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Leadership and Bilingualism. Is It Really a Requirement?

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Solo Flight

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LEADERSHIP AND BILINGUALISM. IS IT REALLY A REQUIREMENT?

By Major David Evans

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“La présente étude a été rédigée par un stagiaire du Collège des Forces canadiennes pour satisfaire à l'une des exigences du cours. L'étude est un document qui se rapporte au cours et contient donc des faits et des opinions que seul l'auteur considère appropriés et convenables au sujet. Elle ne reflète pas nécessairement la politique ou l'opinion d'un organisme quelconque, y compris le gouvernement du Canada et le ministère de la Défense nationale du Canada. Il est défendu de diffuser, de citer ou de reproduire cette étude sans la permission expresse du ministère de la Défense nationale.”

This paper will look at leadership and bilingualism and answer the question, “Is it really a requirement? And if so, “At which level of a member’s career should it reside for NCMs and for Officers to optimize its effectiveness for lasting effect?” We will explore the often overlooked cognitive, and social benefits, of bilingualism, and then examine the shortfalls of how language training is delivered, incentivised, and promoted within DND/CAF. This paper will argue that bilingualism is a definite requirement, and DND/CAF needs to move away from the ‘simply good enough’ model and towards a culture of continual second language training, practice, and improvement to ensure a positive bilingual culture exists, and we can fully benefit from having a bilingual force.

Having joined DND/CAF as a unilingual Anglophone and leveraging several of the DND/CAF language training options throughout my career, this topic both fascinates and frustrates me. I was able to benefit from an 8-month immersive style language training course shortly after enrolling, achieving good results, however this was followed up by more than two years of trades training, and three years posted to Edmonton, where an anti-bilingual culture prevailed. In Edmonton at the time, most people could not speak French, with many arguing that they only needed to speak English and thought bilingual people were given an unfair advantage for promotion. At the time it was easy to believe these fallacies, especially since in the short term there were no incentives or means for a junior officer in a unilingual province to practice or keep up language training. The progress towards bilingualism made on that initial course was going to be lost before I could really understand the benefits.

It was not before being posted to Ottawa in 2009, and regularly interacting with francophone that my view on language started to evolve. I worked hard on my own time and leveraged several French language refresher courses to obtain an intermediate ‘B’ level profile.

Shortly thereafter I was selected to deploy to the CONGO where I interacted with locals in French and lived closely with several francophone. It was a linguistic and cultural experience that has led me to become a stronger, smarter, and more versatile officer than I would have been without it. I would not have been able to gain these experiences had I not achieved a certain minimal level of bilingualism.

Throughout the remainder of this paper, we will explore several benefits of bilingualism and to some extent the biculturalism benefits that are closely related, ones I can relate to based on first hand experience. The ‘Why are Bilinguals Smarter’ article of the New York Times captures my observations well when explaining that, “Scientists have begun to show that the advantages of bilingualism are even more fundamental than being able to converse with a wider range of people. Being bilingual, it turns out, makes you smarter. It can have a profound effect on your brain, improving cognitive skills not related to language and even shielding against dementia in old age.”¹

Neurology and Cognition.

The first category we will cover are the neurological changes, and cognitive advantages often seen with bilingual people. These advantages are a result of how a bilingual brain needs to function. According to Dr. Viorica Marian, and Anthony Shook “The cognitive control required to manage multiple languages appears to have broad effects on neurological function, fine-tuning both cognitive control mechanisms and sensory processes.”² Marian and Shook assert that the

¹ Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, “Why Bilinguals Are Smarter”, New York Times, March 17 2012 - <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-benefits-of-bilingualism.html>

² Viorica Marian, PhD, Anthony Shook, “The Cognitive Benefits of Being Bilingual.” Cerebrum – The Dana Foundation - October 31, 2012. <https://dana.org/article/the-cognitive-benefits-of-being-bilingual/>

reason for this is that “a bilingual person’s language systems are always active and competing, that person uses these control mechanisms every time she or he speaks or listens. This constant practice strengthens the executive control mechanisms and changes the associated brain regions.”³

These changes can be a distinct advantage for all military members and help in the conduct of their duties. According to research bilingual people often have “A superior ability to concentrate, solve problems and focus, better mental flexibility and multi-tasking skills.”⁴ Additionally; Marian and Shook explain that, “The improvements in cognitive and sensory processing driven by bilingual experience may help a bilingual person to better process information in the environment.”⁵ In addition, “Bilingual people often perform better than monolingual people at tasks that tap into inhibitory control ability”⁶ such as quickly switching between tasks. Most people would agree that improved concentration, multitasking ability, and heightened ability to focus and process information from the environment are desirable attributes. These improvements can not only help us in our day to day lives, but also are extremely important attributes for a combat fighter in a battlespace.

