

# **Reassessing Army Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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The United States Army should reassess its leadership philosophy, in much the same way that it reconsidered its view of Army Operations with FM 3-0, in order to account for evolutions in our society as well as an increasingly complex and uncertain operating environment for the Army in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the Army's doctrine has certainly matured regarding the subjects of leadership and leader development, with pertinent regulations and field manuals updated within the last two years, the Army has yet to fully account for modern demands on Army leaders, changes in society, and potential improvements in the Army's leadership climate. Despite efforts by Army leaders like General Shinseki to evaluate our leader development programs and subsequently examine Army culture as it effects leadership and leader development<sup>1</sup>, our doctrine and practices remain deeply rooted in historical traditions – heavily biased by relatively sophomoric assumptions about what leadership is and how it is best practiced. We lack critical reflection on the subject – an appreciation of other ways to look at leadership and leader development and an understanding of *why* our doctrine is rather than simply *what* it is. This paper is an attempt to critically examine several aspects of the Army's view on leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and posit recommendations for change to better prepare our Army's leaders for current and future circumstances.

After returning from Iraq and my second deployment in less than three years, I was lucky to get a break as a young major – a chance to catch up with my family, exchange ideas with my peers, reflect on my experiences in the Army over the past ten years, and make sense of all that I had seen, done, learned, and now believed. I spent almost a year, surrounded by my contemporaries – successful mid-grade Army officers with similar backgrounds, comparable but varied recent experiences, and therefore contrasting but complementary ideas about our military profession. We studied at one of the Army's finest intellectual institutions with instructors who

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<sup>1</sup> LTG William M. Steele, "Training and Developing Army Leaders." *Military Review* (July-August 2001): 1.

are experts in their fields – military and civilian alike. Some were academics; some practitioners. Yet all of them taught in a way that encouraged us, the students, to find our own answers – to question our underlying assumptions, consider other perspectives on what we thought we already knew, and work collaboratively rather than competitively toward our learning goals. And while we studied many topics, the subject of leadership was at the core of the entire curriculum.

Most leaders in the Army would be happy to assume I am writing about Intermediate-Level Education at the Command and General Staff School in Fort Leavenworth. Actually, I am writing about my year at West Point in the Eisenhower Leader Development Program (ELDP) as part of the Army's Advanced Civil Schooling (ACS) program. The ELDP is a cooperative effort between the United States Military Academy and Columbia University in New York City that prepares West Point's Tactical Officers for their roles as mentors to thousands of future military leaders. When most people outside of West Point hear about the ELDP, they infer by the name that it is a program intended to develop us, the students, as military leaders. While this is certainly true, it does not explicitly capture what I think is the more significant goal – to make us better developers *of* leaders and ultimately more grounded in the subject of leadership. As I think about leadership in the Army's current operating environment, this distinction becomes more and more important. I learned a great deal about leadership during my year at West Point, not because the program taught me leadership, but because it helped me to make sense of and better understand what I observed, practiced, and experienced as a leader in the Army prior to attending.

Despite recent evolutions in our Army's doctrine on leadership, the Army continues to practice and teach (or not teach) about leadership in the same ways that it has for decades.

Furthermore, I believe most in the Army still fail to grasp the nuances of what *is* leadership, what it means to *develop leaders*, and what it means to *be* a leader. As an example, I wonder how the concept of leadership as a “social construct”<sup>2</sup> would sit with most Army leaders?

My intent is not to disparage the Army’s leadership doctrine, its leaders, or its leader development programs. Nor is my intent to discredit the Command and General Staff School’s leadership curriculum. These institutions, the people, and the programs that promulgate the Army’s ideas on leadership are of the highest caliber – envied, studied, and imitated around the world and in many sectors of life. But they could be better. More importantly, given changes in our society and the increasing complexity of current and future operating environments, they *need* to be better. This is not an effort to fundamentally change the Army’s leadership philosophy. Rather, it is a proposal that the Army needs to reassess its views on leadership to ensure they remain relevant. Additionally, it asserts that the Army needs to better communicate what our leadership philosophy is and how we will inculcate it given our current and future operating environment as a context rather than relying on historical tradition alone. Just as FM 3-0 was a formal recognition of what had already happened in terms of operating environment and the nature of Army operations, the Army needs to do the same with FM 6-22. And as with FM 3-0, this paper does not propose that we replace our previous paradigms – but more appropriately, we must add capabilities, skills and knowledge to them. Finally, the Army should re-examine how its leadership philosophy is communicated across our doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) to ensure consistency in its description, practice, and reinforcement.

