

# Army Leader Development and Leadership

## Views from the Field

Ryan M. Hinds and John P. Steele, Ph.D.



THE CENTER FOR Army Leadership (CAL) Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) assesses and tracks trends in Army leader attitudes, leader development, quality of leadership, and the contribution of leadership to mission accomplishment. Over 100 questions cover topics on the quality of leadership and leader development. The results of the 2010 CASAL are summarized here in three main sections: leader development, effects of character and climate on leadership, and professional military education (PME) in leader development.<sup>1</sup>

The CASAL provides research guidance for policy decisions and program development. It is an authoritative source that uses a large, random representative sample and a rigorous scientific approach for survey development, data collection, and data analysis, and it calibrates its findings with other Army research. Data was collected online from a representative sample of over 22,000 Regular Army, Army Reserve, and Army National Guard officers (second lieutenant to colonel), warrant officers (chief warrant officer five), and noncommissioned officers (sergeant to command sergeant major).

Approximately 22,500 Army leaders participated, with a response rate of 16.1 percent. The large, random representative sample, combined with comparisons with other Army research, allows for high confidence in the accuracy of these findings. Responses are both quantitative and qualitative.

### Leader Development

Trend data indicates that Army leaders are lacking in developing their subordinates for future leadership roles. Data collected from 2006 to 2010 consistently show that *Develops Others* is the lowest rated Army Leader Core Competency. A two-thirds favorability rating has been established in research as a threshold for acceptability. Since 2006, no more than 61 percent of active duty Army leaders have rated *Develops Others* favorably.<sup>2</sup> While this competency has improved in the last several years, it is still well below the acceptability threshold and rated much lower than all other core competencies.

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PHOTO: U.S. Army CPT Nick Franck, a representative of the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, navigates to a point as a part of the U.S. Army Europe Best Junior Officer Competition in Grafenwoehr, Germany, 16 November 2011. (Master SGT Robert Hyatt, U.S. Army)

This area is important because it affects both current and future generations of leaders. Those leaders who are currently not being properly developed by their superiors will not know how to properly develop others in the future.

The lack of leader development is not limited to just superiors' demonstration of the competency. In fact, the CASAL examined leader development from several angles, including leader development within units as well as development through professional military education courses. When asked what level of priority their unit placed on leader development within the unit, only 46 percent of Active Component (AC) leaders indicated it was a high or very high priority while 24 percent indicated that it was low or very low. This is the lowest level of perceived priority reported on the CASAL.

When asked how effective their direct superior was at calling attention to leader development opportunities, only 59 percent of those surveyed responded that their superior was effective or very effective. In fact, just 49 percent indicated that their superior would support their attendance at institutional training if it required that they miss a key unit event, and 33 percent were convinced that their superior would not support their attendance. This indicates a breakdown beyond firsthand leader development and shows that, to a large degree, leaders are also not helping their subordinates to develop through other sources. Perceptions of poor leader development affect beliefs in commitment to the Army and trust in the Army as an institution. Of those who indicated that they did not believe that the Army was headed in the right direction to face the challenges of the next 10 years, 26 percent indicated that this was because of the poor quality of current Army unit leader development.

Changing the culture of the Army with regard to leader development may be difficult given the currently high OPTEMPO. The strains of fighting two wars for a decade have taken their toll on leader development. According to the Profession of Arms

campaign senior leader cohort survey, 64 percent of the colonels and general officers surveyed indicated that leader development was not taking place due to OPTEMPO time demands and other work. When asked how this problem could be fixed, the respondents most often recommended having more time dedicated solely to leadership development and prioritizing leader development by adding it into the OER process.<sup>3</sup>

Simply allotting more time for leaders to perform leader development is not the solution. If we do not make leader development a priority in units, then the extra time will just be used to complete tasks that are of higher priority.

While making leader development a priority through adding it to the OER process seems like a quick fix, it is not. If leader development is a requirement for promotion, it should be assessed through consistent field observation and scaled so that each leader would be rated for similar leader development actions. This is easier said than done.

## Effects of Character and Command Climate on Leadership

Another issue identified by CASAL data is toxic leadership. Toxic leaders are those self-absorbed and self-promoting leaders who work to meet their own personal goals and the goals of the organization at the expense of their subordinates. While there are many definitions of toxic leadership, there are consistencies. Common behaviors among toxic leaders include avoiding subordinates, denigrating subordinates, hoarding information and job tasks, micromanaging, and acting aggressively toward or intimidating others. We estimate that, based on several CASAL data points, one leader in five is viewed negatively for—

- Not putting unit needs ahead of his own (22%).
- Being “a real jerk” (25%).
- Doing things and behaving in a way that is positive for the organization and himself, but negative for subordinates (18%).
- Doing things and behaving in a way that is

***This indicates a breakdown beyond firsthand leader development and shows that, to a large degree, leaders are also not helping their subordinates to develop through other sources.***

negative for the organization, himself, and subordinates (5%).

- Holding honest mistakes against the unit (2%).