An article about the future of cognitive enhancement training and its effects on military performance highlights many of the same cognitive improvements that result from bilingualism.

³ Viorica Marian, PhD, Anthony Shook, “The Cognitive Benefits of Being Bilingual.” Cerebrum – The Dana Foundation - October 31, 2012. <https://dana.org/article/the-cognitive-benefits-of-being-bilingual/>

⁴ Gaia Vince, “The Amazing Benefits of Being Bilingual.” BBC Future, 12 August 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160811-the-amazing-benefits-of-being-bilingual>

⁵ Viorica Marian, PhD, Anthony Shook, “The Cognitive Benefits of Being Bilingual.” Cerebrum – The Dana Foundation - October 31, 2012. <https://dana.org/article/the-cognitive-benefits-of-being-bilingual/>

⁶ Viorica Marian, PhD, Anthony Shook, “The Cognitive Benefits of Being Bilingual.” Cerebrum – The Dana Foundation - October 31, 2012. <https://dana.org/article/the-cognitive-benefits-of-being-bilingual/>

The article explains that “Inhibition is required to sustain attention and process only the most pertinent and relevant information about the environment in the face of many visual and other auditory distractions.”⁷ And that since “many military operations occur in unknown and stressful environments, situational awareness allows soldiers to make effective use of diverse information, when it is critical to reduce the demands placed on their cognitive load. In situations where new information is presented, cognitive flexibility is required to modify the planned course and ‘think outside the box’ in the face of an unexpected threat or new information.”⁸

The article goes on to reinforce the requirement for “training methods which increase a war fighter’s mental resilience and robustness, in order to remain functionally effective when mission performance is at it’s most critical.”⁹ Providing people with language training, and establishing an environment where bilingualism is encouraged and practiced regularly is another way to improve these executive functions, as bilingualism has been linked to similar neurological and cognitive improvements.

Studies have also show that bilingualism can increase gray matter in several areas of the brain and help to combat and delay the onset of several age-related cognition reducing illnesses such as dementia and Alzheimer’s. The Dana foundation highlighted one study which showed that “bilingual patients reported showing initial symptoms of the disease at about 77.7 years of

⁷ Why Cognitive Enhancement Training is Set to Transform Military Performance, <https://www.neurotrackerx.com/post/why-cognitive-enhancement-training-is-set-to-transform-military-performance>

⁸ Why Cognitive Enhancement Training is Set to Transform Military Performance, <https://www.neurotrackerx.com/post/why-cognitive-enhancement-training-is-set-to-transform-military-performance>

⁹ Why Cognitive Enhancement Training is Set to Transform Military Performance, <https://www.neurotrackerx.com/post/why-cognitive-enhancement-training-is-set-to-transform-military-performance>

age — 5.1 years later than the monolingual average of 72.6.”¹⁰ Not only will bilingualism help with neurologic and cognitive abilities today, but it can help you with your mental state in your elder years.

Tolerance and Acceptance.

The second category we are going to explore is how bilingualism can improve an individual's tolerance and acceptance of people who are different from themselves. The military, like many other branches of Canadian government strive to create workplaces that are free from discrimination, culturally diverse, and that have a positive work environment. The Middlebury language school article outlines that learning a new language helps improve tolerance since it “helps you gain cross-cultural understanding, and It makes you more comfortable with the unknown.”¹¹ Professor Baker of the University of Wales, one of the worlds leading experts on bilingualism goes on to explain that “bilinguals gain the benefits of two sets of traditions, ideas, ways of thinking and behaving, evoking greater tolerance to cultural differences, and perhaps, less racism.”¹² Bilingualism can also help with your ability to work and interact with people who have a different perspective, and/or different opinions from yours since “Our experiences, our values and our cultural background lead us to see and do things in a certain way, generally, our own way. Bilinguals usually deal with the awareness that there many other perspectives in the world, and they learn to face diversity, interpret others 'ideas, and learn

