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Design and the Prospects for Deviant Leadership

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As a follow on to the short essay, “Design and the Prospects of a US Military Renaissance,” (published in Small Wars Journal in May 2010¹), it is also important to pay some attention to the potential impact of design philosophy on the institutionalization of leadership – rephrased, what is the “ideal” leadership model in the context of military design science? Several authors have attempted to reconceptualize organizational leadership to a postpositivist view (postpositivism is the underlying philosophical paradigm shift associated with “design”).² The purpose here is to summarize postpositivist views of leadership by three noteworthy authors that are arguably very important to the design mindset: Ron Heifetz of Harvard University, USA; Donna Ladkin of Cranfield University, UK; and, Keith Grint of Warwick University (and formerly of the Defence Academy), UK. This essay will explore the impacts of postpositivist leadership defined by these authors in the context of military approaches to design.

Heifetz’s View: Leadership as Deviance

Interestingly, Ron Heifetz, in his 1994 book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, does not use any version of the word “follower” throughout his 348 pages of text. His thesis is that leaders help others lead themselves through difficult, complex, and even life-threatening circumstances (leaders beget self-leaders). His principal argument is that leadership is *adaptive work* that occurs where technical definitions and solutions are not available. The implications are clear for the military: if you and your troops are not dealing in adaptive work when faced with unique, novel, and complex situations, you are engaged in something else other than leadership. According to Heifetz, adaptive work involves influencing others away from reliance on *authoritative response*.³ An undesirable feature of the more traditional way of framing leadership is that it creates inappropriate dependencies where others are not motivated to discover or create solutions because they rely on the leader to do it for them. In other words, the traditional (culturally, habit-forming) view is that leadership is a kind of technology that troops depend on as a source for authoritative response. This dependency is a constraint when adaptivity is needed.

Heifetz’s alternative view challenges the values, attitudes, and habits that comprise the military’s proclivity to see leadership as a socially-acceptable form of follower dependency. Heifetz argues that the preferred purpose of leadership is to *lessen* dependence, promoting a more decentralized adaptivity in individuals, groups and, organizations when faced with novel,

¹ See <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/05/design-and-the-prospects-of-a/>

² Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (BasicBooks, 1983). Schön, one of the founders of the “design school,” speaks to the “dominant epistemology of practice” (associated with positivism) which he argues is plaguing professions. He calls for a postpositivist approach to knowledge that he describes as “reflective practice.”

³ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1994), p. 72. Authoritative response is another name for technical work (fixing definable problems with available solutions).

highly complex, and ambiguous situations. Instead of authoritative response being the currency of leadership, reorienting the attention of others on *creative deviance* (or what others have called “craftwork”⁴) becomes the important aspect of leaders’ work. “Leading without authority” displaces the authoritative-technical mindset.⁵ From this view, leadership is provocative in nature – spurring the debate while not resolving it (“with no heat, nothing cooks”).⁶ In Heifetz’s terms, “A sense of purpose is not the same as a clearly defined purpose,”⁷ and the former (purposeful sensibility) is more efficacious than the traditional norm – that leaders are supposed to provide clarity of purpose. While the difference may be subtle, on deeper reflection, his argument reflects the worldview shift demanded by postpositivism (leadership draws attention to the unsurely) from positivism (where leadership is expected to provide surety).⁸

Figure 1 is a “militarized” version Heifetz’s situational typology developed by the present author.⁹ Note the continuum between technical work (associated with “Type I” situations) and adaptive work (with Type “III” situations). In Type I situations, it is possible for the officer or noncommissioned officer (NCO) to employ rational-analytic decision-making models (e.g., the US Marine Corps’ Decision Making Process or the US Army’s Military Decision-Making

| Situation | Problem definition | Courses of Action | Primary locus of responsibility for the tasks | Kind of Tasks |
|---|---------------------------|--------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| TYPE I (positivism works) | Clear | Clear | Officer/NCO | Technical/ doctrinal |
| TYPE II | Clear | Requires Learning | Officer/NCO & Troops | Technical/doctrinal and adaptive |
| TYPE III (positivism doesn’t work) | Requires Learning | Requires Learning | Troops > Officers/NCOs | Adaptive (craftwork) |

Figure 1. Situational Typology (adapted from Heifetz, p. 76).

