



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

No. 43 – July 2023

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Delegating Discomfort

The difficult art of doing nothing

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“And what are the *historic precedents* for the new medal you are proposing?” The then Major General James Bashall inquired firmly about another seemingly unqualified line in my decision note to him. A surge of adrenaline coursed through my body as I stood in the centre of his office. I could feel my face becoming flushed as I felt an intense spotlight bearing down upon me with every millisecond, I failed to fill the ensuing silence with an answer. I glanced to the side of the room at my boss, Wing Commander Bob Bamford in the hope of support or reassurance. But with only a raise of his eyebrows and a half nod forward, he remained silent – I knew he was pressing me to go on.

Yet what might seem like a moment of abandonment, Wg Cdr Bamford's decision not to step in and rescue me was deliberate. With both of us having been unexpectedly summoned to the Chief of Staff (Operations) office only minutes before to answer questions on our proposed introduction of the new General Service Medal (2008), there was little time to prepare, and the 2-page decision note we had submitted the day before had clearly triggered a quicker than anticipated response. As we navigated the floorplates through the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) towards General Bashall's office, we discussed possible scenarios and decided, somewhere along that journey, I would take the lead during the meeting as the project lead for the medal's introduction. In a final momentary pause before we entered the office, Wg Cdr Bamford placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “Dave, it'll all be fine”, and into the dragon's den we went.

Due to the high-tempo of work and broad operational portfolios at PJHQ, Staff branches and respective desk leads are often required to operate 'one brick deep', meaning that everyone must be a master of their own brief, with often little scope for task cross-over between the team. Being one of only a small handful of SO3's¹ within PJHQ in 2013, this expectation was no different for me. I was required to hold my own against more senior and experienced staff, and expected to brief with accuracy, brevity, and confidence. If nothing else, PJHQ was a veritable training ground for developing individual ownership and responsibility. Needless to say, my responses to General Bashall's questions were far from these things, and the whole encounter could have gone a lot better.

Despite having worked at PJHQ for a year by that point, this was my first time briefing at 2* level – an unavoidable rite of passage for all junior Staff Officers at some stage. Indeed, Wg Cdr Bamford and I had discussed such opportunities as my work became more assured. Instead of rescuing me from General Bashall's intense questioning, he allowed me to navigate the discomfort on my own. Although I stumbled through several answers, the experience left me better prepared for my future encounters with him and, indeed, senior officers more widely beyond that point. I learned not to rely on face-value information, and that being able to fall back on a depth of objective data can act as a powerful and compelling foundation for any argument. Perhaps most importantly, I learned that having the humility to admit you do not know an answer but will endeavour to find out and return, keeps one's integrity and credibility intact far better than any clumsy response does. Even senior officers do not expect you to know everything.

What I recognise now is that Wg Cdr Bamford demonstrated exceptional leadership by providing me with space and a developmental opportunity that allowed for real personal growth – a lesson that I still carry with me all these years later. The stakes were low, and my relative inexperience was acknowledged. He remained present, yet unobtrusive, allowing me to succeed or stumble and learn from the experience either way. He essentially did nothing, but in doing so, gave me everything that I needed in that moment. Afterward, he refrained from providing lengthy lists of suggestions for improvement. Instead, he posed thought-provoking questions that prompted me to reflect on how I could have done better and alternative approaches I could have taken. What did I learn from that experience? I'm hoping that some of the strategies below will provide food for thought:

Facilitate more effective delegation

In the Army, leaders understand the importance of delegating challenging tasks to foster personal growth and to cultivate a collaborative, empowered, and effective team. However, when faced with real-world demands in a highly task-orientated environment, putting this knowledge into practice can be challenging. Many leaders express sentiments such as, 'because of the time constraints, I'm better off doing the task myself' or, 'I cannot allow the task to fail, as the whole team will suffer in the long run'.

Furthermore, the application of empathy can also cloud effective delegation. When observing a subordinate struggle, it is natural to feel compelled to intervene and provide immediate assistance – this is the nature of the Army's servant leadership approach. However, from the subordinate's perspective, this may appear more like micromanagement than genuine support. Additionally, when leaders hold onto too much information or too many responsibilities, team skills may go underutilised – both shortcomings outlined by Richard Holmes in his *10 Diseases of Leadership*. To facilitate more effective delegation that drives personal development in others, we can employ a range of methods:

- Shift from a 'doer' to 'leader' mindset. In the Army we are all doers. Even as leaders we are driven by our impulses to problem-solve and achieve results. According to the concept of

¹ Staff Officer Grade 3 – Army Captain or equivalent.

distributed leadership by James Spillane, when appropriate, leaders should transition from focusing on individual, results-based accomplishments to nurturing and developing the potential of others.

