Complexity Leadership

New Conceptions for Dealing with Soldier Suicides

Robert M. Hill, Ed.D.

I no longer believe that organizations are inherently unmanageable in this world of constant flux and unpredictability. Rather, I believe that our present ways of organizing are outmoded, and that the longer we remain entrenched in our old ways, the further we move from . . . wonderful breakthroughs in understanding that the world of science calls "elegant." The layers of complexity, the sense of things being beyond our control and out of control, are but signals of our failure to understand a deeper reality of organizational life, and of life in general.

— *Margaret Wheatley*[1]

I N 2009, THE Army suffered roughly 160 suicides and over 1,700 attempted suicides. As of August 2010, the Army had reported 145 suicides, 80 of which were active-duty and 65 reservist.[2] The reasons for these suicides remain elusive. According to an Army study released in 2010, nearly 80 percent of those committing suicide had deployed to a combat zone only once or not at all, suggesting that stress factors other than those connected with combat are involved.[3]

The Army has traditionally viewed issues related to morale, quality of life, and training as leadership challenges. Field Manual 6-22, *Army Leadership,* identifies eight core leader competencies, among them the ability to create a positive, inclusive, and open environment in which soldiers believe they are valued for their contribution to the unit and its mission. Yet the increase in suicides raises the question whether such environments exist in sufficient number. A *Time* magazine article profiling a Houston recruiting battalion's high incidence of suicides suggests there is definite room for improvement.[4]

The purpose of this article is not to argue that the steady rise in suicides is attributable to a failure in leadership. I believe that leaders at every level are genuinely striving to confront this issue; however, I do argue that unless the Army considers and adopts new forms of leadership, suicides will continue to haunt it. While the Army cannot prevent every suicide, the aim must be to reduce the number dramatically, and new visions of leadership are essential to the task.

The Army prides itself on cultivating leaders capable of dealing with some of humankind's most intractable problems. Yet its views on leadership are

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The Army encourages Soldiers to reach out, talk, and listen when they need help. (Photo Credit: SSGT Carlos Burger).

surprisingly outdated. As Christopher Paparone notes, the military is wedded to a Newtonian worldview that is increasingly irrelevant.[5] In order to understand why our conceptions of leadership need to be expanded, we must examine the evolution of thinking about organizations in which leadership is a fundamental component.

The Evolution of Organizational Theory

Views of leadership are typically aligned with the way organizations are framed. Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal delineate four such frames—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.[6] These frames offer four different vantage points from which to analyze organizations. They reflect a historical and evolving chronology of thinking about organizations.

Through time, organizations and our conceptions of them have become increasingly complex. For example, we might symbolize an organization as a brain.[7] In the past, if organizations were understood purely in mechanistic or structural ways, then the notion of comparing them to the human brain would have been rejected. Either this or the conception of the human brain was far simpler than it is today. Revolutionary advances in science and technology, especially information technology, have made possible the *complexification* of thinking about organizations and leadership. Not only are vastly more complex frames, metaphors, and models available today, but the objects to which they are applied are more complex, because they can be investigated and modeled more complexly. It is useful to see how this evolution has occurred.

Structural frame. Two assumptions undergird the structural frame. Organizations achieve their missions more efficiently when roles are clarified and specialized (division of labor) and subsequently coordinated and integrated. The structural frame also relies heavily on hierarchy as its organizing and coordinating principle, on top of which presides a single individual. In other words, role specialization includes the creation of a leadership role with responsibilities that cannot be shared without risking the effectiveness of the organization.

Leadership theories tied to this view of organizations tend to reinforce the equation that leadership equals leader. The leader is the one around whom the organization revolves, so understanding leadership becomes a case study of leaders themselves–their traits, habits, and behaviors. Among these behaviors is the ability to orchestrate the efforts of subordinates at all levels, either through quid pro quo transactions or by modeling desired conduct. According to Gary Yukl, the challenge with this *heroic* view of both organization and leadership is that it overly simplifies the complex dynamics involved, such as intervening variables, external factors, the dynamics of power, and situational variables, among others.[8]

Human resource frame. If the structural frame focuses on the skeleton of an organization, the human resource frame looks at its organs—the living, breathing apparatus that gives an organization its unique life. The human resource frame begins to broaden leadership possibilities away from mechanical, managerial, or transactional routines and relationships to situational and transformational ones, although the locus of leadership still remains the exclusive province of the formal leader.

