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A Philosophy for Engineer District Command

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ABSTRACT

A Philosophy for Engineer District Command By /par COL Robert A. Rowlette, Jr.

Engineer districts in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers present a unique challenge to engineer officers. The job of a district commander is more like that of a Chief Executive Officer, CEO, than a traditional military unit commander. In preparation for command, future district engineers (commanders) must give some thought to defining how they intend to lead an organization that specializes in the design and construction of water resources and infrastructure projects on a grand scale. An engineer district commander's primary focus must be external to the organization. The commander must concentrate his energy and efforts in developing short and long-term strategies, organizational vision, internal and external communications, developing relationships with stakeholders, mission execution, and he/she must be the engine of change for the organization.

The commander's focus will be external to the organization, but the organization he leads needs to understand the guiding principles that he/she will apply internally in leading the organization. The command philosophy presented in this paper describes a set of principles a commander might apply in leading a district.

A Philosophy for Engineer District Command

By

COL Robert A. Rowlette, Jr. PE

Engineer districts in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are complicated and unique entities within the Department of Defense. They are more like large (very large) engineering design and construction firms than traditional military organizations. Missions include engineering design and construction of flood control and navigation projects, the design and construction of all military infrastructure for the U.S. Army and the U.S. Air Force worldwide, emergency response to natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes, and regulatory support programs (such as enforcement of the Clean Water Act). To accomplish these diverse missions Corps of Engineer Districts are staffed primarily with Department of the Army Civilians in a variety of skills that include engineers, scientists, contracting specialists, attorneys, real estate specialists, human resources, financial and administrative specialists. There are typically very few military personnel assigned to the District, but the commander is always an active duty Army officer.

Engineer districts are funded on a project basis and most often projects are cost shared between the federal government and some local governmental or non-profit entity. Large districts, such as the District in Louisville, Kentucky, have both military construction and civil works missions. Typically such districts have staffs of over a thousand personnel with budgets approaching one billion dollars a year.

The challenge for military officers about to command an engineer district is that the majority of their experience has been with other traditional military engineering

organizations such as combat engineer companies and battalions prior to taking command of his/her district. District commanders are more like CEO's than traditional military unit commanders. Funding is provided for the sole purpose of delivering a product. Staffing decisions are based upon project funds available. Annual budgets are subject to annual political decisions at the federal, state, and local levels. If there is no demand for the district's services then funds available to maintain staffs is lost, and staffing decisions must be made within the district to maintain the district's cost competitiveness.

Unlike most military organizations, district commanders are faced with volatile and uncertain environments. Like business, districts have to adapt to changing market conditions. Traditional Corps missions such as flood control that typically used levees and dams and lakes are being replaced with more environmentally friendly projects that often avoid traditional construction solutions. Rather than draining wetlands the Corps is now aggressively protecting them.¹ A vision of the future and an ability to adapt and change are critical to success.

Officers selected to command these complex organizations must prepare themselves for command as they would for command of an engineer battalion or brigade. They must be prepared mentally and physically for the unique challenges of district command. Mental preparation includes the development or refinement of a command philosophy² appropriate to the organization. There is tendency for military officers to

¹ The Corps of Engineers was instrumental in the dewatering/drainage of the Everglades in Florida. The Corps of Engineers is now responsible for the restoration of the Everglades.

² A philosophy of command puts forward a set of guiding principles that a commander will utilize in all he does as he leads the people in his organization. It does not describe his personal role in an organization, or provide a detailed listing of every mission essential task to be performed by the commander. It does not describe his vision, objectives, or intent. In the U.S. Army, commanders typically provide their subordinates with their guiding principles, philosophy, in the early days of their command. When the commander presents his philosophy of command, he will naturally describe his own personal role in the organization and the 'value added' he anticipates bringing to the organization in these roles, but these

focus on the technical aspects of the district mission. Most commanders are trained engineers and scientists and many are licensed Professional Engineers, but the reason each was selected was not for their technical ability, but to command. They were selected to lead and manage a large complex organization with a diverse mission.

DEFINITIONS

There have been many definitions for command proposed by scholars and practitioners over the years. Ross Pigeau and Carol McCann have defined command as “the creative expression of human will necessary to accomplish the mission.”³ They stress the importance of creativity to command. Noting that it is perhaps the most important requirement of commanders because without creativity commanders will only base decisions on past experiences.⁴ Others have described command as a complementary mixture of leadership and management. Peter Bradley has categorized particular activities as either leadership or management behaviors, as follows:⁵

LEADERSHIP	MANAGEMENT
Visioning	Planning and Budgeting
Motivating	Organizing and staffing
Influencing change in people and orgs.	Control

things are not part of his philosophy of command. The commander presents his philosophy to aid key leaders in ‘getting inside the commanders head’. If done well, it provides the organization with an insight into how decisions will be made and what subordinate leaders should expect from the commander. Its focus is, by definition, internal to the organization.

³ Pigeau, Ross and McCann, Carol. “Reconceptualizing Command and Control”. *Canadian Military Journal*. Col. 3, No. 1. Spring 2002. p. 56.

⁴ Pigeau and McCann. Pp. 55-57

⁵ quoted in, “General’s Doing General’s Work”. Canadian Forces College. NSSC 4. Spring 2002. pp. 1-7.

