



# Reassessing Army Leadership in the 21st Century

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PHOTO: U.S. Army 2d LT Chang Ahn and MAJ David McCulley, 5th Battalion, 82d Field Artillery Regiment, update perimeter maps at Joint Base Balad, Iraq, 11 September 2008. The unit is introducing security force airmen to the base's outer perimeter prior to the airmen taking responsibility of the area from the Army unit. (U.S. Air Force, SSGT Aaron Allmon)

**J**UST AS IT RECONSIDERED its view of Army operations with FM 3-0, the Army should reassess its leadership philosophy to account for evolutions in U.S. society and the 21st century's complex, uncertain operating environment. While Army leadership and leader development doctrine has matured in the last two years, the Army has yet to account fully for modern demands on its leaders and changes in society at large. Despite efforts by leaders like retired General Eric Shinseki to evaluate leader development programs and then examine organizational culture as it affects leadership and leader development, our doctrine and practices remain deeply rooted in historical traditions and heavily biased by relatively sophomoric assumptions about what leadership is and how it is best practiced.<sup>1</sup> We lack critical reflection on the subject—an appreciation of other ways to look at leadership and leader development. We need to understand *why* our leadership doctrine is the way it is rather than simply *what* it is. This article examines several aspects of the Army's view on leadership in the 21st century and sets forth some recommendations for change to better prepare Army leaders for current and future operations.

After returning from my second deployment to Iraq in less than three years, I was lucky to get a break as a young major—a chance to catch up with my

family, exchange ideas with my peers, reflect on my experiences in the Army over the past ten years, and make sense of all that I had seen, done, learned, and now believed. I spent almost a year surrounded by my contemporaries—successful mid-grade Army officers with similar backgrounds, comparable but varied recent experiences, and contrasting but complementary ideas about the military profession. We studied at one of the Army’s finest intellectual institutions with military and civilian instructors who are experts in their fields. Some were academics, some practitioners. Yet all of them taught in a way that encouraged us, the students, to find our own answers—to question our underlying assumptions, consider other perspectives on what we thought we already knew, and work collaboratively rather than competitively toward our learning goals. And while we studied many topics, the subject of leadership was at the core of our curriculum.

Most would assume I am writing about Intermediate-Level Education at the Command and General Staff School in Fort Leavenworth. Actually, I am writing about my year at West Point in the Eisenhower Leader Development Program as part of the Army’s Advanced Civil Schooling (ACS) program. The leader development program, a cooperative effort between the United States Military Academy and Columbia University in New York City, prepares West Point’s Tactical Officers for their roles as mentors to thousands of future military leaders. When most people outside of West Point hear about the program, they infer by the name that it is intended to develop students as military leaders. While this is true, the inference does not capture what I think is the leader development program’s more significant goal: to make us better developers of leaders and ultimately more grounded in the subject of leadership.

As I think about leadership in the Army’s current operating environment, this distinction becomes

more and more important. I learned a great deal about leadership during my year at West Point, not because the program taught me leadership, but because it helped me to better understand what I observed, practiced, and experienced as a leader in the Army prior to attending.

Despite recent evolutions in our Army’s leadership doctrine, the Army continues to practice and teach (or not teach) leadership the same way it has for decades. Most in the Army still fail to grasp the nuances of what leadership *is*, what it means to *develop leaders*, and what it means to *be* a leader. For example, I wonder how the concept of leadership as a “social construct” would sit with most Army leaders?<sup>2</sup>

My intent is not to disparage the Army’s leadership doctrine, its leaders, or its leader development programs. Nor is it my intent to discredit the Command and General Staff College’s leadership curriculum. The institutions, people, and programs that promulgate the Army’s ideas on leadership are of the highest caliber—envied, studied, and imitated around the world and in many sectors of life. But they could be better and, in view of changes in our society and the increasing complexity of current and future operating environments, they *need* to be better. The Army needs to reassess its views on leadership to ensure those views remain relevant, and it needs to better express its leadership philosophy. Furthermore, the Army should consider how it might inculcate leadership in the context of current and future operating environments, rather than relying on historical tradition.

FM 3-0 articulated what had already happened in Army operations and operating environments. The Army must do the same with FM 6-22. The Army does not need to replace its previous paradigms, but it should add capabilities, skills, and knowledge to them and re-examine how it communicates its leadership philosophy across the doctrinal, organizational, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facility (DOTMLPF) domains to ensure consistency in description, practice, and reinforcement.

