

Leader Development in the US Department of Defense: A Brief Historical Review and Assessment for the Future

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ABSTRACT

Leader development efforts in the US Department of Defense have progressed through a series of paradigmatic stages from the trait theory of the early 20th century, to the behaviorists of the 1950s, to the systems analysts of the 1960s. The 1980s brought the influence of Total Quality, the focus of the 1990s was Principle Centered Leadership, and the leadership/continuous process improvement strategy of the past few years has seen the increased popularity of Lean Six Sigma and Competency Based Models. The current operating environment demands we combine the best aspects of each with new and evolving approaches. Tomorrow's leader development efforts should include:

- Rapid decision making
- Adaptability and flexibility enhancement
- Servant and transformational leadership

It's difficult to generalize about military leadership—as an activity, it's tailored to an organization's context, culture, climate, and character. Leadership in the private sector differs from that in the public sector, and even in the public sector, it varies according to the mission. Leadership exercised at the State Department differs from that exercised at Justice, which is different from the Department of Defense (DoD).

Leadership is different than management. While there are many ways to define both, my personal background leads me to define leadership as the sum of those qualities of intellect, human understanding, and moral character that enables a person to inspire and to control a group of people successfully. Leadership focuses on interpersonal interactions with a purpose of increasing organizational effectiveness. This added emphasis on organizational effectiveness is by way of individual effectiveness.

Management, on the other hand, is a process that results in getting other people to execute prescribed formal duties for organizational goal attainment. As a process, it is focused primarily on efficiency. Both leadership and management are critical organizational functions, and some mistakenly believe that management is somehow inferior to leadership. While these competencies are complementary, this article will focus on leadership.

Many theorists recognize three domains of leadership.

- Physical—This aspect of leadership is the most visible and varies by context of service or function. Certainly for the military, it remains a very important component. One must possess certain physical attributes, such as endurance to be successful. There are other physical attributes, like appearance and presence, that have traditionally been considered essential as well.

- Moral—Without question, this aspect is the most critical in developing leaders. As ADM Stockdale was so fond of saying, character (and morality) is destiny.
- Intellectual—DoD spends the lion’s share of its leader development resources on this aspect, and therefore, it will be the focus here.

A Brief Historical Review

DoD leadership programs have evolved into a combination of internally developed training and education and “borrowed paradigms” from the private sector and academe.

For centuries, historians and philosophers suggested that the best way to impart leadership lessons was through the careful study of those who “got it right.” In 1840, a Scottish historian named Thomas Carlyle introduced “The Great Man Theory” through a book and series of lectures entitled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Carlyle profiled great men throughout history and pointed out certain attributes that, when studied carefully and methodically, could be instructive to aspiring leaders. This approach is found in Plutarch’s *Lives*, a series of biographies of great leaders from the ancient world. Plato’s Philosopher- King, Machiavelli’s Prince, Hobbes’ Sovereign, and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* are all embodiments of perfect leaders observed.

The principal drawback to this thesis is that there’s an implied suggestion that some are simply born to lead. This theory of hereditary dominance has been rightly discarded by modern theorists, although echoes of it are still found in the work of contemporary theorists such as Harvard University’s Howard Gardner, countless biographical historians, and the military. The study of the biographies of Great Captains and their campaigns still dominates the curricula of most major military schools

throughout the world today. However, today this so-called “Great Man Theory” and the Trait Theory of Leadership it spawned have been augmented by other paradigms.

In the early 20th century, behaviorists such as Max Weber, Ralph Stogdill, and Kurt Lewin rejected traits as the basis for explaining leader development and began to define replicable behaviors. This now meant that leadership could be studied, practiced, and mastered. Ohio State conducted an extensive research project shortly after World War II on the leadership of aircrews during the war. The study seemed to confirm the behaviorist approach, and the high consideration/high structure styles at the heart of the behaviorists’ work eventually prevailed in DoD until the late 1950s.

