



Soldiers participate in Southern Vanguard, an exercise designed to increase readiness and interoperability, 9 December 2021 in Resende, Brazil. (Photo by Pfc. Joshua Taeckens, U.S. Army)

# Perception Is Reality

## Redefining Capacity to Influence



Maj. Chris Adams, British Army

In January 2022, the United Kingdom was reeling from the realization that the government had hypocritically neglected to follow its own coronavirus guidelines.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Downing Street staffers were at an illegal social event the night before Prince Phillip's

funeral, which was socially distanced and limited to thirty people.<sup>2</sup> The leader of the opposition declared that the prime minister had “lost the moral authority to lead.”<sup>3</sup> In politics and wider society, authority is therefore something that is necessary to lead, and it

can be lost through perception of actions. In military leadership doctrine however, the concept of authority is conspicuous by its absence.

Leadership doctrine lacks an intuitive model that links authority, power, perception, and influence. This article first defines authority before explaining how authority relates to influence. Second, it challenges Gene Klann's model of independent personal and positional power. It then identifies perception as a key component of authority and develops a model that synthesizes this with power. Finally, it explores corollaries of this model across direct and organizational leadership. The result is intended to be a readily understandable model that leaders across the Army can visualize and apply to their actions.

## What Is Authority?

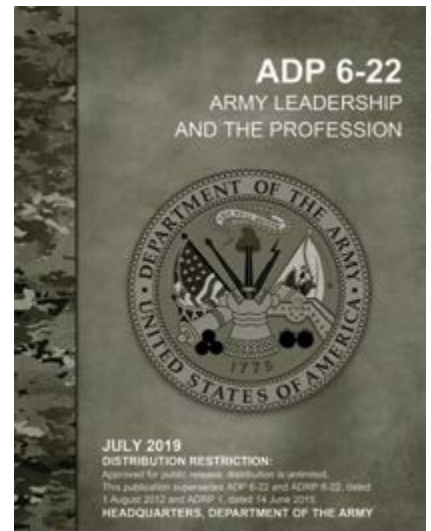
U.S. Army leadership doctrine, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, uses the word "authority" sixty-seven times without defining it once. The word also does not appear in the U.S. Army's 108-page glossary of terms, Field Manual 1-02.1, *Operational Terms*.<sup>4</sup> It does however appear indirectly in ADP 6-22's definition of command: "Command is the authority that a commander in the armed forces lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment."<sup>5</sup> Authority is not the subject of the sentence, however, and is an assumed variable to help the reader understand command. Doctrine is therefore not much help.

In contrast to doctrine, sociology offers a much more robust definition of authority. In 1922, Max Weber defined domination as the probability commands would be obeyed.<sup>6</sup> He identified authority as the foundation of legitimate domination and argues that it inherently requires voluntary compliance.<sup>7</sup> Weber's authority comes in three types. Rational-legal is best exemplified by a traffic light, which only has authority because drivers comply with it. Traditional authority is the stomach full of adrenaline a private soldier feels when a drill sergeant shouts at him. Charismatic authority is fanatical obedience to one exceptional individual's will.<sup>8</sup> Authority is consequently not the act of commanding, but the follower's choice to comply with commands. To summarize, authority is the capacity to influence.

## But What about Power?

John French and Bertram Raven's 1959 study on the bases of social power provide the source for ideas such as expert and referent power.<sup>9</sup> French and Raven describe referent power as a follower's aspiration to emulate a leader, embodied in the Ranger and Special Forces tabs, which so many soldiers strive to achieve. Similarly, they describe expert power as the perception of subject-matter expertise, in relative and absolute terms: expertise communicated by rows of ribbons on chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley's uniform. Gary Yukl and Cecilia Falbe build upon these ideas to argue that these bases of social power come from two independent sources, personal and positional.<sup>10</sup> According to Klann, personal power comprises French and Raven's expert and referent power.<sup>11</sup> French and Raven's research is based on direct interaction between two people and "does not consider social influence exerted on a group."<sup>12</sup> It is therefore not designed for organizational leadership theory. Klann's synthesis with Yukl and Falbe's work is subsequently disingenuous.

Yukl and Falbe's independent sources of personal and positional power are flawed in a military environment. This is because personal and positional power within a uniformed organizational culture are inseparable. Rank and appointment infer a reverence, deference, and assumed expertise irrespective of personality.



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It does not matter who currently commands Seal Team Six, but by virtue of their appointment, they will generate the expert and referent power Klann ascribes to personal power.<sup>13</sup> Combining French and Raven's research with Yukl and Falbe's power concept is therefore ineffective to describe capacity to influence in a military organization. Thus, power is formal and delegated from the commander in chief down to an individual through rank and position.

