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SENIOR LEADER CREDIBILITY

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

SENIOR LEADER CREDIBILITY

by

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ii

ABSTRACT

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U.S. Army officers develop leadership skills during initial assignments in which they frequently exercise direct leadership over subordinates. When they become more senior officers they find themselves in positions where direct leadership skills, learned as junior officers, are inappropriate. Leadership at senior levels involves a different type of work than at lower organizational levels and this requires leaders to possess a different set of skills, knowledge, and attributes in order to be successful.

The purpose of this paper is to examine senior leadership theories and then to look at senior leadership from a constituent's perspective using the concept of credibility. The paper concludes with a review of available studies of senior U.S. Army leaders to see how the concept of credibility is related to the work requirements of senior Army leaders and the role credibility has in helping these leaders to be effective.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
LEADERSHIP THEORIES	1
CREDIBILITY	6
SENIOR ARMY LEADERSHIP	8
CONCLUSION	9
IMPLICATIONS	10
ENDNOTES	11
BIBLIOGRAPHY	15

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vi

INTRODUCTION

U.S. Army officers spend a great deal of time developing their leadership skills during their early years as junior officers assigned to units at the battalion and brigade level. These assignments typically place the officer in a position of authority from which he supervises and is responsible for the activities of those soldiers subordinate to him. Officers become adept at dealing with issues that are generally clearly defined and easily solved within a short time frame. Their position in the organization facilitates problem solving because of their ability to compel compliance by their subordinates.

Leadership at more senior levels requires leaders to use a set of skills different from those they learned as junior military officers in positions of direct leadership. Numerous scholars and writers have done a great deal of research and study to determine both the nature of senior leadership and the skills senior leaders need in order to be effective in the 21st Century. These skills include the ability to handle complex cognitive tasks, self-awareness, the ability to tolerate ambiguity, intellectual flexibility, and an understanding of the organization and its subsystems.¹ These skills seem to focus on the leader's abilities without acknowledging the importance of constituents as an element of senior leadership.

A constituent is either a subordinate, peer, or superior, whose support the leader needs in order to accomplish the organization's task. Constituents assess the quality of their leadership. ² The purpose of this study is to examine the role of credibility as an attribute of senior leadership. This study will first examine some general leadership concepts and theories and then examine the concept of credibility. The hypothesis of this study is that credibility is a necessary element of successful senior leadership.

LEADERSHIP THEORIES

LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP

The U.S. Army recognizes three levels of leadership: direct, senior, and strategic. Direct leadership occurs at battalion-level and below; senior leadership at brigade and corps levels, while strategic leaders make decisions about the Army's structure, its resources, its values, and its long-range direction.³ For the purposes of this paper, the term senior leader includes leaders at both the senior and strategic levels. Leaders at these levels are involved with obtaining and allocating resources, establishing vision and organizational climate, and charting the course for and the execution of change. Soldiers look to these leaders for the sense of confidence about the future and direction of the Army. Soldiers look to these leaders to see whether their actions match their words.

Direct leadership primarily occurs at the lowest organizational levels in the Army. Leaders at these levels are concerned with the direct application of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that help them influence the individual and group behaviors of those they lead. Direct leadership requires the demonstration of technical and tactical competence with individual soldier and leader tasks, as well as the

ability to solve problems, counsel subordinates, build effective teams, execute and accomplish assigned tasks.⁴ Relationships at this level are well-defined and lines of authority are clear. Leaders at this level have relatively few requirements for lateral relationships except for those needed to coordinate for the accomplishment of tasks.⁵

Senior leadership requires additional skills than those used for direct leadership. Senior leaders are involved with establishing the organization's climate and for allocating available resources to subordinate units and for program funding. Senior leaders must be technically and tactically competent in organizing and synchronizing systems and subordinate units. Other required skills include complex problem solving, the ability to shape organizational structure, and the ability to influence others through effective writing, listening, and speaking. ⁶ Leadership at this level is a blend of direct leadership, staff-delegated supervision, and delegated output. Among other tasks, senior leaders build teamwork among subordinate elements and teach and mentor subordinate leaders. Even though the organization is complex, the authority relationships are clear and leaders use lateral relationships to coordinate the activities of the organization.⁷

