



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## Elective Challenge for Junior Commander Development

### A Transformative Process for Individuals and Organisations

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According to the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#), leadership is a blend of character, knowledge and action that inspires others to succeed (ALD, 1-04). Challenge is a critical component of good leadership and followership. We know that junior commanders shape operational effectiveness by providing honest and constructive feedback and by challenging assumptions, and potential mistakes. The [Followership Doctrine Note](#) encourages followers to take on responsible challenge and to offer honest and constructive feedback by challenging assumptions, negative behaviours and potential mistakes. Yet, the Doctrine Note only offers a one-page guideline (Appendix A) on constructive challenge. The Centre for Army Leadership has just released the [Challenge Triangle](#) (also available on the [Army Knowledge Exchange](#) platform). The Triangle is aligned with the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#) and it is based on three key elements (Consequences, Standards, and Values) to offer a practical, values-based tool that is simple and applicable to every rank. It is designed to give all leaders confidence to enforce standards.

This *Insight* expands on the Challenge Triangle and argues that elective challenge can support the organisation as well as personal development. Elective challenge is the decision to push yourself beyond your formal role and comfort zone to accelerate personal development. As this *Insight* demonstrates, elective challenge is transformative for both the individual's development and their contribution to an operationally enhanced organisation.

#### **The Benefits of Elective Challenge**

Psychological theories about mindset growth illuminate why elective challenge is transformative. Carol Dweck's (2016) research distinguishes between fixed mindsets (where abilities are perceived as innate and unchangeable) and growth mindsets (where skills are developed through effort and feedback). Junior commanders who adopt a growth mindset actively pursue tasks beyond their comfort zones, viewing setbacks as learning opportunities rather than reflections of personal inadequacy. Schroder extends this

model by showing that mindsets operate in distinct domains (cognitive, emotional, and personality), so elective challenges tailored to each domain promote holistic leader development (Schroder et al., 2016).

Army institutional culture often discourages proactive initiative. Junior commanders may defer innovation to senior ranks, fearing that unsolicited proposals will be perceived as presumptuous (Cadet, 2023). Impostor syndrome exacerbates this hesitation: concerns about overstepping boundaries or failing publicly can paralyse ambition. Furthermore, without psychological safety (an organisational climate that tolerates mistakes and sees them as learning opportunities) risk avoidance becomes entrenched. In this context, elective challenge is disruptive and serves as both a personal remedy and a cultural signal: when junior commanders undertake visible, voluntary projects, they signal to their peers and superiors that learning through trial is valued and that growth arises from action rather than instruction.

Elective challenge accelerates character formation. Tasks that involve moral risk, such as advocating for unpopular yet necessary changes or assuming responsibility for under-resourced initiatives, show moral courage and humility. Physical and logistical risks, such as leading exercises in adverse conditions or managing time-critical logistical solutions, reinforce self-discipline and resilience. By choosing to confront complexity and ambiguity, junior commanders test their ethical and professional values whilst under pressure, transforming abstract values into lived behaviours that inspire trust and followership.

Knowledge acquisition is equally enriched through elective challenge. Hands-on problem-solving in real-world contexts deepens domain expertise far more rapidly than classroom instruction alone. Junior commanders who organise joint exercises or coordinate inter-regimental support acquire tacit knowledge of planning, resource allocation, and cross-functional collaboration. They learn to anticipate operational constraints, negotiate stakeholder interests, and integrate feedback, a process that builds professional credibility and informs future decision-making.

Action-Centred leadership (Adair, 1979) requires balancing the demands of tasks, teams, and individuals. Electively undertaking challenges in which junior commanders must negotiate limited resources, manage personnel dynamics, and achieve tangible goals provides iterative development opportunities for adaptive leadership. Through these experiences, commanders refine situational awareness, experiment with directive and participative styles, and adjust their communication to diverse audiences (Gallo 2022). This practical soft skill becomes an essential competency when they assume higher command responsibilities, where complexity and uncertainty increase substantially.