Within the human resource frame, leadership tends to emerge as a function of how the people within an organization are viewed or framed from the perspective of the formal leader. Donald McGregor's Theory X/Theory Y provides a case in point. Theory X assumes that people are inherently lazy, lack ambition, and want or need to be led. Theory Y assumes much the opposite—that people are self-directed, ambitious, and need only broad guidance. If a leader operates from a Theory X perspective, then he is more likely to lead in a directed way, using tight controls and perhaps coercion. If he operates from a Theory Y perspective, then his chief task is to "arrange organizational conditions so that people can achieve their own goals best by directing their efforts toward organizational rewards."[9]

Other theories of leadership arising from this frame are essentially variations on the theme that the way leaders view subordinates dictates how they will lead them. Theory X supports more transactional leadership, while Theory Y paves the way for servant and transformational leadership, among others. Situational or contingent leadership is essentially leaders adapting their leadership to fit both the person led and the situation in which leadership occurs. Finally, as leaders evolve their viewpoints about others in their organizations (along the Y rather than the X axis), seeing them

less as subordinates than as peers, more complex conceptualizations of leadership emerge, among them participative, democratic, and invitational leadership.[10]

Political frame. The structural frame looked at the skeleton of an organization or its physical infrastructure. The human resource frame looked at the people inside. The political frame adds the dynamic of broader human interaction and explores facets of organizations that emerge from these interactions. Rather than being a mere collective of discrete living beings, the organization itself begins to take on attributes of a living organism. The assumptions supporting this frame are that organizations are "complex webs of individual and group interests."[11] As soon as there are two people in a room, differences exist and competition begins. Leadership becomes a matter of negotiating these differences and allocating scarce resources.

The political frame concerns issues of power, mediation, and agenda setting. Leadership within this frame involves understanding the dynamics of power and how to achieve, maintain, and engage it. It further involves an understanding of coalition building and consensus building. Within the political frame, the potential for turning legitimate authority on its head becomes very real. Rigid and clear rules of engagement within the structural frame become problematic. Those on the bottom can wield as much if not more power than those at the top. Leadership becomes less a function of the leader's qualities or his views of subordinates and more a function of the ongoing dynamic between them.

Symbolic frame. Enlarging the dynamic that exists between and among people within an organization—what Linda Lambert defines as its "spaces, fields or zones"—takes place in the symbolic frame.[12] These fields and zones channel the animating force of an organization, expressed in its culture, history, traditions, ceremonies, rituals, symbols, and metaphors. This frame widens the possibilities for leadership because it recognizes that leadership, "like energy, is not finite, not restricted by formal authority and power; it permeates a healthy culture and is undertaken by whoever sees a need or an opportunity."[13]

A key assumption governing the symbolic frame is that ambiguity and uncertainty are more widespread within organizations than we might imagine. People employ symbols and metaphor to "resolve confusion, increase predictability, find direction, and anchor hope and faith."[14] Within this frame, then, leadership becomes largely an act of sensemaking. While it is possible for the formal authority to attempt to make sense of things on behalf of the entire organization, the literature on the construction of meaning (which is essentially a process of learning) concludes that sensemaking is a collaborative process in which everyone has a role, both leader and follower, teacher and learner. In fact, in this frame, the line between leader and follower melts away, as everyone has similar traits and possibilities—simultaneously leader and follower—and leadership is a quality of the entire organization rather than any single individual within it.

Images and metaphors. In contrast to Bolman and Deal's four frames, Gareth Morgan employs metaphor to understand organizations: "Metaphor encourages us to think and act in new ways. It extends horizons of insight and creates new possibilities."[15] Thus, it allows for more expanded and complex conceptualizations of leadership from the outset. Morgan expounds on eight metaphors in his *Images of Organization,* but makes clear that many more metaphors are possible. Each metaphor only captures one facet of an organization to any significant degree. "Metaphors create insight. But they also distort. They have strengths. But they also have limitations."[16] Leaders interested in understanding their organizations better are encouraged by Morgan to examine them through as many metaphors as possible, the act of which speaks to the notion that knowledge, even self-knowledge, is both constructed and iterative.

Frames, Metaphors, and Sensemaking: An Integrated Heuristic

Paparone effectively synthesizes the various constructs discussed so far. In his article, "On Metaphors We Are Led By," he investigates how metaphor "shapes understanding in an increasingly ambiguous world of meaning. Indeed the rhetorical work of . . . those [he calls] 'thought leaders' . . . is largely the management of meaning."[17] He argues that these thought leaders are still prone to outdated thinking, and his framework offers a means to avoid

the pitfalls of unreflective practice and ensure the imaginative use of metaphor.