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Gemmill and Judith Oakley, "Leadership: An Alienating Social Myth?" *Human Relations* 45/2 (1992): 113-29.

**General:**

FM 6-22 (Army Leadership) provides a rather comprehensive and modern view of leaders (the people and their qualities), leadership (their actions and the process), and related subjects such as counseling and team-building. However, it is incomplete, and its message is not evident in practice throughout the Army. Furthermore, its explanation of leadership is contradicted by descriptions that more accurately define management. Fundamentally, the Army lacks the following: critical reflection as it relates to our assumptions about leadership, appropriate emphasis on leadership as a skill and subject that needs to be continually discussed and developed throughout the Army, and consistency of what we espouse for leadership when looking at our practice, systems, and doctrine across the Army at large.

In general terms, the Army could improve its leadership philosophy through the following four measures: internal discussion and dialogue, external comparison, inculcation and practical application of our adopted leadership philosophy, and a comprehensive review of how leadership is reflected in our systems and doctrine across the Army.

**Discussion:**

First and foremost, we need to encourage better discussion about leadership across the Army. What leadership is, how leaders are developed, and how leaders influence people and organizations are subjects that require an ongoing conversation and almost defy the notion of doctrine. The Army's formal institutions fail to adequately address the subject of leadership as it is currently described in our doctrine, let alone debate the underlying assumptions and consider improvement of our leadership philosophy. Our doctrine implies, just as Sergeant Major of the Army Richard Kidd said, that "Soldiers learn to be good leaders from good leaders."<sup>3</sup> This is

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<sup>3</sup> Department of the Army, *FM 6-22, Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, October 2006), 8-11.

certainly true, and likely one of the best ways to learn about leadership. But it assumes that every Soldier will have a good leader to mentor them. More importantly, it does not recognize the importance of sense-making – a process in which Soldiers learn what leaders should be, observe it, practice it, and reflect upon their practice and observation to turn experience into knowledge. The Army’s leadership philosophy is also heavily laden with traditional biases, primarily because we study ourselves and past military leaders almost exclusively as the basis for improving our current leadership doctrine and education. Thus, we are left with a socially constructed version of Army leadership.<sup>4</sup>

The Army’s leadership philosophy continues to perpetuate several assumptions that hold little credence outside the military today: our hierarchical structure and promotion system imply that age and experience result in greater knowledge and ability – that a senior ranking person is inherently superior to a subordinate; our leadership model tends toward trait theories, emphasizing the significance of the person and things like physical presence over the process and aspects of communication, collaboration and organizational change; our system values current knowledge over continued learning and decision over consensus; and leadership is often described in terms that really equate to management – describing a unilateral influence from the leader to the led, rather than an ongoing interaction that creates a relationship between people.

Discussions of leadership usually move very quickly to the issue of vision - something that many in today’s Army believe is lacking. While most in the Army agree that the leaders they have worked for display the Army Values, demonstrate the leader attributes and competencies, and exhibit impressive levels of competence and knowledge – many argue that something is still missing. The why, the purpose, the intent – or more broadly – the communication of vision is absent, vague, or seemingly insincere. Given the complexity of

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<sup>4</sup> Gemmill and Oakley, 113-129.

today's operating environment, the message has become much more important than the man.

The narrowing distance between strategic vision or intent and personal decision requires leaders at all levels to understand where they are going and why. The Army does not adequately address this reality, relying instead on our own hierarchical organization and disciplined culture to compensate, subsequently losing much of the Army's organic motivation and momentum.

**Comparison:**

The study of leadership in the Army is often more a study of our own military history and biographies of great military leaders than it is an education on leadership itself. While the Army has certainly produced some great leaders and our history shows us numerous examples of strong leadership, our critical examination of the subject usually stalls at the study of people, their characteristics, and their actions – never really getting to how they came to be great leaders or what made their leadership successful beyond them. And so we are left trying to imitate “great men” in our quest to be great leaders. The success of our own future leaders is left to natural selection rather than a deliberate process of making them into effective leaders. We seem oblivious to the fact that self-study alone is deficient in terms of seeking self-improvement. Our culture is one of arrogance and exclusion when it comes to considering others' views on leadership – implying that other “types” of leadership are not appropriate for the military and that our version of leadership is ahead of the curve. In fact, the study of leadership outside the military (and sometimes in the military's “academic circles”) has matured to the point that many of our assumptions about leadership are the intellectual equivalent of saying “the earth is the center of the universe.” We compensate for failings in our system by reinforcing its hierarchical structure and promoting a culture of discipline and obedience. One might ask – is the Army actually better at producing followers than it is leaders? Put another way – how much of the

