

# Old Dogs and New Tricks: Setting the Tone For Adaptability

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One overarching best practice is the continuing importance of commander-centric operations in which the commander relies on his intuition and judgment, issuing mission-type orders to achieve desired effects. This remains essential, even in this age in which the improvements in technology tempt one to centrally control operations.

Former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker used the metaphor of a cattle drive to suggest that the Army needs to see our move to the Future Force as a journey rather than a destination. The cattle drive, the journey, is an evolutionary process.

While the Army can more or less define “where we are” and “where we need to go,” the process of getting there will not be straightforward.

The cowboys of the 1880s knew that Kansas was the cattle drive’s end and Wyoming its beginning, but they did not know with any certainty the best route to get there or what difficulties they might encounter on the way. It seems relatively clear that the system of professional military education should develop leaders to deal effectively with the ambiguities inherent in accelerating change, represented most urgently by the type of warfare we are now facing and will continue to face into the future. It is unclear exactly how this will be accomplished, thus demanding that the Army approach it as an evolutionary process in the same spirit that the cowboys used: a journey into the unknown, to blaze a vi-

able trail from an Industrial Age into an Information Age Future Force mind-set. We believe that it is essential to emphasize human development on a par with the inevitable infusion of technological advancements.

The capacity to adapt is a chief contributor to military success at the tactical level. In his recent book, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, Lt. Col. John Nagl combines historical analysis with organizational theory to explain why the Army sometimes fails to be as adaptive as required. “Even under the pressures for change presented by ongoing military conflict,” he writes, “a strong organizational culture can prohibit learning the lessons of the present and can even prevent the organization’s acknowledging that its current policies are anything other than completely successful.”

Equipped with a scientific manage-

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ment mind-set associated with the Industrial Age, the Army developed mobilization doctrine and a supporting leader development paradigm characterized by an aspiration to achieve quick results in a massive way. It was necessary in the last century to build a large force conscripted from the citizenry and proficient at the basics in a short amount of time. Laws and policies in support of the Army's mobilization doctrine drove various aspects of personnel management leading to cultural norms and institutionalized measures of success or failure. Some of the easily measurable short-term results valued in today's military culture can endanger the culture and climate needed to promote adaptability over time. Consider, for example, our tactical-art instruction in which simulated and training exercises are structured to teach doctrine producing one right answer. During the capstone division-level simulation *Prairie Warrior*, the opposing forces are restricted in order to produce the prescribed training ob-

jectives for the students. Adaptability can be sacrificed when realism is subordinated to prescriptive training.

Another example occurred during Millennium Challenge 2002 when Lt. Gen. Paul Van Riper, as the opposing forces commander, defeated the blue forces using unconventional tactics. Joint Forces Command then placed restrictions on the opposing forces to restrain such innovative techniques. Gen. Van Riper protested that the enemy will not necessarily fight as doctrinal templates project. The conflict represented tension between the desire to verify existing doctrine and rigorous testing against a free-thinking and wily enemy.

The culture is affected when subordinates see superiors who consistently play it safe and conform to doctrine as the ones who are successful. These superiors build systems in order to produce predictable results. Adaptability and its handmaidens, critical thinking and innovation, are lost if too much emphasis is placed on

staying on the assigned task.

Adaptability is defined as the capacity to change to meet different conditions. We can observe it in the process by which individuals and groups decide to change in the face of new circumstances. Adaptability, agility and resilience are closely related; they lead to changes in missions, plans, procedures and outcomes, but adaptability alone is independent of time constraints. Most individuals, groups and institutions can adapt slowly to changes. Agility, on the other hand, implies a rapid adaptation to environmental changes.

The consequences of resilience for ecological systems were first emphasized by Canadian ecologist C. S. Holling in order to draw attention to trade-offs between constancy and change, between predictability and unpredictability. Hollings defined resilience as "the capacity of an ecosystem to tolerate disturbance without collapsing into a qualitatively different state that is controlled by a different set of processes. A resilient ecosystem can

withstand shocks and rebuild itself when necessary. Resilience in social systems has the added capacity of humans to anticipate and plan for the future." It is this capacity for more rapid change that many believe will contribute to success in the contemporary and future operational environment.

