



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Leadership on the Staff A view from a Brigade Chief of Staff

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The CAL [Leadership Insight N. 40](#) has demonstrated the challenges and opportunities that come with leading Whole Force Teams, where there is greater diversity as Regular personnel, civil servants and contractors work together. Whole Force teams require a deeper understanding of the skills, perspectives, backgrounds, and expectations that each individual brings to the team. As a result, achieving cohesion and gaining trust can be more challenging and it is certainly more time-consuming.

As an Army leader, leading on the Staff can present unique challenges when compared to a traditional command role. The span of influence is flatter and faster, requiring leaders to adapt to a broader range of stakeholders and decision-making processes. However, leading on the Staff also offers many parallels with leading in the field. Fundamentally, it is all about knowing your people. In this *Leadership Insight*, I will first explore how the principles of Mission Command remain a valid tool for any Army leader on the Staff. I will then look at some of the key lessons I have learned as both a member of staff and as a Chief of Staff (COS). I am aware that the use of Mission Command on the Staff may seem an odd choice, but it is quite deliberate. It is part of our capstone doctrine, and I believe we should seek to implement it in all we do to enhance its application and understanding throughout the organisation, not just in the field.

Mission Command on the Staff

Despite a detailed job specification and plenty of direction in publications, such as *ADP Operations Part 3: Command*, the *Staff Officers Handbook* and the *Planning and Execution Handbook*, the role of a Chief of Staff can seem vast and all encompassing. I was fortunate as my Brigade Commander has been clear in what he expected from me and the Staff, and it boils down to two key outputs, both in barracks and in the field:

1. Deliver the Commander's intent and direction.
2. Enable and support subordinates in achieving what they have been directed to do.

Centralised intent resourced to meet a commander's direction is the very essence of Mission Command¹ and this is why I have found using it invaluable as a framework approach for leadership on the Staff. To illustrate this further, I will use excerpts from *ADP Operations Part 3: Command* aligning them with similarities to leading on the Staff.

- **Mutual Understanding.** In the field, 'Commanders will ensure that their subordinates understand the intent, their own contributions, and the context within which they are to act.' This is no different in barracks, staff need to understand the Commander's intent, the mission, and how their individual roles contribute to the overall goal to focus their effort accordingly. Communicating clearly and effectively with your team is key to achieving this. Failure can cause a significant amount of work, delays, and tensions. Early on in my tenure I failed to keep the team briefed on a piece of work that I thought I had made clear was both important and urgent. The staff were fixed and focussed on other work. We almost missed a significant NATO deadline, because I failed to share the *context* of the work, the importance of the piece to the Commander, and that I needed staff input ahead of submission. This resulted in unnecessary, out-of-hours work. Fortunately, the team were forgiving, and we met the deadline.
- **Trust.** 'Commanders exercise minimum control over their subordinates, consistent with the context and nature of the mission and the subordinates' experience and ability, while retaining responsibility for their action.' Understanding the strengths, weaknesses, and motivations of your subordinates is essential and is as applicable at Staff as it is in Command. It allows you to have confidence when delegating tasks, removing the need for constant control. It provides support to your team, saving time and fosters cohesion. It goes without saying that knowing those you work with builds trust, it also helps the team understand you and what they can expect from you, enhancing the effectiveness of the Staff. On an individual level this can be developed simply by spending time with those you work with. Organising weekly coffee mornings and inclusive social activities all contribute. It is important to remember too that building trust in Whole Force teams often requires more attention and time as military, civilians and contractors have different ways of working, managing performance, and responding to feedback. Leaders must therefore spend time engaging with all team members to understand their skills, potential and expectations and to explain what is expected of them and why.
- **Timely and Effective Decision making.** 'Subordinates must be willing to use their initiative.' On operations and deployed activity, commanders recognise this as a key principle to achieving first mover advantage, tempo, or even shattering the enemy's will and cohesion. On the Staff, it should be no different. The key is to provide clear guidance on what you want from your team and to communicate your expectations as early as possible. It allows freedom of action and gives time and space for the team to work to Intent, rather than pulling things together at the last minute. It also makes people feel empowered and that they have your trust. Importantly it means that units that are subordinate to the HQ you are in are clear on what is required from them. Clear and timely communication improves the quality of work for all parties involved.
- **Freedom of Action.** 'Subordinates are delegated authority to decide and to act within their own areas of delegated responsibility.' On the Staff, it is all about informing people they have the freedom to solve problems through their own approach. This can be incredibly powerful and empowering. A good example of this is simple Force Generation of Individual Augmentees. Routinely a staff officer might send a force generation task to all units, creating work for a further twelve headquarters. But if the individual conducting the work is empowered to solve the problem in an informed manner, they may only engage with three other stakeholders because they know the context of the task making the approach more efficient. Clear parameters and prioritisation enable staff's freedom.