Mirroring the *Army Leadership Doctrine*, the more recent *Leader Competency Framework* (LCF) divides these benefits into its three competency domains: what leaders are (character), what leaders know (knowledge), and what leaders do (action). Elective challenges concurrently develop each domain. For example, leading a renovation project tests character through a moral commitment to team welfare, deepens knowledge through budgeting, logistical planning, and stakeholder negotiation, and exercises action through mission-driven execution and collaborative leadership. Such integrated development accelerates progression along the leadership continuum and reinforces the Army's definition of leadership as an enduring, through-career journey.

Junior commanders who electively seek challenge also catalyse cultural change within their units. Their visible engagement in voluntary initiatives models growth mindset behaviours, encouraging peers to propose innovations and experiment with new approaches (Lovich et al., 2025). This creates a positive feedback loop: as followership builds around elective challenges, senior leaders witness the value of devolved initiative and become more inclined to endorse and resource future JNCO-led projects. Over time, this dynamic elevates organisational adaptability and strengthens cohesion.

Moreover, elective challenge fosters psychological safety among subordinates. When commanders openly share their uncertainties, welcome critical feedback, and frame setbacks as opportunities for shared learning, they lower barriers to honest dialogue. This climate enables team members to voice concerns, suggest improvements, and take ownership of solutions, behaviours that are indispensable in operational environments where timely information and streamlined problem identification are imperative.

Therefore, elective challenge transcends the limitations of passive development models. It transforms leadership from a solely role-assigned/rank-based function into a self-propelled journey of experiential learning. By actively seeking stretch opportunities, junior commanders accelerate their mastery of character, knowledge, and action, while reshaping unit cultures to value innovation, resilience, and collective problem-solving. The imperative is clear: voluntary engagement with complexity is not just complementary but central to building the agile, confident leaders the British Army needs.

### **Operationalising Elective Challenge**

A vivid illustration of elective challenge in practice is the revitalisation of the Corporals' club at 24 Commando Regiment Royal Engineers. In March 2021, as an incoming Lance Corporal, I assumed the role of Treasurer for a Corporals Club that had fallen into disrepair. Broken furniture, unreliable utilities, and

diminishing attendance threatened the club's role as a cohesion centre point. Recognising this as an opportunity, a small group of JNCOs embarked on a voluntary renovation project, approaching it as a leadership challenge rather than merely a mess maintenance task.

The project began with a needs assessment rooted in collaborative inquiry. JNCOs were surveyed informally to identify priorities, such as reliable heating, functional seating, and aesthetic improvements. This exercise showcased emotional intelligence in practice: commanders demonstrated empathy, active listening, and inclusion, ensuring all voices were heard and respected. It also signalled the shift from fixed to growth mindsets by soliciting constructive criticism and embracing candid feedback.

Armed with clear requirements, the team drafted a business case exemplifying strategic communication. Costs were itemised, funding gaps quantified, and anticipated returns on investment, measured in morale, retention, cohesion, and regimental heritage, were articulated. Crucially, the proposal translated technical details into language resonant with senior leaders' values, aligning the renovation with broader organisational priorities. When summoned with just five minutes' notice to present to the regional Royal Engineers Association lead, the team's clarity, confidence, and concise narrative secured £10,000 (50 percent more than requested) and subsequent contractor support for permanent fixtures through support from the QM, a senior regimental personality with significant influence.

Execution relied on distributed leadership, particularly in a unit that underwent constant short-notice deployments. Authority was delegated to sub-teams responsible for material procurement, facilities coordination, and design creation, each led by a JNCO whose expertise matched the task at hand. This participative approach tested Adair's action-centred model: sub-teams balanced task completion with team cohesion and individual development (Kitch, 2024). Through experiences such as this, commanders deepened their knowledge of project management, stakeholder engagement, and real-time problem-solving.

The project culminated in the club's renaming in honour of Harry Billinge MBE, a WWII veteran whose legacy resonated deeply with the regimental identity. This symbolic act reinforces the linkage between historical values and contemporary purpose, highlighting visionary leadership. It also generated lasting pride: JNCOs reported elevated ownership, and attendance at reunions and family events surged, demonstrating how elective challenges yield quantifiable improvements in unit cohesion and well-being.