FM 6-22, *Army Leadership*, provides a modern, comprehensive view of leaders (the people and their qualities), leadership (its actions and the process), and related subjects such as counseling and team-building. However, the view is incomplete, and the message is not evident in practice throughout the

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Army. Furthermore, descriptions that really define management characterize FM 6-22's discussion of leadership. Fundamentally, the Army lacks the following:

- Critical reflection on our assumptions about leadership.
- Appropriate emphasis on leadership as a skill and subject that needs to be continually discussed and developed throughout the Army.
- Consistency of what we espouse for leadership when looking at our practice, systems, and doctrine across the Army at large.

In general terms, the Army could improve its leadership philosophy through internal discussion and dialogue, external comparison, inculcation and practical application of its leadership philosophy, and a comprehensive review of how leadership is reflected in Army systems and doctrine.

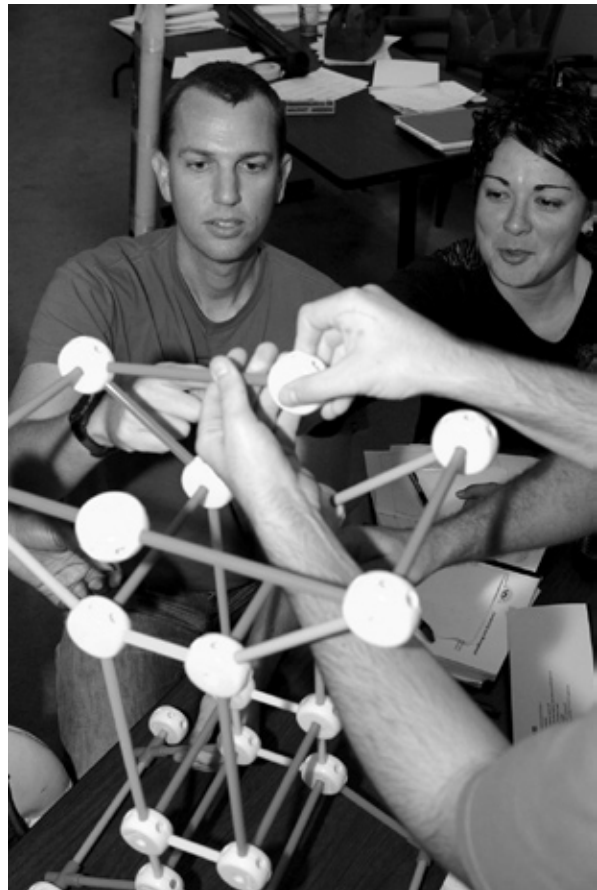
## Discussion

First, we need to encourage worthwhile discussion about leadership across the Army. What leadership is, how leaders are developed, and how leaders influence people and organizations are subjects that require an ongoing conversation, and thus almost defy the notion of doctrine. The Army's institutions fail to address the subject of leadership adequately, let alone encourage debate about its underlying assumptions or methods to improve it. As Sergeant Major of the Army Richard Kidd put it, our doctrine implies that "Soldiers learn to be good leaders from good leaders."<sup>3</sup> This is certainly true and probably one of the best ways to learn about leadership, but it assumes that every Soldier will be lucky enough to have a good leader to mentor him or her. More important, it does not recognize the importance of sensemaking—a process in which Soldiers practice leadership, learn what leaders should be, and reflect upon their practice and observation to turn experience into knowledge. Traditional biases permeate the Army's leadership philosophy, primarily because we study ourselves and past military leaders almost exclusively as the basis for improving leadership doctrine and education. This leaves us with a socially constructed version of Army leadership.<sup>4</sup>

The Army's leadership philosophy perpetuates assumptions that carry little credence outside the military today. Its hierarchical structure and promotion system imply that age and experience

automatically produce greater knowledge and ability—that a senior-ranking person is inherently superior to a subordinate. The Army's leadership model is imbued with trait theories, emphasizing the significance of the person and qualities like "physical presence" instead of the process (e.g. communication, collaboration, and organizational change). The Army's system values current knowledge over continued learning, promotes decision over consensus, and often describes leadership in terms that really equate to management (i.e. unilateral influence from the leader to the led, rather than an ongoing interaction that creates a relationship between people).

