



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

No. 74 – March 2026

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.

Leadership and Cultural Intelligence Reflections on Leading the Gurkhas

Major David Cummings, 250 Gurkha Signal Squadron

When we examine culture and leadership closely, we see that they are two sides of the same coin; neither can really be understood by itself. Edgar Schein (2004).

According to the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) (2021), Army leaders 'must establish an understanding of the environment in which they are operating and the context of the task at hand [...] The art of leadership includes balancing the need to understand the context with the need to act' (ALD 4-02). Leaders must take the time to understand the unique culture and mentality of their team, spend time with individuals, and study group dynamics. Leaders must learn what binds their team together and what motivates them. They must identify the shared values to be able to build a vision that reinforces such values thus creating a strong sense of belonging. Cross-cultural teams – where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds work together – can be challenging because different values, communication styles, and expectations may create tensions, lead to misunderstandings, and reduced cohesion. Leaders need therefore to become culturally aware to navigate this complex environment.

Leadership and Cultural Intelligence in the British Army Context

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is the ability to understand and operate effectively in culturally diverse settings. It goes beyond simply being aware of different cultures and ways of doing things. It involves developing a deep understanding of what such differences mean and what values are at the core of each culture and to identify common traits and behaviours to form an authentic connection across all members of the team and to inspire them effectively. This process takes time, but it is essential for creating a solid base for effective leadership and followership (Crowne, 2008).

The importance of Cultural Intelligence has been recognised in leadership studies, but it carries particular significance within the military context, where teams are often composed of individuals from diverse regional, national, and socio-economic backgrounds. Leaders who are culturally

intelligent build psychological safety, an essential precondition for effective teamwork, while leaders who lack these traits risk creating misunderstandings or inadvertently undermining unit cohesion. Cultural Intelligence also improves the leader's ability to motivate others by enabling them to shape their communication, to set their goals and expectations, and to target their feedback to the unique cultural reality of their teams (Earley and Ang, 2003).

Military sociologists argue that each unit develops its own micro-culture that shapes its identity, norms, and patterns of behaviour (Soeters et al., 2006). Effective military leaders must therefore understand all these cultural dynamics to be able to engage effectively with their teams. When leaders demonstrate genuine interest in the lived experiences, histories, and values of the members of their team, they foster a sense of belonging that strengthens morale and cohesion, which are central components of effective performance. Evidence shows that it is easier to establish trust when members of the team perceive their leaders as respectful, and attuned to their values and cultural context. High levels of trust enable rapid coordination, reduce friction, and support mission command by empowering individuals to act confidently within the commander's intent. In a military context, where motivation is tested under conditions of stress, uncertainty, and risk, these leadership behaviours can be decisive. As argued above, according to the *Army Leadership Doctrine* (ALD, 3-04), it is essential for a leader to know their people, both individually and as a group. They need to understand their ambitions, interests and needs to know how to inspire and motivate them to succeed. This point is further developed in the *Leader Competency Framework* (LCF) and particularly in the *Build Team* section. Although there is no direct reference to Cultural Intelligence in the LCF, it is clear that to be able to achieve the key competencies (Optimises performance, Communicates effectively, and Applies different leadership style), leaders must be culturally intelligent, open to new ideas and intellectually curious. They must be in tune with their teams and with the individual in it and have a developed sense of what motivates, binds them together and inspires them. Leaders must shape the conditions in which their natural qualities can thrive. Leaders must establish a culture in which followers feel they belong to the team, in which trust is the glue that binds the team together and in which responsible challenge is an essential ingredient of high performance (*A British Army Followership Doctrine Note*).

Leaders at every level must cultivate Cultural Intelligence to understand their teams deeply, motivate them authentically, and foster trust that strengthens collective performance. Intellectual curiosity and sustained engagement are not optional leadership behaviours but foundational commitments that enable leaders to build cohesive, resilient, and mission-ready teams.

