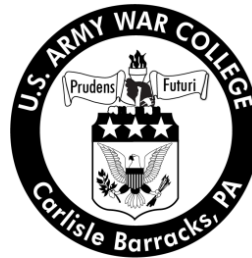# Improving the Leader Development Experience in Army Units

by

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Improving the Leader Development Experience in Army Units

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Abstract

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The Center for Army Leadership's 2011 annual assessment of attitudes and perceptions on leader development (CASAL) identified "Develops Others" as the lowest-rated leader competency for the fifth year in a row with just over half of Army leaders regarded as effective at developing others by their subordinates. The CASAL further revealed one fourth of those surveyed indicated their units placed a "low" or "very low" priority on leader development activities. Feedback also highlighted varying degrees of leader and subordinate understanding of their individual responsibilities as "givers" and "receivers" of leader development. These trends span multiple years and clearly illustrate a deficiency in the perceived effectiveness of Army efforts to "raise the next generation" in the eyes of its most important audience – today's junior leaders. The decade of attention and energy demanded by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has diluted the Army's knowledge and experience base of "what right looks like" in leader development domain. The Army must now seize the opportunity to improve the consistency and effectiveness of its unit-level leader development efforts to deliver capable leaders to the Army of 2020 and beyond.

Improving the Leader Development Experience in Army Units

The all-volunteer Army will draw down by nearly 15% over the next four years while the Nation concurrently makes difficult strategic choices defining the Army of 2020 and beyond. Faced with fiscal constraints and a challenging and unpredictable global environment, Army leaders seek the optimum balance between personnel, force structure, and readiness. Regardless of the outcome, the Nation will continue to rely heavily on the professionalism of the Army and the talent of its leaders. To maintain this trust and preserve this capability, the Army must continue its efforts to focus on the human dimension by refining and adapting its approach to developing leaders.

Recently, the Center for Army Leadership's annual assessment of attitudes and perceptions on leader development (CASAL) identified "Develops Others" as the lowest-rated leader competency for the fifth year in a row.[1] Just over half of Army leaders (59%) were regarded as effective at developing others by their subordinates.[2] The CASAL further revealed one fourth (22-26%) of those surveyed indicated their units placed a "low" or "very low" priority on leader development activities.[3] Feedback also highlighted varying degrees of leader and subordinate understanding of both what constituted leader development activities and programs as well as individual responsibilities as "givers" and "receivers" of leader development.[4] These trends span multiple years and clearly illustrate a deficiency in the perceived effectiveness of Army efforts to "raise the next generation" in the eyes of its most important audience – today's junior leaders. While the Army has enjoyed a stellar reputation for leader development for generations, the decade of attention and energy demanded by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has diluted our knowledge and experience base of "what right looks like." The Army must now seize the opportunity to improve the consistency and effectiveness

of its unit-level leader development efforts to deliver capable leaders to the Army of 2020 and beyond. This improvement is best achieved through a concerted effort to: 1) increase awareness and understanding about leader development as a *process* rather than an event; 2) train and educate battalion and brigade-level commanders on both the Army's expectations for them as key leader developers as well as fundamental approaches to enhance their success; and 3) expand senior leader accountability of unit-level leader development programs.

Leader Development: A Process not an Event

Army leader development is intended to occur across three complementary domains (institutional, operational, and self-development) through the lifelong synthesis of education, training, and experience.[5] Reaching a shared understanding of leader development is crucial to subordinates' ability to recognize it when it is happening and to leaders' ability to identify and leverage opportunities to integrate it with everyday activities. Leader development is not the outcome of a series of classes or the product of a sequence of assignments, nor is it the job of one person or organization. It is a continuous *process* intended to achieve incremental and progressive results over time.[6] The CASAL results suggest the lack of an integrated approach as one reason for lower effectiveness ratings as junior officers consider the various leader development activities as isolated events rather than part of an ongoing process of development.[7] As businesses wrestle with designing effective leader development programs, they commonly cite a patchwork of programs inadequately linked to one another as a persistent obstacle to their perceived effectiveness.[8] In its recently revised and published Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, the Army defines