Strategic leaders establish the Army's structure and promulgate their vision for the Army. They establish its values, and plan for and allocate resources for the entire organization. These leaders require sophisticated technical skills that enable them to effectively plan and resource the Army and its numerous systems. These leaders must know about force structure and the integration of the Army's systems for personnel, equipment, training, doctrine, and maintenance. According to the U.S. Army, they must also have the personal skills that allow them to be effective participants in operations with other branches of the U.S. government, as well as with leaders of other services and leaders of other nations' militaries.⁸ Authority relationships at this level are less clear than at lower levels. Senior leaders use consensus building and persuasion as a means of extending their influence. Lateral relationships are important not just for coordination, but as a source of support for the organization as well. Strategic leaders also evaluate the organization's performance in terms of not only how well it functions, but also how well it relates to its environment. Because the organization is so complex, direct measures of effectiveness are difficult. Senior leaders must establish internal and external sources of information that allow them to assess the organization's performance.⁹

PERSPECTIVES ON SENIOR LEADERSHIP

In a comprehensive study of the nature of and requisite personal characteristics of executive leadership, Zaccaro identifies and characterizes four major perspectives that provide theories about the nature of executive leadership. These perspectives include conceptual complexity theories; behavioral complexity theories; strategic decisionmaking theories; and theories about inspirational leadership theories.¹⁰ Each perspective provides insights into the nature of executive leadership and why executive leadership is different from leadership at lower organizational levels. These theories describe the nature of the work senior leaders perform and the skills effective and successful senior leaders demonstrate.

CONCEPTUAL COMPLEXITY THEORIES

Conceptual complexity theories center on the premise that leaders at higher organizational levels require higher-order cognitive abilities and skills than leaders at lower levels.¹¹ Conceptual complexity theories postulate that the level of complexity of tasks increases as the individual progresses higher throughout the organization. Not only do tasks become more complex, they also require senior leaders to process significantly more information than subordinates do. At higher organizational levels leaders engage in tasks such as boundary spanning and management of the organization's internal units. These tasks require the leader to acknowledge and manage diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives, expectations, and demands. The leader requires higher order skills and abilities to balance and reconcile these views and attitudes while simultaneously managing the outcome so it helps accomplish the organization's goals.¹²

In addition to the external organizations and internal sub-units that place demands on the leader for attention, the leader is also challenged by the amount and nature of information he is required to process. Conceptual complexity theories suggest that leaders must not only process complex information, they must also process that information in a coherent manner so they can make it relevant to the organization. Information processing challenges leaders because leaders receive information from multiple paths and at different times. This creates multiple possible outcomes for the leader. The leader is thus challenged to process and apply this information as he manages these possible outcomes while simultaneously balancing his constituents' views, perspectives, and positions. The combination of more information and the diverse constituencies senior leaders respond to and interact with demand greater cognitive ability on the part of senior leaders. ¹³

Leaders are not only confronted with demands for information processing; they are also challenged by the nature of the problems they must face. At the senior leader level, leaders deal with complex long-range problems that are often not easily defined.¹⁴ Once defined, however, leaders must then must develop and implement solutions to resolve the problem. The complexity of problem solving combined with the demands of information processing place greater demands on leaders as they assume higher levels of responsibility within an organization. A further complicating factor is that the time span associated with issues increases with both the complexity of the problem and the level of responsibility within an organization.¹⁵ Future problems and issues are more difficult to define and are subject to multiple influences and several possible solutions. Even the assessment of the problem is subject to change over time. Leaders therefore require a higher level of cognitive capability to deal with these variables than do individuals who work at lower organizational levels and who deal with more concrete and short-term problems.¹⁶

