Strategic Leadership Education

Air Commodore Peter W Gray¹
&
Jonathan Harvey²

Defence Leadership and Management Centre
Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

‘Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth’³.

Despite the plethora of works published on leadership, the truth behind Burns’ statement remains extant today. Trying to grasp the basics, let alone the subtleties, of leadership is made all the more complex by virtue of everyone having a view on the subject. The more senior the officer – or civil servant – the more convinced they are that their perceptions are the most authoritative. Strategic Leadership education is further bedevilled by the reluctance of many to accept that leadership education is a lifelong journey through which we all can learn. The well known precept that leadership can be learned – but not taught – should be taken as a given in this process. In the ideal world, officers, warrant officers, senior non-commissioned officers and the troops would embark on a coherent thread of leadership development that would see them through their careers. If anything, this perfect process is actually impeded by initiatives and well-meaning bright ideas.

The challenge is made all the greater as the single-Services remain, very properly, determined to mould their young officers and new recruits and instil them with the ethos of their profession. The appropriate level at which a joint, or purple, organisation can be allowed to work on the attitudes, values and beliefs of service personnel and officials is problematic to say the least. All that said, the traditional approach to leadership education and development across the three Services in the United Kingdom shows more in common than any radical diversions.

Leadership Development in an Historical Context

A historical review of leadership development is inevitably plagued by the difficulty of knowing when to start! It is also challenging to apply contemporary notions of leadership education in an earlier context where the common vocabulary differed markedly; this is often compounded by a reluctance to commit views to the files that would end up in archives. One can accept a general progression from the Ancients with glib quotations from Plato into manifestations of Great Man Theory from Alexander the Great onwards⁴. It would, however, be more meaningful from a British perspective, but controversially from a Commonwealth view point, to start at the beginning of the 20th Century and the experience of the Great War.

¹ Air Commodore Gray is the Director of the Defence Leadership and Management Centre – part of the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom.
² Jonathan Harvey is the Senior Research Analyst within the Defence Leadership and Management Centre.
In his work ‘Leadership in the Trenches’, Professor Gary Sheffield highlights the generally low standard of education, health and social standing of the average soldier – who had probably joined under ‘the compulsion of hunger’. The officer cadre had traditionally been taken from families with military tradition in their lineage, the landed gentry, the peerage and, to a lesser extent from the professions and the clergy. Their educational pedigree was entirely predictable – they had all attended the better known public schools (it should be noted for those not familiar with British nomenclature that a public school is one that charges fees – state schools do not). Leadership was effectively learned on the playing fields of these establishments or in the routine business of managing one’s estate and seeing to the well-being of one’s workers. Professor Sheffield confirms what most contemporary readers would intuitively infer, that inter-rank relations within Dominion formations were looser and more informal. Not surprisingly, the casualty rates of the early years of World War I had a serious effect of this traditional source of supply and the British Army had to look elsewhere. As the War progressed, greater numbers of men were commissioned from the ranks and officers were recruited from a wider cross-section of society. Ironically, greater numbers of those from the middle-classes also swelled the other-ranks. As Sheffield points out, the balance between paternalism and harsh discipline was more-or-less maintained, albeit that the influx of thinking men into the ranks tended to mean that the harshness was less appropriate.

The end of the War, and ensuing demobilisations, brought about an entirely predictable return to the old ways until the Second World War required the whole to be revisited. Again the shortage of suitable candidates for officer cadet training was identified. With failure rates through Officer Cadet Training Units as high as 50%, the British Army set about trying to identify a scientific methodology by which officers could be selected on the basis of their leadership potential – rather than just by interview. By 1945, the War Office Selection Board processes had matured to the point that they were being adopted by the other Services and into wider organisations where leadership potential was critical. The team looked at leadership in many guises, but they identified, as a recurring theme, that the leadership function could be looked at in three important aspects – the team, the individual and task. Leadership was therefore a functional relationship between these three basic variables.