leader development as "recruiting, accessing, developing, assigning, promoting, broadening, and retaining the best leaders, while challenging them over time with greater responsibility, authority and accountability."[9] This leader-driven *process* goes well beyond monthly professional development lectures, regular counseling sessions, an ideal combination/progression of assignments, or a two-hour block of instruction in an Army schoolhouse. Annual CASAL results over the past five years indicate subordinates may not always recognize leader development opportunities when they are happening and leaders may be missing or failing to adequately create or leverage key developmental opportunities.[10]

Reading different military and civilian leaders' opinions on leader development in contemporary literature and reflecting on my own experiences, I recall many instances when leader development *happened* to me. In some cases, I did not realize the true importance of various episodes – their long-term impact on my development as a leader – for months or even years later. For example, I recently came across a book given to me by a battalion commander I had when I was a lieutenant. As I pulled the book off the shelf, a few folded papers dropped to the floor. A handwritten note -- written more than three years after I had served with this officer -- explained why he sent me the book: "It's important for officers to read widely and be well-read. Nothing is more dangerous for our Army than creating an officer corps of 'bubbas.' It's critical for your generation to be prepared to accept the mantle of senior leadership when you get there and our job is to make you better than we were." The book's title and author are not as important as the act of this concerned senior leader who built on an existing relationship and made an effort to influence my continued development. His selfless personal

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gesture took forethought, vision, and follow-through – and demonstrated a desire to be actively engaged with raising the next generation to be ready to lead the Army of the future.

Similarly, I recall a conversation my brigade commander had with me while I was a young captain commanding one of his companies. He had just observed an After Action Review (AAR) covering the first three days of a Combat Training Center rotation. While the unit had accomplished a great deal, the AAR brought several areas for improvement to the surface. Noticing that I appeared a bit dejected afterwards, he pulled me aside and quickly recounted all the positive things he heard about our unit during the AAR and identified to me what a great opportunity we now had to work on those things we wanted to improve for the rest of the rotation. "Now, let's get to work," he said. With a quick slap on the back and a handshake, he was gone, but I will never forget that five-minute conversation and what it meant to me then and how it influenced similar conversations I have had with young leaders since. These two personal examples provide useful context to the discussion that follows and help illustrate opportunities for improvement.

It is important to understand that leader development often occurs when and where subordinates least expect it. It is the experienced and perceptive leader who sees an opportunity in the midst of a challenging set of circumstances or at a potential crossroads in a subordinate's career and seizes it. Neither of the formative experiences I related occurred during a professional development block of instruction or scheduled counseling session. Neither was formal or structured, yet both were effective and each influenced my thoughts and actions during crucial periods early in my career. Each

caused me to feel encouraged, challenged, inspired, and developed. Each was part of

a larger process which was not intuitively obvious to me at the time. Their impact on me

as a young leader was likely even more memorable because I perceived each as a

transformational versus purely *transactional* interchange.[11] In other words, they were

not just about what I could do for the leaders or the unit at the time -- accomplish the

next mission or get through the task at hand -- but instead, what each leader was also

doing in the moment to make me better for the long run. As important, each spawned

further one-on-one interaction, or mentorship, and contributed to a broader leader

development experience spanning two units, multiple duty positions, an Army school

attendance, and nearly eight years. Leaders who recognize and approach leader

development as a process are able to balance the long-term needs of the Army, the

near-term and career needs of their subordinates, and the immediate needs of their unit

missions to determine how and when to integrate leader development opportunities in

already-busy calendars and schedules.[12] Subordinates (developing leaders) gain the

greatest benefit when they understand and appreciate the broader process and are able

to learn and grow from each developmental experience thereby readying themselves to

accept greater responsibility when called upon.[13] Engaged leaders provide key context

throughout the process allowing instances like the two described above to be stitched

together, often by the one being developed, to make the leader development

experience more meaningful.

