

## On Becoming a Strategic Leader

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How does one make the transition from tactical to strategic leadership? This enduring question is rising again, not only within the profession as current senior leaders analyze wartime performance, anticipate the future and think through the changes they should make to professional development programs, but also from outside the profession.

Making the transition to strategic leadership is a multifaceted and, in the larger sense, lifelong and continual process. Some can make the transition, others cannot. Even among those who do make the transition successfully, capacity varies. Some strategic leaders are very successful in selected areas but not in others. Furthermore, strategic leadership within a narrow technical or specialty area is different from strategic leadership exercised in a broader scope. Those who try to reduce to a simple formula what it takes to be a strategic leader or to develop someone to become one simply do not understand the complexity of the phenomena with which they are dealing. Reflecting on my own experiences and learning, as well as watching other strategic leaders, I have noticed the following nine patterns.

*The problem set changes.* In general, problems are of two types: routine and adaptive. Routine problems are those that occur and recur regularly and, therefore, have identifiable solutions. Adaptive problems are more complex. Understanding them takes more than one brain, and they do not have readily identifiable, or even permanent, solutions. Rather, because they are so complex and often unfold over time, they yield only to temporary resolutions that require periodic review and revision as conditions change. Strategic

leaders should spend most, if not all, of their time on adaptive problems. The requirement, therefore, is to develop skill in tackling adaptive problems: Getting the right team of people together, leading that team in a proper discourse, setting a climate in which respectful argument can occur and maintaining a long-term perspective are among the most important adaptive leadership skills.

*The solution process changes.* Unlike solutions to routine problems that can be directed, solutions to adaptive problems emerge from dialogue. The strategic leader participates in the dialogue and decides upon a way ahead but understands that a resolution has a limited time in which it can work because whatever is decided will require periodic review. Conditions change, unexpected events alter forecasts and new personnel affect the process, each presenting unanticipated opportunities or obstacles. Furthermore, execution—translating the decision into action—happens over time and through multiple leaders and echelons that are often distributed over a wide geographic area. The requirement, therefore, is to develop skill at attaining alignment throughout the strategic leader's organization and implementing a management scheme that allows for continual, reality-based feedback, learning and adaptation.

*The leadership space expands.* Tactical leaders normally operate within a hierarchical leadership structure. "Two up and two down" is the standard way Army tactical leaders learn to think so that they can act properly within their senior's intent. While this remains true for strategic leaders, the hierarchical structure describes only part of their leadership space. Growing in importance is the set of non-hierarchical relationships with people and organizations external to the strategic leader's

chain of command but who clearly affect the success or failure of that leader's mission. The more senior the strategic leader, the wider his or her leadership space becomes. Hence, strategic leaders need good communication and persuasive skills; they must be good at developing relationships and trust with leaders from widely different professions and experience bases; and they must learn to operate in an environment in which respectful disagreement can lead to decision and progress.

*Decision-making changes.* Often the conditions leading to a strategic decision emerge over time, so strategic leaders think in terms of decision space rather than decision points. Making decisions this way requires anticipatory analysis of when a decision has to be made; what minimum—not maximum—information is required; how that information will be gathered and presented; and what criteria the minimum information must meet. Another important aspect of decision making for strategic leaders is the ability to divest a good many decisions to subordinates after identifying—often in discussion with subordinates or peers—information requirements, criteria and timing. In any case, the decisions will almost always be under the conditions of ambiguity, for to wait for clarity or certainty will mean the decision will most likely be ineffective because it is late. Decisions made under conditions of ambiguity provide yet another reason for the strategic leader to implement a management scheme that allows for reality-based feedback, learning and adaptation.

*Time management becomes more critical.* Given the breadth of their responsibilities, strategic leaders must be deliberate and disciplined in their approach to using time, one of their most important assets. They must focus on the im-



portant, not just the urgent. A formal time-management system, not just a daily schedule, helps strategic leaders do that. Part of that formal system is a disciplined meeting rhythm, one that ensures that subordinates get all the guidance they need at the frequency they need it, thus creating time for thinking and “battlefield circulation”—both critical to strategic leadership. Establishing priorities, matching time allocation to those priorities, synchronizing these allocations to the meeting rhythm and battlefield circulation program, and creating a method to evaluate the use of time, are all critical to a formal time-management system.

