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'All change please...': A Junior NCO's Perspective of Leadership

By Cpl Lucy-Rose Foreman

On The Challenges Posed by 'Generation Y'.

'On the bus...off the bus' is an expression that soldiers hear all the time. It means doing what you are told, when you are told and without asking questions when faced with indecision or short notice change. It is about having an unchallenging mental attitude that allows you to obey without thinking. Conforming is just something that soldiers have always done: but will the young men and women of 'Generation Y' ('why?') fall obediently into line, or are they significantly different to their more senior colleagues?

On a recent sports tour with an Army level team containing players with wide range of time served, I observed that the 'old and bold' among the party, regardless of rank, had no issue with multiple, last minute changes to administrative details. Their attitude was to obey orders and to 'deal with it and get it done'. The younger players however, became increasingly frustrated and began to ask questions about why the changes were necessary. It is, of course,

the 'thinking soldier' that the Army wants to encourage, but the questioning attitude of the less experienced members of the team began to annoy the others who failed to understand the point of their 'Why?'. When this situation developed into a breakdown in the relationship between the newer players and team management - the command element of the tour party - tensions quickly rose and then began to affect the mood of the entire group. The result was a swift nosedive in morale that did not improve until more healthy communication was re-established. Even so, the lasting consequences of the rift were severe with some of the newer players thinking about leaving the team after their negative experience with the command element and some of the senior players looking to quit because of their lingering resentment.

This example of a conflict in mentality between 'Generation Y' and their colleagues is unlikely to be isolated to the sporting world and has consequences for the Army. It is important, therefore, that all personnel reconsider their approach to how they get people to act in a certain way and we must ask ourselves the question, 'Do we *command* or do we *lead*?'. All too often these important words are used to mean the same thing, but they don't and we need to understand when each is appropriate if 'Generation Y' is to feel comfortable in the Army.

So what are the differences between a *commander* and a *leader*? They are closely related and in some areas overlap, but as an NCO I think of a commander as typically being an officer in a formal command appointment and in charge of a large body of men and women - such as the CO of a unit. This individual provides the direction, mission and orders for the establishment they head, embody the Army's values, standards and professionalism and is accountable for their subordinates. The buck stops with the commander. An Army 'leader', however, is a position of authority without necessarily giving the overarching level of direction provided by a commander and therefore relies more on influencing his people. The identification of a leader can come from his/her responsibility, but is more directly reflected in rank and/or specialist qualification and experience. Yet although we may look at a rank slide and appointment as a means of identifying a leader, it is important to remember that anyone can lead whether their authority to do so is formally acknowledged or not. I am sure that we all have examples of being encouraged to undertake a course of action due to the words, deeds or behaviour of somebody that did not have any formal responsibility for leadership, but simply gripped a situation and made something happen. Those people were leaders because they stepped up to take control and make decisions when it was required - and the Army needs more of them.

So what are the similarities between a *commander* and the *leader*? Both share common traits such as confidence and decisiveness, qualities that the Army seeks to develop in both soldiers and officers from the moment they begin training. Both roles also require an individual to take responsibility for their own actions as well as the actions of those under their charge, but they also need to provide drive to the effort to achieve a common goal or mission. Even so, because a commander is most often a distinct and singular figurehead who directs while a leader characteristically uses contextually sensitive influence to achieve an effect, leaders usually need to reveal more personable and interactive traits. Indeed, the Army encourages this through the behaviours outlined in the Army Leadership Code. The question remains, however, are these behaviours wholly relevant to 'Generation Y'?

The challenge that 'Generation Y' poses in its questioning attitude is whether they are willing to 'buy' what is being 'sold' to them. Whether it is a decision that affects them, an attitude or behaviour, it is vital that leaders consider leading by persuasion that achieves buy-in rather than demanding obedience that provokes objection. Of course, not all situations are conducive to the more time-consuming art of persuasion and so a direct command is absolutely what is required, but times are changing and we must use the most appropriate approach at the right time and in the right place. Consequently, all leaders need to have their abilities assessed at regular intervals by the chain of command, receive constructive feedback from those they lead and continually develop their leadership abilities. For an NCO, being subjected to this level of scrutiny and being self-aware enough to see the need for improvement is a challenge, but is necessary to ensure that our leadership is as effective as it needs to be and that the relevant competencies and behaviours are established. We all need to be open minded in the face of honest and well-intentioned feedback and show a positive attitude to life-long learning. It is also important to remember that having a better understanding of one's own strength and weaknesses requires a better understanding of those that you lead and so strengthens team relationships.

Leadership excellence is at the heart of a positive interaction with 'Generation Y', but excellence in anything takes effort. Listening to advice, taking it on board and exploiting the wealth of experience found in subordinates and superiors will not only create a positive team culture, it will also assist personal growth. Leadership needs to be constantly worked at, reassessed and thought through. Each of us not only needs to develop the right competencies

and behaviours, but also understand what leadership styles suit which situation and circumstance. Are you going to lead in an office environment in the same way that you do on operations? Probably not, and for good reason, because leadership should to be shaped by context. Even so, we should never lose sight of the fact that individuals work harder and more effectively – whether sitting behind a desk or on patrol - if they believe their leader is working hard for them and looking out for them. In the final analysis, ‘Generation Y’ demands that leaders reassess how they lead and think more deeply about those that follow them – and that has got to be a good thing.

Questions

1. What challenges does ‘Generation Y’ pose to the Army and its leaders?
2. What opportunities does ‘Generation Y’ present to the Army and its leaders?
3. In what ways is ‘Generation Y’ the same as any other generation?
4. How does your organisation define ‘commanders’ and ‘leaders’? Is this understanding different across the rank structure and if it is, why? What are the consequences of this on how you do business?
5. What expectations do young soldiers now have of their leaders and why?
6. What leadership skills/attributes have you tried to develop and where do you still need to improve?
7. When was the last time you had your leadership attributes assessed and when did you last assess the leadership attributes of somebody else?
8. What differences in leadership style are required when leading in barracks and when leading on operations?
9. Do you feel that you are receiving the leadership development that you need and if not, why?
10. Will leaders of the future need the same skills as leaders today?

*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.*