



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## Leadership – Are We Overcomplicating It?

By Sapper<sup>1</sup> Connor McLelland, 24 Commando Royal Engineers

Good leadership is something that is fundamental to the effectiveness and enduring success of the British Army. A recent secondment with an organisation in the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) made me realise that for officers it is something that is continually expressed in an abundance of ways, some of which appear quite complicated. However, is it really expressed enough to our younger generation of soldier and if so in what manner? This is my humble soldier's perspective about whether we over-complicate leadership from something that is actually pretty simple? My experience on my secondment suggests that the answer is yes!

From day one of being an enlisted soldier you are taught to think in a systematic way, a bit like a robot, and comply with any order whether you agree or disagree about its nature; you

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<sup>1</sup> For wider civilian awareness 'Sapper' is the title used by the Royal Engineers for the rank of Private Soldier.

just get on with it. As this culture is instilled in us from day one, it results in a solid foundation of obedience and 'Servant ship' which is deeply and subconsciously set for the rest of your Army career. However, the result is that any budding young leader wishing to promote through the ranks finds themselves having to excavate a large quantity of this old foundation and replace it with a different leadership mix all together. This can be quite daunting. Is this replacement mix just too complex for its own good?

My short answer would be yes. As society and the Army have evolved so has Army leadership, including the styles that are taught and the combination of theories about what makes an exemplary leader. Some of this is undoubtedly for the better, some for the worse but all, I suspect, with the right intention of enhancing the future of leadership capability. The problem that I see with this process is that we are trying to evolve and enhance something which most likely doesn't need as much attention as the powers that be believe it does. In my opinion our approach to leadership needs to be stripped back to its bare bones rather than be complicated with layers of more or newer theory about how to be a good leader. I feel strongly that there is a need to return Army leadership 'back to basics' because that is what has allowed us to be the organisation we are today and should not be forgotten.

There is nothing complex about the basics of good leadership and I would suggest that six simple principles enable you to achieve it. I believe that if you can live by these principles daily, then you will become a leader for good, and naturally become a good leader. My six simple principles to good leadership are as follows:

- To truly understand, 'become' one of the men or woman you serve (even just for a short time);
- Stay true to the real you - don't try to be become a populist with your superiors, subordinates or peers;
- Invest in integrity and building trust, they are fundamental to everything you do;
- Be knowledgeable about the subject matter;
- Make sure your administration is to the highest standard;
- Don't ask others to do what you can't or wouldn't be willing to do yourself.

I believe if you stick to these six very basic principles no matter what your rank, be it a General, a Captain, a Sergeant or a Private, you will gain respect not only from your peers, but from every other rank around you.

I would like to expand in more detail on the principle of staying true to the real you. In my short career to date I feel that this is one thing the British Army has never succeeded in truly encouraging. It has been stuck in its ways with its personnel believing that a certain type of personality is expected and must be presented dependant on their rank and role. This has resulted in a Jekyll and Hyde situation where we try to adopt a false demeanour and have a fake personality just to fit into the new elevated working environment that progression brings, yet at the same time have a completely different approach to life outside of the workplace. I don't feel that this is necessarily deliberate on the part of the individual, group or the organisation itself, but is down to the stereotype and pressure created of what we envisage a leader to be, and the way that a leader must act to progress within the organisation and gain respect.

One of the simplest forms of leadership I have ever experienced was during my recent secondment to an organisation in RMAS, an institute of the British Army that specialises in leadership. What made this form of leadership so inspiring to me is that it could have happened at any military establishment and at any time. It wasn't complicated, it wasn't confusing, it wasn't new, it was just absolutely simple. It was a hug. That's right, a hug!

This hug was from an American Colonel, whose role is the American liaison officer to the Army Medical Services based at Robertson House in RMAS. At Robertson House any rank can sit in the Officers' Mess for lunch, such is the nature of the units located within, and as it was coming to the end of service I went to sit by myself. This was because it looked like most people were just about to get up and leave. Five minutes into starting my lunch this American Colonel who had been chatting to a couple of Gurkhas on another table, yelled over to me, and asked 'What's your name young man?', I replied with 'Sapper McLelland, Sir'. He then returned with 'Sapper, that's a weird first name'. I then went over to chat with this Colonel, to explain that my first name was actually Connor and Sapper was my rank. We spoke for a further five minutes about what I was doing, if I was enjoying it and what his role was on a day to day basis.

After the conversation started to conclude, he said to me ‘Sapper McLelland, is it ok if I give you a hug?’ I replied, ‘Yes of course, Sir’ and we embraced together as if we had been friends for years. That moment was when I realised that even though I had never met this Colonel before, that we both had completely different jobs, and were both from different countries we had a common bond borne of uniform and service and this was the real denominator to the way in which one should act, regardless of their rank. He broke an unwritten (largely British!) physical convention and gained my long-lasting respect. A small gesture of leadership in taking time to connect and show interest in me was powerful and only took a couple of seconds out of his day.<sup>2</sup> What I’m trying to say I suppose, is that he didn’t do anything complicated to gain my trust, he didn’t refer to different leadership methods or do anything revolutionary and most importantly he didn’t try to be someone he wasn’t. He just kept it as simple as possible and offered a hug and good conversation.

So, in summary, I believe that to be a good leader there is no requirement for complexity or the need to use every new leadership theory or method. Personal study and a desire to improve yourself is of course a good thing but sometimes if you just go back to the very basics you naturally become the leader that inspires people and people aspire to be. As the famous saying goes – “Keep It Simple Stupid” because KISS is sometimes all a person needs to be inspirationally led - with maybe the occasional hug!

#### Questions

1. Do you feel that your organisation is over complicating leadership and if so how and why?
2. What would your simple principles be?
3. Is there room for complex theories in leadership and if so why and when?
4. Why do people act in ways alien to their real personality when they are given a responsibility to lead, how can they avoid that?
5. Should the Army’s ‘Back to Basics’ programme also be applied to its leadership doctrine?

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<sup>2</sup> I would later learn from others this this was normalised, authentic behaviour from him, which he practiced every day.