



(Photo courtesy of Capt. Lindsay Roman, U.S. Army)

Members of the 519th Military Intelligence Battalion collaborate May 2012 during participation in a specialized Center for Creative Leadership orienteering course in Greensboro, North Carolina. The course was designed to create greater trust among leaders.

Building a High-Performing Unit

An Army Battalion's Leadership Journey in Preparation for Combat in Afghanistan

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—Kevin McAninch

Leadership is a core Army function and a unifying element in mission accomplishment. Therefore, creating a unique and challenging leadership development program to grow subordinate leaders is a key task for all commanders. The U.S. Army's doctrine on leadership says, "Through education, training, and experience, leaders develop into competent and disciplined professionals of the Army."¹ But, how do Army units develop leaders to ensure excellent leadership that operates cohesively across the levels of command?²

Most units establish a leader professional development (LPD) program that is briefed and approved during quarterly training briefings. Program topics range from individual professional development skills to execution of routine collective Army tasks. However, in some LPD programs, though some members of the audience might learn elementary standards to improve performance and unit effectiveness, they may not always be exposed to the sophisticated leadership skills necessary to conduct units through the current or future battle space. In other words, while unit LPDs may build leaders who are generally competent in achieving baseline organizational outcomes, some LPDs fail to address the level of individual, team, and organizational development necessary to lead effectively in the increasingly dynamic and complex operational environments most units will face now and in the future.

Simply put, LPDs often establish and enforce routine and baseline standards for minimal task execution. But, they do not routinely grow dynamic leaders who know themselves, seek self-improvement, effectively build teams, or help to develop high-performing organizations.³

A different approach, therefore, was undertaken by the 519th Military Intelligence (MI) Battalion from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in an effort to increase the effectiveness of leader development. In 2012, while preparing for deployment to Afghanistan, the 519th embarked on a unique journey to grow leaders. The battalion partnered with the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)

from Greensboro, North Carolina, to build an LPD program focused on three pillars:

- ◆ Individual: *Who are you?*
- ◆ Team: *Who are we and what are we part of?*
- ◆ Unit: *Who are we as an organization?*

This program fostered the creation of a shared "direction-alignment-commitment" mindset across the organization because each leader knew that collective success came from individual growth and that each individual team member contributed value.⁴ The program was also tailored to the specific needs of the 519th. The battalion developed eight learning objectives for this training:

- ◆ Foster a positive leadership environment by creating shared "direction-alignment-commitment" across the organization.
- ◆ Improve leadership abilities by leveraging leader strengths.
- ◆ Collaborate more effectively with others.
- ◆ Communicate better with peers, subordinates, and superiors.
- ◆ Think creatively about solving difficult tasks and personal challenges.
- ◆ Lead with greater personal insight and improved interaction with others.
- ◆ Provide and act on developmental feedback.
- ◆ Build high-performing teams.

Context for Development of the Program

When employed, the 519th is dispersed to provide intelligence support to the edge of the battlefield at the lowest level. Subordinate companies are allocated to work for different organizations with platoons and teams further disaggregated to smaller elements.⁵ Additionally, the companies deploy task-organized with other MI units' capabilities depending on the mission.⁶ Consequently, to meet the challenges of decentralized execution, the leadership challenge was defined as building the skills necessary to maintain a cohesive organization that could conduct decentralized operations within the commander's intent. This required greatly increased emphasis on building trust among all leaders and the introduction of "boundary-spanning" principles to develop a high-performing team.⁷ To do this, the unit had to create "the conditions, time, and space" to achieve the

desired outcome.⁸ This is where the CCL's expertise was essential.

The CCL is a world-class leadership development organization. It facilitated achieving the vision of our organization's leadership (illustrated in the image) through application of academia, intellect, and other resources. Using established assessment instruments—the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation–Behavior (FIRO–B) tool, and the Change Style Indicator (CSI)—the CCL provided empirical analysis for each leader, focused along the three pillars of growth.⁹ The comprehensive program not only put the growth spotlight on the individual leaders and their teams, but it also broke the CCL's usual paradigm for leadership training.