Setting the example	Producing goods / providing services
Engender faith, trust, respect	Supervising
Subordinates identify with leader	Decision making
Exceed expectations	Monitoring activities
Develop subordinates. Mentor.	Controlling
Provide support	Coordinate
Coach, advise, mentor	Administer
Recognize achievements	Analyze and conduct estimates

Most also recognize that command is also based upon an authority granted to an individual. Pigeau and McCann define authority as the degree to which a commander is empowered to act, the scope of this power and the resources available for enacting his or her will.⁶ All these definitions compliment one another. The common thread in all cases is that command is a blend of leadership and management. The challenge in developing a command philosophy will be to attain the appropriate mix of leadership and management and determining which will have priority.

“There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it.”⁷ Leadership is about influencing the actions of the led, but it is also a group process. That is, it is not just a leader-to-led process, but there also exists a definite group dynamic that gives feedback to the leader.⁸ Northouse’s definition of

⁶ Pigeau and McCann. P. 58.

⁷ Northouse, Peter G. Leadership Theory and Practice. Sage Publication. 1997. Chpt 1, P. 2.

⁸ Northouse. Pp. 1-3.

leadership is sound and is used throughout this paper. “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”⁹

The terms management and leadership have similar import and are often used almost interchangeably. They are however quite distinct aspects of a common purpose. Both are focused on influencing results and people. While similar and not mutually exclusive, management and leadership are different. Management is more related to control systems and processes. The focus of management is producing consistent results while reducing organizational ‘chaos’.¹⁰ Daft and Sharfman state that “most of the job of management is the struggle to make organizations function effectively.”¹¹ Kouzes and Posner suggest that management is about the control of resources such as: people, time, money, and material.¹² Leadership on the other hand, has more to do with values and the motivation of people.

A MODEL FOR CEO’S

Before a commander can detail his philosophy of command, he must evaluate the organization’s current business position and develop an overarching approach to guiding the organization. The philosophy of command that would flow from the approach developed and should support it fully. Of course, there are many approaches a commander might take to leading his organization. The commander could have either an internal or an external focus. He/she could be controlling or decentralized. The

⁹ Northouse. P. 3.

¹⁰ Northouse. Pp. 8-9.

¹¹ Daft, R.L. and Sharfman, M.P. “A General Diagnostic Model for Organizational Behavior: Applying a Congruence Perspective”. From Organizational Analysis: Diagnosis and Case Studies (4th ed.). West Publishing. Minneapolis-St. Paul. 1995. P. 1.

¹² Kouzes and Posner. P. 16.

commander could be focused on people or perhaps an advocate for radical change. The approach the commander, CEO, plans to use must meet the needs of the organization and the business however. Farkas and Wetlaufer have proposed that CEO's 'develop a guiding or overarching approach' to leading their organizations, and they have described five basic approaches to leading organizations. These are the: Strategy Approach, Human-Assets Approach, Expertise Approach, Box Approach, and Change Approach.¹³ (See footnote)¹⁴ As Farkas and Wetlaufer point out CEO's don't limit themselves to a single method or approach to executive leadership. They will shift their emphasis from one approach to another as circumstances require but most will have a prevailing philosophy that best suits the needs of the organization and the marketplace.¹⁵ One-dimensional approaches to command are therefore rarely appropriate and will often lead to failure. Focusing on people, mission, quality, control, change or any other element to

¹³ Farkas, Charles M. and Wetlaufer, Suzy. "The Way Chief Executive Officers Lead". *Harvard Business Review*. May-June 1996. Pp. 110-2.

¹⁴ As defined by Farkas and Wetlaufer.

Strategy Approach: Senior leaders primary focus is on the creation, evaluation and implementation of long-term strategies. Their primary focus will be on external environmental factors such as: customers, competitors, market trends, and technology. These leaders will most value employees and direct reports to whom they can delegate day-to-day operations.

Human Assets Approach: CEOs and senior leaders employing this approach believe that strategy is best developed at the lowest possible level. These leaders focus on the selection and development of leaders who will operate in a predictable/standardized way. Long-term employees who will act as the CEO would be most valued.

Box Approach: This approach is typically employed by CEOs in businesses that are strictly regulated such as the banking and investment industries. Their intent is to create, communicate, and monitor a strict set of controls to ensure that a 'uniform and predictable' behaviors and experiences are delivered to customers. Long-term employees are most valued. Most promotions will come from within the organization.

Expertise Approach: CEO's using this approach believe that they must select and develop an area of expertise within the organization to create a 'competitive advantage'. Leaders using this approach will typically hire employees that have experience and education in the field of expertise being developed. They also typically seek employees with that are flexible and are willing to adjust to the program (of expertise) being developed. A willingness to be "indoctrinated" in the area of expertise.

Change Approach: "Leaders utilizing this approach are guided by the belief that the CEO's most critical role is to create an environment of continual re-invention, even if such an environment produces anxiety and confusion and leads to some strategic mistakes." (p.112) This approach contrasts strongly with the Box Approach. Leaders using this approach most value employees that are aggressive, competitive and out-of-the-box thinkers.

¹⁵ Farkas. Pp. 110-22.

the detriment of the others will unbalance the command effort and be sub-optimal. The commander must strike an appropriate balance if he/she is to succeed.

