

# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## Be The Leader You Want To See

### Leading Without Authority

By Sgt Modou Faye, AGC (SPS)

*Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world.  
Today, I am wise, so I am changing myself.  
Rumi.*

Many people think that only those in a position of power or authority can lead. However, this definition aligns more with command than with leadership. To be a commander, you must be assigned a position of authority and can expect those under your command to comply with your orders to achieve a defined outcome. Management focusses on the processes of planning, organising, controlling and co-ordinating resources. Leadership, on the other hand, is people-focused and can be viewed as providing direction, creating a vision, and then inspiring others to share that vision. Leadership can therefore be defined as 'getting other people to do things willingly'. This does not mean that a leader cannot be a commander or a manager, or that commanders and managers should not also be leaders. In fact, I would argue that the best commanders and managers are also good leaders.

Command, management, and leadership can therefore be viewed as three legs of the same stool: they work best when they are in balance. However, unlike command and management, you do not have to wait until you are put formally in charge to lead. Leadership is a key enabler at every level in a hierarchy. There are many ways in which you can lead even when you are not in charge, but for the purpose this article, I will focus on only one key area: Leading oneself.

Self-leadership should be the bedrock of every leadership development. This is simply because when individuals are trained to lead themselves first, they are more likely to build stronger and more effective teams. In the Army context, self-leadership prepares junior

leaders and soldiers from the outset of their leadership journey and it sustains them through their career.

As stated in the Army Leadership Doctrine 2021, to lead others you must first learn to lead yourself because that is the only way you will build the credibility that you need to be followed by others. This aim can be partially achieved by maintaining and demonstrating high standards, emotional intelligence, leading by example, and being utterly selfless. Self-leadership also requires self-management. This could mean to be able to manage effectively your own time, energies, resources, finances and relationships. It also requires self-monitoring. You need to understand and monitor your actions, thoughts, and behaviours and you must be able to assess how they may impact those around you and how they may affect operational effectiveness.

In basic training, we are taught to polish our boots, iron our uniforms, make our beds and to support our teammates to meet the required standards. In other words, we are taught to look after each other, fondly called the 'buddy-buddy system'. As daunting as some initial training tasks may seem, they are useful tools that prepare every serviceperson to be a leader from the outset. People will only want to follow you when you lead by example, when you uphold the highest standards, are consistent, and demonstrate empathy. Leaders need to be seen as putting the needs and interests of their people before your own.

The British Army's Values and Standards, when applied and not just passively memorised, can be used as a handrail for effective self-leadership. While serving at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 2016, my then Regimental Administration Officer (RAO) used to ask us every week to choose one value and standard of the British Army and explain to the team how we had applied it in our lives. The RAO wanted us to root these values in our lives and not just to memorise them. I personally decided to start practising this approach at home. I used to get frustrated by trivial things like finding a messy kitchen and expecting someone else (my wife!) to tidy up. I began to lead by example by doing what I had expected others to do. I would go into the kitchen and wash every dish in the sink and tidy up the entire place. After doing this for a few times, my wife understood how important it was to me and she also came to appreciate having a tidy and clean space. We now never leave a dirty cup in the sink. Having seen the positive impact that this approach brought to my private life, I went further and extended this practice of service to the wider community. I volunteered for charities, and I co-founded a charity in honour of a deceased friend and colleague.

The same approach shaped my life in the Army. Shortly after leaving Sandhurst, I deployed to Kenya with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Irish Guards on Exercise ASKARI STORM. I was attached to the Battlegroup HQ. Whilst we were at Main Operating Base (MOB) Simba, I noticed that everyone in our planning tent had a full water bottle. Given the high temperatures, everyone had to keep refilling their bottles throughout the day, which was inefficient and distracted members of the team from their tasks. I asked myself, 'How can I apply what I learnt in Sandhurst here? How can I serve?' I spoke with the chefs and asked them if they could provide me with three green 'Norgees', the containers used to store hot water or food by chefs in the field. After explaining to them what my plan was, the catering Senior Non-Commissioned Officer happily gave me the Norgees with a lot of sugar, tea, coffee, milk, and squash. Every morning before anyone arrived at the tent to start the day, I set up the brew area by filling three Norgees: one with hot water for tea and coffee, one with cold water, and the final one with squash. From that day, no one at the HQ ever bothered about carrying around and re-filling their own water bottle.

On the last two weeks of the final exercise, there were no chefs from whom to source the Norgees, I decided to keep a large bean tin in my Bergan (acquired from the chefs before I left FOB Swara). I used it to warm up my rations and those of every other person in the

Battlegroup HQ. Using just one fire, everybody was fed, meaning people could carry on with the planning cycle, war gaming, or delivery of orders without worrying about cooking their rations. This was not an easy task, but it did have a visible positive impact on the morale and operational effectiveness of the team. Upon returning to the UK after the exercise, the Commanding Officer, to my surprise gave me a commendation for what he described as 'outstanding leadership'.

For me, self-leadership has produced results that I had no idea were possible. Instead of worrying about the things I cannot control, I focus my energy on the things I can control: my goals and my objectives. Instead of asking what I could *get*, I ask myself what I can *give* in every situation, and the rewards have often been greater.

