

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Followership through Change

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'Curiously, counterintuitively, what it takes to be a good follower looks a lot like what it takes to be a good leader.' Barbara Kellerman (2008)

In late January 2023, it was announced that the UK would be gifting its AS90 self-propelled howitzers alongside Challenger 2 tanks to the Armed Forces of Ukraine to aid them in the defence of their homeland against Russia (Wallace, 16 Jan 23). At the time, the conflict had reached a relative stalemate since the February 2022 invasion. Winter had made conditions for warfighting in Eastern Europe difficult, though the UK's previous gifting of Multi Launch Rocket Systems had greatly boosted Ukraine's firepower and ability to strike Russian forces in depth.

Talk of a 'spring offensive' in the media had planted rumour among artillery units that guns would be next, to support combined arms manoeuvre (Reuters, 7 Feb 23). The Deep Recce Strike Brigade Combat Team Commander, Brigadier Neil Budd OBE, visited 19th Regiment Royal Artillery (19RA) and 1st Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (1RHA) in late January 2023 to confirm this would indeed be the case, and that their heavy artillery guns would be given to our allies in need along with a training programme. At this point, it was not known what would replace our regimental colours, a gun that had been in service for over 30 years.

Equipment being taken out of service and replaced or updated is nothing new for the British Army, but the weight of this leadership challenge for the new CO was compounded by the uncertainty of not knowing what would be next, nor when it would arrive. The Commanding Officer (CO) of 19RA had been in post less than a month.

Traditionally, the tenets of successful leadership are based around belief, growth, and life, whereas the leaders of 19RA and 1RHA were facing three different tenets of doubt, decline and death (White, 2015). The unit had just received the news that its guns would be gifted within weeks, and the senior leaders faced endless questions from its people about what this looked like. How would our careers be managed now with this loss of capability? Would we be able to transfer our skills directly to its replacement? When will that be procured and brought here? What is the future of the unit, and what are we going to be employed doing in the meantime? There was doubt surrounding people's future and what is next, there was a decline of clear direction and morale, and the death of a capability upon which the foundations of thousands of careers have been built over many years.

With this narrative in mind, the Commanding Officers faced a dilemma: to convince followers to see doubt, decline and death as opportunities within the units; to make them see and understand that we are aligned to a purpose greater than ourselves by contributing to our allies' effort in a conflict against a mutual adversary; and to show that there is a life cycle of capability, which requires the death of one before the arrival of a newer, better one. In this context, success as leaders is dependent upon the ability to communicate clearly and effectively, to contextualise the changes in the long-term life of the unit and of the organisation, and to motivate the units towards a collective goal or vision, despite having no clear map to guide followers with (Chemers, 2001). In addition, the AS90 units' leadership could not disregard the organisational reality that much of their success in transitioning from AS90 would be down to active follower involvement just as much as to good leadership.

This led me to reflect on the importance of cultivating purposeful followership to successfully navigate not only an identity crisis through doubt, death, and decline, but any organisational challenge in the future. There are two key elements for unit commanders to consider:

- **The First Follower:** The concept of the 'first follower' is important. An underestimated form of leadership, the first follower behind a leader encourages others to follow on (Clark, 2018). My experience in troop command taught me that the Junior Non-Commissioned Officers (JNCOs) are our crucial 'first followers'. Officers and some Senior Non-Commissioned Officers, as much as we like to think otherwise, are commonly interpreted as disjointed from the other ranks, away from the coalface. The junior leaders however have a much more direct impact on how their subordinates view and interpret a situation. New followers emulate the first follower, not the leader. This is codified in the Centre for Army Leadership's [Followership Doctrine Note](#) (2023) with 'The Example' being one of followership's enduring characteristics (Followership DN, 2023, point 22.c). Commanders must recognize this by investing in the confidence and resilience of the junior leaders to not only lead but also to follow purposefully in times of uncertainty. I would suggest that the foundations of purposeful followership must be explored on the Army Leadership Development Programme (ALDP) syllabus. This would ensure all JNCOs coming through the ranks get exposed to the concept, understand its importance and their

active role within it beyond just “do as you’re told”. Additionally, individual units should use their own leadership development programmes and Op TEAMWORK sessions as vehicles to explore this concept with their soldiers.