Discussions of leadership often turn quickly to the issue of "vision," which many believe is lacking



U.S. Army, SSG Emily Russell

**Coast Guard Reserve Petty Officer 2d Class Marc Slagle works with an inter-service team to build a tower out of Tinker Toys as part of a class exercise that helps service members to identify various alternative leadership strategies, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, November 2008. While the course was designed specifically for Coast Guard members and is mandatory for rank advancement, the class was open to all Joint Task Force Guantanamo service members.**



## ***Traditional biases permeate the Army's leadership philosophy, primarily because we study ourselves...***

in today's Army. While most in the Army agree that the leaders for whom they have worked displayed Army values, demonstrated leader attributes, and exhibited impressive levels of competence and knowledge, many insist that something is still missing. The why, the purpose, the intent—or more broadly—the communication of vision is vague, insincere, or absent. Given the complexity of today's operating environment, the message has become much more important than the person. The narrowing distance between strategic vision and personal decision requires leaders at all levels to understand where they are going and why. The Army does not adequately address this reality. It relies instead on its hierarchical organization and disciplined culture, and loses much of its organic motivation and momentum.

### **Comparison**

The study of leadership in the Army is more often a study of military history and biographies of great military leaders than an education on leadership itself. While the Army has produced some great leaders and its history is replete with numerous examples of strong leadership, critical examination of the subject usually stalls at the study of people, their characteristics, and their actions. It never really examines how they came to be great leaders or what made their leadership successful. In our quest to be great leaders, we try to imitate “great men.” Rather than trying to develop effective leaders, we leave the success of our future leaders up to “natural selection.” We seem oblivious to the fact that self-study alone is deficient when seeking self-improvement. Army culture is one of arrogance and exclusion when it comes to considering others' views on leadership; it implies that other “types” of leadership are not appropriate and that the Army's version of leadership is ahead of the curve. In fact, the study of leadership outside the military (and sometimes in the military's “academic circles”) has so matured that many current Army assumptions about leadership are the intellectual equivalent of saying “the earth is the center of the universe.” We compensate for

failings in our system by reinforcing its hierarchical structures and promoting a culture of discipline and obedience. One might ask if the Army is actually better at producing *followers* than *leaders*. Consider how much the Army's leadership paradigm depends on people following orders. (For more on this theme, you could read “Knowing When to Salute.”)<sup>5</sup>

The Army can benefit from critical reflection on leadership from some unconventional sources. In the 1920s, Mary Parker Follett presented a view of leadership that compares well with traditional military models. She believed that people are connected through ever-evolving relationships in which their differences serve as fuel for continuous growth of the individual and the group.<sup>6</sup> She coined the phrase “power with, rather than power over.”<sup>7</sup> Follett recognized the importance of human relations in organizations long before most others acknowledged it. She emphasized leadership's human aspects, conflict resolution, and learning from differences.<sup>8</sup> She asserted that one does not have to be aggressive to be a leader. She described power not as a zero-sum situation where one person forces another to do his will or gives up power to another person, but as a capability that increases when people work together.<sup>9</sup>

Follett noted that leaders must also have vision and that leadership was the same as teaching. She believed in the *invisible leader*—the *purpose* of the organization:

There is a conception of leadership gaining ground today very different from our old notion . . . It is a conception very far removed from that of the leader-follower relation. With that conception you had to be either

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a leader or a learner. Today our thinking is tending less and less to be confined within the boundaries of those alternatives. There is the idea of a reciprocal leadership. There is also the idea of a partnership in following, of following the invisible leader—the common purpose. The relation of the rest of the group to the leader is not a passive one, and I think teachers see this more clearly than most people, and therefore in their teachings are doing more than teaching; they are helping to develop one of the fundamental conceptions of human relations.<sup>10</sup>

Follett observed that leaders must see the whole situation and identify patterns, leading in a cooperative rather than a coercive way, helping the organization toward a collective goal, setting priorities, focusing the team, and organizing the experience of the group to meet objectives. In discussing leadership, Follett recognized followership as an understudied discipline “of the utmost importance, but which has been far too little considered.”<sup>11</sup> In her mind, followers should help the leader maintain control of the situation by communicating problems and failures, telling the truth, and taking bad decisions back to leaders for resolution.

Many in the Army would question what we could possibly learn about leadership from a schoolteacher writing in the 1920s. However, Follett’s assertions, while radical and controversial in their time, are widely accepted among those who study leadership today. Yet the Army balks at such democratic and egalitarian notions of leadership. Should we not at least consider the possibilities of such a philosophy in certain situations within the Army?

There are unconventional examples within the military as well. Lieutenant Colonel Evans Carlson, who led one of only two Marine Raider Battalions in World War II, based his leadership philosophy on observations he made while accompanying the Chinese Communist Party’s 8th Route Army during the 1930s. He promoted a leadership style based on absolute clarity of purpose, the highest of ethical standards, consensus seeking, group sensemaking, camaraderie, decentralized decision making, and initiative:<sup>12</sup>

In war, as in the pursuits for peace, the human element is of prime importance. Human nature is much the same the world over, and human beings everywhere respond

to certain fundamental stimuli. So, if men have confidence in their leaders, if they are convinced that the things for which they endure and fight are worthwhile, if they believe the effort they are making contributes definitely to the realization of their objectives, then their efforts will be voluntary, spontaneous, and persistent.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Carlson’s leadership style was controversial—as was his life. The fact that he held such admiration for the Communist Chinese made him suspect in the days of McCarthyism following his death. But what could the Army as an institution apply from his example?