Army's leadership paradigm is actually dependent on people following? For more on this, you could read Dr. Wong's article entitled *Knowing When to Salute*.<sup>5</sup>

The Army can benefit from critical reflection on leadership that includes some unconventional sources. For example, in the 1920s, Mary Parker Follett presented a unique and insightful view of leadership that today offers an opportune basis of comparison with traditional military models. She believed that people are connected through ever-evolving relationships in which their differences serve as fuel for continuous growth of the individual and the group.<sup>6</sup> She coined the phrase 'power with, rather than power over'.<sup>7</sup> Follett recognized the importance of human relations in organizations long before most others acknowledged it. She emphasized the human aspect of leadership, the importance of conflict resolution and of learning from differences.<sup>8</sup> She asserted that one does not have to be aggressive to be a leader. She described power not as a zero-sum situation where one person can force another to do their will nor where power has to be given up for the other person to be empowered. Instead she described power as being a capability shared by people to do things that increases if they work together. Also, she noted the difference between management and leadership.<sup>9</sup>

Echoing an earlier point, Follett noted that leaders must also have vision. To her, leadership was the same as teaching. She believed in the *Invisible Leader*, which she described as the purpose of the organization. In a speech at Boston University about the teacher-student relationships as an aspect of leadership, in late fall of 1928, Follett said the following: "any consideration of this subject must be colored by our definition of leadership, and there is a

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Leonard Wong and Professor Douglas Lovelace, Jr., "Knowing When to Salute." *Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College* (July 2007): 1-6.

<sup>6</sup> Pauline Graham, *Mary Parker Follett—Prophet of Management: A Celebration of Writings from the 1920s*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1995): 217.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Parker Follett, *Creative Experience* (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1924), 187-193.

<sup>8</sup> Graham, 217.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

conception of leadership gaining ground today very different from our old notion. Yesterday I tried to present to you this conception of leadership. It is a conception very far removed from that of the leader-follower relation. With that conception you had to be either a leader or a learner. Today our thinking is tending less and less to be confined within the boundaries of those alternatives. There is the idea of a reciprocal leadership. There is also the idea of a partnership in following, of following the invisible leader—the common purpose. The relation of the rest of the group to the leader is not a passive one, and I think teachers see this more clearly than most people, and therefore in their teachings are doing more than teaching; they are helping to develop one of the fundamental conceptions of human relations.”<sup>10</sup>

Follett observed that leaders must see the whole situation and identify patterns, leading in more of a cooperative than coercive way, helping their organization toward a collective goal, with an ability to set priorities, focus the team, and organize the experience of the group to meet objectives. In discussing leadership, Mary Parker Follett recognized followership as an understudied discipline. As she put it, followership is “of the utmost importance, but which has been far too little considered, and that’s the part of followers...”<sup>11</sup> In her mind, followers should help the leader maintain control of the situation by communicating problems and failures, telling the truth, and taking bad decisions back to leaders for resolution.

Many in the Army would question what we could possibly learn about leadership from a school teacher writing in the 1920s. But it is interesting to note that Follett’s assertions, while radical and controversial in their time, are widely accepted among those who study leadership today. Yet the Army baulks at such democratic and egalitarian notions of leadership. Should we

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<sup>10</sup> Charles G. Eberly, “The Teacher-Student Relation.” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 15/1 (1970): 137.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Parker Follett, *The Essentials Of Leadership* (London: Management Publications Trust, 1949), 41.

not at least consider the possibilities of such a leadership philosophy in certain situations within the Army?

