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The Army's New Senior Leadership Doctrine

WALTER F. ULMER, JR.

Leadership and Command at Senior Levels. US Department of the Army Field Manual 22-103. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1987.

Executive Leadership. US Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-80. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1987.

As we approach the 21st century one can justly describe our Army as mission-oriented, professionally dedicated, populated by enthusiastic soldiers, organizationally complex, tactically sophisticated, technologically aware, turbulently busy, marginally funded, structurally undermanned, and—yes—unevenly led. In analyzing our capabilities, we confront two fundamental questions: first, is our Army as good as it needs to be; and second, is it as good as it really can be? To be more specific: given constraints of personnel strength and budget, are we organized and are we leading to take maximum advantage of available resources? For the purpose of reviewing FM 22-103 and DA Pamphlet 600-80, two important new publications, let's focus on the leadership part of the question.

It is strange that although our Army has devoted enormous efforts toward leadership development, it remains unable or unwilling to articulate and adopt a meaningful leadership model that applies to senior leaders. It is for this reason that recent efforts to conceptualize about the operational level of war may be doubly beneficial, opening up for scrutiny the unique demands of senior combat leadership as well as the intricacies of high-level tactics. Both FM 22-103 and DA Pamphlet 600-80 highlight the special skills and insights required for leaders at brigade and higher levels.

If there is one thing in need of repair within the crucial human domain of the Army, it is that decisive but murky element known as "organizational climate." Climate, like leadership, is more easily felt than defined. Climate represents the collective impact of policies, expectations, priorities, operating values, management techniques, and leadership styles on motivation to get the job done right. FM 22-103 defines climate as "the shared feeling, a perception among members of a unit about what life is

like.” Climate relates closely to trust and confidence in the ultimate fairness and rationality of the larger organization. (If we go beyond the organizational climate and add the collective, accepted, and traditional institutional values and societal underpinnings as developed over time, then we get into the larger domain of the Army’s institutional culture.) Command climate (or even culture) is relevant here because senior leaders shape the climate through both direct and indirect application of their leadership.

The organizational climates in our Army vary widely. Some are remarkable for their support of constructive training, open communications, prudent innovation, mutual trust, and high confidence in unit capability. We have brigades and divisions perceived by officers therein as first-class in any league—even if undermanned and overcommitted. Also out there today are organizations apparently untouched by the care and consideration of thoughtful top leadership. Their climates are the products of a tangle of conflicting policies and priorities unleashed on the troops in an untrusting, insensitive way, turning an already demanding daily routine into an erratic, disjointed maze of uncertain priorities, competing requirements, and unmet expectations. This situation is not unique to the military. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus note in *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (1985) that “a chronic crisis of governance—that is, the pervasive incapacity of organizations to cope with the expectations of their constituents—is now an overwhelming factor worldwide.”

If the significant incidence of unhealthy command climates—in which solid junior leaders are “turned off on the Army”—is not enough to cause serious concern (“After all, you can’t make an omelet without breaking some eggs!”), then another flood of data about command climate should grab our attention. Specifically, we have good indicators from both objective data (number of targets killed, number of mechanical breakdowns, number of preventable injuries, etc.) and anecdotal evidence (tactical competence as reported by exercise observer-controllers) showing a high positive correlation between the state of organizational climate and unit effectiveness at the National Training Center. Further, a 1987 Army Research Institute study links the lowered state of command climate of an organization with decline of soldier values among first-termers.

Another salient feature of today’s Army is the rapid and dramatic change of climates in some large units when senior leadership is reassigned.

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Too often the organization and its people are whipsawed by fundamental changes in leadership concepts and methods. These are not modest changes, stemming from understandable differences in leadership tone and style. Rather, they reflect fundamental differences in senior leaders' concepts of trust, personal priorities, empowerment, assessment of unit effectiveness, and basic understanding of the impact of their behavior. Except in the unique cases of demoralized units, drastic changes of climate should be unacceptable because of the attendant costs in tactical proficiency and human motivation. The ebb and flow of climate over time leave enduring imprints which collectively influence the Army's culture.

Extremes of climate persist despite opportunities within the officer corps for cross-fertilization and socialization through wide-ranging (perhaps excessive) mobility, despite the centralized promotion process, and despite the most comprehensive continuing education system in America. With the phenomenon of multiple climates within the same traditional culture now clearly established, we need to investigate the source of this potentially remediable dysfunction. The source can be found, I believe, in our lack—heretofore, at least—of a senior leadership doctrine.