Cognitive theory holds that senior leaders are primarily focused outward, working to ensure adequate availability of resources to sustain the organization.¹⁷ Senior leaders at this level require a

leadership approach that is focused not downward, but horizontally as they work to build consensus for their vision and direction within the organization. They also work to build consensus external to the organization for the allocation of resources to the organization.¹⁸ Senior leaders at this level are also responsible for the creation, establishment, and maintenance of organizational values that are consistent with the external environment.¹⁹

BEHAVIORAL COMPLEXITY THEORIES

Cognitive theories look at senior leader skills and attributes. Zaccaro characterizes his second group of theories as behavioral complexity theories. These theories examine the behaviors senior leaders exhibit in their roles. Instead of focusing on the senior leader's cognitive ability, behavioral complexity theories focus on the leader's ability to invoke the requisite behaviors required of him as he works with different levels of complexity within his organization. In explaining what it is that senior leaders do, behavioral theories examine the leader's ability to use his social skills to assist him in achieving his plans.²⁰

Senior leaders supervise organizations that execute multiple functions, such as input, throughput, output, and system monitoring. Each of these processes gives rise to its own demands that are in competition with those of the other functions. They can also give rise to sub-cultures within an organization, such as the airborne, cavalry, and individual branch cultures within the Army. Senior leaders invoke different behavior sets in dealing with these different demands and cultures. Leaders who are incapable of effectively dealing with the demands of different and conflicting perspectives are ineffective in harmonizing the efforts of the entire organization and are ineffective in guiding the organization to success.²¹

Tsui has suggested that organizational effectiveness is associated with the leader's reputation. Tsui defines reputation as "the effectiveness as perceived from the perspective of the individual or specific group of individuals who are satisfied with the job behavior and activities exhibited by the manager being evaluated."²² Constituents are continually evaluating a leader's performance in terms of the leader's ability to meet their expectations. Leaders gain a positive reputation when they meet the demands of the multiple constituencies they must respond to.²³ This is one way to define credibility; those who are looking at the leader see him as one in whom they can and do invest their trust and confidence because he meets their expectations. This includes not only those members of the organization, but also constituents external to the organization.²⁴

Tsui continues by saying that the key for the senior leader is to balance the demands of those groups who exert influence on the leader and his organization. Peers, subordinates, and environmental actors all place demands on the leader and the degree to which he meets their demands, which are often in conflict, either increases or decreases his reputation and his effectiveness. The more the leader successfully reconciles the varying demands of his constituencies the greater his reputational effectiveness. The leader who has high reputational effectiveness in turn is better able to shape the

expectations of others.²⁵ This effectiveness is the capital the leader uses to implement effective change within the organization and the capital he uses to build support with external actors not only for change, but for continued support, both political and financial.

STRATEGIC DECISIONMAKING THEORIES

The third group of leadership theories, labeled by Zaccaro as strategic decisionmaking, involves the role senior leaders have in making and shaping strategic decisions. This group of models looks to the senior leader to evaluate the environment and shape his organization's strategy to ensure the organization remains relevant in the future. A key aspect of this group of models is that while they all look to explain the leader's role in keeping the organization relevant and in fostering growth and change, this model looks at the processes leaders use to make their decisions.²⁶

This does not suggest, however, that cognitive ability and leader behaviors are not important in this group of models. Cognitive ability is critical to the leader's ability to evaluate the environment, assess risks, and to develop the strategy for the future.²⁷ This strategy is the result of the leader's vision implemented throughout the organization.²⁸ Individual leader behavior is important in helping the leader to implement his strategy through organizational systems.²⁹

INSPIRATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Zaccaro's fourth group of leadership theories are those that center on the role of vision and inspiration as defining characteristics of senior leadership. This group of theories looks at senior leadership as a function of establishing and promulgating a vision. A vision, as opposed to a strategy, is often characterized as an ideal, and represents a normative view of how the leader sees the world.³⁰ Visions often reflect the values of the leadership and therefore the values of the organization. Leaders also tend to use visions as a vehicle for change, a change in values or culture as opposed to changes in structure or process.³¹ Charismatic leaders are particularly adept at creating conditions that promote individual growth and learning, along with a level of trust and confidence that permits others to question and disagree with the leader's position.³²

Transformational leadership theory is one of the theories in this group. Transformational leadership is the ability of leaders to create within the mind of the follower a future desirable goal as the basis for motivation. Transformational leaders do not rely primarily on rewards and punishments to motivate subordinates, but rather utilize one of the four components of transformational leadership (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) to appeal to subordinates so they work on a basis other than narrow self-interest. They seek to activate higher order needs in subordinates and to leverage those needs as a basis for motivation. ³³ When these higher order needs are activated, individuals often accomplish more than they either intended or thought possible.³⁴ Transformational leadership skills allow leaders to move an organization from its current level of performance to another, higher level of performance because individuals feel empowered by the leadership.³⁵

Unlike theories from the first three perspectives, inspirational theories do not lay exclusive claim on leaders at senior levels. While cognitive ability, behavioral and strategic decision theories all focus on the senior leader, visionary and transformational theories are not necessarily the exclusive tools of senior leaders. Leaders at any organizational level can utilize them. Their focus on subordinate empowerment does, however, provide insights into subordinate motivation and the value added to an organization of empowered subordinates.³⁶

CREDIBILITY

A leader's credibility may have a significant influence on others' decision to either stay with or to leave the organization.³⁷ Credibility, or the ability of leaders to establish and maintain an environment of trust and confidence consists of how leaders sustain this confidence in their direction and how leaders set the stage for change when necessary. Leaders engage in the process of building and maintaining their credibility to ensure that all constituents work from a single frame of reference, or vision, in pursuit of a common goal.³⁸

In their study of credibility, Kouzes and Posner identified four attributes of credibility. They concluded that leaders must consistently demonstrate these attributes if they want to gain and maintain their subordinates' support and efforts. These attributes are honesty; being forward-looking; being inspiring; and demonstrating competence.³⁹

Honesty was identified as the one attribute that was consistently selected more often than any other attribute as necessary in a leader. Defined primarily as ethical beliefs and ethical conduct by senior leaders, this finding was true even in cross-cultural surveys conducted about leadership.⁴⁰

The ability to be forward-thinking is a key leader attribute because individuals expect the leader to determine the organization's path. Followers expect a leader to determine organizational goals, communicate those goals, and then organize subordinates, resources, and time in order to achieve the goals. A forward-thinker plans and organizes events instead of reacting to them.

The attribute of inspiration is closely related to that of being forward-looking. Being inspiring is not necessarily the same thing as being charismatic. There is an element of being dynamic as a leader, but inspiration in this sense means being positive, optimistic, and enthusiastic about not only the future, but about the organization and its movement toward the future. An inspiring leader effectively communicates his vision of the future to others so as to engender their enthusiasm and support, creating a desire to work to achieve the goal. Inspiring leaders view and treat people as individuals, not assets. This in turn influences how individuals perceive their leaders, and influences the individual's belief of how a leader perceives him as an individual.⁴¹

Competence is the final attribute consistently admired. Individuals must believe that the leader is capable of being effective in his job and role as leader. Competence is more than a set of technical skills.