Typical CCL programs are offered to leaders at the same experience and responsibility level. The 519th flipped that around, putting second lieutenants in the same training as company commanders and field grade officers. This vertically aligned cohort was unique. The varying levels of experience in the training created friction, and the challenge was to get the entire group to operate on one level while learning each other's strengths and weaknesses.

So what did the CCL provide that was unique? It provided—

- ◆ Immediate immersion of the leaders in a creative learning environment where risk is accepted and rewarded
- ◆ An environment to think and act “outside the box” and “outside the military framework and culture”
- ◆ A mix of classroom instruction, experiential interaction, and practical application
- ◆ Feedback through assessments and interaction with others
- ◆ Extensive time for networking, reflection, and greater learning from others
- ◆ Team building through exercises aimed at the individual, team, and unit

The training occurred during multiple sessions over the course of one year and coincided with predeployment stages developed by the unit. The leadership training was synchronized with deployment preparation phasing:

- ◆ Build the foundation (nine months prior to deployment).



(Image courtesy of Capt. Lindsay Roman, U.S. Army)

Vision statement of the 519th Military Intelligence Battalion.

- ◆ Employ the techniques (six months prior to deployment).¹⁰
- ◆ Reinforce the principles (three months prior to deployment).

Build the Foundation

The 519th started its leadership journey with the CCL in May 2012, eight months before its early 2013 deployment to Afghanistan. Over three days at the Greensboro campus in North Carolina, attendees focused on individual growth, team development, and unit-cohesion training.



(Photo by Staff Sgt. Shane Hamann, U.S. Army)

U.S. soldiers secure a compound while other soldiers meet there with Afghan elders 3 March 2013 in Spin Boldak District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. The soldiers are assigned to the 2nd Infantry Division's Female Engagement Team 6, 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, and the 519th Military Intelligence Battalion.

The individual growth session allowed attendees to “see themselves” better. This deeper awareness was achieved by providing each attendee MBTI feedback to understand his or her personality.¹¹ The session also helped leaders appreciate their teammates by understanding their personalities. As the Myers-Briggs Foundation website states, “The goal of knowing about personality type is to understand and appreciate differences between people.”¹² Leaders were subsequently able to lead with greater insight about themselves and their teammates.

The CCL also administered the CSI assessment to identify one of three change styles for each attendee. Considering the changes anticipated during their deployment, this tool allowed leaders to understand how they approached change and preferred to deal with situations requiring change.¹³ For example, according to the CSI, *conservers* desire “solutions that are tested and proven,” while *originators* “prefer quick and expansive change” and to “challenge assumptions” and “enjoy risks.”¹⁴ With an appreciation for how each leader saw change, subordinate leaders could assess the situation and provide more informed personnel and operational recommendations.

The focus of the program then shifted to the development of teams. Renowned leadership expert John C. Maxwell says, “Everyone wants to be part of a winning team. Individuals play the game, but teams win championships.”¹⁵ The FIRO-B tool helped because it assesses how one feels about interpersonal relationships: “how the need for inclusion, control, and affection can shape interactions with others.”¹⁶ Leaders apply their FIRO-B feedback to increase effective collaboration and communication with others.

Leaders began practical exercises designed to bring their individual talents together after analyzing their assessments. They began to form their teams with the knowledge of each other’s personality, strengths and weaknesses. The CCL’s vast array of experiential activities and experienced staff proved beneficial again. The crawl phase was over, and now leaders were walking.

The “color blind” experiential activity required teammates to be blindfolded while trying to solve a complex puzzle. The solution to the activity required effective verbal communication and each individual managing his or her own perceptions

(without the sense of sight) while the group developed a strategy. During the exercise, each team achieved a shared comprehension, but only after accounting for each member's different perspectives on the activity. The activity improved each individual's ability to think creatively about solving difficult tasks and challenges, while also improving the team's ability to communicate.

