Emotional Intelligence and Army Leadership:

GIVE IT TO ME STRAIGHT!

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The scene is Hollywood movie producer Harry Meyer’s office. Harry is talking to famously bad B-movie actor Johnny O’Connor. Harry tells Johnny he is not renewing his contract.

“I’m lettin’ ya go, Johnny!” he says. “Your contract’s not being renewed.”

“But . . .”

“You’re finished Johnny!”

“Whaddya mean?”

“I think you stink!”

“Don’t mince words, Harry. If you’re unhappy with my work, speak up, will you? Tell me now.”

“You’re through Johnny! You’ll never work in this town again!”

“Geez, Harry! Don’t leave me hanging by a thread! Give it to me straight! Let me know where I stand!”

“Johnny, I think you are the worst actor I have ever seen, and I get 500 letters a week telling me the same!”

“O.K., O.K., Harry! But, what’s the word on the street?”

This exchange, between comedians John Lovitz and Phil Hartman, highlights a proven aspect of human nature: it is sometimes difficult for us to accept negative feedback. Research suggests that leaders tend to overestimate their strengths and underestimate their weaknesses. This trait is thought to be essential for maintaining a positive self-image. However, it has a negative effect. It can blind a leader to his personal shortcomings.

This kind of blindness can be especially problematic for leaders of Army organizations. Elevated to positions of authority by rank and regulation, Army leaders can become so distanced from their subordinates that the candid feedback essential to organizational effectiveness is absent. In Primal Leadership, Daniel Goleman and his coauthors describe this as “CEO disease.” They define the condition as “the information vacuum around a leader created when people withhold important (and usually unpleasant) information.” The Army’s rigid hierarchy and traditions can contribute to such a vacuum. A leader attempting to divine subordinates’ perceptions is often required to infer the meaning of subtle feedback from the members of the organization.

How can Army leaders influence their organizations in such a way that they promote candid, constructive feedback? What aspects of leaders’ personalities allow them to recognize and understand feedback of all types from those
around them? We might find one answer to these questions in theories about emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the ability that an effective leader harnesses to influence his subordinates and the climate of his organization in a positive manner.

**Redefining Army Leadership**

The first step to understanding and applying emotional intelligence is examining the interpersonal relationship between leaders and followers. To understand the leader-to-follower connection as an interpersonal relationship, we have to back up once more and define leadership. In his bestselling textbook *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Peter G. Northouse defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.” Northouse uses the word “process” to describe how leaders influence because the word implies an interaction; that is, leaders “affect and are affected by” those they lead.6

The Army definition of leadership in Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership*, is more prescriptive than that used by Northouse. It says that “leadership is influencing people—by providing purpose, direction, and motivation—while operating to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.” This wording implies that leadership is a one-way action. The leader simply provides purpose, direction, and motivation, and the followers are influenced. In fact, in the next sentence the FM defines “influencing” as “getting people to do what you want them to do.” Put another way, Army leadership is simply telling people what you want them to do. There is no provision for subordinate input and no requirement for subordinate “buy-in.”

While “influencing” is a central tenet to Northhouse’s and the Army’s definitions of leadership, the influencing process Northouse describes is quite different from the Army’s. It is getting followers to do what leaders want as a result of an interactive process between the two. Effective leaders are able to align followers’ goals and aspirations with the organization’s missions and long-term health.

Some Army leaders are likely to dismiss this process as too “civilian” and therefore irrelevant to the Army’s unique warfighting mission. That would be a mistake. According to research conducted by Craig Bullis and Colonel George E. Reed at the U.S. Army War College (AWC) in 2003, an inability to recognize the importance of subordinate feedback and buy-in is one of the symptoms of a toxic leader.9 Bullis and Reed had Army colonels fill out a survey, and all of them indicated they had worked for destructive leaders at some point in their careers. They described such leaders as unconcerned about, or oblivious to, staff or troop morale and/or climate.

Bullis and Reed’s finding suggests that Army leaders need to get in touch with subordinates’ perceptions and morale. Research has shown that this seems to hold true for hundreds of other organizations as well. Organizations with leaders whose perceptions of themselves more closely match subordinates’ perceptions enjoy greater long-term health and are more successful in terms of mission accomplishment.10 Clearly, leader self-awareness directly affects organizational effectiveness.

