



# Adaptive Leadership in the Military Decision Making Process

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*Army leaders in this century need to be pentathletes, multi-skilled leaders who can thrive in uncertain and complex operating environments . . . innovative and adaptive leaders who are expert in the art and science of the profession of arms. The Army needs leaders who are decisive, innovative, adaptive, culturally astute, effective communicators, and dedicated to life-long learning.*

— Francis J. Harvey, Secretary of the Army, speech for U.S. Army Command and General Staff College graduation<sup>1</sup>

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PHOTO: 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment soldiers identify targets for Iraqi Army field artillery training, Wasit, Iraq, 20 October 2010. (U.S. Army, SPC Charles M. Willingham)

**T**ODAY'S ARMY LEADERS have accepted adaptive leadership as a practice and a methodology, integrating it into the way we train leaders to meet the challenges of the contemporary operating environment. Adaptive leadership is an accepted leadership practice that facilitates leading in a difficult and changing environment, as we encounter threats that change and evolve their tactics, techniques, and procedures on a weekly to monthly basis. Much has evolved in this practice in the last eight years, including leadership and operational doctrine and new training venues to train tomorrow's leaders. This article examines current U.S. Army doctrine on adaptive leadership, reviews current adaptive leadership theory and practice, and recommends ways to incorporate adaptive leadership practices into the military decision making process (MDMP).

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey recently commented on new leadership and operational doctrine, stating, "The recent release of FM 5-0, *The Operations Process*, represents a major shift in how we develop adaptive leaders through its introduction of the Design process. The goal here is to develop leaders who do not think linearly, but who instead seek to understand the complexity of problems before seeking to solve them. Design gives leaders the cognitive tool to *understand* complex problems as part of the Visualize, Understand, Decide, Direct responsibilities of the commander."<sup>2</sup>

General Dempsey added, "We're trying to decide how to build in new skill sets for our leaders to meet the hybrid threats that exist in these uncertain times. The pace of change adds to the increasing complexity . . . We're seeking creative thinking skills and trying to replicate those complexities in our

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training scenarios. We want to build on the ability to adapt. The 2015 learners will be able to easily create and adapt virtual training environments to meet their individual or collective training needs.”<sup>3</sup>

Our current doctrine addresses what adaptive leadership is and provides some tools for being adaptive, but fails to address how to implement it in the MDMP process. This is important because the MDMP is the genesis of operations. In order to develop and execute adaptive plans and operations, and lead adaptively, today’s leaders must understand where and how in the MDMP they can integrate, apply, and master adaptive leadership to meet adaptive threats and changing situations.

## Adapting to the “Hybrid” Threat Environment

The U.S. Army Combined Arms Center Threats Division defines the hybrid threat as a diverse, dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, and criminal elements unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects.<sup>4</sup> The term “hybrid” is used to capture the essence of the complexity of war, the multiplicity of actors involved, and the blurring between traditional categories of conflict. Hybrid threats are innovative, adaptive, globally connected, networked, and embedded in local populations. They can possess a wide range of old, adapted, and advanced technologies—possibly including weapons of mass destruction. U.S. forces must prepare for a range of conflicts. New threat doctrine includes an operational Design component called *adaptive operations* or actions to preserve the threat’s power and apply it in adaptive ways against overmatching opponents.<sup>5</sup> The hybrid threat’s immediate goal is survival, but its long-term goal is the expansion of its influence. The hybrid threat’s operational goal is to adapt temporarily, using patience, adapting tactics, techniques, procedures, and even operational and strategic goals, to live and fight another day.

In the article “Beyond the ‘Hybrid’ Threat: Asserting the Essential Unity of Warfare,” the authors reinforce the notion that adaptive leadership is essential to counter present and future adversaries. They note, “Those [threats] that have not adapted have faced rapid extinction in the jungle of the global strategic order. Those that do are *entities or movements that, based on a*

*continuous scanning of their operational environment, maneuver with speed and agility through material and cognitive capabilities to affect the will and psyche of others, in order to attain their political objectives.”*<sup>6</sup>

The ability to shift approaches with agility and speed is the essence of the future threat, as well as of former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates’ vision for our armed forces (adaptive in organizational and campaign Design, capabilities development, and execution). Future threats will adapt specific mixes of cognitive and material capabilities based on a continual assessment and reassessment of the other’s strengths and weaknesses, requiring constant adaptation, experimentation, and learning. This adaptability is a measure of one’s ability to change in order to fit altered circumstances and provides commanders an added measure of resiliency in the face of the unknown. This need for adaptability and adaptive leadership points to a potential gap in our doctrinal system.<sup>7</sup>

## Adaptive Leadership Reviewed

The Army’s current leadership doctrine, Field Manual (FM) 6-22, provides a solid definition for adaptive leadership, exploring the practice of creative thinking that uses adaptive approaches drawn from previous circumstances or lessons learned, along with creating innovative approaches.<sup>8</sup> It says that when tasks are difficult, adaptive leaders identify and account for the capabilities of the team, noting that while some tasks are routine, others require leader clarification, and still others present new challenges.<sup>9</sup> FM 6-22 provides some new tools for adaptability and defines what it is to be an adaptable leader.