¹⁰ Viorica Marian, PhD, Anthony Shook, “The Cognitive Benefits of Being Bilingual.” Cerebrum – The Dana Foundation - October 31, 2012. <https://dana.org/article/the-cognitive-benefits-of-being-bilingual/>

¹¹ Middlebury Language Schools – “Why Learning a New Language Improves Tolerance” <https://www.middlebury.edu/language-schools/blog/why-learning-new-language-improves-tolerance>

¹² Rafael Cervantes, Martha Vela, “More Benefits of Bilingualism” <https://sites.google.com/site/morebenefitsofbilingualism/home/module-1-cultural-awareness-is-well-supported-on-bilingual-people>

from them.”¹³ Additionally Rafael Cervantes, and Martha Vela explain that “Misunderstandings through cultures appear when human beings do not comprehend there are other perspectives different from ours. Bilinguals, among other features, can be in general recognized for being aware of the existence of others and show empathy.”¹⁴

Greater Tolerance and Acceptance are important attributes to have in both the domestic office work environment and deployed overseas on missions where we are expected to work with very diverse cultures. The ability to learn from others and from different perspectives can also strengthen us both individually, and collectively. Since the evidence suggests that bilingualism can lead to more tolerance and acceptance of people who are different from oneself by helping people to realize there are other perspectives, I would argue that benefits will be seen in other areas of discrimination, such as Sexism, Racism, Ageism, LGBTQ2+ Discrimination, and others. If we are better able to show empathy to others, and as Gaia Vince suggests is true with bilinguals, who “are better at blocking out their own feelings and beliefs to concentrate on the other person’s.”¹⁵ We should certainly be better adept at working with different people, regardless of the difference.

Absolute requirement.

In addition to these Neurological, Cognitive, and social benefits of bilingualism, there are definite requirements for DND/CAF to operate as a bilingual organization. For Canadian federal

¹³ Rafael Cervantes, Martha Vela, “More Benefits of Bilingualism”
<https://sites.google.com/site/morebenefitsofbilingualism/home/module-1-cultural-awareness-is-well-supported-on-bilingual-people>

¹⁴ Rafael Cervantes, Martha Vela, “More Benefits of Bilingualism”
<https://sites.google.com/site/morebenefitsofbilingualism/home/module-1-cultural-awareness-is-well-supported-on-bilingual-people>

¹⁵ Gaia Vince, “The Amazing Benefits of Being Bilingual.” BBC Future, 12 August 2016.
<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160811-the-amazing-benefits-of-being-bilingual>

institutions there are several designated ‘bilingual regions’ where “for language-of-work purposes, the right to work in the official language of their choice is an individual right belonging to all public service employees, both English- and French-speaking.”¹⁶ Within DND/CAF we need to ensure that we create an environment where the language rights of all individuals are upheld. We also need to ensure we create a culture where both official languages are supported, encouraged, and where people who speak the minority language of the area feel safe to speak in their preferred language. In addition to this, having the CAF be a bilingual force, makes it a much more versatile and adaptable force on the world stage, able to operate effectively in more parts of the world, and with more partners, allies, and other nations.

The requirement for a bilingual DND/CAF is quite easy to argue, the bigger and more complex issue here, is what level of bilingualism is enough? Is it good enough for leaders to have a language profile on paper, but not utilize it? Are the language profiles we are striving for high enough? I answer no for both questions, since we are failing at creating a culture of bilingualism, which I argue is a requirement. According to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, “Before 1988, there were no language-of-work rights in the federal public service. And so, over the decades, a particular atmosphere and certain work habits developed and became ingrained within federal institutions. The result is that today, using both official languages in the workplace does not come naturally.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, “Beyond Bilingual Meeting: Leadership Behaviours for Managers” March 2011. PP2

¹⁷ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, “Beyond Bilingual Meeting: Leadership Behaviours for Managers” March 2011. PP1

Struggles with achieving true Bilingualism.

A study conducted by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, titled ‘Beyond Bilingual Meetings: Leadership Behaviours for Managers’ highlights many of the struggles that the DND/CAF experience with trying to create a more bilingual work environment. This study highlights four main issues that hold us back from becoming a truly bilingual workplace, they are:¹⁸

- Managers use little French even if they meet the language requirements of their positions.
- Anglophones are not comfortable working in French, which results in the use of English.
- Francophones have good knowledge of their second official language, which again results in the use of English. This situation culminates in the professional assimilation of Francophones, who then fail to maintain their French language skills.
- To their own detriment, Francophones tend to use the language of their supervisor so that their work is fully appreciated.

