



Soldiers of Headquarters, C Company, 3 RIFLES, pose for a group picture in Patrol Base Folad, Afghanistan, during Operation Herrick 16 (March–October 2012). The author is in the front row, fourth from right. Company Serjeant Major Paton is seated fifth from right. (Photo from author)

Four Minutes to Make a Leader



Maj. James Cowen, British Army

In the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, there is a scene where Tom Hanks's character, Capt. John Miller, is staggering up the beach.¹ His helmet has been blown off, and he struggles to take in his surroundings. The sound of battle is muted by a ringing noise that replicates the temporary deafness he is experiencing. One of his NCOs is shouting in his face, but he remains incognizant and unhearing. Finally, he reaches for his helmet and places it back on his head. Doing so drags him sharply back to reality, the din of battle returns, and his surroundings come back into focus. This sequence lasts only a minute and a half. Still, to me, it is one of the most powerful cinematic moments ever committed to film. I find myself returning to those ninety seconds quite frequently. They help me relive,

in a visceral way, a personal memory that is a keystone to my approach to leadership. This is because I have been John Miller staggering up the beach, overcome by shock, unable to bring myself back into the here and now, despite reality screaming for my undivided attention. What I learned in those moments is hugely rich insight for a leader. On the face of it, much of what I learned would appear to be limited to the direct leadership that the experience most obviously exhibits. However, as a newly promoted major, my career will gradually remove me from that direct leadership role over the coming years.

In the spirit of preparing for this transition to organizational leadership, I must return to this seminal moment in my career. Marshall Goldsmith suggests

that “what got you here won’t get you there.”² His general thesis is that the leadership habits that have proved successful as a direct leader will not necessarily carry over into organizational leadership. Naturally, this is a worrying proposition for someone whose identity as a leader is vested in a formative experience from the early days of his career. As a result, I have dedicated significant time to extracting what I can from this event to carry with me into this new role. Naturally, my principal concern is avoiding a leadership identity crisis should this formative event diminish in importance.

The event I am about to discuss is inherently personal, so it is with some trepidation that I choose to share it. I do so for three main reasons. First, it is to demonstrate the role of leaders in overcoming shock. In so doing, I hope to provide an explicit endorsement of the principles of transformational leadership and their utility under extreme pressure. Transformational leadership is, of course, a valuable tool for direct leaders. Still, this article will focus on how the principles of this concept grow in importance when it comes to defining an organizational vision and setting a culture.

Second, perhaps self-indulgently, I want to acknowledge the event in a public forum. The event lasted only

Maj. James Patrick

Cowen is a reconnaissance officer in the British Army. He is currently a student at U.S. School of Advanced Military Studies having recently completed the Command and General Staff Officers' Course. He graduated from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 2013, where he earned a commission in 1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards. Deployments to Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Malawi, Zambia, and Mali have punctuated time spent on staff at battalion and brigade level.

four minutes out of the long summer of 2012 in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Yet, since that August morning, it has played on the back of my eyelids almost daily. Writing about it, trying to capture it on paper, feels like an essential step in coming to terms with the true significance of what happened.

Finally, I hope to encourage anyone who recognizes the look in John Miller's eyes to respect these experiences properly. My vocation, and that of many in the audience to which I am

writing, brings us into direct contact with trauma more frequently than we care to acknowledge. Committing this one traumatic incident to writing will have been worthwhile if sharing my story helps someone else find their means of catharsis. My attempt is not without example; the British chief of the General Staff, Gen. Sir Patrick Sanders, did something similar two years ago when he acknowledged his mental health journey.³ This article is my response to his short video that Sanders called *Time to Talk*. Doing so normalizes the practice and hopefully has developed an environment where others will feel comfortable doing the same.

The Event

At 1135 hrs. on 9 August 2012, our company operations room in Nad-e-Ali District, Helmand Province, fell silent. We had just heard the chilling squawk of the radio inform us, “Contact, small arms fire, man down, wait out.” It was not the voice we were expecting. My close friend Andy Chesterman was the patrol commander on the ground, yet he was alarmingly absent from the net. A cacophony and frantic activity replaced the initial silence following the contact report. My worst fears were confirmed when the anonymous voice relayed the nine-line medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) request over the radio. Andy had prior service in the Navy, so his ZAP (personal ID) number was different from a standard Army number. Ironically, we use ZAP numbers as a way of protecting the identity of a casualty. Andy's number was so distinct that the radio operator might as well have been shouting his name into the handset as he relayed the contact report. The remainder of the nine-liner was also grim listening; it was clear that Andy was in serious trouble.

