



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## Mentoring for Leaders

How mentoring can positively develop  
the skills and behaviours of Army leaders

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The development of effective leaders is essential to the success of any organisation. In the military environment, it is widely recognised that it is 'leadership above all else that impacts the most on achieving operational success' (Meehan and Neill, 2014, p.112). It is therefore not surprising that investment and interest in mentoring is increasing across the British Army. However, there is currently little understanding of how mentoring may support the development of leadership skills and behaviours of the leaders themselves, and whether its impact may go further than what it is currently outlined in the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) (2021) and [Leader Competency Framework](#) (2024).

This *Insight* explores the role of mentoring in leader development within the British Army. It is based on the research I carried out as part of my Master's dissertation. It demonstrates that the benefits of mentoring go beyond career advancement and that it contributes to the growth of leadership skills and behaviours like empowering subordinates, developing others, and fostering an inclusive culture. Interestingly, there is also evidence that mentoring can produce positive leadership outcomes for the mentors themselves, such as developing empathetic leadership and emotional intelligence. Such findings point to the importance of targeting mentoring opportunities to those with leadership responsibilities as research suggests that this is when the greatest benefits to the development of individual leadership skills and behaviours can be realised.

### **Mentoring and leadership in the Army**

In a military setting, mentoring is often perceived as a voluntary developmental relationship that fosters trust and respect and which benefits the mentee. Senior individuals guide their

juniors through reflection and knowledge-sharing. The benefits of mentoring in both military and wider organisational settings are often largely explained in terms of a positive impact for career advancement, job satisfaction, and skill acquisition.

The Army's literature on mentoring sees mentoring as a critical developmental activity to build a more inclusive, connected, and diverse organisation. Critically for the purpose of this *Insight*, mentoring also has a complementary role to routine leadership activities as it provides broader development opportunities outside the chain of command. The extent to which the mentoring of leaders themselves – as opposed to leaders mentoring subordinates – can further develop individual leadership skills and behaviours is currently under-acknowledged in the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) and literature. The [Army Mentoring Handbook](#) and the Mentoring Fundamentals course on the Defence Learning Environment platform offer an introduction to what a good mentoring relationship may look like. Crucially, they also explain what mentoring is *not*: it is not counselling, and it is not a tool to deal with poor performance.

The [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) dedicates a whole section to mentoring along with coaching, as part of 'What Leaders Do' (p. 4-1). According to the Action Centred Leadership model, there are three key components to what leaders do: develop individuals, build teams, and achieve the task. They are interdependent and they reinforce each other. When considering how a leader's skills might be developed by assuming the role of mentee within a mentoring relationship, it is worth considering what the development of an individual's leadership skills and behaviours might look like in practice. A useful benchmark is to assess whether a mentoring intervention has improved an individual's mastery of the cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural skills associated with leadership (Iszatt-White and Saunders, 2017). In addition, it is vital to link these findings to the [Army Leadership Code](#) and the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) to assess the potential benefits and impact to leadership of taking part in a mentoring programme or relationship.

The [Army Leadership Code](#) identifies seven leadership behaviours: lead by example, encourage thinking, apply reward and discipline, demand high performance, encourage confidence in the team, recognise individual strengths and weaknesses, strive for team goals. The [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) expands upon the skills and behaviours it expects of leaders and what they do, highlighting areas such as empowerment of subordinates, harnessing diversity and being inclusive, and developing others. The [Leader Competency Framework](#) supports the development of further leadership skills and behaviours by helping identifying gaps and areas of improvement.

### **The development of leadership skills and behaviours through mentoring**

My research on the wider benefits of cross-organisational mentoring programmes for the development of leaders has exposed a range of additional leadership traits and qualities that can be positively developed. Interviews with Army serving personnel who had recently taken part as mentees in such programmes experienced positive outcomes in their leader development, across both recognised leadership traits, i.e. those outlined in current Doctrine, as well as for wider leadership traits currently not acknowledged.

Nine of the ten participants interviewed were able to cite examples where they had discussed with their mentors some of the skills or behaviours specified in the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) as being important to what leaders are and do, which subsequently influenced their own leadership behaviours and approaches to situations. Mentees also reported greater confidence in delegating and empowering their subordinates. According to the interviewees, this new confidence was a direct result of discussions with their mentors where they had the opportunity to discuss their own management style and to develop ways to delegate and empower. In addition, they discussed their subordinates' feedback on their performance, which highlighted a greater desire of subordinates to feel trusted and empowered. This is something that is developed in detail in the new [Leader Competency Framework](#) (p. 13).

According to my research, 'Developing others' was a key area of leadership directly influenced by conversations with mentors. Participants cited examples where they were able to discuss their subordinate's development plans with their mentors. They subsequently implemented the ideas and offered new development opportunities they had identified with the support of their mentor. Interviewees were also able to identify tangible benefits they had produced for their people. The results were so encouraging that one participant explained how the experience of being mentored had motivated them to set up a new mentoring programme within their own cap-badge. The examples provided during the interviews demonstrate how, by discussing leadership challenges with their mentors, participants were able to devise new strategies to boost the motivation and performance of their own subordinates and to turn difficult conversations into practical development opportunities.