Paparone's heuristic categorizes metaphors by the worldviews from which they arise. These categories fall into four quadrants defined by two continua: objective-subjective and simple-complicated. Bolman and Deal's four frames are overlaid onto this construct, as seen in Figure 1. While not exactly correspondent, the correlation between them demonstrates the degree to which thinking about organizations, leadership, and meaning-making is convergent and congruous.

Paparone states that within the complicated-subjective quadrant "thought leaders feed on metaphors from the other three views of reality while they attempt to impose their view of reality . . . their sensemaking, on others."[18] This article modifies Paparone's thought that sensemaking (what he also refers to as sensegiving) resides solely within the mind and actions of leaders who indoctrinate others with their sense of things. In a complicated-subjective world in which suicides are rampant, a more diffused and pluralistic process of sensemaking is needed.

By definition, diffused and pluralistic sensemaking only becomes possible when more people are involved in the process. Before exploring more expansive visions of organization and leadership, why we persist in privileging hierarchical structures and heroic leadership is worth examining.

Hierarchies and Heroes

The first reason that we adhere to hierarchical structures and heroic notions of leadership is that they conform to the prevailing and unchallenged worldview that leadership equals leader, a form of circular logic from which it is difficult to break free. Yukl argues that theories and conceptions of leadership are laden with biases. These theories "include the often implicit assumption that leadership is primarily about heroic individuals who possess essential traits and skills and use appropriate behaviors to motivate and develop effective dyadic relationships with subordinates."[19]

Too, heroic conceptions of leadership further reinforce historical power structures. A structural (Newtonian) worldview remains a way to justify the patriarchy and the patriarch. Theories of leadership

SUBJECTIVE

Human Resource Frame

Humanities and Fine Arts
This idea type includes history, journalism, case law, dance, music, painting, comedy, movies, sportcasting, fictional accounts, and other signs, symbols, and contextual descriptions of what happened or could happen.

3

Sensemaking
This quadrant represents the existence of competing constructions of reality created from the three sources of metaphor (located conceptually in the other three quadrants). Thought leaders attemt to indoctrinate sensemaking in others by borrowing terms from the other three quadrants.

4

Symbolic Frame

SIMPLE ← → **COMPLICATED**

2

1

Structural Frame

Newtonian Sciences
Based in the "Enlightenment," this quadrant includes "hard" science metaphors based in physics and represents the values of prediction, reductionism, replication, linear causality, and certainty; e.g., studies of physics, engineering, and architecture.

Post-Newtonian Sciences
This imagery is underpinned by complicated, mathematical views of emergence; it represents the values associated with unpredictability, holism, mutual causality, dynamic instability, relativity, complex biological systems, and concepts derived from chaos and complexity theories.
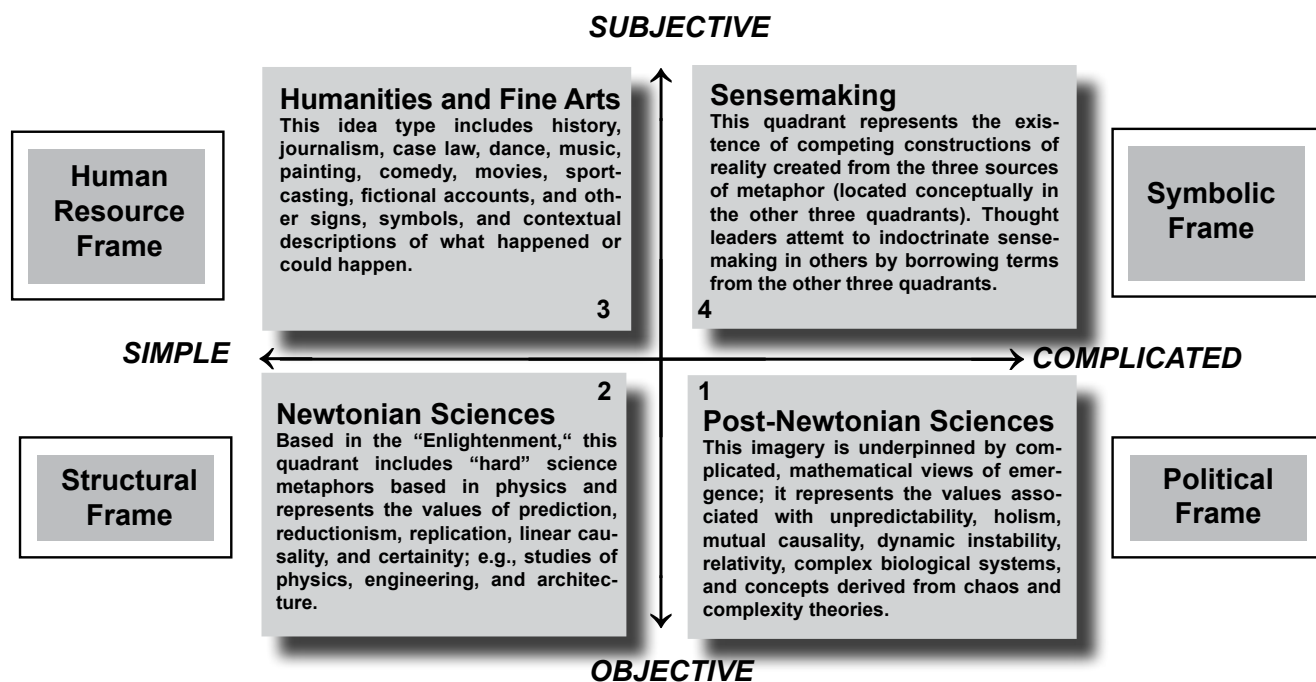
Political Frame

