



# BECOMING AN ADAPTIVE LEADER

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**M**ANY ARMY OFFICERS know the story of Lieutenant Colonel Nate Sassaman. Even if they do not recognize his name, they probably remember a *New York Times* article about him, “The Fall of the Warrior King,” which tells how Sassaman, a rising star in the Army officer corps, resigned after Soldiers under his command pushed two Iraqi civilians into the Tigris River for violating a local curfew.<sup>1</sup> One of the Iraqi civilians survived; the other either drowned or escaped and went into hiding. When Sassaman learned of the incident and its impending investigation, he suggested to his subordinates that they tell investigators the entire story of their detention of the Iraqi civilians, except for the part where the Soldiers pushed the Iraqi civilians into the Tigris River. Army investigators eventually uncovered the entire scheme. Several Soldiers were punished, and others, including Sassaman, left the Army.

This is not the only example of leadership failure in Iraq. Others include the widely publicized Abu Ghraib prisoner-abuse scandal and reports of unnecessary killing of civilians or the unjustified destruction of private property. These were isolated incidents, but students of military leadership must question what causes military leaders, especially proven ones like Sassaman, to foster a command climate that supports illegal acts and endorses unethical behavior that clearly runs counter to Army values.

Sassaman was respected by senior officers and reportedly idolized by subordinates.<sup>2</sup> To have been selected for battalion command, he must have excelled as a company commander and a staff officer. He had completed all requisite training and education the Army deems necessary for one to command an infantry battalion of nearly 800 Soldiers. Like many of his peers, however, he had spent most of his career preparing to fight a large-scale linear battle against well-equipped armies, and had little, if any, training on counterinsurgency; the Army had shelved its counterinsurgency doctrine and training after the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, Sassaman’s 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, was part of a larger force that became a major player in the counterinsurgency fight that broke out shortly after U.S. forces occupied Baghdad. Some Army leaders adapted well to the counterinsurgency fight. Others, like Sassaman, maintained a kinetic-operations mind-set in a world that needed nation-building and peacekeeping operations. Like other recent

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PHOTOS: (left) Circa 2001, mechanized forces maneuver during a field training exercise at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. (right) In 2006, Soldiers from 1st Brigade, 3d Infantry Division, protect the front gate of mock Forward Operating Base Dallas from simulated rioters during a mission readiness exercise at Fort Stewart, Georgia in preparation for an upcoming deployment to Iraq. (U.S. Army, MSG Johancharles Van Boers)

leadership failures in the Army, Sassaman's failure was a result of his inability to adapt to the changing battlefield in Iraq. His story illustrates why military leaders need to practice adaptive leadership to succeed in the challenging contemporary operating environment.

## Adaptive Leadership

To understand a military leader's failure to adapt in unfamiliar circumstances, we ought to first define adaptive leadership. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "adapt" as "to make fit (as for a specific new use or situation), often by modification."<sup>3</sup> Thus, in its essence, adaptive leadership is the ability to modify individual and collective actions based on circumstances. In his study, *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Leonard Wong tells us: "Adaptive leaders learn to live with unpredictability. They spend less time fretting about the inability to establish a routine or control the future and focus more on exploiting opportunities."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the recipe for success in stability operations depends upon embracing the possibilities created by the changing environment.

This focus on exploiting opportunities seems to run counter to such formulas as the Army's military decision-making process and troop leading procedures. Army leaders are quick to reach for a field manual (FM) or Army regulation to learn the next step to take in any set of circumstances, and the canon of Army literature does an outstanding job guiding them in the familiar actions of preparing for combat. Any Soldier, from a private to a general, can grab a manual and read what is required for success on tasks ranging from physical fitness to rifle marksmanship. But during the early phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), there was no manual on how to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign and no metrics to gauge success.

In the absence of experience and doctrine, commanders struggled to find a way to measure progress during OIF. They used reports of the number of killed insurgents, captured weapons, and houses cleared, and even resorted to diligently charting the murder rate in Iraqi cities. Today, commanders like Sassaman continue to struggle to find the right formula for success. However, when given the option of adapting or maintaining their mental status quo,

many leaders choose the latter with no hesitation, and often with negative results.

