

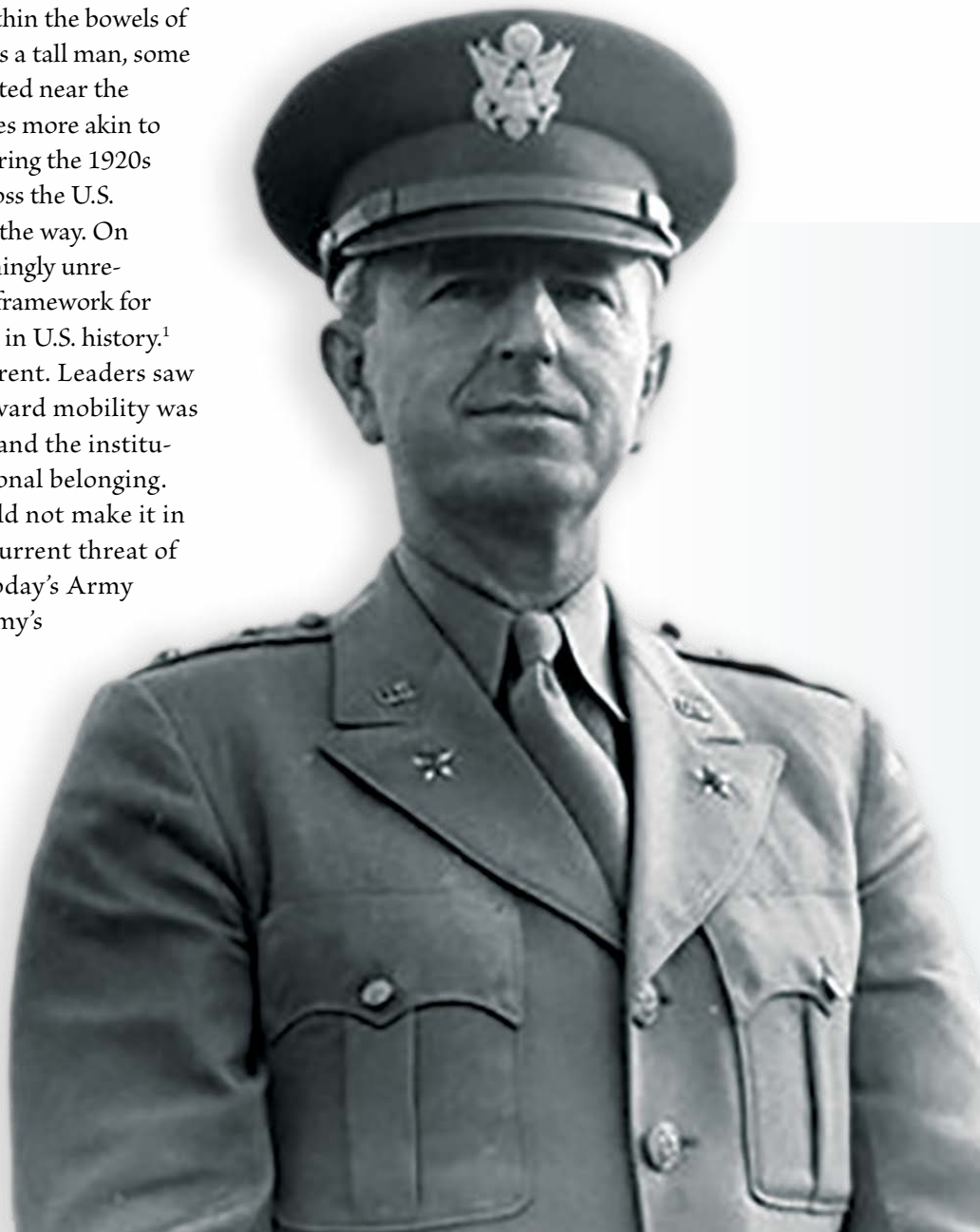
# Professional Development Is about the Profession, Not the Professional



