

ON LEADERSHIP

A BACK BEARING ON LEADERSHIP FOR LIEUTENANT-COLONELS AND BELOW

By

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“It is better to be totally blind than to see things from one side only”.
West African Proverb

FROM THE SANCTUARY of theory—since, sadly I am unlikely to serve with soldiers again—I am well placed to offer some thoughts on peacetime leadership. However personally disappointing this unrequested status might be, it affords two advantages. First, it permits a degree of objectivity which is perhaps denied to others. Second, I will not be obliged to practise my preachings.

The Criteria of Leadership

‘What we want in industry in this country is not bosses but leaders’.

Lord Feather

Today there is an overwhelming array of leadership qualities, for example Britannia Royal Naval College (BRNC) lists no less than fifteen, including cheerfulness—which must be a creditable achievement against such a complex requirement. The disturbing reality for the practical student of leadership is that little commonality of the essential qualities prevails either between Services or the practical architects of the subject like Field Marshal Slim, Field Marshal Montgomery and General Hackett: this disparity confuses the student and may even engender a feeling of inadequacy and maybe it is more realistic to accept that few of us can possess such a vast array of qualities (perhaps such realism led to other approaches to leadership such as the Situational and Functional Concepts theories). Nevertheless, where the potential germ of leadership exists there may be scope for development through training—‘Smith is not yet a born leader’ implies just that.

Into the melting pot of qualities and theories on development could also be thrown the question; are the criteria for peacetime leadership synonymous with those for war? This question has prompted this article.

Management

‘A leader is best when people barely know that he exists’.

Lao Tzu

Assuming that a leader acts within the moral bounds of customary behaviour, do the peacetime led demand most or all of the many qualities which are held in such great regard? I doubt it. The officer leader possesses the advantages of a disciplined environment, a manual of military law, high calibre NCOs and the posting cycle: so, catastrophes apart, the problems of peacetime leadership are reduced to one of management. Surely what offends the led is unfairness (not a frequently listed quality) and poor administration which may affect their quality of life through pay and other conditions. It could therefore be postulated that in peace, management is a more appropriate term than leadership: this is an unpalatable hypothesis which might hit hard at the virility of the Officer Corps.

The Moral Framework

‘Everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it’.

Lewis Carroll

The framework of motivation for a successful peacetime leader is perhaps a belief in deterrence and, in consequence, the preservation of peace; this is also a possible morality. However it is no easy task to educate the led on the importance of deterrent philosophy and, thereafter, inspire interest and pride in the job so that all are persuaded of the relevance of the profession of arms to our modern society. I suspect the practical application of such a theory is a difficult goal and understandably abandoned in favour of the old philosophy—

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'an Army marches on its stomach', which effectively means good pay and conditions.

Having dismissed the moral framework of educating the led to believe in deterrence, the question is begged, 'What criteria remain?' Without considered argument one possible answer is offered—the 'right result'. Success often defies analysis, frequently falling between extremes (as Machiavelli puts it 'man must be caressed or annihilated') and can involve such factors as luck, inherited situations, hard work, determination to succeed, theatre of service, personality (in the words of Field Marshal Wavell 'character will always beat brains'), hard work, delegation, the selection of subordinates etc. In considering the criteria of peacetime leadership, a cursory glance at some of these factors might be of interest.

Competitiveness

'A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore it is necessary for a Prince, who wishes to maintain himself, to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge and not to use it according to the necessity of the case'.

Machiavelli

Some may feel that the inclusion of the foregoing Machiavellian thought is little short of scandalous. My purpose is to make two points. First, that we do not live in a perfect world and are, perforce, obliged to take a gloves-off approach to life. Second, it is valueless to offer multifarious leadership qualities without being aware of their opposites—ie, know your enemy. So, leadership qualities cannot be imposed in a vacuum divorced from the harsh, often unpleasant realities of a competitive world.

Power and Ambition

'The one who loses control over his cabinet loses himself'.

James Margach on Eden

There is a correlation between the use of power and ambition. Like it or not, as already suggested, we live in a competitive age and success is largely dependent on a determined use of power. The officer who knows what he wants and does not compromise over his aims



THE QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

stands a better than average chance of being considered an effective leader. The successful application of these qualities may not invite love, popularity or even respect but the responsive subordinates survive with the established certainty of the finite nature of command appointments.

Selection of Subordinates/Delegation

'The fools have picked the best man by accident'.

Lloyd George on the selection of Bonar Law.

It is an inescapable reality that at the level of command under consideration, the leader has largely to make do with the accident of his supporting cast. The wherewithal to hire and fire is somewhat limited—indeed a commander who over-exercises his right to fire might subject himself to the scrutiny of his superiors. There is inevitably an element of luck with subordinate availability—a classic example of the inherited situation.

The selection of subordinates is sometimes listed as a quality of leadership but for the reasons discussed, it is frequently not possible



SELECTION OF SUBORDINATES - SCENE ONE

remind ourselves of the need for team work rather than stick to the rigid definitions of the 'leader' and the 'led'. The positive contribution to peacetime leadership that the system (MS and PB) can make is to take account of officers' qualities when agonising over postings. Of course the good commander will always take account of this team work factor.

