Strengths-Based Leadership Theory and Development of Subordinate Leaders

Melinda Key-Roberts, Ph.D.

TO CONDUCT MILITARY OPERATIONS through decentralized execution, soldiers must understand their commander's intent and then determine the best course of action to achieve mission objectives. The success of applying mission command in operations depends on how well the soldiers and subordinate leaders on the ground make decisions in rapidly changing circumstances. Unless the Army develops soldiers properly, and unless commanders establish an environment of trust and mutual understanding, soldiers will be less likely to make good decisions in the heat of the moment.

Developing subordinates is a primary responsibility of Army leaders. Army leaders develop subordinates in several ways, including—

- Constructing a positive organizational climate.
- Influencing self-development.
- Encouraging the growth of subordinates through mentoring, coaching, counseling, and careful job assignment based on individual talent.

Dr. Melinda Key-Roberts is a senior research psychologist at the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI). Her work at ARI focuses on leader development and training, with an emphasis on leader strategies for developing and mentoring subordinates. Dr. Key-Roberts earned her Ph.D. at the University of Kansas.

To develop junior leaders, higher-level leaders need a full understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of those within their chain of command. Leaders who are aware of subordinates' strengths are more likely to place soldiers in positions that play to their abilities, creating the conditions for individual and unit success.

Army Doctrine and Strengths-Based Leadership

Doctrine is consistent with a strengths-based approach to leadership. According to Gretchen Spreitzer, the assumption underlying a strengths-based approach is that nurturing strengths, as opposed to focusing exclusively on correcting deficiencies, creates subordinate leaders who are able to recognize and realize their full potential.[1] In keeping with strengths-based leadership theory, Army leaders who focus on subordinates' strengths and potential will be better equipped to manage and grow existing talent within their units. At the same time, they can build subordinates' capabilities for future leadership roles. Leaders who understand subordinates' strengths and weaknesses are not only in a better position to affect individual soldiers positively, but also they are in a better position to influence unit and organizational effectiveness through team and task assignments.

Performance vs. Leader Development

When asked about ways to assess subordinates' strengths and areas for growth, soldiers frequently reference the Army's Evaluation Reporting System. The officer and noncommissioned officer efficiency reporting processes—with their very real impact on career progression—have some bearing on subordinate development. However, these processes are designed primarily to report on performance rather than promote leader development. Alone, officer and noncommissioned officer evaluation reports contribute little to the development of subordinates.

Likely, no formal, structured system of coaching or mentoring will succeed as well as an informal approach employed by astute leaders interacting with subordinates one and two echelons below them. Unfortunately, the demands of modern leadership make it a challenge to find time for dedicated subordinate development activities. In the *Military Review* article "Reassessing Army Leadership in the 21st Century," author Jason M. Pape describes how making time for subordinate development—considered a thing that *should* be done—tends to give way to requirements regarded as things that *must* be done.[2]

Considering the tension between time available and typical workloads, this article suggests concrete ways leaders can enhance subordinate development in the course of their day-to-day activities. The goal is to help leaders conduct developmental activities during daily business without adding time-consuming tasks to a leader's load. These suggestions will also help leaders build a climate conducive to their subordinates' development.

Research-Based Strategies

The suggestions for leader development presented in this paper summarize themes that emerged from research exploring the application of strengths-based leadership in a military context. As part of this research, the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, known as ARI, conducted interviews with 41 active duty Army leaders.[3] The majority of Army leaders interviewed by ARI reported using strengths-based techniques to some extent, often without an explicit knowledge of strengths-based leadership theory. Nevertheless, many soldiers reported finding the techniques successful. This article describes six ways Army leaders can develop subordinates, consistent with strengths-based leadership theory:

- Identifying strengths.
- Providing individualized feedback.
- Utilizing subordinate strengths.
- Building and maintaining a positive climate.
- Caring for subordinates.
- Empowering subordinates.