⁴ Such as: Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay* (3d ed.) (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1972); and, the close resemblance of “practical drift” coined by Scott A. Snook, *Friendly Fire: The Accidental Shootdown of US Blackhawks over Northern Iraq* (NJ: Princeton University, 2000).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁸ See my previous argument in a May 2008 SWJ article, *FM 3-0: Operations on the Cusp of Postpositivism*, at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/05/fm-30-operations-on-the-cusp-o/>.

⁹ Heifetz, p. 76. The present author indeed took liberties with Heifetz’s table in his book that used his frame (physician-patient) instead of “Officer/ NCO-Troops.” Where he had Solution/Implementation, this author substituted “courses of action. This writer also substituted “tasks” for his word, “work,” added the term “craftwork,” and linked “doctrine” to technical tasks. In spite of these liberties to serve the military context, this figure still presents the main ideas of his typology.

Process or Troop Leading Procedure) to define the problem and find the best course of action.

Type II situations may offer clarity in problem definition while operational approaches are undeterminable -- they call for critical inquiry, knowledge creation, and contextual development. Type III situations defy both problem identification and the quest for preplanned courses of action. As we move along the scale from Type I to Type III, authoritative direction shifts from those in organizational positions of authority to a more dispersed power arrangement to the “troops” as they craft ways to immerse themselves in the situation to learn more and more (i.e. they creatively deviate from attempts for centralized approaches called theater strategies or campaign plans).

The current author speculates that “design space” is seated somewhere between Heifetzian Type II and Type III situations that involve more adaptive than technical approaches. Adaptive tasks require the emergence of craftwork (open to aesthetic-, get-a-feel-for-, or tacit-learning), and less so doctrinal theories of action and set methods of assembling knowledge (such as those premade authoritative responses focused on learning the knowable-knowns through analyses and intelligence collection plans). This differentiation again highlights the postpositivist (“Humbly, I may have to act to creatively deviate from known-knowns”) from the positivist (“I know authoritatively what we must do”) leadership epistemologies.

To create situations for honest and open dialogue (required by the Heifetzian postpositivist epistemology where knowledge creation is characterized as creative deviance), commanders and others in hierarchical authority must guard their emotional reaction from being annoyed by adaptive leaders. Creative deviance can come across as insubordination characterized by uncomfortable forms of professional questioning of authoritative response. However, particularly in Type III situations, “Deviant may become the best source of leadership.”¹⁰

In irregular warfare settings (which may be characterized more as Type III situations), traditional, top-down views of command and control (the military institutional form of authoritative response) may be inappropriate. The proposition of an *inverted campaign* may serve the shared sense of purpose with troops-in-the-field who are acting, adapting, crafting, and being inventive about their learning about what constitutes security and stability operations (i.e. they engage in creative deviance). Traditional forms of campaign planning (higher headquarters top-down efforts to link and orchestrate tasks among subordinates) may actually squelch the necessarily unique learning strategies going on in smaller unit areas of operation (termed by the present author as “island communities of action-learning”) (Figure 2).¹¹ From this viewpoint, “design” at the island-community level better serves the more *emergent* war effort than attempts to integrate design efforts at the traditional authoritative theater-level headquarters. Adaptive (deviant!) leadership is dispersed, linked primarily by common values and sense of purpose. Instead of directing operations, those in senior positions would instead seek to foster support to these diverse and disperse island-communities of action-learning; for example, helping security,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 271.