OBJECTIVE

Figure 1. Paparone's sensemaking heuristic overlaid with Bolman and Deal's four frames.

thereby tend to focus exclusively on individuals at the top of the pecking order, predominately men.

Another reason for viewing leadership heroically is the need for simplicity. Human beings strive to systematize the world's complexity. Without question, organizations and leadership are complex, so we tend to "exaggerate the importance of leaders in order to explain events in a way that fits [our] assumptions and implicit theories."[20] Yukl concludes we want to see and explain the world in rational terms when, in fact, experience is ambiguous, messy, and often incomprehensible.

The need for simplicity and rationality leads inexorably to the last and most compelling reason we cling to outmoded visions of leadership: the demand for accountability. Military leaders take to heart the dictum that they are responsible for everything their unit or team does or fails to do. This demand for responsibility and accountability often has legal implications, as in the case of those serving in command billets, but it arises from the same implicit biases and assumptions that undergird our long-held belief that leadership is, at its core, about the qualities and behaviors of the person at the top of the organization. The need for accountability carries with it the onerous implication that the formal leader can *touch everything* and *shape all outcomes*, which is a tenuous and even dangerous assumption. In the specific case of dealing with the increase in suicides, the time has come to consider alternative conceptions of leadership, ones that imbue entire units with shared accountability. The question arises whether the Army, as an institution, will permit such conceptions to flourish or flounder. The lives of our soldiers depend on how we answer this question.

Complexity Leadership

The 2008 revised edition of Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations,* was made necessary in large part because the "operational environment" had so radically changed. Among the important trends that FM 3-0 highlights as affecting the environment are globalization, technology, demographic changes, urbanization, resource demand and scarcity, climate change and natural disasters, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and failed or failing states.[21] In combination, they create a global environment of chaos and uncertainty, where predictability is rare, and linearity and determinism are increasingly irrelevant and dangerous forms of thinking.

The current global environment is chaotic and uncertain, complexity underpins every system and process, and determinism is no longer consistently operative. What are military leaders to do? Below are a number of strategies.

Think more complexly. Yaneer Bar-Yam argues that in order to exist and survive in a complex environment, organizations must think and behave complexly.[22] Pierpaolo Andriani and Giuseppina Passiante employ the metaphor of "open source" to define a leadership capacity that is available to all members of the organization and that continually balances stimulation and constraint. They argue that decisions have to be made at the level at which the relevant information resides and be distributed dynamically between top-down control and bottom-up percolation. In some instances, hierarchies may be necessary for purposes of accountability and responsibility but not to dictate how employees act and think. "Rather, complex leadership requires a system in which managers facilitate the speedy co-evolution of the organization (or part of it) with the relevant external environment."[23] Wilfred H. Drath states that the first step to dealing with complex problems may seem counterintuitive: to create even more complex capacity. "A complex capacity to respond means something different from just a more complicated process. It means a more varied, less predictable, more layered process capable of greater subtlety."[24]

In the information age, with open source models such as Wikipedia defining new forms of

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collaboration, organizations must quickly adapt similar models or risk irrelevancy. Co-evolution of the organization requires new structures of organizing, learning, and working new structures based on new ways of seeing. Kevin Kelly offers a number of metaphors that capture emergent organizational structures, among them networks, complex adaptive systems, swarm systems, "vivisystems," and collective systems.[25] All of these systems are highly diverse and diffuse. There is no clear organizing center, yet a sort of collective mind exists, nonetheless; Kelly terms it the invisible hand of control without authority. The network structure best adapts to a complex, information-saturated, and interconnected world:

> The only organization capable of unprejudiced growth, or unguided learning, is a network. All other topologies limit what can happen. A network swarm is all edges and therefore open ended any way you come at it. Indeed, the network is the least structured organization that can be said to have any structure at all. It is capable of infinite rearrangements, and

of growing in any direction without altering the basic shape of the thing, which is really no outward shape at all.[26]

For leaders who are used to hierarchical control, the struggle is how to master what Kelly terms "noncontrol," allowing the benefits of the network or swarm to thrive while, at the same time, minimizing its disadvantages.

Let go. Army Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (2008) posits that in a highly complex and uncertain environment, "predictability is rare, making centralized decision making and orderly processes ineffective."[27] It instructs leaders to delegate to the maximum degree possible in order to retain flexibility and initiative. In other words, formal leaders need to let go and empower leaders at every level to contribute based on their relevant and immediate knowledge. Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom argue that there is a "sweet spot" between the extremes of tightly controlled, hierarchical organizations and open-source, leaderless organizations.[28] Being active and diligent in pursuit of this sweet spot is an important task for
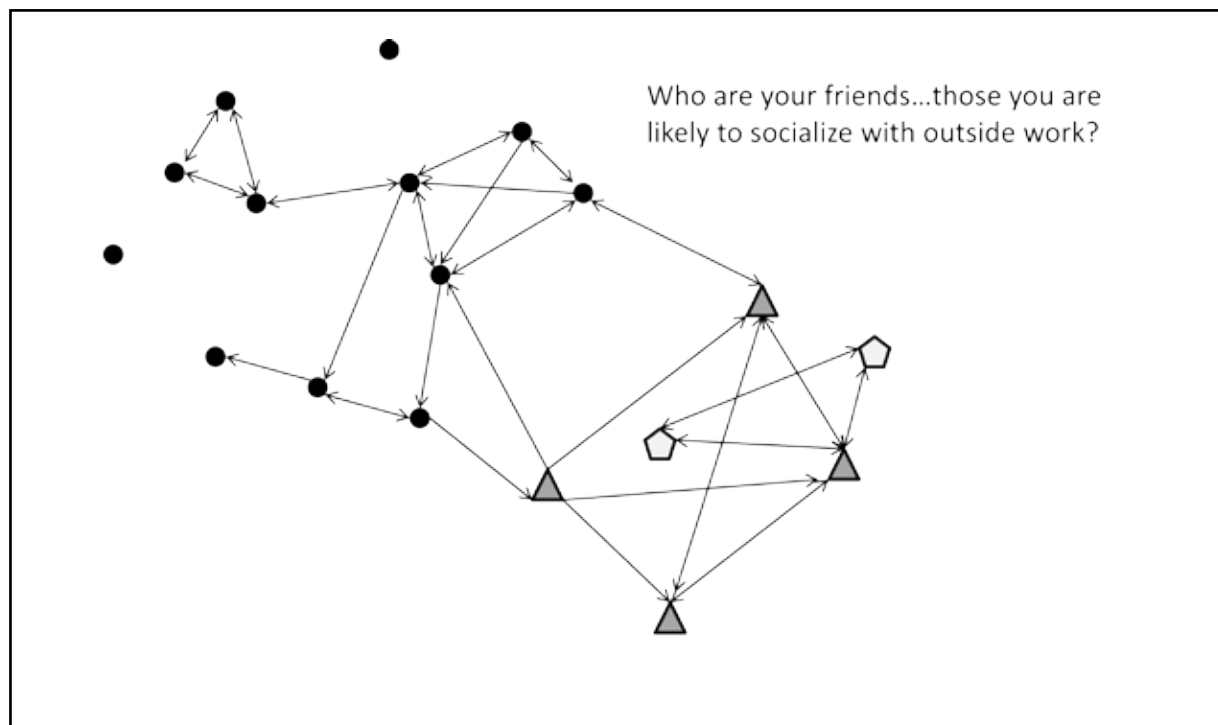
Figure 2. Example of a social network diagram, produced by the Organizational Risk Analyzer application that depicts a network centered on friendships. Icon coding is used to differentiate officers (pentagons), noncommissioned officers (triangles), and enlisted soldiers (circles).

leaders who seek the capacity-building capabilities for mission command.