Maj. David Armando Zelaya, U.S. Army

In the spring of 1941, Albert C. Wedemeyer found himself as a planner deep within the bowels of the War Department. He was a tall man, some might say gangly, with his hair parted near the center. He had unassuming features more akin to a schoolteacher than a soldier. During the 1920s and 1930s, he had meandered across the U.S. Army, reading and learning along the way. On the eve of World War II, this seemingly unremarkable major would create the framework for the most challenging mobilization in U.S. history.<sup>1</sup>

Wedemeyer's Army was different. Leaders saw past the individual mistakes, upward mobility was not a given, assignments varied, and the institutions instilled a sense of professional belonging. Unfortunately, Wedemeyer would not make it in today's Army though given the current threat of large-scale combat operations, today's Army could certainly use him. The Army's current model for professional development focuses on improving the individual skills of professionals. Unfortunately, the Army's current professional development would



A photo of Albert C. Wedemeyer—presumably as a lieutenant colonel circa 1941—taken around the same time he was assigned to the Pentagon to write the Victory Program. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. War Department)

not only ignore Wedemeyer, but it would also alienate and shun him.

To avoid losing the next generation of Albert C. Wedemeyers, Army leaders should adopt a professional development model that attempts to develop better professionals by developing a better profession. The approach improves individuals by improving organizations. An organizational approach would require a change in perspective. Leaders would need to see that professional development is not about the professional; professional development is about the profession.

## Tensions and Perspectives

In his book *On Grand Strategy*, John L. Gaddis wrote that tactics and strategy find themselves in tension when their ends are misaligned.<sup>2</sup> The tension between tactics and strategy places professional development under particular strain. Several recent reviews of U.S. Army leadership found that professional development is chronically misaligned. According to those studies, despite

increased funding and senior leader emphasis, junior leaders continue to rate U.S. Army professional development as wanting.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that there is a gap between junior and senior leaders, but what if the gap is not the issue? Perhaps senior leaders are instead missing a bridge that connects these distant shores.

Building bridges is no easy task. When engineers build a bridge, they must first understand the nature of the banks they hope to traverse. In the context of leader development, tactics and strategy are distinct perspectives. A tactical perspective of professional development focuses on the professional. A strategic perspective, however, concentrates on the profession.

## The Tactical Perspective

Perspectives on professional development are shaped by their environments. A tactical perspective on professional development arises in a tactical environment characterized by limited time, space, and resources.<sup>4</sup> Tactical perspectives arise from what is affectionately called the “knife fight.”

## Wedemeyer and the Victory Program

Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer was a visionary thinker who helped shape the Allied path to victory in World War II. He was both the primary author of the Victory Program, which provided the basic plan for mobilizing the United States for war overall, and was a key planner of the D-Day invasion. His education and training had prepared him for these planning responsibilities. In the late 1930s, Wedemeyer had attended the German Kriegsakademie as a U.S. military exchange student, the German equivalent of Fort Leavenworth's Command and General Staff School. Thus, as Germany initiated its expansionist war in Europe in the late 1930s, he was among the very few ranking officers in the Army who intimately understood the origins of the changes to the battlefield that had occurred due to Germany's revolutionary prewar development

of mobilized blitzkrieg doctrine and tactics, and their limitations. As the inevitability of the United States becoming involved in the new European war became apparent, Gen. George C. Marshall recognized in then Lt. Col. Wedemeyer not only unique strategic vision but also great intelligence and a penchant for meticulous planning. Consequently, Marshall gave Wedemeyer the task of overseeing the writing of the overall strategic plan that would guide U.S. strategy in the coming war. The subsequent Victory Program was completed in the summer of 1941. As the chief author of the Victory Program, Wedemeyer advocated that the United States defeat of Germany's armies in Europe as its first priority before turning to completing the Asian war. The plan contained an estimate of the number of units that the United States would require as well as an es-

timate of the massive logistical requirements necessary to successfully conduct the war. Wedemeyer's plan was adopted and expanded as the war progressed. Initially, it became the impetus for the massive national industrial mobilization that was required. Additionally, the plan contained actual battle plans, including a call for early concentration of forces in England in preparation for a cross-channel invasion into France at the soonest chance. Despite his European focus, Wedemeyer was not given the opportunity to command troops in Europe but instead was transferred to the Burma-China Theater, where he replaced Gen. Joseph Stilwell as commander of U.S. troops. There he similarly acquired a reputation for diplomacy and strategic vision, especially with regard to the implications of the civil war occurring in China.