¹¹ The present writer borrows the term “island communities” from Robert Wiebe’s book, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (Canada: HarperCollins, 1967) in which he uses that metaphor to describe the relative isolation of social communities in the United States that only began to interconnect as roads, railroads, and other forms of electronic communications began to flourish. The concept of “island communities” may especially well describe post-colonial factious states (i.e. the social interconnectedness of communities has not flourished like it did in the United States).

transition, and reconstruction troops “out there” to be reflective on their actions that seem to be working in the unique context they are situated.

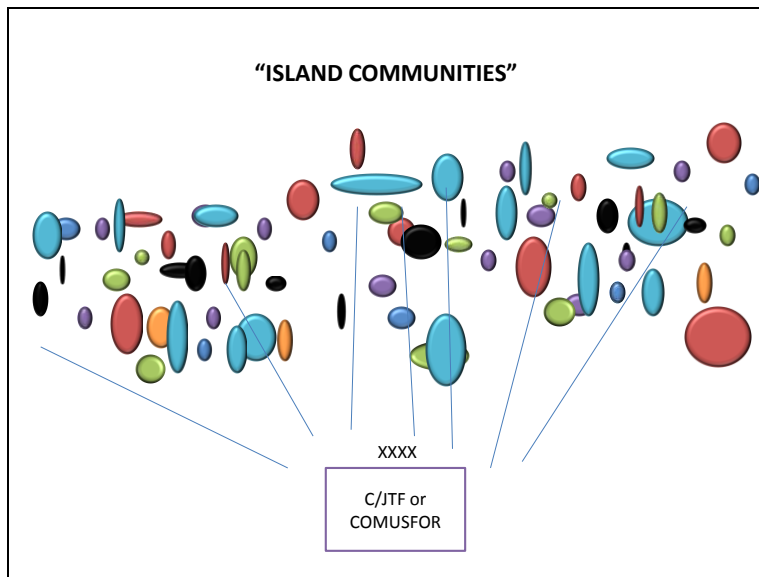


Figure 2. Author’s Idea of an “Inverted Campaign” of Island Communities of Action-learning based in the Heifetzian View of Leadership.

In the inverted campaign, the combined-joint task force or US subunified command (C/JTF or COMUSFOR) is oriented on supporting the many diverse activities of troops operating as adaptive leaders in various locations. While some similarities may exist, the ideas of “best practices” and “lessons learned” (associated with the Heifetzian construct of authoritative response) becomes problematic while creative deviance and *designing-in-action* are more desirable. The work of Heifetzian-style leadership in each island community is uniquely adaptive to the context at hand. This is a good segue to Ladkin’s construction of leadership.

Ladkin’s View: Leadership as Context

Complementary to Ron Heifetz’s view of this sort of emergent leadership, Donna Ladkin’s phenomenological approach to leadership is nontraditional, at least with respect to the military community.¹² In her 2010 book, *Rethinking Leadership: A New Look at Old Leadership Questions*, she describes leadership as a phenomenon that cannot be separated from the context from which it emerges. Her social constructivist argument may startle those who have framed leadership around desired qualities usually sought from those endowed with authoritative rank and position (e.g., the commander-centric model). With her framework, the leader, the follower, and the purpose (what is leadership for?) interact with the socially-interpreted historicity (i.e. the context). These together create unique dynamic and ephemeral leadership conditions— the ***leadership moment***.

¹² Phenomenology is interpreted by Ladkin from a philosophical viewpoint primarily based in Alfred Whitehead’s version of process metaphysics (the Heraclitean idea that the world is in constant flux and transformation; hence, so is our knowledge of it). Another writer on phenomenological approach to leadership described it as a “radical shift in perspective away from logical and empirical evidence and toward subjective, intuitive, personal, symbolical, and hermeneutical interpretations as they appear to the consciousness.” John G. Mitchell, *Re-Visioning Educational Leadership: A Phenomenological Approach* (NY: Garland, 1990), p. 51.

