

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 22
Number 1 *Parameters* 1992

Article 12

7-4-1992

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Recommended Citation

George B. Forsythe, "The Preparation of Strategic Leaders," *Parameters* 22, no. 1 (1992), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1627.

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The Preparation of Strategic Leaders

GEORGE B. FORSYTHE

As fierce gusts of wind lashed the early morning rain against the windows of Southwick House, the lone standing figure paced the floor, pondering the weight of this momentous decision. . . . As he paced, he considered the options. Finally, quietly but clearly and confidently he spoke, "O.K., let's go." Immediately, a cheer went up as his commanders rushed to their command posts to oversee the invasion. The liberation of Europe had begun.¹

World events brought General Eisenhower quickly from obscurity to this critical moment in history. Indeed, his advancement to strategic-level leadership was meteoric—from lieutenant colonel to general of the army in four years. However, the significance of Eisenhower's story is not in his advancement, which was accelerated by the requirements imposed on an army at war, but in the fact that he was so well prepared to assume the responsibilities of strategic-level leadership when the nation called. It is a story of strategic leader development, a career-long process involving experience, formal professional education, and self-study.

Strategic leadership and strategic leader development have recently attracted considerable attention in the Army, as evinced by the publication of DA Pamphlet 600-80, *Executive Leadership* (1987), the publication of Field Manual 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels* (1987), and the Army War College's Strategic Leadership Conferences in February and October 1991. What does it mean to develop officers as strategic leaders? This article explores the concept of strategic leader formation from the point of view of developmental psychology, addressing in the process two fundamental questions: What is development? and What can the Army do to foster the development of strategic leaders?

Before turning to these questions, two prefatory issues deserve mention: Can leaders be developed? and What is meant by strategic leadership?

Scholars have invested years of study in pondering whether leaders are born or made, but the scientific evidence they have amassed is equivocal.² Common sense alone, however, would tell us that neither explanation by itself is sufficient to account for the complex phenomenon of leadership.³ Leaders are both born and made; or, more accurately, stable attributes of the leader establish certain boundaries within which further development can occur. Thus even so-called "natural" leaders can benefit from the studied pursuit of leadership enhancement. In sum, the Army's concern for leader development surely must rest on the assumption that a soldier's capacity for leadership can be improved by the intelligent application of educational and training procedures.

What is strategic leadership? In the civilian sector, scholarly work in the area of strategic management signaled an interest in leadership at the top levels of the organization by arguing that the work of senior executives is qualitatively different from the work of lower-level managers and therefore deserves unique emphasis in theory as well as in practice. Research emphasis shifted away from leadership in the context of small groups and focused instead on studying the job requirements and management practices of business executives.

With the publication of FM 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels*, and DA Pamphlet 600-80, *Executive Leadership*, the Army gave formal recognition to the idea that leadership at higher organizational levels differs substantively from leadership at lower levels. Unfortunately, FM 22-103 does not provide a delineation of senior levels, leaving the reader to infer that the differentiating factor is the reliance on indirect as well as direct forms of influence.⁴ However, DA Pam 600-80 is more explicit, defining the executive level (more recently, the term "strategic" has come to be used in lieu of "executive") as the top one or two echelons in a large, multi-layered organization.⁵ Furthermore, DA Pam 600-80 argues that leadership, regardless of level, aims to achieve "understanding and commitment of subordinates for the accomplishment of purposes, goals, and objectives envisioned by the leader, beyond that which is possible through the use of authority alone."⁶ Hence, strategic leadership involves the building of understanding and commitment

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among followers by incumbents at the top. Both DA Pam 600-80 and FM 22-103 acknowledge that leaders at the top of an organization direct demanding systems in the context of complex, dynamic, and uncertain environments. Consequently, strategic leader development should focus on developing officers for the unique mental, behavioral, and emotional requirements of leadership in such milieus.

What is Development?

