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## Culture Change: Should People First Trump Mission First?

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**JCSP 48**

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**Culture Change: Should People First Trump Mission First?**

**Major Guillaume Paquet**

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## CULTURE CHANGE: SHOULD PEOPLE FIRST TRUMP MISSION FIRST?

### AIM

1. This aim of this paper will be to discuss the relative merit of a people-first approach on culture change. Significant changes require exceptional measures; therefore, the fundamental question this paper will attempt to answer is which principle that governs military activities need to be reformed in order to have the most positive and enduring effect on culture change. Although many culture change models have proved their utility within industry, this paper will provide an atypical approach to culture change from a traditional military standpoint.

### INTRODUCTION

2. The Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), General Wayne Eyre, highlighted last July the urgent need to implement a meaningful, and enduring culture change. “The last several months have ... clearly illuminated the urgent need to change our culture, not only to meet the expectations of all of our members and our citizens, but to ensure our future operational relevance.”<sup>1</sup> Although the CDS’s message was aimed at the recent allegations of sexual misconduct, the culture crisis that is currently challenging the institution is much broader than gender-based, and stems from many years of unhealthy power relations between members and their superiors. As stated by Leah West, a professor at Carleton University, “... efforts to change the culture will have to go beyond the issue of assault ... because the issue is fundamentally about men and women in the military not feeling like they’re equals.”<sup>2</sup>

3. That said, war is a dangerous enterprise, and mission success relies heavily on orders and directions being followed without hesitation. Canadian military doctrine states that “the command structure is hierarchical, must be clear, unequivocal, and must be respected.”<sup>3</sup> A fundamental principle of the military chain of command, the unconditional respect for authority, is an excellent practise for harmful relationships to develop.

4. Although CAF personnel are the most valuable resource that the institution possess, mission success still remains the institution’s primary focus. Mission success, also known as mission first, unintentionally conveys to the troops the underlying message that they are not the priority, the mission is. As stated in Canada’s defence policy, *Strong,*

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Canada, “Message from the Acting Chief of the Defence Staff: Update to the Canadian Armed Forces on Culture change.” 12 July 2021. Accessed 1 December 2021.  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2021/07/message-from-acting-cds-update-to-caf-on-culture-change.html>

<sup>2</sup> Anja Karadeglija, “We need to change the culture in military, says general in charge of rooting out sexual misconduct.” *National Post*, 11 May 2021. Accessed 1 December 2021.  
<https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/we-need-to-change-the-culture-in-military-says-general-in-charge-of-rooting-out-sexual-misconduct>

<sup>3</sup> Government of Canada, “Canadian Military Doctrine CFJP-01.” *Canadian Joint Forces Publications*. (April 2009), table 5-1: The Principles of Command. Accessed 1 December 2021.  
[https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2010/forces/D2-252-2009-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2010/forces/D2-252-2009-eng.pdf)

*Secure, Engaged*, “people are at the core of everything the CAF does to deliver on its mandate.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the leadership doctrine manual states that “mission success ... should normally take precedence in a leader’s thinking over all other considerations.”<sup>5</sup> This dichotomy causes confusion amongst leaders on what is the priority for the institution. As a result, certain types of leaders will consistently prioritize the mission ahead of personnel. As such, this paper will argue that the mission-first concept that permeates military activities conveys the wrong message. Consistently prioritizing the mission has had unintended and negative consequences that superior commanders have either failed to recognize, or simply ignored.

5. The long term and unintended consequences of favouring a mission-first approach as opposed to a people-first approach can be difficult to evaluate accurately; however, research shows that when leaders make conscious and deliberate efforts to focus on people instead of results, their organizations become more successful, and more productive. Kris Boesch, the author of *Culture Works: How to Create Happiness in the Workplace*, states that “... culture-driven organizations experience 26 percent fewer mistakes, 22 percent higher productivity, 41 percent lower absenteeism, and 30 percent [higher] satisfaction.”<sup>6</sup> For institutions that are consistently struggling with personnel shortages like the CAF, these statistics indicate that by re-orienting the focus from a mission-first mindset towards a people-first approach, the level of productivity, dedication, and satisfaction improves, while also lowering the attrition rate. These findings represent an optimistic scenario, which is what the CAF needs at the moment. According to the organization Hirevibe, which specializes in leadership, “embracing a people-first culture is key to becoming a magnetic organization and creating lifelong brand ambassadors ...”<sup>7</sup>