Identifying Strengths

To develop a strength, individuals must first identify what they do well and what they need to improve on. Although individuals can identify strengths and weaknesses through formal processes, they also can use informal methods such as self-reflection. Because people tend to gravitate toward what they do well, such things as rate of learning, desire to participate in certain activities, and satisfaction gained from specific tasks can

provide strong clues to underlying talents. According to researchers P. Linley, Reena Govindji, and Michael West, other signs that individuals are using their strengths include high levels of performance, increased energy and engagement, and a sense of losing track of time.[4]

Leaders can assist subordinates in identifying strengths and weaknesses. According to the soldiers interviewed by ARI, leaders tend to focus on their subordinates' rank and military occupational specialty (MOS). That is, leaders focus on the qualifications the Army has assigned the soldiers and neglect to take into account other skills and abilities soldiers may have. Simply asking subordinates what they believe they do well is a simple, yet often overlooked, strategy for identifying strengths. Other methods for identifying strengths and weaknesses that emerged from the interviews include observation and task exposure. "Sticking to the shadows" and observing subordinates allows leaders a candid look at their knowledge, skills, and abilities. As one participant stated, a leader can learn a lot by walking down the hall and listening to what people are talking about or watching people work.

Feedback on soldier performance should not be reserved for annual evaluation reports and mandatory counseling.

By assigning unfamiliar tasks to subordinates and providing minimal guidance, leaders also reported learning a significant amount about the soldiers' strengths and weaknesses. While this method can help discern a subordinate's skills, it is important to keep in mind the soldier's level of experience. Giving an inexperienced junior NCO the responsibilities of a senior NCO may end with undesirable results. The goal is not to set subordinates up for failure, but to assign unfamiliar tasks they can learn to accomplish at their current skill level and rank. As one soldier interviewed by ARI stated, "Give . . . every lieutenant at least one job every now and again that is not only out of their lane, but challenges them to do something different."[5] Introducing new tasks can help subordinates develop critical thinking and decision-making skills, which will be invaluable as they progress through the ranks.

Providing Individualized Feedback

Identifying strengths alone is not enough; leaders must know how to hone talents to an even higher degree of excellence. In the interviews, the most commonly cited technique for enhancing a leader's natural talents was providing that leader with individualized feedback. Feedback on soldier performance should not be reserved for annual evaluation reports and mandatory counseling. Rather, feedback should occur as often as possible, and the leader who works most closely with the subordinate should provide it. Feedback can come in various forms, including counseling, mentoring, coaching, teaching, and assessment. As Lt. Col. Thomas E. Graham pointed out in his *Military Review* article, "Counseling: An Ignored Tool?," these techniques are cheap and often do not take as much time as leaders believe them to.[6] Feedback does not need to be formal. It can be as simple as telling individuals they did a good job or giving advice about how to become more proficient at a task. However, it must be genuine and precise. Vague phrases such as "good job" or "you screwed that up" do not address specific strengths or weaknesses. One officer interviewed by ARI explained,

> You need to kind of step out of bounds and talk to them. Say, "hey, this is what we've been seeing," . . . and "this is something we would like for you to improve on." . . . Rather than every year when I get an annual OER [officer evaluation report], that's when I find out about it [my areas for improvement] for the first time.[7]

Graham also accurately comments on the mutual trust built between leaders and subordinates when using feedback techniques such as counseling, mentoring, coaching, and teaching.[8] Moreover, individualized feedback provides leaders an opportunity to connect with their subordinates on both a personal and professional level.

Utilizing Subordinates' Strengths

Almost all leadership functions described by the soldiers interviewed were aimed at providing subordinates with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to be successful now and in future endeavors. According to Army leaders, assigning soldiers tasks they have a natural affinity toward is one of the most successful means of creating competent junior leaders. When individuals invest time and energy in their talents, they are more likely to experience success. These success experiences are an important source of efficacy information (referring to people's beliefs about their capabilities to succeed), and can positively affect how individuals feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. According to Albert Bandura, placing individuals in situations that increase self-efficacy has also been shown to result in improved productivity and job satisfaction.[9] The following quotations from the interviews conducted by ARI demonstrate how Army leaders capitalize on subordinate strengths:

> At the end of the day, I would assign the lieutenant who had great communication skills to be the guy who would interact at a more complex level with the Iraqi Security Forces, and the guy who was completely inarticulate but could kick down the door and do raids is the guy I would generally assign to more kinetic operations.

