



# LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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## Lessons Learnt

By OCdt Christopher Maloney RMAS

I find myself writing this insight at an unusual juncture in my career. Taking the odd opportunity to find twenty minutes to make some notes or write a paragraph, in between the intense flurry of administration going on around me. This is a time all soldiers and officers will recognise as their first five weeks of basic training. I, however, am going through it for a second time, eight years after joining the Army. I make up a small portion of ex-rankers within my intake who have taken the leap into the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in order to take our careers in a new direction. 'Why?', is the question I often receive when I tell people I have worked with previously about the decision I have made. The answer to that question, seemingly becoming more blurred with each room inspection, each lap of the drill square and each almost unfathomable question asked by some of my fellow Officer Cadets. Nonetheless, it is a decision I am glad I have made and an opportunity that I intend to make the most of. My career up until this point has taught me some lessons that I hope will be beneficial to those not only starting their career, but also to those well entrenched in their own. I have been fortunate to have served within two exceptional infantry battalions in my career. In 2010 I joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers and upon amalgamation I moved to

the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Grenadier Guards. While both were light role infantry, both were extremely different places to work. I attended the Section Commanders Battle Course in 2015, promoted to Lance Sergeant and have been a section commander in one of the specialist support platoons within the Grenadier Guards Support Company. So what? My leadership experience is by no means extensive. But working in a Support Company context means that I have a good working knowledge of operating within a sub-unit in an ORBAT that relies much more on effective mission command and delegation.

From my own experiences of leading, being led and observing others, there are three primary lessons that I have learnt and will be taking forward with me. First is adaptability in leadership styles. Second, ensuring that subordinate development is worthwhile and constructive. Finally, I will examine the importance of ensuring that as a leader, your subordinates come first, and just how detrimental an unthinking moment can be. Throughout, I am going to steer clear of Army leadership doctrine and keep this insight as honest as I can, in the hope that at least a small part will encourage thought from those that read it.

### **Adapting your leadership style to the situation**

From lessons received on leadership and articles read in research, there is often a large onus put on differing leadership styles and the need to 'find your own'. There is no doubt that associating oneself to a particular buzzword such as transformational, transactional, autocratic or charismatic will work when in an unchanging environment and that understanding what works best for you is important. However, leadership is as subjective for the leader as it is for the led. What I mean by that is that no two people work the same way, and therefore they can't be led the same way. Finding common ground in order to lead a whole team is essential, as attempting to adapt to every individual is an impossible task. But even then, the beauty of the Army is that we rarely face the same challenge on a day-to-day basis, as such the team can't be led the same way on every occasion. An approach to enthusing soldiers into an activity in camp cannot be dealt with the same way as ordering the digging of a defensive position in poor weather when a platoon is already running close to empty. Sometimes as human beings we need that firm hand to drive us in the right direction. As leaders, we have to be prepared, to be confident enough to be that hand when times are hard,

when our usual leadership style buzzword isn't quite doing the trick; and when empowering those below us to complete a task becomes a much more vital asset.

### **The importance of relevant and challenging development**

This empowerment, and subordinate development, is the second lesson I want to take forward. As leaders it is our responsibility to ensure that we set those whom we lead up for success at every opportunity. Unfortunately, this is often misunderstood and enacted poorly. Passing on a task that you don't want to do, under the thin veil of 'development', does nothing for either party. Development, whether that be personal or professional must be constructive and guided. If a soldier wishes to attend a promotion course, offer to expose them to the process of planning an operation, writing orders, booking training areas or writing a military document. Don't put them in charge of a stores count and call it development. Of course, those kinds of tasks need doing by responsible people, but avoid insulting them by putting the 'development' blanket over it and arguing that such experience will improve their grade on SCBC. Soldiers aren't stupid, they understand how the Army works and they understand the difference between delegation and development. This leads me to my final point.

### **Serving to lead**

The regard in which you hold your team as a leader will be the make or break of any attempts you make to command them. If you command the respect of the team, you command the team and they will follow you. A twitter comment under a video of the current CGS said "It's been decades since this man was my platoon commander, and I would still follow him to the gates of hell". That kind of effect on another person had to be earned. Working hard to instil in yourself the ethos that Field Marshal Slim had when it came to how his officers were putting their soldiers first is one way of earning that respect. The welfare of the individual will prop the team up so take every opportunity to put the needs of the soldier first. This is of course mission and task dependant and as soldiers this is our priority, but welfare of the team must be a close second. Every member of your team will be better than you at at-least one thing, so never be so arrogant as to think that you are the be-all-and-end-all of the task in hand. I have unfortunately witnessed people in positions of leadership make decisions or take actions purely based on their own self inflated image and teams of people suffer as a result. The

effects of actions such as this can have dramatic consequences further down the line. Soldiers terminating flourishing careers because of one poor decision by a commander who simply didn't think about the consequences of his or her actions is all too common, so never be the straw that broke the camel's back.

Ensuring that we adapt our leadership style to the situation is essential to mission success. Certifying that the development we give to subordinates is necessary, structured and relevant. Safeguarding that the need of our soldiers are put first wherever possible, and that we make decisions with their welfare in the forefront of our minds in order to avoid the ripple of negative consequences. I have learnt a lot since joining the Army, but it is those three lessons, taught to me by a long list of exceptional company commanders, platoon commanders, platoon sergeants and section commanders, many of whom I am still lucky enough to be in contact with, that I am going to take forward. I hope that if nothing else, this has served to spark conversation amongst those that have read it, and that the experiences I have had motivates others to reflect on their own and act upon the lessons they have learnt.

### **Questions**

1. Could your workplace environment benefit from your leadership style being more flexible to the situation?
2. Development or delegation, where have you drawn that line?
3. Where would you draw the line when it comes to the boundary between welfare support and over-familiarisation?