Creating Meaningful Developmental Experiences

Ask any successful leader to describe his or her most significant developmental

experiences and the result will undoubtedly resemble a list of memorable moments --

jobs, special assignments, interactions with peers, coaching from mentors, adverse

situations, significant emotional events, etc. One commonality between all experiences

is likely that each one taught the developing leaders something about themselves.

More importantly, this increased self-awareness almost certainly resulted in personal

growth and development based on a change the experience helped them first recognize

and then subsequently make to their leader behavior. Gaining a greater understanding

of what these high-growth experiences consist of and how they contribute to increased

self-awareness is therefore a useful endeavor.

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) suggests individual developmental

experiences are most powerful when they combine elements of assessment, challenge,

and support (See Figure 1).[14] Ideally then, the most impactful examples would include

Figure 1: Developmental Experiences Model
(Center for Creative Leadership)

an opportunity for some form of assessment or feedback regarding the leader's

strengths or skill in a particular area, a challenge or set of challenges that stretch

participants, and support for learning and progress before, during, and after.[15] These

formative experiences provide essential lessons often in an "on-the-job" context, but

always with a combination of challenging variables – time constraints, human conflict,

moral or ethical dilemmas, the reality of declining resources, etc. These "crucibles"

forge the development of leaders unlike anything they can experience in the classroom

or by reading a book. Similar to trials or tests that corner individuals and force them to make decisions about who they are and what is really important to them, crucibles come in all shapes and sizes.[16] Some might occur over months or years while others may run their course in just a few hours. Leaders can enrich any experience – a training program, an assignment, a relationship, or even a conversation, by ensuring the elements of assessment, challenge, and support, are present.[17] Maximum benefit occurs when subordinates are able to not just "survive" these experiences one after another, but rather when they can benefit from routine assessment and feedback and the opportunity to learn from and apply these lessons.

A common theme among many of today's leader development programs is to provide young leaders opportunities to learn HOW to think rather than merely learning WHAT to think. To this end, experiences seen to encourage innovation, ingenuity, initiative, and adaptability are generally viewed as not only worthwhile objectives for leader development activities, but also highly-desirable leader attributes. For the past several years, the Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) has focused on how to achieve adaptability as a training outcome. They assert it is possible to design training that enhances the adaptability of individuals and teams by introducing opportunities to test and demonstrate their confidence, practice decision making, practice innovative problem solving, and/or demonstrate initiative -- all with an awareness of accountability for their actions.[18] In AWG's two-week course, the Asymmetric Warfare Adaptive Leader Program (AWALP), instructors teach student leaders to design training "at the threshold of failure" in order to enhance adaptability and achieve maximum growth (See Figure 2).[19] Like the CCL model which calls for a challenging "stretch experience,"

AWG believes participants should come as close to failure as possible to achieve

maximum growth and learning. By adjusting scenario conditions and creating a "sweet

TRAINING AT THE THRESHOLD OF FAILURE

WHERE DEVELOPMENT
AND GROWTH HAPPENS

DESTRUCTIVE IMPACT
Impossible; can't succeed.
Out of control; unrealistic.