FM 22-100 does discuss the leader’s need to be self-aware.11 It states that self-aware leaders understand their own strengths and weaknesses better and that they are better able to benefit from constructive criticism. The issue is that the Army does not consider self-awareness a central component of leadership. As a result, Army leaders are not driven to understand this essential leader skill or make development of it a priority.

Let us assume that the definition of leadership does highlight the process of interaction and feedback between leaders and subordinates. Most leadership theories emphasize that this is an important relationship and that it is the responsibility of the leader to maintain it.12 What then should the role of emotion be in the development and maintenance of this relationship?

**Emotions and Leadership**

A manager develops systems and identifies key missions the organization must accomplish. A leader instills will and spirit into subordinates and inspires them to meet or exceed organizational objectives.13 The emotional connection between the leader and the led and the leader’s understanding and control over his own emotions characterize descriptions of leadership throughout history.

Ancient Greek philosophers wrote that emotion had to be controlled. To prevent the passionate leader from making emotional decisions devoid of rational thought, they prescribed *sophrosyne*, which
can be translated variously as moderation, prudence, or self-control. Ultimately, sophrosyne refers to the art of self-mastery. Central to the Greek concept of self-mastery was a directive supposedly passed down from the gods to the oracle at Delphi: “Know thyself.” In other words, one had to know one’s own personal weaknesses as well as those that are a part of human nature. With this knowledge, the Greeks believed, a reflective leader could develop the virtues or excellent character traits required to inspire followers. This leader would not be a slave to his passions, biases, or ignorance; he would control his emotions.

Thousands of years later, military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz described the characteristics he thought were required of a great leader in combat. According to Clausewitz, the leader or commander’s force of will was often the only thing that kept men from running away amid the chaos and horror of the battlefield: “By the spark in his breast, by the light of his spirit, the spark of purpose, the light of hope must be kindled afresh in others.” Clausewitz added, however, that the leader must also possess the virtues of steadfastness and resolve in addition to the spark of passion, so as not to let his emotions rule his decision making.

Although the leader should be steadfast and resolute, Clausewitz warned against overconfidence and egotism. A leader must be open to suggestions and input, especially if they show he has made an error in judgment. Clausewitz regards stubbornly resisting input as a “fault of the feeling and the heart.” A commander must avoid frivolous changes of course, he writes, but he must also avoid obstinately refusing to change course when conditions warrant doing so. Clausewitz says military genius resides in avoiding these extremes.

A commander must sometimes use his emotions to inspire and at other times override his emotions to make sound judgments. This is not easy. Nor is it easy to know when to implement feedback from subordinates and when to maintain direction in the face of uncertainty. Army leaders must be able to perform all of these actions to be successful.

Recent theories of emotional intelligence explain how individuals can attain some of the self-awareness and interpersonal awareness of great leaders as described by historians.

**Emotional Intelligence**

In 1983, research psychologist and bestselling author Howard Gardner proposed that there is more than one kind of intelligence. He took issue with using a single number, the intelligence quotient, to measure human intelligence. Gardner posited the existence of seven different human intelligences: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. He believed that each of these intelligences developed independently of the others and that high performance in one did not predict high performance in another. (Gardner uses the words “talents” and “intelligences” interchangeably.) Emotional intelligence theory deals with the last two types of intelligence defined by Gardner: intrapersonal and interpersonal. Intrapersonal intelligence refers to an individual’s ability to fully comprehend his own emotions and thought. Interpersonal intelligence refers to the ability to notice and interpret the moods, temperaments, motivations, and intentions of others. Peter Salovey and Goleman combined intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences to create emotional intelligence.

Neurological research suggests that chemical and electrical reactions in the brain allow emotions to influence thought and, in cases of extreme emotions, shortcut thought to induce an automatic reaction. The ability to keep one’s emotions and thoughts in harmonious balance is what distinguishes a person who has high emotional intelligence from one who does not.

Emotional intelligence is divided into four skills—

- **Knowing one’s emotions.**
- **Managing emotions.**
- **Recognizing emotions in others.**
- **Handling relationships.**

**Knowing one’s emotions.** Self-awareness describes an individual’s ability to understand his feelings, even as they change from moment to moment. It allows the individual to regulate his actions, if he needs to, in the midst of an emotionally distressing experience.
Goleman calls this a “parallel consciousness that correlates physiological response to emotional stimuli with an understanding of mood.” Goleman and others state that a high level of self-awareness in an individual can sometimes make the difference between lashing out in anger or simply thinking “I am angry right now.” Science has proven that much of what an individual feels occurs in the subconscious, and that these feelings can subtly guide a person away from potentially harmful (physical or emotional) choices. The ability to “hear” such feelings might be the key to better intuitive decision making, among other applications. Self-awareness is an essential building block for managing emotions.