In summary, the district commander must develop an approach to command that is most appropriate for the environment and circumstances of his/her organization. He/she must communicate his/her intent to the organization and particularly to direct reports¹⁶ if the organization is to understand and execute according to the course set by the commander. The environment and the organization may well change during a commander's tenure and he/she must be ready, willing, and able to adjust his/her command philosophy to meet the changed conditions. The approach taken should not be a 'reflection of personality or personal style,'¹⁷ but based upon the needs of the organization. Before developing a 'philosophy of command, the district commander must decide upon the approach to be used in leading the organization. By necessity, the commander's underlying philosophy must be carefully developed to support the approach¹⁸ he intends to use. I will advocate a philosophy for district command that supports a Strategic Approach as defined by Farkas and Wetlaufer, and will next present my case for a strategic approach to command.

STRATEGIC APPROACH

Why should a district commander use a strategic approach to command? First, the district commander has a unique position of authority and c

He will have the most interaction with key federal, state, and local politicians that represent the public in the district. He will also have significant and personal interaction with customers and end-users. He will be the primary interface with local political authorities and installation commanders for all projects undertaken by the district. In many ways the commander is the face of the district to the outside world. As a result, he/she then becomes the symbolic and sometimes direct link between the product and the producers (the district staff), the customer and execution.

Given this unique position the commander is best situated to see the present and future of the district, and as a result the commander must be the principal visionary, responsible for setting short and long-term strategy.¹⁹ This is, in fact, the district commander's key role: assessing the current business position of the district and developing an overarching and long-term vision and strategy that will serve as the best way forward. The commander must develop a positive and accurate vision for the organization and couple that with a coherent strategy to synchronize the organization and its resources to its environment and define in detail the district's core mission including market and customer descriptions, definition of products to be delivered, and market penetration methodologies.²⁰

While the strategic commander's primary focus may be long-term strategy and influences external to the command, the commander cannot lose sight of short-term execution and adapting his/her organization in the present as required. The district's customers require a quality product for a fair price and as a result current operations and mission execution cannot be neglected even as the commander looks to the future.

¹⁹ Farkas and Wetlaufer. P. 113.

²⁰ Daft and Sharfman. Pp. 4-7.

Customer satisfaction and loyalty result directly from the district's ability to execute in the short-term, in the present. Satisfied customers will translate into additional mission assignment and funding for the district. The ability to execute efficiently and effectively also keeps the district competitive with alternative design and construction entities available to its customers. Quality and efficiency must be the strategic commander's watchwords.²¹ The commander must remember however that the district is a large and complex organization, and

with hundreds or thousands of employees, the strategic leader must rely on intermediaries for managing the daily affairs of the enterprise. While it may be a prescriptive ideal for the strategic leaders to have a strong personal presence throughout the organization, realistically the job entails the 'management of managers' who will serve as the leader's conduits and agents.²²

The tremendous complexity and scope of the district mission combined with an unstable market environment make it imperative that the commander should take the lead in adapting/changing his/her command.²³ The commander in addition to seeing the future and executing in the present must be able to adapt or change the organization to the external environment as necessary while considering its current position. As a result, considerable effort must be made to assess current business position using the monitoring tools currently in use and then making appropriate course corrections to maintain the course for the future.²⁴ Given the strategic commander's external focus, the commander must rely in large part upon his direct reports and key leaders to execute the mission and manage daily operations. Change, if it is to be effective and efficient, must arise from a

²¹ Farkas and Wetlaufer. Pp. 110-5 and 120.

²² Hambrick, D.C. "Putting Top Managers Back in the Strategy Picture". Leadership and the Leadership Process. J.L. Pierce and J.W. Newstrom, eds. Austen Press. Chicago. 1996. P. 2.

²³ Farkas and Wetlaufer. P. 115.

²⁴ Kaplan and Norton. Pp. 1-9.

thorough understanding of the current corporate position. Additionally for change to be positive it must be synchronized with corporate strategy and vision for the organization.²⁵

Of course, the hard reality is that the commander and his/her organization are evaluated largely on his performance in the present. The temptation is to avoid risk and play it safe; maintain rather than excel, to maintain control rather than delegate, and to keep the status quo rather than change and adapt.²⁶ That said, the commander must avoid the temptation to rest on his/her laurels or protect the present business position rather than focus on product delivery, mission execution, and change.²⁷ Success for both the commander and the organization will come from successful execution in both the near and long-term.

The essential question for a commander that has concluded that he/she will utilize a strategic approach to command of their organization is what should be his/her guiding principles (philosophy of command) that support his overall approach to leading the organization. There are several essential components and concepts for the commander who will utilize the Strategic Approach to command and leadership. Taken together these elements have a synergistic effect and must be fully integrated into his/her philosophy of command. First, the strategy developed must include a strategic vision for the organization, and this vision must include and advocate organizational values to guide the district in the execution of its mission. The commander with a strategic approach must be driven to produce concrete results (mission execution) and they will accept risk in their decision making; to innovate and make changes to create something new, to

²⁵ Farkas and Wetlaufer. Pp. 110-5.

²⁶ Lencioni, Patrick. The Five Temptations of a CEO (A Leadership Fable). Jossey-Bass. San Francisco. 1998. Pp. 1-134.

