

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Leadership in a Whole Force Team

By Dr Linda Risso (CAL)

The Whole Force concept aims to deliver a balanced, resilient, and fully integrated force structure. It brings together Service Personnel (Regular and Reserve) and civilians (MOD Civil Servants and contractors). It is a plan to optimise the human component of Defence's Operational Capability at declared readiness and defined risk, in the most cost-effective way. The Whole Force concept enhances operational effectiveness and resilience by pulling together a rich set of skills and expertise, and by bringing together the flexibility of the military rotation system, the institutional memory provided by the civil service, and the specialised expertise of contractors. The concept has been adopted by several allies and partners. The Defence Team in Canada, One Defence Team in Sweden, and Total Defence Workforce in New Zealand are just a few examples.

The Whole Force concept comes with its own challenges. Leading a mixed military-civilian team can be difficult as cultures, working methods, and organisational differences may hamper unity of effort and undermine performance. After several years working in Defence, first at the Supreme Allied Headquarters in Belgium and now at the Centre for Army Leadership at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, I would like to offer some points of reflection based on my personal experience, conversations with colleagues, and official data. I am aware that some of the comments below are generalisations and will not apply to all Whole Force teams. This piece focuses primarily on Regular serving personnel on Staff and MoD civil servants. However, I hope this Insight will resonate with a wide range of readers, and hopefully act as the starting point for a more informed discussion about the challenges of leading Whole Force teams.

Barriers and Challenges

First of all, there are notable differences between the career structures, personnel management systems, and conditions of service and employment of military and civilian colleagues. The Civil Service supports lateral entry and hires at every level of the organisation, including mid-career transfers, whereas the military side does not. It relies on a progressive through-career approach, with financial incentives both on promotion and within each rank. Conversely, the absence of within-grade salary progression within the MoD Civil Service pay structure means that salary increases are only possible on promotion. Promotion for civil servants, however, does not necessarily occur within the same organisation or department, nor even in the same location. It is also not uncommon for civil servants to be constrained in their ability to apply for promotion because of a lack of opportunities available within their organisation or in their local area. The lack of incremental financial progression and limited promotion opportunities may affect the way in which managers can reward good performance or discourage poor behaviour.

Conversely, most Army personnel make a long-term commitment to a career in the Armed Forces, a commitment echoed by the more progressive nature of its through-career training and development approach. Career progression and talent management are controlled and supported centrally. The continuous pace of career assignments allows military colleagues to acquire new skills and to challenge themselves. This approach arguably better supports professional development both within and outside of the Army. However, this rate of churn also limits the ability of Army personnel from developing the same depth of knowledge and detailed expertise as their counterparts in the civil service. This often results in military personnel being unable to see projects through to completion. This is not only detrimental in terms of personal fulfilment, but it also has the potential to adversely affect operational effectiveness due to the more transient nature of personal responsibility and accountability when things do not go as expected. Rotation also comes at a personal cost and has an impact on families and social connections, which in the long term may impact personal motivation and commitment.

There are also some important structural and workforce differences between the Civil Service and the Regular Army. On average, Army personnel tend to be younger and with a smaller proportion of women, particularly higher up the rank structure. The Army's hierarchy is typically steep and pyramidal in nature, with a very narrow upper third as fewer senior appointments exist above the ranks of Colonel. On the other hand, the MoD Civil Service's structure has an hourglass shape, with most employees occupying either very junior grades (Administrative Officer/Assistant) and upper middle grade (Senior/Higher Executive Officer) with a narrow lower middle grade (Executive Officer), and a small senior cohort (G6, G7 and SCS). There is also a higher percentage of women in the MoD Civil Service than in the Army.

Comparisons between military ranks and Civil Servant grades does not always translate into seamless cooperation. Education, training, and professional development responsibility shape collaboration as only members of the armed forces have the legal authority to 'command' and give 'orders' to their subordinated, who are then duty bound to follow. The same does not apply between a civilian superior and military junior member of staff. While there is a good reason for this, in the day-to-day work it can create frustration on both sides. Military personnel may be seen as uncooperative, disrespectful, and rude by civilians who do not understand the implications of command responsibility. On the other hand, civil servants may be perceived not as an integral part of the team but simply as in a 'support role'. The result is that civilians feel undervalued and disrespected while military colleagues see them as unnecessarily uncooperative and unruly.

It is not only a matter of rank and authority but also of the package offered to equivalent roles. There is of course a reason for this as civilians do not sign an unlimited liability agreement and cannot be deployed on operations at short notice. They do not have to relocate every couple of years and their children do not have to change school so frequently. However, on a day-to-day basis, these huge discrepancies can create resentment particularly if the military personnel lack or fail to display the necessary levels of understanding.