- **Followership as an attribute:** Robert Kelley purports there are four essential qualities that effective followers share: self-management, commitment to the organization and purpose, building their own competence, and demonstrating honesty, courage and credibility (Kelly, 1988). These qualities align almost perfectly to the British Army’s Values of Selfless Commitment, Respect for Others, Loyalty, Integrity, Discipline and Courage. Up to now, we have been guilty of using these values as attributes to define and evaluate leaders and leadership behaviours. We should apply them to the definition and evaluation of followers and their behaviours, too. The CAL’s Followership Doctrine Note is the first Army publication to align our Values to followership qualities. It would serve the organization well to apply these tenets to followership development within units, aligning to Kelley’s proposal that evaluation of followership is just as important as that of leadership. Currently the Army’s reporting system shines light on leadership behaviours, whereas I recommend the inclusion of followership as a topic for evaluation, in at least the mid-year appraisals for each individual soldier.

How far does challenge go?

In a discussion of followership, I believe it pertinent to touch on the issue of challenge culture. There has been a lot of discussion in the Army across Op TEAMWORK about psychological safety and challenge. It has been argued that it is important for a leader to be able to foster an environment where respectful and responsible challenge is accepted and listened to, and for subordinates to be willing and able to do so. We must certainly develop an organisational culture in which both leaders and followers have the best outcome for their unit and organisation in mind and feel confident to challenge decisions and processes that they think will not contribute to organisational success.

I believe it is important that discussions of challenge go hand in hand with those of followership, and are set within the context of effective followership, which the CAL Followership Doctrine Note (Section 6) does well. There must be a space to challenge but there must also be a point where the decision is made, and the team gets onboard to drive the decision to success. The Army should absolutely encourage transformational leadership styles and our people to use constructive and responsible challenge effectively. However, to do so we are flattening the rank structure to create a more palatable environment for challenge. This is becoming open to abuse by those using the banner of challenge to evade or dispute unpalatable aspects of our work, rather than for genuine collective or organisational benefit.

It is my belief that to promote questioning leaders’ direction *too much* in the workplace – without being balanced by promotion of good followership – risks undermining the chain of command, the trust we place within it, and the world class training it receives to make decisions on behalf of others every day. During a prolonged absence of conflict to – collectively and at scale – sharpen our skillsets and our bayonets, and with an increasingly senior generation of soldiers that have not experienced warfighting, we must not forget what the true purpose of our organisation is. All levels must remain professionally comfortable with transactional, direct (lawful) orders through a hierarchy to meet the

demands of high intensity warfare – it will come again. WO1 David Hird discusses this balance well in his interview for the CAL podcast [The Human Advantage](#) (Sep 23). I fear that without a cultivated followership culture that remains well practiced in acting decisively as ordered when required, we will lose time and momentum still disagreeing with our leaders when it matters most.

Conclusion

Witnessing this seismic period of change for the Gunners, I have recognised the importance of good, proactive followership and the Army's tendency, until recently, to pay lip service to it. The first follower validates the intentions and actions of a leader and influences others to follow, therefore is a key enabler for success. Providing feedback on followership traits through mid-year appraisals is a simple mechanism to cultivate and nurture active followership, whilst ensuring challenge remains well judged and appropriate. While technical excellence is key for warfighting, capabilities come and go. People remain our constant most important asset, therefore human focused leadership and followership should be prioritised in career pathways and reward mechanisms.

Questions

1. The author notes two methods of cultivating good followership (ALDP and mid-year appraisals). How else can we promote the doctrine of followership within our respective units and organisations to see impactful change?
2. Do you think we get the balance of challenge, leadership, and followership right in the Army?

Resources

- [A British Army Followership Doctrine Note](#) 2023.
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- White A. (2015). [The Challenge of Leading in the 21st Century](#). TEDx Talk.
- WO1 David Hird, [The Human Advantage, Ep 11: Evolving more professional leadership](#). The Centre for Army Leadership Podcast, 15 Sep 23.