¹ Defined in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) Operations, Mission Command is a command philosophy centred on the clear expression of intent by commanders and the freedom of subordinates to act to be able to achieve that intent, within established constraints. This philosophy emphasizes decentralised decision-making and encourages initiative at all levels, fostering a culture of trust, mutual understanding, and effective communication.

Spending time early on mentoring staff in this approach will yield dividends in efficiency as they become established in role.

- **Unity of effort.** 'Subordinates understand what outcome they are contributing to, the effects they are to achieve and why.' In orders, we expect a unifying purpose to knit a plan together and strive to operate together as a cohesive entity. From a staff perspective, fostering a positive working environment that encourages collaboration and teamwork amongst your staff is the same as building a fighting force with a unity of effort. On arrival in post, although there was an excellent battle rhythm, the HQ was lacking priorities that allowed the Staff to focus effort against manageable objectives to achieve the overarching commander's main effort. As a Brigade Command Team we are lucky to be aligned as the NATO Response Force and Very High Readiness Joint Task Force Land VJTF(L). From my perspective, setting priorities aligned to this role made a tangible change to the HQ and set a unifying purpose for staff cohering their work. It provided a clear 'why'.
- **A Specified Main Effort.** 'The activity that the commander considers critical to the success of the mission.' The clear articulation of a main effort is the most obvious principle of Mission Command, but it is often neglected in the staff environment. This is required just as much as it is in any tactical action.

Lessons – my reflections on the role as Chief of Staff

Having explored the similarities between leading as a commander and leading on the Staff, this next section focuses on some of my own observations and the nuances of leading in a staff environment. There are certain pieces of advice that remain applicable in any leadership appointment. I assume that any leader would for example: express gratitude, mentor their team, walk the floor, abstain from making decisions on informal means such as the Signal app, and work hard to get to know their people. The areas below, are those that I have found to be unique as a staff leader or COS.

- **You are the HQ's interpreter:** From the Staff's perspective, the COS is the codebreaker. You spend more time with the Commander than they do, so it is beholden on you to ensure that you are honest to the Commander, and you translate direction to them. Communicate your expectations clearly to ensure that the Staff know what you want from them and equally how they should best engage with you. Tell people the format of briefs that you or the Commander prefer to make decisions. This saves time and ensures staff effort is not wasted in preparing work that is not needed or in a format that is not fit for purpose. Early on as a staff officer, I got this wrong and invested hours of my time on nugatory work due to poor communication with my team.
- **Commanders make decisions – Staff Officers inform them:** As the COS, you need to understand your decision-making threshold and what needs to be elevated to the Commander. Sit down with your commander and define the decisions you are empowered to make. It protects your 'one-up's time, and it means that only genuine command decisions are elevated, causing minimal delay to action. If asked to make a decision, exercise your authority decisively but be open to feedback and alternative perspectives. It is easy to defer a decision or wait for more information, as set out above, nothing is more frustrating as a staff officer than the additional pressure caused by delayed decision making. Equally as a commander, staff blocking decisions or making command decisions could be infuriating and undermining. It can lead to compressed 'action' space causing delays in making progress. It is frustrating in camp and can be bordering on dangerous in the field. If you are being asked to make a decision, it is to unlock an issue, or for the Staff to make progress, so invest early to understand what are considered your decisions and those that need to be elevated.
- **Understand what is fixing your staff:** Be aware of the issues and challenges your staff face, and work to address them. Some lines of effort and pieces of work are fraught with friction and difficulties. Talking about them and simply bouncing ideas around often helps. Your team will appreciate the engagement, it will also mean you know who has capacity and who is fixed and where to invest resource. Few things are more disheartening than being given a task that could be achieved with a little additional resource, even if it is as simple as allocating more time. When managing the HQ's workload, I have attempted to

