



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

No. 49 – February 2024

*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 Through the Written Word

By Major William Dunlop AGC(ETS)

Communication is an essential leadership tool. You can have the best vision in the world but if you cannot communicate it to others then you will not be able to inspire and lead them. Communication goes far beyond the transmission of orders; it allows leaders to create a vision, to energise, to promote a sense of belonging, to build trust (ALD, 2021). Effective leadership, as Simon Sinek has written, is a matter of achieving a common understanding not just of “what”, but of “how” and – most importantly – “why” (Sinek, 2019). Effective communication is therefore one of the essential ingredients of good leadership and of high-performing teams.

### **The importance of the written word**

Military leaders at all levels lead through the written word every day. Twenty-five years ago, computers and email were confined to headquarters, smartphones were a distant aspiration and group communication apps such as Signal were beyond imagination. Today, they are commonplace at every level of leadership. This raises the stakes. Every word a leader types makes an immediate difference and leaves a permanent record. It follows that leaders who aspire to be the best should strive to write as well as they possibly can.

To lead effectively through the written word, we must spell out some fundamental differences between oral and written communication. Speakers can complement their words with non-verbal communication: tone of voice; pauses and speed; physical expression; gesture; position; background. Even the speaker's clothing can influence the reception of their message. The writer has few of these advantages. Writers only control when the word is put on the page, but they have negligible influence on when it is read and in what context. As anyone who has read a difficult email late at night will know, bad timing can have a disastrous effect on outcome.

Writing in a military context is a regulated activity. The conventions of Defence Writing provide detailed guidance on the format and style of all but the most informal written work. For the most part this is helpful. It creates a shared understanding of how we must communicate. But if, as Slim famously said, leadership is "just plain you" (Slim, 1957), rigid conventions of style present a problem. How can a leader convey their character without the tone, expression, gesture, and non-verbal communication that comes with the spoken word? How can they be "just plain you" if their style is codified?

Finding your "voice" in writing is not easy. Two decades ago, I was ADC to a famously direct and no-nonsense General with a strongly distinctive written style. Reading his work, one would recognise him as the author within a sentence or two; one would sit up and take note accordingly. By modern standards his approach to writing was unconventional as he did not use a computer. Instead, he wrote longhand on paper and passed his notes through to the outer office to be typed up and sent on. This gave his writing the direct, personal style that was his hallmark. Of course, for most readers this way of working is not an option as the office tempo does not allow to indulge in this kind of exercise. However, handwriting is an important tool in self-development as writers and communicators. Reducing the ability to make immediate corrections and adding in the physical effort of writing on paper forces the writer to weigh their words carefully and to think how a point is developed and with what clarity. This often results in a clearer, more personal communication style. It is an exercise worth trying regularly. New research also suggests that handwriting practice refines fine-tuned motor skills, and it improves a range of learning skills faster and better than if the same material was learnt by typing on a keyboard. This discrepancy appears to be linked to the time that the brain is allowed to process and absorb the information (Wiley and Rapp, 2021).

For communication to be truly effective, it needs to resonate with the audience. Military readers are familiar with the importance of a strong "summary of execution" section in a set of orders. An effective summary tells the story of the operation in language that builds understanding. Storytelling of this nature is not just for operations; it is part of the routine business of military leadership (Laity, 2022). The American consultant and author Jeff Gothelf describes how storytelling can be critical to the success or otherwise of apparently routine, even mundane initiatives. Language needs to be audience-specific; it should contextualise the story; it should humanise it; it should make the story action-orientated; it should show humility, ensuring that communication remains two-way (Gothelf, 2021). Language that expresses this level of sensitivity sets the tone for shared endeavour. This is important in the high-stakes environment of military operations, and it is just as important when the job is apparently mundane and the risks are low.

## **Read, write, and think**

If leadership through the written word is as complex as it is important, what can we do to improve our writing?

First, we must read: read more, and read more widely. As General James Mattis argues, “If you haven’t read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate, and you will be incompetent” (Mattis, 2021). Mattis was talking primarily about the importance of learning from the experience of others but his point about functional illiteracy applies just as much to the skills of leadership, including writing. The act of reading stimulates the brain’s communication centres, exercising them like a muscle to work more efficiently. Reading broadens our vocabulary and sharpens our own communication skills. Moreover, reading increases our ability to view things from new perspectives and to understand how the same issue or event may affect people in different ways. Reading strengthens our understanding of the multiple cultural, social, and political contexts. It develops our emotional intelligence and improves our ability to define and to anticipate human responses and perceptions. Reading broadens our vicarious experience and opens our horizons, allowing us to see the complexity of the world around us (Williams, 2019).