²⁷ Lencioni. Pp. 25-31.

enhance effectiveness, and to excel at everything the command does.²⁸ The commander will develop a performance contract with direct reports and key leaders and provide all necessary support and hold them accountable for their actions.²⁹ This is all done while keeping in mind that “leadership is a dialogue not a monologue”³⁰ and that leaders will take decisions without perfect information and mistakes will be made. The commander will involve all those impacted by strategic decisions and not fear professional debate and discord. He/she must empower people to act.³¹ Finally, command “is a relationship, founded on trust and confidence. Without trust and confidence, people don’t take risks. Without risks, there’s no change. Without change, organizations...die.”³²

Given that a strategic approach as described by Farkas and Wetlaufer is to be used, an engineer district commander’s primary focus will be external to the organization. The commander will concentrate his energy and efforts in developing short and long-term strategies, organizational vision, internal and external communications, developing relationships with stakeholders, and organizational change, and mission execution. The commander will, of course, define his role and expected ‘value added’ to his/her direct reports and the organization as a whole. In addition to simply defining his role the commander must also provide some of his rationale for why he intends to make things external to the district his priority. Naturally, the organization will be very interested in what the commander will be doing for them, but they will be most interested in ‘what makes the old man tick’, what they can expect from the commander as he deals with the people in the organization. The commander’s focus will be external to the organization,

²⁸ Kouzes and Posner. Pp. 1-18. and Farkas and Wetlaufer. 110-1 and 113-5.

²⁹ Kouzes and Posner. Pp. 1-14.

³⁰ Kouzes and Posner. Pp. 11.

³¹ Kouzes and Posner. Pp. 12-4.

³² Kouzes and Posner. P. 12.

but the organization he leads needs to understand the guiding principles that he/she will apply internally in leading the organization.

This paper will present a philosophy for district command that draws upon much that has been written and presented about leading private sector entities. I have proposed that the district commander's guiding philosophy should support a strategic approach/focus. By necessity, leadership will take precedence over management while recognizing that both are essential elements of effective command of the district.

VISION

“Leaders inspire a shared vision. They gaze across the horizon of time, imagining the attractive opportunities in store when they and their constituents arrive at a distant destination. Leaders have a desire to make something happen, to change the way things are, to create something that no one else has ever created before.”³³

The first step in developing a long-term strategy is developing a vision of the future. Considerable thought and effort must be given to this task. General Sullivan defined vision as

Vision is a sense of the future. It is an imagined possibility, stretching beyond today's capability, providing an intellectual bridge from today to tomorrow, and forming the basis for looking ahead, not for affirming the past or the status quo. The power of a vision is that it gives leaders a basis for positive growth and transformation...a leader uses vision and values to mobilize people, to facilitate change and growth, to create a future for his or her organization.³⁴

³³ Kouzes and Posner. P. 11.

³⁴ Sullivan, Gordon and Harper, Michael. Hope is Not a Method: What Business Leaders Can Learn from America's Army. Toronto: Random House. 1996. Pp. 79-80.

This visioning process will be led by the commander but it “grows out of the needs of the entire organization.”³⁵ It must be done with full consultation and debate amongst the command team to achieve complete ‘buy-in’ by the entire district; and ‘buy-in’ is essential if change is to be long lasting. The commander will make the final decision and must communicate change, but the vision developed must result from a collaborative effort between the commander, leaders, and his/her staff.³⁶

The common theme in any vision must be the pursuit of excellence guided by a positive almost idealic view of the future.³⁷ The vision should communicate that which makes an organization unique. It will distinguish the organization from its competition.³⁸ There are many Corps of Engineers districts, but the commander’s vision distinguishes one from another. Our differences will encourage new employees to join the district, and old hands to stay on the team. It fosters pride and confidence in the organization. By promoting a unique, positive, and results driven vision customers are encouraged to be part of the future envisioned.³⁹

Values guide the commander’s development of an organizational vision. They are the bedrock upon which an organization is built and results achieved. Values represent the ‘enduring beliefs’ of an organization.⁴⁰ In simplest terms these values represent ‘how we do things around here.’⁴¹ The Army Corps of Engineers has a long and proud history of service to America. Our service ethic is epitomized by our Army’s Values of: loyalty, duty, respect, self-less service, honor, integrity, and personal

³⁵ Northouse. Chpt. 8. P. 140.

³⁶ Northouse. Chpt. 8. P. 140.

³⁷ Kouzes and Posner. Pp. 93-9.

³⁸ Kouzes and Posner. P. 99.

³⁹ Kouzes and Posner. Pp. 99-100.

⁴⁰ Canadian Forces College. “Ethics”. N/PS/ETH/LD-1. P. 6.

⁴¹ Quinn. P. 32.

courage.⁴² Through these values the “members of the organization establish confidence in each other based on predictable patterns of behavior according to expected norms. From this confidence arises mutual trust and organizational cohesion...”⁴³ It is not enough that the commander simply define and preach values. The commander must lead by example. Through the consistent application of organizational values and ‘practicing what he/she preaches personally’ the commander will inspire trust and confidence in his/her decision-making. An organization will implicitly trust a commander whose ‘deeds and words match’.⁴⁴ Values must guide all that the commander and the entire organization does and will do, and they must guide the decision-making of all leaders.

Values are essential to our future. If we can institutionalize our values we will be better prepared for the future and change. We will enhance our ability “to attract and retain the best people and hold their commitment...”⁴⁵ By making values part of everything the organization is and does we can get our people to “transcend their own self-interests for the sake of the team.”⁴⁶ Only then will the organization overcome its natural resistance to change and embrace change that is necessary for the sake of the team.

⁴² Army Values:

Loyalty: Bear true faith and allegiance to the United States Constitution, the Army, the Corps of Engineers, the district, and our people.

Duty: Fulfill all obligations.

Respect: Treat people as they should be treated. The ‘Golden Rule’

Selfless-Service: Put the welfare of the nation, the Army, and your subordinates before your own.

Honor: Live up to all the Army values.