IDEALIZED REALM
OF TRAINING

ORDER   CHAOS

SIMPLICITY   COMPLEXITY

THRESHOLD OF FAILURE

NEGATIVE IMPACT
Boring; don't have to think.
You'll tell me what to do.
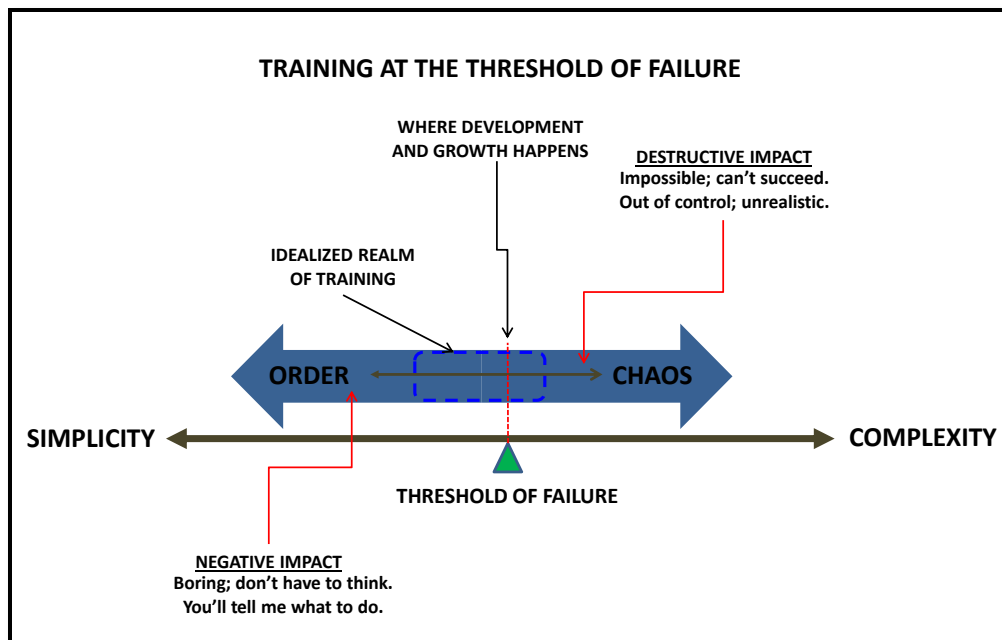
Figure 2: "Training at the Threshold of Failure" model
(Asymmetric Warfare Adaptive Leader Program)

spot" between order and chaos and simplicity and complexity, leaders can modify the

experience to better align it with the competence and/or developmental needs of the

individual or group.[20] Busy training calendars and pre-deployment timelines can force

training conditions to one side or the other of the "idealized realm of training" depicted in

Figure 2. Training conditions that provide few opportunities for subordinates to exercise

initiative, overcome adversity, consider innovative solutions, or taste failure may not

achieve maximum growth and are not likely to become a crucible experience for most

participants. Conversely, attempting to accomplish too many training objectives in one

exercise, failing to properly gauge the readiness of units and leaders to accomplish

certain tasks, or providing inadequate support and guidance during execution will likely

have a destructive impact.

Integrating Developmental Experiences into a Systematic Approach

No matter how well-designed or robust an individual developmental experience or crucible might be, no single event achieves complete development.[21] Development is most effective when lessons from one experience can be linked to, and ideally reinforced by, other experiences. Behavioral change typically occurs gradually, as developmental experiences are linked to one another in the context of a larger, continuous process.[22] Leaders can create a systematic approach to progressive development by exposing subordinates to a variety of experiences over time within an organizational context (See Figure 3).[23] A key aspect of this approach is the recognition
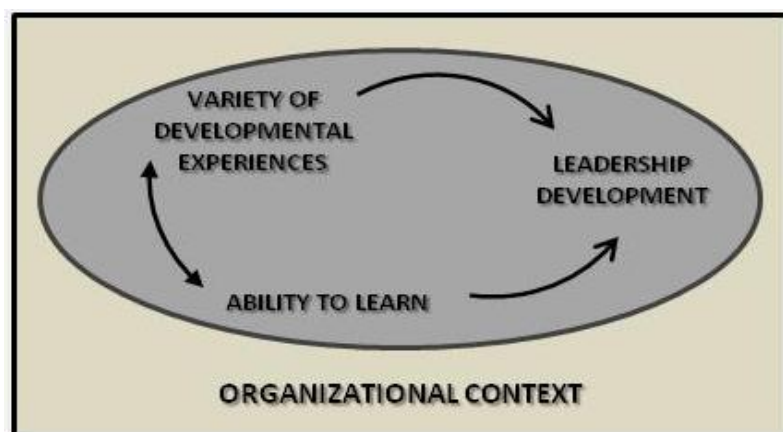
Figure 3: The Development Process
(Center for Creative Leadership)

that people do not all develop in the same way. Some individuals can learn different things from the same experience, and some may assimilate key lessons more readily than others.[24] Engaged and perceptive leaders recognize these differences in individual progress and incorporate them into the feedback they provide and the design and timing of subsequent developmental experiences. While the Army offers numerous potential development opportunities, the ultimate objective, and most important job for

leaders, is creating and aligning these experiences most effectively based on the individual needs of their subordinates.