Shifting next to development of the unit, the CCL team introduced the concepts of "direction-alignment-commitment" and "boundary spanning."¹⁷ According to Donna Chrobot-Mason and Chris Ernst, "Boundary-spanning leadership is the capability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal."¹⁸ This advanced organizational leadership idea was applicable to the unit given the vertical, horizontal, stakeholder, demographic, and geographic boundaries it had to manage and span once deployed.¹⁹ Experiential activity coordinators then asked company command teams, the battalion staff, and the battalion leadership to define the specific boundaries affecting the organization. In a candid discussion, leaders described boundaries they felt impacted organizational success. This exercise employed the concept of buffering, which helped create team safety and the feeling of psychological security that develops when intergroup boundaries are defined.²⁰ Each leader understood the complex nature of the 519th's mission and the need to develop into a high-performing team to span these boundaries.

The unit's vision statement called for a team in which members were accountable to each other and committed to each other's success. The goal was to create a greater trust among leaders, allowing for risk taking, seizing the initiative, creating teams, and fostering collaboration (both internal and external). Increased trust allowed team members to feel more comfortable and to express their opinions freely. As Chrobot-Mason and Ernst describe it, the experience is about building a sense of community:

[It] is about the experience of belonging emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically to a larger group. Each group identifies with a collective that is larger than its individual group alone. It is also about the sense of ownership that develops when groups feel that

they belong. When community exists, groups may have widely different sets of experiences, values, and expertise, yet they feel committed to taking joint action on behalf of a larger common purpose.²¹

To reinforce this, leaders conducted another experiential activity. A unique orienteering course required each company team to find points equating to a monetary value, and to maximize the amount collected. However, companies could not act alone. They had to work through the battalion leadership to have their plans approved while the staff synchronized the plans to help the unit raise the maximum amount. This interactive, multiechelon exercise stimulated the communication and coordination the unit needed. It put to test the commitment of each leader and enabled all attendees to see their roles individually, on the team, and within the organization.

The foundation had been laid, for the most part, but the leader development was not complete until the concluding session—a session that made a lasting impression on the leaders. Before graduating from the CCL program, all attendees had to write down goals for themselves and to draft an accountability statement: *What do you want to do better as a leader in the future, and how are we going to keep each other accountable?* Each attendee spoke openly to the group, offering an individual growth plan and a personal commitment to the team.

The commander then asked a series of questions to reinforce instruction and to effect ownership by the participants of the commander's vision for the unit:

- ◆ Could we create a high-performing team?
- ◆ Do you accept the responsibility to build a high-performing team?
- ◆ Do you want to work in a community and feel like you're in a cohesive unit?
- ◆ What will you do to help us achieve this as a unit?

By building a foundation, the LPD program reinforced the commitment to the organization's mission while also ensuring individual leadership growth.

Employ the Techniques

The battalion's next interaction with the CCL came during a training rotation at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California. In August 2012, six months before deployment, the CCL



(Photo by Capt. Lindsay Roman, U.S. Army)

Soldiers of the 519th Military Intelligence Battalion work hand-in-hand with Afghan National Security Force soldiers during situational training exercises 8 August 2012 at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California.

facilitators braved the stifling heat and expeditionary living conditions of the NTC to visit the 519th and work with it “in the box.” This culminating training event simulated the harsh environment of Afghanistan and put stress on the relationships built in Greensboro. It was the perfect environment for the CCL team to reinforce the learning points and to ensure leaders retained what they were taught.

Over four days, the CCL facilitators conducted one-on-one interviews with leaders and went out on patrol as much as possible with 519th’s soldiers. By being outside the wire, they observed the decentralized employment of the unit in support of 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division. Companies and teams came face-to-face with boundaries every day, and leaders applied what they learned to overcome them. The CCL facilitators attended the unit’s after action reviews and reemphasized boundary-spanning techniques. This was critical to reinforce in leaders’ minds their development and their role in achieving unit success.