*Thinking style changes.* Tactical leaders think in terms of discrete actions and closed systems. Strategic leaders are most often concerned with more open systems. Their thinking, therefore, must be campaign-like—that is, a form of thinking in which individual decisions and actions have meaning only in relation to a larger, usually future, whole to which the success of the individual act contributes. Strategic leaders must hold in their minds simultaneously the following: individual acts (the current present), the broader whole of collective potential reactions and response (the ever-unfolding present), and how both can be used to achieve the envisioned goal (the future). In addition, the strategic leader recognizes that while he or she may be focused on a long-term goal or objective, the time horizon is so long that reality as understood at the start of a campaign changes along the way, often dramatically. The need arises once more for strategic leaders to see reality as it is, learn from that reality and adapt in ways that ultimately achieve the larger envisioned whole. This kind of thinking, deciding and acting is not easy. It requires multiple feedback mechanisms, an open yet focused mind, adaptable subordinates and a flexible organization.

*Responsibility to the institution rises.* Strategic leaders must develop a broad understanding of the profession and institution. They cannot afford an overly narrow understanding of the Army, as one would expect in a bu-

reaucrat or technocrat, for strategic leaders have responsibility for the overall health of the profession and institution. Strategic leaders must live professional and personal lives as well as set policies that, for example, manifest the institution’s values. Strategic leaders and the policies they set must also champion adaptive change; select, educate, train and promote the right leaders; mentor junior leaders and encourage dialogue among the generations of leaders that make up the Army; preserve as many ground force options for future political leaders as possible given resources available; and create organizations and processes that see reality as it is, learn from that reality, and adapt. Finally, strategic leaders must be prepared to participate in civil-military discourse with integrity and respect and in ways consistent with common service to our nation’s democracy. These examples, albeit limited, illustrate that the role of strategic leaders is larger than the requirements of any one specific duty position.

*Responsibility for talent retention rises.* The Army is people. Future Army success will derive, most of all, from the leaders who remain in service. The Army promotes from within, so set-

ting the right command climates in units and a healthy work environment in headquarters, identifying and developing leaders, and promulgating policies that attract and retain families are, arguably, “job one.” Strictness in enforcing standards and treating people well are not mutually incompatible. Corporate America actively seeks the kinds of leaders the Army recruits and develops. The requirement for strategic leaders, therefore, is to nurture leaders and create the right conditions for service so that America’s best natural resource—our citizens—is not squandered or taken for granted while they are in uniform.

*Caring for yourself, your spouse and your family takes on a representative dimension.* Most of us who made the Army our career did so because we were motivated and inspired by a battalion commander, first sergeant or command sergeant major (or equivalent leaders). Junior leaders look up to these seniors as having “made it.” Junior leaders decide, often from their first tour in the Army, to remain or depart military service based upon their assessment of these senior leaders’ lives, professional and private. Mid-grade leaders do the same with more senior command sergeants major and



“Is anybody honest?”



general officers. The questions both groups ask themselves are: Can I have a life and a career? Do I want to be “like them”? These are not selfish questions; they are practical ones. The leaders in both groups understand the kinds of sacrifices that service in the Army entails, and they are willing to make these sacrifices if, over the term of a career, a balance can be struck. How senior and strategic leaders live matters, not just for their own lives but also as a model for others.

Of course, this list is not exhaustive. It is representative of the kind of complexity associated with strategic leadership, and it reflects, therefore, the complexity of developing and se-

lecting those leaders who may themselves become successful strategic leaders. One of the major conclusions that should be apparent even from this limited discussion is that success as a tactical leader, as important and necessary as it is, is an insufficient guide for the selection of potential strategic leaders. With respect to strategic leadership, past performance is not necessarily reflective of future capacity. The difference between tactical and strategic leadership is a difference in kind, not degree. Some skill overlap exists, to be sure, but there is greater difference than commonality.

One of the marks of a healthy organization is that it reflects upon itself, learns from that reflection and adapts.

In my experience, the Army is that kind of organization. The Army has not been afraid to look into the mirror and be critical of what it sees. It created the after-action review process to do just that. My hope is that this article contributes to the ongoing conversation among the generations that make up Army leaders, so that as we correctly ponder the enduring question of making the transition from a tactical to strategic leadership yet again, we do so in the proper context. □

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