



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## Harnessing Network Leadership in the British Army

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We do not need to look far to identify our networks. Our own chain of command is an obvious example of a network. Yet, it is our wider set of interpersonal relationships, maintained at both an individual and organisational levels, that form our wider networks and can do much to enhance our leadership capability. Peer relationships formed on career courses, the battle grouping of capabilities, and regimental families, are all good examples of our wider networks. As leaders, we must acknowledge these networks and understand how they can support us, our team and our outputs.

What follows may sound like activity and behaviours happening at the highest levels of command, but 'network leadership' applies to us all. As a section or vehicle commander, for example, what are you doing on the next Battle Group exercise to build your Attached Arms and Fire Support personnel into your network? When was the last time you touched base with that Sergeant Major or Captain who went off to an external post, and how can you leverage that relationship to benefit your team now?

Networks abound and will become ever more complex and important on the future battlefield. To be able to lead in the context of such networks, we need to understand what both leadership and networks look like, and how to harness and combine them effectively. This is everyone's business. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery argued that leadership is, "the capacity and will to rally men and women to a common purpose, and the character

which will inspire confidence” (Montgomery 2009). This is the definition of leadership applied in this *Insight* to discuss the nature and purpose of network leadership. It is used in preference to John Adair’s definition, which specifies that leaders should be “supported by a degree of relevant technical knowledge and experience” (Adair 1973). While it is true that we will get nowhere without technical competence, relationships drive our organisation. We must of course be subject matter experts in the tactical employment of our weaponry, workforce, and systems. However, it is our ability to harness knowledge and to lead networks across our Army that produces the leadership capability needed for mission success.

Modern armed forces must create leaders able to situate themselves in teams that are part of networks. This must be done up, down, across and beyond official command structures to achieve effect and to produce a vibrant military culture in which organisational outputs and the intent of networked teams become more important than traditional hierarchies. Much of the *Army Leadership Doctrine* focuses on situational leadership, a theory based on the work of Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard (2010), who worked on the premise that leaders must “tailor leadership style to the situation” in which they operate. According to this view, leaders must understand that individuals within their teams – and further, that whole teams and organisations – will have varying degrees of competence and commitment. This means that the leader must know their subordinates’ (whether individuals, teams, or organisations) skills and capacity and then deliver directive, coaching, supportive or delegating behaviours as required to maximise the potential of those being led.

In *Team of Teams* (2015), retired US Army General Stanley A. McChrystal argued that as the world becomes more complex and interconnected, teams must be able to operate as networks rather than operating as hierarchical structures. Teams must be interconnected. This requires information to be circulated as freely and as efficiently as possible across the organisation to allow for better informed decisions to be made at the pace and level of relevance. According to McChrystal, if this networked ‘team of teams’ structure is achieved, then traditional leadership of “move-by-move control natural to military operations [will be] less effective than nurturing the organisation – its structure, processes, and culture – to enable the subordinate components to function with ‘smart autonomy’.” Schrieber and Carley (2008) explain that a leader must create interactions and interdependencies, enhance knowledge flows, maintain relational coupling, increase the speed of learning and ensure communication of new knowledge. Much like situational leadership, this approach requires a significant emotional intelligence capability so that individuals can connect with teams across the spectrum. This means going beyond the much simpler transactional leadership style often associated with military organisations, and demands that leaders engage proactively with the needs, potential and expectations of their teams, peers, and superiors.

The key is not to be constrained by our hierarchical chains of command and rather to exploit relationships and networks within the intent of the chain of command. While many traditional theories focus on leaders’ behaviours towards subordinates, network leadership is about relationships with peers as well as with relevant teams and leaders across the organisation. This approach builds confidence and trust between echelons of command. As organisations become networked, leaders within nodes must lead up, down, and across structures to build relationships across a network of people and teams rather than using rigid command hierarchies to meet their aims. This approach empowers action at the level

and pace of relevance. This is what Willink and Babin (2017) call 'leading up' the chain of command.