The visit also allowed the commander and CCL facilitators to discuss the commander’s deployment

vision. Closer to the deployment, there was a clear sense of what would be required for the unit once downrange. We applied the concept of *mission-soldiers-me*—which, though not new, fit well given the unit’s planned employment. We used this concept to establish priorities at all levels while also signaling the importance of the *me* portion. The idea was that developing and improving yourself while also being responsible for your actions was clearly linked to effective mission accomplishment and to taking care of soldiers. As the CCL so expertly captures in its *Leading Effectively* blog,

We must always accomplish the mission—it is why we are here. And while doing the mission, we must care for our soldiers ... after leaders have met the first two requirements, we must take care of ourselves. If we do not take care of ourselves by sleeping right, eating right, and even talking with others about our experience ... well (here he hesitated and then looked at the ground slowly) then we become casualties. Then everyone has to take care of us and that detracts from our soldiers’ readiness and mission accomplishment.²²

Reinforce the Principles

Because new teammates were arriving to the 519th prior to deployment, the unit needed a way to train them as well. In November 2012, two months after training at the NTC, and before the deployment, fifty-five leaders went to Greensboro for a one-day “leadership tune-up.” The CCL team facilitated the session, which was focused on the fundamentals of the three pillars of growth. Each attendee received MBTI, FIRO-B, and CSI assessments, and learning groups were created with the now task-organized company teams. The battalion staff and leadership, which included two new members, also participated. This session reinforced individual development while also allowing teams to work on their goals and communication.

Soon after their trip to observe the unit at the NTC, the CCL facilitators provided observations and feedback that helped unit members also understand the boundaries limiting their effectiveness. To overcome these boundaries, the facilitators then armed each leader with tools to span them. They introduced Chrobot-Mason and Ernst’s six practices for solving problems: buffering, reflecting, connecting, mobilizing, weaving, and transforming.²³ Though only lasting one day, and touching only the surface of those key principles, the training nevertheless provided useful context for leaders to take forward to Afghanistan. Writing from Afghanistan later, Capt. Nick Keipper, a 519th company commander, put it best:

Direction, Alignment, and Commitment are common practice here. We may use different terms—Mission, Task and Purpose, End state, Mottos—but the intent is still the same. Change is constant: adaptation is the name of the game. One minute we may be conducting major operations and several hours later we are counting equipment. Strong leadership at the lowest levels is even more important now than ever. So how do we keep focused?

- ◆ Clear and concise guidance, even when the current end state is ambiguous.
- ◆ Empower junior leaders and recognize their work.
- ◆ Reinforce the basic principles of leadership and force leaders to lead through difficult times.

- ◆ Lead by example ALWAYS.
- ◆ Allow for cross-talk, even when you “think” you know the solution. This stimulates team work and not individualism.
- ◆ Let down your preconceived notions. Do not let rank, patches, and badges cloud your judgment. Just because someone is not a part of your organization does not mean they are of lesser value. Quite the contrary, they tend to provide more honest feedback.²⁴

It is certainly clear from these comments that boundary-spanning training helped in leadership development. The reinforcement session helped junior leaders put the concepts they learned into practice during deployment. By conducting the reinforcement session, the leaders solidified their development while making progress towards becoming a high-performing team capable of spanning boundaries.

The unique leadership development program instituted by the 519th focused on individual, team, and organizational growth. The uniqueness of the program came from how it developed leadership skills—by emphasizing the *me* aspect together with *mission* and *soldiers* while simultaneously building capable and informed teams. Utilizing the CCL’s vast leadership resources was decisive. The 519th’s leaders now had a deeper self-awareness and the tools to span boundaries for greater organizational effectiveness. The training helped young officers develop the leadership skills needed in the operating environment they faced in Afghanistan, while also fueling their leadership development journey.