It involves the leadership skills required to effectively and efficiently work with people and to deal with organizational and administrative systems.⁴²

Kouzes and Posner conclude that not only do individuals most desire these attributes the leaders, but that these attributes correlate highly to those criteria individuals use in evaluating the credibility of information sources. Kouzes and Posner conclude that individuals want credible leaders, leaders worthy of faith, trust, and confidence. Credibility is an essential element of leadership and honesty is the most important attribute of credibility.⁴³

Leaders must consistently model and demonstrate these attributes to their organizations and to their peers, subordinates, and superiors. Leaders earn credibility through personal contact and exposure with others who see these skills and attributes modeled. Contact provides constituents with the knowledge necessary to overcome what they do not know about the leader. Contact provides leaders the opportunity to learn about others and to gain feedback from those who are frequently closer to the problems and the issues addressed in an organization. Contact provides constituents the chance to learn about the leader and to learn about the organization and their role in it. One may hold negative or cynical views about others, but one infrequently holds those same views about those that one knows and works with on a regular basis. ⁴⁴

The concepts of clarity, unity, and intensity help operationalize senior leader tasks that contribute to credibility. Clarity concerns the leader's role in creating and understanding the vision, values, needs, and interests of the organization and its constituents. Clarity illuminates how these come together to form principles and actions which contribute to organizational and individual success. Unity consists of those steps leaders undertake to establish acceptance of organizational values in individuals and leader efforts to convince constituents about the need for change and to build support for their vision. Intensity represents the internalization of values and principles and the use of these values and principles as a basis for decisions. It represents the congruity between espoused values and tangible actions.⁴⁵

Faith and confidence become important as leaders communicate shared values and vision throughout the organization. Shared values and accepted vision not only help ensure everyone is working toward the same goal, but are necessary because they help ensure the willing participation and support of constituents. Credibility involves the leader's efforts to establish and communicate values and vision and to get constituents to accept, internalize, and operate from within the framework the values and vision establish. By engaging in this process, leaders earn trust and confidence by demonstrating their actions are consistent with their words.⁴⁶

A leader's vision may or may not involve change, but it represents the leader's understanding and articulation of what the organization must either do or represent to be successful. It is the codification of the organization's guiding principles. The leader, by effectively communicating his vision, enlists support and enthusiasm for his vision from members of his organization. Having the trust of subordinates is a prerequisite for achieving support for the vision.⁴⁷

Faith and confidence in leaders reflects trust in a leader's judgment and actions. Trust implies expectations constituents have about a leader's behavior and that these expectations are fulfilled and reinforced over time.⁴⁸ Organizations with high levels of trust produce better results and experience higher levels of productivity than organizations that demonstrate lower levels of trust.⁴⁹

SENIOR ARMY LEADERSHIP

The Army has studied its senior leaders in order to gain insight into the nature of senior leadership in the Army. One study focused on the degree to which senior Army leaders display the skills and attributes suggested by cognitive complexity theories. Cognitive complexity theories predict senior-level work is complex because of factors such as the time span of the work involved, responsibility for multiple systems, and an external leader orientation with emphasis on consensus building and establishing a common vision.⁵⁰ The study supported the hypothesis that three- and four-star officers engage in work with significantly longer time spans than officers engage in at lower levels in the Army. It also concluded that these senior officers do in fact have an outward focus and are occupied by the necessity to report to more than a single boss or constituent. These findings are consistent with and supportive of cognitive complexity theories.⁵¹

In terms of specific skills and knowledge, this study determined that multinational knowledge, along with an understanding of joint and unified relationships were key skills and knowledge required of successful three and four-star Army officers. Without this knowledge they were unable to understand their environment and unable to position their organization within the environment. Closely related to this was the requirement to understand the entire Army system. Consensus building was a key skill since it allowed them to exercise influence, based on persuasion and negotiation. In fact, consensus building was the skill most frequently mentioned by respondents.⁵² Other skills identified by the study included the ability to effectively deal with abstracts and concepts; establishing values and a desired organizational climate; self-evaluation; creating a shared frame of reference within the organization; and an ability to to tolerate risk and uncertainty.⁵³

Research into the nature of work at the one and two-star level in the Army revealed a somewhat similar set of knowledge and skills required by these officers as with three and four-star generals.