When Robert S. McNamara was appointed Secretary of Defense in 1960, he brought with him a system of statistical inference that he had developed at Harvard University and put to work in the automotive industry in 1959. His task from President Kennedy was to bring efficiencies to the Pentagon and wrest control from stodgy career military officers. He soon applied these statistical processes to all functional domains of the military—to include leadership. Called “systems analysis,” this approach had very mixed results and was seen as a misapplication of engineering models to thoroughly human interactions. Like Great Man Theory, this approach to development still has many adherents in the military today, although it is generally viewed as insufficient in itself. Its greatest legacy may be in the DoD fascination with process improvement strategies somehow sold as leader development programs.

The best example of this from the 1980s was Total Quality Leadership TQL (or Management TQM). W. Edwards Deming was a Yale-educated statistician who helped Japan rebuild its economy after the Second World War. The Japanese were so successful

that by the 1970s the US was scrambling to learn the secret to Japan's meteoric economic rise. Deming's TQL seemed to provide a rational, participative model of management that maximized efficiency and human capital. It was all the rage. Unfortunately, the language of Deming's process improvement advice was not altered to fit military or even public sector scenarios. Many rejected TQL as irrelevant to warfighters.

Since TQL of the 1980s, a number of approaches have been borrowed from the private sector. Steven Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *Principle Centered Leadership* were the personal effectiveness and leader development *du jour* of the 1990s. Lean Six Sigma has been the fascination of the 2000s. Meanwhile, all the previous approaches have retained a place in schools and the operating forces. Typically, they're combined with context-specific, homegrown approaches developed especially for soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, with some services focusing more on the homegrown and some more on the best practices of the private sector.

Assessment for the Future

With all of that as historical backdrop on leader development in the military, it's possible to assess DoD's current landscape and future direction. Much of the leader development program from entry level through the strategic level within the US military is based on the traits and behavior/style approaches popular during the last century with continuous process improvement strategies added for good measure. However, many programs are beginning to focus more squarely on the context of the current operating environment—an environment characterized by volatility, uncertainty, and chaos. In other words, the DoD is building leaders for the "Long War" against radical non-state actors who offset their lack of traditional military power with information technology,

terror tactics, and networked alliances of like-minded extremists. Really effective leader development programs focus on full-spectrum operations that reflect unconventional and conventional environments. Dynamic leadership skills are demanded in such environments. Dynamic leader development programs must be perfected to meet such challenges.

Issue #1 Decision Making: The “Coin of the Realm” in Leader Development

Much attention has been paid lately to the development of intuitive decision making or rapid cognition. Malcolm Gladwell’s wildly popular book “Blink” has direct reference to its application in the military.¹ Rapid cognition, however, relies heavily on instantaneous pattern recognition. Much of a warrior’s time is spent attempting to discern patterns in interpersonal interaction, technical functioning, and tactical interplay. At the entry level, students are only introduced to the rules and standards upon which patterns are established. There can be no realistic hope—except for a particularly talented few—to bypass the stages of cognitive development. Coming to terms with chaos and complexity takes cognitive and attitudinal adjustment. Many warriors simply lack the confidence in their own abilities to make those adjustments quickly. As with all personal development, education and experience combine to create the desired effect. There can be no educational “silver bullet” to obviate the need for seasoning.

Forethought is the precursor to intuition and was identified by Theodore Roosevelt to be the most important quality in preparation for leadership. Forethought, unlike intuition, can be honed exclusively in the classroom. Case study method, discussion, decision gaming, and broad reading all develop this quality. The key is to

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown, Inc. 2005).

replicate the experience desired as closely as possible. Adding stress to the lesson is critical. Learner confidence rises as hypothetical and real-world scenario simulations are introduced, tested, and debriefed. Actual experience cannot be replaced, but adequate forethought can be established. Intuitive decision making is predominantly the product of experience.

Forethought is, on many levels, a precursor to the skills demanded of leaders to make timely, appropriate decisions. And decision making constitutes a key objective of leader development programs. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that decision-making training seminars have had any effect on participants. Those seminars are typically based around selection strategies for choosing from among multiple courses of action. Such analytical methods miss the point entirely. Research has shown that decision makers, particularly those in military settings, “spend more time sizing up the situation than comparing alternate courses of action.”² “Sizing up the situation” is only one function of forethought.