### **The Changing Face of War**

Change begins in soldiers' minds before it becomes operational reality. Williamson Murray asserts in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* and articles such as "Military Culture Does Matter," that effective change begins with innovation facilitated by an evolved culture, characterized by effective professional education and a climate that encourages and rewards new ideas. Change centers on people who encourage and educate leaders on how to use new ideas and then find the hardware to enable them. Ultimately, minds win wars, yet technology and hardware seem to occupy the attention of inordinately large sectors of the functional Army. It seems as though the Army typically reacts to the development of new hardware by first considering how it might be employed, and then, almost as an afterthought, considering about how people would adapt with and use the technology. Such apparent disregard of the human dimension is surprising in an organization that consistently describes soldiers and people as its centerpiece.

Admittedly the United States and its allies won major wars of the past century by developing more highly advanced technologies and deploying them with far superior numbers of troops and materiel on the battlefield and elsewhere. Sophisticated technological capabilities allowed the United States to reach into the adversaries' heartlands and destroy their means of sustaining and maintaining forces. This technological and industrial might overshadowed the tactical and operational prowess the Army displayed in the later stages of World War II. Many perceive that the American Army won by "strangling them to death," rather than on the battlefield, per se—technology appeared to carry the day.

The pervasiveness of the industrial mind-set carried into the postmodern age. The United States has developed some of the most technologically sophisticated conventional weapon systems ever known. The Army won the first Gulf War with them and used them to preemptively enter and topple the government of Iraq. Ironically, the glow of victory allowed the Army to justify retaining a leadership and training paradigm developed under the umbrella of the mobilization doctrine of the Cold War and before that, for World Wars I and II.

Large, bureaucratic structures, with rigid lines of authority, are inherently slow to respond and adapt. Adversaries use information technology in innovative ways to decentralize to the lowest possible level—cells influenced by a loosely supervised yet commonly defined mission. The Army has not managed to achieve the benefits of decentralization nearly as well, as attested to by the recent change of strategy in Iraq, where smaller units, pushed out from large-unit forward operating bases, live, work and provide security for the population. Al-

though many leaders, soldiers and processes are adapting, some are not; so, we might ask, "How does this lack of adaptability affect the mission within the emergent and complex strategic security environment?" It is increasingly apparent that the Army requires soldiers and leaders to see change as necessary, if not positive, and not as an attack on current or past approaches.

Personality-profile data compiled from Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator instruments administered at

the U.S. Army War College indicate that War College graduates, our future senior leaders, are predominantly of the sensing-thinking-judging types. Collectively, this can translate into a dominant cultural norm: an overriding organizational preference for control, structure and obedience. This means that leaders and their organizations may not be as comfortable with adaptability—encouraging innovative ways to develop it, as well as how to nurture it—as the Army and future operational environment may require

them to be. "The bad news," according to Kroeger, Thuesen and Rutledge (*Type Talk at Work*), "is that the dominant leadership style in the workplace—thinking-judging—is the type least capable of coping with change." This observation portends an uphill battle.

Preferences, however, do not predict behavior, especially when the implications of such preferences are well understood. History has shown that senior leaders, regardless of personality type, can set the conditions for culture and command environments that encourage and foster change. This was demonstrated by the actions of Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall as the Army prepared for World War II.

While many of his past experiences would prove helpful in this crisis, nothing in Marshall's previous training had specifically prepared him for dealing with such issues. Nothing could have. The situation was unprecedented, and to deal with it effectively he had to move beyond many of the concepts and boundaries he had lived with throughout his life. So did most other Americans. Marshall's thought patterns, like theirs, would be dramatically transformed during these years, and while he would later rate them his most difficult during the war, they were also the most important in expanding his horizons beyond the previous confines of his profession.

The Army's culture could prove to be a major obstacle to developing a sufficient level of organizational adaptability. The contemporary Army has the technology and the quality of people necessary to decentralize control and increase discretion downward and throughout the organization. We must also recognize, however, that peacetime values emphasizing hierarchical accountability, procedural standardization, control and risk aversion are hard to break. We concur with others who suggest that Army institutions should evolve to meet the expectations of those leaders who adapted in the field. If we do not, the adaptive and imaginative leaders will likely vote with their feet.

Success on this cattle drive may require leaders who are willing to reinvent, innovate and become far more agile and adaptable than in the past. Changing the Army's leader-development paradigm and attempting to move the organizational culture are good places to start. Efforts under way to establish a modular force are necessary and commendable, but we suggest that it will take more than structural changes to be ready for an increasingly unpredictable array of national security challenges.

"Getting to Kansas" requires an organization in which innovation and adaptability at all levels are encouraged and rewarded. This approach offers hope of producing real and lasting change when the future is not predictable. Changing one aspect of the enterprise (for example, restructuring) is unlikely to achieve intended objectives. Moving the culture from one that values control and standardization to one that values innovation and adaptivity is much easier said than done.

### Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks

It has been said that the Army will support adaptive leaders as long as they don't rock anyone's boat. Is the Army learning to become adaptive to change from a mobilization-oriented big war, linear attrition warfighting focus to one that can deal with varying missions across the spectrum of conflict? Or is it clinging to a conventional warfighting focus and retaining legacies from the Cold War? Then-Brig. Gen. David Fastabend (now major general) and Col. Robert Simpson acknowledged the need to change the culture in "The Imperative for a Culture of Innovation in the U.S. Army: Adapt or Die," a thought-provoking article in *ARMY Magazine* (February 2004).

Organizational change, however, can sometimes occur at the margins and leave the underlying culture largely untouched. The contemporary operating environment and the future environment may demand more. Recent history provides little encouragement. The Army's evolution to AirLand Battle was arguably one of the

most important change periods of the post-Vietnam era. Changes implemented in the 1982 Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, largely focused on doctrine and hardware, and left the personnel system intact.

One might argue that change is endemic to Army culture. Examples include a rapid mechanization of maneuver-oriented forces that occurred during World War II, racial integration in the 1940s and 1950s, changing to an all-volunteer force in 1973 and expanded opportunities for women that began in the 1980s and continue today. Nevertheless, while change is arguably a way of life within the Army, so, too, is inertia, especially at the institutional level. People at all levels resist change, especially when their definition of success depends on preserving the status quo.

If an organization has had a long history of success based on certain assumptions about itself and its environment, it is unlikely to want to challenge or reexamine those assumptions. Even if the assumptions are brought to

consciousness, the members of the organization are likely to want to hold on to them because they justify the past and are the source of their pride and self-esteem. This holds true particularly in the people aspect of any equation of change in the Army. The post-Vietnam renaissance of the Army provides an excellent example of this phenomenon.

The Army boldly developed technology in the form of the "big five" weapons systems and AirLand Battle as its maneuver doctrine (ideas), but attempts to change the personnel system such as COHORT (cohesion, operational readiness and training) failed. At the core of this doctrine were the tenets of mission tactics or maneuver warfare. Only adaptive organizations execute mission tactics and maneuver warfare, yet individual-centric personnel management practices did not use the full ability of people to execute such advanced doctrine.

AirLand Battle tenets of agility, initiative and decisiveness called for more decentralized command and control.

Such notions soon came into conflict with institutional values of the time. At the center of this culture was a desire for control, an outgrowth of the need to create and sustain a largely conscript Army operating under mobilization doctrine. Today, such legacy approaches can impede efforts to change the Army into a “campaign quality Army with Joint and expeditionary capabilities” and hamper efforts to posture the force to handle the vast spectrum of missions in the 21st century.

As the Army moved forward with technological and doctrinal changes, it left essential variables untouched—personnel management laws, policies and beliefs—that contributed to management practices of the Army during the Vietnam War. This was highlighted in the Army Training and Leadership Development Panel (ATLDP) report in 2001, and it echoes findings of the Study on Military Professionalism conducted 30 years before.

The ATLDP stated that “micromanagement has become part of the Army culture.” Other sources have found that

despite being engaged in some type of conflict since 9/11, this has not changed except in selected command environments. In 2003, an Army War College research project reported, “Today’s organizational and individual level systems ... are insufficient to ensure [that] positive command climate is universally established and sustained across the U.S. Army.” The author, Col. Steven Jones, established a link between climate and adaptability. “The persistence of serious climate problems today and throughout the past 30 years demonstrates convincingly that the organizational mind-set and ability to retain aggressive, innovative junior leaders are in jeopardy,” Jones wrote.

The Army achieved unparalleled tactical success against the Iraqi Army in Operation Desert Storm and in the opening combat phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom and in Operation Enduring Freedom. One could argue that the Army has been a victim of its own successful deployments, validating what has become the ultimate conventional warfighting organization. At the heart

of this Industrial Age organization is its commitment to conventional large-unit maneuver warfare, as well as a centralized, top-down command style, which stands in contrast to public proclamations of adaptability.

The system of promotion and selection is a potent social control mechanism. In “The Impact of Policies on Organizational Values and Culture,” Lt. Col. William Bell wrote that promotion and selection laws and policies, as well as popularly espoused criteria of success “have the greatest impact on demonstrating and teaching the values of the organization.” Lt. Col. Harry Bondy states that in the Army, promotion and selection as well as evaluation tools provide the primary “power levers for changing or maintaining culture.” These critical tools, presented as inherently fair, determine awards and control access to positions of influence and control. Industrial Age organizations seeking to avoid error and maximize predictability tend to provide detailed instructions when tasking subordinates and strive for an unreasonable level of certainty. The individual as well as the system carefully monitor the execution of instructions and track all activities and outcomes with the finest attention to detail.