Interestingly, evidence shows that we do not need to read only in the conventional sense by following words on the page. Audiobooks stimulate the brain’s communication centres in very similar ways to reading. They are a perfectly valid way of experiencing a text. Listening rather than reading can provide an equally effective way into some more complex texts given the cues of tone and expression. An experiment by the American psychologist Art Markman found that when hearing rather than reading proverbs, people were often able to extract deeper meaning more readily. This is possibly because when we listen, we are aware that we cannot easily go back and “re-read” when listening and therefore pay more attention (Sachs, 2019). Research also shows that our brains are more likely to create impactful images when we listen to a story as opposed to when we read about it (Eddie and Glass, 1981). In a similar way, involvement rates and even physical reactions are much starker when we compare watching a video to listening to a story. This may be because listening to a story becomes a more active process of co-creation via the listener’s own imagination than passively watching a video (Richardson, 2018).

Second, we must think. The written word can offer a high level of clarity and permanence. To be able to use it well, we need to weigh our words, choose the language, structure and form that conveys our intent precisely, reflect on the level of certainty (or uncertainty) that we feel, and the level of initiative (or obedience) that we expect. The critical advantage of the written word is that it gives us time to think. We should not waste it by dashing off words that may be misinterpreted (hence the advice above to take the time – occasionally – to write by hand to slow down and to think more deeply about the content and style of a given piece).

Then we need to consider our readers. Who are they: military subordinates, civilian colleagues, the public? Are we writing for a small, precisely defined, audience or a wider, more diverse readership? What is their experience and understanding of the situation? What might be their assumptions? When, where and how will they read what we have written, and how will that affect their understanding of the message? How are they being addressed? Will they understand the language? If they misunderstand it, what might happen? Are we writing for a

current readership or for a more enduring one, and if for the latter, how might changing language affect meaning? If communication is to be effective, the readers must always be at the forefront of the writer's mind.

Thirdly, we must practise. By finding opportunities to write more often, we become more confident in ourselves, in our skills, in our thinking, and in our language (Hall, 2019). Like anything difficult, writing gets easier the more you do it. Writing practice way becomes particularly effective when it is done for publication as the process of being edited for publication offers an unrivalled level of constructive feedback (as I have found in preparing this Leadership Insight). Writing for publication is not something that many of us can do regularly but we can still practise with more routine work. Leaders who write well often have the habit of asking others outside their direct audience to check and comment on their drafts, not just for content but for style, expression, and clarity. Honest, constructive critique is one of the most effective ways of developing other skills of leadership (Hall, 2019). We should therefore be confident in putting our writing to the same test.

## Conclusion

Reading, thinking, practising: three things we can all do, whatever our experience and our role. They help us develop confidence, clarity of thinking, and impact of our writing. Building up one's writing skills takes time, patience, and humility.

It can be a difficult and frustrating process. However, efforts will be rewarded with stronger and more effective written work, which will mean clearer thinkers and more effective leaders.

## Questions

1. Think of a time when someone misinterpreted your writing. What caused the misunderstanding, and what could you have done to prevent it from occurring?
2. Look critically at an effective piece of written work done by somebody else. Highlight the elements that you find most effective. What makes it work? How is the language adapted to the task and the reader?
3. Log your reading for a week. What are the patterns? How could you expand the range of your reading?

## Resources and Further Reading

[Army Leadership Doctrine](#) AC 72-29 (2021).

Eddie, J.K. and Glass, A.L. (1981) [Reading and listening to high and low imagery sentences. \*Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour\*](#). DOI: 10.1016/S0022-5371(81)90483-7.

Gothelf, J. (2020) [Storytelling can make or break your leadership. \*Harvard Business Review\*](#). 19 Oct.

Hall, J. (2019) [Want to become an amazing leader? Write more. \*Forbes\*](#). 9 Jan.

Laity, M. (2022) [StratCom & Leadership: Adapting to a new challenge. \*CAL Leadership Insight\*](#) N. 35, Nov.

Mattis, J.N. and West, F.J. (2021) *Call sign chaos: Learning to lead*. New York: Random House.

Richardson D.C. et als. (2018) [Measuring narrative engagement: The heart tells the story. \*BioRxiv\*](#). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1101/351148>.

Sachs, A. (2023) [Are audiobooks good for the brain?. \*Chirp Audiobooks\*](#). 9 Jun.

Scott, K., Fosslien, L. and West Duffy, M. (2023) [How leaders can get the feedback they need to grow. \*Harvard Business Review\*](#). 10 Mar.

Sinek, S. (2019) *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. London: Penguin Business.

Slim, W. (1957) *Courage: And other broadcasts*. London: Cassell.

Wiley R.W and Rapp B. (2021) The Effects of Handwriting Experience on Literacy Learning. *Psychological Science* (First published: June 29, 2021) DOI: 10.1177/0956797621993111

Williams, A. (2019) [7 ways reading improves emotional intelligence. \*Children's Literacy Foundation\*](#). 1 Feb.