Adaptability is the ability to recognize changes in the environment, identify the critical elements of a new situation, and trigger changes to meet new requirements. Adaptability is an effective change in behavior in response to an altered situation.

Adaptable leaders scan the environment, determine the key characteristics of the situation, and are aware of what it will take to perform in the changed environment. Highly adaptable leaders are comfortable entering unfamiliar environments, have the proper frame of mind for operating under mission command orders in any

organization (FM 6-0), and seek to apply new or modified skills and competencies.

Adaptive leadership includes being a change agent. This means helping other members of the organization, especially key leaders, recognize that an environment is changing and building consensus as change is occurring. As a consensus builds, adaptive leaders work to influence the course of the organization. They use several different methods for influencing their organization depending on the immediacy of the problem.<sup>10</sup>

Deciding when to adapt is as important as determining how to do it. Deciding not to adapt in a new environment may result in poor performance or outright failure. On the other hand, adapting does not guarantee the change will improve matters.

Field Manual 6-22 describes adaptable leaders as leaders who are comfortable with ambiguity and are flexible and innovative. They are ready to face the challenges at hand with the resources available. They are passionate learners, able to handle multiple demands, shift priorities, and change rapidly and smoothly. They view change as an opportunity.

Adaptability has two key components:

- The ability of a leader to identify the essential elements critical for performance in each new situation.

- The ability of a leader to change his practices or his unit by quickly capitalizing on strengths and minimizing weaknesses.<sup>11</sup>

Adaptive leaders are open-minded. They do not jump to conclusions, are willing to take risks, and are resilient to setbacks. Our new leadership doctrine informs leaders how to become more adaptable. They must learn to lead across cultures, seek challenges, and leverage their cognitive abilities to counteract the challenges of the operational environment through logical problem solving.<sup>12</sup>

### Adaptive Thinking, Design, and FM 5-0

The Army's new FM 5-0, *The Operations Process*, addresses adaptation by focusing on creative thinking, a process that involves creating something new or original when facing old or unfamiliar problems that require new solutions. Creative thinking



(U.S. Army)

Chief of Staff of the Army GEN Martin E. Dempsey speaks with U.S. soldiers from United States Division-Center during a visit to Camp Liberty, Iraq, 19 April 2011.



produces new insights, novel approaches, fresh perspectives, and new ways of understanding and conceiving things. Leaders look at the options to solve problems using adaptive approaches (drawn from previous similar circumstances) or innovative approaches (completely new ideas).<sup>13</sup> Today's full spectrum operations demand planning that can be integrated and addressed in the operational Design process, the MDMP, and troop-leading procedures.<sup>14</sup>

***...adaptive leadership is the framework required to effectively close the gap and make aspirations a reality.***

Innovation, adaptation, and continuous learning are all central tenets of Design. Innovation involves taking a new approach to a familiar or known situation. Adaptation involves taking a known solution and modifying it to a particular situation or responding effectively to changes in the operational environment. Design helps commanders lead; guides planning, preparing, executing, and assessing operations; and requires agile, versatile leaders who foster continuous organizational learning while actively engaging in iterative collaboration and dialog that enhances decision-making at all levels.<sup>15</sup> Design provides a model for problem framing and cognitive tools to understand problems and appreciate their complexities before trying to solve them. The tools help leaders recognize and manage transitions, educating and training them to identify adaptive, innovative solutions, create and exploit opportunities, and leverage risks to their advantage.<sup>16</sup> Leaders must lead organizational learning, develop methods to determine if reframing is necessary during the course of an operation and continuously assess, evaluate, and reflect on the problem at hand.<sup>17</sup>

## **Adaptive Leadership Practice**

The pioneer of adaptive leadership theory, Ronald Heifetz of Harvard University, states that adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing

people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. It's about changes that enable the capacity to thrive. Such changes build on the past rather than jettisoning it. Organizational adaptation occurs through experimentation.<sup>18</sup>

Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky state that adaptive leadership is an iterative process involving three key activities:

- Observing events and patterns.
- Interpreting them.
- Designing interventions based on the observations.<sup>19</sup>

Adaptive leadership has three parts: observation, interpretation, and intervention. Adaptive leaders must adopt an experimental mind-set that commits to an intervention but does not become wedded to it. Adaptive leadership is about will and skill. "The single most important skill and most undervalued capacity for exercising adaptive leadership is diagnosis," which in military terms translates to "mission analysis" and "running estimate analysis."