6. As a final point, in a 2019 Defense Research and Development Canada (DRDC) survey, researchers identified numerous reasons why CAF members are either leaving, or considering leaving the institution. These included, “advancement and promotion, personal evaluation report (PER), training and development, leadership, postings, workload and demand, organizational inefficiency, lack of transparency and fairness.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Department of National Defence, “Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy.” Ottawa: DND, 2017: 19. Accessed 1 December 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2018/strong-secure-engaged/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Department of National Defence, A-PA-005-000/AP-006, “Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Leading the Institution.” Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy — *Canadian Forces Leadership Institute*, (2007), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Inc., “How to Create a People-First Company Culture: The path to a more connected, internally motivated workforce must be cultivated from within.” *Entrepreneur Organizations*. 24 September 2021. Accessed 13 January 2022. <https://www.inc.com/entrepreneurs-organization/how-to-create-a-people-first-company-culture.html>

<sup>7</sup> “Building a People-First Culture: Developing a Strategic Competitive Advantage for Your Organization.” *Hirevibe*, 2020. Accessed 12 December 2020. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee946cecc44fe2d7d19990c/t/5f2ba19b7b92c53ce37b6074/1596694953199/HB\\_WhitePaper\\_2\\_v3.1.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee946cecc44fe2d7d19990c/t/5f2ba19b7b92c53ce37b6074/1596694953199/HB_WhitePaper_2_v3.1.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Edward Yeung, Evanya Musolino, and Emrah Eren. “The 2019 CAF Regular Force Retention Survey: Descriptive Analysis.” *Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC)*, 2019, Document Control Data, Box 13: Abstract.

When scrutinizing all these factors, a people-first approach could definitely play a role in reversing the negative trend highlighted by DRDC and, perhaps, solve not only the culture that the institution needs to change, but also the attrition rate.

## DISCUSSION

*A time of turbulence is a dangerous time, but its greatest danger is a temptation to deny reality.*

– Peter Drucker, *Drucker Institute*

7. “A people-first approach means actively creating a desirable work environment that considers and fulfills the needs of one of your most important assets: your employees, or your people.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, “[a] people-first approach prioritises satisfaction in life over job satisfaction ....”<sup>10</sup> In the following paragraphs, this paper will underline first the negative consequences of a results-oriented model. Second, the paper will illustrate that the decline of trust between leaders and subordinates observed across the CAF stems from many years of focussing on meaningless bureaucratic processes, and consistently over-committing scarce resources. Third, this paper will argue that public institutions like the CAF are generally more concerned about protecting their image over attending to the well-being of its members.

8. According to Dr. Puneet Bhushan, a business management expert, results-oriented institution practices lead to employee low self-esteem, burnout, job dissatisfaction, as well as higher personnel turnover, decreased motivation, unjustified demand on resources, and the unfair application of standards.<sup>11</sup> Looking back at the DRDC findings, one could link the current CAF culture challenges with the consequences of a results-oriented approach. The CAF leadership doctrine states, “mission success ... should normally take precedence in a leader’s thinking over all other considerations.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the updated CAF ethos - *Trusted to Serve*, emphasizes that “the primacy of operations directs military leaders to prioritize their decisions based on a hierarchy of the mission first, then their subordinates....”<sup>13</sup> The previous two excerpts are indicative of unhealthy organizations where “... the value of getting results becomes the priority,

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<sup>9</sup> Team Freshworks. “How organisations can succeed with a people-first approach.” *Freshworks*, 7 June 2021. Accessed 13 December 2021. <https://www.freshworks.com/how-a-people-first-approach-positively-impact-the-success-of-an-organisation-blog/>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Puneet Bhushan, “Result Orientation and Performance Management.” *Himachal Pradesh University of Business (HPUBS)*. Accessed 12 December 2021. [https://himachal.nic.in/WriteReadData/l892s/15\\_l892s/1499233588.pdf](https://himachal.nic.in/WriteReadData/l892s/15_l892s/1499233588.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence, A-PA-005-000/AP-006, “Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Leading the Institution.” Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy — *Canadian Forces Leadership Institute*, (2007): 19.

