

# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## Leaders Must Build Action-Centred Teams

### A Leader-To-Leader Approach

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In responding to a more contested and volatile world, leadership that delivers results is as important as ever. Broadly speaking, the Army knows what it needs to do to modernise, but rapid delivery is a widely recognised weakness. For example, the Army recognises the potential of artificial intelligence but visit a battlegroup planning exercise and it often looks as it did ten years ago, with printed maps still being drawn on with marker pens. Elsewhere, one will too often find soldiers lamenting missed opportunities as they await orders or direction. Equally, many readers will sympathise – and some will empathise – with the staff officer who doggedly chases decisions from their higher headquarters for weeks and months with no sign of resolving seemingly small issues. There is a discrepancy between where the Army wants to be and the reality of many lived experiences.

How do we – as Army leaders – achieve our objectives when bureaucracy stands in our way? How can we overcome the frustration that comes with working in a complex organisation? How does our leadership training help us achieve our team goals? As this insight suggests, the answer is through appropriately apportioned effort, which must be informed by what the team can achieve, rather than simply working on long-term priorities or the most urgent tasks. This requires leaders to inculcate the culture of a leader-leader approach.

#### **The importance of prioritisation**

The Army's Leadership Doctrine 2021 places a clear focus on achieving objectives through balancing task, team, and individual requirements, according to John Adair's action-centred

leadership model. The objectives can be generated by various sources. For example, a commander's orders, the organisation's objectives, or the needs of the team. However, objectives can be in competition with each other, and it is the leader who must prioritise them and instruct their team accordingly. Some leaders tend to focus only on the highest priority tasks. This may be an appropriate response in specific contexts where a leader only wants to apportion resources to the highest priority objectives. In the Army context, long-term and complex objectives are often frustrated by bureaucracy, complex internal processes, and systemic delays. Yet, the time-consuming projects are often the most important and it is essential that leaders do not lose focus and stamina. In an organisation in which these frustrations are well known, it is not uncommon for a leader to set aside resources allocated to long-term objectives while they overcome bureaucratic barriers. This approach can lead to a lack of investment in emerging opportunities or achievable incremental gains. Over time, this focus on the highest priorities can lead to inaction. It can affect the growth and development leaders, their teams, and the organisation they serve. As Joel Baker says, "vision without action is merely a dream".

### **The importance of vision**

At first glance, an approach where leaders encourage their team to seize opportunities quickly and make rapid incremental gains, may seem simplistic. One might think that a team operating in this way can lose focus on priorities and the bigger picture. It is important that acting and deciding quickly is based on a detailed analysis and deep understanding of the mission and of the operating environment. From this understanding, the leader's vision can flow.

Having the vision to guide day-to-day actions is essential. Vision is one of the themes underpinning the Army Leadership Doctrine and it is the leader's role to provide it within the parameters set by the organisation (ALD, 5-04). Beyond that, a leader must be adept at orchestrating the team's actions to ensure they are aggregating to achieve not only the immediate task but the overarching goals of the organisation. Where an action is not contributing to the long terms aims of the organisation, a leader should reconsider their course of action. When their team is not taking the right actions necessary to achieve the task while also contributing to the organisation's progress, they should intervene and give appropriate guidance.

The concept might be easier to visualise through an example: A team on operations may want to disrupt a priority enemy threat. In most cases this is the most appropriate action. However, this threat might emanate from an area the team cannot yet reach, or they may need to overcome a particularly tricky policy hurdle prior to action. The levers to achieve this task might be beyond the leader's remit. As a result, beyond advocacy, allocation of resources, and intellectual effort, the leader will have to wait before they can act. In this case, the leader will have two choices: focus effort on the top priority, in this case disrupt adversary activities, or do something else that may facilitate the task at a certain point in the future.

If they decide to wait, they might be able to gather more intelligence or plan the operation in more detail. They might move the needle of progress slightly. This could lead to action against the adversary a few days earlier, or other minor benefits. The leader that takes this option is still working towards the objective of disrupting threats. They are also applying resources appropriately by focusing on the highest priorities first.

Alternatively, they may seek other opportunities and perhaps go after other targets that are a lower priority. If the risks are manageable, they may succeed and disrupt – and possibly decrease – the overall adversary threat. This approach requires the leader to have a thorough understanding of mission command, which enables them to act with more latitude to achieve the stated intent. They will need to understand prioritisation well, and consciously accept that they are acting on lower priority objectives with the aim of contributing effectively to the

overarching goal. However, there is the risk that they might lose focus on the higher priority target.

The question is: what should leaders do? How can they decide between the two? This insight suggests a leader can – and should – do both at the same time.