With all the recent interest in leader development, it is surprising how little empirical research has been done on the subject. Although considerable attention has been devoted to leadership and to the study of human development across the life span, leader development is a relatively new field of inquiry. Most studies of leader development are retrospective; they attempt to understand leader development by studying the experiences of successful executives. For example, a study of Eisenhower's career might reveal how his childhood and early education at West Point molded his character. Or Ike's assignment experiences and the mentorship of Generals Connor, MacArthur, and Marshall might show how he acquired the technical and professional expertise and interpersonal acumen that made him so effective as Supreme Commander.⁷ Scholars interested in executive development might survey or interview successful corporate leaders to learn how experiences on the job contribute to executive advancement.⁸

Although these methods inform our understanding of leader development, their broader application is limited. Unfortunately, relatively little longitudinal research has been conducted on the subject. The best we can do now is to extract certain concepts from what is known about human growth and relate them to strategic leader development. Two theoretical traditions for understanding such individual change—Learning and Developmental—provide a framework for the discussion that follows.

Learning. One way to conceive leader development is simply as the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values associated with what is generally acknowledged as effective leadership. This approach is primarily concerned with what leaders do. From this perspective, leader development is a continuous process of building a knowledge base and a behavioral repertoire. The Learning approach might be called the "kit bag" view of leader development—development involves adding tools to the leader's kit bag.

This way of looking at leader development is similar to the approach often taken to shape other aspects of job-related performance. It rests on an analysis of the job and its requirements—the knowledge, skills, and values required of leaders at different organizational levels. For example, Clement and Ayres identified nine competencies associated with leadership at each of five organizational levels.⁹ These competencies include the following: communications, human relations, counseling, supervision, technical skill, management

science, decisionmaking, planning, and ethics. Other researchers have generated similar lists. From a Learning perspective, competencies form the basis for training programs, with specific training objectives tailored to the needs of individual learners. For example, a training program on the subject of group dynamics might serve leaders who need to work on intra-group communications and consensus-building techniques, which are two competencies associated with strategic-level leadership.

The Learning method of leader development should be familiar to all Army officers. It is the basis for the Military Qualification Standards (MQS) program and is embedded in the "Be, Know, Do" framework of FM 22-100, *Military Leadership*.¹⁰ It is also the underlying basis for executive development workshops offered in industry as well as in the military (e.g. precommand courses). This view of leader development is relatively straightforward and certainly helps us understand how we can shape leader behaviors modifiable by learning infusions of relatively short duration. However, this approach cannot account for changes in more complex leader attributes that may take years of experience to bring about.

In practice, leadership is more than the sum of accumulated knowledge and skills; therefore, leader development is more than the process of filling the leader's kit bag. Focusing simply on Eisenhower's knowledge and skills might cause us to miss the richness of his leadership as the Supreme Commander and the essence of his greatness. Leadership at higher organizational levels requires not just more knowledge and skills, but qualitatively different ways of doing business.¹¹ The Learning approach to leader development is inadequate for describing how these qualitative changes occur. Consequently, we must look to the second approach to human maturation to gain a complete understanding of strategic leader development.

Developmental. The complexity of the process of making leaders may be understood as an integral part of the larger process of individual development. (In speaking of the Developmental approach, we will capitalize the term to distinguish it, as a particular formal theory of human change, from the broad general sense of the term, which is lower-cased.) The Developmental approach is concerned more with who the leader is and how the leader makes sense out of the world than with what the leader does. A Developmental paradigm has been applied to a variety of areas, including: moral development,¹² cognitive development,¹³ and personality development.¹⁴ Recently some scholars have begun to apply this framework to leader development as well.¹⁵ Because the Developmental framework is less familiar to most military officers, the remainder of this article will be devoted to it, including some implications for strategic leader development in the Army.

Psychologist Robert Kegan points out two separate Big Ideas that underlie a number of Developmental theories.¹⁶ One is the idea that people

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construct their own reality rather than having it thrust upon them. Humans, in this view, seek to impose sense on their experience. The second idea is that human beings evolve through patterned stages or periods according to principles of stability and change. Taken together, these ideas suggest that development is a life-long process involving progressive patterned changes in peoples' understanding of themselves and their world. From these general ideas come a number of important Developmental concepts that shed light on the process of making leaders.

How do we organize and understand experience? DA Pamphlet 600-80 introduces the concept of a frame of reference to conceptualize how we structure and interpret experience.¹⁷ A frame of reference is a mental map that we use to construct our understanding of reality and to make sense out of life's experiences. We rely on frames of reference to recognize patterns formed by events, to understand cause and effect, and to make decisions and solve problems in a wide variety of areas. For example, a shortstop would use a softball or baseball frame of reference to decide what to do with a ground ball hit between second and third base when there are two outs and a runner on first base. Without a relevant frame of reference, events become difficult to understand. A softball frame of reference would be of little value for understanding a cricket match.