engender an element of flexibility to staff resourcing on important areas of work. This means aligning work to branches that would not classify it as their core job specification or role. The unintended benefit is that it builds understanding and cohesion. However, it can also lead to dissatisfaction, so careful management is required. If necessary, lean in with your own time without becoming decisively engaged and be prepared to stop a discretionary work strand to achieve the main effort.

- **Leave the job in a better place:** Staff churn has a disproportionate impact on the capability of a HQ so it is essential that Army leaders invest in leaving the organisation in a better place. Seek improvements where you can, reduce waste by saving time, cut out unnecessary processes, and be an advocate for continuous improvement. Leverage established doctrine and processes where they work to enhance decision making and staff productivity, particularly with new staff but recognise some processes are inefficient and are a consequence of unintended bureaucracy rather than by design. My predecessor developed a rapid planning cycle to improve planning under pressure which has proven very useful as a deployed HQ and is now a firm feature of our HQ's Statement of Intent. 1 (UK) Div currently have a project called SILVER RHINO, where process and policy can be challenged with 2* HQ support to reduce wasted time.
- **Be ready to do your job:** Although you are the 'COS' or leader on the Staff, you still need to do the mandatory training. Make sure you do your fitness test, go to the ranges, and complete your Individual Training Requirements (ITRs). It is easy to be trapped by the inbox and feel overwhelmed by the weight of office work. If you are in a deployable HQ, you need to be as ready as the soldiers in your units. All too often there is a 'say-do gap' in behaviours, so close it. Besides, it can also be good fun and allows you to engage with staff outside of the usual workplace, which contributes to creating a stronger team spirit. You set the culture of your HQ with your own actions. Issues like presenteeism need to be removed through encouraging flexible working and an output-based approach. Yet, as the COS you always need to know when to assemble the Staff and call the workforce together to respond to a crisis. This was recently experienced by 7 Light Mechanised Brigade Comat Team (LMBCT) through the activation of the Op ELGIN Strategic Reserve Force (SRF) to Kosovo. We were activated on a Friday, and I thought it would be difficult to call the staff back in, but they all returned to work through the weekend in the knowledge it was linked to an operational output and not on the whim of the COS. If you have built trust and kept your team informed, you will find that decisions you think are difficult are made easy by the amazing people you work with.
- Finally, **'pay into the brew fund'**. Be an active part of the team, enable the team to have fun by tasking the coordination of social activities, HQ gatherings, sport, adventure training, and battlefield studies. It allows people to engage on a human level, shows you are an invested part of the team and avoids break away groups that may not be inclusive of all. Also, worth remembering: you do have to pay into the brew fund if you want a coffee. Lead by example in everything you do, at all times.

Questions

1. How much do you know about the members of your team in terms of their skills and expertise, their aspirations, and their expectations?
2. What could be an 'easy win' to improve communication within your team today?
3. What long-term improvements can introduce to make the work across your organisation smoother and more efficient?

Resources

Risso, Linda, '[Leadership in a Whole Force Team](#)', *CAL Leadership Insight* N. 40, Apr 23.

Risso, Linda (ed.), [Mission Command and Leadership on Operations Since 1991](#) (Camberley: Centre for Army Leadership, 2024). AC 72278.

ADP Operations Part 3: Command (2022), AC 72203.

Staff Officers Handbook (2018), AC 71038.

Planning Execution Handbook (2023), AC 72099.