My Journey Towards Cultural Intelligence

I realised the importance of Cultural Intelligence when I learned that I would be taking command of 250 Gurkha Signal Squadron. As many readers know, the Gurkhas are known for their loyalty and discipline. They are consistently described as among the most disciplined forces in the world. Their key cultural traits are loyalty to the regiment, their comrades, and the Crown. They have strong group cohesion and mutual support, rooted in Nepali village and clan culture, and outstanding discipline derived from both their military training and Nepali cultural norms (Caplan, 1995). The bravery of the Gurkhas is well-documented across two centuries and with numerous military awards.¹

At the outset, I knew little about the Gurkhas. I had watched a few videos on YouTube and read some books, particularly Kailash Limbu's account of his experiences on Op HERRICK (Limbu, 2016). However, as a leader, I felt I had to be fully immersed in this reality to be able to gain a better understanding of their culture and to earn their respect. I spent as much time as I could with my team to contextualise what I had learnt. While it is impossible to summarise the richness of Gurkha culture and ethos in a short piece, for the purpose of this *Insight*, it may be helpful to explain that it was a steep learning curve that allowed me to identify some core ideas to guide me.

One of the first concept I learnt was *Kaida*, the standard of tradition and of professional excellence. It has its root in Nepali village culture and refers to common ethos based on shared values such as trust, respect and community. *Kaida* is more than rules or routines; it is a common understanding of how to live, work, and soldier together. Within it, every individual is bound to the collective, and every action is measured by its impact on the group. It is not an instruction imposed from outside but an internalised principle, kept alive in traditions and shared culture. Over

¹ See [The Gurkhas](#) on the National Army Museum website and the Gurkha Victoria Cross Recipients at [Gurkha Museum Victoria Cross Collection](#).

decades, *Kaida* has allowed the Brigade of Gurkhas to maintain its own cultural identity while playing a key role in the British Armed Forces. As a leader, this meant that my team had already set very high standards for themselves and that my role was to create the right conditions for them to thrive and achieve these goals more than pushing them to do so.

Another important concept unique to the Brigade of Gurkhas is that of *numberies*, a bond between those of the same recruit intake, wherever their careers may take them. Regardless of the unit in which they serve or the rank they attain, *numberies* remain close to each other. This provides a strong support network that is not often visible to external observers, but which is vital.

In terms of behaviours, I learnt three mutually reinforcing ones, coined as my 'three tenets'. The first is *Yo hamro standard ho* (this is our standard). It is a unifying benchmark for the team's expected level of performance. John Parker argues that clear, collectively endorsed standards strengthen cohesion among the Gurkhas because they provide a common reference point for behaviour, discipline, and accountability. In a leadership setting, invoking a shared standard helps align individual actions with collective goals, it reduces ambiguity and it fosters mutual commitment. Thus, *Yo hamro standard ho* acts as a cultural anchor that reinforces group identity and strengthens team cohesion and effectiveness (Parker, 2013). The second is *Hami ek team haun* (we are one team), which means that collective identity is central to the team. Evidence shows that strong shared identity increases cohesion, cooperation, and resilience (Haslam et al. 2020). In the military context, this collective efficacy (the belief that the group can succeed together) significantly enhances performance under pressure. By emphasising that the team operates as a unified whole, leaders help reduce interpersonal barriers, align individual motivations with group goals, and strengthen the trust required for coordinated action (Bandura, 2000). Thus, *Hami ek team haun* serves as a powerful cultural message that binds individuals into a cohesive force capable of meeting complex operational demands. Leaders must therefore be aware of this trait and build on it with purpose. The final is *Deployment ko lai, hami sadhain ready chaun* (for deployment, we are always ready). This is about purpose, collective preparedness, and operational readiness, which directly influence mission success. It reinforces psychological preparedness and collective confidence. The phrase serves not just as a motivational statement but as a cultural commitment to disciplined readiness and professional responsibility across the entire team, which is particularly relevant in the military context (Bartone, 2006). What struck me most was how instinctively the Gurkhas internalised these principles and carried them within.

These ideas echo the [Army Leadership Code](#) and the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#). Leaders must be clear in setting their vision, which must be based on shared standards and values. It is here that *yo hamro standard ho* takes on its real meaning. It is not about impossible perfection, but about setting a shared bar we can all reach together, one that measures worth not by a single outcome, but by consistency, loyalty, discipline, and professionalism. My task as their leader is not to impose unity, but to nurture the one that already exists. To do so, I needed to set a shared purpose, to recognise every soldier's contribution, and to align individual goals in pursuit of our shared mission. In living *hami ek team haun*, the Gurkhas show me that leadership is never about the brilliance of one, but about enabling the strength of all.