The dramatic differences in units as revealed at the National Training Center and reported by students at the Command and General Staff College and the Army War College should alone justify the nascent interest in leadership at senior levels which FM 22-103 and DA Pamphlet 600-80 reflect. If nothing else results from these two publications—both representing herculean efforts in attacking a tough subject—they should prompt a high-level discussion of where we are in the business of selecting, developing, educating, assigning, and monitoring our senior leaders.

As proximate causes of the persistent phenomenon of erratic, uneven leadership, there are three possibilities. One is that we have a perennial crop of colonels and generals who don't really care about creating organizational climates that focus on combat readiness and the long-term development of an officer corps in which candor, courage, competence, and commitment abound. This possibility is somewhat plausible because there is always a group of utterly self-serving officers of unreined ambition—those who are happy to initiate any new project irrespective of its adverse longterm effects just so long as it looks and sounds good now. However, the overall character of today's Army could not possibly be as sound as it is if the top echelon were typically weak in the basic soldierly virtues.

A second possibility is that our senior leadership, while mostly solid, has a good share of well-intentioned non-leaders who cannot—by virtue of their personality, limited capacity for trust, lack of self-confidence, or improper definition of success—perform at the executive level. This seems to be confirmed by Army-wide surveys which repeatedly depict significant numbers of seniors as self-protecting, untrusting, and overly

managerial. The highly respected 1985 Professional Development of Officers Study, among others, revealed significant misgivings within the ranks concerning the leadership style of some senior officers and the health of the command climate in some units. The solution to the problem of the well-intentioned non-leader may be a refinement of our evaluation system through some form of leadership assessment by the led. This would supplement the present exclusively top-down system, which has not been sufficiently effective in weeding out non-leaders. Neither FM 22-103 nor DA Pamphlet 600-80 adequately addresses the crucial role those in the highest ranks must play in designing and implementing more reliable systems for precluding non-leaders from being thrust into critical leadership roles.

Yet a third possible source of unhealthy or deteriorating command climates is simply the lack of finely honed skills among senior officers in diagnosing, creating, and maintaining the necessary climate for sustained excellence. It is mostly and appropriately to this possibility that the two publications address themselves. Our Army's interest in the role of seniors in climate-building, reflected in the field manual and the pamphlet, couldn't have emerged at a better time.

FM 22-103 starts from the useful premise that leadership is a critical element of combat power. We have always assumed the truth of this premise (which, incidentally, is amply supported by recent studies ranging from the latest Israeli wars to exercises at the National Training Center), but we have never rigorously acted upon it because of our pronounced reluctance to measure the leadership proficiency of our senior officers. We attempt some measuring, of course; we fire people who fail conspicuously on the battle-success or integrity scales. However, we tolerate an enormous range of command and control styles even as we attempt to lend some consistency to our concepts of AirLand Battle doctrine.

FM 22-103 has three stated purposes: to assist in professional development; to "provide a ready resource for those already serving in senior positions"; and to "serve as a common reference point for the many ongoing initiatives related to leadership and command at large-unit level." It aims to be "complementary" to FM 22-100, *Military Leadership* (1983), but recognizes "the separate need to address indirect leadership concepts and fundamentals critical to building organizational teams." FM 22-103 makes a good case for the need for a separate look at the challenges facing leaders in senior positions. In the very beginning, however, it fails to distinguish between "leadership" and "command" at senior levels. The difference between "leadership" (the art and process of influencing and motivating) and "command" (the exercise of authority by a responsible officer) is one of several points needing greater clarification if FM 22-103 is to assume a place of importance on the bookshelves of teachers and practitioners. The impact of FM 22-103 is further weakened by a style that from the start repeats all the clichés of officership, restates the obvious ("Success

on the AirLand battlefield will depend on the combined effect of many teams, units, and organizations”), and insists on a present tense which describes the desired result as though it already exists universally (“Senior leaders have an unshakable belief in their own technical competence”). The preachy, moralizing tone is bound to keep some readers from moving much past the first chapter—which would be too bad, for there is very good stuff scattered among these pages. Perhaps the unevenness is inevitable in an ambitious first effort such as this, but FM 22-103 needs a more concise and rigorous general thesis. The major headings of vision, ethics, skills, command processes, organizational structure, and leaders in action all make sense, as do the helpful appendices. DA Pamphlet 600-80 has greater organizational clarity, although it could also benefit from additional explanation of its underlying concepts. More time is needed to educate readers on “frames of reference,” “value added by executives,” and “cascading translation process”—all essential concepts which the pamphlet introduces and which should become part of a senior leader’s standard vocabulary.