**I**n their book *Embracing Uncertainty: The Essence of Leadership*, Phillip Clampitt and Robert DeKoch are critical of traditional leadership approaches that tend to suppress the acknowledgment of uncertainty that is inherent in today’s environment. They argue that our demand for clear direction and confident leadership drives those in authoritative positions to pretend to know what they do not to avoid perceptions of weakness or indecisiveness. They suggest that a desire to control events, the quest for efficiency, emphasis on social cohesion, inertia of success, underdeveloped leadership skills, arrogance and unrealistic expectations combine to drive organizations away from adaptability.

Clampitt and DeKoch go on to say that adaptive organizations require “transformation of employees’ mindsets and organizational processes.” If

*CWO Walter Rose, from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 58th Infantry Brigade Combat Team peers around an obstacle during training at Fort Dix, N.J., in preparation for deployment to Iraq.*

the Army is to become a true adaptive learning organization, systems should support and not retard the move to an adaptive Future Force. An environment must be in place to support and nurture the adaptability the Army needs in its organization and soldiers. This places significant responsibility upon leaders who have the power and authority to identify and change systems and processes that impede creativity, innovation and adaptability.

There are solutions. First, the move to adaptability could be viewed as a way to establish a foundation to deal with future threats through full spectrum operations by making it a principle of war. Clampitt and DeKoch see this as a three-step process: (1) cultivate an awareness of uncertainty; (2) process (for example, communicate) the uncertainty; and (3) catalyze action in an uncertain environment. By using this approach, they say, "plans are constantly in flux, the rules of the game may vary from day to day and leaders must quickly determine when it is time to change the approach." Such notions are discomfiting in an organization with a planning mind-set that is notoriously risk averse, where predictability and routine are highly valued. The foundation of the new culture of the "campaign quality Army with Joint and expeditionary capabilities" may rest in how the Army selects, educates, trains and develops its leaders and soldiers.

One way to foster adaptiveness is to implement new approaches to leader development that foster intuition and innovation earlier in a leader's career. Technical rationality, as a worldview, implies determinism, that we can know in advance the variables that are at work and that we can manipulate them to our ends as natural scientists would manipulate variables in an experiment. This conveys linear causality



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when we know that belief in one-way, linear causality is not appropriate in social systems.

Clampitt and DeKoch call this the process of developing an appreciation for chaotic environments. We submit that it is also important to develop and protect a culture that nurtures and encourages adaptability and tolerance for uncertainty, where exploration and experimentation are encouraged and rewarded. Since most experiments are not successful on the first attempt, it would also require a healthy tolerance for failure, especially among leaders who serve as evaluators in the system of performance evaluation.

#### **Evolutionary Adaptability**

A culture of adaptability is one that accepts a lack of absolute control over events on and off the battlefield. Implementation requires revisiting mission orders or trust tactics. It necessitates raising the bar in the education, training and coaching of leaders and soldiers. It seems trite to suggest that an adaptive institution will reward those who, when the need arises, act without waiting for orders, but this also necessitates a climate that is supportive of those who act and fail to achieve stellar results. Instead of seeking perfection or optimum solutions, operators will find

a solution that works locally and then exploit those results as a continual evolution facilitated by an organization adept at receiving and communicating such information.

In the movie "The Cowboys," John Wayne plays a cattle rancher who conducts the drive with teenagers who have no experience. As a group, they are similar to the Industrial Age Army of the past. A few seasoned professionals would lead masses of "newbies," and through experience from the hard lessons of battle they would eventually forge a force that could win. The butcher's bill was tragically high for this approach as the force created with assembly-line efficiency absorbed losses as it learned. Leader development for this group consisted of drilling in a pre-script set of competencies followed by on-the-job learning. We seem to have not come very far from this worldview. But the bar could be raised in leader accessions in search of professionalism (high levels of competency as well as the freedom to evolve and experiment in the quest to always evolve with the world around them).

Reliance, as in the past, on technically rational approaches will not suffice in the future. Instead of creating longer lists of false independent variables—knowledge, skills and attributes—that leaders must master and

professional military education institutions must teach, it may be better to address a few essential values and attributes such as fast learning, adaptability and ethical reasoning. The teaching of fewer, earlier, will allow teachers and curriculum to be evolutionary, open to experimentation with up-to-date lessons learned.

