



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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*The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and so further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. **Leadership Insights** are published periodically by the CAL to feed and shape the leadership debate in the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership.*

Learning to Change

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On the CAL 2018/19 theme of 'Leading through Change'

We are often told that change is the only constant. We frequently hear about developments in technology, artificial intelligence, space exploration and cyber which are set to change the course of history and humanity's role within it. So, what can we do to keep ourselves in the game? Quite simply, we must recognise that there will be a premium on those people who are willing and able to learn and adapt constantly.

At school, I was classed as a 'good' student; I was well behaved, I did my homework on time and my exam grades were decent because I waded through practise papers and could memorise information. I didn't actually *understand* the information I was memorising and had no idea *why* the answer was right, I just knew it was correct. As a result, I'd say that although I was a good student, I was a poor learner. Being a strong learner is not about academic qualifications, it's about an approach to life and how you cope with uncertain situations. In times of constant change we need to develop and adapt our behaviours to achieve the best outcome at a given time, engage with constant self-improvement while also questioning what we believe to be 'vital'. Being able to learn and willing to change creates an agile mindset, which is what we need in times of uncertainty and constant change.

From an organisational perspective, if the Army isn't at the forefront of developments and isn't willing to question current practice in the pursuit of something better, there is a risk that it will be out-manoeuvred by emerging threats. People often talk about learning organisations but an organisation is not a distinct entity, it is the interaction of individuals – us. Our behaviours, ideas and decisions are what make the organisation; so if we want the Army to be at the forefront of future warfare, then we need to make sure that as individuals we play our part. In order to transform an organisation, we must focus on the individuals within it. If we perceive change as unlearning old behaviours and learning new ones, it becomes easy to understand why being a good learner is likely to make us all better at not just coping with change, but being the instigators of it.

So how can we become better learners?

Arguably the best learners are human babies. If you have watched a baby, you will have seen that almost everything goes into their mouth for it to be assessed. They are constantly curious and over a period of 18 months have gone from pram accessory to fully walking and mumbling miniature human. If we can maintain a curious mindset as adults, it can help us to learn more from everyday life. Yet although reading and researching information through books, YouTube videos and podcasts are all excellent development activities, the real learning takes place when we put what we have learned into practice. Try running mini experiments during your day. It could be something personal such as trying a new type of workout, or it could be something work-related such as asking a colleague to observe you delivering a lesson so they can give you some feedback. It doesn't matter whether you try personal or work related goals, ultimately you are still learning.

Once you have run a mini experiment, it's then important to reflect on what happened. Did you enjoy your new workout? What lessons can you take from the feedback you were given? Reflection is a key part of the learning process as it allows us to process what happened and break it down into parts. For example, if you didn't enjoy your workout was it because you didn't like the particular exercise, was the environment lacking something, or was it because you found the session too hard? Each of these could lead you to draw different lessons; so what was previously just an experiment becomes a conscious learning experience with numerous potential avenues for you to explore.

The next step is then to decide what you want to carry forward from the experience and what you need to let go of because learning demands not just taking on new knowledge and skills, but also shedding old behaviours, biases and thought process. Changing your mind is a vital characteristic for a good learner. It also makes that individual more empathetic and, therefore, more likely to be a better leader.

Using everyday learning opportunities

When it comes to formal learning opportunities (lectures, study days, courses) good learners always try to be more deliberate in their approach to them. Although sitting listening to an 'expert' is often very interesting, the experience isn't necessarily going to create a long-lasting impact unless you have already thought about what you want to gain from it. Could you perhaps, try to raise your own confidence by asking the speaker a question? Might you absorb as much of the information as possible from the programme, but primarily use the event to meet people and network?

Although perhaps not obvious, both examples are still creating learning experiences and will turn the formal learning event into something useful for *you*. Also, make sure that you spend time after the event gathering your thoughts and discussing them with your colleagues. By articulating what you have learned, you will embed it and even find that the discussion further inspires you to action. Anything can be a learning experience if you approach it with the right mindset.

From a leadership perspective, creating a learning mindset within a team or organisation can shift the culture from competing over superior knowledge, to one that embraces listening, learning and bringing out the best in each other. If we accept that we all have things to learn and we are all capable of learning, then we can see everyone as someone to learn from, whether they have been in the organisation for a long time or have just joined. Creating a learning culture within a unit can therefore harvest a truly inclusive environment that will also lead to better performance as it exploits access to wider thinking and different ideas.

Being a good learner isn't about your educational background. Learning is an active process that we all engage in every-day. By being more deliberate in how we approach our day-to-day activities, we can all become better learners. We are therefore not only able to

cope better with change but we are also more likely to be the instigators of it. By running small experiments, *you* too can instigate change. Although it may start small, seeing results and testing yourself can become addictive and soon you will feel confident sharing your experiments with those around you. If each of us remains open to learning, we will create positive change and ensure that the Army stays at the forefront of current and future operations. In order to be the agile and innovative organisation we want and need to be, we must focus on the people within it and each of us must play our part.

Questions:

- Are you a good learner, if so why? If not, what are the barriers preventing this?
- Do you readily accept the responsibility to self-improve or is that the Army's 'job'? If you do accept it, what do you do that is successful?
- Do you reflect on your experiences and if so how? Do you apply your reflective conclusions to your next experience?
- How might you help cultivate a learning mindset within your team or unit?

Further Learning:

- TED Talk – 5 Ways to Lead In An Era of Constant Change by Jim Hemerling. Jim talks about putting people first in organisational change, including creating a continuous learning culture.
https://www.ted.com/talks/jim_hemerling_5_ways_to_lead_in_an_era_of_constant_change#t-583621
- TED Talk – The Power of Believing That You Can Improve by Carol Dweck. Carol talks about cultivating a 'growth' mindset.
https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve
- Podcast – HBR IDEACAST Episode 627: Use Learning to Engage Your Team
<https://hbr.org/ideacast/2018/05/use-learning-to-engage-your-team.html>
- Short Read - The Benefits of a Learning Organization Culture – by Rachel Alexander
<https://bloomfire.com/blog/benefits-learning-organization-culture/>

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