Leading to Develop: A Transformational vs. solely Transactional Approach

While commanding a battalion, I recall describing an effective leader as one who "dealt with people and solved problems" better than his or her peers. Furthermore, I believed a successful leader had to demonstrate skill in "determining what was important and then seeing that it got done." While I still agree with these relatively simple principles, I now recognize them as incomplete because they address only the transactional nature of effective leadership. Incorporating the transformational aspect adds a longer-term view and emphasizes individual development as a key part of task accomplishment. As leaders mature, they must recognize their role not only in *managing* human capital to accomplish the mission (the transactional component), but also in *cultivating and enriching* that human capital to make it more valuable in accomplishing the missions of the future (the transformational component). Retired Lieutenant General Walt Ulmer Jr., a respected authority on leadership and leader development in both military and civilian circles, describes transformational leadership as applying the "enlightened use of inspiration, communication, and understanding of human behavior to motivate subordinates to achieve more than could ordinarily be expected."[25] At their best, transformational leaders go well beyond the transaction of task accomplishment and convert their followers into leaders themselves by making them feel valued, helping them understand and find meaning in their contributions, and fostering a sense of ownership in the bigger picture of what the organization is doing.[26] Leaders successful in applying this approach are more effective at converting the

lessons of crucible events into truly transformational experiences that result in growth and improved performance over time.[27]

As leaders identify opportunities to integrate leader development lessons across the full range of unit-level activities, they soon realize many of the lessons can be viewed as "teachable moments." Respected leader development advocate and prominent author, Noel Tichy, believes that leaders who approach every meeting, every training event, every job assignment, and every decision with developing others in mind will find teaching and leading to be strongly linked.[28] Tichy further emphasizes this connection by declaring that "for winning leaders, teaching is not a now-and-then sideline activity. It is *how* they lead and at the heart of everything they do."[29] The result is that leader development may not be something one can see on a calendar or even log the number of hours devoted to it in a given day or week. Instead, leader development permeates the very culture of a unit; embedded in all aspects of how the unit and its leaders approach accomplishing their missions.   In the very best units, every day is "leader development day."

Reducing the Disparity between Leader Development Experiences in Units

The consensus among private sector leader development professionals is that 70% of leader development occurs on the job, 20% is the result of their interactions with other people (peers, mentors), and 10% comes from training courses.[30] Similarly, Army leaders spend the majority of their time, 70-80% of a typical career, in units and consistently refer to the experience they gain in the operational domain as most effective in contributing to their development as leaders.[31] A 2008 study conducted by Rand's Arroyo Center (*Leader Development in Army Units: Views from the Field*)

surveyed over 450 officers (Captain - Colonel) from several Captains' Career Courses, the Command and General Staff College, the National Training Center, the Army War College, and the National Defense University and focused its inquiries on leader development activities in the officers' last operational unit.[32] Officer feedback indicated a wide disparity between individual leader development experiences -- from excellent to non-existent.[33] While the RAND Arroyo team found ample evidence of unit-level leader development activities, there was "no set of activities they could characterize as a standard or typical leader development program."[34] Experiences differed not only between units, but also within units and were based primarily on the attitude, capability, and approach of the commander (primarily battalion/squadron level).[35] Noting this variation, the study concluded that while a "one-size-fits-all" approach to unit-level leader development was not practical or prudent, the unit commander clearly set the tone, developed and shepherded the program, and was most responsible for its perceived effectiveness.[36] Yet study results and junior leader feedback clearly illustrate a wide range in commanders' ability to design, implement, and execute programs and activities that sufficiently stimulate and encourage subordinates. From understanding the broad approach of a good program, to acknowledging the scope of their responsibilities to design, monitor and assess the experiential learning within their organizations, leaders from Captain through Colonel demonstrated a wide range of awareness and abilities.[37] Recent CASAL trends reinforced the Rand findings with many commanders expressing difficulties in implementing leader development programs, specifically needing help prioritizing, fostering, and supporting leader development initiatives in their units.[38] Further highlighting the lack of consistency in

