

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Leadership in the Reserves – An RSM's Perspective

By WO1 Clough (Intelligence Corps)

Leading in the Reserves offers a particular set of challenges. How do you build effective teams, maximise talent and provide credible output when severely constrained by the time volunteers can offer? It's a question that has resonated over many decades, if not centuries, in the British Army, but it is has never more pertinent than now if we are to get the best out of our Reservists. This *Insight* forms my response to the question after more than two years as a Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) in an Army Reserve (AR) unit. During my time as RSM, I have had the pleasure to serve with some incredibly dedicated people and have come to better understand many of the challenges that our Officers, Warrant Officers and NCOs face in the AR. I have also gained experience of leadership from a Battalion (Bn) Headquarters (HQ) perspective which, when compared to sub-unit level, can bring less daily interaction with personnel. Leadership at Bn level is different in many ways and demands clear communication and intuitive policies in order to meet the needs of AR personnel, and the delegation of responsibilities has to be realistic.

The Challenges

As a leader in the AR, challenges can soon start to present themselves in non-traditional ways. Imagine, for example, the difficulties posed by a situation where most of a sub-unit only attend 27 Reserve Service Days (RSDs) a year, 16 of which are a 2-week camp and 11 are split between weekend and weeknight training. What is more, AR personnel may or may not parade on the same day as other team members and may not see the same faces for six months or more. Add to this the geographic dispersal of sub-unit detachments and you can start to see just some of the challenges inherent in providing effective leadership in the AR. How can you be led and lead effectively under such conditions? But this is the current reality.

The AR works within the standard organisational and rank structures of the Regular Army, however the adherence to these structures is not always possible. On paper, the structure is fit for purpose, but you must be adaptable to work with the type and number of personnel that are available on any given day, and these vary. This makes short duration tasks (such as 'complete within a day') work extremely well. Medium duration tasks sometimes present issues due to a lack of continuity of personnel, while long duration tasks (ironically) are more likely to be completed successfully because we can overcome attendance fluctuation.

The interaction between the Bn HQ and sub-unit command teams can also pose problems. Bn HQ communicates its intent to sub-unit commanders via the sub-unit Permanent Staff – the FTRS Permanent Staff Admin Officer (PSAO) and Regular Permanent Staff Instructor (PSI). It is a method reliant on our ability to pass information in a timely fashion and with clarity that maintains effective communications. The sheer volume of activity to be communicated across narrow PSI team, however, can create a choke point and even with the digital options it is a situation that impacts on an ability to pass information within the ideal timeframe. The result is a potential for sub-unit command teams to function sub-optimally and to have a detrimental impact on the normal CoC functions. Indeed, it can become frustrating to hear that a much-needed soldier was available to support a task but hearing this information only after the deadline had passed. The successful passage of information requires greater effort in AR units than in their Regular Army equivalents, while the reinforcement and repetition of intent is essential if messages are to land with their intended recipients.

Solutions

There are no quick fixes to these challenges, but once recognised and accepted, they can be addressed to the benefit of all. In my experience the application of leadership which recognises (rather than is frustrated by) the anomalies of the AR is the best way to deliver results. It is important, for example, that we maximise the output a volunteer provides by ensuring that he or they understand what is being asked of them. Simple communication solutions to overcome issues of face to face contact and geographic fragmentation of units can be found, use of Defence Connect and MODBox are good examples of how my unit has improved its ability to reach out to all our personnel to publish warning orders, admin instructions, notices, Mess e-meetings, Corps activities and the like. We can also use voting tools to plan attendance, which not only informs the planners but also allows our personnel to see who else is attending. Smart application of e-tools can be force multiplying if properly embraced.

When planning a task or setting a deadline, deliberately allowing longer timelines offers the ability to access the full capacity of AR personnel. By doing this, issuing priorities and empowering team leaders to set their own attendance routine, team efforts can be synchronised to achieve a successful outcome. When it come to the training timetable, it has to be structured in a way that is sympathetic to the requirements of AR personnel. Forecasting out and minimising date changes removes constraints for Reservists allowing them to plan and minimising disruption. Permanent Staff must always remain cognisant that AR personnel have conflicting priorities in their life – their primary career as well as their family and their service. The CoC and Permanent Staff must support and create the conditions to enable them to balance all their commitments rather than forcing stark choices on them which leads to AR activity being missed due to poor planning or overwhelming pressures.

Creating the right environment for individuals to thrive is important. A thoughtless comment or negative atmosphere from an instructor with a poor attitude can result in a smaller audience attending next time around. The environment needs to be nurturing and professional to create a positive experience for the AR soldier or officer. As with the Regular Army, commanders and leaders must know their personnel and understand their motivations for being there. AR personnel generally have their own reasons for serving; some are ex-Regulars wanting to remain with the Army after retirement, while some are just looking for something different. Even so, they are bonded by the desire to contribute and will be among the most highly motivated soldiers and officers you will come across. Their selfless commitment to serve needs to be recognised and respected not least because it takes effort to put on a uniform after your day job and then deliver

in the AR. It is important that we all make the best of the time that the AR can give and support them in order to maximise their efficiency and effectiveness. A stale environment will have a negative impact, but the opposite will reap huge benefits and it's the job of leaders to provide it!

Implications for the Leader

Encouraging and enabling your personnel to undertake appropriate responsibility (in line with the empowerment agenda) inspires confidence through your actions and creates the space to achieve and deliver. This is probably the hardest to apply as less contact time can create fewer opportunities for trust to develop. As such, additional effort is required from all involved with significant investment in intimate mentoring coupled with a nurturing approach and the creation of a genuine 'safe to fail' training environment.

Using transactional leadership styles should be given careful consideration when dealing with AR personnel on a routine basis. That is not to say a directive or pace setting leadership style should be avoided, but the second order effect needs to be considered. AR personnel report for duty through choice, an apparent error in judgment may be due to a lack of understanding and require a coaching style to be used to enable long term correction. By complementing the transactional approach with transformational leadership (as described in the Army Leadership Doctrine) and applying the tenets of mission command (decentralised action, freedom and speed of action, initiative) with excellent communication, you can set the right conditions for AR personnel and structures to thrive.

Summary

There are many diverse challenges in the AR which must be recognised and understood to lead effectively. Good planning, empowerment and setting a positive environment are needed – it will not overcome all the AR challenges, but it will help. If you apply good leadership behaviours incorporating our values and standards, you will be primed for success.

Questions

1. Does your leadership approach need to be different in a Reserve unit than in a Regular unit?
2. Does transactional leadership have a place in a Reserve unit?
3. How can you develop individuals and build effective teams in a Reserve unit?
4. How can TACOS be adapted to maximise our Reserve capability?