**Managing emotions.** According to emotional intelligence theorists, understanding alone cannot prevent people from being slaves to their emotions. The body’s physiological response to emotional stimuli is such that certain emotions build on themselves if left unchecked. In experiments testing the body’s physiological response to anger, scientists found that levels of the chemical that corresponds to angry emotions immediately spike when anger is felt. The chemical lingers in the body, dissipating at a much slower rate than it built up. A second anger-provoking stimulus, presented before the first response fully dissipates, will cause a chemical spike higher than the original. This results in a prolonged state of anger, and increased sensitivity to reduced stimuli. In other words, there is a chemical reason why average people get angry easier if they are having a bad day—the more anger-provoking events that occur in sequence, the easier it is to lose control.

Extensive research demonstrates that we rarely express emotions directly. In a marriage, for example, when one member of a couple asks, “What’s wrong?” and the other exclaims, ”Nothing!” before sharply turning and stomping off, both parties know instinctively that more content was present in “Nothing!” than the word implies. About 90 percent of the emotional message of communication is contained in the tone with which it is communicated and in the nonverbal language of posture, hand movements, and facial expressions. Knowing the “vocabularies” of tone and posture can help a leader better understand his subordinates and their feelings. Similarly, knowing that you are less likely to accurately empathize with others if you are angry or afraid can also help you empathize with your subordinates. It illuminates the need to manage oneself as a precursor to managing others.

**Handling relationships.** Empathy enables us to perceive and understand emotional clues in others. Handling relationships means capitalizing on such clues to reinforce (or assuage) perceptions.
Relationship management refers to an individual’s adeptness at using emotional intelligence in a group setting when organizing groups, resolving conflict, connecting in a personal way, and analyzing social dynamics.³¹

An individual with high emotional intelligence can sense the mood of a group and communicate information in a way that captures group members’ attention and ensures they are likely to understand the information. An experienced standup comedian adept at “working the room” is an example. Goleman is of the opinion that handling relationships boils down to managing emotions in others. An individual with high emotional intelligence is likely to do this in an authentic, nonmanipulative fashion so as not to cultivate feelings of distrust.³²

**Implications for Army Leaders**

Applying emotional intelligence theory to Army leader development and training is an idea whose time has come. The costs of selecting and promoting leaders with poor emotional intelligence skills are lost unit effectiveness and junior leader disenchantment. The Special Forces (SF) community, leading the way in the application of emotional intelligence theory, has already begun to incorporate it into the SF’s selection process.

**Self-awareness.** Army Special Forces needs Soldiers who can adapt quickly in ambiguous and dangerous situations. SF Soldiers must work closely with people from various cultures, services, and government agencies, and this requires tremendous interpersonal skills. Evaluators use various aspects of emotional intelligence as screening criteria in the Special Forces Selection Course. They select candidates open to feedback who are able to inspire small teams and work well with a wide variety of people. Successful candidates must therefore have an accurate view of their own strengths and weaknesses.³³

To help candidates accurately assess themselves—a key first step to self-awareness—SF cadre use a combination of assessment tools, including a 360-degree assessment by peers who have been teammates and subordinates during training. These assessments help candidates reconcile their concept of self with the perceptions others have of them, which helps the candidates become more self-aware. Candidates who cannot accept the feedback given and then improve on their performance are generally not selected. Overall, candidates picked for Special Forces score high in self-awareness, which is one building block of emotional intelligence.³⁴

Studies at the U.S. Army War College support the need to train and assess conventional-force Army officers for emotional intelligence as well. Participants in a study on command climate called for implementation of a 360-degree assessment program for officer evaluation.³⁵ Such assessments, even if used solely for professional development, would go a long way toward increasing self-awareness in officers and helping leaders establish a more effective command climate.