The evident success of the testing regime, at least in the Army and the Royal Air Force, was such that it was left in place after the end of the War, and indeed remains the foundation for testing in the Services today. Leadership education tended remain relatively in the doldrums with inevitable reliance on the Ancients and Great man theory. Although the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst (RMAS) and the Britannia Royal Naval College at Dartmouth (BRNC) had full academic departments, the RAF College at Cranwell did not. The mould was broken in the mid-sixties with the research carried out by Dr John Adair who developed the principles that underpinned the testing into a comprehensive theory of functional leadership. Adair has subsequently published widely on the basis of functional leadership with the three variables of team, task and individual

---

6 Sheffield, ibid, page 1.
7 Sheffield, ibid, page 166.
8 Sheffield, ibid, page 178.
10 Harris, ibid, page 19.
needs being represented in a Venn diagram with the size of each circle depending on the context at hand. From a training perspective, Adair broke down the functions further into setting objectives, briefing, planning, controlling, informing, supporting and reviewing. This methodology allowed for cadets, from all three Services, to analyse their performance in a range of exercises not dissimilar to those originally envisaged for the testing arena. The Adair approach is in use today in a wide variety of institutions and organisations. Interestingly, it is not widely cited with, for example, only one reference to Adair and action-centred leadership in Bass & Stogdill.12

This throws up an interesting divergence within leadership theorists with separate camps being occupied by the behavioural psychologists, sociologists, military historians and the business school world. Presumably this could easily be reflected in an appropriate two-by-two! Suffice it to say, the behavioural psychologists do not consider there to have been sufficient methodological rigour in Adair’s work for it to be relevant. Adair himself, is absolutely unabashed stating, in several discussions with authors, that his work has more than stood the test of time.13

The end of the Cold War (which seems to get the blame for a lot of things) coincided, in the UK at least, with a desire to make as many institutions joint as possible. The individual Services balked at any notion of combining initial officer training but eventually acceded to a Joint Command and Staff College with the Advanced and Higher courses being truly purple. These have been running successfully for some 9 years. With increasing emphasis of deployed operations, and the need to be able to operate within combined operations centres, has seen the emphasis shift to operational art, campaign planning and the generations of skills necessary to function as a component commander – or member of his staff.14 The concomitant decline in traditional staff skills came at a time when a number of studies – including across government – were concluding that inadequate provision was being made in the field of public sector management and strategic leadership.

The Formation of the Defence Leadership Centre

Following the election of the Labour government in 1997, the Modernising Government initiative of the Prime Minister (White Paper 1999) sought to examine the role of the public services. As part of this process, the role of leadership in the public services came under scrutiny resulting in the establishment of a number of centres with the mandate to develop leadership within their respective sectors. This included centres for the National Health Service and Higher Education. The Defence Training Review (DTR) recognised that “operational leadership skills are amongst the Armed Forces’ most valuable assets” and that those demonstrated on recent operations were “acknowledged as being amongst the best in the world” it nevertheless recognised the need to “meet the demand for improved leadership skills”. Further clarifying work led to Ministers’ agreement to the establishment of the Defence Leadership Centre (DLC) in 2002 as part of the wider Defence Academy.

13 See the article by Sue Weeks, ‘Professor versus Professor’, Edge, the Journal of the Institute of Leadership and Management, Sep 2005, pages 24 – 27 in which Adair debates the state of leadership education in the United Kingdom with Professor Keith Grint (formerly of the Universities of Oxford and Lancaster who takes up the Chair of Defence Leadership with Cranfield University with the Defence Leadership & Management Centre at Shrivenham!
14 One of the authors, Air Commodore Peter Gray, was Assistant Director of the 2001 Higher Command and Staff Course and is a graduate of the programme.
Defence Context

The view held within defence and endorsed by the DTR is that through our range of training and development opportunities in both the single service and joint environments we equip our military leaders to lead in operations with a high degree of effectiveness. The challenge that we face is that for much of an individual’s career (both military and civilian) their leadership will be tested in non-operational roles. What has been termed ‘The Business Space’ (in contrast to ‘The Battle Space’). Whilst one might take issue with the terms, arguing that perhaps equipment development / acquisition for example is simply a less immediate form of Battle Space, particularly if you consider where the consequences of failure to deliver may be felt, the distinction serves to illustrate the need to consider the leadership roles that military and civilian leaders in the business of defence.

