



In a fast-evolving operational environment, adaptive leadership isn't just an option — it's a necessity. NCOs who embrace change will succeed, mastering readiness for greater responsibilities and challenges in future roles. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Thiem Huynh)

Understanding Adaptive Leadership

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In a fast-evolving operational environment, adaptive leadership isn't just an option — it's a necessity. Adaptive leaders understand their organizations and empower individuals and teams to get results while navigating uncertainty. These leaders make tough decisions that drive innovation and positive change to meet organizational goals.

Adaptive leadership emphasizes responding effectively to changing circumstances, challenges, and opportunities (Heifetz et al., 2009). As the operational environment rapidly changes, adaptive leadership thrives.

As in corporate America, Army leaders must learn to lead in dynamic environments. NCOs who embrace change will succeed in today's evolving operational environment. They will be better prepared for greater responsibilities and challenges in future roles.

Flexibility in Adaptive Leadership

Leaders who adapt effectively demonstrate flexibility and creativity in addressing challenges with the resources at hand. In this setting, flexibility refers to a leader's ability to shape conditions and address shifting mission requirements with adaptable and timely responses.

Adaptability has two main aspects:

- The ability to identify essential factors crucial for success in unique circumstances.
- The capacity to adjust practices to align the workforce with changing requirements (Department of the Army [DA], 2019).

In today's fast-paced and complex environment, organizations face unique levels of uncertainty. The term *leadership* evokes images of influential, energetic leaders who lead victorious armies, oversee corporate giants, and

influence the direction of entire nations (Yukl, 2013).

Factors crucial for success are “mental agility, critical thinking (with inherent ethical reasoning), adaptability, knowledge, wisdom, innovation, judgment, expertise, and interpersonal tact” (DA, 2024, p. 20). For military leaders, understanding and embracing adaptive leadership is especially critical.

Aspects of Adaptive Leadership

Modernizing the Army requires leaders with a flexible and versatile mindset that adjusts to changing circumstances and environments. Leaders must pivot strategies as necessary to address emerging challenges or seize opportunities. Flexibility is the ability to shape conditions and expertly address shifting threats and scenarios with suitable, adaptable, and prompt responses.

Leaders refine their skills over time, mastering their application in particular situations and showing versatility. Army leaders must be ready to diverge from traditional leadership methods when needed. When adaptability and versatility combine, leaders can anticipate and react to changes effectively (DA, 2019).

As noted above, other keys to success include mental agility, sound judgment, innovation, interpersonal tact, and expertise — all components of the Army’s leadership attribute of intellect (DA, 2019). Adaptive leadership relies on these five sub-attributes to make prompt decisions, foster innovation, communicate effectively, promote teamwork, maintain stability, and show proficiency in leadership.

As Simon Sinek said in a popular talk, “The real job of a leader is not about being in charge. It’s about taking care of those in our charge” (McClung, 2017). Army superiors who are empathetic are adaptive leaders. Leaders don’t manage people. They lead them.

Leaders across military and corporate organizations face many of the same problems. Sinek notes that not every leader can transition from being responsible for their job to being responsible for their people (McClung, 2017). Adaptive leaders who understand the situations, motives, and emotions of others in their organizations inspire and achieve mission objectives (DA, 2019).

One example seen in the fast-evolving operational environment is the Army’s modernization efforts in developing and deploying multi-domain operations (MDO) capabilities. As adversaries develop sophisticated anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) systems, Army leaders are adapting their tactics to integrate cyber, space, and electronic warfare capabilities into traditional combat operations.

The series of exercises in the Army’s Project Convergence showcased how our forces can rapidly integrate artificial intelligence, drones, and advanced sensor systems to adjust battlefield strategies in real time. This flexibility in leveraging new technology enables the Army to maintain dominance in complex, multi-domain environments. The success of these modernization initiatives hinges on leaders who can quickly adapt their strategies and resources to evolving threats (Congressional Research Service, 2022).