I can certainly echo these four points based on personal observation. Within DND/CAF language training seems to be managed as just in time training, and a requirement to get done prior to promotion boards, or just prior to profile expiration after 5 years. For me this is not an adequate approach, as what tends to happen is language training becomes bunched and only happens every 4-5 years. This leads to skill fade and managers and supervisors being uncomfortable speaking in their second language, despite having the correct profile on paper.

The Official Languages study also explains that for leaders and managers “Not only must they have good language skills in both official languages, they must also be willing to use both languages at work and demonstrate behaviour that shows their commitment to linguistic duality

¹⁸ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, “Beyond Bilingual Meeting: Leadership Behaviours for Managers” March 2011. PP2

in the public service.”¹⁹ From what I have witnessed, and my own personal experience, peoples willingness to speak in their second language increases dramatically with their proficiency in their second language. People do not like to make mistakes, and they do not like feeling uncomfortable, and speaking a second language on a course, is quite different than providing direction to subordinates, or briefing a large group in a second language.

Part of the issue I see, is that the target language profiles we strive towards are insufficient for the desired outcome at each level. If we want leaders and managers to be able to be confident in their abilities and be able to fully function in their second language, profiles of C’s and E’s are required. The study highlighted that despite “92% of employees in designated bilingual supervisory positions meeting the language requirements of their positions, half of those positions only require level B oral language skills. Many study participants did not think this was a sufficient level to qualify someone as bilingual or to be able to communicate and supervise in both languages.”²⁰ With higher proficiencies needed we cannot expect people to immediately achieve C’s, so we need a structure and progressive plan to achieve these higher results. Currently people are automatically promoted to Captain with absolutely no language profile requirements. I would argue that you could line up language skills with rank. For instance, we could make a hard language profile requirements by rank, such as:

- Capts, MCpls, Sgts – Require A’s;
- Majors, WOs, MWOs - Require B’s
- LColts, CWOs – Require C’s, and
- Colts and above – Require E’s.

¹⁹ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, “Beyond Bilingual Meeting: Leadership Behaviours for Managers” March 2011. PP1

²⁰ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, “Beyond Bilingual Meeting: Leadership Behaviours for Managers” March 2011. PP7

You could re-hash this many ways, perhaps there are different requirements depending on trade, but the point is we need to strive for a better structured progression and ensure continual improvement.

The official language study explains that “For its part, senior management must provide supervisors with the opportunity to participate in various language training programs, as needed, to achieve the appropriate level of skill in their second official language”²¹ This is another point where DND/CAF falls short. In general leaders support language training, however there is not enough, nor sufficient language training available. Instead of viewing language training as being done prior to your profile expiring, we should view language training more like we do with fitness. Where there is a requirement for ongoing practice and maintenance of these important skills. We need to provide more people with more opportunities to train, and we need to dramatically increase the capacity and availability on courses like the year long. Like any corporate culture issue, it all starts with leadership, and their ability to shape the desired outcome. As the study explains “Institutional leadership are contributing factors in creating a workplace that is conducive to the effective use of both official languages.”²²

Conclusion

Bilingualism is a requirement within all federal institutions, and having bilingual workforce and leadership makes us a much stronger and more versatile force. In addition, the many second order Neurologic, Cognitive, and social benefits strengthen the case to strive

²¹ Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, “Beyond Bilingual Meeting: Leadership Behaviours for Managers” March 2011. PP8

²² Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, “Beyond Bilingual Meeting: Leadership Behaviours for Managers” March 2011. PP5

towards a more bilingual force. The question becomes how do we achieve that bilingual force, and to what level? Based on my research and personal experience, we need to strive for much higher levels of bilingualism, and a much stronger bilingual culture. Members should start receiving language training early on in their careers, be encouraged, and incentivised to practice, and leadership rewarded for creating a truly positive bilingual culture. To achieve this, language training needs to be prioritized higher, and made a requirement for promotion. We need to have a vision for the bilingualism within DND/CAF, where do we want to be in 10 years, 20 years? We are certainly more bilingual now than we were prior to 1988, but we are still not bilingual enough, and need to develop that vision, and plan to ensure we continue to advance.

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