Within UK Defence, as with many organisations, the move into strategic leadership is a critical one. From the perspective of the individual this may be the first time in their career that they have had to take a view beyond their particular service or perhaps specialism. This transition should not be underestimated in terms of the challenges that result. From a career that to date has focussed on perhaps regimental or specialist skills provision to embracing the broader issues for defence is a step change in perspective. The challenge of setting and selling the future direction of the organisation beyond single-Service aspirations undoubtedly will result in difficult decisions and conflicts of interest.

The suggestion is that the development of an officer’s career in which the focus is on the operational is insufficient to equip them for the wider challenges that are likely to be faced at the strategic level of defence. From the perspective of the civil service, a career that has been characterised by the ability to develop and implement policy, effectively run the administrative functions of defence is also an insufficient basis for addressing the organisational challenges that present at the strategic level. In both cases the demands of operating on defence boards and executive committees provides a number of challenges.

It is clear that Defence has an obligation in the light of the seriousness of the challenges facing those at the strategic level of defence to provide the language, concepts and skills that equip them to deliver the strategic role. The challenges in the business of defence are significant and should not be underestimated, specific consideration therefore of the development needs of these individuals lie at the heart of the Defence Leadership and Management Centre (DLMC).

Whilst there is a general acceptance of the need to support senior staff in the delivery of the strategic role there is less of a consensus on the detail of what should be developed. Often the expression is of the need to ‘improve leadership’ which on closer inspection may lead to a wide variety of development and structural / organisational issues, after all leadership development should not be seen as a panacea for all ills. Indeed the development of the leadership centre into a leadership and management centre reflects the holistic approach being advocated by the Academy. Indeed it is entirely possible on closer examination that the barriers to success at a particular level lay in organisational or structural failings, not leadership or management deficits.

Mission

The DLC was established in 2002 with the remit to ‘improve leadership in defence,’ ‘at the strategic level’ and ‘beyond the domain of war-fighting’.
The strategic level was defined in terms of rank (One Star and above) with the single services and civil service retaining responsibility for leadership development up to that point. This reflected the desire of the single-Services to retain their particular leadership culture and context in the development of officers with the civil service utilising its existing development tracks.

The initial task of the DLC was the establishment of a Strategic Leadership Programme for newly appointed One Star Officers or Senior Civil Servants that would run four times a year capturing the average annual appointment to that level. Key stakeholders in this Programme were the Vice Chief of Defence Staff, the 2nd Permanent Undersecretary of Defence and the Director of the Defence Academy. The DLC was also tasked with providing definitions of Command, Leadership and Management.

1 Star survey

The initial challenge in this undertaking was to ask what it is that we mean by strategic leadership in UK Defence. Unless we could articulate a view of leadership that was broadly recognisable by those at the Strategic level of defence and presented in such a way that a programme could be built around it then the achievement of our first objective, the establishment of the one star course, would be extremely difficult to say the least.

This resulted in a piece if research that involved a survey of the entire one star population of UK Defence with the aim of establishing how that population viewed the nature of leadership at the strategic level. The survey was followed by a series of in-depth interviews with a sample of that population using repertory grid and critical incident methodology.

Development of helix model

A literature review was undertaken in order to understand the evolution of leadership theory underpinning contemporary thought in order to inform judgments on the validity of current leadership definitions and models. On the assumption, supported by the literature, that leadership is culturally contextual a survey was undertaken of thirteen UK based organisations across Defence, the wider Civil Service, the public sector, the private sector and academia. The US Army was included as a fourteenth organisation in order to broaden the sample, however it remained within a separate cultural cluster and military context. The attributes, qualities, competencies, values and actions ascribed to by these organisations where compared and analysed to extract the most frequently cited attributes. This produced a model of six broadly clustered attributes; Integrity, Vision, Communication, Decision Taking, Innovation, and Focussed on Development. In order to reflect both ancient and modern thinking on ideals of leadership excellence, Humility was included despite scoring poorly.

