



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## Teaching and Learning is a Two-Way Street How to Teach our Future Army Leaders

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I often read articles or hear opinions about Generation Z (those born roughly between 1997 and 2012) and about criticism of their perceived lack of abilities as individuals and as a collective. Sceptical views about the younger generations are not uncommon. I recall how as a recruit in 2002 I heard similar sentiments being aired about my generation (millennials, born between 1981 and 1996) from the group of people referred to at the time as the 'old and bald'. Although stereotypes between generations are nothing new, they can become a problem if they are used as an excuse for lazy thinking. Stereotypes can prevent us – as individuals and as an organisation – from understanding the needs of others and we may miss opportunities to use the right tools to engage with them and to motivate them. This *Leadership Insight* examines our current teaching and training methods and whether they are fit for purpose to engage with our future Army leaders.

### Challenges and Opportunities

According to recent research, Generation Z cares deeply about building a diverse, community. They are highly collaborative and flexible, confident with new technologies, with an eye to being efficient and getting the job done. They are pragmatic and value direct, honest communication. They respond well to non-hierarchical leadership styles (Katz 2021).

This resonates with my own experience. The young people I have the privilege of working with are often more informed, better educated and more conscientious than some of their older colleagues. Their capacity to digest complex ideas and theories in a short space of time is inspiring. For the most part, they have inquisitive minds and try to understand how and why things work in a certain way. In part, credit is due to our education system, with university-trained teachers from primary school up to university. As students, most of

them have experienced student-led approaches to teaching and learning, which means that they are trained to engage actively with sources, teaching materials, theories, and ideas. These methods allow for student's choice and autonomy and encourage them to ask questions, to reflect, and to challenge ideas (Iversen 2015). Access to social media, often decried as corrupting and damaging, can also be an incredible tool to access different sources and points of view, and to explore new theories and ideas. Gen Z is actively engaged on a much wider horizon of ideas and experiences than we were at their age. They are more technologically confident and intellectually hungry.

In my time, our learning opportunities were markedly different from what the young recruits are used to in school and at university and – in my view – we must adapt to be able to harness their potential and to keep them engaged. As a young soldier, I recall that all lessons we received were based on the 'lecturer style' approach, where the person delivering the lesson stood at the front, often behind a lectern, and spoke for most – if not all – of the time. Teachers often used the traditional 'explain, demonstrate, imitate, practice' (EDIP) method, which is more than a century old. Whilst these teaching methods ensure that the required notions are passed on, they do not attempt to stimulate the students as they are not required to engage proactively with the content of the lesson. They are not asked to contribute or to shape the direction in which the learning activity is going. Engagement is recognised as an essential teaching tool and evidence shows that a higher degree of participation prior and during the lesson leads to better and more long-lasting learning outcomes (Cents-Boonstra 2020).

All established teaching methods have their advantages and strengths. The key is to use the right teaching method for the right subject. The teacher must be comfortable switching between different styles based on the cohort of students they have, the skills and knowledge they want to develop, and the context in which they operate. While EDIP remains a valuable tool, for example, when teaching skills at arms lessons, it may be less useful when discussing the Army's values or while developing the recruits' leadership potential. Considering the learning environment from which the new recruits come, it is essential to aim for the highest level of engagement and participation possible to ensure that the students fully engage with the content and retain what we wish them to retain.

I was first exposed to innovative teaching methods when I attended the Defence Train The Trainer (DTTT) course and subsequently the Army Trainer Mentor course, where I had the opportunity to put into practice innovative ways to deliver lessons to students. What struck me the most was the almost complete shift from a situation in which the instructor delivered the lesson giving all the information, to one in which the students worked to find the answers themselves individually or in groups as part of the lesson. On the course, we were taught the principles of adult learning and shown how all our lesson plans should encompass John Keller's ARCS motivational model (Figure 1).