We have many frames of reference. Some are associated with our job (e.g. operational doctrine, weapon systems, unit organization, training doctrine); some are associated with what distinguishes us as individuals (e.g. personal values, career experiences, self-identity); others are associated with interpersonal relations (how to behave at a party). We also have frames of reference about leadership that have been formed over the years through formal study, practical experience, and observation. From a Developmental perspective, leader development can be viewed as adaptive changes in the soldier's leadership frames of reference as he progresses through successively higher organizational levels.

What causes change? Developmental theory suggests that the impetus for change results from a recognition that existing frames of reference are inadequate to deal with new situations. Novel experiences and new information that cannot be understood in terms of existing frames of reference

create the conditions for change. The inability to make sense out of experience often brings with it strong emotions—frustration, confusion, and anxiety—because it makes us vulnerable to unanticipated events and makes adaptation to life's demands more difficult. The resultant disequilibrium sets the stage for development, because it forces a restructuring of our frames of reference to take into account the new experience.

How do frames of reference change? Change often occurs through a process of accommodation, where existing frames of reference are altered to take into account new information.¹⁸ Accommodation leads to a reorganization of frames of reference; old elements are reinterpreted and previous structures are rearranged to deal with the new information. For example, frames of reference concerning tactics and operational art developed during the Vietnam War had to be restructured to make sense of AirLand Battle doctrine when it was first published in 1982. AirLand Battle doctrine offered a qualitatively different way of conceptualizing operational art, thus requiring a restructuring of the way in which Army leaders viewed combat operations. In leader development, accommodation helps account for qualitative and structural changes in a person's understanding of the leadership requirements at succeeding levels of responsibility—from face-to-face influence at the small-unit level all the way up to system management at the strategic level. Accommodation is closely related to the leader's ability to empathize with different points of view (i.e. to accommodate to alternative ways of understanding) when faced with novel situations or competing demands, which is a critical feature of strategic leadership.¹⁹

Hence, change in our frames of reference involves both the addition of new elements and the reorganization of old elements in a way that leads to greater understanding of experiences.²⁰ Adding new elements permits us to differentiate or discriminate between things that we originally saw as the same and to see parts of a larger whole.²¹ Reorganization of the frames of reference permits us to recognize patterns when we saw only parts before. To show how frames of reference influence understanding of events, consider the case of a young captain, newly appointed as one of the aides to a service chief, who accompanies his boss to a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the national military strategy. The captain's frame of reference for national strategy is likely to be relatively simple (not very many elements and not well organized), while the Joint Chiefs probably possess highly complex frames of reference. The captain may view military strategy in terms of units, weapons, and tactical doctrine. In contrast, the service chiefs' strategic frames of reference may include both military and nonmilitary factors, such as demographics, trends in the industrial base, technological developments in non-defense related research, political considerations, fiscal constraints, and world security trends. The captain may not even be able to recognize the

relevant features of the national security environment that affect our military strategy, much less know what to look for ten years into the future. On the other hand, the Joint Chiefs will see both great detail as well as patterns and interrelationships.

It is important to recognize that development is not simply a quantitative change in the frames of reference, that is, the addition of more elements. Development also involves qualitative change (reorganization and restructuring), whereby we come to understand the world in fundamentally different ways than we did using less advanced frames of reference. Developmental theory suggests that restructuring of the frames of reference is always in the direction of increased complexity, leading to more sophisticated ways of understanding. Higher levels of development are considered to be more adaptive than lower levels because they permit us to make sense out of an increasingly wider range of experiences.