Integrity: Do what is right, legally and morally.

Personal Courage: Face fear, danger, and adversity (physical and moral).

⁴³ Canadian Forces College. “Ethics”. N/PS/ETH/LD-1. P. 1.

⁴⁴ Kouzes and Posner. P. 29.

⁴⁵ Government of Canada. Department of National Defence. “People in Defence Beyond 2000, A Human Resource Companion to Shaping the Canadian Forces: A Strategy for 2020 A Matter of Teamwork”. P. 12.

⁴⁶ Northouse. Chpt 8. Pp. 130-5.

PEOPLE

“Look After our people, invest in them and give them confidence in the future.”⁴⁷

It may be an overused expression but people are an organization’s most valuable asset. “Ultimately the work of organizations gets done through the behavior of people, individually or collectively, on their own, or in collaboration with technology.”⁴⁸ People execute missions, produce products, and deliver results. In fact, leadership itself is a collective effort.⁴⁹ Successful mission accomplishment requires that the commander trust his/her direct reports decision making ability, and trust that the entire organization will execute the organizational mission. Of course, the commander has no choice other than to delegate and trust; especially in an organization as large and complex as an engineer district the commander cannot hope to supervise every task. But, trust is an essential quality of all leaders.

“Individuals who are unable to trust other people fail to become leaders. Because they can’t bear to be dependent on the words and works of others, they either end up doing all the work themselves or supervise work so closely that they become over controlling. Their demonstration of lack of trust in others results in other’s lack of trust in them.”⁵⁰

Trust is engendered by empowering direct reports, key leaders and staff. Direct reports and key leaders must be empowered to act on the commander’s behalf not just because of the scope and scale of the job, but to foster trust. If the commander empowers

⁴⁷ Government of Canada. Department of National Defence. “People in Defence Beyond 2000, A Human Resource Companion to Shaping the Canadian Forces: A Strategy for 2020 A Matter of Teamwork”. P. 12.

⁴⁸ Daft and Sharfman. P. 1.

⁴⁹ Kouzes and Posner. P. 11.

⁵⁰ Kouzes and Posner. P. 163.

key leaders, giving them greater autonomy and authority to act, they are much more likely to be committed personally to the organization and to producing extraordinary results.⁵¹ The commander is also more likely to be seen as credible by his subordinates, key leaders and the entire organization if he empowers them to act on the his/her behalf and trusts that they will deliver for the organization.⁵² This is not only true for mission execution, but also when implementing change. Many that have studied (and practiced) leadership and organizational effectiveness have concluded that the best practice is “to delegate decision making to the lowest level at which a considered judgment can be made.”⁵³ In short, for all the reasons given above the commander has no alternative but to trust his people with the reputation of the organization (and his/her reputation as well).⁵⁴

It is not enough to delegate missions to direct reports and key leaders. The commander must also ensure that adequate resources are available to accomplish any assigned task. The district commander must entrust his/her people with the necessary resources for mission success. Entrusting direct reports with the organization’s treasured resources only serves to emphasize his/her trust in them and engender their good will. Failure to provide adequate resources for mission accomplishment will result in reduced organization morale and overall effectiveness.⁵⁵ The perceived ‘power’ delegated is often most associated with the resources allocated, and the greater the willingness of the commander and his key leaders to allocate resources, the more power is given to those

⁵¹ Kouzes and Posner. P. 12.

⁵² Kouzes and Posner. P. 185. “Credible leaders accept and act on the paradox of power: we become the most powerful when we give our own power away.”

⁵³ Augustine. P. 89.

⁵⁴ Lencioni. P. 118.

⁵⁵ Ulrich. P. 130.

charged with execution.⁵⁶ If the commander will delegate and trust his leaders to execute the mission, he will be rewarded with the good will, respect and commitment of his entire organization.⁵⁷

Delegating authority and empowering subordinates is also a key element in developing future leaders and delivering results. Strategy 2020 (Canadian Forces) identifies as a strategic objective the requirement to develop decisive leaders. Strategy 2020 states commanders should “develop and sustain a leadership climate that encourages initiative, decisiveness and trust while improving our leader’s abilities to lead and manage effectively.”⁵⁸

Change processes are inextricably linked to the organization’s people. A trusting command climate with leaders empowered to act on behalf of the commander are also more likely to accept change. The CEO may be primarily responsible for change, but change is delivered and executed by the organization and the organization is not just a wiring diagram. It is the people that are the organization. The organization’s culture must support transformation if the effects of change are to be long lasting.⁵⁹ To thrive in an ever-changing environment, organizations must constantly adapt to external pressures. Organizations must “create a healthy discomfort with the status quo”.⁶⁰ They must be able to recognize environmental changes and adapt more quickly than the competition to meet the needs of their customers.⁶¹ To accomplish this people (that are the organization) must be comfortable with change, identify the need for change, make recommendations

⁵⁶ Kouzes and Posner. Pp. 191-3.

⁵⁷ Lencioni. P. 118.

⁵⁸ Government of Canada. Department of National Defence. “People in Defence Beyond 2000, A Human Resource Companion to Shaping the Canadian Forces: A Strategy for 2020 A Matter of Teamwork”. P. 10.

⁵⁹ Ulrich, Dave. “A New Mandate for Human Resources”. *Harvard Business Review*. Jan-Feb 1998. P. 125.

⁶⁰ Ulrich. P. 127.

