



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 to 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 within the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership. The views expressed in **Leadership Insights** are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official thinking of the British Army or the Ministry of Defence. Series Editor: Dr Linda Risso (CAL).*

Leading on Leadership

Reflections on two years at the Centre for Army Leadership

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In this *Insight*, I offer my reflections on the privilege of leading the Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) for two years, and the once-in-a-career opportunity to think, research, explore, and discuss leadership in depth. I have been fortunate to be able to read and think, interrogate approaches and individuals from across the public, private, and third sectors, and other nations' armies as well as across our own organisation – exploring the full range between mundane office-based leadership challenges to those of the most visceral soldiering experiences in modern times. Captured here are the common themes and reflections from those interactions; they aim to help leaders continue to progress in their development.

Why do we need a Centre for Army Leadership?

As I stepped through the door, I learnt quickly why having the CAL is so important. I had imagined an interesting but somewhat ethereal assignment: the new doctrine had recently been published; the [*Leader Competency Framework*](#) was in the final stages of development; and I had an experienced team. Yet, I soon realised that once the Pandora's box of leadership is open and you climb – rather than peek – inside, you keep wandering with interest and keeping going. The entrance disappears behind you and there is no end in sight. It quickly became clear to me that as an organisation we still have much to learn.

The *nature* of leadership is not different now from what it has been for hundreds of years; those positive interactions between people (leadership) rely on a core of human personality traits and skills. But the *character* of leaders and leadership needs to keep moving forward to reflect the current social and cultural context as well the changing operating environment. The CAL does this kind of thinking on behalf of the Army (Sharp, 2021). While links into command, management, and culture are inextricable, isolating leadership as a skill in its own right is fundamental to its continuous development. Most organisations I have interacted with do not isolate it. The skills required to be an outstanding leader often get lost in the noise of tactics, command and corporate management 'away

days'. Few organisations explicitly train leaders to improve the emotional and social skills that are the basis of outstanding leadership.

As an organisation, the Army starts from a good overall baseline of leadership; we benefit from recognising its importance, setting high expectations and offering the opportunity to practice it both daily and in the most testing circumstances. The Army's definition of leadership, 'the combination of character, knowledge and action that inspires others to succeed' ([ALD](#), 1-04) dictates the Army's leadership framework, and is useful for elaborating the points most prominent from my time at the CAL. However – like every organisation – there will always be room for improvements in our people and the institution. Yet, the requests to learn about Army leadership from the vast array of organisations approaching the CAL in the last two years is testament to the Army's reputation in this field.

What Leaders Are

The character of leaders, and the standards they set and exemplify, prove their worth (McChrystal, 2025). As I engaged with several organisations across multiple sectors, I realised that in corporate settings values are often transitory, changing with each new CEO or business change programme. The consistent and enduring nature of the [Army Values](#) is therefore of critical importance; it allows them to become imbued in the organisation and leads its people to delve deeper than a superficial understanding or ability to recite them. The Army's Values have been consistent for 25 years but are routinely interrogated – often with support from the CAL – to check their validity. In my many conversations on the Values, the absence of humility as a headline value is the most consistent challenge. It is an important point, and I agree that while humility features in the subtext of many descriptors, it could become more prominent. Similarly, loyalty as a headline value prompts questions as to whether it may sometimes generate the hazard of misguided loyalty – people sticking by leaders or organisations regardless of their actions. Again, this is addressed in the sub-text of the Values and demonstrates why more than an ability to parrot them is required.

As an Army, I am convinced we need not shy away from an aspiration for our people, especially leaders, to 'be the best'. Recruiting people with the ability to exemplify the Army's [Values and Standards](#) is the start point; it is the Army's job to elevate its people to consistently meet them. If some deem those Values and Standards to be aspirational relative to those currently reflected in modern society, we should view it as a strength as we must be ready to operate and succeed in extreme circumstances. Perhaps the most impactful moment of realisation in my time at the CAL was recognising the utility of the Values and Standards as a decision-making tool. On those darkest or most difficult of days, in the absence of clear direction, or in no-win situations, making leadership decisions using the Values and Standards as a guide will predominantly lead to the best one. Even if the outcome is not as positive as planned, the decision would have been made for the right reasons.