Heifetz, Grashow, Linsky provide the following recommendations for practicing adaptive leadership:

- Don't do it alone.
- Live life as a leadership laboratory.
- Resist the leap to action.
- Discover the joy of making hard choices.<sup>20</sup>

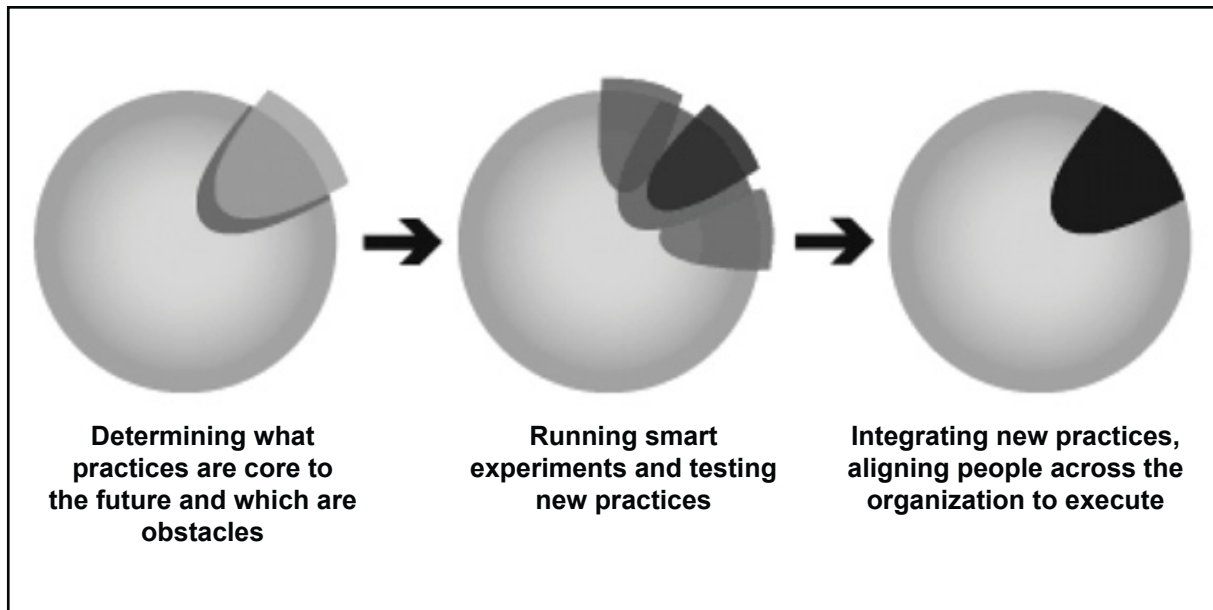
Adaptive challenges are difficult because their solutions require people to change their ways. Adaptive work demands three tough human tasks:

- Figure out what to conserve from past practices (lessons learned).
- Figure out what to discard from past practices.
- Invent new ways that build from the best of the past.<sup>21</sup>

When leaders realize their organization's aspirations—the innovations and progress they want to see—demand responses outside the current capacities, adaptive leadership is the framework required to effectively close the gap and make aspirations a reality.<sup>22</sup> It provides a disciplined approach to do more for what you care about most.<sup>23</sup>

## **Adaptive Leadership and the MDMP**

Understanding adaptive leadership is important, but integrating it into the military decision making process is a challenge. Not many have written about



### Introduction to Organizational Adaption.

it. The following are some recommendations worth considering during the MDMP:

**Step 1. Receipt of mission.** Receiving higher headquarters' order of a new mission is receipt of mission. Commanders are responsible for providing initial guidance and time allocation. Depending on the complexity of the situation, they may initiate Design activities before or in parallel with the MDMP. As specified by FM 5-0, commanders may choose to conduct Design to help them understand the operational environment, frame the problem, and consider operational approaches to manage it or solve it.

Why are leaders reluctant to “Design”? Is it because they don’t understand what Design is? Is it because it takes too much time? Or is it because they feel they have a firm grasp of what the real problem is and do not need to waste time validating the problem?

Whichever the case, Design provides an ideal platform to begin adaptive thinking by modeling innovative, adaptive problem framing. Design provides leaders with the tools to understand problems and appreciate their complexities before trying to solve them. Taking and making time for this valuable exercise helps build adaptive leadership skills by educating and training leaders to identify and employ adaptive, innovative solutions, create and exploit opportunities, and leverage risks to their

advantage. Time invested in the Design process is a valuable step in understanding the threat, the environment, and how to meet both with adaptive plans and operations.