While authors like Wong have highlighted the necessity for adaptive leadership in the Army, the 1999 edition of FM 22-100, *Army Leadership*, uses the word "adapt" only 6 times in its entire 278 pages.<sup>5</sup> The FM implies that such flexibility is important, but with so little discussion devoted to the topic, we should not be surprised that Army officers fail to associate the term with success in military leadership.

Fortunately, some Army leaders noted the absence of the concept of adaptive leadership in Army doctrine. In the wake of significant change and restructure in the Army, a team was devoted to the rewriting of FM 7-0, *Training the Force*, and FM 6-22, *Army Leadership*.<sup>6</sup> The revision to FM 7-0 changed one of the training principles from "Train and Develop Leaders" to "Train Adaptive Leaders and Units."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, a section titled "Tools for Adaptability" was included in FM 6-22.<sup>8</sup> These changes imply that Army leaders should adapt as their organizations' peacetime and wartime missions change and, arguably most important, they should train and mentor subordinates to be flexible, or as the proposed revision to FM 7-0 states, "Train leaders how to think, not what to think."<sup>9</sup>

## Critical Components of Adaptive Leadership

To be adaptive and train others to be so as well, leaders must understand the fundamental tenets of adaptive leadership. According to FM 6-22, an adaptable leader has the ability to "recognize changes in the environment, identify the critical elements of the new situation, and trigger changes accordingly to meet new requirements."<sup>10</sup> These three components are simple and straightforward; in fact, the entire concept appears to be almost a given at first glance. Yet, the ability to practice it

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consists of more art than science. To understand adaptive leadership, we need to explore each of these components.

**Recognizing change.** FM 6-22 states, “Leaders must be particularly observant for evidence that the environment has changed in unexpected ways.”<sup>11</sup> In our daily lives, we often fail to notice subtle changes around us. We may not notice that the tree in front of our headquarters was trimmed or that our spouse rearranged the pictures in the hallway. These examples demonstrate how easily we can fail to notice unexpected changes. On the other hand, we are quick to observe expected changes. If we tell the Sergeant Major to ensure the motor pool is clean for the commanding general’s visit, we will be quick to notice his compliance to the order and even quicker to notice his noncompliance. Thus, to be adaptive leaders, we should train ourselves to look for unexpected changes.

To this end, we need to challenge our preconceived notions. For example, most Army officers have the opportunity to test their concept of operational art when they try to envision the enemy’s actions in a war game. Young officers often expect an enemy tank platoon to fight just like their own platoon fights. They quickly learn that this assumption is not valid after their first encounter with the opposing force. They have to adapt to “think like the enemy.”<sup>12</sup>

In addition to challenging our assumptions, we should seek out “situations that are novel and unfamiliar.”<sup>13</sup> As company commanders, many of us never experienced convoy live-fire training without excessive control measures. In the 1990s, commanders were so risk averse that they were reluctant to conduct realistic training. When we attempted scenarios with live ammunition, training control measures made injuries unlikely, but at the same time, there was little value in the training beyond the opportunity to improve one’s marksmanship skills. Now operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have made the Army more willing to conduct the type of training that takes Soldiers outside of their comfort zone and forces them to recognize and adapt to new situations.

In preparation for operations in Iraq, Sassaman’s battalion participated in a rotation

at the National Training Center where it fought a conventional opposing force.<sup>14</sup> The staff spent countless hours planning for engagements with massed armored formations much like the battles in Operation Desert Storm a decade earlier. Those engagements did take place in the initial phases of OIF, but the situation had changed by the time Sassaman arrived. Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez summarized the problem in June 2004: “In May 2003, the general attitude was that the war was over. But within a matter of days, we began to realize that the enemy was still out there.”<sup>15</sup> The enemy was there; however, it was not the conventional enemy that U.S. units had prepared to fight. Sassaman and others knew this, but they did not recognize the need to change their tactics.