In this context, it may be relevant to point out that in the recent survey of MoD civil servants, more than half of the respondents felt they were underpaid and undervalued, particularly when compared with similar roles in the private sector. Crucially, however, when asked why they stayed in the job issues like 'feel I am making a positive difference' and 'believe I am contributing to the success of my organisation' scored higher than job security. This suggests that, in general, MoD civil servants are highly dedicated and committed to the organisation they serve and what keeps them in their post is more than just job security.

Military and civilians often live and operate in different social and professional circles. Army personnel go through the same recruitment and training processes. Common deployment experiences form a strong bond and a connection that has no equivalent on the civilian side. These shared experiences produce a deep sense of belonging. Military colleagues tend to have much more in common with each other than the civil servants do among themselves. This is why civilians tend to look at their military colleagues as an almost homogenous 'they', while they see each other as individuals, which can lead to a sense of isolation. This division is emphasised by the dress code particularly in those cases in which military uniforms sit along an eclectic array of civilian outfits.

Language often acts as an additional barrier. The military tendency to speak in acronyms and to use specialised jargon, and their in-depth knowledge of cap badges, regiments, and ranks can make conversations difficult to follow for civilians. Broadly speaking, MoD civil servants receive no induction to military language and concepts to help bring down these barriers. It often takes a new member of staff months to be able to unpack the content of a 30-minute meeting or to grasp the most basic joke heard over a cup of tea. This can lead to insecurity, lack of understanding, and a sense of not to be able to fit in. This situation is often exacerbated by the fact that official communication tends to run in silos, with information like military promotions and appointments as well as key decisions not being directly communicated to all members of staff but to military colleagues in the first instance, which leaves civilian blindsided. Finally, as a result of their training military personnel are used to direct interactions (orders) and have a tendency to

mentally filter what seems higher priority to the task immediately in hand. This may be seen as dismissive or outright rude by civilians who have not undergone the same training or who do not have the same mindset.

Crucially, the military and the civilian members of a Whole Force team have different roles and working procedures. This is another gross generalisation of course but it could be said that on average the civil service is process-driven while the military is output-driven. Civilians act as the checks and balance mechanism against official policies and procedures. Army personnel focus on the deliverables and the deadlines regardless of how many working hours there are in a day. These differences in approach result in a clash of behaviours and can create frustration on both sides. Military colleagues can sometimes see civilians as uncommitted and pedantic, while civil servants may resent the continuous last-minute requests for outputs at the expense of long-term planning and detail.

These frustrations fuel stereotypes. It is not uncommon for military staff to equate civil servants with poor commitment. The perception that civil servants are 'stuck in their job' is – often erroneously – seen as lack of initiative and ambition rather than a constraint imposed on them by what can be a rigid system. On the other hand, civilians stir their own pot of stereotypes. It is not uncommon to comment on the military's lack of sophistication, in-depth thinking, and long-term vision. The perception of military colleagues prioritising the need to account to their own military chain of command to the detriment of a job well-done or of the morale of the team is a recurrent complaint among civilians.

Both sides are often guilty of a tendency to delay problematic issues. It is certainly easier for some military staff, the minority who may be so inclined, to delay particularly thorny issues until after their assignment date, and to leave for their next incumbent to deal with. On the other hand, civilians who find a leader or a colleague problematic may opt to simply ride it out rather than challenging negative behaviours, bad decisions, lack of cooperation or respect, in the knowledge that they will be replaced within two years at most. Both approaches ultimately have a corrupting effect on the team and on the entire organisation.

Interestingly, an area of agreement is a degree of resentment against the constraints imposed by the Civil Service's recruitment process. The lengthy and convoluted process linked to outside recruitment from outside the organisation often translates into not being able to get the best applicant for the job. The process can also be lengthy, highly bureaucratic, and convoluted. The current limits imposed on expanding the Civil Service also mean that when a civilian colleague moves on or resigns, there is a high chance that the team will be short-staffed for months if not years, with their colleagues – whether military or civilian – picking up the pieces and increasing their already heavy workloads.

How to Lead a Whole Force Team

The ingredients of leadership in a Whole Force team are not dissimilar to good leadership of any team, although some adjustment may be necessary. The key is to build a cohesive team in which trust, good communication, and a shared vision become pervasive traits. Leaders must foster a culture in which the team does not work on a 'us vs them' basis but create a working environment in which everybody feels as a valued member of the team.