Tactical leaders perceive and influence their immediate surroundings. They relate to others in their environments directly. Tactical leaders also face several problems simultaneously and are forced to “kill the alligator closest to the boat.” Their capacity to look beyond their immediate needs

not preplanned; Wedemeyer’s path was like a drunken walk, dictated by wayward chance and emergent opportunity. Few people would have had the perspective to predict that his path would be of any use to the military, but Malone took a chance. He must have seen Wedemeyer’s

“The U.S. Army has outlined lethality and agility as the two objectives of professional development. An operational approach to professional development should, therefore, have two analogous lines of effort.”

is constrained by resources. Therefore, it can be a challenge for them to shape their environments into the future.<sup>5</sup>

The tactical perspective focuses on individual attributes and competencies. U.S. Army doctrine encapsulates an individual focus in its leadership requirements model.<sup>6</sup> The premium placed on individuals leads to unexpected incentives. From the tactical perspective, the constant loss of individuals due to permanent changes of station makes it costly to invest in long-term development at the expense of more immediate requirements. From a tactical perspective, the benefits of professional development are difficult to realize and could very well not be worth the cost. That is not to say that tactical leaders cannot overcome the tactical perspective, or that most leaders do not value leader development. Many fight the good fight; the point is that their environment does not make it easy.

Wedemeyer certainly did not make it easy for his leaders. As a young lieutenant, he became entangled in a drunken incident that led to his removal from leadership. Instead of taking the time to address Wedemeyer’s deficiencies, his leadership sent him elsewhere to be somebody else’s problem. Luckily for Wedemeyer, a leader with a strategic perspective saw the value in him beyond the short term.

## The Strategic Perspective

After being fired, Wedemeyer was taken in by Brig. Gen. Paul Malone as an aide-de-camp.<sup>7</sup> Malone saw something in Wedemeyer that transcended Wedemeyer’s situation.<sup>8</sup> Wedemeyer’s time with Malone seemed to be an inflection point. Wedemeyer would continue his career in assignments off the beaten path that broadened his experience in unique ways.<sup>9</sup> These opportunities were

long-term potential. It is that kind of strategic perspective that the U.S. Army needed going into World War II.

The strategic perspective is as much a product of its environment as the tactical perspective. The strategic perspective can also be defined in terms of time, space, and resource availability. Strategic horizons extend further into time than tactical horizons. The strategic limit in time is not an absolute barrier; it is based on how long it takes to shape the environment to gain an advantage.<sup>10</sup> A strategic lens also transcends traditional spatial constraints. It accounts for multiple domains of action and hunts for opportunities. While the strategic perspective views resources along a broader scope in space and time, it must still contend with scarcity.

The scarcity in question, however, is a scarcity of options instead of a scarcity of resources. The strategic perspective leverages resources to shape the environment to yield increased options to achieve an objective.<sup>11</sup> Limits imposed by the environment and resources matter in that they limit available options. In the case of professional development, a strategic perspective seeks not to develop individuals; it instead attempts to shape the organizational environment to increase the probability of generating developed individuals. The strategic perspective understands that organizational environments endure through time regardless of personnel movement. Additionally, it understands developed individuals are a means to create an environment that perpetuates more developed individuals.

## Tactical and Strategic Systems

Systems theory underpins the logic that connects tactical and strategic perspectives.<sup>12</sup> Systems theory



complimentary tools. The first and most familiar tool is formal and focused on lethality. The second tool is informal and focused on agility. Both lines of effort are necessary to yield a developed professional organization.

Units can use the structure of military organizations to bolster each line of effort, like suspension cables on a bridge. Figure 1 (on page 117) visualizes the structure of military organizations. Each node represents a leader and the line connecting the nodes represents a type of relationship. Military units are organized into hierarchies. The traditional view of a hierarchy looks like a pyramid with a broad base and a narrow peak.<sup>17</sup> Information moves up and down sequentially through the nodes. These vertical relationships are formally established through regulations that incentivize adherence. These formal relationships are the vehicles by which organizations conduct formal leader development and drive lethality.