In my time at the CAL, toxic leadership has been a topic of great interest across our organisation and beyond. Toxic leaders do exist but are not as prevalent as many claim. In reality, many alleged toxic leaders are in fact just poor leaders, often as a result of a lack of leadership training and underdeveloped emotional intelligence. Where organisations are not selecting leaders based on genuine leadership qualities, they have a duty to train those they do select to be better – and deselect those who fail to meet the required standards. One of the hardest hitting revelations – particularly it seems in the corporate world – is the extrapolation of 'servant leadership' into a simple but stark concept. A leadership position allows a leader to work *for* people, in contrast to have people work for them. If every new leader sets off with this core concept at the front of their mind and keeps it there, they will be much more likely to succeed.

What Leaders Know

As outlined in the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#), what Army leaders need to know falls into three categories: themselves; their people; and their job. In psychology, this would be broadly recognised as demanding high levels of EQ (emotional quotient), SQ (social quotient), and IQ (intelligence quotient) respectively (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008). Experience tells me each component receives a notably different level of attention – with most leaders allocating priority and effort to them in reverse order

to the one listed above. Yet, the foundation of improving one's leadership is in EQ: knowing ourselves and being able to recognise and regulate our emotional state, leading appropriately for the situation we are in. Few organisations commit resource to specifically developing EQ in their leaders, rather than just talking about it. Defence is one that has realised its importance and is investing in it.

Similarly, how we interact with others (SQ) can be trained to be better (Sanwal, 2024), but rarely is. However, it is critical for leaders to master. It might seem contrived to seek to change elements of our personality to better interact with those we lead, inauthentic perhaps. However, we learned how to be as we are at some point early in life, and hence there is no shame in adjusting by re-learning. These are not particularly elusive competencies to find training for and improve; for example, a cursory online search can find free courses on how to improve our listening skills, body language, and communication style, which will ultimately improve our interactions with the people we lead. The CAL has produced several resources to raise the awareness of Army leaders in this area.¹

The lack of EQ and SQ training and development for leaders is the glaring gap in the leadership market. The development of IQ however is still the go-to facet of leadership skill development for most organisations; teach some theory about leadership, show some doctrine, and train people to do their job. It is relatively straightforward, and most organisations do it well – especially the Army. Without sound foundations of EQ and SQ though, high IQ will not automatically correlate with good leadership. Indeed, most followers can recall that leader who is technically proficient but very difficult to get on with – and hence they do not get on with them, regardless of their technical proficiency. If we want to be better leaders, we need to reflect on ourselves and what we could be better at in terms of our EQ. Similarly, what do we know (or have we been told) we need to improve in how we interact with those we lead? Once we know and acknowledge these points, we can set about improving them with training to form new skills and habits. Commonly, having these conversations with people (or ourselves) is uncomfortable; if so, it probably means we are looking in the right areas for improvement.

In general, the Army will take care of the development of our IQ. Naturally, a leader with high EQ and SQ who chooses to elevate their professional IQ above that of the baseline delivered will stand out even further from the crowd. There are other areas of study, into the experiential quotient (XQ) and adversity quotient (AQ), broadly equating to how an individual's life experiences shape who they are and how they behave, and how resilient they are to adversity (Zhao and Sang, 2023). Clearly both have value in how the Army understands and develops its leaders; these elements too need to be incorporated in future leadership development work.