A strength of FM 22-103 is the introduction of some specific challenges that have not been isolated and targeted in earlier leadership manuals. “Implementing the vision” is a mainstay of executive leadership, and the concept is explored in enough depth to generate interest. However, the discussions of such necessary techniques as penetrating the echelons of the organization, measuring progress in implementing the vision, and reinforcing shared organizational values are not comprehensive. The greatest potential contributions of FM 22-103 and DA Pamphlet 600-80 rest in their ability to stimulate thought about what senior leaders should be spending their valuable time on, and then providing a lot of senior leader “how-to’s.” Both texts can stand more of the how-to’s, since it is not understanding the ideal but knowing how to move toward it that separates the effective climate-builders from the well-meaning others.

Chapter 3 of FM 22-103 is titled “Professional Ethics.” It has the mark of committee work, as first-edition field manuals often do. (Many hands helped to fashion this manual, and the bits and pieces from the many helpers, including this reviewer, are stuck in here and there.) This chapter reflects our current—understandable—emphasis on ethics along with our well-known difficulties in reconciling the ethical implications of the ideal and the operating worlds. This hodgepodge chapter includes everything from the comments of a general’s daughter to the somewhat misleading conclusion that “in times of danger, the ethical element of leadership bonds soldiers and units together, enabling them to withstand the stresses of combat and ultimately gain victory.” One part (incorrectly) equates incompetence to disloyalty, while another part (correctly) addresses the need for senior leaders to reinforce ethical behavior with policy and example instead of by pronouncements about the high ideals of the command.

Within this important chapter, we find a theme that surfaces often: the necessity for senior officers routinely to explain the military code of ethics to junior officers who are often insensitive to or uncomfortable with high ethical standards. Where ethical indoctrination is needed, the senior shouldn't hesitate to give it. My experience with junior officers, however, is mostly the contrary: they expect and are prepared to support high ethical standards but are sometimes confused, frustrated, and disappointed by what they see as unethical behavior on the part of some of their seniors.

The chapter in FM 22-103 on "Professional Skills" mentions the critical need for self-knowledge, but doesn't give us many specific avenues toward attaining that goal. This subject offers one of several opportunities to capitalize upon some of the useful new discoveries of behavioral science, but the manual shows an unfortunate aversion to appearing "academic" or "scientific," thereby forfeiting opportunities to move robustly into newly established doctrinal territory. There have been, for example, legitimate, palatable, non-fattening findings about the behavior of people in organizations that can be useful to our senior officers. Recent research on executive competence and growth in the corporate world establishes the essentiality of self-awareness as a precursor to continued development, and reveals the reluctance of executives to "come to terms with their limitations" (Robert E. Kaplan et al., Center for Creative Leadership, 1987). This phenomenon is mentioned in both FM 22-103 and DA Pamphlet 600-80, but the critical role of self-understanding (and the relative impotence of the Army's Officer Evaluation Report system and upward communication channels in furthering it) remains underemphasized.

The DA Pamphlet moves toward the academic end of the doctrinal scale, perhaps dispensing too much theory too fast. Still, its mature tone will be more convincing and suitable in the long run. Certain kinds of leader behavior in organizations produce largely predictable kinds of organizational outcomes, and leaders need to know the likely outcome of laissez faire, transactional, and transformational leader styles, for example. Colonels and generals need not feel embarrassed for understanding those terms. There appear also to be some useful implications for organizational leadership deriving from a familiarity with standard psychometric tests—such as those used at the Army War College and National Defense University. Neither of the publications under review mentions these tools, nor the techniques explained so well in an excellent recent publication, DA Pamphlet 600-69, *Unit Climate Profile Commander's Handbook* (1986). Our senior leaders need also to be instructed on the tendencies for themselves and others to respond in somewhat predictable ways given their measurable personality makeup and their position in the hierarchy.

Chapter 5 of FM 22-103, titled "Command Processes," begins a good discussion of the methods by which a senior leader integrates the various systems of the command and develops a coherent mosaic wherein

the missions and values of the organization are in fact supported by daily reward and punishment schemes. Future editions would be enriched by more detailed how-to in this area. We also need to address directly in the manual a major obstacle to developing universally healthy command climates: the fact that the senior leadership of our Army does not share a common vision of what a good organization looks and feels like over time.