I froze, completely choked. The room fell out of focus, and sound became meaningless. Without a doubt, I was experiencing an acute shock. It was not immediately apparent why I was so affected as to be overcome to the point of incapacitation. However, having relived that moment repeatedly in the intervening years, I have a good idea why I responded as I did. I was a twenty-three-year-old boy on the adventure of a lifetime. We, my unit, had spent the summer fighting a fierce opponent and consistently winning without suffering a scratch. We thought of ourselves as invincible. Yet, that illusion, built over months, had come crashing down in seconds. The sucker punch was all the more devastating because at the moment he was shot, my friend was stripped of everything that made him Andy. In his place, just the six-digit ZAP number and rapidly deteriorating vital signs constantly spitting out of the



A Medical Emergency Response Team Chinook helicopter leaves Patrol Base Qudrat to rush Andy to the hospital in Camp Bastian, Afghanistan. (Photo from author)

radio speaker. The company serjeant major (CSM), Gavin Paton, had seen my reaction; he had watched me choke from across the room and acted quickly, leading me outside.⁴ Four minutes after the initial contact report, I was back in the operations room contributing to the MEDEVAC effort. In the intervening four minutes, I had been consoled, rebuked, motivated, and returned to the fight by an expert leader.

Transformational Leadership

It may appear to be a bit of a leap to apply a concept like transformational leadership to a four-minute period. In his book *Leadership*, James Burns, the initial proponent for the term, stresses that transformational leadership is not a one-time event or a quick fix, but rather a continuous process.⁵ Much of the groundwork for leading this way is achieved by articulating and modeling a set of values and beliefs. In essence, it is about organizational culture. The CSM set the culture in the company. He demanded total professionalism that he rewarded with humbling levels of trust. A closeness permeated the company that permitted us to be remarkably forthright across all ranks. Paton conditioned us this way because

he knew it would build individual and team resilience, a trait that the company would need during the long fighting season. As I will explore, the value of this investment lies in the reserves of resiliency, mutual trust, and dedication we relied upon in a crisis.

This section will take the reader through the four minutes following the shooting of Andy Chesterman. Then, using the principles of transformational leadership, I will demonstrate the effectiveness of a transformational style in the heat of the moment. Taken in turn, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence, the “four Is” of transformational leadership will demonstrate how the investment in the team by Paton set the foundations that we would need during our worst day in Helmand. Doing so will be crucial to expanding the relevance of my experience to my future as an organizational leader.

Individualized Consideration

Individualized consideration is the leader’s ability to understand each follower’s unique needs and to provide personalized support and guidance to help them reach

their full potential.⁶ Transformational leaders build strong relationships with followers and prioritize their well-being and growth.

The above synopsis of the first pillar of transformational leadership suits my purpose very well. The first half talks about identifying the unique needs of the individual follower. In the seconds following the contact

sense of urgency and excitement that inspires people to work harder and achieve more than they ever thought possible.⁷

Early August was one of the most delicate periods of our deployment. Our usual chain of command was fractured and disjointed. I was covering for the company second in command (2IC) because the commander



Transformational leaders challenge their followers to exceed their own expectations and to achieve results that they never thought possible.



report, Paton led me outside and, with very few words, reminded me that I had a job to do. He also reminded me that I had my role in keeping my subordinates motivated. As a leader, I had to display physical courage and selfless commitment. He tailored his words perfectly for me. His execution acted as a sharp jolt to my senses, he didn't mince his words, and I snapped out of the daze. His bluntness was a risk; of course, it could have backfired, but it didn't, and I believe Paton knew it wouldn't.

The second half of the synopsis of individualized consideration talks about the importance of building solid relationships. Before writing this, I had not considered this event in any broader context. The significance of that conversation was limited to the impact of the intervention in that moment. However, from my current vantage point, I can appreciate the slow and deliberate effort Paton made with the individuals in the company in the months before deploying. Every interaction he had with the team was meaningful and designed to match his eventual vision for C Company, a vision founded on mutual trust and total professionalism. Paton wanted to be able to talk frankly with whoever needed to hear frank words. To do so, he took the time to get to know the team. Paton executed perfect individualized consideration in the six months that led us to that conversation and in those four minutes with me.

Intellectual Stimulation

Transformational leaders challenge their followers to exceed their own expectations and to achieve results that they never thought possible. They create a

was on leave in the UK. Likewise, the normal 2IC was now in command. Our organizational resilience was not at 100 percent. My role that day would be running the operations room. Therefore, I was the person tasked with coordinating the MEDEVAC.

