

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Where has 'Serve to Lead' gone?

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Where has "Serve to Lead" Gone?

From the outside looking in, it may feel like something in the Army has changed. The recruiting campaigns of 'Belonging' and 'Your Army Needs You' have appeared to some critics as a fundamental shift in the way that the Army conducts its business. In conjunction, internally, Defence released its new Diversity & Inclusion Strategy. But do either of these events signify a change in the Army and is there a better way to create a culture that is inclusive, and which generates diversity?

Army culture is shaped by our leadership and the Army Leadership Doctrine (ALD) speaks of the need to support and empower our employees while, 'being inclusive and harnessing diversity.' The transformational/transactional spectrum of leadership styles discussed in the ALD is widely accepted, but it does also have its critics. Recently RMAS Officer Cadets fed back that they felt that some of their officers lacked emotional intelligence and students on the Intermediate Command and Staff Course Land (ICSC(L)) were moved to argue that there needs to be more emphasis on followers and followership during leadership training.

What this means, therefore, is that while the ALD asserts that transformational leadership produces excellent performance, followers would say otherwise. Is there a more relevant model that leaders can follow which will improve leadership behaviours? Has the ALD overlooked a critical concept?

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership could negate the need for ineffective D&I statements on noticeboards. Why? Because as Robert K Greenleaf argued in 1971, leaders need to focus on followers and so servant leadership 'begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first.' Despite refinement over the last four decades, servant leadership retains its focus on followers rather than on an organisation's objectives. The RMAS motto, 'Serve to Lead' predates Greenleaf's model and servant leadership is already an essential part of RMAS ethos which has influenced generations of junior officers, but the spotlight has shifted to other models.

Transformational Leadership

The ALD endorsed model of transformational leadership does not dismiss the importance of followers as it requires leaders to inspire them to achieve greatness beyond their own imagination. Even so, transformational leadership diametrically opposes servant leadership due to its concentration on objectives and rests heavily on the use of charisma to influence the followers. If leadership is, 'just plain you' then it can be difficult to achieve a transformational style if you do not exude charisma and yet emulating an unnatural style will lack authenticity and, therefore, credibility. Servant leadership is an important and viable alternative that all leaders should master.

Servant Leadership, Diversity and Inclusivity

If the Army really is a 'people organisation', we must create an ethos that puts those that we serve, the people, at the centre of all that we do. Every day leaders execute their responsibilities in a manner conducive to servant leadership – ensuring that junior ranks eat first, leaving the Christmas R&R slot to those more deserving, checking that leave is being taken, providing access to resettlement - and yet the ALD ignores this model. The consequence is that while servant leadership behaviours are deeply rooted in many, the emphasis on the transformational leader model can lead to confusion. Indeed, I am often surprised when an Officer Cadet tells me that he or she is developing their transformational leadership style but then struggles to articulate what their primary role as a troop or platoon commander will be. I

strongly believe that the ALD's omission of a Serve to Lead approach has skewed our training to the point where Officer Cadet's do not instinctively recognise that their priority will be to look after their troops - transformational leadership should come later. Servant leadership has the potential to reinvigorate the Army spirit of 'service' in support of the Defence People Strategic Objective number five which aims to 'develop a more inclusive culture within defence and a more diverse workforce at all levels.' Creating an inclusive environment is recognised as the first stage in building diversity and demands that the needs of each member of the workforce are considered in place of a blanket policy of conformity. That, I believe, is the essence of 'Serve to Lead'.

How might we apply it?

A strength of servant leadership is the development of trust between leader and follower as it encourages a shift away from achieving objectives and towards the individual. It is therefore vitally important that leaders are given the opportunity to develop trust with their teams and consider how this might be achieved. Troop commanders may see the importance of troop level tasks and adventurous training expeditions, but the challenge for Sub-Unit Commanders and above is the difficulty in finding the time and opportunity for such activities. As such, these leaders will rely more on ensuring that trust is built upon fairness of actions - a time consuming process in itself as it requires dialogue, explanation and persuasion but also, critically, demands that the leader is alive to the implications of their actions. Major General Paul Nanson's DLeadership BAR article (Summer 2018) stressed the need for leaders to be more self-aware and the benefits of 360-degree reporting. Indeed, peer evaluation features on the RMAS commissioning courses and instructors across RMAS Gp, both at RMAS and Junior Staff College (JSC), regularly submit themselves for feedback from their students, but this is not standard across other types of units. If our focus really is towards our people, shouldn't validation and feedback systems be welcomed across the Army rather than feared? Gaining an understanding of the general atmosphere of a unit needs to be supplemented with a better understanding of the needs and motivations of each member of the team. Platoon and Troop Commanders are told that their first task is 'to get to know their soldiers', a basic building block of servant leadership, and should include an understanding of their followers' goals, no matter what they might be. It is just such consideration of the individual which, if handled fairly, leads to inclusivity.

Final Thoughts

Serve to Lead requires the commander to place the followers at the centre of his or her actions but it does not however mean that a commander relinquishes the right to make decisions and provide direction. Servant leaders follow a leadership style rather than a management style. Choosing to Serve to Lead can be a time-consuming way of leading, but it just may be a style that comes more naturally to you and will, as a result, promote better results and related organisational benefits. Listening to followers, considering their needs, placing them at the centre of activity are all principles that were hammered into me as a troop commander and yet they appear to have no useful place in the ALD. This is a mistake, for in following Serve to Lead principles we create an inclusive environment that means that there will be no need for separate D&I strategies, action plans and objectives.

Questions

1. In what ways do you consider the needs of the individual in your organisation?
2. Would a focus upon Serve to Lead rather than Transformational Leadership bring benefits to your organisation?
3. Would you welcome feedback on your performance from your followers? What ways could you develop feedback loops in your organisation?

Further Reading

Herman Hesse, *The Journey to the East*, Samuel von Fischer, 1932.

Robert K Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant Leadership*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1998.

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