> I have one guy who's great—he's the PT stud. The other guy's a horrible PT guy . . . but [he's] good at commo. He's my commo NCO, and that's how I handle him. . . . He's not [actually] a commo NCO, he's a scout, but he's good at it [commo]—he knows what he's doing. . . . Seeing what he's good at [I say] "ok man, you're my communications NCO."[10]

By taking advantage of the natural talent of his NCOs, the leader in the second example ensured the best-suited person handled each task. While the need to look beyond a person's MOS or branch seems self-evident, it is important to view subordinates as individuals with uniquely individual talents. Soldiers are much more than their military experience; they come to the Army with skill sets and talents that may or may not be pertinent to their assigned MOS.

Recognizing the skills and abilities of subordinates can give leaders a distinct advantage when completing tasks and missions. Leaders who understand the range of talents within their subordinate leaders will be more successful at maneuvering people within the organization to meet the complexity and ambiguity of today's challenges. Granted, at times a leader must task the next available subordinate to complete a job. However, when given the opportunity, leaders who delegate tasks based on talent have much more effective teams. The following quotations from the interviews conducted by ARI provide additional examples of Army leaders applying this approach:

> Regardless of what your rank is, you want to put the most competent person in whatever job it is for the betterment of the unit, 'cause otherwise, if you're just playing on the old Army system of "you're a SPC, you're a SGT, put the SGT in charge," that can be detrimental.

Sgt. Erica Rinard, Charlie Co., 1st Battalion, 185th Armor, California Army National Guard, assigned at the time to the 391st Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 16th Sustainment Brigade, greets Maj. Gen. William H. Wade II, California Adjutant General, at Contingency Operating Base Speicher, 19 February 2009. (U.S. Army)

> You want a different type [of] leader for different situations. So if I had five leaders and each of them had a specific strength which I could use in very different ways—they don't all have to be the well-rounded, Johnny All-Star . . . If you can employ all that [you are given by the Army] . . . it turns out to be a very successful unit/very successful operation once you get all the pieces clicking.[11]

As the second leader suggested, it would be unreasonable to expect every soldier to excel at every task, or to know all there is to know about each system or organization within the military. Leaders must realize that in today's complex operational environments, neither they nor their subordinates will possess all the necessary skills or knowledge to accomplish every task. Therefore, good leaders intentionally surround themselves with the right people for the task at hand. By arranging subordinates in a way that capitalizes on strengths and mitigates personal or team weaknesses, leaders can build capable junior leaders while simultaneously creating more efficient and effective units.

Building and Maintaining a Positive Climate

Many of the soldiers interviewed by ARI identified techniques leaders can use to build and maintain a positive climate. Techniques mentioned included being approachable, controlling personal emotions, tolerating risk and mistakes (approaching them as learning opportunities whenever possible), and being open to ideas from all personnel within the organization regardless of rank or position. Psychologists Caren Baruch-Feldman, Elizabeth Brondolo, Dena Ben-Dayan, and Joseph Schwartz report that techniques such as these establish a foundation for individual growth, while also reducing burnout among junior leaders, increasing job satisfaction, and leading to improved individual and group performance within an organization.[12]

Leaders interviewed by ARI repeatedly highlighted the importance of listening to all perspectives and allowing subordinates to voice honest opinions without fear of retribution. Subordinates feel valued when leaders listen to their ideas in briefings or mission planning meetings. In contrast, belittling a subordinate for an idea or suggestion stifles creativity and problem-solving within a unit. The next quotation from the ARI interviews illustrates how leaders in the field can establish a positive climate by permitting discussion and feedback:

> I think the ability to listen, not just to your superiors and your peers, but also your subordinates, is pretty critical to success. If you're too stubborn to acknowledge that fact that, "hey I might be wrong, or somebody else has a better way of doing it," regardless of their rank or who they are—you can set yourself up for failure . . . Every person is going to have something . . . to affect your performance as a unit, so being able to listen and being able to grasp those pieces of knowledge [is important].[13]

Consistent with prior research, participants viewed regulating one's emotions as another tool military leaders can use to cultivate a positive work environment.[14] A leader's mood and emotional state can affect how the unit is operating and is often contagious. In their 2010 *Military Review* article "Toxic Leadership: Part Deux," authors George Reed and Richard Olsen point out that leaders often are under immense pressure from their chain of command to accomplish a goal or task; yet, the most successful leaders are those who prevent the pressure from above from infiltrating their organization.[15] One soldier interviewed by ARI described how two different leaders managed their emotions under pressure and how each affected his unit:

> I guess whatever problems or stress that he had coming from higher, he kind of brought it down to everybody in his shop. [In contrast,] the second guy was more of a mentor because even though he was taking it from higher, he wasn't bringing it to the shop—so that allowed him to empower more people inside the shop, and they never really saw that negative side.[16]

In their article, Reed and Olsen identify a concept they call *kissing up and kicking down*.[17] They explain that people tend to be more considerate and courteous to those who sign their paycheck—kissing up—and less civil when interacting with their subordinates—kicking down. In the example above, the second leader avoided the kicking down spiral. By acting as a buffer for his subordinates, this leader was able to establish the conditions for success within his unit.

To foster a positive climate, leaders should make their subordinates feel they appreciate an honest effort, even when mistakes are made. Study participants reported that military leaders who willingly tolerate risk are better able to provide subordinates with opportunities for development. Soldiers working in a safe and supportive learning environment have greater incentive to practice new behaviors and learn from their mistakes. As one interviewee stated, giving subordinates the opportunity to practice a task without pressure can also lead to large gains in confidence and ability.[18] Because mistakes inevitably will be made, leaders must make an effort to provide constructive feedback instead of embarrassing or disparaging remarks. Allowing subordinates learning opportunities in which mistakes go unpunished, but corrected, can decrease risk of failure or injury in future missions. Allowing subordinates to experiment within the commander's intent is a powerful learning experience that also cultivates trust between subordinate and commander, as the next quotation from the ARI study illustrates:

> My squadron commander . . . set my standards and guidelines; and I knew I could go out there and screw up. And as long as I was within his left and right limits, he was going to defend me whether I got in trouble or not, or [he would] just take it as a learning experience.[19]

In decentralized operations, it is critical to maintain a positive climate for effective mission command. Leader behaviors (such as being open to feedback, regulating emotions, and tolerating mistakes) are essential to maintaining morale and effectiveness when units tackle complex assignments—especially when direct leadership is counter to the mission at hand. Leaders must be able to gauge the level of toxicity in their organization and strive to keep an open and professional working environment. Because many of the strategies for establishing a positive climate encourage subordinates to engage in independent action, they may seem counter to the traditional military structure. However, establishing a positive climate is a top-down leadership function. That is, the leader at the top establishes the rules and boundaries for group behavior, provides instructions, and establishes clear mission intent. Moreover, by allowing trial and error, managing emotions, and accepting feedback from subordinates, senior leaders create the conditions for development to occur.

In addition to the strategies for cultivating a positive climate outlined above, further guidance on influencing unit climate will be found in ARI's forthcoming publication *CLIMATE: Instructor's Guide for Ethical Climate Training for Army Leaders*.[20] Actions such as assessing climate, modeling behavior, and articulating and enforcing standards, although discussed in the context of ethics, will apply to understanding and influencing the developmental environment in a unit.

