



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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StratCom & Leadership

Adapting to a new challenge

By Mark Laity (CAL Fellow)

*As a commander you now live in a fishbowl; war is a theatre, and you are a producer of a spectacle that must appeal to a range of audiences. For success is invariably defined by the triumph of the narrative.
General Sir Nick Carter, former Chief of Defence Staff (2019)*

*We need to become much more adept at operating with agility across this grey zone...
In short, we must become more adept, and comfortable, with acting across and dominating the cognitive domain.
Effective deterrence also means communicating clearly,
so we maximise deterrent effect without increasing the risk of mobilisation.
General Sir Patrick Sanders, Chief of the General Staff (2021)*

Two generals, two leaders, highlighting the world in which we now live. General Carter embraces the power of narrative even when the guns are firing. General Sanders powerfully describes the challenges of the new information age and the skill sets required to operate within the grey zone and ensure it does not become a full-war zone (DSEI Speech, 14 Sep 21). In his recent RUSI speech, General Sanders has also emphasised the too often downplayed third C of deterrence, the Communication that ensures potential adversaries are aware of our Credibility and Capability (RUSI, 28 Jun 22).

I take as my starting point that Strategic Communications matter. But do you need to be good at Strategic Communication (StratCom) to be a good military leader? Is StratCom now a necessary part of the army officer's toolbox? And if so, is the British Army adequately preparing its officers for implementing StratCom? My answer to those three questions is, yes to the first and the second, and no to the third. The degree to which it applies to the first question – do military leaders need to be good at StratCom – is part of what I want to discuss in this Insight.

The term StratCom is thrown around rather loosely, often by people with more confidence than knowledge. Just as a narrative is not media talking points or 'Lines to take', so StratCom is not public affairs on steroids. It is much bigger than that. The UK's useful Joint Doctrine

Note on StratCom (*Defence Strategic Communication: An Approach to Formulating and Executing Strategy*, JDN 2/19, 2019) is illuminating on this point, with its proposed definition, 'advancing national interests by using Defence as a means of communication to influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of audiences' (Chap. 4, Par.4).

'Using Defence as a means of communication' is a striking phrase and I will add to that one of NATO's formal statements first used in 2008 about the aim of StratCom, 'place StratCom at the heart of all levels of policy, planning and implementation and, as a fully integrated part of the overall effort, ensure the development of practical, effective strategies that make a real contribution to success' (ACO Directive 95-2). Even more notable is the much-revised content of NATO's draft *Allied Joint Doctrine*, AJP-01, now out for final promulgation. AJP-01 is the NATO capstone doctrine for Allied joint operations and activities. As such it is the highest-level doctrine and the basis from which all subordinate NATO doctrine is derived. It is soaked in StratCom thinking with its analysis of the transition to the Information Age, sections on StratCom, information advantage and so on. But perhaps the most striking part is the chapter on 'Orchestrating Fighting Power'. It has as its two key doctrinal tenets the 'Behaviour-centric approach' and the 'Narrative-led approach'. The more familiar manoeuvrist approach is described as, 'This approach provides the mindset to achieve their behaviour-centric outcomes' (AJP-01, Chap. 4, p. 95).

It is difficult then to see how StratCom can be seen as anything other than essential to army leaders, which brings us back to our early questions and suggests the answers. If StratCom is that central, then understanding and mastering its use is increasingly essential to any leader. This is not to say that every leader needs to be a StratCom practitioner, any more than every leader working in the joint environment – which these days is pretty much everyone – needs to be aircrew to understand airpower. However, we would expect them to understand airpower's limitations and potential and from quite an early stage in their career. And of course, it is not just airpower. Although a young officer may join (for example) the infantry, we would expect that as they progress, they will develop a breadth of understanding of all sorts of lines of effort that together produce success – air, plans, logistics, indirect fires, intelligence, cyber et al.

What needs to be recognised is that StratCom is not a natural military activity, nor does the military naturally attract that kind of person. Put in crude terms, people rarely join the military to do Public Affairs, PSYOPs or develop narratives. Most join to fly, drive or shoot stuff – to practise 'hard', not 'soft' skills. This is not to say military personnel cannot handle StratCom, they can and they do, but that is not why they join and so it does not come naturally – any more than a journalist is a natural soldier. The job you choose reflects your character and outlook. Further, military training and education unsurprisingly focus on what are seen as the primary skills most directly concerned with the 'day job'. Tradition also plays a part. Institutions have a momentum that naturally inclines them to keep doing what they have always done and StratCom is still a relatively new kid on the block.

Over my years in NATO, ultimately as SHAPE Communications Director and responsible for StratCom development, I have watched the stuttering development of StratCom within the Alliance, including the UK. It has got better without doubt, but its growth has not caught up with the growing need. We are still playing catch-up.

For most training and education, StratCom is still shoe-horned into existing curriculums as an add-on, and that applies to structural changes as well. Planners in particular need to come to terms with what behavioural- and narrative-led operations really mean in a systemic, integrated and sustained manner. This approach requires a mindset change and it is a real leadership challenge. To a significant degree we are asking our people to think and act differently – to integrate so-called soft skills into the concrete hard skills that reflect what is more often seen as military reality. This change requires leaders to embrace this challenge first. Over the years I have frequently found senior leaders are coming to terms

with the principles of the StratCom challenge but operationalising it – translating it into action – is another matter. This is an observation not a criticism, because it is hard to turn concepts into effects. This is new territory.