In addition to formal vertical relationships, military organizations also have informal horizontal connections.<sup>18</sup> In the specific case of military organizations, the vertically aligned relationships are strong and stable due to

formal relationships of authority. The system's horizontal connections are generally informal and temporary. They are established by personal connection relationships.

When visualized, the hierarchical structure may seem pyramidal; however, this visualization does not tell the full story. With a change in perspective, military organizations can be seen as networks.

Formal structures, while robust, are far from agile or resilient. Formal structures are best suited to simple environments.<sup>19</sup> They can process data and can be quite lethal,

but they struggle to adapt in complex environments and break down in chaos. Informal networks, however, adjust to their environments and adapt to survive.<sup>20</sup> They thrive in complex environments and can survive in chaos. Most importantly, informal networks grow themselves. An operational approach for professional development should focus on building formal and informal networks to bridge tactical and strategic perspectives.

## Professional Development as a Hybrid Network

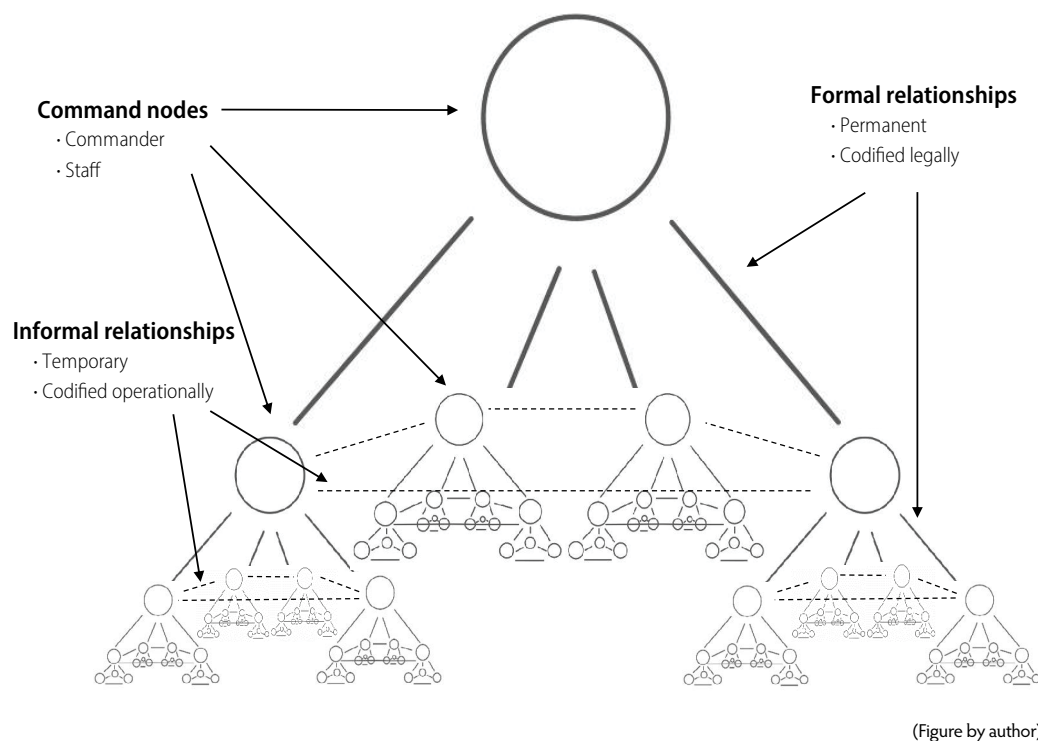
Professional development combines the strengths of formal and informal networks to yield hybrid networks. In their book *The Starfish and the Spider*, Rod Beckstrom and Ori Brafman describe the strengths of hybrid networks. Hybrid networks adapt quickly to change but remain resilient when stressed.<sup>21</sup> Professional development programs can leverage the strengths of hybrid networks by buttressing informal relationships with the formal chain of command. Professional development networks bridge preestablished silos of unit tribalism reinforced by the chain of command. A professional development network, as outlined in figure 2 (on page 118), establishes informal links that transfer information across the entire organization.