Expand capacity at all levels. Letting go invariably leads to the expansion of leadership capacity throughout an organization. The inverse also proves true. When capacity expands, leaders are more readily able to let go. Lambert defines capacity as broad-based and skillful participation.[29] Managers must cultivate both. Drath calls on three capabilities to create complex capacity: shared sensemaking, connection, and navigation, the last of which is the ability to continually assess and course-correct toward an uncertain point on the horizon.[30] There is no known destination; rather, through interconnected and shared sensemaking, the organization learns to arrive at the right destination, or rather makes each destination along its route right for that moment and time.

Move toward profound simplicity. Karl E. Weick asserts that "we are all struggling with events that don't make sense."[31] A noted theorist on sensemaking during chaotic or disastrous events, Weick argues that in the face of uncertainty, individuals tend to grasp for old or ready-made solutions rather than become agile and attentive to new ones. People progress from superficial simplicity, to confused complexity, to profound simplicity. Superficial simplicity is often apparent in the impulse to flee in the face of chaos or to rush to quick explanations or causes. Confused complexity occurs when superficial explanations begin to break down and leaders attempt to control the uncontrollable. Profound simplicity is the recognition that complex problems demand complex solutions that can only come through a process of shared and evolving sensemaking. Profound simplicities are "seasoned simplicities, simplicities that have been tested by mentally simulating their consequences, simplicities that reaffirm what it means to be a human being."[32]

Profound simplicity echoes Eastern philosophical thought, which offers a countervailing view to the Western tradition that informs much of our thinking about sensemaking, decision making, and leadership. In the Western tradition, history is comprised of great acts, while in the Chinese tradition, history is continual transformation. In the former, the only way to deal with uncertainty is to take bold, decisive action, which is ephemeral.

In the latter, no seismic action is taken, but as François Jullien notes, efficacy is nonetheless achieved:

> For, in contrast to action that, even if it is prolonged, is necessarily momentary, the duration of transformation is extended; and it is this continuity that produces effects. Chinese thought constantly returns to this theme. However imperceptible the starting point, by slowly accentuating its propensity, one can end up with the most decisive results.[33]

Put another way, Chinese philosophy argues that rather than imposing effects on the environment, man must allow effects to impose themselves. Weick argues that dealing with complexity requires persistent sensemaking that equates to transformation: "Sensemaking is dynamic and requires continuous updating and reaccomplishment. As a leader, don't let people languish in the feeling, 'Now we have it figured out.' They don't have it figured out.'"[34] Dealing with the inexplicable involves telling stories about what is being faced and how to deal with it, but the stories constantly evolve based on new information. Profound simplicity means allowing these stories to unfold.

Start small. Eastern thought suggests that lasting change comes through continual small adjustments rather than intermittent major ones. Rather than taking decisive, bold action, leaders need to allow action to unfold organically and naturally. Weick argues that instead of thinking then doing, individuals must think *while* doing or think *in* doing: "All we have going for us is the tactic of stumbling into explanations that work and talking with others to see whether what we have stumbled into is in fact part of the answer."[35]

In brief, achieving Information Age leadership requires Army leaders to empower their organizations to self-learn and self-organize so that inherent and organic ways of dealing with a complex world can be harnessed more effectively. It means becoming a true learning organization and all that this entails. It means resisting the urge to over-control the environment and allowing for stumbling into answers, no matter how antithetical this letting go may seem to current ways of operating and leading. In most instances, it means

giving way to a capacity larger than self, a capacity formal leaders nonetheless help cultivate, expand, and sharpen.

Fictional Vignette: "I Don't Know"

The following vignette examines how this seeming paradox might be achieved and applied to the problem of rising suicide rates.

Lieutenant Colonel Walt Dickens shook his head from side to side. The day prior, a noncommissioned officer (NCO) in the battalion next to his hanged himself in his garage. Dickens had heard about it within hours and decided to have a battalionwide stand-down the next day. He now stood before Bravo Company (he would visit each company in succession), where Staff Sergeant Hitchens had asked him why this NCO had killed himself. "I don't know," Dickens replied. "That's why I wanted us to take some time today and maybe over the next few days and weeks to figure out how we ensure this doesn't happen in our unit. I'm going to stand in the back and just listen as you all talk out loud. Captain Clarke and First Sergeant Hodrick are going to facilitate the discussion. Nothing is off the table. Don't hold back. Speak your minds. Clarke, the first sergeant and I don't have the answers to this tragedy. But, I am confident that we—all of us here in this room—do. So help us figure this out." The members of Bravo Company nodded somberly.