Some of the most convincing research assembled to support this “domain expertise” approach has shown that the key is in teaching students to maximize their experiences, rather than provide them with some form of analytical decision-making matrix. Like the case study method recommended earlier, Decision Skills Training³ experimented with during military training exercises beginning in 1998, provide a generalizable template that could be applied across the levels of professional military education.

² Gary Klein et al, *Training Decision Skills for Urban Warrior Squad Leaders*, Technical Report prepared for Synetics Corp., April 1998.

³ *Ibid.*

Issue #2 Developing Key Traits for Uncertain Environments: Adaptability and Flexibility

While it is evident the current operating environment the military finds itself in calls for skill sets more consistent with the leadership of Lewis and Clark than Patton, the military education and training structure that produced Patton remains virtually unchanged. If the current and future battlefield can be characterized by an uncertain non-uniformed enemy, vague and rapidly changing missions, cultural sensitivity of warfighters, and a chaotic environment, then leadership development models crafted when there was a certain and predictable enemy, set leadership roles, and proscribed methods of fighting must be changed. For example, the *Department of the Navy Objectives for 2006* calls for grooming and properly deploying innovative leaders at all levels. The Chief of Naval Operations' goals include combat capabilities of speed, agility, and adaptability. The Campaign Plans of the Army and Marine Corps are even more specific about the need to develop adaptable leaders. But what does this mean, and how are these concepts brought to reality?

The first step in inculcating a spirit of adaptability is to change how leadership is taught rather than to simply change what is taught. Training that is based solely upon the traditional task/condition/standard model breeds rote conformity. Education that is based solely upon the objective/lecture/assessment model breeds the same. Traditional methods encourage analysis of a challenge and selection of standard solutions drawn from anticipated options. Methods that encourage the synthesis of information include reflective journaling, the Socratic Method, demonstration assessment, broad skim reading, and the study of the philosophical principles that underlie the immediate challenge.

The second step in developing adaptable leaders is to focus on material that encourages creative thinking. Becoming familiar and comfortable with research in the field is critical. From psychology to sociology to military history to philosophy, all fields that explore human response to complexity must be considered. To make this broad grounding feasible, careful selection of instructional techniques and content must be undertaken by all stakeholders in the leadership development process.

Flexibility is typically defined as a personal quality that allows an individual to alter his or her opinions, practices, beliefs, or approach based on changing demands. Flexibility is absolutely essential on the 21st century battlefield as the environment and mission may change constantly. A pre-cursor to the quality of flexibility is open-mindedness. One can not flex to the environment if one is not willing. Many believe it is open-mindedness that is sorely lacking in leaders at every level and in every context. The military is no exception.

Open-mindedness is the personal quality that enables flexibility in practice and can be encouraged, if not developed in the classroom environment. This attribute can be developed at the tactical level in the following ways:

- Creating empathy for those who have gone before (case study)
- Exploring other world views and debating them fully (Socratic method)
- Reviewing credible research in the topic at hand (broad skim reading)

In traditional, structured organizations such as the military, open-mindedness is not often prized as an essential trait. This can be changed by fully debating the position of other, non-traditional, non-Western, and even non-military viewpoints. Adding culture education to the military system is already paying dividends. Confirming its status as a

force multiplier will serve to increase the open mindedness required to thrive in the irregular fight.⁴

All of this empathizing and careful study of other world views need not lead to what is perceived in the military culture as “touchy-feely” or “politically correct” indoctrination. Quite the contrary. Exploring alternative world views typically leads Americans to reconfirm their belief in the underlying principles upon which their Nation, and the military service of it, is founded. A classic point of debate can be built around the three central beliefs in the 21st-century United States:

- Representative democracy holds the greatest promise for rule of law, security, and happiness
- Free market capitalism presents the best hope for opportunity and upward mobility
- Each human being has fundamental worth—a value that guarantees freedom from physical harm or the harmful interference of government

Applying the world views of competitors or adversaries against these three factors of American life serves to confirm faith in the system that uniformed Americans uphold. Proponents of Islamist, communist, anarchist, or fascist ideology argue from a positional disadvantage. Scrutinizing their philosophies and demands serves to confirm the rectitude of honorable military service. It is nearly impossible to confirm that rectitude without a spirited debate involving alternative world views.