- To facilitate this mindset shift, leaders must also recognise that the satisfaction derived from one's own personal achievements and the allure of immediate rewards are short lived. Instead, leaders should embrace the longer-lasting and more authentic fulfilment that comes from helping others to develop and succeed.
- Define your leadership approach. As advocated by Peter Northouse in *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, we can ask ourselves: what three words do I want others to use when describing my leadership style? For example, do I lead with intensity, control, and perfectionism? Or with humility, mutual trust, and empowerment?
- Respond intentionally instead of impulsively. In critical moments that trigger the urge to intervene, we should pause and consider if our actions are developing others and, if by intervening, are we removing vital opportunities for growth in others.

Embrace the discomfort of the learning process

Many leaders admit that when witnessing a subordinate struggle, retaking control of the task seems like the most supportive approach. I have personally faced this dilemma and occasionally still do when I feel the weight of external pressures. However, Wg Cdr Bamford taught me the power of allowing space for others to experience challenge. Research by Carol Dweck on *growth mindset* emphasises the importance of embracing challenge for learning and development. Although challenge generates discomfort for both the leader and the subordinate, it introduces a new way of working that promotes growth for all involved, resulting in a more resilient team culture that is less dependent on the leader. To embrace, rather than resist, the discomfort of learning, we can:

- Practice emotional intelligence, as advocated by Daniel Goleman in his book *Emotional Intelligence*. Becoming more self-aware and acknowledging and understanding our emotional responses to external pressures enables us to respond more deliberately when faced with the urge to intervene.
- Normalise discomfort during the learning process. Recognise that periods of challenge are highly valuable opportunities for growth and personal development.
- Reframe the situation. Consider the perspective that discomfort allows for the acquisition of confidence, skills, and experience, whether for oneself or in others.
- Distinguish between high- and low-stakes tasks. When stakes are low, grant subordinates the gift of time to make mistakes and to solve problems independently.
- Let go! Leaders who find themselves trapped in a cycle of doing everything themselves, due to the fear that subordinates may make mistakes that require intervention, tend to hold onto tasks for too long and delegate them too late in the process, where valuable opportunities for ownership by others has passed.
- Encourage exploration, risk-taking, and learning through mistakes. By delegating tasks early when the stakes are low, we allow for tolerable mistakes to be made. It is important that this is done within the context of mutual trust and a 'safe to fail' culture. Embracing such discomfort can only be fruitful if both leader and follower trust each other and know that mistakes will be treated as growth opportunities.

Learn when to delegate, as well as what to delegate

To identify tasks suitable for delegation, we can utilise the concept of *situational leadership* proposed by Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard:

- Consider tasks that have become routine or less challenging for you as a leader but offer valuable developmental opportunities for your subordinates.

- Reflect on tasks that drain your energy and do not align with your own skills and strengths. These tasks may energise and suit others within the team. This stresses the importance of *knowing your people* – a principal component of the Army Leadership Doctrine.

Be curious and facilitate input from others

Early in my military career, I received feedback that I displayed visible nervousness and an ‘eagerness to please’ while briefing. When I expressed my concern about not having all the answers, my OC at the time altered my perspective by advising me that my role, as a leader, was not to have all the answers but to tease out the right information from others and to facilitate the exchange of expertise and experience among the team.

Lastly, we must practice compassion and empathy

This entails offering understanding and accommodation when individuals approach tasks differently than how we would. Wg Cdr Bamford's approach during that encounter with General Bashall initially unsettled me. However, his decision not to intervene allowed me to develop the ability to respond to unexpected questions and subsequently reflect on how to improve my preparedness for high-stakes situations. If he had provided immediate advice, I would not have discovered my own authentic methods of improvement. I credit him for equipping me with the composure necessary to excel in challenging circumstances. Furthermore, he instilled in me the courage to delegate to colleagues and team members, even if it means witnessing their discomfort.

I did return to see General Bashall the following day, but without my boss in tow. Armed with the knowledge of what was getting him excited and realising I did have the right answers all along, I delivered a far more assured and compelling brief. The net result was a good one – his agreement to proceed with the introduction of a new medal for hundreds of highly deserving personnel deployed on various small operations around the world.

Questions

1. What are the common ‘triggers’ that cause you to intervene in a subordinate’s task?
2. Think of a recent example of when this has occurred; from the perspective of your subordinates, how might they have felt when you intervened?
3. What methods could you employ to create the necessary space and opportunities for others to develop through challenge and discomfort?

Resources

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