both programs and results, CASAL recommendations stated commanders could benefit from knowing "what right looks like" in terms of designing and implementing a unit-level leader development program.[39] The implication is not that the Army's process for selecting battalion and brigade-level commanders is flawed, but instead that merely being a good leader does not necessarily make one a good leader developer.

Leaders are the product of their experiences. Most commanders rely heavily on superiors, mentors, and peers to help shape their leader behavior and draw primarily upon their past leader development experiences -- both positive and negative -- as they design and execute their own programs.[40] However, given the disparity in the effectiveness of unit programs and the developmental abilities of the commanders who lead them, there is value in attempting to raise awareness and improve results through increased training and education. While informal interaction amongst senior leaders governs this process today, time and energy invested in a more structured process could conceivably raise both leader confidence and the perceived effectiveness among subordinates. From understanding what meaningful development experiences consist of to recognizing the value of connecting these events in the broad context of a unit-level program, the Army could leverage this opportunity to ensure its future commanders understand their pivotal role and inherent responsibilities in leader development. Facilitating this professional dialogue and nesting it with current pre-command course instruction would allow the Army to give its soon-to-be commanders a better appreciation for the "science" of leader development and better prepare them to immediately apply the "art" upon assuming command.   For example, without necessarily prescribing a single solution, products like the one in Figure 4 could guide a

discussion on the holistic or campaign-like approach to unit-level leader development

given the 24-36 month tour of a typical junior officer. By illustrating the breadth, depth,

Figure 4: Example Unit-Level Leader Development Program

and interconnectedness of potential developmental experiences, commanders could

begin to envision what their own programs might look like given unit-specific conditions

and variables. Additional discussions could showcase products like the Commander's

Handbook for Unit Leader Development and the recently-published Leader

Development Improvement Guide, both developed by the Center for Army Leadership

to address deficiencies noted in recent CASALs. Simple exercises highlighting their

intended purpose and usefulness would expand commanders' developmental tool kits.

Expanding on a CASAL recommendation, commanders could also gain a better appreciation for the capability and flexibility of the Army's Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) system during this structured dialogue. More than just a tool for 360-degree feedback for individuals, MSAF can be used to design a unit-level feedback event useful to gain insight into the aggregate strengths and developmental needs of a particular leader audience (by rank or position, for example) and therefore focus leader development activities.[41] Coaching future battalion and brigade-level commanders on "what right looks like" with respect to these and other leader development approaches while resourcing them with knowledge, tools, and assistance from subject-matter experts can help our talented leaders become better leader developers and consequently raise the average leader development experience in units.[42]

The Role of Accountability and Enhancing its Effectiveness

Fundamental leadership doctrine declares that a lack of true accountability often results in less effective or consistent results and frustrated or dissatisfied leaders and followers.[43] A 2001 review of industry best practices in leadership development by the Army Research Institute (ARI) acknowledged that the "presence of an influential champion" appeared to be the most important principle in successful leadership development efforts.[44] Soldiers do what leaders check -- and junior leaders do what senior leaders check. While all senior leaders arguably understand the importance of leader development as well as their responsibility to develop their subordinates, expanded senior leader accountability can reduce inconsistencies across units. This *accountability* can take on many forms: guidance, emphasis, personal example, spot-checks, rewards and recognition, allocation of resources, empowering junior leaders to

plan and conduct training, the active sharing of best practices, etc. However, it must go beyond merely establishing a positive command climate and stating that leader development is important.