⁶¹ Ulrich. P. 127.

and then transform the organization quicker and more effectively than the competition.⁶² This can only be accomplished when the entire organization is built upon trusting relationships between leaders and between leaders and their people. The commander and all leaders in the organization must be willing to empower subordinates and consider the input, tempered by experience, of the organizations people. The commander must be “willing to let others exercise influence over the [organization]”.⁶³

CHANGE

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives; nor the most intelligent; it is the one that is the most adaptable to change.” *Charles Darwin*

Change is the one constant in business today. As Lockheed-Martin concluded as it sought to adapt to a rapidly changing defense market place, “there are only two kinds of companies – those that are changing and those that are going out of business.”⁶⁴ Kaplan and Norton state that “A company’s ability to innovate, improve, and learn ties directly to the company’s value.”⁶⁵ “Given that change is inevitable, it is crucial that organizations not only have a vision, they should apply it in a pro-active manner to meet and stay ahead of emerging challenges.”⁶⁶ The commander must take the primary role in leading change. It should not be delegated to others but is the sole responsibility of the

⁶² Ulrich. P. 127.

⁶³ Kouzes and Posner. P. 165.

⁶⁴ Augustine, N.R. “Reshaping an Industry: Lockheed Martin’s Survival Story”. *Harvard Business Review*. Vol. 75, no. 3. May-June 1997. p. 85.

⁶⁵ Kaplan, Robert S. and Norton, David P. “The Balanced Scorecard – Measures That Drive Performance”. *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb 1992. P. 6.

⁶⁶ Nuemann. P. 12.

commander.⁶⁷ This is not to say that the commander will develop a transformation plan in isolation. He must consult with his direct reports and key leaders in developing a vision and any plan to adapt his organization to the changing environment, and perhaps the best way to get outside the box and develop innovative solutions is to consult with those outside the leadership box for input.⁶⁸

Change may be necessary but it is difficult to change an organization. People and organizations collectively tend to resist change even if it is seen as necessary. People want to maintain the status quo. The organization understands that decisions about change are based on predictions of a future environment that may be imperfect, and the final impact of change may be predicted but is not certain. There may or may not be opportunity in change, but people know that personal and organizational stress will be a certainty.⁶⁹ Whenever the commander seeks to change an organization, to experiment, or to innovate they put themselves and their organization at risk. Yet if the commander is “to lead efforts to improve the way things are, [he/she] must be willing to take risks” and put his treasured organization at risk.⁷⁰ The challenge for leaders is to get organizational buy-in and acceptance of proposed changes and associated risk.

The keys to getting to implementing and getting buy-in for organizational change include: inculcate common organizational values, fully debate proposed changes, communicate change, and empower direct reports. Previously, I discussed the significance of values in creating a climate of team first. I will discuss the significance of

⁶⁷ Sullivan and Harper. P. 13.

⁶⁸ Augustine. P. 89.

⁶⁹ Northouse. Chpt. 8. P. 141.

⁷⁰ Kouzes and Posner. P. 66.

each the remaining keys to implementing change in turn, but will begin with the first and most important method of getting organization buy-in for change.

Internal debate is an absolute requirement for effecting long-term change in an organization.⁷¹ Professional and productive debate about such things as the organizational vision, future business environment, short-term and long-term goals and objectives, or organizational values is necessary for several reasons. First, the commander's decisions will be better having the full benefit of the input of his direct reports and other key leaders and staff.⁷² Another value of internal debate is credibility. If the commander permits a full and open debate of the pros and cons of a plan or decision, his/her direct reports, key leaders, and even the entire organization will have greater understanding of his / her thought process. The willingness of the commander to permit a free exchange of ideas, to include the ideas of others in shaping the future of the organization, and to expose planned actions to challenge and debate increase; organizational 'buy-in' for final decisions regarding organizational change.⁷³

Successfully communicating change is as essential to making changes as the transformation plan. Leaders must communicate the goals and purpose of any action undertaken. Goals must be set; transformation closely monitored, detailed feedback provided, and finally measure the effect of change if change is to be successful.⁷⁴ It is not enough to know what change is being sought and that it is necessary, but we must communicate the objectives for change. The team must be confident that change initiatives are "focused on creating high-performing teams, reducing cycle time for

⁷¹ Northouse. Chpt. 8. P. 141.

⁷² Lencioni. Pp. 59-73.

⁷³ Lencioni. Pp. 59-73.

⁷⁴ Augustine. P. 90.

innovation, or implementing new technology.”⁷⁵ The clarity and consensus that results from clearly communicating change will make change enduring and enhance the likelihood of ultimate success.⁷⁶

An essential part of communicating change is communicating the need for change. Change is not obviously and inherently better than the status quo.⁷⁷

Last but not least is a topic discussed previously, the delegation of authority and assignment of resources to execute missions (and change). If key leaders and employees have been part of the process of defining the strategic vision and change and the commander has effectively communicated the nature and purpose of the changes to be undertaken, the commander will have gone far in getting buy-in. The final step will be to pass ownership of the change to the organization and its people. The simplest and surest way to do this is to empower direct reports, leaders, and employees to execute change.

DECISION MAKING and RISK AVERSION

“Leaders are pioneers – people who are willing to step out into the unknown. They’re willing to take risks, to innovate and experiment in order to find new and better ways of doing things.”⁷⁸ Kouzes and Posner.

The higher one goes in an organization the more challenging it becomes to lead and manage. The major challenge faced by senior leaders and managers is the requirement to operate in an environment of uncertainty. Rarely are all the facts and data desired in decision making actually available. Leaders must make tradeoffs, and rarely

⁷⁵ Ulrich. P. 130.