A more proactive approach to the concepts of inclusivity and harnessing diversity was another frequently reported benefit. Forty percent of the participants reported productive discussions with their mentors on these topics and explained how such exchanges led to further personal reflection. In response to whether the programme was impactful on their leadership development, one interviewee responded, 'It was definitely the diversity and inclusivity bit that I was far more aware of. [...] My tolerance of what was unacceptable was probably higher than it should have been, and it took someone else to give me that perspective [...] that was really, important and that's something I've carried forward.' Another interviewee responded that, 'I feel I'm much more inclusive with what the civil servants need or want and in being able to include them within the team.' These statements clearly link the participants' mentoring relationships with their leadership development, citing specific examples to demonstrate an increased confidence to deal with challenges to inclusion and diversity, and in determining their own boundaries as leaders in dealing with such issues in the workplace.

Interestingly, there were other leadership traits and behaviours that were developed during their mentoring programme. The ideas of empathetic leadership and authenticity featured several times in the interviews. Discussions between mentors and mentees around empathetic leadership provided an opportunity for mentees to reflect on their own empathy and how it might be applied in their working environment. One participant reported that, 'My mentor described empathetic leadership as being part of her personal brand. She goes the extra mile to know her people, to reach out to them, to try and understand them better [...] I now think empathy is a really important part of leadership.' This example demonstrates the depth of conversations and the level of sharing that took place in the mentoring relationship, providing an element of role-modelling whereby the mentor articulated their personal leadership approach and explained ways in which they applied it. These conversations allowed the opportunity for self-reflection on the part of the mentees, who considered new approaches and perspectives.

Authenticity was cited by many of the mentees as an area they felt they had developed because of their mentoring relationships. One participant described a discussion that required them to consider a list of 'values', to determine which were the most important to them, and to assess whether they led their own team in accordance with these values. This exercise encouraged the mentee to reflect that, 'it goes back to that bit about leadership being you, authenticity, and I think some people can lose that link between their authentic self and the leader they are being at work, and I think that's when it starts to fail'. Another mentee said that, 'the mentoring relationship experience really focuses on understanding yourself better, which I agree are important bits of leadership'. Both examples highlight authenticity as becoming a critical component of the mentees' own leadership style, which they were able to identify and to develop during their mentoring relationships.

The research shows an overwhelmingly positive experience of the participants taking part in the cross-organisational mentoring programmes. Although based on quite a small

sample, it demonstrates the positive impact on the development of identifiable leadership skills and behaviours, such as empowering subordinates, developing others, harnessing diversity and being inclusive, empathetic leadership and authenticity. Other skills that were often mentioned were higher tolerance to risk, setting clear directions, and accepting honest mistakes. The fact that all these examples correlated across several participants in the study provides a compelling argument that engagement in mentoring relationships provides tangible value in the development of individual leadership skills and behaviours. Wider benefits of mentoring beyond leadership development are also critical, such as providing underpinning support, guidance and psychological safety for leaders finding themselves in challenging, and often lonely, appointments.

Finally, the research also demonstrates the value of mentoring for the mentors themselves. The mentor has an opportunity to enhance their interpersonal skills, to reflect on their experiences, to articulate their values and priorities, and to support the development of others. This relationship helps both mentor and mentee to broaden their perspective, develop their skills, and discover untapped potential. The chain of command and the wider organisation ultimately benefit from improved leadership performance and increased motivation of all parties involved, which enhances job satisfaction and increases retention.

## Conclusion

Despite the small sample size, these findings of this study suggest that participation in mentoring programmes can have a wider impact on the development of leaders beyond the broad benefits already recognised. Crucially, it suggests that leaders in new appointments in particular benefit from having a mentor, enabling them to test and sound-board issues, to feel supported whilst experiencing the 'loneliness of command', seek wider experience and perspective, and to reflect and develop upon their own leadership skills and behaviours. To that end, consideration could also be given to targeting mentoring programme opportunities towards those taking up new leadership appointments, at any level, across the chain of command, to ensure that those in such appointments feel supported, and that their subordinates also benefit from the increased perspective and personal development invested in them as leaders.

## Questions:

1. What role do you think mentoring can have in developing subordinates?
2. Have you ever been a mentor or a mentee? What benefits did you experience? Do you have examples of how your mentoring discussions enabled you to reflect on your leadership style?
3. How might you be a valuable mentor in your workplace?

## Resources

This *Insight* is based on Groome, Anna. (2024) *An Exploration of the Value of Cross-Organisational Mentoring Programmes in Developing Leaders within the British Army*. MSc (Exec) Dissertation, Henley Business School, University of Reading.

Centre for Army Leadership, [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) (2021), AC 72029.

Centre for Army Leadership, [The British Army Leadership Competency Framework](#) (2024), AC 72279.

British Army, [Army Leadership Code](#) (2015), AC 72021.

British Army, [The Army Mentoring Handbook](#) (2020).

British Army, *Army Command Standing Order 3241 - Army Mentoring Capability*. (2020).

Iszatt-White M., and Saunders, C. (2017) *Leadership*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Meehan, M. and Neill, D. (2014) 'The New Zealand Defence Force: An Adaptable Organisation Requiring Adaptable Leaders', in Lindsay, D. and Woycheshin, D. (eds) *Adaptive Leadership in the Military context - International Perspectives*, Ontario: Canadian Defence Academy Press.