**Step 2. Mission analysis.** The commander and staff conduct mission analysis to better understand the situation and problem and identify *what* the command must accomplish, *when* and *where* to do it, and most important, *why*—the purpose of the operation. Mission analysis is the most important step in the MDMP because no amount of subsequent planning can solve a problem if the commander and staff do not understand it. Mission analysis allows commanders to visualize the operation and describe how it may unfold in the commander’s intent and planning guidance.<sup>24</sup> Mission analysis is one of the most important steps for integrating adaptive leadership. How adaptable, flexible, and agile are we? Are we lock-stepped into our tactics, techniques, and procedures, continually reacting to the threat, or are we preemptive, proactive, and agile? Although not specified in Army doctrine, two valuable tools that can facilitate adaptability are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis and the force field analysis. The staff should also observe, analyze, understand, and interpret patterns (pattern analysis).

**Step 3: Course of action (COA) development.** This step generates options for follow-on analysis

and comparison to satisfy the commander's intent and planning guidance. Planners use the problem statement, mission statement, commander's intent, planning guidance, and knowledge products developed during mission analysis to develop COAs. Staffs often develop one to two courses of action that are diametrically different in their approaches to solving the problem. Many times, staffs are directed to develop a third COA that often serves as a throw-away option, with the staff not investing much time on it. Staffs should instead develop a proactive, preemptive COA as a way to inject adaptability into the MDMP. They may also use "adaptive" as a screening criterion to screen for validity in COA analysis. Of course, we must train our staffs to understand what the screening criterion is and how to apply it in quantifiable terms.

**Step 4: COA analysis (wargame).** This step allows commanders and staffs to identify difficulties or problems in coordination as well as the probable consequences of actions they are planning or considering.<sup>25</sup> Threat-focused decision making, proactive or reactive, and adaptive actions, reactions, and counteractions make for a dynamic COA analysis. Risk assessment is another consideration. Are we

pushing the risk envelope? Are we hinging on a low- to moderate-, or moderate- to high-risk level during wargaming? COA analysis (wargaming) can become an extremely adaptive exercise if the staff develops an adaptive COA, war games it, integrates the results, and assesses them. This MDMP step is the experimental stage, during which the staff tests interventions.

**Step 5: COA comparison.** This is an objective process to independently evaluate COAs against set evaluation criteria approved by the commander and staff to identify their strengths and weaknesses and allow the commander and staff to select one with the highest probability of success and develop it in an operations plan or order.<sup>26</sup> Using adaptive screening and evaluation criteria for COA comparison injects adaptability into the MDMP process.

## Conclusion

Adaptive leadership is an accepted leadership practice that facilitates leading in a difficult and changing environment in which we encounter adaptive and "hybrid" threats that change and evolve tactics, techniques, and procedures across the conflict spectrum. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. Dr. Francis J. Harvey, Secretary of the Army, speech for U.S. Army Command and General Staff College graduation (2005).

2. See <<http://www.military-training-technology.com/mt2-home/259-mt2-2010-volume-15-issue-4-july/3105-qaa-general-martin-e-dempsey.html>>.

3. See <<http://www.army.mil/news/2009/09/04/27024-tradoc-commander-discusses-leadership-training-at-forum>, <http://www.military-training-technology.com/mt2-home/259-mt2-2010-volume-15-issue-4-july/3105-qaa-general-martin-e-dempsey.html>>.

4. Training Circular 7-100, *Hybrid Threat* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2011), iv.

5. *Ibid.*, 4-1.

6. David Sadowski and Jeff Becker, "Beyond the 'Hybrid' Threat: Asserting the Essential Unity of Warfare," *Small Wars Journal* (2010), Small Wars Foundation.

7. *Ibid.*, 11.

8. Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006), 6-2.

9. *Ibid.*, 9-1.

10. *Ibid.*, 10-8.

11. *Ibid.*, 10-9.

12. *Ibid.*

13. FM 5.0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2010), 1-6.

14. *Ibid.*, 2-7.

15. *Ibid.*, 3-1.

16. *Ibid.*, 3-3.

17. *Ibid.*, 3-7.

18. Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston, MA, Harvard Business Press, 2009), 14-17.

19. *Ibid.*, 32-32. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky state that adaptive leadership is an iterative process involving three key activities.

20. *Ibid.*, 37.

21. *Ibid.*, 41-45.

22. Figure 1. CLA (2010), from <[http://www.cambridge-leadership.com/index.php/adaptive\\_leadership](http://www.cambridge-leadership.com/index.php/adaptive_leadership)>.

23. *Ibid.*

24. FM 5.0, B-5.

25. *Ibid.*, B-21.

26. *Ibid.*, B-33.