As leaders, we must understand how to positively influence those in our wider structures to engender a common understanding and a shared vision of what needs to be achieved and how. Compartmentalising activity and giving subordinates only a piece of the puzzle is counter to this approach and leads to silos that operate in isolation within the network. This in turn creates obstacles to collaboration and it undermines trust and good communication.

There are, of course, cases in which security will restrict network leadership and limit the sharing of information. However, these should be exceptions. Whenever possible, leaders must avoid the risk of creating cognitive dissonance between levels of command or nodes within their networks. Hence, as leaders, we must think hard about when it is necessary to withhold information and why.

McChrystal demonstrated his networked approach when commanding US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). He matched Al Qaeda's global network with his own through the utility of technological advantage, and thus operated at a pace beyond his adversary. McChrystal noted that his daily operations and intelligence briefs were what he used as his primary leadership tools to communicate his intent and direction across the organisation. This articulation of intent and prioritisation is central to the networked leadership theory. As US Army General James N. Mattis said in 2019, "with all hands aligned to your goals, their cunning and initiative unleashed, you need only transparent sharing of information to orchestrate, as opposed to 'control' or 'synchronise' a coordinated team."

In the British Army, this approach and intent have often been realised through mission command whereby "local commanders temporarily gain independence to make immediate tactical decisions" (King 2017). Mission command is critical when organisations are dispersed or disrupted and in which communication is difficult or completely broken down. For example, in those cases when the adversary has the ability to mass fire on tactical HQs and to interrupt our communications systems. In these circumstances, networked leadership facilitates action at the level and pace of relevance for mission success. It allows independence and interdependence of action across nodes to meet the overall intent where centralised command is not available. Any other leadership approach is likely to be too slow to react to the required "scale, pace and urgency of change" (Carleton-Smith 2018).

For network leadership to function properly, however, it needs to be built over time and well before it is needed. It requires leaders to spend time cultivating knowledge flows, trust and confidence with their peers, teams, and structures. It also demands a proactive attitude and active engagement on the part of every leader across the organisation. The difficulties of cohering activity across broad, dispersed, and overt/covert organisations from tactical to strategic levels, operating at geographic reach, can be overcome with the nurturing behaviours of the networked leader.

Crucially, the fostering of network leadership does not make the hierarchical systems within the network redundant, it strengthens them. Perhaps we can learn from our own 'Fusion Doctrine', whereby 3\* Senior Responsible Officers from across government lead National Security Strategy and Implementation Groups to deliver "strategic policy and planning against thematic/regional areas of interest" (McKeran 2019). The challenge for this doctrine lays in bringing in third party and private sectors to harness the power of all stakeholders in the network. The ability of governmental networks to influence these actors differs dramatically from the way in which they would influence internal military

capabilities, but there is a clear understanding that such relationships can be leveraged to the benefit of both parties if managed correctly.

If an individual seeks to interact and lead within a network, then adopting situational leadership behaviours is a natural starting point. If Daniel Goleman's behaviours (visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pace-setting, commanding) are used at the right place and time (Goleman 2002), then the network behaviours described by Schrieber and Carley will likely follow (Schrieber and Carley 2008). As an Army, what we need to create are relationships which grow and nurture a network of forces within a clear and common vision and intent. As argued above, emotional intelligence is critical to achieving this as it is vital to understand our peers as well as those we lead and those to whom we report.

Awareness of our own networks and of how they can be leveraged is the first step in harnessing the power of network leadership for mission success. The underlying principle must be that our organisational outputs are of higher importance than rigid command hierarchies or indeed than the leader themselves.

### Questions:

1. To which networks do you belong? Where do they overlap?
2. Does your environment allow for 'smart autonomy' in developing your networks?
3. What different behaviours are required to develop relationships and understanding in your networks?
4. To what extent are technological advances shaping your networks and how may they transform Mission Command on operations?

### Resources

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