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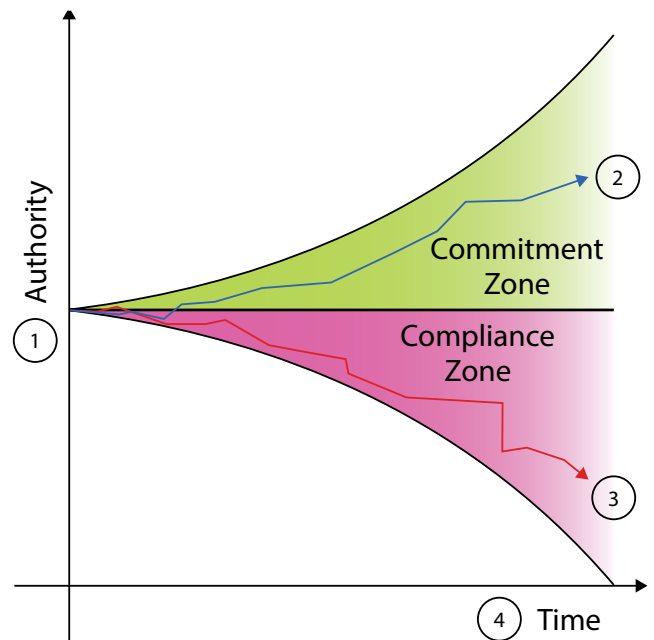
If the probability commands to be obeyed depend on the follower's choice to comply, then perception is reality. As such, authority is the combination of formal power and perception. It is important to note that perception can be positive or negative. Power, however, is either zero for a private with no command position, or extremely high for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

$$\text{Capacity to influence} = \text{Authority} = \text{Power} + \text{Perception}$$

## Power and Perception over Time

Let us consider a brigade in which two previously unknown battalion commanders arrive on the same day: Lt. Col. Blue and Lt. Col. Red. By virtue of their rank and position, both have the same authority with the brigade staff and their subordinates. Lt. Cols. Blue and Red therefore both begin their time in command at point 1 on figure 1, because their authority comes from their rank and position. Over time, perceptions of Lt. Cols. Blue and Red crystallize in brigade, among the other battalion commanders, and within the battalions. Blue embodies the teachings of ADP 6-22, and she rapidly builds a significant positive perception. Her authority increases over time, beyond the level attained on the first day from rank and position. She elevates herself into the commitment zone at point 2. The zones on figure 1 are banded because caution, loyalty, and denial prevent perception-altering authority quickly at first, but the zones degrade over time. The potential for perception to impact authority therefore increases over time.

Meanwhile, Lt. Col. Red is a counterproductive leader. Those surrounding him build a negative perception. Subordinates within the battalion follow orders grudgingly. Malicious compliance becomes default as the climate collapses. Lt. Col. Red has sunk



(Figure by author)

**Figure 1. Power, Perception, and Authority over Time**

into the compliance zone at point 3. Eventually, negative perception cancels out the authority that comes from rank and position. This is where soldiers reach a point of distress and fracture. Subordinates refuse to follow Lt. Col. Red's orders at point 4, and Red's authority is directly challenged. A recent example of a leader's authority degrading to point 4 is the Russian commander who was supposedly "fragg'd" by his own troops in Ukraine.<sup>14</sup>

## Perception of What?

Perception is based on several factors that are equally applicable to superiors, peers, and subordinates. Each is essential, and the aggregate of all these factors forms a holistic view. These five factors are referenced on table 1 (on page 37). The explanation of each factor is included within table 1.

## Positive Perception without Power Creates Informal Leaders

Treating power and perception as orthogonal concepts also helps explain informal leaders. Table 2 (on page 37) shows how an individual without authority from rank or position can still be a leader.



**Table 1. The Five Factors That Drive Perception in Direct Leadership**

Factor	Description
Time	A combination of age and time within the organization. Someone who has served twenty years is likely to generate a positive perception without evidence of what those twenty years were spent doing.
Experience	Someone may have only served a brief time but have important technical or operational experience that affects perception.
Ability	Perceived ability is a strong factor in professional perception. An infantry leader that cannot shoot straight or look after themselves in the field despite time and experience will receive a negative perception.
Trust	Based on Hurley's trust factors such as shared values. Perception based on whether the experienced and capable twenty-year infantry leader cares.
Character	Ability to follow the values of the service. Hypocrisy in maintaining standards undermines perception.

(Table by author)

That person's authority can come entirely from perception, which compels others to follow his or her commands. On the right side of table 2 is a formal leader whose authority has degraded through negative perceptions. He or she is unable to lead effectively, and his or her subordinates are likely to only act through compliance. Finally, an individual without positive perception or the formal power is simply a follower.

To summarize the proposed model for direct leadership, authority comes from the combination of formal power and perception. Authority in sociology is the probability commands will be followed and is therefore the capacity to influence. Perception is built from time, experience, ability, trust, and character. The perception of those above,

alongside and below the leader, all matter. This is visualized in figure 2 (on page 38).