Immediately before the CSM led me outside, I vaguely recall a signaller asking me to decide on a course of action. Like Capt. Miller in the film, when his NCO was shouting for his attention, I was incognizant and deaf to everything around me. Part of what contributed to my shock was the weight of responsibility suddenly thrust upon me. To give Andy the best chance of survival, I would have to exercise decision-making under an extreme level of pressure that was new to me. Paton had his role in getting Andy off the ground. He would deploy out and move Andy to the helicopter landing site. Before he could do so, he needed to be reassured that the operations room was functioning as it should be. The last thing the CSM said to me before sending me back into the room was, "Mr. Chesterman needs you." I reentered the operations room and took hold of the radio handset, imbued with a burning desire to play my part in what would follow. He knew I would find intellectual stimulation by putting me back into the fray. He provided a singular focus for the stream of emotion that I was experiencing. Paton had created the "sense of urgency and excitement that inspires people to work harder."

Inspirational Motivation

Based on Burns's explanation of inspirational motivation, it might appear challenging to link this pillar

of transformational leadership to an isolated event. According to Burns, inspirational motivation ultimately rests on moral and ideological foundations, not on a mere search for short-term gains.⁸ I will argue here that a transformational leader who has conditioned their team to their leadership style can adapt that style to achieve short-term results. “C Company will be the best

and that we had to exercise every sinew of our collective body to get those in the fight out of trouble. He told us our priority was the MEDEVAC and preventing further casualties. He went on to focus us on what was to come; when everyone was off the ground, “C Company would find the shooter and wrestle back the initiative from the insurgents.” This short-term vision

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company in 3 RIFLES” is the vision I remember for the company. If you asked any of us back then who was the best company in Afghanistan, let alone 3 RIFLES, I know what most would say.

The members of C Company were well-conditioned for this vision. We operated in an environment of total professionalism and mutual trust. We were accountable to ourselves first but likewise for each other and to each other. That said, the execution of a vision of excellence is fraught with some risk. Firstly, suppose that “excellence” is an illusion or the mantle awarded without concrete support. In those cases, organizational resilience will suffer under crisis. Put simply, there will be nothing concrete to fall back upon and structures will crumble. Likewise, if the foundation is not maintained, the illusion of excellence might persist despite an erosion of those foundations. We believed we were the best company in Afghanistan because we had complete faith in the team. From this belief grew the boldness with which we fought the insurgent for the first three months of the deployment. It is why I was so affected when the enemy eventually hit one of our own. I overcame this emotional response through the immediate corrective intervention of Paton. I only needed a quick intervention because of our individual and team resilience. When a leader can rely upon a solid foundation that complements and supports their vision, they can stimulate a positive response during a crisis.

As Paton and I reentered the room, he issued a thirty-second edict to the team. He made it clear that we in the operations room serve the people on the ground

built upon the long-term idea that C Company was the best company in 3 RIFLES. Paton appealed to the resilience he had built into our team. As he finished talking, he strapped on his body armor and moved out to assist in the MEDEVAC. There was nothing Churchillian about his speech. It was matter-of-fact, down to earth, and precisely what we needed to hear. We were inspired, and we went to work.

Idealized Influence

Bernard Bass holds up idealized influence as the bedrock on which the other three principles stand. For Bass, it means the degree to which leaders act as role models, demonstrate high standards of ethical and moral conduct, and make personal sacrifices to achieve group goals.⁹ I prefer to imagine the four Is as independent pillars supporting the overall transformational leadership concept. I do so because in Burns’s original work, he emphasizes a leader’s charisma as the vehicle for achieving idealized influence.¹⁰ If charisma is a crucial personal characteristic for idealized influence, one could extrapolate that only charismatic people can execute transformational leadership. I much prefer Bass’s reliance on high standards and ethical, moral conduct as a more important trait in a leader than charisma.

As it happens, Paton embodied everything Bass describes as a requirement for achieving idealized influence. He had high standards that he modeled and demanded of others. Likewise, Paton always exhibited firm ethical grounding and unimpeachable moral conduct. One of the things I admired most during those



Crowds line the streets of Edinburgh, Scotland, as soldiers of 3rd Battalion, 3 RIFLES, march through the city 3 November 2012 after returning from a demanding six-month tour in Helmand Province during Operation Herrick 16 as part of the 12th Mechanized Brigade. We were all very aware that one of us was missing. (Photo by Cpl. Paul Morrison, Crown Copyright)

six months was his readiness to put himself in the line of fire for the soldiers he was fighting alongside. Setting an example is what he did that day when he went out to get Andy off the ground. It is probably worth sharing another anecdote about Paton at this point. He is huge. When the Taliban would count us out of the patrol base (a procedure we listened to by intercepting their radio transmissions), they had a nickname for him. You would hear them count; “1, 2, 3, The Bear, 5, 6.” He knew that his presence on the battlefield affected everyone. C Company knew he was coming to get us if we got hurt. Likewise, the insurgents knew when he was heading out and they feared him. He knew his place was on the battlefield. In setting this personal example of physical courage, the company witnessed a role model doing what was right in a tough moment—idealized influence.