Following compilation of the initial survey results, a facilitated 'stakeholder' workshop was held for four senior people, representing the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force Boards and the MOD Civil Service, to consider what outcomes they would seek in a

16 Attribute was adopted as the most appropriate generic term embracing the different descriptors used across the fourteen organisations surveyed.
Strategic Leadership Programme. This event endorsed the attributes identified and highlighted the (perceived) importance of professional knowledge and a thorough understanding of the environment in which senior leaders operate. It led to the addition of ‘Professional Knowledge’ to the model, to ensure it fulfilled their aspirations. The resulting model is represented in Figure 1. The representation of the DNA double helix was used to illustrate the model as it represents the manner in which the attributes combine to create the unique leadership of an individual. The hydrogen bonds that hold the helix together represent self-awareness underpinning the development of effective leadership. The question mark represents the uniqueness of the individual.

Definitions

Given the abundance of writing on the subject of leadership and management, the wide variety of definitions and the requirement to provide definitions for UK Defence this rather daunting task was undertaken with a very clear view to the context in which leaders must operate in the UK. They are presented here for reference, not as a statement that we have the definitive answer!

*Command is a position of authority and responsibility to which military men and women are legally appointed.* Leadership and management are the key components to the successful exercise of Command. Successful management is readily measured against objective criteria but commanders are not leaders until their position has been ratified in the hearts and minds of those they command. © DLC

*Leadership is visionary; it is the projection of personality and character to inspire the team to achieve the desired outcome.* There is no prescription for leadership and no prescribed style of leader. Leadership is a combination of example, persuasion and compulsion dependent on the situation. It should aim to transform and be underpinned by individual skills and an enabling ethos. The successful leader is an individual who understands him/herself, the organisation,
the environment in which they operate and the people that they are privileged to lead. © DLC

*Management is the allocation and control of resources (human, material and financial) to achieve objectives, often within the constraints of time. Management requires the capability to deploy a range of techniques and skills to enhance and facilitate the planning, organization and execution of the business*. © DLC

**Development of the Defence Strategic Leadership Programme (DSLP)**

The development of the (DSLP) followed from the initial work outlined above. The helix model provided for a framework of attributes around which to build a programme. The approach adopted was not to seek to produce a training package, rather to provide a forum for experienced leaders to reflect on their leadership, the challenges of the strategic level and contemporary leadership thinking. The underling theme of the programme was to be one of self awareness and the importance of developing that critical capacity as a vehicle for personal development. For many delegates this would be the first time in many years, if indeed ever, that they had experienced this approach to development. There was to be no reporting on or assessment of delegates. The structure of the programme was to be a one week residential phase followed by a number of electives.

As a support to the development of self awareness a number of psychological tools were identified, the use of 360 degree feedback was endorsed and the use of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (a personality type tool) and the Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument were adopted. The 360 tool was a bespoke instrument built around the leadership attributes of the helix model.

A great deal of consideration was given to the mechanisms for delivering this element of the programme. The use of psychological tools, particularly 360 was not common in the UK military and there was some resistance to the proposal. These concerns were mitigated by using a third party organisation to administer, report and feedback the results of the instruments, effectively ring fencing the process from any defence involvement. The sole intention in this process is to provide the individual with information.

Discussion of the application and value of self awareness approaches and the individual feedback of results forms the initial phase of the DSLP providing the foundation for the subsequent sessions that explore issues such as Contemporary Leadership Paradigms, Ethics, Leading Change, Leadership Derailment, Strategy, Followership and the Psychophysiology of leadership. In addition a day is spent with executives from an organisation outside of defence exploring the strategic challenges that impact both.

The programme includes presentations from both civilian and military four star members of the Defence Management Board (current and recently retired) to provide insight into the strategic challenges faced at the very highest levels of defence. The ongoing commitment of these individuals has proved invaluable in demonstrating the importance that is attached to the programme.

Following the week residential portion of the programme a series of electives are available to alumni over the subsequent eighteen months. The nature of these electives cover a wide range areas typically over one or two days duration. They include areas such as negotiation skills, working with the media, application of coaching skills, corporate
governance, board membership etc. They are made up of bespoke courses and public access programmes and where necessary the centre will design, commission or source an elective to meet a particular individuals needs.

Recent developments to the programme have seen the option of a further coaching session with the same facilitator from the residential phase 6-8 weeks after completing the residential component. The aim is to provide the opportunity and focus for reflection on the implementation and embedding of learning / insight from the residential phase.