**Command climate.** While a student in U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) class 2006-01, I conducted a survey with the goal of probing the relationship between emotional intelligence and command climate.³⁶ A total of 271 students responded to the survey. Of those, 254 had more than a year’s experience as a company commander. The survey asked these students to think of a battalion or brigade commander who had rated them while they had been in command and then to rate that individual’s competence on a series of leader actions, three of which were subsets of emotional intelligence behavior: managing emotions, assessing emotions, and understanding the impact of one’s actions on subordinates. The students also rated the organizational climate under the same commander. The survey used several of the variables of command climate proposed by Bullis and Reed in their 2003 AWC study.³⁷

Last, the survey asked students how leader actions and competencies affected the command climate and how command climate affected organizational combat effectiveness. Students then ranked the seven leader competencies in FM 22-100 from

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*An individual with high emotional intelligence can sense the mood of a group and communicate information in a way that captures group members’ attention and ensures they are likely to understand the information.*
most to least important with respect to setting a positive organizational climate.

When taken as a complete data set, the survey results tell a comforting story of the state of leadership in today’s Army. According to the respondents, more than 70 percent of the leaders exhibited “competence” or “exemplary competence” in all of the 36 leader actions on which they were rated. More than 60 percent of responses indicated positive results for all aspects of positive command climate. Similar to findings presented by Lieutenant General Walter F. Ulmer Jr. and others in Leadership Lessons at the Division Command Level, my findings indicate that poor leadership at battalion and brigade levels is the exception, not the rule.38

Asked which leadership competency was most important to shaping effective command climate, the highest number of students responded in favor of “interpersonal” followed closely by “influencing.” (See figure below.) If one equates interpersonal competency to the fourth emotional intelligence domain, “managing relationships,” survey results suggest that leaders high in emotional intelligence are more likely to set a positive command climate.

Actually, to discern a relationship between emotional intelligence behavior and command climate, it was necessary to analyze only those responses in which officers rated former commanders as having low (or no) competence in the emotional intelligence behaviors of self-management, empathy, and self-awareness. The survey results seem to show that there is a distinct relationship between poor emotional intelligence and negative command climate.

On the original sample, only 26 percent of respondents said that working for the rated commander was an unpleasant experience. When I checked the input of the 33 respondents who rated their commander poorly on all aspects of emotional intelligence, I found that 32 of the 33—96 percent—had said their commanders were unpleasant to work for. Commanders with poor emotional intelligence scored poorly on loyalty, communication skills, and sense of humor, all aspects that are indicative of the quality of command climate.39

Further analysis of the survey responses is required. It is possible that poor ratings on other leader actions, in addition or coincidental to the emotional intelligence domains, are responsible for the lower ratings on the indicators of command climate. Despite this potential bias, initial findings indicate that leaders who possess high levels of emotional intelligence are more likely to set a positive organizational climate. Because many leadership experts agree that a poor organizational climate will almost certainly preclude sustained operational effectiveness, the implications for the Army are potentially profound.40

A Failure to Communicate

One way that leaders with low emotional intelligence poison command climate is by isolating themselves emotionally from their subordinates.

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**30. Rank order the following leadership competencies from most (#1) to least (#7) important for a battalion commander (or equivalent organizational level leader) to possess in order to set a positive command climate in his or her organization:**

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<tr>
<th>Leadership competencies</th>
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<td>Technical</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operating</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tactical</td>
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<td>8%</td>
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<td>17%</td>
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<td>17%</td>
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<td>18%</td>
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<td>3.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influencing</td>
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<td>24%</td>
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<td>28%</td>
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<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
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<td>34%</td>
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<td>16%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<td>Improving</td>
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<td>7%</td>
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The following scenario depicts the aforementioned CEO disease, Army style:

A battalion commander was already having a bad day when he walked into the battalion area. One of his company commanders met him at the staff duty desk. “Sir,” said the company commander, “I just found out a few moments ago that Staff Sergeant Jones got a drunk-driving ticket this morning. I wanted to tell you in person.”

“Son of a bitch!” the commander screamed. “That is the third NCO caught drunk driving in the last 6 months. I hope the next one winds up dead in a ditch! Somebody around here better start showing some leadership fast!” The commander stormed down the hall to his office and slammed the door, oblivious to the 20 or so Soldiers in the headquarters who had witnessed his blowup.

Several months later, as the battalion commander was settling in for a day’s work, he received a call from his boss, the brigade commander: “how come you didn’t tell me about last night’s drunken driving incident, Bob?”

“Sir. First I heard of it, sir! I don’t know why the men don’t let me know when these things happen.”