Developmental Theory Vis-à-vis Producing Strategic Leaders

What are the implications of the Developmental perspective for the development of strategic leaders? There are at least three. First, because development is progressive, with each level building on preceding levels, strategic leader development actually occurs over the course of an entire career. If the services delay attention to strategic leader development until an officer matriculates at a senior service college, it may be too late. Development is a life-long process. The ability to deal with the complexities inherent in the strategic environment are related to a number of developmental characteristics that take considerable time to mature. For example, Lewis and Jacobs argue that the extent to which a person can view his work environment objectively—to step back in a detached fashion—is essential for strategic-level leaders.²² Psychologist Siegfried Streufert has made a similar case, suggesting that the ability to discriminate among new elements of information as well as organize them in some coherent fashion characterizes successful executive performance.²³

Second, Developmental theory suggests that the formation of strategic leaders is facilitated when existing frames of reference are challenged. As

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suggested earlier, the intellectual, interpersonal, and technical requirements of strategic-level leadership are fundamentally different from the leadership requirements at lower levels of the organization. If development is to occur, officers must be challenged to think and act in ways that go beyond the requirements of their current level in the organization. We will return to this subject shortly.

Third, development occurs as we interact with the environment and attempt to make sense out of our experiences. This implies that the formation of strategic leaders is enhanced when officers at lower levels are exposed to experiences, even on a modest scale, that give them a glimpse of and feel for the organization's strategic environment. These experiences can be provided on the job or they can be simulated in educational settings.

What Can the Army Do?

There are a number of ways in which the Army can incorporate Developmental theory into its programs for preparing strategic leaders. Three broad areas will be discussed here: professional education, on-the-job development, and self-development.

Professional Education. As mentioned earlier, strategic leader development occurs over the course of a career. The Army cannot afford to wait until War College attendance to lay the foundation for leadership at the strategic level. The foundation must be established early on in the officer education system and must be built upon at each subsequent educational level. Despite the practical requirement to focus on technical training during the basic and advanced courses, some steps must be taken even at those levels to provide the kinds of developmental experiences that help shape strategic leaders. Furthermore, such developmental experiences must become progressively more central to the professional school curriculum as one moves to higher levels in the educational system. The emphasis should shift from skill training to education and development as an officer progresses.

Listed below are a number of ways to incorporate Developmental concepts into the officer education system. These can be applied at all levels, from the basic course through the War College; however, they become increasingly more important at the higher levels.

- Officers must be exposed to multiple points of view in the curriculum. They should be encouraged to consider alternative explanations and alternative ways of doing business. Learning experiences should give students the opportunity to argue the merits of competing solutions to complex problems. Single approved solutions should be avoided, especially when students are dealing with complex conceptual tasks (data-assimilation, evaluation, decisionmaking, problem-solving).

- Learning exercises should cause students to engage in synthesis as well as analysis. Analytical tasks help students add new elements to their frames of reference, but synthesis fosters the ability to integrate and thus reorganize their frames of reference. Both are important, but Army education tends to be weighted toward analysis rather than synthesis. Case studies, for example, are a common feature of officer education. The central intellectual task is analysis—the student identifies the relevant features in the case in order to see how specified principles are applied or specific concepts are illustrated. Less frequently in education do officer students derive principles based on a synthesis of different cases where the facts may be contradictory and ambiguous. Studying the ethical climate in the My Lai case, for example, requires analysis; deriving characteristics of an ethical command climate based on a review of several cases requires synthesis.

- Learning experiences that challenge existing frames of reference are more likely to foster development than those that do not. A by-product of this may be student discomfort and frustration. Few officers like to have their opinions challenged and their logic critiqued. Such challenges can lead to defensiveness and anger directed at instructors. Consequently, sufficient supports should be available to help officer students work through the emotional responses that accompany threats to their customary modes of thinking. Explicit feedback, opportunities to modify and resubmit written work, and one-on-one coaching are possible support mechanisms.

- Wherever possible, students should be challenged to deal with demands that are characteristic of the strategic environment—complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Donald Schön refers to simulating the context of professional practice as creating a “virtual world” in professional education.²⁴ A virtual world is a representation of the real world that permits the student to experiment with new ideas and techniques, while real-world variables are purposefully manipulated. Officer students should be encouraged to undertake open-ended projects on complex topics of contemporary relevance to the Army. Recent changes in the international security environment provide a perfect opportunity to explore the implications for national military strategy in the coming decade. Strategy-formulation simulations and crisis scenarios used at the senior service colleges are good examples of learning exercises that take into account the strategic leadership environment. The more, the better.

- Time must be provided for reading, reflection, discussion, and writing. All too often, military educators confuse quality with quantity in their drive to improve educational standards. They add more subject matter but fail to provide opportunities for the students to actively use what they have learned. If development is to occur, and indeed, if we are to encourage self-development, then officer students must be given the opportunity to build and modify their frames of reference by truly engaging the subject matter with their minds.