<b><u>ARCS step</u></b>	<b><u>Trainee state of mind</u></b>
<b>Attention</b>	This is: interesting ... curious ... humorous... surprising
<b>Relevance</b>	This is: useful... something I know a little or a lot about... something that I can use in my work
<b>Confidence</b>	This is: doable... challenging but not too hard... within my control
<b>Satisfaction</b>	This is: rewarding... worthwhile ... a positive experience

**Figure 1.** Adapted from Keller (1983).

The ARCS Model is a framework for designing learning activities that aim to enhance and sustain the learners' motivation (Keller 1983). It consists of four elements (attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction) and it provides strategies for teachers and instructors to capture the learners' attention, show the relevance of the learning goals, build their confidence, and provide tailored feedback. It focuses on the student's own learning experience and demands a more open and engaged teaching style from the instructors. As a result, teachers see higher levels of student engagement. Students are more invested in the material and actively participate in class discussions. When students are given the opportunity to lead their own learning, they are more likely to retain information and develop a deeper understanding of the material, which leads to better learning outcomes. The ARCS Model has also the benefit of aligning the Army with teaching practices used by schools and other education providers and therefore makes the transition for new soldiers and officers easier as they find it familiar to what they have experienced in their previous education.

Since working with officer cadets, one of the most noticeable quirks I have observed is their question techniques. It is not so much the style of questioning or how they pose a question, but their desire to dig into a subject by asking funnel and probing questions. This is something I had rarely experienced before. They do not have any hesitation in putting me, their Sergeant Major, on the spot to get the answer they are looking for. Frankly, I find it refreshing as this type of questioning is what I want as a coach and mentor. I want to be challenged. I want (where appropriate) to be drawn into a debate. Open discussions get more students involved and they expose our potential officers to different points of view. Moreover, as an instructor, I feel renewed motivation to prepare my lessons using the most recent research to ensure I offer the best content and I am prepared for any question that may come up during the session. I do not want to let the recruits down or leave the classroom feeling I could have done more. It is a positive spiral that leads us to be better instructors, cadets, and future officers.

In teaching and training activities, challenge can also be seen as a form of trust as those taking part in the lesson feel comfortable to offer an opinion without being put down or ostracised by either their fellow students or the person delivering the lesson as described in 'the 10 diseases of leadership' (Holmes 2021). More broadly, the need to understand the 'why' and being prepared to question or even to challenge more senior leaders is essential to a healthy organisational culture based on transparency and accountability. If a recruit feels they can probe me in class and do so with informed, well-rounded questions, they may – one day – be able to challenge negative behaviours and bad decisions that do not align with the Army's values. This is essential for the future of the Army as it will be a powerful tool in stamping out unacceptable behaviours and in creating a culture where every member of the team can contribute to organisational success. Hence, I do think the new generations will bring positive change to the Army and we need to nurture and guide them and be prepared to learn from them, too.

This inquisitive attitude comes of course with its own risks and we – as an organisation – must find the right balance between harnessing the confidence and inquisitive approach brought on by the new generation and getting things done as expected. Ultimately, in the Army there is the need to follow directions and orders to achieve operational success. It all depends on the context, the timing, and the modalities in which the challenge is being put forward. This point has been discussed in the recent *A British Army Followership Doctrine Note* (2023) and it can be best illustrated using the 'challenge spectrum' (Figure 2).

Following this realisation, my own teaching style has changed. I see myself more of a coach and mentor than a simple instructor to the officer cadets. I am responsible for their intellectual and personal growth rather than just a figurehead who delivers lessons. Far from just taking the group through a particular activity and then moving on, I now use the initial part of the lesson as a vehicle to identify their level of understanding of a particular subject so I can quickly determine where it should be pitched. I ensure that those that wish

to offer an answer or alternative view are heard and those who appear unsure or quiet have the opportunity to engage and express their own views. Coaching is all about unlocking an individual's – or team's – potential and that is at the forefront of my teaching style now. Often this means that the lesson will need more preparation time and resources; it certainly means that I need to be more open and flexible. This can be sometime unsettling, but this is the only way to maximise performance.



**Figure 2.** Source: British Army Followership Doctrine Note, p. 15.

## Conclusion

Before I deploy on Exercise, I am sometimes apprehensive about how the officer cadets will manage what we have planned for them. With each Exercise, they meet and often exceed our expectations. It is an experience that I am in the process of managing, not because I want them to struggle or to be particularly overwhelmed, far from that. It is more the fact that they have a great ability to rally as a collective displaying grit and enthusiasm that you cannot help but admire. I am without doubt witnessing something special within the University Officer Training Corps and I am grateful because I am better for it.

## Questions

1. Are we too quick to judge our young people? Do we need to challenge our biases?
2. Is there a way I can harness new ways of teaching to deliver my lessons to a younger audience?
3. What are the opportunities and challenges of training and educating the younger generations of recruits?

## Resources

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