Winning With a Full Range of Leadership

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THREE YEARS AGO my colleague and I received a grant from the Army Research Institute (ARI) to study platoon readiness as a function of what we call a "full range of leadership." For the past several years we had studied leadership in various settings using Multifactor Leadership Questionnaires (MLQ) and Team Multifactor Leadership Questionnaires (TMLQ).

The ARI grant allowed us to collect data from 90 light infantry platoons. Units completed leadership questionnaires at home stations about a month before deploying to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). The questionnaires determined whether leadership ratings collected in garrison could predict operational leadership.

The Survey

We studied 72 platoons that went to the JRTC at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Each platoon leader and platoon sergeant's leadership behaviors were measured using a military version of the MLQ. We also measured a platoon's culture and collective leadership behaviors using a military edition of the TMLQ. Superiors, peers and subordinates completed questionnaires describing leadership at home stations. Platoon performance was measured using field data cards completed by platoon observer/controllers (O/Cs) at the combat training centers.

By observing JRTC O/Cs, I saw firsthand what was desired in leadership and its development. Within three days at the training center, I witnessed the challenges and chaos that platoons confronted under near-battle conditions, including surprise attacks, high operating tempo and light infantry operations in wooded areas and on urban terrain.

We compared a platoon's leadership in garrison with its performance at combat training centers. The goal was to identify the home-station leadership behaviors that best sustained the platoons while they trained at the JRTC.

[Data was collected] from each of five infantry brigades before they deployed to the JRTC. . . . The consulting team developed and tested the military versions of the MLQ and TMLQ to measure leadership behavior across a full range of leadership potential—from the highly ethical, inspirational, transformational behaviors through various transactional or corrective behaviors, to the "avoidant behaviors" of absent leadership.

With the help of a consulting team, scientists and active duty officers assigned to ARI, we collected data for a week from each of five infantry brigades before they deployed to JRTC. Data was collected from the three light infantry platoons in each rifle company that participated in the brigade rotation. The consulting team developed and tested the military versions of the MLQ and TMLQ to measure leadership behavior across a full range of leadership potential—from the highly ethical, inspirational, transformational behaviors through various transactional or corrective behaviors, to the "avoidant behaviors" of absent leadership. This full range of leadership was measured using the MLQ in which respondents described how often they observed such behaviors in the platoon leader and the platoon sergeant.

The MLQ takes about 30 minutes to complete. The TMLQ takes about the same, but it measures overall leadership in the platoon and the extent to which it was inspiring, creative, learning-oriented, transactional, corrective or avoidant.

Platoon members, fire team leaders, squad leaders, platoon sergeants, platoon leaders, company commanders, company executive officers and first

US Army

Platoons that functioned most effectively at JRTC had leaders who were seen in garrison as more inspiring, showed more individualized consideration for developing soldiers and had clear performance expectations. They considered what others had to say and incorporated good ideas into their thinking and decision-making processes. Platoons that evaluated themselves in garrison as being effective leadership units performed more effectively at JRTC and appeared to learn more as a unit.

sergeants completed the MLQs and TMLQs. This considerable effort provided 70 perspectives describing leadership and culture in each infantry rifle platoon. The survey took about one hour per company, and sessions were scheduled at each unit's convenience, with mail-in provisions for absentees. Participation was voluntary, and average platoon participation rates exceeded 80 percent of assigned personnel and 95 percent among leaders E-7 and above.

We created a field data-collection card on which O/Cs could comment on specific strengths and weaknesses observed in platoon leaders and platoon sergeants and assess overall platoon performance.

This included comments on leader behavior and the cooperative relationship between platoon leader and platoon sergeant. Company commanders, executive officers and first sergeants also completed data cards on each platoon at the end of its rotation.

We coordinated access to four different installations and the JRTC. A senior Army officer from our team gave courtesy briefings and described our goals to post commanders before the project began. Our team did not provide feedback to individual platoon leaders or platoon sergeants. To protect the anonymity of participating units, feedback to brigades did not identify specific units with specific findings. The performance of all 72 US Army light infantry platoons surveyed was highly impressive.

The US Army is a learning organization. Not many organizations spend as much time on educating, training and providing feedback to their employees as does the Army. Observing the O/Cs at JRTC was one of the best places to see this learning orientation. Having observed trainers from cultures across the world, the O/Cs at JRTC are remarkably focused and committed to developing leaders.

The O/Cs' skills during after-action reviews were impressive and without evaluative tone. The O/Cs approached the most difficult officer with clear observations, patience and a willingness to listen to the soldiers and to focus feedback directly on the situation. For example, after passing over a land

mine four times on the same day, a company commander was "blown up" when his vehicle hit the unmarked land mine. The company commander certainly did not want to hear why he died. The O/C listened to the commander vent, then emphasized what the officer had learned and how the lesson could be applied in real time. The O/C displayed coaching at the highest level of the full range of leadership, being both inspirational and understanding, and focusing on moving forward to the next challenge.

JRTC should be considered a best-practice benchmark for our country's nonmilitary institutions. During this project, I saw repeated examples of exemplary O/C coaching that came in many forms but generally had the same qualities:

- Basing feedback on data collected while observing leadership in action.
- Providing positive feedback to motivate leaders.
- Listening to others and adjusting feedback accordingly.
- Focusing on development instead of being critical.
- Working well together, becoming role models in teamwork for leader pairs.

Observing units at JRTC provided conclusive results that mirror other findings obtained through quantitative research. The relationship between platoon leaders and platoon sergeants is critical to how well a platoon functions. In the worst cases, platoon leaders and platoon sergeants talked past each other, displaying a complete lack of communication. In less extreme cases, platoon leaders did not appreciate platoon sergeants' expertise, experience and observations.

During debriefings some officers tried to squeeze out everything they could learn. Other officers failed to take the time to consider feedback and were sometimes referred to as "cement heads" because they considered only their perceptions of the situation. Fortunately, these incidents were much fewer.

The best leaders looked ahead to see what they would be confronting. They listened to others actively, gathering knowledge about a particular situation or challenge. They briefed and back briefed troops to ensure mutual understanding. They were considerate of soldiers' needs and were role models in the field, enduring the elements with their soldiers. They continually exercised their minds and the minds of others.

Survey Results

How leaders lead determines, in part, platoon readiness. Platoons that functioned most effectively at JRTC had leaders who were seen in garrison as more inspiring, showed more individualized consideration for developing soldiers and had clear performance expectations. They considered what others had to say and incorporated good ideas into their thinking and decision-making processes. Platoons that evaluated themselves in garrison as being effective leadership units performed more effectively at JRTC and appeared to learn more as a unit. The quality of the platoon leader and platoon sergeant relationship in garrison was mirrored at JRTC. If it was good in garrison, it was good at JRTC. If it was lousy in garrison, it was even worse under pressure at JRTC. Leaders' self-perceptions often were not congruent with ratings from either followers or peers. These gaps present a key development opportunity.

Exemplary transformational leaders are more inspiring, ethical, developmentally oriented, intellectually challenging and clear in setting expectations. They represent the exemplary platoon leaders and sergeants who do best at JRTC and who likely would do best in even more challenging situations.

What we learned from this three-year project confirmed much of what we found during other recent research. Exemplary transformational leaders are more inspiring, ethical, developmentally oriented, intellectually challenging and clear in setting expectations. They are represented by the exemplary platoon leaders and sergeants who do best at JRTC and who likely would do best in even more challenging situations. We also learned that O/Cs exhibit exemplary leadership in their vital training roles. The transformational teacher-officer combination can powerfully enhance unit readiness, adaptiveness and performance.

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