The Adaptive Leader's Course (ALC) model serves as an example. ALC involves innovative leader development concepts and the latest advances in education applied at the Georgetown University ROTC detachment and recently implemented by cadre in the Basic Officer Leader Course II, a six-week course for all newly commissioned lieutenants. The ALC constantly puts students in difficult, unexpected situations and then requires them to decide and act under pressure. ALC takes students out of their comfort zones. Stress—mental and moral as well as physical—is a constant. Wargames, map exercises, tactical decision games and free-play

force-on-force field exercises constitute the bulk of the ALC curriculum. But the ALC is more than just a series of essential events.

The Adaptive Leader's Course holds to the idea that every moment and event offers an opportunity to develop adaptability. Every action taken by a student in the classroom or in the field training is important to the process of inculcating a preference for new solutions. If students err while acting in good faith, they do not suffer anything more than corrective coaching. Constructive critiques of solutions are the norm, but more important are the results of actions and the reasons for those actions. The role of coaching and 360-degree assessment is to develop students so their future actions will make a positive contribution to their unit's success, no matter what the mission. This idea is based on the premise that one learns more from a well-intentioned mistake reviewed critically and constructively than from applying an established and memorized process.

Adaptive Leader's Course teachers

will be very concerned with why the students do what they do, an action-learning approach. The emphasis of the course will be on ensuring that the students gain and maintain a willingness to act. During numerous after action reviews and mentoring sessions, occurring during and after numerous scenarios with different conditions, the teacher will analyze why the students acted as they did and the effect the action had on the overall operation.

The ALC curriculum and leader evaluation system will use two criteria to judge whether students did well: the timeliness of their decisions and their justification for actions taken. The first criterion will impress on students the need to act in a timely manner; the second requires students to reflect on their actions and gain insights into their own thought processes. Since students must justify their decisions in their own minds before implementing them, imprudent decisions and reckless actions will be less likely. During the course, students' decisions in terms of a "school solution" will be



relatively unimportant. The emphasis will be on the effect of the students' actions, not on the method they may have chosen. This encourages a learning environment in which there will be few formulas or processes to achieve optimum solutions. This environment will elicit creative solutions.

The learning evaluation system in the ALC is based on the philosophy that feedback should be given in a way that encourages a willingness to act and then reflect on actions in a manner that maximizes learning. Unconstructive critiques destroy the student leader's willingness to act and can lead to false reporting or withholding of adverse information. The course will avoid formulaic solutions and provide room for innovative solutions in its program of instruction. This begins at the entry level to achieve transformation over a generation of leaders, teaching new dogs new tricks.

Stewards of the profession are responsible for identifying those individuals with future potential. This makes the teachers at the Adaptive Leader's Course particularly important. When selecting or promoting subordinates, the evaluator should ask, "Would I want this person to serve in my unit?" Throughout, the teacher instills in students the importance of accurate reporting and action when the situation demands it. The Future Force culture should not tolerate inaction, but it should be tolerant of failed attempts provided that learning occurs. The inability to act becomes the cardinal sin.

To cultivate a culture of adaptability throughout a large and complex mature organization like the U.S. Army will require effort—from the top-down as well as from the bottom-up. Adaptability is so central to the Future Force that it applies equally to squad leaders and Joint-force commanders. It requires an organization that embraces uncertainty and leaders who are action-learning oriented and risk tolerant. In such an environment future leaders would have to make reckless or negligent errors to reflect negatively on their efficiency reports. Learning and adaptation require exploration and experimentation, and most experiments initially fail.

Moving the Army toward the Mideal of a learning organization, as an Army-in-action where its institutions create conditions for adaptive and creative organizing, could bring the collective creativity of the Future Force to bear in solving problems at the tactical, operational and strategic levels of war. It requires senior leaders who encourage, teach, trust and support innovative subordinates.

Adaptable soldiers and processes are keys to the Future Force, especially in an era of unprecedented and accelerating change. The understanding and application of adaptability will come through rigorous education and tough training early on and require reinforcement throughout the system of professional military edu-

cation. The move to adaptability will take more than using the term in PowerPoint presentations or repackaging curricula and personnel policies with adaptive sounding names. Substantive change begins with the use of innovative learning models such as that used in the Adaptive Leader's Course and with the selection of qualified teachers to implement and carry out the curriculum. Simple recitation of canned lesson plans and implementing turnkey curricula will not suffice to prepare our leaders to be action learners in full spectrum operations as those operations emerge. The institutional as well as the operational Army must be prepared to support, encourage and reinforce adaptability. □

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