A key form of senior leader support for leader development is their personal example demonstrated by developing their own subordinates and holding their subordinates accountable for doing the same.[45] Through their actions rather than merely words, senior leaders must convince their subordinates that developing leaders is good for them in the short and long term and that creating a system of leaders developing leaders is best for the organization as well as the Army.[46] Additionally, senior leaders must consider innovative ways to measure and reward their subordinates' true contribution to developing leaders for the future. As important, and perhaps more difficult, senior leaders must influence the behavior of those leaders seen as not adequately contributing to the development of their subordinates. Jack Welch, former Chief Executive Officer of General Electric, had trouble getting his subordinate leaders to share his passion for leader development until he started stripping power from those who did not do so.[47] When considering individual leaders for promotion, Ford Motor Company now requires prospective leaders to declare which of their subordinates they have developed sufficiently to assume their position before they themselves are fully considered for promotion.[48]

Based on the Army's long-term, process-centric approach to leader development, evaluating the true impact of present day programs and activities is often difficult. Ideally, a battalion commander's investment in developing his lieutenants would be measured by how many of them became battalion commanders themselves a decade

later. Similarly, a brigade commander's impact on raising the next generation of field grade officers would be at least partially measured by the percentage of captains serving under his or her leadership who elected to leave the Army before being promoted to major. Obviously, senior leaders cannot wait for downstream indicators like these, but with a long-term view in mind, the personal example they set, the questions they ask, the things they check, and the feedback they give on subordinate unit leader development programs and activities can have valuable impacts today. For example, a division commander could both assess and influence brigade and battalion commander emphasis on one aspect of leader development by asking his personnel officer (G1) to tell him how many captains and majors across the division's subordinate units were headed to recognized broadening assignments after their key and developmental time. Likewise, senior leaders might spend less time observing the actual execution of a particular training exercise and more time examining how the leaders attempted to shape the outcome of the event through leader training beforehand; by coaching the importance of well-constructed, leader-driven After-Action Reviews (AARs); or by ensuring leaders dedicated adequate time to retraining. Their demonstrated interest and focused curiosity alone speak volumes and over time communicate a consistent desire to instill a leader development culture across their organization.

It is not hard to imagine how these and other related leader behaviors would expand accountability and result in subordinate commanders thinking more broadly about how they are developing the various audiences of junior leaders under their care. The well-known studies on division-level leadership conducted in 2004 and 2010

underscore how quickly a division commander's behavior, preferences, and priorities become known down to battalion and lower levels.[49] Some might view these techniques as simply good leadership, but results from both the Rand and CASAL studies clearly illustrate inconsistency across the Army and therefore an opportunity for improvement.[50]

Leader Development: Cultivating Human Capital for the Army of 2020 and Beyond

Over the past decade, Army leaders have performed superbly while fighting two wars under a demanding operational tempo.[51] Countless examples of valor, integrity, fortitude, and compassion illustrate the talent, depth, and versatility of Army leaders at all levels, but we must not rest on our laurels. As today's leaders ready the next generation to lead the Army of 2020 and beyond, the Army must leverage doctrine and the capability still resident in the force to improve the consistency and results of unit-level leader development efforts. This crucial endeavor must go beyond merely reinvigorating efforts to ensure the Army continues to develop quality leaders at all levels. More completely, it must be about training great Army leaders to also be great leader developers and fostering an organizational culture where the next generation sees it as a primary responsibility, indeed a duty of theirs, to develop the generation behind them. By increasing awareness of the *process* of leader development, training and educating commanders to better understand the art and science of designing and executing first-rate leader development programs, and enhancing senior leader accountability of unit-level leader development activities, the Army can improve the quality and consistency of leader development in units ensuring the greatest number of future leaders reap the benefits of a comprehensive and coherent leader development experience.

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