<sup>13</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence, “Canadian Armed Forces Ethos – Trusted to Serve” (Draft). Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy – *Canadian Forces Leadership Institute*, (2021): 16.

superseding core values.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, leaders that prioritize results over people tend to show signs of indifference, narcissism, and lack of empathy.<sup>15</sup> In a military context, it is fair to assume that under certain circumstances, mission success must be prioritized; however, this paper argues that when all missions are considered no fail, an enormous level of stress is put on subordinates, leading to work-life imbalances, fatigue, depression, and high attrition rates.

9. The CAF culture crisis observed recently should not be surprising to anyone. In fact, the CAF has been trying to change its culture since the release of the Somalia inquiry over 30 years ago.<sup>16</sup> It is understood that changing an organizational culture requires time and relentless efforts, but perhaps the senior leadership is not looking at the problem from the right angle. According to Allan English, a Ph.D. professor at Queen’s University, the cumulative effect of resource-mission mismatch, meaningless bureaucratic processes, inappropriate promotion systems, and the collapse of mission command, all contribute to the erosion of trust and confidence across military institutions.<sup>17</sup>

10. When looking closer at the factors presented by Allen English, one can single out a common theme, the well-being of military members clearly comes after the need of the institution. This systemic and harmful state of affairs has been normalized and accepted by many CAF leaders. “The cumulative effect of all of these factors has been to weaken the bond of trust between leaders and subordinates, as well as to diminish that bond between those armed forces and the societies they exist to serve.”<sup>18</sup> In the following sub-paragraphs, each factors will be discussed in more details.

a. **Resource-mission mismatch.**<sup>19</sup> Resource-mission mismatch is a prevalent issue that forces leaders to cut corners in order to meet the demand of the institution, and leads to “cheating, dishonesty and a corrosive ethical culture.”<sup>20</sup> Over-committing resources is also “associated with abusive supervision ...

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Williams, “Toxic Culture: Enabling Incivility in the U.S. Military and What to Do About It.” *Joint Force Quarterly* (4th Quarter 2017), 59.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Kenneth Williams (2017), table on Criteria, Description, and Examples of Toxic Behavior, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Government of Canada, “Dishonoured Legacy: The Lessons of the Somalia Affair.” *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia*, (1997). Accessed 14 January 2022. [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2015/bcp-pco/CP32-66-1997-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/bcp-pco/CP32-66-1997-eng.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Allan English (2017), “Corruption in the Canadian military? Destroying trust in the chain of command.”, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 23:1, 32-46, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2016.1250654>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-46.

<sup>19</sup> Resource-mission mismatch is a term coined by George E. Reed which occurs when governments and higher headquarters demand more from units than can possibly be achieved given the resources allocated to them. Cited in Allan English (2017). “Corruption in the Canadian military? Destroying trust in the chain of command.” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 23:1, 35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2016.1250654>

<sup>20</sup> Allan English (2017), “Corruption in the Canadian military? Destroying trust in the chain of command.”, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 23:1, 36, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2016.1250654>

manipulation, coercion, and threats....”<sup>21</sup> If not addressed promptly, resource-mission mismatch will wear down trust between leaders and subordinates, a contributing factor for early release.