## Inculcation and Practice

The Army has yet to fully realize improved leadership doctrine in practice. Leadership continues to be inculcated through stories, personal example, and summaries in doctrine, but these methods do not offer a thorough education and deliberate practice. Leadership emerges as something that just happens as the Army operates, rather than something Soldiers must discuss and practice.

To further complicate matters, the Army does not always practice what it preaches; Army leaders do not always epitomize what they espouse. The Army espouses values-based axiological leadership, but it employs classical organizational management systems and practices. Because the Army has failed to differentiate the two subjects, most assume that leadership and management are synonymous. But leadership is ethical; management is inherently practical.

The Army esteems command decisions over consensus building as perhaps it should most of the time, but this is not necessarily true all the time. Many of the historical underpinnings for our leadership archetype are unsuitable for the complexity and uncertainty of the modern operating environment. Some of our most prolific catch-phrases expose our continued bias: “The staff exists to help the commander make decisions,” “No plan survives

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U.S. Army, MAJ Michael Indovina

**U.S. Army military police Soldier, SGT Janet Ybarra, 18th Military Police Brigade and Multi-National Division-Baghdad, prepares her squad to depart for a mission in Baghdad, Iraq.**

first contact,” “A good solution now is better than a great solution later,” and “Lead from the front.” These platitudes reflect admiration for decision, the commander’s *coup d’oeil* or intuition, and heroic leadership. Might not there be times when the following phrases are more appropriate: “The commander exists to help the staff (or his/her subordinates) come to a consensus” or “Lead by purpose and vision rather than by presence”? Could “No plan survives first contact” sometimes be an excuse for poor leadership vision, allowing us to quickly revert to direct management of the situation? And what if the immediate solution has lasting strategic consequences? Perhaps consultation, deliberation, and patience have a place in decision. If the Army’s appreciation of leadership is to remain relevant, we must understand and communicate the difference between tactical maneuver decision making and complex problem solving.

## **Comprehensive Review**

The Army ought to ensure that all of its systems, processes, and practices encourage or are consistent with our espoused forms of leadership. Of primary concern is the tendency towards manage-

ment instead of leadership that modern technology brings with its increasing real-time situational awareness and its improvement of our ability to communicate. While FM 6-0 asserts that mission command is “the Army’s preferred concept of command and control,” our systems and procedures often show a proclivity towards detailed command, reinforcing real-time management rather than anticipative leadership.<sup>14</sup>

The following story, told by Air Force Lieutenant General Mike Short (16th Air Force Commander at the time) about a conversation between an A-10 pilot (who by happenstance was the general’s son) and forward air controllers (FAC) in Kosovo, highlights just how prone the military is to micro-manage as technology improves:

About 5 o’clock in the afternoon, we had live Predator video of three tanks moving down the road in Serbia and Kosovo. As most of you know, my son is an A-10 pilot, or he was at the time. We had a FAC [Forward Air Controller] overhead and General Clark [Gen. Wesley K. Clark, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)] had the same live Predator video that I had. “Mike, I want you to kill those tanks.” I quickly responded, I had something else in mind, “Boss, I’ll go after that for you.” When shift time came, [Major General] Garry Trexler was on the floor, finishing up in the daytime, and [Brigadier General Randy] Gelwix arrived to take the night shift. I was there because the SACEUR wanted those three tanks killed. We had a weapon school graduate on the phone talking direction to the FAC on the radio. Call went something like this: “A lot of interest in killing those tanks, 421. I’d like you to work on it.” “Roger.” Two or three minutes

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went by, and 421 clearly had not found those tanks. The young major's voice went up a bit and said, "ComAirSouth and SACEUR are real interested in killing those tanks. Have you got them yet?" "Negative." About two more minutes went by and the weapons school graduate played his last card. "General Short really wants those tanks killed." And a voice came back that I've heard in my house for the better part of 30 years and he said, "God damn it, Dad, I can't see the fucking tanks!"<sup>15</sup>

This example shows how, unless we make concerted efforts to reinforce the principles of mission command, we run the risk of contradicting key aspects of a decentralized leadership philosophy as technology continues to improve. A critical self-assessment would likely conclude that the Army spends a disproportionate amount of time and resources giving commanders the ability to see and know everything that is happening within their organization and little time and resources to communicate their own intent and situational understanding to their organization.