In all fairness, when he learned of the change, Sassaman probably conducted training for operations in urban environments and explored the ramifications of occupying a country with a foreign and ancient culture, but he admittedly was not prepared to conduct counterinsurgency missions. He once remarked that he wished “there were more people who knew about nation-building.”<sup>16</sup> In his favor, he successfully organized a city council and conducted elections.<sup>17</sup> He clearly made a concerted effort to eliminate insurgents in a region troubled with Sunni and Shi’a violence. Unfortunately, with his limited



DOD, Jim Garamone

**General Richard B. Myers, center, listens to a briefing from COL Fred Rudesheim, right, and LTC Nate Sassaman, left, at the headquarters of the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, Balad, Iraq, 28 July 2003. Behind Myers is 4th Infantry Division commander MG Ray Odierno.**

knowledge of counterinsurgency and no doctrine to guide him, he resorted to conventional actions to wage an asymmetric fight.

To illustrate, in one instance, before entering Samarra to combat insurgents, Sassaman commented that his forces were going to “inflict extreme violence.”<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, his conventional mindset and frustration with the continuing insurgent activities led to the unlawful actions that occurred in January 2004.

If Sassaman had foreseen the changes in Iraq, he might have studied the concepts of counterinsurgency in detail and pursued novel training approaches to give his Soldiers a better knowledge of the environment and the actions necessary for success in it. If the Army had anticipated the Iraqi insurgency, it might have given Sassaman and others additional training to prepare for the complexity of the environment. Sassaman was not the only leader in Iraq who underestimated the magnitude of the insurgency and found it a challenge to adapt to the new operating environment, but he bore the brunt of a collective failure to anticipate, recognize, and then adapt to this change.

**Identifying critical elements.** Once a leader perceives changes in the operating environment, he should identify the “critical elements of the new situation.”<sup>19</sup> Arguably, this step is the most challenging one in the journey to becoming an adaptive leader. One may see the change, but one may be unable to determine the essential elements of the change.

To identify these critical elements, the leader has to first determine what caused the change. In some situations, a single cause that one can easily discern might have provoked the change. In others, multiple factors may have contributed to it. In either case, leaders should understand that they might be constrained in their ability to affect the cause or causes of change, even if doing so would solve the problem. Moreover, just addressing the cause or causes for the change may not lead to success in the new situation. Leaders ought to remain flexible and adaptable so that they can employ the most appropriate solutions.

To illustrate this concept, consider a simple counterinsurgency example. A battalion commander in Iraq notices an increase in violence in his area of operations. Clearly, he has identified

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the change. Iraqi forces in his area have reported the arrival of a new sheik who is inciting members of the community to take up arms against Americans. The commander realizes that it would not be wise to detain the sheik, even though he has likely encouraged the increase in violence. The commander determines that the critical element that he needs to address to reduce the violence is the community’s discontent with a lack of public services. Thus, he chooses to guarantee the community access to public services such as water, sewage treatment, and electricity. This simplified example illustrates the concept of determining the cause for change and identifying the critical elements necessary to ensure success in the new environment. Furthermore, it illustrates the importance of remaining open to alternative solutions.

As previously stated, LTC Sassaman failed to recognize the magnitude of the change in his environment, but he was quick to recognize such symptoms as escalating violence and curfew violations. In fact, these were the changes he expected and was prepared to combat. In most cases, however, he did not attempt to identify the factors that caused the increased violence. Instead, he determined that the critical action necessary for success was to respond to violence in kind. Sassaman told CNN: “You’ve got to meet aggression with controlled violence. A lot of people will say violence leads to more violence. I’ll tell you that controlled violence leads to no more violence.”<sup>20</sup> Sassaman’s eye-for-an-eye philosophy reveals that he failed to assess the elements critical to success in this environment. Instead, he focused on a solution that he and his Soldiers were well prepared to execute.

Sassaman also resorted to extreme measures to control violence. After the death of one of Sassaman’s Soldiers, he ordered his men to emplace barbed wire around the village where the Soldier was killed and to require all citizens entering the village to carry identification cards written in





Children look through the barbed wire fence surrounding the village of Abu Hishma, 75 kilometers north of Baghdad, 14 January 2004. The fence was put up by Soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 8th Regiment, in a bid to prevent attacks on its troops coming from the village.