When asked to estimate how big of a problem toxic leadership is in the military on a scale of one to seven, 39 percent of leaders responded six or seven, indicating a serious problem, while only 13 percent responded with one or two, indicating it was not a problem. Furthermore, 83 percent of leaders indicate that they have observed one or more leaders exhibiting negative behaviors in the last year, and 17 percent indicated seeing five or more. Unfortunately, there is no indication that this issue with toxic leadership will correct itself. Promotion of toxic leaders along with lack of negative feedback from subordinates, as well as their willingness to emulate toxic leaders, creates a cycle of toxicity that is not easily broken.

The cycle is due to several factors. The first is the paradox of tyrannical leadership, which states that subordinates who work for a toxic leader tend to be more productive due to fear of reprisals. This increase in productivity then reflects well upon the

leaders, bringing accolades and even promotion. In this instance, such individual and organizational responses reinforce the negative behaviors. Consequently, the leaders continue to engage in them and the cycle continues. Another reason that toxic leadership continues without intervention is that in the current Army culture most subordinates are unwilling to speak out against leaders that behave in such a manner.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the success of superiors who are toxic reinforces the message to their subordinates that this is what the path to success looks like. Unfortunately, 50 percent of those subordinates who indicated they worked for a toxic leader expected him to receive further promotion, and 18 percent indicated that they would still emulate him.

Toxic leadership negatively affects command climate. Toxic leaders often promote zero-defect mentalities and hold honest mistakes of subordinates against them. As stated earlier, 24 percent of leaders believe that honest mistakes are held against them. This leads to a zero-defect mentality, which causes many to believe that they should not be creative or attempt to discover novel solutions because they will be punished if the chance they take does not work.



(SPC Michael Vanpool, U.S. Army)

**U.S. Army 1LT Krystal Hertenstein helps recover a mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle from a mire pit during the brigade's leadership professional development course at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, 11 June 2011.**



Thirty percent of respondents indicated that they believe their unit has a zero-defect mentality. An additional side effect of the zero-defect mentality is it may deter leaders from seeking help because they feel this may get them into trouble. Only 55 percent of leaders indicated that seeking help within their unit was acceptable.

There are several things the Army can do to help to alleviate issues with toxic leadership. First, cultivating a climate in which we allow subordinates to evaluate their superiors honestly without fear of reprisal is essential. This will require a break from the tradition of superiors reviewing leaders in a top-down fashion. Open criticism of superiors by subordinates is not a realistic solution. Instead, programs such as the Army's multisource assessment and feedback (MSAF), which allow leaders to receive 360 degree (i.e., self, superior, subordinate, and peer) feedback, will help leaders to see how they are viewed by those they work with rather than just by those they work for. The MSAF process also allows leaders to openly and honestly evaluate themselves and reflect on the evaluations of others. Further, it provides individualized coaching on how to improve as a leader, based on superior, subordinate, and peer feedback. This process may not work for all leaders who are perceived as toxic, because some will know that they are toxic and will not care to change, but it should work to change the behaviors of those leaders who were unaware that they were perceived as toxic to begin with and do desire to be positive leaders.

Another potential solution to the toxic leadership problem is to implement a systemic change in identification and selection of leaders. To do this, the Army must first examine its screening and promotion processes, effectively preventing them from gaining leadership positions.

## **Professional Military Education in Leader Development**

A third key concern suggested by CASAL data is the state of professional military education. According to the Army Leader Development Model, leader development should happen across three overlapping domains: operational experience, self-development, and institutional training.<sup>5</sup> Operational experience and self-development have

***Even though self-development is seen as important...only 40 percent of leaders agree that their unit allows them time to do so.***

consistently been rated high in their ability to prepare leaders for future leadership roles. Even though self-development is seen as important, 65 percent of leaders indicate that their unit expects them to engage in self-development, but only 40 percent of leaders agree that their unit allows them time to do so. Thus, there is a clear gap between value and unit support. A larger gap exists between operational experience and self- versus military-directed education. Military education is based on an organized, time-tested, professionally accepted and shared knowledge base intended to apply to many situations. Capitalizing on operational experience requires feedback and careful planning, in order to ensure practice makes perfect, instead of practice reinforcing negatives or aligning with arbitrary goals and idiosyncratic leader desires. If the Army is to improve leader development by offering purposeful and doctrinally aligned guidance then it is critical that the military education domain improve. Unfortunately, only 49 percent responded that their most recent professional military education course actually improved their ability to develop subordinates.

Institutional education has a 58 percent favorability rating, a 9 percent increase from 2009, and is perceived as having the following strengths:

- Proper career timing, with the exception of junior NCOs.
- Quality of instructors (80% favorability rating, 5% increase from 2009).
- Seventy-one percent AC and 79 percent RC consider attendance at Army institutional courses as beneficial beyond meeting education requirements.
- Effective application of lessons. The majority of leaders (67%) think that they are effective at applying what they learned.