### **Generating tempo with a leader-leader approach**

A leader must adopt an approach that is wholly consistent with mission command. They must identify opportunities that sit within their superior's intent, and the organisation's broader objectives, and work towards them. This comes back to the importance of a leader defining a consistent vision and communicating it clearly. As Winston Churchill said, "the difference between leadership and mere management is communication". Although this is an oversimplification, it shows that a leader cannot simply set the vision. They need to communicate its nuances consistently.

A leader must take a step further and fully embrace mission command in the form of a leader-leader approach. It is no good for a team member to ask the commander, "this is an opportunity, what do you want me to do about it?". This approach consumes too much command capacity because it requires the commander to be involved in the detail of each team member's line of work and tailor their response to each individual and task. It constrains command capacity in terms of the leader's time and attention. The commander could lose sight of the longer-term vision.

Leaders must train their team to approach their commanders with mostly worked out solutions and with detailed suggestions that show an understanding of the operating context and of the organisation's objectives. For example by saying, "this isn't a priority, but here is an opportunity, we can do this with limited cost. If we go ahead, we will achieve this and that. It will bring us closer to achieving our overall task". This is what David Marquet calls "operating with intention" in *Turn the Ship Around*. It ensures that the commander is sufficiently involved so that they can continue to own risk and ensure that all action is consistent with their broader intent. This approach allows the commander to both focus on the big objectives, while still achieving incremental gains.

In *Teams of Teams*, US Army Gen (ret'd) Stanley McChrystal argues that deciding and acting quickly generates tempo. When this approach is adopted consistently, marginal gains will aggregate over time into some significant progress. Furthermore, deciding quickly frees up intellectual, command and staff capacity to focus on the next issue. This type of leadership is the antithesis of *analysis paralysis* but it requires significant investment in the team to build trust and a shared vision.

Beyond common training and education, the team's leader must build trust across the team and understand how each team member thinks and operates. This requires more coaching than other forms of leadership and can be considerably time-consuming in the set-up phase. Investing in generating this culture could seem counterintuitive to some leaders who are trying to achieve results quickly, and they could be tempted to revert to a more directive leadership style to save time. However, a leader-leader approach will pay dividends.

Even after it is established, a leader will need to continually reinforce this culture. They will need to welcome constructive challenge and reward personal initiative from team members. Members of the team must feel that it is safe to put forward new ideas, they must know that their leader will listen with an open mind and that mistakes will not bring disproportionate personal consequences. In other words, leaders foster a challenge culture and a psychologically safe environment.

Leaders will also need to have the discipline to avoid solutioning for their subordinates and allow them to grow instead by giving them space to actively seek solutions. Leaders must be able and willing to remove themselves from process, wherever it is appropriate to do so.

This may be uncomfortable for some leaders as they remain responsible for the decisions and actions of their teams.

### **Act now, while ensuring you do not jeopardise the vision**

This approach should be applied as widely as possible and should not be limited to leadership on operations. Whether Army leaders work in procurement, personnel, or anywhere else, there are always incremental gains they can pursue for the benefit of their organisation. We need to live mission command every day, at all ranks, and avoid the tendency to centralise decision making.

The key is to ensure the action their team takes does not prejudice the broader vision. Jeff Bezos, Amazon's CEO, championed 'Type 2' decisions, where a leader can decide to act swiftly if they know that a decision can be reversed with no or minimal consequences. According to Bezos, taking these decisions rapidly is almost always positive. Either the team succeeds after taking the decision or receives feedback and can manage or reverse the consequences of a sub-optimal decision. This approach, of course, can only work if the leader and their team are fully trained and have a deep understanding of their organisation's ethos, vision, and goals and of the environment in which they operate.

Experience shows that a well-prepared team will rarely act in a way that is cataclysmic or that clashes with their organisation's vision or ethos. In addition, this approach is also a boon for team morale. It keeps them engaged in tasks as they feel they have the agency to achieve and take initiative; leading a team that believes their hard work will not yield results or where people feel micro-managed is demoralising for all. The ability to "do what we can, when we can" keeps people's imagination active and it empowers the team to seek out low risk opportunities to achieve the mission and the leader's vision.

### **Conclusion**

The highest priority objectives must remain a leader's primary focus. However, the military environment is complex, constrained and contested, which often frustrates progress on those objectives. By building action-centred teams through a leader-leader approach, leaders can concurrently seize opportunities and make marginal gains while also remaining focussed on the big, longer-term issues. This leadership approach helps the Army deliver results faster, while protecting its ability to set priority objectives.

### **Questions**

1. Do we over-prioritise 'urgent' tasks or procrastinate on longer-term, 'big' issues while neglecting a bias for action that can deliver results? If so, how can we build a culture that decides and acts faster?
2. How can leaders drive greater speed and tempo through intent-based decision-making in a highly task-orientated organisation like the Army?
3. What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of a leader-leader relationship over that of a leader-follower relationship?

### **Resources**

[Army Leadership Doctrine](#) (2021)

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