Growth into the DLMC

As the DLC developed the DSLP and associated electives the need to provide for the range of executive development need became increasingly self evident. This gave rise to the expansion of the DLC into the DLMC in 2004. This involved the recruitment of staff to mirror those dedicated to leadership development and in addition incorporated the existing Defence School Financial Management. This has had the effect of creating a broad organisation with a remit to provide executive education across the range of leadership and management themes. Within this is consideration of the term strategic as a function of role rather than as a function of rank. That is, recognising that there are those below the rank of one star who nevertheless occupy strategic roles.

Whilst the DSLP is undoubtedly the flagship programme of the DLMC the engagement of this group of leaders in defence and the growing profile of the organisation has resulted in a wider range of activities being undertaken. This has include the provision of advice and support to other defence organisations in the development of training and support initiatives and a range of specific interventions including the following.

Masterclasses

A programme of masterclasses for two and three star leaders in defence responsible for major change programmes. These are designed to provide a vehicle for discussion on issues such as risk, benefits realisation, governance and leading as a single point of accountability on large change or acquisition programmes.

Defence Leadership Network (DLN)

The DLN is a regular forum for those involved and interested in leadership development in defence and the wider public services plus invited guests from voluntary organisations and the private sector. A theme is adopted for each network event (up to three a year) with invited speakers presenting different perspectives on that theme. The objective is to expose delegates to a wide range of contemporary issues that have utility in leadership development whilst providing an opportunity for exchange of ideas and experiences. Recent events have covered themes such as Ethics, Leadership Derailment, Change Leadership and the Physiology of Leadership.

Executive Coaching

The DLMC is the focus point in defence for executive coaching, building contacts and relationships with individuals and organisations providing coaching services and facilitating the provision of coaching for those senior leaders in defence who wish to explore its utility in enhancing performance.
Coaching Network

The coaching network is a forum for those in defence involved in training and development to discuss the application of coaching and coaching techniques. This forum whilst in its early stages has addressed issues of developing common understanding of terms and techniques and challenges in demonstrating utility.

Board Development

This has involved the DLMC identifying appropriate board level diagnostics and interventions reflecting the unique nature of boards in the defence context. Allied to this has been the process of identifying appropriate sources of support to deliver agreed interventions.

Introduction of Academic Staff on a long term Contract

The Defence Academy of the UK has entered into a long term contract for the provision of academic services to the Defence College of Management and Technology of which the DLMC is a part. In practice this means the introduction of a Professor of Leadership, a Senior Lecturer in Management and a Senior Lecturer in Leadership to commence in October 2006. All these appointments are to be research active contributing to the evidence based underpinning of the DLMC output. It is anticipated that this will include doctoral level research students that will yet further enhance the research base of the DLMC.

Challenges

As the DLMC develops there are a number of challenges that we must embrace as we continue to improve the delivery of our service. As with many aspects of development one of the principle challenges lies in the linking of theory to practice. By nature, the armed services have an action orientation and a limited attention span for theory. It is incumbent on the Centre therefore to seek to provide the bridge between the academic and the applied, to translate the theoretical and research base into development opportunities that our population will engage with. The development of the DLMC to include subject matter experts is part of this continuum.

Every year, we are told that financial resources are tighter than ever. We have every reason to believe this to be the case for the next two years. Here we have a classic Catch 22 situation in which we need to invest in the education of our people at the highest levels if we are to make best use of the resources. And yet we are constrained ourselves in terms of people and money. Nor are we any different from the rest of Defence – or indeed rest of the public sector. The critical challenge therefore, is to design, and implement, a coherent suite of educational and training offerings aimed at targeting the most urgent needs of leaders and decision makers at the higher levels of defence. We are increasingly confident that our aim is increasingly accurate and the effects of the interventions both relevant and beneficial.

We are also confident that our blend of original research, distilled reasoning and pragmatic approach to learning are paying dividends beyond the immediate remit. Organising events through the Leadership (and Management networks); upcoming major conferences and participating in a range of network events in the public and private sectors have had a disproportionate impact on target audiences.