



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Institutionalised Army Leadership – Friend or Foe?

By Col Miles Hayman (Late ETS)

25 years ago I was struggling to make a success of a new way of life during the first term of officer training at RMA Sandhurst. As with so many of us, my army career happened while I was making other plans! Funny thing is I quickly grew to love life in the army and felt at home and comfortable in my new environment. Fast forward to the present and I am in the final year of a full-time PhD leadership study. This does not make me an expert in all things leadership, the body of literature would take 100 lifetimes to get through. But I have had the time to read, research and reflect deeply on the experiences that have influenced my development as a leader in the army. I'll aim to demonstrate why I think the institutionalised influences are so significant to the way we lead both as individuals and as an organisation.

What does it mean to be institutionalised?

I often hear conversations that refer to army personnel being 'institutionalised'. The conversation usually peters out with assertions that we need to change our culture in some way or other, often with 'leaders' assigned to the task of bringing about the change. A little change sometimes captures the mood successfully;

a big change is usually resisted or written off as absurd. A whole body of literature has grown around 'institution theory' over the past 60 years or so. Put simply, an institution is a form of social structure that has developed ways for that structure to be reproduced through self-activating processes. Broadly speaking these self-activating processes - the things that cause organizations and the individuals within them to behave in particular ways - can be aligned to three forces of influence. Regulatory, normative and cognitive influences all play a key part. For regulatory forces think perceived external constraints, organisational rulebook and SOPs. For normative forces think organizational group photo capturing 'how things are done around here', the implicit group practices we carry out, illuminating our organisational personality. And for cognitive forces think individual movie compilation of experiences through-career that help you build and develop your mental models of what good looks like. These forces typically strengthen as personnel become more senior (as you gather 'evidence' that your choices and methods have been the right ones) and behaviours become deeply embedded over time.

'A little change sometimes captures the mood successfully'

A quick re-cap on 150 years of leadership writing

The key premise of 150 years of leadership writing, from Thomas Carlyle in the mid nineteenth century, to Bernard Bass in the later part of the twentieth century, is that certain individuals – let us call them leaders – do things, bound in a relationship with other individuals – let us call them followers – to achieve things. This relationship was described as the leadership tripod by Bennis. There are dozens of different models and theories of course and there is no universally agreed way to describe it. I like the way that Professor Keith Grint tackles it, when he refers to the ebb and flow of normative and rational schools of thought. Normative schools focus on qualities in people (i.e. trait theories, transformational, charismatic and authentic schools); and rational schools focus on scientific or objective skill sets required to practice effectively (i.e. functional, situational and contingency schools). But what these traditional schools of thought all have in common is they conform to the leadership tripod. They privilege some form of special person who sits at the top of a tripod that binds others (the led) and their coordinated actions together in a relationship. I think the army is pretty comfortable with this conception of leadership, albeit with a focus that over the years has moved from the transactional and authoritative to the transformational and authentic. Nevertheless, our notions of effective leading are aligned strongly with these traditional schools of thought. And for many of our challenges, especially at the most adversarial end of the spectrum, this traditional leadership dynamic is probably as fit for purpose as it ever was.

Institutionalised leadership and making a break from the old routine

I am proud to serve in the British Army and think it is full of outstanding leaders practising their craft admirably, often in exceptionally difficult conditions. We work hard to live up to our most authentic and humble forebears and to be the catalyst to inspire transformational effects within our spheres of influence. So, what does being institutionalised mean in relation to leadership? It isn't necessarily a bad thing. For example, our organisational norms provide us with a crucial link back to our learned experiences, helping us to orientate for future action. Nevertheless, being institutionalised is associated with doing things in a particular and *self-activating* way, in accordance with recognised group behaviours, which makes it difficult to break from the old routine.

Over time, dominant institutional forces have come to profoundly affect the army's leadership dynamic. These forces triangulate to prescribe leader actions aligned to decisive, time-sensitive, solution-orientated decision-making, regardless of the problem context. When these institutional forces combine with individual preferences for getting the job done and a competitive instinct to win, problems can only really be framed in one of two ways. The problem can be framed for clarity (with known solutions), or crises (with a perceived time-critical requirement for immediate action). Framing problems in either of these ways acts as a powerful constraining influence on adaptation and innovation; and the messy and imperfect outcomes associated with the type of problems often referred to as complex. Complex problems are non-reducible, mutate over time and typically require collaborative rather than individually decisive action.

'Over time, dominant institutional forces have come to profoundly affect the army's leadership dynamic.'

Institutionalised leadership - friend or foe?

Well...it's both. At their best the army's institutionalised leadership practices provide an immediately accessible link, subconsciously tuning us in to our learning from past experiences and act very much as friend. Typically, this works well with *crises* type problems, where we devote so much of our energy. We train hard to thrive in demanding and time critical conditions and most of our leadership 'tests' are delivered in the form of 'command appointments' – where time is highly constrained, and objectives need to be achieved. Time and effort is also devoted to producing well planned, synchronised and executed activity for *complicated* problems – whether that be the J5 planning function, or the technically focused skill

sets that support specialist capabilities. Unsurprisingly, our regulatory influences, normative behaviours and individual mental models relating to good leadership are closely aligned with these two areas – crises and complicated problems. However, if we are to thrive in the 21st century, we need to be effective when addressing *complex* problems and I don't think we currently have the self-activating processes to lead in this domain. Our institutionalised leadership practices act as foe, attacking across three fronts to stifle collaboration and adaptation.

Institutional theory suggests that we reproduce behaviours that maintain the legitimacy of what we recognise as appropriate action. If one considers this in relation to our conceptions of good leadership it is unsurprising that we have difficulty recognising effective leading as collaboration, compromise, uncertainty and failure as the necessarily winding route to messy outcomes associated with complex problems. We must not underestimate the challenge faced by the latest initiatives designed to promote organisational agility and empowerment. It will take a coordinated effort across all three institutional pillars to adapt and change, to create new *self-activating processes*. Focusing on just one pillar of influence will be insufficient, we need to focus on all three. We need to change the rules (a business case without hardwired benefits anyone?); encourage and reward different group behaviours (safe spaces for collaboration and compromise to outshine individual decisiveness); and introduce new mental models (a learning and development syllabus less reliant on conforming to and reproducing DS solutions). And all this without losing the ability to thrive in crises and to coordinate a complicated plan. Good luck!

Questions

- **What comes to mind when you think of effective leading and is it compatible with addressing complexity, and supporting adaptation and change?**
- **What can you do to challenge the rules, external pressures and policies constraining action to promote adaptation and change?**
- **What can you do to provide the safe spaces for people to try new ways of doing things and promote collaborative endeavour over individual decisiveness?**
- **Are your mental models of leading based predominantly on your successful experiences of 'fixing' problems, inspiring others, thinking clearly under pressure, and delivering the 'DS solution' to problems? If so, what can you do to find space to develop alternative models?**
- **What can you do to be more suspicious when all of your sensors – the rules, group norms and mental models – triangulate to provide the 'evidence' to act decisively and with clarity regardless of the problem context?**
- **What can you do to pay more attention to the junior voices who can more naturally question 'the way things are done around here'?**

