

# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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*The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and to further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. **Leadership Insights** are published periodically by the CAL to feed and shape the leadership debate within the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership. The views expressed in **Leadership Insights** are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official thinking of the British Army or the Ministry of Defence.*

## Leadership reflections from a deployed battlegroup commander<sup>1</sup>

By Lt Col William Wells (2 RIFLES)

I have been fortunate to spend the last six months as the commander of the Agile Task Force, a UK battlegroup deployed in Estonia, working to the 2nd Estonian Brigade but also, as a UK sovereign force, projecting force elements right across the region. What follows are my personal reflections on leadership on operations.

### **Prioritise your objectives**

Be clear about what is important and review your priorities frequently so that that they remain both useful and relevant. Get this right and both your staff and your subordinates will be able to work through several issues without seeking further direction from you. This will result in a much more efficient environment for everyone. My priorities are the first thing I review each week before then briefing them at our Monday morning Commander Update Brief.

### **Issue clear direction**

Be as clear as possible about your overarching vision and the outcome that you are seeking to achieve with each project. Give your subordinates as much freedom as possible over the route to achieve the stated outcome. This direction should be written down and it should be timebound so that your subordinates can keep it for reference as they work towards the

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<sup>1</sup> This CAL Insight is based on AKX paper by Lt Col Wells' *Leadership reflections from a deployed battlegroup commander*, 12 Dec 22.

outcome. It is critical that you properly consider the content of the document before issuing it. Loose and un-timebound direction will lead to suboptimal and late results. For this deployment, we had a baseline Op ORDER, the depository of all extant direction from readiness requirements to the rules governing walking out. It was updated at several points during the tour. In barracks, we follow a similar model, annually publishing a 'battalion plan'.

### **Get carefully into the detail**

You must know what is going on but without getting lost in the minutiae. Getting into the detail is important as you are prepared for any scenario and your people know what to do in any situation. Yet, too much detail may be problematic as you will stifle the energy of your people and the organisation's outputs will suffer as a result. Getting the balance right is hard! The solution lies in knowing yourself. If you are a 'details person', you need to work hard at controlling yourself: ask fewer questions, trust your people to get after their responsibilities to such a degree that it makes you feel uncomfortable, and give people time to get after the detail themselves. If you are not naturally into the detail, then you need to force yourself to get into it: ask more questions, programme back-briefs and inspections, and ensure you have a tight battle rhythm which reports across the array of the organisation's output metrics on a regular and frequent basis. I use weekly Commander Update Briefs and monthly Command Boards for this alongside a weekly inspection period which rotates around the BG's sub-units and departments.

### **Display and publish data**

Use data to compare the current state of your sub-units, encouraging each of them to strive for greater excellence. Publishing measurable metrics across an array of helpful areas will ensure that your OCs' attention will remain focused on ensuring their sub-unit tops the 'leader board', to the benefit of the whole organisation. At the moment, we display data on Individual Training Requirements and Core Sub-unit Qualifications on a weekly basis at the Commander Update Brief. The same approach can be applied across the breadth of the organisation. For example, we are currently publishing lists of ranked fitness results, officers and SNCOs highlighted, encouraging those at the top to stay at the top and those at the bottom to want to be higher up.

### **Release your subordinates**

Do not just empower your subordinates but release them to allow both them and the whole organisation space to excel. Mission Command is a fundamental part of the British Army's approach to leadership: explain what outcome you want (your intent) without directing the route to it, leaving that to your subordinates to determine. This is effective empowerment. There is a step beyond this though, which sees your subordinates striving for less defined outcomes which are still within your vision but are not a result of tasks you have set. This comes about if you release them, giving them both the confidence and the freedom to get on with making things better. To do this, they will need to know you trust them completely and that you are not going to drag them over the coals when things go wrong, a price you must be willing to bear. That said, get this right and they will surprise you while your organisation will flourish.

### **Reward your people**

Thank your people often for their efforts. There is a myriad of options for how to reward individuals effectively, whether by mentioning people by name in meetings or by issuing

coins, commendations, prizes and awards or by writing letters. As far as group rewards are concerned, plan some fun such as whole-team events, whether fancy-dress fitness, a barbeque or a day out. The bottom line: 'thank you' and 'well done' need often to be on your lips. It will imbue your organisation with positivity.

### **Practice makes perfect**

Do not become overconfident. You too need to stay on top of your game and that requires practice. Do not, for instance, think that you can deliver a big speech 'off the cuff'. Take time out to either practise what you plan to say or to write out some sensible notes. The same is true of your core battle drills as a leader. For example, are you comfortable with the planning process? Are you confident in the use of your night vision? How good is your map reading? How 'squared away' is your field admin?