Cognitive skills at the one and two-star levels include mental mapping, problem management, and planning/envisioning. As defined in this research study, these terms reflect the same need on the part of one and two-star officers to engage in consensus building, to understand the external operating environment, to manage long-term issues, and to establish an effective vision for their organization.⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that seventy-five percent of respondents did not mention the importance of a shared frame of reference, of understanding the context of actions and decisions two levels higher.⁵⁵ This raises

the question of how they place their organization and responsibilities within the larger context of the Army, and how they use that knowledge to establish direction, priorities, and a vision for the organization.

Related to this is the fact that respondents focused on establishing a common frame of reference with those above them in the organization, but said nothing of creating a similar frame of reference for their subordinates. Several explanations are possible. One is that these leaders do not consider this to be important. This seems unlikely, since at the tactical level leaders and staff officers are taught and trained to know and to understand commander's intent two levels up and to promulgate their own intent for their subordinates. A second possible explanation is that because these officers are accustomed to providing guidance and intent, they viewed this as a "given" or something they did reflexively because of their training and experience. They did not associate this with a special skill required of them as a senior leader but something leaders do at all levels. If this is the case it is not clear why they spoke of the need to understand the context two levels higher. There may have been something in the nature of the officer's job (such as an assignment that require them to work with officers of either different services or different countries) that made him more sensitive to this than would otherwise be the case. A third possible explanation is that a frame of reference is not important, but such a suggestion would seem to be contrary to what much of the literature says about senior leader tasks, skills, knowledge, and attributes. The research does not, however, link success to a clear frame of reference. It merely documents the importance of a shared frame of reference as a skill or ability necessary for senior leaders to be effective.

CONCLUSION

Senior leadership is unlike leadership at lower organizational levels. Unlike lower levels where more direct leadership skills are primarily used, senior leaders require a different set of knowledge, skills, and attributes than lower-level leaders because the nature of their work is more complex. Senior leaders primarily engage in work that requires them to establish the organization's direction, maintain its values, obtain support and resources, monitor the organization's performance, and to initiate corrections when needed.

Senior leaders need unique skills in order to accomplish their tasks effectively. These skills include the ability to balance competing demands and perspectives, both internal and external to the organization. They must pay attention to and evaluate the environment; to process vast amounts of information from multiple sources; and to manage problems over time to achieve a desired outcome. Individuals at this level typically engage in consensus building as a means to establish support and enthusiasm for their programs and vision. Lacking direct influence over both internal and external constituents whose support they seek, senior leaders rely on consensus because they cannot compel acceptance of their vision and goals by peers and superiors.

This literature review supports the hypothesis that credibility is a necessary element of successful senior leadership. The consensual nature of senior leader actions, in particular those of establishing and communicating vision and values, requires leaders to be credible in the eyes of constituents. Constituents must see leaders model and demonstrate the values and attitudes they espouse. Leaders must earn the trust and confidence of constituents before constituents will begin to accept and to internalize vision and values. Without credibility senior leaders may very well find it difficult to implement their vision and to sustain the support they need to maintain their organization.

Although these studies on Army senior leaders are limited, the few studies that were found do support the belief that the challenges of U.S. Army senior leaders are consistent with cognitive complexity theories of senior leadership. Senior Army leaders engaged in the type of complex work predicted by the model. These leaders also demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and attributes hypothesized by the model.

IMPLICATIONS

There appears to be little research done on the concept of credibility as well as the relationship between credibility and leader success. Further research should attempt to empirically establish the link between credibility and leader success. This research should be undertaken from the viewpoint of both external and internal constituents. Research involving external constituents should investigate the relationship between leader credibility and the ability of the leader to obtain support (either political, social, or fiscal) from external sources. Research concerning internal constituents could focus on senior leader credibility as evaluated by various levels within the organization to determine whether a senior leader can be perceived as credible across the organization. Such an effort would necessarily account for and explain the leader's ability to reconcile diverse expectations, his success in doing so, and the impact these efforts had on the organization.

Word Count: 4653

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