The final chapter of FM 22-103 includes the story of General Robert L. Eichelberger's actions at Buna in 1942. This powerful picture of a strong commander moving into a grave combat situation provides a fine example of one assuming command of a dispirited, disorganized outfit and taking appropriate, dramatic, prompt actions. But I wish this scene had not been selected to portray the norm of senior leadership at work. Given the physical courage which is common among our leaders, the Buna scenario may not be the most challenging or the most typical. The overriding challenge to our senior leaders comprises the more indirect, more complex tasks of shaping the total climate of our organizations in peace and war—in developing subordinates, exemplifying values, sorting out priorities, resolving conflicts among various good intentions, and recognizing the ultimate ripple effects of our directives.

DA Pamphlet 600-80 is essentially an Army Research Institute product derived from leadership research, and it's a competent, although sometimes challenging text that adds significantly to our ongoing dialogue on senior leadership. It is businesslike and explanatory in contrast to the prescriptive FM 22-103. Its themes are more complex and conceptual, but the overall package is tighter. The perspective carries a lot of Pentagon and intragovernmental baggage, and may be tilted too heavily toward such Washington leadership chores as interfacing with Congress. It also uses a somewhat esoteric concept which relates hierarchical level to the length of planning time frames. The distance into the future that must be planned for probably does increase in rough proportion as one ascends to higher executive levels, but the focus on planning span as a discriminator between levels of management can be overdone. Complexity by level seems a more useful distinction between organizational echelons. In any case, the immediate need is to develop concepts for the study and practice of executive-level leadership which will make good practical sense throughout the Army's leader training system and of course in the minds of future senior leaders.

Not long ago the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research reported on such factors as horizontal and vertical bonding in the 7th Infantry Division (Light) at Fort Ord, California, and on the state of its organizational climate over a crucial 18-month period. There were many successes during this high-pressure experiment in organization and motivation. But we did not always orchestrate the systems well, and the report highlights the disappointments in developing mutual trust and

confidence during the early life of the division. This episode is but one of many pointing to the need for a general theory of climate-building.

DA Pamphlet 600-80 addresses two concepts in particular that should shed light on the needed general theory: first, the concept of leader "frame of reference," meaning an understanding of cause-and-effect relationships within large and complex organizations where outcomes aren't reasonably discernible, as they are at the platoon or company level; and second, the concept of the "cascading translation process," wherein organizational values, policies, and directives are routinely distorted or otherwise modified as they get communicated down through the successive rungs of the hierarchy. These concepts will not be mastered in one reading. They have intellectual rigor and don't always go down easily. But it should not be too much to ask that we do some intellectual push-ups while developing the necessary leader routines to handle our forces and materiel.

In any event, this DA pamphlet offers a good start on the subject of executive leadership, and the Army War College has adapted it as a special text in its command and leadership program for the current academic year. It hits a lot of nails on the head—from recognizing the tendency to overestimate the ability of senior headquarters to influence the routine actions of subordinate echelons, to showing how the leader's discretionary limits of action vary consciously by organizational level. These new additions to our doctrinal vocabulary ought to be refined and integrated into standard leadership instruction as presented at Leavenworth and Carlisle.

A study group at Leavenworth's Center for Army Leadership is now at work to analyze the kind of leadership we need to execute the AirLand Battle and sustain the profession. The study is about the 250th identifiable Army study on leadership since World War II. However, it and the two publications under review arrive at a good time. A number of today's senior officers—the Commandant of the Command and General Staff College among them—are coming to grips with the business of command climate and how senior leaders make it good or bad.

We are thus recognizing that gaining essential acceptance of the military virtues is not in fact the basic institutional challenge. The basic challenge rather is in developing senior leaders who know the correct organizational climate when they see it, and know how to build and sustain such climates—those in which leader development and real tactical effectiveness can routinely flourish. Neither FM 22-103 nor DA Pamphlet 600-80 fills the bill entirely. But if FM 22-103 could be cut in half, if DA Pamphlet 600-80 could become a bit less Washingtonian, and if in another six or eight months we could combine the best of the two along with some feedback from the field, we could enter a new era of understanding. Our senior leadership needs to take a hard look at our uneven command climates and devise major revisions to the way we do business. We have the *potential* for a major breakthrough in Army leadership doctrine.