Conclusion

When I set about writing this article, I had three main goals. The first was to use my experience of strong

leadership as an antidote to shock to endorse a well-executed transformational leadership style. I did so to prove that my identity as a leader would remain intact even as I transition to organizational leadership. I have been reassured that Goldsmith’s warning of “what got you here won’t get you there” is only somewhat valid. I do not have to discard the lessons in direct leadership from that summer. They will continue to be as relevant as ever, particularly because they have taught me to build and maintain strong and meaningful relationships. Writing this article has given me an opportunity to uncover a rich vein of lessons that will be supremely relevant at the organizational level. We did not achieve excellence by being the best at marksmanship or the most aggressive on the battlefield. On the contrary, we fulfilled a vision of excellence founded on trust, professionalism, and relationship building. Perhaps most pertinently, I can now see this moment of extreme emotion and violence through a wider lens. Of course, there is much more to leadership for a military professional than these moments. These moments are the exception

and not the norm. But for an organizational leader hoping to immunize their team against the effects of shock, what is clear to me now is that resilience is hard earned and requires dedicated investment. I learned to lead, or at least what leadership looks like, in a baptism of fire that I have kept very close for my whole career. It is a solid grounding that will serve me well as I continue to study the art and science of leadership.

Second, I planted a flag in my mental health journey. I think this article comes across as a stream of consciousness at points. I refuse to edit that because this purpose of catharsis is more important to me than the first. Paton had built a resilient team in which we cared for each other. The morning after the shooting, the battalion commander stood on the steps outside the operations room. The whole company had gathered to hear him speak. I knew what he was about to say, but it still hit me like a freight train. "Lt. Chesterman fought bravely through the night but did not survive his wounds."¹¹ Before I had processed the words, I felt a hand on my back, and another grabbed my hand. Two riflemen, private soldiers, had reacted the way Paton had trained us and were supporting their teammate. At that moment, I saw the distinction between setting a vision and achieving a vision. That was the true mark of excellence and why C Company was the best company in 3 RIFLES and the best in Afghanistan. From top to bottom, we had each other's backs.

Finally, I wanted to contribute my voice to the conversation on mental health more widely. I have seen firsthand, not just in the aftermath of that tour but throughout my career, that most of us are living with our trauma. Writing about it will not be the way for everyone, but I would echo the chief of the General Staff's encouragement: it's time to talk. One thing that has struck a chord as I have relived these events is the impact that leaving a team like C Company has had on me as an individual. The further away from that summer in Helmand time takes me, the further away I am from being in that team. That is a reasonably common emotion for a soldier, but it is worth considering. Those tight-knit teams are built to provide mutual support to get through tough times. The broader conversation about mental health must continue to help us deal with everyday life after trauma.

No, Andrew Chesterman did not survive his wounds. Still, we rallied around his death and went after the insurgents with renewed ferocity. For the remainder of the summer, we did very well. The tone was set in the four minutes after the contact report was received. I will always be grateful to Paton for how firmly yet sensitively he guided me from the precipice of self-indulgent grief to a place of ruthless determination. My career ever since has been dominated by two personal priorities; to guard the memory of Andy Chesterman and to lead per Paton's transformational example.¹² ■

Notes

1. *Saving Private Ryan*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Universal City, CA: Dreamworks Pictures, 1998).

2. Marshall Goldsmith, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: A Round Table Comic: How Successful People Became Even More Successful* (Mundelein, IL: Writers of the Round Table Press, 2011), 10.

3. *It's Time to Talk* by General Sir Patrick Sanders, YouTube video, posted by "NSDF," 4:10, 8 July 2021, https://youtu.be/xiblUgr_xoo.

4. British light infantry spelling of "sergeant."

5. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 20.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, 2nd ed. (New York: Psychology Press, 2005).

8. *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

9. *Ibid.*, 14.

10. Burns, *Leadership*, 16.

11. Title of author's diary entry for 11 August 2012. The image of the battalion commander standing on the steps outside the operations room has become a persistent, recurring, memory. The impact of Andy's loss has been life and career defining for the author.

12. "Lieutenant Andrew Chesterman Killed in Afghanistan," UK Ministry of Defence, 9 August 2012, accessed 27 June 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/fatalities/lieutenant-andrew-chesterman-killed-in-afghanistan>.