### **How to Make Elective Challenge a Habit**

To encourage other junior commanders to take up new challenges and embed elective challenge into Army culture, the British Army should institutionalise elective challenge through three interlocking mechanisms.

- Structured challenge initiatives can be integrated into garrison cycles. Units should allocate dedicated time, resources, and minimal oversight for JNCO-led projects, ranging from minor infrastructure upgrades to community outreach programmes. By formalising these opportunities, the Army sends an unequivocal message that voluntary initiative is both expected and rewarded.
- Mentorship and reflection frameworks should accompany elective challenges. Pairing volunteer Junior commanders with experienced officers or SNCO mentors ensures that seasoned perspectives guide risk assessments, stakeholder strategies, and after-action insights. Incorporating structured reflective practices, self-assessments, peer feedback, and debriefs, transforms episodic projects into enduring competence gains, reinforcing the growth mindset cycle.<sup>1</sup>
- Recognition and learning cultures must be cultivated. Official commendations, unit awards, or leadership development credits for both successes and instructive failures normalise experimentation. Regular innovation forums, where project teams present case studies and dissect lessons learned, further solidify a culture that views setbacks as integral to progress rather than stigmas. Such forums also facilitate cross-unit knowledge sharing, amplifying the impact of individual projects.

For junior commanders eager to leverage elective challenge, several practical strategies emerge. Adopting a disciplined growth mindset involves deliberate self-reflection: maintaining journals of challenges undertaken, documenting learning points, and setting incremental stretch goals. Seeking stretch assignments beyond one's comfort zone, such as coordinating exercises or leading multimedia projects, provides diverse contexts for skill development. Throughout these endeavours, commanders should model vulnerability, openly sharing uncertainties and lessons to reinforce psychological safety and to embolden subordinates to contribute actively.

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<sup>1</sup> Our Mental Health, Unlock Potential: [Practical steps to develop a growth mindset](#)

Moreover, commanders can harness the LCF's competencies as diagnostic tools. Before embarking on elective challenges, they might map anticipated tasks, team strengths and weaknesses, and individual development needs against the LCF's three domains. This exercise clarifies which competencies will be exercised, including moral courage, professional acumen, adaptive action, and guided learning, such as targeted doctrinal study or shadowing opportunities.

Ultimately, elective challenge is not an optional extra, but the engine that propels through-career leadership; it is ultimately a marathon, not a sprint. Junior commanders who self-initiate demanding, mission-aligned projects accelerate their mastery of core competencies and simultaneously invigorate unit culture. By combining character development with knowledge acquisition and adaptive action, elective challenges produce leaders who are self-aware, credible, and agile.

The case of the 24 Commando Regiment's Corporals club revamp stands as proof of concept. A voluntary effort, born of necessity and ambition, creating tangible enhancements in morale, cohesion, and group identity, while cultivating leaders equipped for higher command tasks. When elective challenge is institutionalised, through structured opportunities, mentorship, and recognition, the entire force stands to benefit from a proliferation of proactive, growth-oriented commanders. (Kjellstrom et al, 2020).

## Conclusions

This *Insight* contributes to the expansion and practical application of the *Challenge Triangle* as it invites junior commanders to deliberately place themselves in situations that demand complex decisions, thereby accelerating their personal development and leadership. Elective challenge should be embraced as a strategic imperative. It transforms junior commanders from passive recipients of directives into architects of their own development and champions of continuous improvement. In a security environment defined by uncertainty and complexity, such leaders are indispensable: they anticipate change, mobilise resources, and inspire collective excellence (Krulak, 1999). Elective challenge is not merely a development tactic; it is the crucible that forges the adaptive, resilient leadership the British Army requires now and into the future.

## Questions:

1. What elective challenges around you could you use to develop your leadership potential?
2. What current tasks could you delegate to develop your followers' leadership potential?
3. How could you change the status quo by electively taking on avoidable but productive challenges?

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