English.<sup>21</sup> The Iraqis' response was a negative one. Journalist Dexter Filkins reported that the villagers "compare[d] themselves to Palestinians," who regularly endure similar security measures because terrorists live in their midst.<sup>22</sup> Even though violence temporarily decreased after the battalion carried out Sassaman's orders, he had clearly alienated the population.

Other commanders in the region chose different strategies. For instance, Colonel Dana Pittard's efforts to engage the Sunni population in Diyala Province were highly successful.<sup>23</sup> Pittard credits the success his Soldiers achieved to actions designed to "gain the trust and confidence of the people." For instance, if Iraqi children gestured inappropriately at his Soldiers, Pittard had his Soldiers approach the children's parents and tell them what the children had done.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, Pittard demonstrated respect for the sovereignty of the Iraqi people in their own land.

Had Sassaman taken the time to assess the critical elements driving the insurgency, he might have quelled the violence in his area of operations by means of a more successful long-term solution. In fairness to Sassaman, he was not the only commander who resorted to extreme measures, but his failure to determine the essential elements to ensure his unit's success ultimately led to the

alleged drowning of an Iraqi civilian. While we will probably never know how complex Sassaman's situation was or the other actions he considered, military leaders can study this case to learn how to apply adaptive leadership to future situations.

**Using triggers.** As FM 6-22 states, "Deciding when to adapt is equally important as how to adapt."<sup>25</sup> The final tenet of adaptive leadership is the ability to trigger changes accordingly to meet new requirements. Much like using a triggering event to decide when to attack a column of tanks with artillery, knowing when to make changes in operations is critical in complex missions like stability operations.

In the contemporary operating environment, the adaptive leader should balance force and restraint. The environment's complexity might suggest a peaceful solution in one circumstance and a violent solution in a very similar circumstance. Because every situation is different, a leader may never use the same tactic twice. However, a leader who has correctly assessed the conditions and determined the critical elements for success under the circumstances will be in a better position to know what events will require what response from his organization.

Another important element in determining the mark for change is the leader's ability to assess his strengths and weaknesses and those of his organization.<sup>26</sup> If he knows his organization has a tendency to resort to violence, he ought to program more restraint to prevent unnecessary escalations of violence. Conversely, he should also assess his Soldiers' tendency for restraint in certain circumstances to ensure they appropriately escalate actions. Because of the rapidly changing operating environment, a commander's best method to assess his unit in this regard is to observe them during training. A commander needs to develop realistic scenarios that test his organization's ability to progress rapidly from restraint to violence. These scenarios will develop Soldiers' discipline and ability to interpret triggers. Such training also allows a commander to

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practice visualizing potential actions based on his organization's level of competence.

Like other deploying units, the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, conducted training exercises in preparation for combat.<sup>27</sup> During their NTC rotation, Sassaman and his staff had probably refined their targeting procedures for close air support, army aviation, and artillery but spent little, if any, time considering how to adapt the organization for a counterinsurgency fight. This oversight was largely a result of the Army's focus on the conventional fight. Once in Iraq, Sassaman employed his forces in a conventional manner instead of adapting to the operating environment. His primary trigger was insurgent violence. For example, if violence erupted, he regularly ordered his Soldiers to detain Sunni sheiks and imprison Iraqis who provided bad intelligence. When insurgent violence against American Soldiers escalated, Sassaman responded by escalating violence in turn.<sup>28</sup> From the evidence available, it appears that Sassaman never adapted his tactics to the changing environment. Rather, he merely applied various levels of punishment in an attempt to deter violence.

After Sassaman's Soldiers pushed the Iraqi civilians into the Tigris River, members of his unit acknowledged in interviews that Sassaman included such acts within the scope of the authorized use of nonlethal force. The Soldiers apparently acted in a manner that they felt was consistent with their commander's intent.<sup>29</sup> By failing to assess his unit's propensity for violence and set limits accordingly, Sassaman, in effect, allowed his subordinates to decide when and how they would respond to events they encountered during patrols, searches, or guard duty. In a conventional fight, Sassaman certainly would not have left the decision to request close air support on a column of tanks up to each one of his subordinate leaders. Had Sassaman considered the changes in the environment, assessed his unit's strengths and weaknesses, and established a balance between force and restraint suitable for the types of events his Soldiers encountered, he might have avoided the leadership failure that led to his resignation.