### **Take time to think**

If you can, take time out to think rather than rushing into big decisions or rushing to issue direction. Simple and small decisions can be made in the moment, but big or complex decisions take time to get right. Invariably, a big decision that has been made in a rush will be less good than the one carefully pondered. Wherever possible, for example, I try to make big decisions following a full night's sleep. On top of taking time for decision-making, getting the direction right takes time. As the leader, you need to take time out, time away, to think clearly and carefully to make sure that the direction you issue is as helpful, clear and focused as it can be.

### **Be a listener**

Listen more than you speak. In meetings, all too frequently, my tendency is to dive in with solutions to problems. A much better approach is to stay silent until others have finished briefing you, allowing them to share their thoughts on the matter, including possible solutions, before you blunder in with your possibly ill-considered wisdom. Once you have been briefed, you will have a much richer understanding and be in a much better position to make the right decision. To get after this, I have asked always to be presented with more than one 'course of action' alongside a recommendation.

### **Programme 'down time'**

All work and no play make Jack a dull boy, but more than this, it makes Jack a worse leader. We all need to take time out, away from the desk, the meeting room, or the field headquarters. It refreshes us and provides space to think but also an opportunity to de-stress and unwind. Whether it is ensuring you get time for physical exercise during the working day (I have been pretty rigid in ensuring I am doing exercise at least five times a week) or being disciplined about what time you turn your laptop off at night (2100hrs for me at the moment but c1800hrs when in barracks in the UK), or having some firm rules about the extent to which you are going to let work invade your weekends and your holidays (not been a concern for me during this deployment but when I am in barracks in the UK, weekend and holiday email-checking is banned unless I have been alerted to a crisis). Not only does 'time out' benefit you, but it also allows those who work for you to take a break as well. If you are on your emails during the evenings, at the weekends or on leave, so will they, to the whole organisation's detriment.

### **Care deeply**

Care deeply about your soldiers, about their needs, desires, and views. There is nothing more abhorrent than the military commander who does not care for those in their charge.

Put your soldiers before yourself. Think hard and often about how you can make their situation better, how you can meet their needs more fully, how you can match their reality more closely with their desires. Consult them often so that you remain alive to their perspective. Unhappy soldiers make for an unhappy battlegroup and an unhappy battlegroup is a less effective fighting force as well as a miserable place to be for everyone. To stay in tune, I try and share at least a meal a day with different soldiers from across the battlegroup as well as taking every opportunity to talk to them as I go about my day.

### **Keep things in perspective**

Be clear-eyed about what's important in life and do not be deluded into thinking that your military status will endure meaningfully beyond your service. Do not do this job for status. Do it because you love it, and because you are content to give yourself in service to those you are working for and those in your organisation. On top of this, have a game plan which endures beyond the Army, a plan which focuses on the needs of your loved ones, those who have borne a much heavier sacrifice than the one you have made.

As I continue my learning journey, I hope these reflections prove helpful as you continue yours. As stated in the *Army Leadership Doctrine 2021*, leadership is a never-ending journey and although different leaders, teams and contexts may require different leadership style, each military leader must always support their people and put the needs of their people before their own. 'Serve to Lead' is enshrined in British Army Leadership and it the most powerful concept an Army leader can embody and abide by.

### **Questions**

1. To what extent are you a self-serving leader? How can you become a servant leader?
2. To what extent is your leadership style out of balance? What adjustments do you need to make to improve the balance?
3. What goals are you chasing and what do you think they will bring you?

### **Resources**

CAL Leadership Podcast, [Episode 34 - Brigadier Rob Hedderwick - Leading the Army Special Operations Brigade](#), 7 Dec 22.

CAL Leadership Podcast, [Episode 32 - Lt Gen Roly Walker DSO - Turning Good Leaders Into Great Leaders](#), 22 Jul 22.

Lt Michael Goode (INT CORPS), [The Unflattering Mirror: Lessons in Junior Leadership on Non-Kinetic Operations](#), *CAL Leadership Insight* N. 21, Aug 20.

Maj Jennifer O'Connor (RE), [Where has 'Serve to Lead' gone?](#), *CAL Leadership Insight* N. 12, Feb 19.

D. Michael Abrashoff, *It's Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy* (New York: Warner Books, 2002).

James Clear, *Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results* (London: Random House, 2018).

L. David Marquet, *Turn the Ship Around: A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders* (London: Penguin, 2013).

Matthew Syed, *Rebel Ideas: The Power of Thinking Differently* (London: John Murray, 2021).