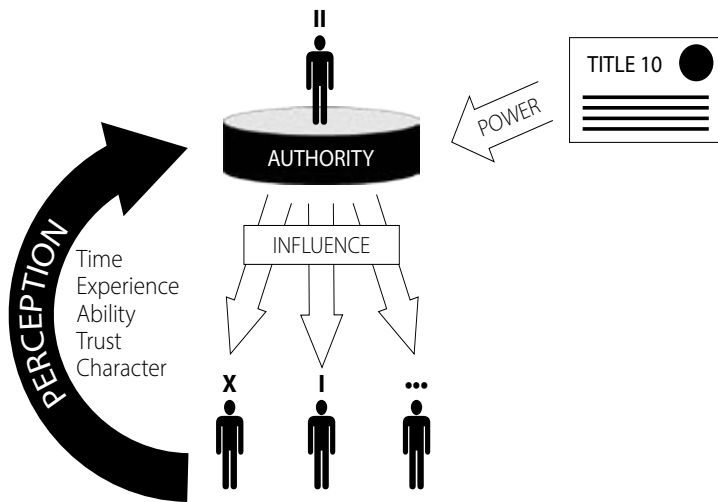
**Perception is Equally Important to Organizational Leadership**

To understand the importance of perception in organizational leadership, it is important to define the limits of perception in direct leadership. A squad leader will know his or her platoon leader, have limited dealings with his or her company commander, and probably know the battalion commander by name and reputation only. Similarly, the average battalion commander is unlikely to know every soldier within a squad. Therefore, the limit of direct perception is three up and three down. Figure 3 (on page 39) visualizes this for a battalion commander and platoon leader.

**Table 2. Power Authority Matrix**

		Perception?	
		Positive	Zero/Negative
Power?	Yes	<i>Formal, effective leader (Lt. Col. Blue)</i>	<i>No authority. Formal but ineffective leader (Lt. Col. Red)</i>
	No	<i>Informal, effective leader</i>	<i>No authority. Not a leader</i>

(Table by author)



(Figure by author)

## Figure 2. Capacity to Influence = Authority = Power + Perception

Beyond this range, organizations are perceived as self-aware super-organisms. “Big Army decided to send me to Fort Polk” or “IV Corps made some terrible decisions on Warfighter” are good examples of this. Similarly, at an echelon above battalion, commanders cannot form a direct perception of each individual soldier. They will instead naturally form a holistic perception of “the little people,” a phrase adapted from K. W.

Cooper’s book *The Little Men* about a platoon in Burma.<sup>15</sup> This begins to occur in echelon differences as close as two up and two down, but it is more pronounced the wider the gap between perceiver and organization.

Organizations therefore create perception in the same way as individuals, which affects their capacity to influence in much the same way (see figure 4, page 39). The same factors drive organizational perception, albeit with different descriptions. These are described in table 3.

### Three Corollaries of Perception and Influence

The importance of perception to an organization’s ability to influence has three significant corollaries which merit further exploration.

First, commanders and staff are both responsible for the perception of their organization. To use the original vignette, it doesn’t matter whether the British prime minister was at the illegal parties his staff hosted in the heart of government, because the organization and the commander are both tarnished by public perception. Organizational culture inevitably colors perception, for better or worse.

Second, the decentralized execution that embodies mission command is wholly dependent on trust and

### Table 3. The Five Factors That Drive Perception in Organizational Leadership

Factor	Description
Time	New organizations are typically perceived as ineffective until established. Similarly, very old organizations are sometimes seen as archaic and obsolete. A good example of the former is the U.S. Space Force.
Experience	Artifacts of experience can create a perception even if the individuals from that experience have all changed. For example, guards’ designations within the Russian army today based on experience in World War II.
Ability	Perception is affected by the reputation that an organization builds both at home and deployed. The “Rakkasans” in 101st Airborne build, maintain, and lean on the perception their actions create.
Trust	What does the organization value, and how does it look after its people? The negative perception of Fort Hood during the AIM2 process was based on a lack of organizational trust.
Character	Embodied by the commander and staff, this is the organizational culture. The British government violating its own coronavirus laws is an excellent example of failure.