Staff Sgt. Feliciano Sotelo-Spence, 11th Airborne Division, provides new strategy instructions to Spc. Snider Garrison at the Donnelly Training Area, Alaska, Feb. 17, 2024. Leaders who adapt effectively demonstrate flexibility and creativity by shaping conditions with suitable, adaptable, and prompt responses. (U.S. Army Photo by Sgt. Avery Cunningham)



Army leaders must be ready to diverge from traditional leadership methods when needed. As adversaries develop sophisticated anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) systems, Army leaders are adapting their tactics to integrate cyber, space, and electronic warfare capabilities into traditional combat operations. (U.S. Army photo by Steven Stover)

Maj. Thaddeus Wilson (2024) offers takeaway lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war for adapting to the expected fight in the future. Army senior leaders must emphasize to their NCOs the need for continuous adaptation in military training, doctrine, and strategy to address the complexities of modern warfare. Honing decision-making skills is imperative for all leaders.

These skills will be constantly scrutinized in the operational environment. By cultivating flexibility in training and adaptability in decision-making, by promoting collaboration across all ranks and committing to continuous learning, NCOs can better navigate the complexities of future high-intensity conflicts.

Call to Action

As the Army faces dynamic and unpredictable operational environments, its leaders — particularly NCOs — must embrace flexibility as the driver of adaptive leadership. NCOs at all levels must master the art of adaptability and versatility. They must understand how to lead their organizations with empathy.

Adapting to dynamic situations “allows the leader to anticipate what others are experiencing and feeling and gives insight to how decisions or actions

affect them” (DA, 2019, para. 2-23). Empathetic leaders create an environment that encourages open communication and emotional intelligence, which are crucial for adaptive leadership.

By fostering environments that promote flexibility, innovation, and empowerment, Army leaders ensure mission success and the continued evolution of their teams in an ever-changing, complex operational environment. Now is the time for NCOs to reflect on their leadership style, embrace change, understand their Soldiers, and guide them with a mindset ready to meet any challenge head-on.

Conclusion

NCOs who embrace change and adapt will thrive. Understanding adaptive leadership principles is key for Army leaders in all organizations.

Adaptive leadership is crucial in today’s Army, emphasizing the ability to adjust and respond effectively to changing circumstances and challenges. Leaders who embody this approach empower individuals and teams to navigate uncertainty, make tough decisions, and drive innovation to meet organizational goals.

Leaders must be flexible and versatile, ready

to adapt strategies and approaches to address emerging challenges. Combining adaptability and versatility enhances a leader's ability to anticipate and respond appropriately to change.

Adaptive leaders in military organizations must prioritize leading people over managing people and tasks. And NCOs must genuinely understand the situations, motives, and emotions of others, fostering empathy and effective communication that drive success. ■

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Staff Sgt. Jeremy Ephriam, 36th Engineer Brigade, prepares a Ground Obstacle Breaching Lane Neutralizer drone (GOBLIN) for launch at Fort Irwin, California, in March 2025. The exercise showcased how U.S. forces can integrate artificial intelligence, drones, and advanced sensor systems to adjust battlefield strategies in real time. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Marita Schwab)

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IMAGINED SCENARIO: SUCCEEDING ON A MULTI-DOMAIN BATTLEFIELD

Staff Sgt. John Smith, a seasoned squad leader, finds himself in a densely populated urban environment. The city streets, the air above, and the digital environment are a complex, multi-domain battlefield. Enemy forces employ advanced cyber warfare capabilities to disrupt his team's communication and navigation systems.

As the squad winds its way through the narrow streets and alleyways, they deal with enemy unmanned aerial systems (UAS) patrolling the skies, providing real-time intelligence to enemy commanders. Meanwhile, enemy electronic warfare units try to jam or disable his team's communications capabilities, making it difficult to call for close air or artillery support — or receive orders from the chain of command.

The city's infrastructure is also used against the team, with enemy forces using traffic management systems to create gridlock and hinder his team's

movement. Social media and other online platforms are also used to spread disinformation and propaganda, undermining his team's morale and sowing distrust in the civilian population.

With his platoon commander counting on him to make quick decisions based on his knowledge of the commander's intent, Smith must rely on his training and experience to adapt to the rapidly changing situation. He knows the principles of adaptive leadership. He must be flexible, innovative, and empathetic to lead his team to success in this complex environment.

Leaders must guide their teams through operational chaos. They must communicate effectively and stay one step ahead of adversaries. Understanding the capabilities of the different domains at their disposal is key. Reassessing when necessary, regrouping when they must, and coming up with new plans to complete mission objectives are what adaptive and flexible leaders do to succeed.

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