There are of course significant improvements in Army leadership to be realized with new technology. An example today is our ability to network people together in collaborative knowledge-sharing ventures like the Battle Command Knowledge System (BCKS) and other communities of practice. Because of systems like the BCKS, people in the Army can now assume a leadership role in one or more fields or areas of interest outside their formal hierarchical positions—unbounded by rank, geography, or duty assignment. Communities of practice facilitate discussion, learning, and collaboration that skirt our bureaucratic systems and transcend the usual boundaries between officer and enlisted, practitioner and academic, or combat arms and

support. Members are generally valued more for their contributions and demonstrated expertise than their rank or position. These organizations provide an example of alternative forms of leadership that can (and do) exist within the conventional military today. Such organizations should be formally incorporated into our leadership doctrine to account for their utility in supporting and improving the Army's leadership climate.

## Conclusion

Army leadership in the 21st century will likely be characterized by collaboration and cooperation as much as it is by direction and decision. In addition to leading other Soldiers, we will operate by, with, and through people and organizations outside the Army. Therefore, Army leaders must recognize that there are different cultures of leadership, know how to adjust their own styles and approaches to accommodate those views, and be comfortable working within and around other-than-Army organizations.

What should our leadership philosophy be? Again, the answer is contingent on what operating environment the Army will face, what roles we will assume, and what outcomes will be expected from us. To agree on this requires a shared vision for our future—something the Army is still conflicted about despite efforts like the publication of a new FM 3-0. Perhaps this dissonance remains because, as with many things, the Army's vision is contradicted by observation and practice across the DOTMLPF. Our leadership philosophy should reflect this future vision, describing what Army leadership *should* be to meet our future needs, rather than reasserting what Army leadership *has been* in the past.

The concept of leadership has to be understood for its multifaceted and symbiotic nature. It can no longer be thought of as a distinct or concise subject. It is much more than simply the interaction between the leader and the led, and it relies on much more than the attributes and competencies of the leader to be effective. Leadership should be distinguished from management, in principle and in practice, recognizing that sometimes the people best suited to take on a leadership role will not be those with the most rank. Our culture should be one that encourages life-long learning, diversification, and continuous self-development as the foundation

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for leadership rather than deference to authority or rank. Leadership must be considered in an organizational context—as a reciprocal and perpetual process—ideally a collective agreement between people about the purpose they are working towards. Leadership is influenced by culture—multiple aspects of culture beyond just the organization’s. It requires an appreciation of adult learning methodologies and organizational change in its education and implementation. It would be more effective if it considered things like differences in personality, group dynamics, and conflict resolution rather than assuming that we are all the same, with rank and hierarchy mediating group processes and interpersonal problems. Most importantly, leadership should be viewed in its proper context—with an understanding that what was once effective military leadership may not remain effective in the future, a realization that we are prone to self-fulfilling constructs about leadership that might hamper us in the long run, and an agreement that to truly be effective military leaders we should extend our quest to learn about leadership beyond our own profession.

The Army should conduct a thorough reassessment of its leadership philosophy across the DOTMLPF to ensure we have appropriately defined leadership and leader development within our organization and have planned, resourced, and implemented systems to encourage that leadership philosophy throughout the Army. This reassessment should be ruthless in its skepticism, rigorous in its objectivity, and it should strive for multiple perspectives. It should maintain open-mindedness to determine whether the Army’s leadership philosophy is actually as good as it can be, or just a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Army should work less to differentiate its own particular leadership philosophy and instead try to educate its people on the subject of leadership in a broader sense. In thinking about the realities of our current operating environment, we should appreciate what leadership means in a civilian, Joint, interagency and multi-national context.

Finally, it is important to note that what we often refer to simply as *leadership* is in fact *Army Leadership*, just as it appears in the title of FM 6-22. It is as effective as it is, in large part, due to the Army’s organizational culture and formal underpinnings such as command authority and the Uniform Code for Military Justice (UCMJ). In the 21st century, Army leaders cannot assume they will have things like command authority, unity of command, military protocol, military law, or even American cultural norms to facilitate the leadership process around them or within their organizations. Much of what we take for granted in leadership is lost when working with other organizations, nationalities, or cultures. Rather than insisting on a command relationship that makes our system work artificially, or imposing our cultural norms upon others to make them more suited to our style, we might just need to better understand leadership in a purer sense. Rather than rely on a command relationship that makes our system work or imposes our own cultural norms upon others, we might just need to better understand leadership in a purer sense and practice, simply, Leadership! **MR**

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#### NOTES

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