Professional development should focus on building these informal networks to maximize cohesion, diversity of thought, and personal connections. Building hybrid networks is easier said than done. The key to success is to nudge a hybrid network into building itself.

In his memoir, Wedemeyer writes how his organizational environment as a young officer nudged him into becoming a professional. He was not naturally inclined to study or professionally develop while at West Point. He was initially more interested in sports and enjoying time with his peers. However, what he found was that over time, West Point's culture burrowed its way into him. By the time he commissioned, he was reading history for enjoyment and studying out of an innate hunger for professional knowledge. During the interwar period, Wedemeyer found himself stuck in the lower ranks for the better part of decade. Interestingly, that lack of upward mobility allowed him to take assignments off the beaten path to include postings in China and Germany that let him pursue the professional interests he had

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earned his commission as an infantry officer from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 2009. Zelaya has published several print and online publications that include "The Paradox of Control" in *Small Wars Journal*, "Failure and the After Action Review" in the *Center for Army Lessons Learned Newsletter*, "Leveraging Strategic Exercises for Tactical Readiness" in *Joint Force Quarterly*, "The Input-Output Problem: Managing the Military's Big Data in the Age of AI" in *War on the Rocks*, and most recently, "Echoes in Time" in the *Company Leader*.



**Figure 1. The Military Hierarchy**

developed as a cadet. Wedemeyer broadened within a profession unconcerned with individual progression. Wedemeyer's example provides a useful model from which to build.<sup>22</sup>

## Tools of the Profession

As Wedemeyer's example demonstrates, professional development should build organizational environments that self-perpetuate and create new professionals. Successful professional development programs use the tools of the profession—reading, writing, and public speaking—to build organizations and hybrid networks. To return to the bridge analogy, these tools are like an engineer's construction equipment.

To build informal connections, professional development programs require some critical characteristics. They should be voluntary; they should not use formal authority to force participation. Coercion inhibits cohesion and limits decentralization. There is no easier way to kill interest in a professional development program than to hand soldiers a book and tell them to

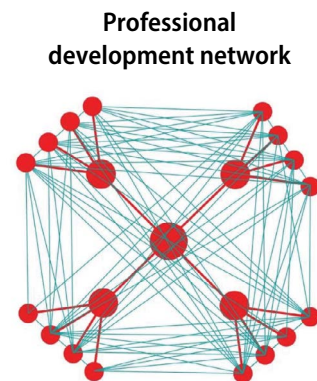
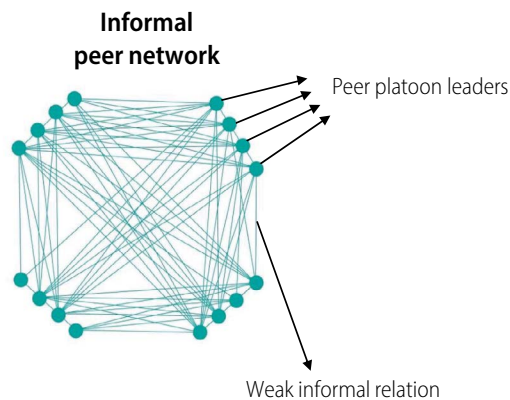
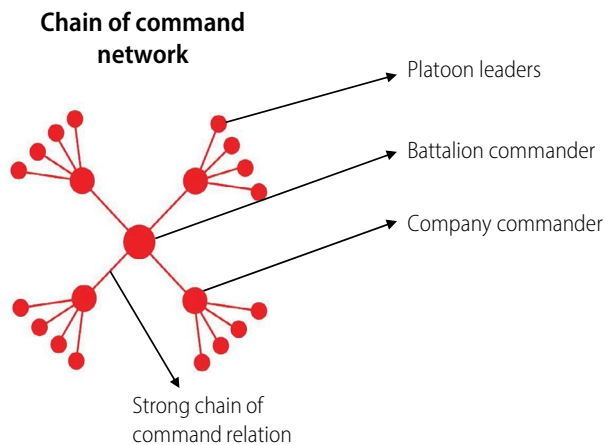
read it in thirty days and write a report. Instead, leaders should adopt a long-term strategic approach that fosters intrinsic interest in professional development by finding and influencing key audiences.