There are unconventional examples within the military as well. Take Lieutenant Colonel Evans Carlson – the man who led one of the two Marine Raider Battalions in World War II. Carlson based his leadership philosophy on observations he made while accompanying the Chinese Communist Party's 8th Route Army during the 1930s. He promoted a leadership style based on absolute clarity of purpose, the highest of ethical standards, seeking consensus, group sense-making, camaraderie, decentralized decision-making, and initiative.<sup>12</sup>

In an article out of the Marine Corps Gazette, Carlson is quoted: "In war, as in the pursuits for peace, the human element is of prime importance. Human nature is much the same the world over, and human beings everywhere respond to certain fundamental stimuli. So, if men have confidence in their leaders, if they are convinced that the things for which they endure and fight are worthwhile, if they believe the effort they are making contributes definitely to the realization of their objectives, then their efforts will be voluntary, spontaneous, and persistent."<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Carlson's leadership style was controversial – as was his life. The fact that he held such admiration for the Communist Chinese made him suspect in the days of McCarthyism – following his death. Additionally, many in the Army might argue, his style was applied to a relatively small and elite unit. What could the Army as an institution apply from his example?

### **Inculcation and Practice:**

What the Army has improved in many components of its leadership doctrine, it has yet to fully realize in practice. While leadership continues to be inculcated through stories, personal

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Blankfort, *The Big Yankee: The Life of Carlson of the Raiders*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1947).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Dalton, "The Legacy of Evans Carlson." *Marine Corps Gazette* (August 1987).

example, and summary of the subject in doctrine – it lacks thorough education and deliberate practice. It is treated as something that just happens, as the Army operates, rather than something we must discuss and practice. To further complicate matters, the Army does not always practice what we preach; Army leaders do not always epitomize what we espouse. The Army espouses values-based leadership but implies classical management practices through our systems and organization. Because the Army has failed to differentiate the two subjects, most assume that leadership and management are synonymous.

The Army values command decisions over consensus building and perhaps it should most times, but arguably not in all situations. In many ways, the complexity and uncertainty of our modern operating environment has surpassed many of the historical underpinnings for our leadership archetype. Some of our most prolific catch-phrases expose our continued bias: “the staff exists to help the commander make decisions,” “no plan survives first contact,” “a good solution now is better than a great solution later,” and “lead from the front.” These phrases reflect our admiration for decision, the commander’s coup d’oeil or intuition, and heroic leadership. But might there be times when the following are more appropriate: “the commander exists to help the staff (or his/her subordinates) come to a consensus” or “lead by purpose and vision rather than by presence?” Could “no plan survives first contact” be an excuse for poor leadership, allowing us to quickly revert to direct management of the situation? And what if the immediate solution has lasting strategic consequences; perhaps consultation, deliberation and patience have a place in decision. If our appreciation of leadership is to remain relevant in modern times, we must understand and communicate the difference between tactical maneuver decision-making and complex problem-solving.

**Comprehensive Review:**

The Army must ensure that all of its systems, processes, and practices encourage our espoused form(s) of leadership. Of primary concern is the tendency towards management instead of leadership that modern technology brings in increasing real-time situational awareness and improving our ability to communicate. While FM 6-0 asserts that mission command is “the Army’s preferred concept of command and control,”<sup>14</sup> our systems and procedures often show a proclivity towards detailed command, reinforcing real-time management rather than the anticipative leadership.

The following story from the Air Force about a conversation between an A-10 pilot in Kosovo who ends up being the son of Lt Gen Short (16<sup>th</sup> AF Commander at the time) and the FAC highlights just how prone the military is to micro-management as our technology improves:

About 5 o’clock in the afternoon, we had live Predator video of three tanks moving down the road in Serbia and Kosovo. As most of you know, my son is an A-10 pilot, or he was at the time. We had a FAC [Forward Air Controller] overhead and General Clark [Gen. Wesley K. Clark, SACEUR] had the same live Predator video that I had. “Mike, I want you to kill those tanks.” I quickly responded, I had something else in mind, “Boss, I’ll go after that for you.” When shift time came, [Maj. Gen.] Garry Trexler was on the floor, finishing up in the daytime, and Gelwix arrived to take the night shift. I was there because the SACEUR wanted those three tanks killed. We had a weapon school graduate on the phone talking direction to the FAC on the radio. Call went something like this: “A lot of interest in killing those tanks, 421. I’d like you to work on it.” “Roger.” Two or three minutes went by, and 421 clearly had not found those tanks. The young major’s voice went up a bit and said, “ComAirSouth, and SACEUR are real interested in killing

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<sup>14</sup> Department of the Army, *FM 6-0, Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, August 2003), 1-14.

those tanks. Have you got them yet?” “Negative.” About two more minutes went by and the weapons school graduate played his last card. “General Short really wants those tanks killed.” And a voice came back that I’ve heard in my house for the better part of 30 years and he said, “God damn it, Dad, I can’t see the fucking tanks!”<sup>15</sup>

This example shows how, unless we make concerted efforts to reinforce the principles of mission command, we run the risk of contradicting key aspects of a decentralized leadership philosophy. A critical self-assessment would likely conclude that the Army spends a disproportionate amount of time and resources giving commanders the ability to see and know everything that is happening within an organization rather than communicate his or her own intent and understanding to the organization.