Luck

'Lord Lucky, by a curious fluke, became a most important duke'.

Hilaire Belloc

The importance of luck is assuredly a reality but at the same time defies analysis or quantification. Lucky breaks can range from inheriting a good command, at whatever level, to being seen by one's superiors (of course) to be doing the right thing at the right time. Arguably, an officer can generate luck through such virtuous actions as stage management ('think two up') or indeed by creating bad luck for others. However, because of the difficulties of analysis, I will confine consideration of this quality to a true story of a commander's annual inspection of our battery in Malaya. Some 45 minutes before the said inspection was due to start, we were obliged hurriedly to order a soldier to sign for a vehicle. Inevitably, the inspecting officer subsequently stopped in front of this soldier and uttered the dread question, 'How long have you had this vehicle on charge?' After a delay which agonised the battery officers, the soldier concerned said, 'Six months sir'. Had that soldier said 45 minutes, it is likely that the brigadier would have left with a false impression that it was a badly administered and poorly-led sub unit.

Hard Work—Knowledge—Communication

'And therefore the Prince who is ignorant of military matters, besides the other misfortunes already mentioned, cannot be esteemed by his soldiers, nor have confidence in them'.

Machiavelli

These attributes have been deliberately linked. Hard work is often factitious, and geared to impress superiors, but it is a prerequisite to the acquisition of knowledge. However, both are worth nothing without the ability to pass on accurately their results—a

for today's leader to show this quality. Against this background the more appropriate skill, particularly in the shifting sands of the two-year posting cycle, is the ability speedily to separate the reliable subordinate officer from the unreliable one. This process places significant man-management demands on the commander who must be careful to avoid an overt display of eroding the status of the less reliable officer in the eyes of the soldier. Equally he has to avoid the temptation of over-loading the reliable one.

In the peacetime environment there are two other alternatives—frequently interrelated. First, the commander can opt to run a totally centralised or dictatorial regime, thus leaving nothing to chance; second, he can, perhaps in combination with the former, by-pass the officers in favour of utilising the senior NCO structure. The former approach can create serious-minded commanders who may fail in war, largely through total exhaustion. Equally disturbingly, both approaches perpetuate the survival of the undependable officer since he is denied a role as well as the possibility of learning through experience.

If these considerations on the selection of subordinates appear to be defeatist in tone, offering no solution, then perhaps other avenues of resolution should be explored. In this regard who could fail to be impressed by the assessment of two American Civil War leaders—'the calm, resolute, sensitive and scholarly Lee and the fiery but calculating Jackson made a perfect military team'. In the light of such perfection we would do well to

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process Sir Frank King calls 'the precision of communication'. Of course the ability so to communicate is both a peace and war requirement.

Loyalty

'Grant stood by me when I was crazy, and I stood by him when he was drunk'.

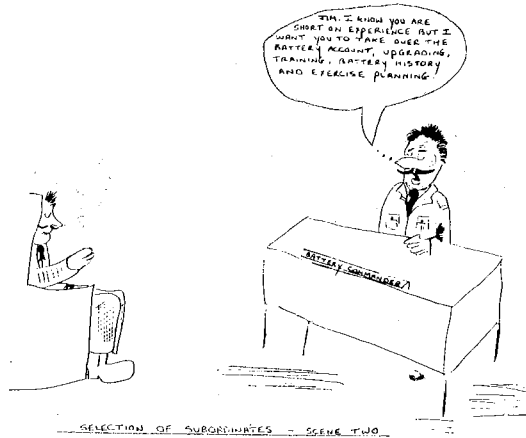
Sherman

Although loyalty achieves some commonality in the various lists of leadership qualities, it has deliberately been left to last. Whilst not debasing the concept of loyalty, I fear that it is often used as the vehicle for blackmail, frequently by those who choose to forget that it is a two-way process. Further, it frequently results from the satisfactory application of other qualities; some superiors can inspire and deserve loyalty whilst others cannot and do not. Loyalty should not be coercive and any commander who doubts the loyalty of his subordinates would be well advised to contemplate his own virtues before demanding it.

Conclusions

It would be foolish to pretend that some of the qualities discussed are not necessarily appropriate in war. Indeed the essential dilemma for the military, unlike our civilian counterparts, is that we are obliged to conduct most of our business in an environment (peace) which is totally different from our ultimate working one (war). Clearly we must be prepared for the latter, through perhaps a combination of selection and training, but that should not be taken to mean that the qualities for both situations are synonymous.

The successful peacetime leader is essentially a competent administrator, with a



determination to succeed, a competitive spirit, ambitious, prepared to use power, a team member, with an ability to exploit the competent subordinate, professionally knowledgeable, able to communicate, lucky and with a capacity to inspire loyalty. I do not imagine that these eleven qualities are common to any list produced by recognised military thinkers and the only serious conclusions appear to be firstly to remind ourselves of the possible leadership differences between peace and war, and, secondly, to suggest that potential leaders should not be over-awed by a multitude of golden rules which only engender a feeling of inadequacy.

The final word on the desired end result of leadership—in peace or war—must surely be attributed to a very secret admirer of General Douglas MacArthur:

'The ability to get other people to do what they do not want to do and like it'.

President H. Truman