Conclusion

The CCL’s research shows that “early career experiences play a formative role in igniting any or all of the future leadership skills.”²⁵ In the case of the 519th, a leader professional development program helped its leaders become competent and disciplined Army professionals, while also serving as an investment in their lifetime leadership development journey. It built company teams with improved cohesion and communication. It gave unit leaders a deeper understanding of themselves and how to leverage their strengths. It also reinforced the importance of the trust needed in a highly decentralized environment. ■

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Notes

Epigraph. Kevin McAninch (the author) during a speech to his unit given at the beginning of the leadership development program established in conjunction with the Center for Creative Leadership.

1. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 2012), 1-2.

2. Ibid., 1-1.

3. "Professional Development that Platoon Leaders Value," *Army Magazine*, March 2013, 65. This article provides examples of routine tasks often taught during leader professional development sessions.

4. Donna Chrobot-Mason and Chris Ernst, *Boundary Spanning Leadership: Six Practices for Solving Problems, Driving Innovation, and Transforming Organizations* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 6.

5. Task Force Thunder companies operated from four different locations. There were up to sixty teams operating at over twenty-five locations consistently during the deployment.

6. ADRP 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, May 2012), 2-15. *Task organization* is defined as "a temporary grouping of forces designed to accomplish a particular mission."

7. Joseph Grenny, "The Best Teams Hold Themselves Accountable," *Harvard Business Review*, 30 May 2014, accessed 14 January 2016, <https://hbr.org/2014/05/the-best-teams-hold-themselves-accountable/>. High-performing teams are often categorized as being (1) accountable to each other and (2) committed to each other's success.

8. Chrobot-Mason and Ernst, *Boundary Spanning Leadership*, 191.

9. It is important to highlight that the commander removed all 360-degree-type instruments to ensure the focus of the feedback was on the *assessment* of the individual and not any evaluative data that could be misperceived as being used in evaluation reports. This was a deliberate decision to ensure a positive learning environment.

10. This phase happened to coincide with high-intensity training at the U.S. Army National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. Two Center for Creative Leadership facilitators, Clemson Turregano and Tom Gaffney, joined the 519th Military

Intelligence Battalion for four days during that training to observe leaders in action and reinforce principles learned during foundation building in Greensboro, North Carolina.

11. The Myers & Briggs Foundation, "MBTI [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator] Basics," The Myers & Briggs Foundation website, accessed 12 January 2016, <http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/>.

12. Ibid.

13. Center for Creative Leadership "Change Style Indicator (CSI)," [developed by W. Christopher Musselwhite and Robyn P. Ingram], in *More on the Changing Nature of Leadership*, 2007, slide presentation, 11-20, Center for Creative Leadership website, accessed 12 January 2016, <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/landing/changestyleindicator.pdf>.

14. Ibid.

15. John C. Maxwell, *Teamwork 101: What Every Leader Needs to Know* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 8.

16. CPP, Inc. [formerly Consulting Psychologists Press], "FIRO-B [Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior] Profile," CPP, Inc. website, accessed 12 January 2016, <https://www.cpp.com/en/firobproducts.aspx?pc=143>.

17. Chrobot-Mason and Ernst, *Boundary Spanning Leadership*, 5-6.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 84. Buffering is one of the authors' six practices for solving problems.

21. Ibid., 154.

22. Clemson Turregano, "Cool Leadership in a Hot Place," *Leading Effectively.com* blog, 1 October 2012, accessed 12 January 2016, <http://www.leadingeffectively.com/cool-leadership-in-a-hot-place/>.

23. Chrobot-Mason and Ernst, *Boundary Spanning Leadership*. Parts 2-4 describe the six tactics.

24. Nick Keipper, email message to author during Operation Enduring Freedom XIII deployment.

25. Bob Johansen, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1 May 2009), 21.