The strategic approach is certain nuanced and indirect, but again, it focuses on the long term holistic understanding of an organization. The key audience for any professional development program should be lower-level leaders. The reasoning is simple: junior leaders are the ones most likely

to lack connections across the broader organization based on their location in the hierarchy (refer to figure 2). While higher echelon leaders are important, due to their formal positions at the narrow end of an organization, they already have cross-organizational connections with peers. Within the target audience, there is a subset of leaders that should be specifically identified. These leaders tend to be the most senior members of the most junior groups. The consummate example is the senior specialist, leader of the "E-4 Mafia." Junior soldiers respect them as informal leaders because they are reliable. Gaining their interest in professional development is critical to long-term success.

Reading, writing, and public speaking each establish connections among people in unique ways, especially with skeptical target audiences. Organizations can use these characteristics to achieve a desired effect. Importantly, they reinforce diversity of thought and cohesion.

Reading is a powerful developmental tool. Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis bluntly wrote, "If



(Figure by author)

**Figure 2. Hybrid Networks**

you haven't read hundreds of books you are functionally illiterate, and you will be incompetent."<sup>23</sup> Reading programs can highlight diverse ideas across an organization. They are also decentralized and do not require formal structures. They can help generate shared values and increased understanding of the operational environment. Reading programs should focus on building cohesion through shared reflection. Book clubs are an effective model to get professionals reading and foster discussion across an organization.

The old adage that "the pen is mightier than the sword" rings just as true now as ever. Writing programs sustain organizational connections through time as the written word endures beyond the movement of individual personnel. Writing also encourages diversity of thought and the sharing of ideas that may not otherwise

be communicated. Most importantly, writing refines thinking. There is no better way to clarify an idea than to write it out. Writing, however, tends to be an individual endeavor. Leaders can use writing competitions to help foster collaboration in a writing program.

Another great model to foster collaborative writing is the "solarium." Created during the Eisenhower administration and named after the White House solarium, the solarium gets junior leaders in front of senior leaders to brief them their ideas directly.<sup>24</sup> Generally, junior leaders submit information papers on their ideas prior to the event. At the event, senior decision-makers are briefed directly on each idea and pick one for implementation. In addition to improving writing, solariums also highlight the idea that junior leaders can effect change in their organizations.

Leaders often overlook the power of the spoken word in professional development programs. There is no doubt, however, that military professionals need to speak with vigor and passion when addressing soldiers. Public speaking fosters collaboration and communication skills. It can also build cohesion across an organization. Unfortunately, public speaking programs tend to require more centralization and coordination. They are also difficult to create organically. The “leader call” is a possible model that leaders can use to get soldiers speaking in public. Leader calls are informal events used to welcome new soldiers, farewell departing soldiers, and mark major organizational transitions. While they might not directly relate to the topic of professional development, they still get leaders speaking in front of others. Leaders can also combine the solarium model with a public speaking component to build connections across an organization.

With these tools, any organization can foster professional development at minimal cost. It is critical to emphasize that a leader’s example is the best way to start and maintain a leader development program. Leaders need to talk about what they are reading. They need to

write out their thoughts. The need to speak passionately about their profession. With time, leaders will find if they model professional development through their actions, their organizations will follow.

## Conclusion

The purpose of professional development should be to build the types of organizations that will yield the next generation of Albert C. Wedemeyers. It takes a unique approach that bridges tactical and strategic perspectives to build agile and lethal organizations. Hybrid networks are the means of achieving that end. Reading, writing, and public speaking are tools organizations can leverage to build the profession and professionals. Mixing and cueing these tools allows informal bonds to extend through time and survive the turbulence created by personnel turnover. These programs need to be voluntary, broad, informal, and enjoyable to build commitment and create a hybrid network to reinforce the chain of command. With enough luck, the profession will yield the professionals needed to build bridges across turbulent waters and darkening skies. ■

## Notes

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