This story is based on a real Army experience. It illustrates one reason why a leader with poor emotional intelligence might be left out of his unit’s information loop. The commander’s inability to gain control over his emotions caused him to snap and berate a subordinate over a bit of bad news. Worse, this display occurred in public, and news of his reaction was quickly passed throughout the unit. The commander had made keeping him informed a dangerous undertaking—and one that subordinates avoided when possible.

It takes very little imagination to see how such an organizational environment could result in dangerous situations in combat, when passing bad news to the commander becomes a matter of life and death.

High-ranking people in organizations are easily isolated. Leaders have few if any peer-to-peer relationships, which limits their access to the main conduit for information—friendly discussion. The natural deference of subordinates to the boss helps to increase this communication gap. When a leader with poor self-awareness and little self-control blows up in public, he widens this gap.

It is no surprise that the authors of Leadership Lessons at Division Command Level rated the ability to accept bad news with equanimity to be one of the required traits in a division commander. Calm acceptance of bad news is a direct reflection of a leader’s emotional intelligence. In fact, it signals competence in all emotional intelligence domains. On receiving bad news, a commander with high emotional intelligence might immediately realize that the news is something that makes him angry (self-awareness). Before his emotions can hijack his reaction, however, he takes a deep breath and says, “O.K., I am sure we both feel upset about this. We can talk about it a little later.” He has just demonstrated self-management, empathy, and interpersonal skills.

There are times when anger or other emotional displays are appropriate to emphasize a point or to motivate people to action. S.L.A. Marshall wrote that “too much has been said in praise of the calm demeanor as an asset to the fighting commander.” The trick, however, is not to display those emotions with second-order effects that will poison the organization’s climate. This is the mark of a self-aware leader.

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Concept Gaining Momentum

The concept of emotional intelligence is gaining momentum in the world of cognition. This new way of looking at how people interact has tremendous applications for assessing and training leaders. From the ancient past to contemporary times, philosophers have described great leaders in terms of their self-awareness, balanced temperament, and ability to inspire. Now a blueprint exists for achieving some measure of success in these areas.

Leaders with high emotional intelligence who are more in tune with their own strengths and weaknesses and open to feedback understand their subordinates’ moods and stay in touch with the mood of the organization. They are more likely to establish organizational climates in which their subordinates
can excel. The success of subordinates inspired by the interpersonal influence of an emotionally intelligent commander to work together in pursuit of organizational objectives creates organizational synergy. The Army needs leaders who are high in emotional intelligence. **MR**

### NOTES

4. Ibid., 93.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
11. FM 22-100, 2-17.
12. Northhouse describes 10 leadership theories and approaches. Each assigns varying degrees of importance to the leader–led feedback loop. For example, in the skills approach to leadership, human skills are what allow a leader to see from another’s perspective. In the style approach, it is concern for people that lets leaders see from the perspective of their subordinates. The important point is that each of these leadership approaches assigns some importance to empathy and to feedback from the one to the leader.
13. Ibid., 8-9.
14. The oracle’s spokesperson was housed in the temple’s inner sanctum, the adyton, or “no entry” area in the temple’s core, and the prophecies came through the Pythia, a female chosen to speak, as a possessed medium, for Apollo, the god of prophecy; <www.sciam.com/article.cfm?articleID=0009BD34-398C-1F0A-97AE80A84189EDF>; See <www.worldwidewords.org/weirdwords/ww-sop1.htm> for a discussion of sophrosyne; Aristotle, as quoted in Christopher Kolenda, Leadership: The Warrior’s Art (Carlisle, PA: The Army War College Foundation Press, 2003), 9-12.
16. Ibid., 152.
18. Ibid., 237-76.
22. Ibid., 47.
23. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 42-45. For a fascinating and up-to-date look at how the brain works, see Steven Johnson, Mind Wide Open (New York, NY: Scribner, 2004), specifically pages 41–43 and 108–10, which discuss instinctive decision making.
24. Dolf Zilman, as construed by Goleman, 56, 60-63.
25. Donna Tice, as construed by Goleman, 63-65.
27. Aristotle, quoted in Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 80.
28. Goleman, 43.
29. Ibid., 97-98.
30. Ibid., 104.
31. Ibid., 118.
35. Bulls and Reed, 9–11.
36. U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) Survey No. 05-050, “Characteristics of Organizational Level Leaders,” Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2006. The survey was conducted as part of the research for the author’s Master Army Leadership: The Warrior’s Art (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Foundation Press, 1947), 138.