Unfortunately, institutional education has many perceived weaknesses as well, and they offset the aforementioned strengths:

- Too few (about 50%) company grade officers and junior NCOs believe that they had sufficient opportunities to attend courses or schools.

- Many junior NCOs (40%) said they attended their most recent course too late in their career.

- Two-thirds of graduates think that they are effective at applying what they learned, while less than one-half (48%) believe that their organization is effective at utilizing or supporting their leadership skills.

- Nineteen percent of all AC recent graduates think that current Army education/schools are so ineffective that the Army will not be prepared to meet future challenges.

- Only a slim majority of graduates (51%) thought that the course actually improved their leadership capabilities.

Colonels, lieutenant colonels, and chief warrant fives were also surveyed about what skills were lacking for recent graduates. The most common response was “appropriate critical thinking and problem solving skills.” When asked about potential improvements, students who found their course ineffective said the course should make leadership

a focus and cover specific leadership issues. About a third of the sample suggested improving course content by having focused instruction specific to leadership, including basic leadership skills and specific leadership issues such as developing others and mentoring. Comments also suggested that courses should provide more hands-on experiences where leaders could lead others in the course and course content should be updated to be relevant and match current operational settings.

The curricula of for professional military education courses should be reevaluated to ensure it is relevant to the demands leaders face in day-to-day activities. Although a large portion of leaders (32 to 43 percent depending on deployment status and history) do not believe course content is relevant or up-to-date, an examination of the program of instruction by recent course graduates would ensure that the content targets leaders’ knowledge and skills. If the curriculum is on track, the process in which we deliver the content to leaders would then become the most likely reason that leaders are not learning the skills they need to be effective.



(SGT Angelica Golindano, U.S. Army)

**GEN Martin E. Dempsey, commanding general of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, addresses field-grade officers' current issues in hopes of enhancing the professional military education at Joint and Combined Warfighting School, Norfolk, VA, 16 July 2010.**

## Conclusion

The main issues identified in this paper relate to the lack of leader development of subordinates. We could overcome lack of leader development of subordinates if professional military education properly taught this topic, but the CASAL respondents do not believe it does. Disappointingly, only half of the respondents felt that they were better able to influence others, or were better prepared to develop others, or that the course actually improved their leadership abilities.

Furthermore, we might overcome lack of leader development if subordinates had strong positive leaders to emulate, but data on toxic leadership indicate that this is not always the case. With 1 in 5 leaders viewed negatively, and 83 percent of respondents indicating that they have directly observed a toxic leader in the last year, it would seem that a large percentage of soldiers should not emulate the leaders around them.

So what can we do to correct this problem? As stated earlier, changing the culture within the Army to make leader development a priority is an important first step. Some sort of incentive for engaging in leader development might make it likely for this to happen. Nearly all of the hundreds of leader priorities have some sort of consequence for not completing them. If leader development is to become a priority, there must be consequences for those leaders who do not develop their subordinates. Furthermore, we need an organizational vision that makes leader development a priority in the unit. This will require a top-down promotion of leader

development in units, with commanders integrating leader development into their vision for the organization and making it part of their measure of success. As this occurs, leaders must go beyond developing their subordinates. They should *exemplify* an attitude which exalts subordinate development and use *self-promotion* (demonstrating competence and sharing accomplishments) to communicate the different developmental opportunities provided in briefings, trainings, and during counseling. These two strategies can resolve perceptual deficiencies (i.e., a subordinate does not always realize when he is being developed) and benefit learning by reminding the subordinate that development is occurring and that he should be taking something away from the experience.<sup>6</sup> In short, leaders need to make it clear when their actions are meant to develop the subordinate.

In the meantime, we must improve leader development in professional military education. Leaders currently do not believe that the professional military education system is effectively preparing them to influence others or develop others as leaders, and that's a problem because that is the heart of what Army leadership *is*.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, efforts should be made to identify and remove negative leaders in the Army. These leaders not only bring down morale and increase turnover, but also provide bad examples for subordinates to emulate. Programs that incorporate 360-degree feedback will allow leaders to see how all those around them view them and adjust their behaviors to improve their leadership abilities. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. Note that what follows are subjective perceptions and not test results of knowledge and skills. That being said, the data are important because perceptions affect behavior, and ultimately, mission accomplishment. Percentages denote favorability unless otherwise stated.

2. All data unless otherwise indicated come from CASAL surveys, 2006-2010.

3. Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, (2011), Profession of Arms Campaign, senior leader cohort survey, unpublished raw data.

4. Sean T. Hannah, Donald J. Campbell, and Michael D. Matthews, "Advancing a Research Agenda for Leadership in Dangerous Contexts," *Military Psychology*

(2010): 157-89.

5. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Training Units and Developing Leaders for Full Spectrum Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 2011).

6. E.E. Jones and T.S. Pittman, "Toward a General Theory of Strategic Self-presentation," in Jerry M. Suls, ed., *Psychological Perspective on the Self* (Vol. 1) (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1982), 231-62.

7. Department of the Army, FM 6-22, *Army Leadership: Competent, Confident, and Agile* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006).

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