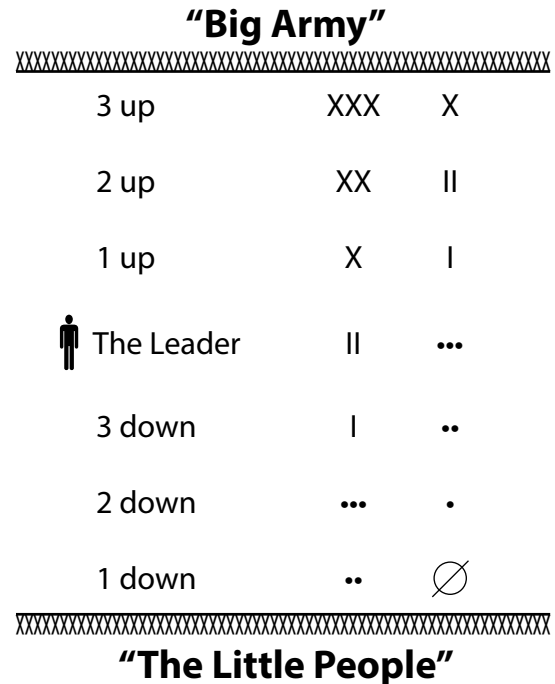
(Table by author)

shared understanding. This cannot happen in the compliance zone in figure 1, because grudgingly achieving the bare minimum through fear kills any disciplined initiative. Positive perception to build authority into the commitment zone is therefore essential for mission command to work. Leading by example, upholding values, and building trust and expertise are all prerequisites to effective mission command.

Third, if leaders across the Army learn to understand and reflect on the perception they generate, they will drastically increase their operational effectiveness. Self-reflection on perception generation will increase emotional intelligence and improve communication. The ability to manage perception also applies to adversaries. The Russian army has a different reputation one month into its invasion of Ukraine than it did a year ago.<sup>16</sup> If leaders can control the perception they create, they can generate a disconnect between an enemy's understanding and reality. This is the essence of operational deception and surprise.

### Summary

Perception is reality. Authority as defined by Max Weber in sociology is lacking in Army doctrine, yet “the probability commands will be followed” is essential to military leadership.<sup>17</sup> Personal and position power are not independent within a military environment,



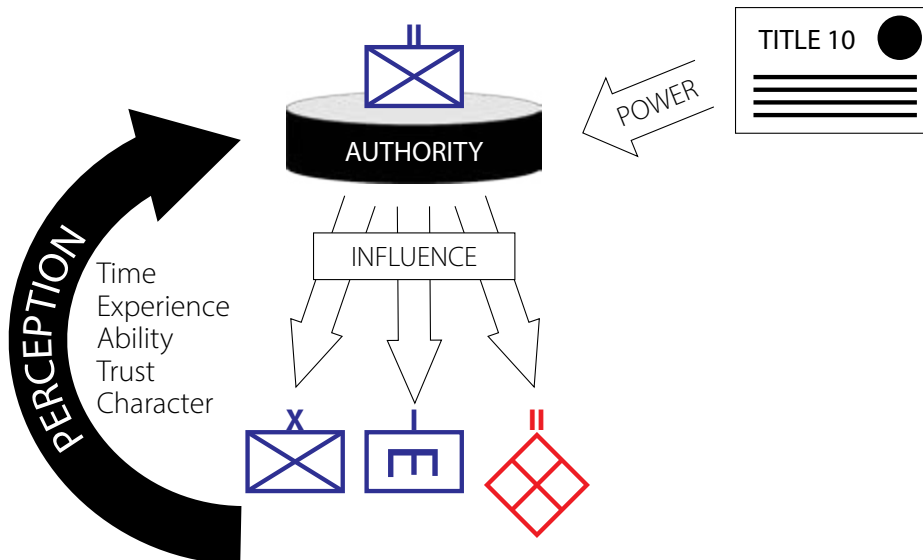
(Figure by author)

**Figure 3. Limits of Direct Perception: Three Up and Three Down**

because an individual's rank, role, and specialist qualifications can create an aura of reverence and perception of expertise regardless of what the individual is like.

Yukl and Falbe's model therefore does not fit military leadership, especially when applying Klann's misleading synthesis of French and Raven's research. Thus, the capacity to influence is authority, which is comprised of power and perception.

Perception has five component parts: time, experience, ability, trust, and character. A leader must build positive perception in these five areas to elevate his or her authority into the commitment zone. This equally applies to direct leaders and organizations as entities.



(Figure by author)

**Figure 4. The Same Model Works at an Organizational Level**

Moral authority derives from the perception of character, not just of the commander but also the staff. Character for an organization is embodied in its culture, which will always radiate outwards and influence the perception of subordinate, peer, and superior organizations alike. A collapse in character perception results in leaders losing “the moral authority to lead.”

Mission command and deception on operations depend on trust, shared understanding, and an ability to

understand and manage perception. If the Army could adopt a model where perception powered a leader or organization’s capacity to influence, it would promote self-reflection and build emotional intelligence across the force. This would improve command climates and employment of mission command everywhere. It would also allow formations in conflict to build a disconnect between enemy perception and reality, generating opportunity for deception and surprise to find relative advantage. ■

## Notes

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8. *Ibid.*, 241–49.
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