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Caring for Subordinates

Like establishing a positive climate, caring for subordinates creates the conditions for individual and unit success. Caring for subordinates encompasses behaviors aimed at relationship and rapport building and can have tremendous payoffs. When subordinates feel that their leader is interested in them and their experiences, they feel more motivated to excel. Practices such as asking subordinates about their family and personal interests, as well as understanding their personal problems and assisting when possible, ensure soldiers feel they are an important part of the team. Soldiers will obey a command regardless of whether they personally know the leader who gave it. However, when soldiers feel they are an important part of the organization and respect their leader for more than rank or position, they often go beyond the call of duty to ensure they do not disappoint that leader.

Leader behaviors aimed at developing subordinates are often interpreted by subordinates as caring

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin E. Dempsey talks with soldiers and marines stationed at ISAF Headquarters and Camp Eggers in Kabul, Afghanistan, 20 July 2013. (DOD, D. Myles Cullen)

for soldiers. This overlap between developing and caring can be seen in the following examples from the ARI interviews:

> If your leadership is talking to you . . . [just] to check the boxes, you know that they don't care about you. It's important to me that my commander cares whether or not my kids are doing good in school, whether or not spending 13 months in Iraq, you know, straight . . . what it does to a 5-year old, 7-year old, and 11-year old—that type of stuff. It's important that he knows me as an officer, just like I need to know my privates.
>
> Showing that interest in that soldier, by developing him, he feels like he wants to stay. [He might say], "the squad leader genuinely cares about me, I feel like I'm on the right path."[21]

A number of leaders interviewed by ARI expressed unease over showing care and concern for subordinates. Because military leaders may need to ask soldiers to perform difficult tasks, or may be required to take corrective action with a subordinate, they want to maintain professional relationships with their soldiers. However, showing care and concern for subordinates does not mean that leaders must be overly considerate or nurture unprofessional personal relationships with their soldiers. On the contrary, most military leaders interviewed by ARI highlighted the importance of achieving balance in their leadership approach.[22] For example, most leaders will experience a time when they must provide stern, even harsh leadership to get the job done. In general, this leadership strategy should be reserved for drastic times, when stakes are especially high (such as combat situations), and leaders should use it in such a way that soldiers do not take it personally. Individuals have their own leadership styles, and

some people may motivate their subordinates through gruff means naturally. Regardless of the approach, the key is to find a leadership style that works, and embrace it, while maintaining a positive outlook for the organization and toward subordinates.

Empowering Subordinates

At the core of strengths-based leadership theory is the goal of developing and empowering subordinates to be independent, adaptable, and resourceful leaders. Leader behaviors such as task delegation build confidence, encourage independence, and instill a sense of responsibility in subordinates. Strategies for empowering subordinates often overlap with the other leadership functions described in this paper. For example, exposing subordinates to new tasks helps them develop new skills. Moreover, it helps leaders identify their subordinates' strengths and weaknesses. Thus, assigning a subordinate a new task with minimal guidance or interference is a good barometer of talent as well as a potential source of empowerment for the junior leader. The following statements from the ARI interviews illustrate the relationship between task assignment and empowering subordinates:

> I think if you're willing to let the squad leaders and section leaders do what they're supposed to and take that responsibility, I think you'll have a better leader . . . If you give that soldier that responsibility . . . [it will] pay off dividends . . . .
>
> You've got him inculcated more into that unit, [he might think] "hey, I'm not just a trigger puller that does whatever so-and-so tells me. I have a task, a purpose, and a responsibility to stay in the unit, and they can't succeed without me."[23]

Empowering subordinates by helping them discover and leverage their strengths can have many advantages. People find more enjoyment and satisfaction in doing things at which they naturally excel. Identifying and using one's strengths can also increase levels of happiness, fulfillment, and confidence at work and home. Subordinates who receive positive task assignments and support from superiors and co-workers experience decreased burnout and increased productivity. Moreover, one soldier interviewed believed that inspiring and empowering subordinates with a sense of responsibility led to fewer behavior problems in his unit.[24] These advantages all run parallel to the Army's goal of attracting highly talented individuals, developing adaptable soldiers, and retaining high-quality soldiers beyond their initial enlistment or commission.[25]