Hodrick looked around the room. Many of these soldiers knew the sergeant who had taken his life. Their faces registered grief, uncertainty, disbelief, even anger. In a quiet voice, he asked them, "What can we do to ensure someone in this room never feels so alone, so overwhelmed, so hopeless that he or she would take his or her life?" There was a long silence. Finally, Private First Class Warren raised her hand. She looked back at Dickens, Clarke, and Hodrick. "I'll be honest, sirs, First Sergeant . . . I sort of thought you'd tell us."

Clarke spoke now. "You know, Warren, when Lieutenant Colonel Dickens called me last night about having this meeting and the reason behind it, I started to rattle off a list of things that the First Sergeant and I could do, like leading a sensing session, reshowing the *Beyond the Front* videos we watched during the Armywide stand-down earlier this year, and he said, 'Whoa, Mike, this isn't about

U.S. Army, SSG Justin Weaver

In 2009, the Army suffered roughly 160 suicides and over 1,700 attempted suicides. As of August 2010, the Army had reported 145 suicides, 80 of which were active-duty and 65 reservist.[2] The reasons for these suicides remain elusive. According to an Army study released in 2010, nearly 80 percent of those committing suicide had deployed to a combat zone only once or not at all, suggesting that stress factors other than those connected with combat are involved.[3]

what you or I should or could do. The solution is beyond us. We truly need to engage everyone in discovering solutions that will work, and even then, we have to keep engaging everyone. We can't let up.' So, in that spirit, have you got any ideas?"

Private Warren was silent for a long time. Everyone's eyes were on her. She started to tear up and swore under her breath because she knew she was just fueling gender stereotypes, but she couldn't help it. Falteringly, she spoke: "I lost my best friend in high school to suicide. I've carried a lot of guilt that I wasn't there when she needed me most. So, I don't know if this will help or not . . . I'm just a PFC . . . but I am willing for anyone to call me 24/7 if they need to talk to someone, about anything. I mean my phone is almost an appendage, and I'm a really good listener."

Sergeants Acorn and Allan simultaneously spoke up. "I'm willing to do the same," they said. A few more volunteers spoke up. First Sergeant Hodrick smiled. "Wow, this is good. Thank you. Let's talk some more a bit later about how we can sustain this 'help line' concept. But let's face it. This is pretty emotional right now, and emotions have a way of energizing us to *say* we'll do something, but later on, once the emotions have subsided, that sense of passion tends to go away, too. If we do something like this, we have to be able to sustain it. We have to be willing three months down the road to still get that 2:00 a.m. phone call. Are we really ready for that level of commitment? My point is that we need to think through all this and make sure that whatever we set up we can sustain. Still, this is a great first step. What else?"

It was summer and the company was augmented by a West Point cadet, Stefan Zeninski. He raised his hand. "I'm studying the application of network science and social network analysis to problem solving. It can be a bit technical, but it's basically a means of understanding ways that people interact with each other. I could do some action research and see what a network analysis of this company, maybe even the battalion would reveal." Lieutenant Colonel Dickens quickly took Cadet Zeninski up on his offer. In the coming two weeks, Cadet Zeninski had soldiers complete a survey in which they were asked questions like: To whom do you turn for help being a better soldier? To whom do you turn with personal problems? Who are your friends? Who do you confide in? When he entered the results into the Organizational Risk Analyzer (ORA) software, he discovered some interesting patterns and trends that he shared with the battalion.[36]

With Lieutenant Colonel Dickens, the command sergeant major, and the company commanders and first sergeants, he shared a series of network diagrams like the one in Figure 2. Later, he spent time with each company showing them the same diagrams, only with the names changed to protect identities. These diagrams led to a series of conversations in which these same patterns and trends emerged.

The first pattern was a handful of soldiers in each company who were totally isolated. When asked who they turned to with personal problems or who they confided in, these individuals indicated no one. Another handful was connected to the larger network by only a single tie. Other trends included the tendency of subgroups to form cliques based on rank or section. For example, E-3s and below turned largely to each other; platoon members did the same. While not unexpected, these findings made more explicit the tendency of such cliques to fragment the organization in ways that might inhibit communication or the "bubbling up" of potential problems. More troubling were the cliques forming along racial lines.