Here, the essence of leadership-followership is a collective undertaking especially in highly complex situations becomes meaning-making as context and purpose may be fuzzy; hence, reality is created through a socially-interactive process.¹³ When meaning of context and purpose are sensed to be “right” for the situation at hand (by parties involved), this constitutes the leadership moment (Figure 3), implying that “right” may be ephemeral.¹⁴ As with Heifetz’s argument, the traditional roles of leader-follower become blurred and as more participants are involved, the meaning-making becomes more networked-like with the leader role shifting around the network, serving as a hub for facilitating co-constructed meanings.¹⁵

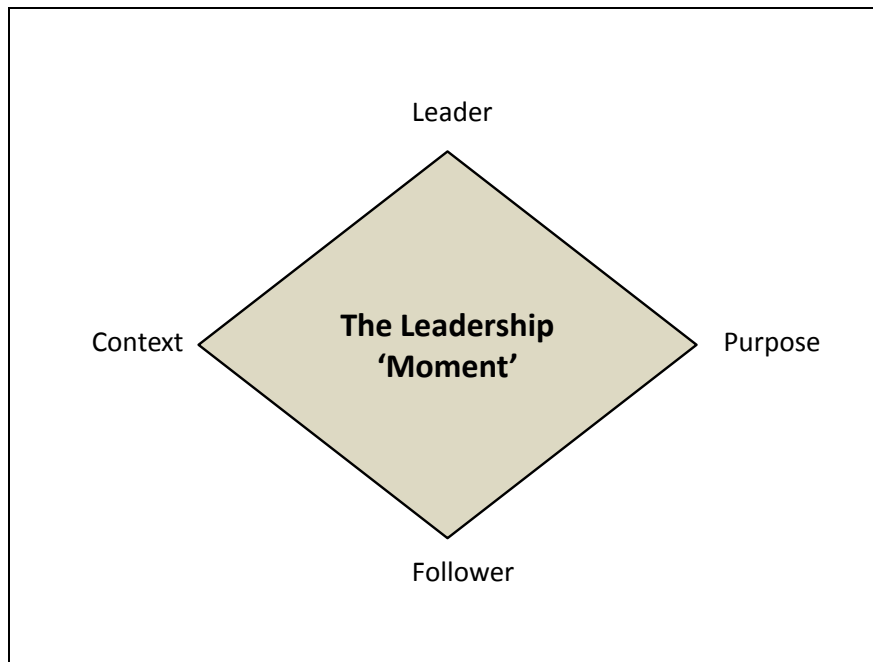


Figure 3. Ladkin’s Leadership Moment (from Ladkin, 2010, p. 178).

The implications of such a radical view of leadership with respect to complex military operations could be somewhat revolutionary. For example, this view may call into question the traditional military organizational values associated with positional authority and military rank. As with Heifetz’s explanation, knowledge displacement and creation of new knowledge are viewed as critical to reframing situations in a much more participative fashion. Small teams operating in *island communities* perhaps should be officered by more savvy women and men who might otherwise occupy positions in a higher headquarters. The inverted campaign (proposed by the present author earlier) seems well-supported by Ladkin’s phenomenological version of leadership. In this case, the idea of leadership is redefined away from hierarchical values and more toward decentralized and participative values (those most closely linked with design science). Yet, this should not preclude the situationally-driven need for other forms of officership that may call for central direction and hierarchical accountability – as suggested next by Grint.

¹³ Donald A. Schön (cited earlier) called this *having a conversation with the situation*.

¹⁴ Donna Ladkin, *Rethinking Leadership: A New Look at Old Leadership Questions* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2010), p. 178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

Grint's View: Officership as Command, Management, and Leadership

Keith Grint is a prolific writer on leadership and often uses military history as the basis of his arguments on how to best conceive of leadership. In his 2008 book, *Leadership, Management & Command: Rethinking D-Day*, he presents a definition of leadership largely based on what leadership is not – that is, it is neither command nor management.¹⁶ As with Heifetz's and Ladkin's, Grint's view is a hard departure from the military convention that sees: commander as a synonym for leader; and, managers as logisticians, human resource managers, comptrollers, and the like (with an added punctuated disdain for the McNamarian-style management-of-war). For Grint, command, management, and leadership represent different sources of authority (that the present author proposes to group these various sources of authority under the term, *officership*).

