



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Reflections on Unit Command

By Lt Col Rob Hedderwick (CO 3 SCOTS, Oct 16 – Dec 18)

All the rumours are true. Command of a unit remains an immense privilege, is hugely enjoyable and should be savoured for one's tenure ends all too quickly. Now, four months after handing over command, I have had an opportunity to distil my reflections from two marvellous years serving with 3 SCOTS and have packaged them under six themes.

Trust

As Confucius identified centuries ago, trust is probably the most important commodity of all between a leader and his team. It should be treasured above all else. Anything that threatens to undermine it should be fought vigorously for without trust our foundations of primary group cohesion and mission command are hollow concepts. Richard Neustadt once said that, '*powers are no guarantee of power*' and although written in a political context the sentiment is equally applicable in a military environment. A Commanding Officer is invested with much responsibility and power but if mutual trust is absent then making progress in any direction is both problematic and exhausting. I was extremely fortunate. I knew many of my team from previous Regimental Duty, so a degree of trust was already in place. Therefore, as unit tempo increased, I could delegate additional responsibilities without feeling uncomfortable.

Democratise

Empowerment is a common word in the Army today. And understandably so for it is a tenet of our warfighting doctrine and encourages appropriate delegation. But my experience is that the younger generation have a thirst for something greater. They wish for an extension of access to information, opportunity and governance; what in other sectors has been termed 'democratisation'. And why not? For what our young soldiers wish for is the same access to exclusivity craved for by the very population we represent. I recently read an article explaining how a prominent political figure was losing support amongst the youth having been swept to power by their very mobilisation. The reasons were simple. This leader had promised a new form of political action in which the people would have a constant voice in their governance. Two years later and the article claimed that many of the young felt betrayed, that this leader was guided solely by his own opinion and not those of the grassroots; the very opposite of the platform he had stood on in his rise to power. As a result, the young were rapidly withdrawing their support. To reassure doubters I am not advocating some sort of anarchy. But success in our profession requires a collective endeavour and soldiers invariably perform more effectively when they have a stake in the intellectual property rights of a plan. Therefore, initiatives such as the 3 SCOTS Leadership Programme were run by soldiers and not officers. They decided the curriculum and determined the emphasis on individual responsibility. As my Brigade Commander used to say, *'allow people to own their fate as far as possible for affording them this responsibility is at the heart of putting our people first.'*

Invoke Entrepreneurial Spirit

Success is often the result of accidental circumstance and the ability to adapt, innovate and overcome challenges. Therefore, it is a safe assumption that a unit will fare better if every member is actively seeking better ways of doing business. But how does one evoke a truly entrepreneurial spirit? For me there are a few key components. First, the leader must have a clear, unambiguous vision so that entrepreneurial spirit may be situated accordingly. If it provides a little bit of inspiration then so much the better for as someone whispered in my ear before command, there is a reason why Martin Luther King had a dream and not a six-point plan. Second, reduce the restrictions caused by excessive policy. In the private sector CEOs are setting fewer Key Performance Indicators than ever before. The reason? Because, just like having too many policies, they restrict cognitive freedom. Third, provide intellectual

stimulation. Let networks at all levels flourish and create touchpoints with other organisations who display strength in areas you wish for your unit to grow in. My Welfare Officer took inspiration from a large hotel company and transformed part of the married quarters' welfare building into a child-care centre during working hours. The result was free child care for serving soldiers of 3 SCOTS and several notice-to-terminate withdrawals.

Set the Foundation

Everyone has their own view on the components of fighting power. My own is that all three are equally important but that the moral component is the foundation upon which physical and conceptual excellence is built. In its absence the fighting power of a unit will always be fragile. In previous counter-insurgency tours my unit used the mantra, *'it's all about the people'*. Well, unit command is no different and, at its core, must be premised on enabling others to succeed. So, whether it be culture, atmosphere or infrastructure, never lose sight of the human element to command and ensure that the moral component is well founded. I spent far more time than I envisaged addressing moral component issues, but I was blessed with a talented team who provided me with the time and space to do so. Even with the benefit of hindsight I believe this focus was correct. Although not reflected by JPA statistics, the moral component is a factor in unit readiness that can easily be overlooked. But to do so is folly for it is a critical ingredient in determining a unit's resilience and will to fight.

Author

Everything an organisation does should be part of a narrative because human understanding is shaped by story. It remains the principal way in which humans make sense of anything and as Commanding Officer you shape your unit's story. You link its past to its future through your vision, you set the tone and character of your unit and you mould its reputation and brand. *#belonging* is a powerful motive but only if made clear precisely what family you are advertising. How one does this is determined by individual character and context and of course needs to be nested within Army and Defence's broader narrative, but unit authorship remains the preserve of the Commanding Officer. Every interaction you have, internal or external, will leave ground-sign. Over time this ground-sign will build and eventually create a reputation and brand. Decide what your priorities are, what reputation and brand you wish for and be consistent in your actions. It sounds easy but in practice requires a deft hand and for a team to act in unison. But it is important. Misperceptions can be damaging so defining and communicating your own unit's narrative should not be undervalued.

Optimism

If consistency is an important quality in a Commanding Officer, so is optimism. For as Ajaz Ahmed so eloquently states, *'fear eats the soul, but hope nourishes it'*. Not a day went by that I did not pinch myself at the privilege I had been afforded but equally some days were darker than others. But no matter how dire the circumstance, retain your optimism and positivity for if you do not a fog of negativity can quickly descend on a battalion. Of course, I do not advocate blind optimism, but if a Commanding Officer is perceived to be either overly pessimistic or incapable of charting a course through troubled waters it suggests to the unit that he or she is uncertain of how to lead in times of adversity. And it is in difficult times that a Commanding Officer earns their crust. Discuss issues with your Regimental Sergeant Major, reach out to your Brigade Commander or whoever you designate to be your trusted agents, for omniscience is not a pre-requisite of command and no-one should consider themselves above the need for good advice. I often sought it, including one late-night telephone call to the Colonel of my Regiment to check that my plan was not utter madness (it wasn't completely!). And by doing so it allowed me turn up every morning optimistic as to what lay ahead.

There is no fixed template for unit command, nor should there be. But there are leadership themes that merit consideration whatever the context or circumstance. I have highlighted some of those that were important to me, but the correct recipe and ingredient ratio will differ for another. However, irrespective of method, unit command will always be an immense privilege and a significant responsibility. Enjoy it!

Questions:

- Is your unit's foundation set? What can you do to fix any outstanding issues?
- Do your commanders trust you? Will they tell you bad news as readily as good news?
- Whose ideas were the last five you supported and what does that tell you?

Further Learning:

- Ajaz Ahmed, *Limitless: Leadership that Endures*, Vermilion, 2015.
- Onora O'Neill, *A Question of Trust*, Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- David Marquet, Greatness, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqmdLcyES_Q
- Margaret Heffernan, [Forget the pecking order at work](#), www.ted.com

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