b. **Bureaucracies.** The bureaucratization of the CAF has resulted in job dissatisfaction, and a higher attrition rate where individual freedoms are threatened “leaving people trapped in an iron cage of impersonal, irrational, and inflexible rules.”<sup>22</sup> Bureaucracies tend to “impede the practice of a values-based profession ... contribute to [the] erosion of the military ethos ... and inhibit the organization’s ability to deal with wicked problems.”<sup>23</sup> Regrettably, the bureaucratization of the CAF “has been fostering a management-based culture that favors process over substance.”<sup>24</sup>

c. **Promotion system.** The current promotion system, known as performance-based, is poorly adapted, and is no longer having its intended effect. Instead, it “encourages dysfunctional behaviors ... influences culture adversely, and has repeatedly failed to ... weed out toxic leaders ....”<sup>25</sup> Performance-based systems entice careerist leaders to overwork their personnel, while focussing on short-term goals so they can climb the institutional rank quicker, without due respect for the people around and below them.<sup>26</sup>

d. **Mission Command.** Mission command, a leadership notion that promotes initiative, creativity, and mutual trust, has been impacted by all aforementioned issues. Although the CAF’s leadership doctrine promotes a values-based approach to guide leaders, the reality is that the values-based system that the institution seeks to embolden, has been superseded by a rules-based bureaucratic system.<sup>27</sup>

11. Lastly, according to a CAF wide survey, only “... 35.8 per cent of regular forces ... agreed in 2019 that they have confidence in the leadership ....”<sup>28</sup> As highlighted by Marie Deschamps in her report on sexual misconduct in the CAF, “too many [members] expressed the view that the chain of command is mostly interested in protecting itself

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Williams, “Toxic Culture: Enabling Incivility in the U.S. Military and What to Do About It.” *Joint Force Quarterly* (4th Quarter 2017), 59.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Longley, “What Is Bureaucracy, and Is It Good or Bad?” *ThoughtCo*. 3 February 2021. Accessed 13 December 2021 <https://www.thoughtco.com/bureaucracy-definition-examples-pros-cons-4580229>.

<sup>23</sup> Allan English (2017). “Corruption in the Canadian military? Destroying trust in the chain of command.” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 23:1, 36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2016.1250654>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Wells, “A crisis of confidence in the Canadian Armed Forces.” *Macleans*. 14 May 2021. Accessed 15 January 2022. <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/a-crisis-of-confidence-in-the-canadian-armed-forces/>

from the negative effect of a complaint ... and is less concerned with protecting the well-being of complainants.”<sup>29</sup> The CAF is now at a critical junction, and until the widespread lack of trust and confidence in the leadership is addressed, attempting to change its organizational culture is pointless. It is time for the CAF, once and for all, to prioritize the well-being of its members and their families, which will invariably contribute towards achieving mission success.

## CONCLUSION

12. The institutional culture flaws that the CAF has been trying to address since the Somalia inquiry are a well-known. Recently confronted with multiple denunciations of inappropriate behaviour as well as sexual misconduct allegations, the time is now right for the CAF to fix this deep-rooted culture issue. If the hope is to modernize the institution and make it a replica of the society it currently serves, there are no other choices, but to challenge the fundamental principles that have forged the profession of arms in Canada.

13. As highlighted earlier, the challenges that the institution is dealing with are much broader than just gender-based. In fact, there are many other critical issues that also need immediate attention. On the one hand, the DRDC report highlighted many concerns like work-life balance, advancement and promotion, the lack of trust in the leadership, postings and moves, organizational inefficiencies, and the perceived lack of transparency and fairness.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Allan English believes that resource-mission mismatch, meaningless bureaucratic processes, a dated promotion system, and a marked decline in mission command are the main contributors for the lack of trust currently observed across the CAF. If many of these factors are not addressed promptly and effectively, the hope of remaining relevant will quickly vanish, and likely undermine the CAF’s credibility amongst our partners and allies.

14. Finally, a fundamental shift from a mission-first approach towards a people-first approach would pave the way for a well needed culture change. Opting for a people-first approach would yield immediate and positive results on retention, productivity, operational readiness, as well as mission success, a scenario observed in many progressive and successful organizations; however, maintaining the status quo will likely interfere with the institution’s ability to meet its engagements at home and abroad. If a people-first approach model is not acceptable or too radical, the CAF will need to come

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<sup>29</sup> Marie Deschamps (2015), “External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces.” *National Defence and the Canadian Forces*: 32. Accessed 8 January 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/sexual-misbehaviour/external-review-2015.html>