As a situationalist, like Heifetz and Ladkin, Grint tries to flesh out leadership based in the context at hand. Leadership takes place when commanding (ordering others what needs to be done) and planning (efficient management of resource allocation) not only do not work but may interfere with effectiveness especially under very volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (high VUCA) circumstances. Grint's argument is that in complex operations it takes all three (command, leadership and management) to win. The trick is to intuit what is the proper balance while not given the advantage of time and geography of one's choosing. Hence, Grint's argument is supported through retrospection on perhaps one of the most complicated campaigns of World War II – the allied invasion of France in 1944. (Note – Here the present author must caution the reader that retrospective forms of rationality are much more certain than prospective forms of rational argument, so Grint's methods are subject to that criticism. Nevertheless, his model seems intuitively “right” to speak to the problem of officership.)

Command is something associated with speed of decision-making and the ***critical*** need to do something or not do something even if the commander is not sure his/her command is the right one. The sources of power for command are coercion and compliance. Command is autocratic (hierarchical and coercive) in that it requires obedience (in its ideal form, execution-without-question).

Management (or what the US military terms “administration”) is associated with deliberate (note the meaning of the term when hyphenated: “de-liberate”) setting of rules, process engineering, and rationally-derived resource allocation decisions to handle ***tame*** (recurrent) problems that have been solved before. Key management values are bureaucratic and technocratic (technological). The source of power for management is regulated by legal-rational rules and procedures.

Leadership is associated with ***wicked*** situations that make command and managerial technical rationality problematic. Whether the situation is diagnosed as critical, tame, or wicked should drive whether to exercise command, management or leadership (and as Grint concludes, the complexity of the situation may demand elements of all three—and it is an art form to properly blend them). The key source of power for leadership is democratic (heterarchical) in nature in that it comes from those who, through intuitive processes and emotional responses,

¹⁶ Keith Grint, *Leadership, Management, and Command: Rethinking D-Day*, UK: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2008).

choose to follow. Figure 4 is the present author’s militarized adaptation of Grint’s model.¹⁷ Note that the situation drives which values (hierarchical, technological, or heterarchical) should dominate; hence, whether to command, manage and/or lead is based on appropriateness (what others have called appreciative judgment).¹⁸