What Leaders Do

The most obvious assessment of a leader is based on their actions. Where their character and knowledge may be less overt – at least at first – what they do and how they do it will be in plain view of their followers. Ideally, sound character and knowledge will naturally flow through to deliver great leadership actions, but it is not inevitable. For some leaders, the style in which they lead – and whether they can adjust it to meet the situation they find themselves in – sometimes simply does not match the people and the circumstances. Similarly, knowing when to move between applying the skills required for organisational leadership and those required for team leadership may not come naturally to some. The nexus of both points is that skilled leaders recognise the particular elements of leadership demanded by a follower or the situation they are in and adjust their style to it. For many, this comes with experience and elevated EQ; for some it remains elusive. If it is the latter, completing the virtuous circle with focussed self-reflection and improving our skills is one answer. Another is to ensure we fill the gaps in our range of required skills and styles with others in our 'top team' that do have them.

The Armed Forces are one of the few professions where its people sign a contract of 'unlimited liability', acknowledging that giving up our life in the course of our work – achieving a task – may be required. It is the driver of the action-centred leadership model remaining at the heart of [Army Leadership Doctrine](#). Individuals must be trained well and tested hard, and forged into teams, so on those most difficult and dangerous days, the task is achieved. When we take people into battle knowing their lives are at risk is the point the components of fighting power and the action-centred leadership

¹ See the list of CAL [Resources](#), the [CAL Leadership Insights](#) series, and the [Centre for Army Leadership Podcast](#).

model come together. Fundamentally though, what leaders do in those moments determines success or failure, and perceptions of the outcome, in the short and long term.

There are no shortcuts in the deep-rooted development of leaders and how they execute its skills. There is also no endpoint. No level of experience, seniority, or training will deliver the perfect leader. Great leaders can though generate great followers (whose character, knowledge, and actions will closely replicate those of leaders) at pace, using the leadership super-power – leading by example. If leaders want to influence their followers, to change or to act, then those followers will emulate that which they see in their leaders. Leading by example comes out on top of research into the most influential elements of the [Army Leadership Code](#) and [Values and Standards](#).² Inevitably, sometimes leaders will fail, in good faith; for most it can be one of the most powerful leadership development experiences and should be treated as such.

Conclusion

I have learnt more on the theory of leadership in the last two years than my previous 25 years in the Army. Most likely, my prior service and experiences put me in a fortuitous position to contextualise it. I know though I could have been a better leader if I had more of a focus on the skills of leadership much earlier in my career. If I and my peers were steered onto serious self-awareness, had been trained and developed in the emotional and social skills which fill the gaps in everyone's leadership toolbox, and iterated that cycle throughout, we would all have been better. I cannot remember many times it would have felt I had the capacity to do so – as is the case now, everyone is seemingly too busy to dedicate genuine effort to leadership development. Those times do exist though, if we accept that it takes a greater priority than other things which keep us busy. It must.

My plea to every audience I deliver to about leadership – including to the readers of this *Insight* – is for everyone reading or listening to commit to doing something as a result. Pick something you know you could be better at, or a positive leadership trait of a leader you respect that you want to emulate, then learn how to be better at it. Learn it, practice it, make it a new habit, repeat. If even that seems too difficult or complex, the most consistent message I have heard from the many respected leaders I have interacted with is to fall back on being a decent human.

Thank you to the superb team at the CAL for their support, guidance and drive over my time there; your work continues to make our leaders better for the Army and the nation.

Questions:

1. Know yourself. What are the leadership competencies (see the LCF) you know you could improve? Pick one, do something about it, create a new habit, identify the next one, repeat.
2. Know your people. What are the leadership competencies needing development in the leaders you are responsible for? Tell them, help them improve, keep them moving forward.

Resources

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

[Values and Standards of the British Army](#) (2018), AC 64649.

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

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

Goleman D. and Boyatzis R.E., '[Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership](#)', *Harvard Business Review*, 2008.

McChrystal, S., *On Character: choices that Define a Life* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2025).

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² See the upcoming research paper Centre for Army Leadership, *British Army Values: A Contextual Review* (to be published in Summer 2025).