There are of course significant improvements in Army leadership to be realized with new technology. An example today is our ability to network people together in collaborative knowledge-sharing ventures like the Battle Command Knowledge System (BCKS) and other communities of practice. Because of systems like the BCKS, people in the Army can now assume a leadership role, in one or more fields or areas of interest, which is outside their formal hierarchical positions – unbounded by rank, geography, or duty assignment. Communities of practice facilitate discussion, learning, and collaboration that negate our bureaucratic systems and transcend the usual boundaries between officer and enlisted, practitioner and academic, or combat arms and support. Members are generally valued for their contributions and demonstrated expertise more than their rank or position. These organizations provide an example of alternative forms of leadership that can (and do) exist within the conventional

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<sup>15</sup> Mustafa R. Koprucu, *The Limits of Decentralized Execution: The Effects of Technology on a Central Airpower Tenet*, SAAS Thesis (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: School for Advanced Airpower Studies, 2001), 71.

military today. Such organizations should be formally incorporated into our leadership doctrine to account for their utility in supporting and improving the Army's leadership climate.

**Conclusion:**

Army leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will likely be characterized by collaboration and cooperation as much as it is direction and decision. In addition to leading others within the Army, we will operate by, with, and through people and organizations outside the Army – civilian, joint, interagency, and multi-national to name a few. Therefore Army leaders must recognize that there are different views on leadership, know how to adjust their own styles and approaches to accommodate those views, and be comfortable working within and around other-than-Army organizations.

What should our leadership philosophy be? Again, this is contingent on what operating environment the Army will face, what roles we will assume, and what outcomes will be expected from us. To agree on this requires a shared vision for our foreseeable future – something the Army is still quite conflicted about despite efforts like the publication of a new FM 3-0. Perhaps this is because, as with many things, the Army's vision is contradicted by observation and practice across the DOTMLPF. Our leadership philosophy should reflect this future vision, describing what Army leadership *should* be to meet our future needs, rather than reasserting what Army leadership *has been* in the past.

The concept of leadership must be understood by its multifaceted and symbiotic nature. It can no longer be thought of as a distinct or concise subject. It is much more than simply the interaction between the leader and the led and relies on much more than the attributes and competencies of the leader to be effective. Leadership must be distinguished from management, in principle and in practice, recognizing that sometimes the people best suited to take on a

leadership role will not be those with the most rank. Our culture should be one that encourages life-long learning, diversification, and continuous self-development as the foundation for leadership rather than deference to authority or rank. Leadership must be considered in an organizational context – as a reciprocal and perpetual process – ideally a collective agreement between people about the purpose they are working towards rather than influence of the leader. It is influenced by culture – multiple aspects of culture beyond just the organization's. It requires an appreciation of adult learning methodologies and organizational change in its education and implementation. It would be more effective if it considered things like differences in personality, group dynamics, and conflict resolution rather than assuming that we are all the same, with rank and hierarchy mediating group work and interpersonal problems. Most importantly, leadership should be viewed in its proper context – with an understanding that what was once effective military leadership may not remain effective in the future, a realization that we are prone to self-fulfilling constructs about leadership that might hamper us in the long-run, and an agreement that to truly be effective military leaders we should extend our knowledge of leadership beyond our profession.

The Army should conduct a thorough reassessment of its leadership philosophy across the DOTMLPF to ensure we have appropriately defined leadership and leader development within our organization and have planned, resourced, and implemented systems to encourage that leadership philosophy throughout the Army. This reassessment must be ruthless in its objectivity, use of multiple perspectives, and open-mindedness to determine whether the Army's leadership philosophy is actually as good as it can be, or just a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Army should work less to differentiate its own particular leadership philosophy and instead try to educate its people on the subject of leadership in a broader sense. We should incorporate the

realities of our current operating environment with an appreciation for leadership in a civilian, joint, interagency, and/or multi-national context at all echelons.