



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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The Voice from Behind

By CSgt George Scott

On the theme of 'Moral Courage and Human Behaviours In Leadership'

On the 10th of November 2010, during Operation HERRICK 13, a composite platoon from B Company, 3rd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment, were operating in the Nad-e-Ali district of Helmand Province. On a freezing November day B Company conducted a complex fighting patrol into a heavily contested Taliban area, seeking to directly challenge the Taliban's control of the area. The patrol was, perhaps, unremarkable. One of many violent and dangerous battles that took place in Afghanistan that year. But the patrol's action that day exposed two key examples of real-time leadership which soldiers, officers and any leader would benefit from understanding

Within weeks of completing his officer and Phase 2 training, Lt Sam Whitlam found himself deployed on operations in Afghanistan. His Platoon were tasked at short notice by the Company Commander to mount a fighting patrol onto a well-defended enemy stronghold which dominated the area of operations.

A left-flanking assault would see his platoon insert through an IED belt. The right-flanking alternative offered limited cover from view and fire during the approach but a final assault route littered with IEDs. The most direct route would involve scaling several compound walls which were approximately eight foot in height. This option would have been painfully time consuming, broadcast his intent to the enemy and placed the point man of the patrol at considerable risk during the ladder climb.

The battle space was so complex and full of high risks that, when working through his COA comparison, all options seemed reckless, highly risky or completely untenable. Whichever way he looked at the problem, he could not see an option which would offer mission success while avoiding putting his soldiers at severe risk.

As he continued to plan more pressure was being placed upon the young Lt from his chain of command. The Company Headquarters were requesting SITREPs and updates, demanding to know when H-Hr would be and what course of action Lt Whitlam was going to take. Time was against him and he was fully aware that in order to seize the initiative he would have to execute his plan within the hour.

Here lies the first key example of leadership in action: Did Lt Whitlam fully appreciate and understand the task at hand? Did his HQ add to the pressure he was already facing? How does a leader balance the need for information and his subordinates need for time to think?

Because Lt Whitlam was thinking; thinking hard and fast to come up with a plan that operated within his OC's intent. He knew that timing was critical. He had to prioritise, accept risks and focus on only what was crucial in order to get his Platoon on the ground in the safest manner. Without hesitation and taking the moral high ground by accepting defeat, Lt Whitlam turned to his Section Commander's and Platoon Sergeant for suggestions, advice and support. Not one COA stood out as acceptable to all those concerned and consulted.

However a young soldier called Pte Cunningham, only a couple of years out of training himself, stood at the door to the Ops Room listening intently. He offered up a suggestion;

"Boss, this is a no-brainer. Place a Mastiff on the left and the right flank for protection. Send an Engineer Section straight up the middle with the point section and place bar mines onto the

compound wall. Blow the charge [achieving surprise] and slam a third Mastiff through the gap. The blokes will advance on foot using the vehicle as protection and when the target compound is in sight, use a rapid weight of fire to move across the open ground and stack up on the point of entry. Simple."

Lt Whitlam replied "Then that's exactly what we'll do!" Pte Cunningham's vision coupled with Lt Whitlam's execution saw to it that, although the Platoon encountered fierce resistance from the Taliban, they broke into the initial compound without taking casualties and fought right up to the Limit of Exploitation within the allotted time and achieving the mission.

Here lies the second key example of leadership in action. A large number of junior subalterns or experienced NCOs, faced with this complex issue, would have been too proud to listen to advice from a private soldier, let alone even act on it. Does the British Army teach leaders to listen to others if those people are under their command?

Collaborative Leadership

There used to be a time when we thought of leaders as having all the ideas. Our leaders were heroes, who know all, were better than all, were giants of men. This was the heroic view of leadership. That time has largely passed in the complex, interconnected, business world. These days all the talk in the business world is of collaborative leaders who bring together different people with diverse thinking to harness ideas and passion.

Those of us who have experienced combat know that there is still a time for heroic leadership – we need to be able to trust someone to make the right decisions when the situation is going wrong or when we are scared. Sometimes we want to be able to turn to a leader and say 'boss, what do we do?' But even on operations, and especially off operations, the time for heroic leadership is either going or gone.

For Lt Sam Whitlam, even with less than an hour to make a decision, he benefited from his ability as a leader to take advice and not equate rank with value. He was able to put his pride and his ego aside. When the mission succeeded the success was as much Pte Cunningham's as it was Lt Whitlam's, but had the leader not been open to advice the mission might not have been successful at all.

The insight here isn't for subordinates. It's for leaders. When you read this are you wondering why your leader doesn't listen more to you? Or are you wondering if your subordinates would speak up and help you? We often wish those senior to us would take our advice without thinking about whether we would do the same to our subordinates.

As a Corporal, I wished my Sergeant and platoon commander listened more to my advice. Now I am more senior, do I worry about whether the CO listens to my advice? Or do I worry about whether I create the sort of leadership environment that makes sure the next Pte Cunningham will speak up to me? This isn't about me. It's about the culture I create in those beneath me.

The first time you let your soldiers offer advice you might not get great input. Or the second time. Or the third. But eventually you will. And you can kill that off just by closing them down one single time.

Questions:

1. If we spent our time listening to our subordinates during mission planning we'd never get anything done. There is a chain of command for a reason. Do you agree?
2. Collaborative leadership is a workable style in business but in the Army we make life or death decisions where there isn't time to ask for people's opinions. Do you agree?
3. Pte Cunningham spoke up because he was in a culture that allowed him to do so. Was that culture built in a day? Who built it? How can you go about building that culture?

Further Reading

- The Oxford Leadership Whitepaper on Collaborative Leadership:
<http://www.oxfordleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/OL-White-Paper-Collaborative-Leadership.pdf>
- HBR. Are you a Collaborative Leader? <https://hbr.org/2011/07/are-you-a-collaborative-leader>
- Forbes. Tips for collaborative Leadership:
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolkinseygoman/2014/02/13/8-tips-for-collaborative-leadership/#7868cfc95fd9>

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