Militaries have an almost unique advantage over the civilian sector, which is carefully planned career-long education and training. Barely anywhere else does a profession regularly give its future leaders long periods of time to prepare in a holistic way for their future career. StratCom education and training therefore needs a thorough assessment to ensure that it is not just an add-on – a relatively relaxing day or so of lectures amidst the crunchy stuff. It must become an integral part of education and training as an essential line of effort. This process must include two complementary parts: the operators, who incorporate it as part of the overall effort, and the practitioners – the Subject Matter Experts who ‘do’ StratCom. Doing StratCom does not just mean delivery as in managing Social Media and handling the media but, as the JDN says, providing the planning, thinking and advice for ‘using Defence as a means of communication to influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of audiences.’

At the moment, training for practitioners is at best poor, and at times non-existent. I think there can be few (if any?) areas of the military where officers so commonly arrive with so little training, including those taking leadership roles. This can be a sensitive topic. No-one wants to admit to amateurism, but that is the reality. Very often this is disguised by the British Army’s ‘superpower’, which is the high standard of the average officer. They learn fast and crack on to effect. But the fact remains as far as StratCom is concerned, they are supposed SMEs (Subject Matters Experts) without much E.

Frequently officers need to deal with StratCom only in one appointment, with no prior training. After often minimal training, their first few months are often a vertical learning curve before they can deliver real value, in a middle phase of increasingly useful work. Then there is the wind down, preparing to move on to something completely different, taking the hard-won knowledge with them, while behind them the cycle begins again.

This approach has a variety of effects. The lack of expertise means lack of authority. StratCom practitioners are meant to be advisers but, especially early on in their role, why would leaders take advice from an SME without much E. As a StratCom adviser at SHAPE, my advice did not need to be heeded (in that aspect of my job I was an adviser not a decider) but my expertise meant I had the authority to at least be listened to.

Additionally, at the moment the military is not developing serious expertise. A StratCom tour may ultimately produce a decent staff officer but, like any other specialism, to produce higher-level leadership and innovation requires experience at multiple levels to go with the talent and a sustained effort to make StratCom an integral part of education, planning and preparation. That also produces the confidence to advocate for StratCom in integrating it with ‘policy, planning and implementation’ and ‘using Defence as a means of communication’.

This is asking a lot. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1531) is seen as a byword for cynicism when it would be more accurately described as world-weary advice by a senior adviser to his young leader. In it, Machiavelli noted, ‘There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order.’ Indeed. In my view, not only do we need expertise in StratCom but introducing it requires commitment, determination, and a willingness to be bold and to challenge the system – in other words, it needs leadership.

Is the system geared up to produce what today's security environment needs? StratCom is not the only bespoke skill that militaries need. The military is traditionally and understandably orientated towards generalists and producing senior commanders, so can it also produce the specialists in StratCom, AI, Cyber etc that the new information age is calling for? Not everyone can be a general or brigadier, so is there scope to create satisfying niche careers in specialist topics, while also balancing them with ensuring our future leaders have a balanced career progression?

I suggest there is. All communication disciplines (PSYOPS, InfoOps, Public Affairs) could be brought together in one grouping, ideally 'purple', which would create something closer to a critical mass of numbers justifying a proper career field that would produce some officers having both sufficient seniority and expertise to hold their own at the top table. The staff in such a corp would do multiple tours to build up real 'degree-level' expertise. Their training and education could be both within the military and outside.

Meantime, StratCom training and education would be more thoroughly integrated into broader military curriculums for everyone else. To avoid stovepipes, some StratCom posts, including leadership, would still need to be filled by the high-flyers, and seen as an important tick in the box for a well-rounded preparation for command. That said, no-one would be put in a StratCom post without proper training, even if it is just for one tour.

Throughout the history of conflict one of the constant challenges of leadership has been to adapt to change, and we are now living in the Information Age. The current security environment has rarely been more complex. Russia's aggression in Ukraine reminds us that major war in Europe is not history, but at the same time all the tools of the 'grey zone', 'hybrid conflict', 'constant competition' or whatever we call them are still in active use.

To go back to General Carter's quote at the head of this essay stating, 'success is invariably defined by the triumph of the narrative'. Owning that narrative is key to maintaining public support, which is not just the job of politicians but all leaders, not least because our soldiers themselves need to believe in the cause, so the narrative plugs directly into the moral component of fighting power. Look at Ukraine now and the motivation of Ukrainian forces and incidentally their understanding and use of communication.

Meantime our lethal weapons remain unused. Apart – that is – from their essential deterrence value. Hence, 'using Defence as a means of communication to influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of audiences', in other words StratCom, is currently our most active tool – and therefore a tool which leaders need to thoroughly understand and use.

Questions

- Are 'soft skills' like StratCom important for military leaders?
- How can StratCom become an integral part of the military planning and operational processes?
- What are the challenges and advantages of creating StratCom 'purple teams'?

Resources

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