## **How Do Army Officers Become Adaptive Leaders?**

Sassaman was in a challenging situation in the violence-riddled region surrounding Balad, Iraq. Because we have not experienced the daily events that he did, it is difficult to pass judgment on each aspect of his operation. Clearly, scheming to withhold information during an investigation is wrong. But the value in this analysis is in considering how we might have acted in a similar situation. Would we have encircled a village with barbed wire if one of our Soldiers had been killed? Would we have responded to violence with escalating violence in every case, or would we have considered other options and adapted as necessary? We need to be able to adapt so that we can make the best possible decisions when faced with challenges.

First, we should "learn to adapt by adapting."<sup>30</sup> We ought to put ourselves in challenging, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable situations. As a young staff officer, I conducted many movement-to-contact missions in training. In almost every case, the operations order required the forward passage of a brigade combat team to continue the fight, but I do not recall actually executing this phase of the operation. Instead, the order to conduct a forward passage of lines was followed by brief radio silence and the inevitable "end ex" call to signal the conclusion of the mission. I always wondered why we never executed what appeared to be the most challenging part of the mission. In retrospect, we certainly did not have the money or maneuver space to conduct the operation with a full brigade, but the squadron could have used a smaller force to replicate the challenges involved in passing a unit forward while in contact. I now realize that we probably did not conduct the passage because it fell into the "too-hard-to-do" category. As a result, we sacrificed a great training opportunity by not placing ourselves in unfamiliar or uncomfortable territory. As leaders, when we train we should seek challenging situations for our organizations and ourselves, or we will fail to take the first step toward becoming adaptive leaders.

Second, we should learn to "lead across cultures."<sup>31</sup> We will probably always fight as a joint and multinational coalition, so we should actively seek opportunities to train and work with other services and other nations. When those opportunities are available, we

should make the effort to embrace and learn our sister services' and our allies' culture. In Iraq, we will continue to work with an interagency presence, so we need to capitalize on opportunities to learn the interagency business. In short, we should strive to attain as much cultural knowledge as possible to adapt and succeed on today's battlefield.

Finally, we ought to seek challenges.<sup>32</sup> We should maintain proficiency in our individual branches, but the ability to understand other aspects of the profession of arms is critical to our long-term success. We should look for tough and unusual assignments and find new and unique ways to challenge our organizations. As FM 6-22 states, the ability to adapt increases with breadth of experience.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

When we can recognize change in the operating environment, assess its critical elements, and modify our own actions to adapt to the change, we become adaptive leaders who can excel in today's counterinsurgency fight.

The story of LTC Nate Sassaman offers only one example of why we need adaptable leaders. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan will not end in the near future, and other opportunities will likely present themselves as we wage the War on Terrorism. We should not disregard the lessons we have learned about conventional warfare, for as soon

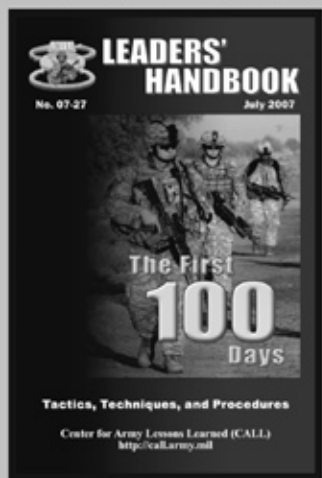
as we dismiss the concept, we may find ourselves preparing to wage a conventional war. Rather, we need to be proficient in every facet of our profession, regardless of how unlikely the requirement to use the proficiency might be. That, in essence, is what an adaptive leader does. **MR**

## NOTES

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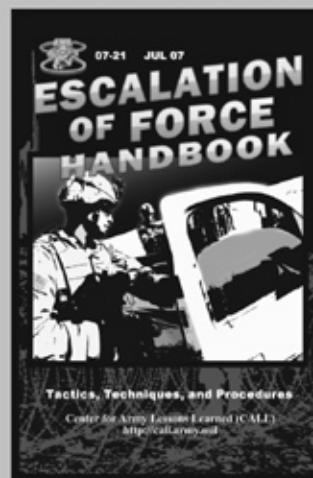


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