. Its objective, he proclaimed, was that 'every officer, NCO and man will [by its conclusion] have a clear idea of the action of his unit in each of the various operations of war.' There had been no consultation with others about his plan, no courting of opinion or conversations about his intentions, merely a typed and stapled paper for the bewildered group to scrutinise. Even the commanding officer, the well-regarded Lieutenant Colonel C. R. Macdonald, was presented with the programme as an irreversible fact.

Montgomery cleared the company's schedule to focus on his troops' basic physical fitness and military skills, including use of ground, signals, platoon tactics, company tactics, and co-operation with other arms, before preparing a series of field exercises of increasingly complex. Critical to the process, Montgomery explained to his officers, was the need to reflect on each phase of the training and to define practical lessons that could inform the phase what followed. The monitoring of individual, platoon and company performance was to be rigorous, and feedback was to be honest. To help with this, Montgomery initiated 'teach the teachers' sessions designed to develop the NCOs' own military skills, improve their leadership, and give them robust instructional techniques. Empty hours were filled, requirements were set, and the company began to work harder than at any time they could remember. In a traditional battalion, which had previously enjoyed undemanding training and plenty of free time, Montgomery's revolution led to few supporters in any mess. Some of his most vocal detractors were particularly perturbed by the lack of time devoted to ensuring that dress and drill were up to standard. When the CSM found the courage to challenge Montgomery on this, he was told, 'such things are simply a waste of valuable time'.

'A' Company's *Training Diary* documented its activities throughout the spring and summer of 1925. It shows that Montgomery undertook the bulk of all instruction, teaching (including leading a ten-day battlefield study of the old Western Front for his subalterns – on bicycles), observation, and assessment. Those that did not perform as he expected were soon confronted. One subaltern was deemed by Montgomery to be so ineffective that despite his wider responsibilities, he took on the role himself for a period to show the suitably chastened man how the job should be done. The new world that had been imposed on the company required a demanding transition for every man (while sister companies looked on aghast), but as the weeks passed a new company emerged – 'Monty's Company'. Bonded by common experience rooted in successes and failures, the platoons were soon enjoying the fruits of a mutual trust that had previously

been absent and, what is more, they were enthused. 'For the first time in my career', wrote Sergeant Jimmy Donald, 'I felt part of a company of men I could rely on. We had been given strong leadership and we liked it.'

Few failed to throw themselves into the commander's new initiatives, but the few that failed to adapt were removed from the company in April. Yet such action was only taken after Montgomery had consulted with his officers and NCOs in one of his new evening meetings initiated so that he could listen to their views, access new ideas and discuss his plans. Those present were under no illusion as to who was boss, yet over time Montgomery's authoritarian style began to give way to something far more inclusive. Everybody was learning, including Montgomery, who became more skilled at communicating with subordinates and increasingly recognised the benefits of thoughtful challenge.

'A' Company quickly became a good news story for MacDonald who enjoyed the fact that the chain of command (through Montgomery's unabashed promotion) was aware of the battalion's 'remarkable new training programme.' Various officers were subsequently sent to observe the company as it fought mock battles, was tested by live-firing, and conducted night operations. 'Monty is divisive and a terrible self-publicist', wrote MacDonald to a friend, 'but he's also a real marvel.' Having given him full support to continue with his training programme, Montgomery's confidence soared and in a first for the battalion, he ran an exercise in which his company worked closely with a battery of field artillery, a platoon of sappers, and a squadron of Royal Air Force fighter-bombers. Having personally invited the brigadier to observe the action alongside MacDonald, Montgomery was delighted when both cooed over what they saw. 'A' Company's performance immediately became the benchmark against which others in the brigade were judged and, by June, it was requested to provide demonstrations for a host of other battalions and brigades. It was hardly news that would endear Montgomery to his peers but, he wrote, 'I am not interested in petty regimental politics or the opinions of those poorly situated to offer a judgement about what I have achieved.'

By August, the recently promoted Major Montgomery was satisfied that his company had met the objectives he had set for it in the spring and was generous in sharing the evidence he had gathered to support the claim. Even one of his harshest critics, an officer in battalion headquarters whom Montgomery held in low regard, was forced to admit 'Underneath, as I learned, he was bloody good.' Indeed, just six months after the whirlwind had first struck the battalion, MacDonald ordered the 'A' Company's training programme be rolled out across the entire battalion. Montgomery gave up the company to overseeing the work while also running a new NCO training cadre. Within weeks, however, the Army had swooped in to pluck Montgomery from his regiment with the offer of an appointment as Staff College instructor in the rank of lieutenant colonel. Montgomery was on his way up.

A disruptive leader determined to pursue impactful and wide-ranging change, Montgomery was a task-focussed officer bent on realising his ambitions as quickly as possible and at the expense of everything else. In common with many leaders of this

type, he was headstrong, confrontational, self-confident, and content to facilitate destruction in order to create something new. Initially, he was unrelentingly transactional, imposing his authority on the company with a heavy hand. Although not blind to his actions and behaviour causing consternation - hurt, even - he remained zealous in the pursuit of his objectives. Yet while such an approach may be acceptable in certain demanding operational contexts, in southern England during the mid-1920s when 1/Royal Warwickshire Battalion was enjoying a quiet posting, severity was bound to cause disquiet. The fact that Montgomery seemed to glory in the turmoil he instigated promoted the view that he was using the company purely for his own self-promotion while not understanding the negative affect he had on his subordinates. The truth, however, is that Montgomery *did* understand his impact, but believed that displeasure would soon be buried beneath the completed programme's compensations. Moreover, when he saw the benefit of utilising into the less used colours on his leadership palette, he became more collaborative, inclusive, and transformational. It was a development that was to the very great benefit of all concerned, but those hues are not those most associated with Bernard Montgomery.

At the end of his short time with 'A' Company, few could honestly say that Montgomery's impact had been anything other than remarkable. But what had he learned? Over and above his own progress as a leader and the vindication of his training methods, there was also the less palatable reality that the system encouraged Montgomery to believe that he was rapidly becoming the complete soldier, a peerless leader and a model professional who could expect to rise to the top of the Army. But in rewarding this able officer, the Army was also tolerating a difficult and eminently flawed man.

Questions

1. Are disruptive leaders an asset to the Army? If so, why?
2. How might disruptive leaders be led to ensure that they reveal their positive best rather than their destructive worst?
3. How might leaders ensure that having the courage of their convictions is not perceived as arrogance and wilful blindness?
4. What might the actions and behaviours of a disruptive leader have on the climate of a sub-unit?

Resources

- Lloyd Clark, *The Commanders – The Leadership Journeys of George Patton, Bernard Montgomery and Erwin Rommel* (Atlantic Books: London, 2022).
- Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery, *The Path to Leadership* (London: Collins, 1961).
- Robert L. Taylor and William E. Rosenbach (eds), *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009).
- Cam Caldwell et al., 'Transformative Leadership: Achieving Unparalleled Excellence', *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 109, No. 2, 2012, pp. 175–87.
- Andrew Millar, [Why Your Business Needs Dissenters](#), Ted Talk, 8 Jan 18.
- TED Radio Hour, [Disruptive Leadership](#), 17 Jan 14.
- Clayton M. Christensen, Michael E. Raynor, Rory McDonald, '[What is Disruptive Innovation? Twenty Years after the Introduction of the Theory, We Revisit What It Does – and Doesn't](#)', *Harvard Business Review* (2015).