Obstacles to Strengths-Based Leadership

While this paper strongly advocates for a strengths-based approach to leadership, the author recognizes the obstacles to its implementation within the Army. Army leaders interviewed by ARI acknowledged the importance of understanding and utilizing soldiers' strengths, yet they also emphasized the need to identify and remediate weaknesses, as the next quotation from the study illustrates:

> I think to get after [a] leadership development through strengths concept, you also need to identify the weaknesses. You can't just tell somebody they're great at this and not tell them what they are bad at. And if they're bad enough to the point where it needs to go down on paper, there needs to be an effect . . . We need leaders to make that honest assessment and do the hard thing of checking that block that says refer to report on OER.[26]

Soldiers interviewed by ARI repeatedly indicated that leaders who focus exclusively on positive or negative feedback create systemic problems for the Army. According to participants, when leaders spend the majority of their time focused on poor performers, they are effectively ostracizing stellar performers.[27] Under these circumstances, mid-to-top performers receive little-to-no formal or informal development and may even find themselves being rewarded with more work. This lapse in subordinate development—combined with a failure to reward soldiers for their good efforts and an over-reliance on top performers—likely contributes to burnout and attrition among the best soldiers.

Focusing only on strengths can be just as problematic as focusing solely on deficits. Army leaders, whose jobs may hold life-or-death consequences, cannot overlook the negative. They

must balance the need to remediate weaknesses with the desire to nurture subordinate strengths. Examples provided by interviewees afford some insight into how Army leaders might capitalize on and improve the talents of subordinates while simultaneously addressing areas of concern. For example, one leader interviewed by ARI stated, "if I'm not a confident person, . . . find something I'm great at . . . and have me work on that [strength]. [This] builds confidence to work on things I'm not good at."[28]

Contributing to the difficulties encountered by military leaders when identifying and developing subordinates' capabilities is the speed of Army operations. While military leaders recognize the importance of developing and mentoring subordinate leaders, rapid deployment cycles and high turnover of personnel leave counseling and developing subordinates at the bottom of the priority list. Many leaders interviewed by ARI said they simply do not have the time to identify a person's strengths or weaknesses while in garrison.[29] Unfortunately, once in theater, the speed and complexity of operations often leave little opportunity for formal developmental efforts.

According to Casey Wardynski, David S. Lyle, and Michael J. Colarusso of the Strategic Studies Institute, without sufficient depth and breadth of talent, organizations face an inability to innovate and meet new challenges.[30] Without adequate mentoring and development of junior leaders, the Army will likely encounter a shortage of talent needed to meet future operational demands. Because subordinate development is a key to building a strong future fighting force, more effort is needed to understand and address the current deficit in leader development and mentoring.

The Road Ahead

Soldiers interviewed by ARI repeatedly referred to the interactions between leaders and subordinates as the greatest contributor to subordinate development and organizational success. To achieve success, it is clear Army leaders need concrete strategies for developing and mentoring junior leaders. This article provides some courses of action based

U.S. Army soldiers begin the ruck march portion of the U.S. Army-Europe Soldier and NCO of the Year Competition, Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany, 15 August 2007. (U.S. Army, Spc. Joshua Ballenger)

on strengths-based leadership theory, supported by feedback obtained from soldiers. To summarize, leaders will improve the probability for individual and unit success by—

- Identifying subordinates' talents and areas for growth.
- Providing individualized feedback.
- Utilizing subordinates' strengths.
- Building and maintaining a positive climate.
- Caring for subordinates.
- Empowering subordinates.

While, these strategies are common sense and may not represent a groundbreaking discovery, the goal of this article is to increase *intentional* use of effective leadership functions to develop subordinates. According to soldiers interviewed by ARI, when leaders focus on developing subordinates, their subordinates' morale and well-being improve. Soldiers with knowledge of their own strengths and the confidence to make decisions within their commanders' guidance are also better equipped to adapt to ever-changing operational environments. By intentionally focusing on subordinates' development using the strategies outlined here, senior-level leaders do more than develop well-trained subordinates—they develop future Army leaders. ***MR***

NOTES

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