The philosophical and pedagogical technique of questioning and testing one’s most basic assumptions has a place in contemporary professional military education.

⁴ Contemporary Marine Corps approach to accomplishing this can be found at <http://www.tecom.usmc.mil/caocl/>.

Instructors need only to be guided through its purpose and method. These methods, however, will vary according to the developmental level of the target audience.

Regardless of the stage of a service member's career, an academic coverage of our own foundational principles vis-à-vis those of our adversaries is time well spent. DoD leader development programs that ignore this do so at their own peril.

Issue #3 What Really Counts: Inspiring young men and women to buy into something bigger than themselves

In the end, rapid decision making and development of particular competencies is balanced with the timeless approaches that define the practice of military leadership—and those are servant leadership and transformational leadership. Servant leadership, as the name suggests, is an approach that encourages a person vested with authority to approach the task with a desire to serve first. Although Robert Greenleaf is credited as the modern author of this approach, leadership based on trust, empathy, collaboration, and the ethical use of power is an ancient concept. Ultimately, this approach is tied up in the character trait of selflessness and resists classroom applications. One simply has to want to lead this way and habituate certain behaviors and attitudes until it becomes natural—it's more challenging for some than it is for others.

Transformational leadership, a term coined by the famous theorist James MacGregor Burns, seeks to raise the level of motivation and morality in organizations. This is done by appealing to more long-term intrinsic needs and less to short-term extrinsic demands. In military settings, this is often bound up in charismatic leadership but does not depend upon it. It depends more on a high degree of competence in interpersonal communications or emotional intelligence. The younger the workforce—and the military represents the youngest workforce in the federal government—the

greater the demand for a leadership approach based on intrinsic motivation and transformational leadership. High turnover and the level of risk involved in executing the mission add to the demand. Some organizations get it right, while some have a proven track record of failure. Morale, esprit, and retention rates are typical metrics for measuring success. I think we're getting better at developing leaders grounded in servant and transformational leadership, and the timing couldn't be more critical. The Millennial Generation seems to have come to expect such leadership.

In sum, the intellectual component of leadership development in the US military is an amalgam of process improvement techniques, decision theory, and competency enhancement, but ultimately it's a matter of leaders committed to selflessly putting the needs and interests of their followers above their own and then effectively communicating that care and concern. No borrowed leadership techniques are going to replace that fact. No highly theoretical management practices are going to change that fact.

Perhaps the best summary of the imperatives of effective leadership comes from a best-selling historical novel called "Gates of Fire" by a former Marine named Steven Pressfield. In it, a character tells the Persians why the Spartan King Leonidas is more effective than their own and, therefore, why the Spartan soldiers are more effective:

A king does not abide within his tent while his men bleed and die upon the field. A king does not dine while his men go hungry, nor sleep when they stand watch upon the wall. A king does not command his men's loyalty through fear nor purchase it with gold; he earns their love by the sweat of his own back and the pains he endures for their sake. That which comprises the harshest burden, a king lifts first and sets down last. A king does not require service of those he leads but provides it to them. He serves them, not they him.

As trite and clichéd as those words may be, they still capture the ultimate truth for aspiring and practicing military leaders. Everything else is secondary.

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Dr. Joseph J. Thomas is the Lakefield Family Foundation Distinguished Military Professor of Leadership at the United States Naval Academy and past Director of the John A. Lejeune Leadership Institute, Marine Corps University. The author of numerous articles on the subjects of command and control, military training and education, and leadership, his published books include, *Leadership Education for Marines* (UMI Press, 2000), *Leadership Embodied* (The US Naval Institute Press, 2005, 2007), *Naval Leadership Capstone* (McGraw-Hill, 2006), and *Leadership Explored* (AcademX, 2007). Joe's education includes an M.S.Sc. from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, a M.S.S. from the US Army War College, and Ph.D. from George Mason University.