Armed with the insights yielded from Cadet Zeninski's analysis, Lieutenant Colonel Dickens and his leadership team undertook a number of initiatives. First, they set up a monthly town hall meeting, inviting battalion personnel to engage their peers on issues they believed relevant to everyone. Presenters of all ranks knew they had an opportunity to raise concerns or ideas for improvement; they also knew that they had to propose solutions. The next day, officers and senior NCOs facilitated discussion groups, whose composition was rotated month to month and across the battalion. The ideas presented the day prior were discussed in greater detail and solutions refined. The outcomes of these discussion groups were addressed at the next staff call, and decisions reached on how to best implement them. All decisions were shared with members of the battalion. Whenever it would amplify the issues being discussed, Lieutenant Colonel Dickens invited a community "thought leader" to address the battalion and share experiences and ideas.

The leadership team also invited members of the battalion to complete an interest survey and, based on the results, established a series of interest groups. Every soldier had to belong to one interest group. Each month, members of these groups would share a meal, and Lieutenant Colonel Dickens allotted time in the training schedule for each interest group to participate in one activity. The gamers' interest group, for example, had a tournament each month, sponsored by one of the battalion's community partners. Leadership of these groups was not limited by rank. The gamers' group selected Specialist Garcia as its leader, based on his exceptional knowledge of gaming.

Based on the results of analysis conducted by Brigadier General Colleen McGuire, then director of the Army's Suicide Prevention Task Force, Lieutenant Colonel Dickens knew that soldiers who

committed suicide tended to exhibit patterns of risk-taking as precursors to ending their lives, such as reckless driving, reckless spending, alcoholism, or marital infidelity.[37] In combat, these behaviors were often masked or sublimated. Back at home station, they reemerged and, if not monitored and regulated, quickly created a downward spiral that often led to suicide. This fact only reinforced in his mind the need for constant vigilance.

Dickens memorized the name of every soldier. He expected his subordinate leaders to do the same within their units. He circulated widely and daily. He encouraged soldiers at every level to use their talents to lead from that level, and challenged formal leaders to cultivate and harness the energy that comes with shared leadership. He asked tough questions in order to stimulate meaningful conversations, and patiently listened to what he heard. He knew he couldn't let up. A suicide always hovered in the shadows, he thought.

"Good morning, Sergeant Young," Dickens said, noting a clouded look on Young's face. He was visiting Charlie Company in the motor pool.

"Good morning, sir," Young replied, a bit distant and distracted.

"Is something troubling you, Young?" Dickens asked.

"Yes, sir. Something is. Specialist Hart separated from his wife recently. Hart's been acting weird. I've tried to talk with him about it to let him know I'm here, but it's like he doesn't want to hear it. I just knew I couldn't leave it at that. He's part of the soccer interest group, so I asked Sergeant Bulfone to talk with him, see if he could make headway. He's talking to him now. I'm just anxious to know how it's going."

"Good job, Sergeant. Please give me an update as soon as you can. Track me down if you have to. If necessary, we'll get Chaplain Green involved and get Hart additional counseling."

He moved on, confident in Young's and Bulfone's ability to pull Specialist Hart out from the shadows.

This was not rocket science, he thought. It was about making and sustaining connections and conversations. Every now and again, he worried that all these meetings and discussions, all this reflection and soul-searching meant that "real work" wasn't getting done. Then, just as he approached Second Lieutenant Glazer, he reminded himself that *this was the real work*.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," he said. "What's new with 2nd platoon?"

Shared Accountability

One challenge of suicides is that no one-size-fits-all solution exists or works. Every soldier is unique. So is the journey some take to the brink of the abyss. If we limit ourselves to heroic conceptions of leadership, then we risk the worst kind of failure because we place inordinate expectations on one or a few individuals alone to sense and fix what is wrong. No matter how brilliant a leader might be, he or she alone has limited capacity. In contrast, *a more networked organization, in which everyone is able to sense problems and fix them within his scope of expertise, offers greater chances for dealing effectively with the myriad problems confronting the Army today*.

Military organizations are operating this way to some extent already; however, they need to do it more and sooner. Leaders initiate the process by consciously, willfully, and willingly letting go and fostering an environment in which shared sensemaking and capacity building are not only possible but actively encouraged. It may well be the case that a private first class has answers to the complex conundrum of suicide that colonels do not. We must enable this soldier's voice to be heard. More important, we must be willing to listen and put his ideas into action, along with other good ideas woven together by the collective brain of the organization. If rank has any privilege, it may simply be the privilege to encourage a capacity in which everyone can equally voice good ideas and equally account for his or her own welfare and that of the organization. **MR**

If rank has any privilege, it may simply be the privilege to encourage a capacity in which everyone can equally voice good ideas…

NOTES

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