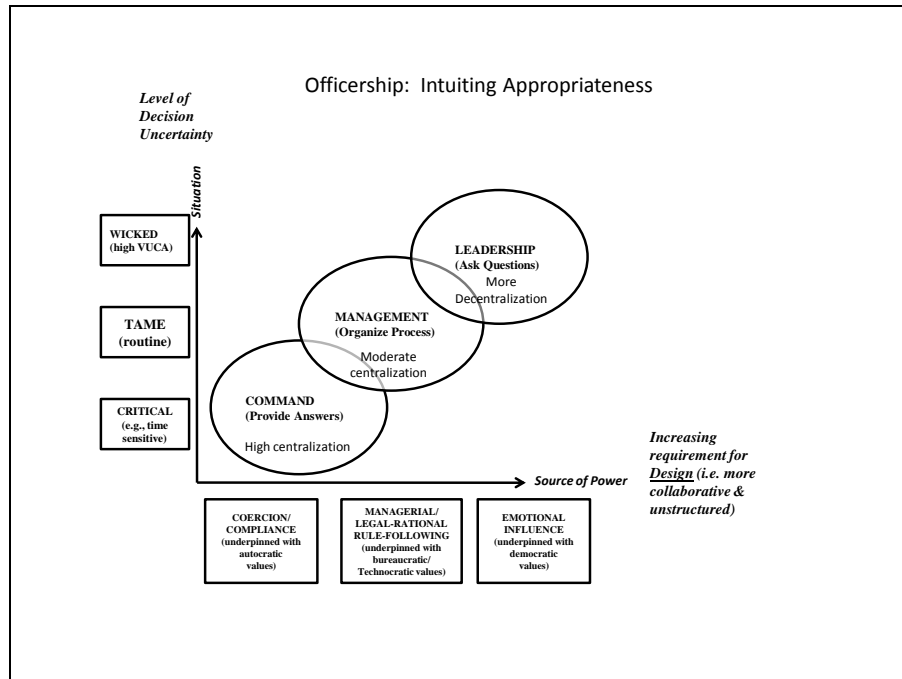


Figure 4. Officership as Command, leadership and Management (adapted by author from Grint, p. 16).

The impacts of Grint’s view on military design science are not quite as radical as Ladkin’s or Heifetz’s; yet, are complementary. While Heifetz’s and Ladkin’s existential views of leadership are compatible with Grint’s model, Grint adds other important forms of power—command and management (that account for Heifetz’s *authoritative response*) are also recognized as necessary to get things done. Grint’s perspective on leadership is associated with Heifetzian Types II and III situations (i.e. higher VUCA conditions). Ladkin’s idea of a *leadership moment* can be extended to include *command moment* and/or *management moment* signaling, in the military context, the complicatedness of officership.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that three authors (Heifetz, Ladkin, and Grint) offer a nontraditional view of leadership that is complementary to military design science. Synthesizing their views, there are several considerations for furthering the military design science agenda:

¹⁷ Keith Grint, *Leadership, Management, and Command: Rethinking D-Day* (UK: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2008), p. 16. Again the present author took liberties to blend some military lingo into Grint’s model, hoping not to lose the wisdom of his original. Added were references to design (not mentioned in Grint’s book) as well as calling these three aspects of effectiveness “officership.” Also the acronym “VUCA” is used here that is similar to “wicked problems” (Grint uses the latter).

¹⁸ Such as Geoffrey Vickers, *The Art of Judgment: A Study of Policy Making* (NY: Basic Books, 1965).

- Military futurists and doctrinaires should consider revising toward a more postpositivist view of leadership (that is most associated with design) and one that sees leadership as one ingredient of ideal officership.
- Recognize that dialogical sessions inherent to the professional practice of military design science require postpositivist forms of knowledge construction – where rank and positional authority associated with command and management should be left at the door and where commanders and senior ranking managers become first among equals.
- Military futurist should contemplate a postpositivist framework of officership that is flexible enough to decrease hierarchical and technological values associated with *authoritative response* and replace them with more heterarchical values in crafting more adaptive military organizations, associated with *creative deviance*.
- The need to reframe military situations as *problems of decisiveness* (associated with command) and/or *planning problems* (associated with management) should be extended to include framing them as *problems of design* (associated with leadership).
- Whereas current doctrine and contemporary writings orient on “getting to a planning solution” through command or design (where design is relegated to a method-status that supports planning), this is not appropriate in light of postpositivist models of leadership. There are at least three subsets to this argument:
 - Military design science represents a paradigm shift (both ontologically and epistemologically);
 - Long, irregular wars (such as being experienced in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region) are perhaps better portrayed continuing dispersed design effort that may require an *inverted campaign* approach.
 - Leadership emerges from context, not from organizational/legalistic empowerment (reserved for command and management). This also should alter the framing for talent placement in the suggested inverted campaign. Perhaps the most talented or experienced members should be engaged in local island communities of action learning, not in campaign headquarters (the rough equivalent of WW I chateau-style command and control) that were created for integration or orchestration of operations. For example, the US Army traditionally places School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) and Basic Strategy Education Program (BSEP) graduates (arguable the Army’s best potential creative deviants) at the highest command headquarters. If the idea of the inverted campaign has merit, why not place more of these officers at the smaller unit level?

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