Self-leadership requires self-control. Unless you know how to control yourself and be a role model, nobody will want to follow you. To achieve self-control, one must be self-aware first. It means gaining a deep understanding of one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs and drives. Self-aware people have empathy and are honest with both themselves and others. People with high degree of self-awareness have a thirst for constructive criticism whereas those with a low level of self-awareness perceive any negative feedback as a threat or an attack on their ego. Being self-aware does not necessarily mean that the individual must be a 'rock' and never feel anything, never have a moment of weakness. It means that the individual can control and re-direct disruptive impulses and moods as they are aware of their presence. They can anticipate their own reactions and respond appropriately.

When I asked Major Kidane Cousland, the first officer of Rastafarian faith in the Commandos and the first Chair of the Defence Rastafari Network, how he had advanced up the career ladder so quickly, his answer was simple: 'Hard work, consistency, and emotional intelligence'. He explained that just being right is not enough but that the timing and way in which you express your point matters a lot. Maj Cousland remembered, 'I built a lot of relationships with everyone by being completely selfless. Some of the other experienced cadets or high performers would just sort their own stuff out and then go to bed and get an extra two hours sleep on everyone else. Instead, I would stay up till three, helping everyone. I would offer to do a piece of kit for everyone and anything else that they needed my help with. So, the collective was better as a result and all I had to deal with was a little less sleep. The result of that was that people worked hard for me when I was in command or needed a hand, reciprocity is key to group cohesion, but it relies on someone making the first move to be vulnerable and give with no expectation of return.' Maj Cousland also added, 'The hardest rank I earned was my first tape, Lance Bombardier. I was a total pain in my Fire Support Team Commanders' backside, constantly criticising the plan or route, suggesting alternatives in confrontational manner which put him in a difficult position. Either he takes my advice and encourages my impetuosity, or he ignores it and fails to maximise the talent of his team. It wasn't until one of my mates took me to one side and explained that it doesn't matter how good your ideas are, if you do not communicate them with respect they will not be accepted'.

Maj Cousland understood at an early stage that both followership and leadership require emotional intelligence. He realised that people are social animals with emotions and egos, and do not like to be challenged. Experience shows that when challenged people are more likely to double down on their own idea than to concede. Maj Cousland explained that he believed the key for earning his first tape was learning how to support others, how to take advice, and how to challenge respectfully. There are so many things in our lives that we cannot control. But one thing we can change is how we behave towards others and the words we use.

Officer Cadet (now Major) Cousland's hard work, empathy and emotional intelligence paid off. He won the Sandhurst Sword of Honour as the top Officer Cadet in his intake at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and he most recently earned an MBE. His transformational leadership style has inspired and motivated many to work at levels beyond mere compliance. He has changed teams and organisational cultures and has moved them in a new direction. His company commander at Sandhurst said, 'Throughout his time at Sandhurst, he has led by example, whether it is by fitness, professionalism or as a role model and consequently readily gained the respect of peers and directing staff alike'. Major Cousland's journey is an amazing and unique one that is worthy of emulation by anyone that is aspiring to be a good leader.

Empathy is an essential ingredient of good leadership. Those who have it are more attuned to the feelings of other people and hear the message beneath the words being spoken. This is what makes them good listeners. They do not listen to *respond*, but they listen to *understand* and always look at things from the other person's standpoint. They also have a strong understanding of the existence and importance of cultural and ethnic differences. Captain Michelle Slade-Jones has been described by many people I interviewed for this article as one of the best RAOs they ever had. She is most admired by her detachment for her empathy, honesty, and strong cultural awareness. She always knows the date for every religious festival and is always the first to wish everyone a merry Christmas, happy Diwali or Eid Mubarak. She told me she believes a 'good leader should be completely honest and transparent' to earn the trust of their followers and for her this is 'non-negotiable'. She argues that 'to get the best out of your people you need to understand them and their situations both in and out of work. You can't resolve all their issues but if you understand, you can support where and when required. Lead by example - do not ask your team to do something you are not prepared to do. Sometimes the hard decisions are the right decisions, and to expect your team to do something, you have to be right there with them'.

## Conclusion

To be an effective leader, one needs to first learn to lead oneself. Let honesty, empathy, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and good communication be your playbook. Most importantly, lead by example. People will never want to follow you if you say one thing but do the opposite. Self-leadership is not about trying to be anyone else; it is about being the best version of yourself in both bad and good times.

## Questions

1. What can you do in your team to serve others and to ensure that the team's performance is supported?
2. How can self-leadership contribute to changing the Army's organisational culture towards a more cooperative and less confrontational working environment?
3. Is empathy really an important ingredient of Army leadership?

## Resources

[Army Leadership Doctrine](#), 2021.

Lt Col Matt Ketterer, [If Leadership Is About Developing Others, Then You Need To Connect](#), *CAL Leadership Insight* N. 11, Jan 19.

Capt Verity Duncan, [Emotional Intelligence and the Army Leader](#), *CAL Leadership Insight* N. 28, Sep 21.

Tasha Eurich, [What Self-Awareness Really Is](#) (And How to Cultivate It), *HBR*, 4 Jan 18.

Daniel Goleman and Richard E. Boyatzis, [Emotional Intelligence Has 12 Elements](#), *HBR*, 6 Feb 17.

Daniel Goleman, [What People Still Get Wrong About Emotional Intelligence](#), *HBR*, 22 Dec 20.