For those who may one day have the privilege of commanding a Gurkha unit, I would like to humbly offer three pieces of advice, which I hope will be useful. Firstly, the Gurkhas will not measure you by the jobs you have done, the courses you have taken, or the background you carry. They will look for the authenticity of your leadership. Lead as your true self, with honesty and humility, and you will earn their respect. Secondly, recognise that the Gurkha's drive for perfection is both their gift and their burden. Your job is to channel that drive. Use clarity, purpose, and shared standards to give them support and balance. Finally, never forget that you are not apart from them but among them. Their *kaida* makes unity more than a slogan and it touches all members of the team. It is the golden thread that binds everything they do. As a commander, you must be willing to share in both their triumphs and their disappointments.

My first year in command taught me that leading the Gurkhas is not about managing the best soldiers in the British Army; it is about being shaped by them. The three tenets we live by were not only guideposts for them, but important lessons for me. They showed me that standards must be shared, that strength is born from togetherness, and that purpose is what gives meaning to every effort. My time with the Gurkhas has started a new learning and self-improvement journey and has opened new personal development possibilities and for that I am grateful.

Conclusion

Effective leadership is not defined by authority or decision-making, but by the quality of the relationship between leaders and those they lead. Followership must be understood not as passive compliance, but as the active and willing expression of the Army's values through loyalty, discipline, and selfless commitment. True cohesion arises when leaders and followers recognise their shared responsibility for the team's purpose and standards.

Leadership, therefore, should not seek to impose unity but to create it and to nurture it. Leaders must shape teams where trust is reciprocal, authority is earned, and strength is drawn from the unity of the collective rather than the individual. For leaders to be able to do so, they need to become culturally aware and culturally intelligent. They must immerse themselves in the unit's cultural context and spend time and effort to learn the culture and norms of the group to engage with them meaningfully and effectively. It is a long and rewarding journey.

Questions

1. How effectively do you translate intent and values into clear, shared standards that enable your team to perform confidently and consistently under pressure?
2. To what extent do your actions reinforce collective identity and mutual trust, rather than reliance on individual performance or positional authority?
3. How well do you recognise and manage the human dimension of leadership, particularly the balance between demanding excellence and sustaining moral, emotional, and professional resilience?
4. In what ways does your leadership earn voluntary followership, and how do you assess whether your influence is derived from trust and credibility rather than rank alone?

Resources

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

[A British Army Followership Doctrine Note](#) (2023), AC 72029-1.

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

[Leader Competency Framework](#) (LCF) (2024) AC 72279.

[The Gurkha Museum](#) website.

[The Gurkha Welfare Trust](#) website.

[The Gurkhas](#) on the National Army Museum website.

Bandura, Albert (2000). "Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy". *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9(3), 75–78.

Bartone, Paul. T. (2006). "Resilience under military operational stress: Can leaders influence hardiness?" *Military Psychology*, 18(Suppl.), S131–S148.

Caplan, Lionel (1995). *Warrior Gentlemen: Gurkhas in the Western Imagination*. Berghahn Books.

Crowne, Kerry Anne (2008). "[What Leads to Cultural Intelligence?](#)". *Business Horizons* (September).

Earley, P. Christopher. Ang, Soon. (2003). *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions Across Cultures*. Stanford University Press.

Haslam, S. Alexander., Reicher, Stephen D., and Platow, Michael J. (2020). *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*. Routledge.

Limbu, Kailash (2016). *Gurkha: Better Die Than live a Coward* (Abacus).

Parker, John (2013). *The Gurkhas: The Inside Story of the World's Most Feared Soldiers*, Headline.

Soeters, Joseph., Winslow, Donna. Weibull, Aklise. (2006). "Military culture." In Caforio, Giuseppe (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military*. Springer.

Schein, Edgar H (2004). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd Edition. Wiley.

Warner, Philip (1989). *The Vital Link: The Story of Royal Signals 1945-1985*. Pen & Sword.