⁷⁶ Jacobs and Jaques. Pp. 437-9.

⁷⁷ Quinn. P. 40

⁷⁸ Kouzes, James M. and Posner, Barry Z. The Leadership Challenge. Jossey-Bass Publishers. San Francisco. 1995. Pp. 9-10.

are ‘right answers’ obvious to the casual observer.⁷⁹ Commanders will even find it more difficult to develop acceptable and realistic alternative courses of action given the lack of clarity that is commonplace.⁸⁰ The challenge will be to make the best decision using the available information. “The choice will not be between good and bad, but between one good or another or between two unpleasant alternatives.”⁸¹ In some cases, decision-making is made in situations in which the outcomes may be uncertain.⁸² Leaders must make a decision using the best available information while carefully avoiding failure. To be sure, any decision involving less than complete data will involve risk. While all leaders must avoid unnecessary risk of mission failure, we must also not let risk aversion lead to inaction.⁸³

The district commander must guard against the temptation to make decisions based upon certainty rather than clarity.⁸⁴ District commanders are almost universally engineers by formal education and are all trained as engineers and scientists in their formal military education. Based upon their formal education and training they have been thoroughly indoctrinated in logical decision making. When this training is combined with an ever-increasing ability to collect and analyze detailed data / information, it may lead commanders to conclude that decisions may be reached based upon certainty of information. Of course the information available to commanders is almost always incomplete and imperfect.⁸⁵ Decision making in the absence of perfect

⁷⁹ Quinn, Robert E. “Mastering Competing Values: An Integrated Approach to Management”. From *Beyond Rational Management*. Jossey-Bass Inc. 1998. P. 30.

⁸⁰ Jacobs, T.O. and Jaques, Elliot. “Executive Leadership”. *Handbook of Military Psychology*, Chapter 22. R. Gal and A.D. Mangelsdorf, eds. John Wiley and Sons. New York. 1991. P. 435.

⁸¹ Quinn. P. 30.

⁸² Jacobs and Jaques. P. 435.

⁸³ Jacobs and Jaques. P. 439.

⁸⁴ Lencioni. P. 50.

⁸⁵ Lencioni. P. 115.

information not only applies to day-to-day operational decisions but also to visioning and organization change. Even in developing long-term strategies, corporate vision and plans for organizational change; it is better to execute with the best information available rather than miss the opportunity to adapt.⁸⁶ The commander must make decisions based on clarity not certainty.

Decisions must be made based upon the best information available to maintain momentum and prevent stagnation. Indecision on the part of the commander will stall or stop an organization. The commander does not have the luxury of developing a vision, defining, short and long-term goals and objectives based upon absolute certainty. If the commander is waiting for perfect information to develop a plan, the plan will never be finalized and never executed. The commander must remember that his / her direct reports depend upon the guidance of the commander to execute the mission of the district, and mission objectives will not be met without timely decisions by the commander.⁸⁷ Commanders would be well advised to remember the admonition given at Command and General Staff College; ‘any plan violently executed is better than the best plan never executed.’ The commander’s job is to make decisions and “risk being wrong”.⁸⁸

Your direct reports and key leaders will learn more from a commander that makes decisions based upon good rather than the perfect information. They will also be better positioned mentally and psychologically to exploit the inevitable opportunities if they have been developed and trained in an aggressive, offensively minded organization.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Augustine. P. 88.

⁸⁷ Lencioni. Pp. 49-58 and 115.

⁸⁸ Lencioni. P. 116.

⁸⁹ Lencioni. Pp. 115-6.

The strategic commander should encourage subordinate leaders to follow his model and accept risk in decision making to achieve ever, greater results. The commander should never penalize leaders who are willing “to step out into the unknown rather than play it safe.”⁹⁰ Leaders do learn from the mistakes that they make, and decisions taken considering organizational values, clarity, and logical thought process should be rewarded even if some mistakes are made.⁹¹

ACCOUNTABILITY

“Soldier’s do well those things that their leaders demand they do well.” 1SG Johnson.

The commander is responsible for everything that happens or does not happen while he / she is in command. Pigeau and McCann define responsibility as “the degree to which an individual accepts the legal and moral liability commensurate with command.”⁹² The commander will similarly be held accountable for the achievements or failures of his entire command. Accountability according to the Oxford dictionary is the degree to which one is required to answer for one’s conduct. There are two components to responsibility one extrinsic and one intrinsic. Extrinsic responsibility is a measure of the accountability one feels to superiors and subordinates. Intrinsic responsibility is the “degree of self-generated obligation that one feels towards the ...mission.”⁹³ Extrinsic responsibility is closely linked with the legal and moral authority associated with a position in an organization. Pigeau and McCann believe and I fully support the premise

⁹⁰ Kouzes and Posner. P. 66.

⁹¹ Kouzes and Posner. Pp. 67-72.

⁹² Pigeau and McCann. P. 59.