To do so, leaders should consider the following suggestions:

- Foster a strong team spirit and identity. Military and civilian colleagues should have the opportunity to socialise and get to know each other beyond the easy stereotypes. Create regular space for the team to come together, even briefly. A weekly team lunch, a regular team coffee break, or a monthly after-work activity can boost team morale and cohesion with long-term positive effects on performance.
- You don't know what you don't know. Do not assume anything and get to know your team. A Whole Force team must be aware of what skills and expertise the other members can offer. Everyone should seek to develop knowledge and understanding about their colleagues' training and experience, their personal circumstances, and their career plans. Over time, this will increase trust within the team and support the team's objectives.
- Understand how the other side works. Military line-managers must understand the level of responsibility and control that the Army has over civil servants and how they must be fully integrated in the workforce. This starts with the basics. Military line-managers need to engage with the Civil Service Code, its structure, values, and ethos. They must be able to use the online platforms and engage proactively with the periodic evaluation and reporting process to support those colleagues who may feel stuck or underappreciated. However, said that, given the amount of time and energy that this approach requires, one may question the wisdom of cross-organisation line-management and it may be more effective to keep the two sides separated. On the other hand, civilians must be given an induction to military acronyms, jargon, concepts and reporting process. They should gain a broad understanding of today's key security and defence issues and know how their colleagues are selected, promoted, and trained.
- Speak clearly. Effective communication is an essential ingredient of good leadership. In Whole Force teams, it is even more important to explain all concepts and acronyms that may not be clear to the entire

group. Leaders must create an environment in which everybody feels comfortable to ask questions about anything, even things that are clearly obvious to the rest of the group.

- Communicate everything widely. Do not assume that everybody knows about a decision simply because it was announced in an internal military document. Not everything is accessible to civilians. Use regular meetings to ensure that everybody knows what the others are doing and place the work of the team within the evolving strategy of the organisation.
- Allow space for constructive challenge. Because of their different backgrounds, working methods, skills, and expertise, members of the Whole Force team bring a unique outlook to the question or project at hand. Leaders must allow the time and space to listen and to evaluate observations and challenges.
- Don't forget lessons learnt. Civil servants are the institutional memory of the team and of the organisation. The pace of military assignments often means that military colleagues do not have sight of what has been done in the past and why. They may not know why a decision was made and what it hoped to achieve. Civil servants are essential in providing context and in avoiding the repetition of past mistakes. Civilians, on the other hand, must take the time to explain the rationale of past decisions, the reasons behind them and the ramifications of both successes and failures. Crucially, they must be ready to do this over and over again, following the pace of rotation of each military role in their team.
- Reward outstanding performance. As civilians do not have career progression in the same way that military colleagues do, it is important to recognise their contribution even if only symbolically. This can be done via the In-Year Reward Scheme, recognition during meetings, invitations to represent the team at organisation-wide events, Honours submission, etc.
- At the organisational and strategic levels, the Army and the MoD should consider offering civil servants of all grades the relevant training and development opportunities open to their military colleagues. This should not be an option, but it should be an integral part of being an MoD civil servant. At Army level, the General Staff Induction Course and the Army Generalship Programme at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst are currently opened to Senior Civil Servants although the uptake has been low, with only two people attending over the past two years. There is nothing on these lines currently available to medium and lower grade civil servants, who are the majority of the MoD civilian cohort. There is certainly scope for improvement and an argument to create similar offers for all grades. This approach would allow civilians to build specialised expertise, make connections with military colleagues beyond their team, and develop a stronger sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Leaders of Whole Force teams must realise that the composite nature of their team is a challenge as much as an essential ingredient of success. Leaders must invest in their team's ethos and vision and allow for different cultures, working methods, and approaches to come together. Following the action-centred leadership model, leaders must strike the right balance depending on the task, team and individual and continuously reassess priorities and calibrate their leadership style. Often, this will be decided on a case-to-case basis, but it is an essential part of Whole Force leadership.

Questions

1. What frustrates you most about working in/leading a Whole Force team?
2. What is the best thing about working in/leading a Whole Force team?
3. Do you see civilians as being 'in a support role' or to be an integral part of the team? Why?

Resources

Louth J. and Quentin P., [Making the Whole Force Concept a Reality](#), *RUSI Briefing Paper*, Nov 14.

[Grades and structures of the Civil Service](#), Institute for Government, 23 Nov 17.

[Ministry of Defence: Civil Service People Survey 2018](#)

[Civilian and Military Personnel Integration and Collaboration in Defence Organisations](#), TR-HFM-226, NATO STO, 2018.

[Reward your team's high performance](#), Defnet, 16 Feb 23.

[Statistical Bulletin – Civil Service Statistics: 2022](#), Cabinet Office, Jul 23.

Goldenberg I. et al. "[Integrated defence workforces: Challenges and enablers of military-civilian personnel collaboration](#)" *Journal of Military Studies*, 8 (2019).