<sup>30</sup> Edward Yeung, Evanya Musolino, and Emrah Eren. “The 2019 CAF Regular Force Retention Survey: Descriptive Analysis.” *Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC)*, 2019, Document Control Data, Box 13: Abstract.



to terms with the fact that it will continue to lag behind societal developments, and may never achieve the end goal of successfully changing its culture.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

15. A people-first approach would be an important deviation from the traditional military thinking that has shaped the CAF for many years. It is important to acknowledge that until now, most attempts at changing the institutional culture have either failed, or progressed at such a slow pace that it has been very difficult for the institution to keep up with Canadian society, thereby, deepening the divide between the CAF and Canadians. If the CAF wishes to reflect Canadian society in terms of culture, it can no longer expect different outcomes without challenging the basic principles that govern military activities. The next few paragraphs will offer three viable recommendations that all support a people-first approach.

16. First, for a people-first approach to succeed, and yield enduring and positive results, the leadership must clearly articulate the vision, explain why the changes are needed, and how these changes will be implemented and realized. The implementation of a people-first approach requires all leaders to embrace a bottom-up communication methodology, where all members are encouraged and supported to voice their innovative ideas, leading to greater self-commitment and self-realization, two essential elements in job satisfaction. Although putting people at the centre of all institutional activities promote “creativity, innovation, and fresh thinking...”<sup>31</sup> it still remains a difficult concept to grasp for hierarchical institutions like the CAF, but is absolutely crucial.

17. Second, focussing primarily on people seems like common sense, but the fact that the CAF is still experiencing retention and recruitment challenges suggest that members within the institution are not contented, and people outside the institution show very little interest in joining the institution. This striking lack of interest is problematic, and needs immediate attention. The CAF’s leadership needs to re-asses its priorities, expectations, and demands on its personnel, but it also needs to re-examine its recruitment strategies. For example, work-life balance has been cited time and again as one of the most important factor in job satisfaction; however, it remains a main motive for leaving the institution. The CAF can no longer ignore this fact, and needs to stop asking for meaningless and irrelevant reports and returns that do not contribute in any ways to the betterment of the institution.

18. Third, the CAF is currently grappling with a prevalent lack of trust between the institution, its members, and the Canadian public. This is a significant problem and will require decades of relentless devotion to rebuild. As pointed out by LGen Jennie Carignan, the Chief of professional conduct and culture:

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<sup>31</sup> Graham Wilson, “What is People-Oriented Leadership and why is it important?” *Success Factory*. Accessed 7 January 2022. <https://www.thesuccessfactory.co.uk/blog/what-is-people-oriented-leadership-and-why-is-it-important>

Leadership and management, at all levels, must rebuild trust where it has been broken and we need all of our members to be a part of this renewed effort to create a work environment characterized by mutual respect, dignity, safety and where everyone feels a constant sense of belonging.<sup>32</sup>

19. It should now be clear to the CAF that the status quo is not an option. Again, opting for a people-first approach is a viable way forward. Paul Zak, a professor who discovered neurologic mechanisms that enable cooperation and trust, recommends the following managerial behaviors to succeed: recognize success immediately, induce challenging, but realistic goals, enable creativity, innovation, social skills, and personal growth, communicate information widely and quickly, and implement 360 evaluations.<sup>33</sup> Research has shown that personnel who trust their organizations reported “74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives, [and] 40% less burnout.”<sup>34</sup> What these statistics indicate is that failing to prioritize the well-being of personnel will continue to erode the level of trust between leaders and subordinates, which in turn, will deprive the CAF of a healthy workforce, and hinder its ability to deliver effect at home and abroad. CAF personnel are the most valuable resources that the institution possess, and as such, they should not be treated as a replaceable commodities.

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<sup>32</sup> Canada. Government of Canada, “CDS/DM Initiating Directive for Professional Conduct and Culture.” Last modified 30 April 2021. Accessed 5 Jan 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/policies-standards/dm-cds-directives/cds-dm-initiating-directive-professional-conduct-culture.html>

<sup>33</sup> Paul J. Zak, “The Neuroscience of Trust.” *Harvard Business Review*. January-February 2017. Accessed 5 January 2022. <https://hbr.org/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust>

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

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