⁹³ Pigeau and McCann. Pp 59-60.

that ‘intrinsic responsibility is the most fundamental of all the dimensions of command.’⁹⁴ “Intrinsic responsibility is associated with the concepts of honour, loyalty, and duty those timeless qualities linked to military ethos... Without it, very little could be accomplished. It is the source of all motivation, effort and commitment.”⁹⁵

The commander must remember that accountability does not reside with the commander only. I discussed earlier the value and necessity of delegation of authority for mission execution to direct reports. With this delegated authority to act on behalf of the commander comes accountability for the actions and results of the direct report. Your direct reports will be allocated the treasures of your command (people, time, and funds) to accomplish certain missions, and you should expect results. Applaud the successes of your direct reports and hold them accountable for any failures. There is no substitute for success. The simplest way to gain the affection of those in your charge is to create a successful and results based organization, while dealing fairly and openly with those in positions of responsibility.⁹⁶ The commander’s goal should be the respect of his direct reports not their love.

A key element of the accountability process is defining expectations. In effect, the commander must develop a contract with his direct reports regarding performance expectations. Specific goals and objectives must be established. The commander must “articulate goals for time, quality, and performance and service.”⁹⁷ Where possible these goals should be refined further by defining specific measures.⁹⁸ Contracts are two-way

⁹⁴ Pigeau and McCann. P. 60.

⁹⁵ Pigeau and McCann. P. 60.

⁹⁶ Lencioni. P. 113-4 and 33-47.

⁹⁷ Kaplan, Robert S. and Norton, David P. “The Balanced Scorecard – Measures That Drive Performance”. *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb 1992. P. 3.

⁹⁸ Kaplan and Norton. P. 3.

agreements, and the commander must engage his/her direct reports in defining goals, measures and expectations. In a similar way, the commander and his/her direct reports must discuss and come to a meeting of the minds regarding command support that will be required. All contract goals should focus on district strategic objectives, vision, and execution.

One of the most important duties of the commander is to develop the next generation of leaders. While holding direct reports and leaders accountable is necessary for mission accomplishment it is also an essential part of developing the next generation of leaders. As part of the leader mentoring process the commander must not merely highlight successes (which is easy) but must also make leaders accountable for their actions.⁹⁹ The commander must also follow up with the necessary teaching and coaching of his/her key leaders to ensure that mistakes are not repeated. As discussed in the preceding section, the commander must keep in mind that leaders do learn from their mistakes and severe penalties for reasoned risk taking will inhibit innovation, aggressiveness, and initiative.

MISSION FOCUS

“Leaders want to do something significant, to accomplish something that no one else has yet achieved.”¹⁰⁰

The old military adage of mission, men, and self is still appropriate. Commanders must remember that their primary responsibility is mission success. In the lexicon of the

⁹⁹ Lencioni. P.33-47.

¹⁰⁰ Kouzes and Posner. P. 94.

CEO, he/she must achieve results. Most commanders and leaders were driven to produce results while in pursuit of their career goals.¹⁰¹ District command is the ultimate career goal for most engineer officers. Having attained this goal, the commander must guard against complacency, risk aversion, and status protection for there must be a higher goal than personal achievement. Leaders excelled and were recognized with command opportunities because they were driven to success, and that must not change after accepting district command. The commander must also remember that he/she was once in the trenches and make sure that those direct reports and other leaders in his/her charge are rewarded for producing results and not for contributing to the ego of the commander and other district leaders.¹⁰² As Lencioni puts it: “Make results the most important measure of personal success, or step down from the job. The future of the company you lead is too important for customers, employees, and stockholders to hold it hostage to your ego.”¹⁰³

A great challenge for every commander is the requirement to develop a balance between mission and people. As noted earlier, people are our most important resource and every element of mission accomplishment hinges upon the efforts of our people. Even in an engineer district, mission requirements may require policies or operational decisions that would place mission success ahead of our people. It is the commander’s responsibility to create a command team that can deal with such circumstances effectively. Our people must have confidence that their leaders have their best interests at heart. They must have confidence that command decisions are taken in light of our

¹⁰¹ Lencioni. Pp. 25-32 and 112-3.

¹⁰² Lencioni. Pp.112-3.

¹⁰³ Lencioni. P 113.

common values. They must have confidence that the when mission takes priority over people that the burden will be carried fairly by the entire district team.¹⁰⁴

CONCLUSION

An engineer district commander's primary focus must be external to the organization. The commander's first priority is developing and implementing long-term strategy that must include a vision of the future for the organization. He/she must be the principal architect and engine of change. The commander is responsible for execution in the near-term and can never forget that much of the future is built today, but he/she must count on his direct reports and key leaders to manage and execute much of his/her organizations daily mission. To accomplish these tasks the commander must foster organizational trust in the commander and its leaders. This is best accomplished by empowering direct reports and key leaders to act. Authority must be delegated to the lowest level possible, and authority to act must be accompanied by the necessary resources to act. The commander must understand and accept that decisions on long-term strategy, visioning, near-term execution, and change will be taken under conditions of uncertainty. The fact that risk is a part of decision-making and command must not prevent the commander from taking decisions. The commander must encourage his subordinates to accept risk in their decision making as well, and must guard against punishing them for risk taking encouraged by the commander. That having been said the commander must be willing to hold people accountable for their actions. Mistakes in judgment or mistakes resulting from decisions taking with reasonable risk must be used

¹⁰⁴ Government of Canada. Department of National Defence. "People in Defence Beyond 2000, A Human Resource Companion to Shaping the Canadian Forces: A Strategy for 2020 A Matter of Teamwork". P. 12.

for individual and organizational learning, but mistakes that result from lack of energy, effort, and failure to follow organizational values must be considered and accountability assessed. Last, but certainly not least, the commander must never forget that he/she is charged with delivering results be they product, customer satisfaction, change, leader development, or any organizational activity. Missdevelo 7isf

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