***Time must be provided for reading, reflection,
discussion, and writing.***

• Students should be given the opportunity to engage in collaborative tasks. Army education has recently made extensive use of small-group instruction. However, in most cases, the collective tasks can actually be accomplished by a single student. True collaborative tasks cannot be accomplished by a single individual (e.g. a situation where each group member has different information, which they must synthesize in order to solve a problem). Collaborative tasks encourage the development of interpersonal skills that are critical for successful strategic-level leadership.

Officer education based on Developmental theory has significant implications for the selection and preparation of service school faculty. Traditional methods of instruction still remain necessary tools in the instructor's kit bag, but they are no longer sufficient. They must be supplemented by educational and developmental concepts that equip the faculty to provide the kinds of experiences that lead to true growth. They must become educators as well as trainers.

On-the-Job Development. A number of scholars have argued that most significant development occurs on the job, not in the schoolhouse.²⁵ On the job, leaders are faced with the actual requirements of leadership rather than a virtual world of practice. Job experiences that challenge existing frames of reference are more likely to have developmental value than experiences that are comfortable. In studies of successful executives, Cal Wick found that novelty and challenge were the two most frequently mentioned developmental features of work experience.²⁶

What kinds of experiences foster strategic leader development on the job? A number of practices that have been suggested for leader development at the battalion level apply equally to strategic leader development.²⁷ Assignments may be based on developmental needs. For example, the emphasis on joint service experience illustrates a policy that links assignments to developmental requirements. However, regardless of the particular job or position, officers at all levels might be assigned tasks and responsibilities based on their specific developmental needs (considering strengths as well as shortcomings). For example, officers who need to broaden their perspective on civil-military relations may be given tasks that require interaction with local community leaders. Strategic vision might be fostered by assigning a team of

officers to prepare a strategic assessment for the organization to which they are assigned. Mentoring and coaching as well as private reflection also have the potential to enhance the value of job experiences. Self-evaluation, in particular, enhances one's ability to learn from experience, which is itself an important feature of strategic-level leadership.

Self-Development. Ultimately, each officer is responsible for his or her own development. Professional education and on-the-job developmental experiences can greatly facilitate leader preparation, but in the final analysis, the burden rests with each individual. Much of Eisenhower's development, for example, was self-directed. Throughout his career he engaged in disciplined, purposeful, self-directed study and reflection.²⁸ The same applies to George S. Patton, Jr., perhaps more so even than in Eisenhower's case.²⁹

What can the individual officer do in this regard? A number of ideas come to mind. First, involvement in an active reading program is highly advantageous, not only in the military field but in areas outside specific professional interests. Broadening horizons enhances the ability to discriminate and expands frames of reference. A second technique is to seek challenging assignments in the service that provide opportunities for stretching one's abilities, with resultant professional growth. This may sound overly idealistic, since our assignments are often beyond our control. Nevertheless, within a particular job, the potential generally exists to assume responsibilities that stretch current ways of thinking and behaving. Third, it is desirable to seek challenges outside the job, as well as at work. Community service, for example, provides exposure to different points of view and broadens one's understanding of domestic issues as they influence national security. Finally, writing for publication is certainly a promising avenue of self-development. Professional writing forces us to organize and communicate our thoughts, and it provides a vehicle for serious discussion among professional colleagues. These are only a few examples of techniques that can be used by the individual officer to prepare himself for the responsibilities of strategic-level leadership.

Conclusion

Despite all the rhetoric regarding leader development, we have a great deal more to learn, especially concerning the preparation of strategic leaders. The Army's approach to leader training based on Learning principles is sound and has served us well. However, the field of developmental psychology offers important insights which have, until recently, gone unrecognized. This is a fertile area for systematic study. Fortunately, our sparse understanding of the process of leader development does not prevent well-qualified people from ascending to strategic leadership positions. As we come to understand more about this complex phenomenon, the Army will no longer

have to leave the preparation of its strategic leaders to chance or to providence. Instead, the Army will be able to provide planned developmental opportunities for more of its officers and, as a consequence, have a larger pool of talent from which to select its top leaders.

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