

Leader Development: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience¹

INTRODUCTION

“The Chief of Staff of the Army’s priorities are my priorities and they should be yours as well,” Colonel Redman stated emphatically, waving a copy of the CSA’s “Marching Orders”² in front of his new battalion commander.

Lieutenant Colonel Simpson nodded his head nervously. He was scheduled to take command of his battalion in less than two hours and had a houseful of relatives to shuttle to the ceremony. Why was the brigade commander sharing these insights with him now?

“The Army’s number one priority is leader development, and it is my top priority in the brigade and the commanding general’s top priority in the division. I’ve shared with you my command philosophy and vision, so this should come as no surprise. The S3 is developing a new, more robust, leader development training program for the brigade that I will brief at next month’s quarterly training brief (QTB) to the Commanding General (CG). In the mean time, I want you to look at the leader development programs within your unit and present me with a plan at our QTB pre-brief in two weeks. I just got off the phone with the CG and this is one of his hot button issues.”

“Yes sir,” LTC Simpson responded, “I will make it my top priority.”

LTC Simpson felt uneasy as he rushed out of the office to gather his family for the ceremony. If this was such a high priority, why did it sound like everyone was scrambling to put together a plan?

For an institution that prides itself on developing leaders, the U.S. Army does an abysmal job of it, at least according to an annual survey conducted by the Center for Army Leadership. “*Develops Others*” has been the lowest rated leader competency in the Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) since 2006.³ Not only does it have the poorest rating at 63 percent, it is the worst by a significant margin, nine percentage points.⁴ In fact, 45 percent of the respondents on the 2012 survey did not believe their superiors showed genuine concern when it came to developing leadership skills of followers, up six percent over the previous year.⁵

Is there any doubt why GEN Odierno, Army Chief of Staff, has stated repeatedly over the last two years that the Army’s number one priority is leader development?⁶ Apparently, our Army leaders have little understanding of how to do it.

¹ By Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, the Department of Command and Leadership for the CGSC - not to be further reproduced – 2014. Revised August 2015.

² Department of the Army, *Marching Orders: 38th Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, America’s Force of Decisive Action* (Washington, DC: January 2012). The CSA’s “Marching Orders” outline GEN Odierno’s vision for the Army and how it will transition from years of continuous combat into a leaner and more agile force as part of Joint Force 2020.

³ *CASAL: Army Leader’s Perceptions of Army Leaders and Army Leadership Practices Special Report 2011-1* (June 2011), 1.

⁴ *2013 CAL Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings Technical Report 2014-1* (April 2014), 9.

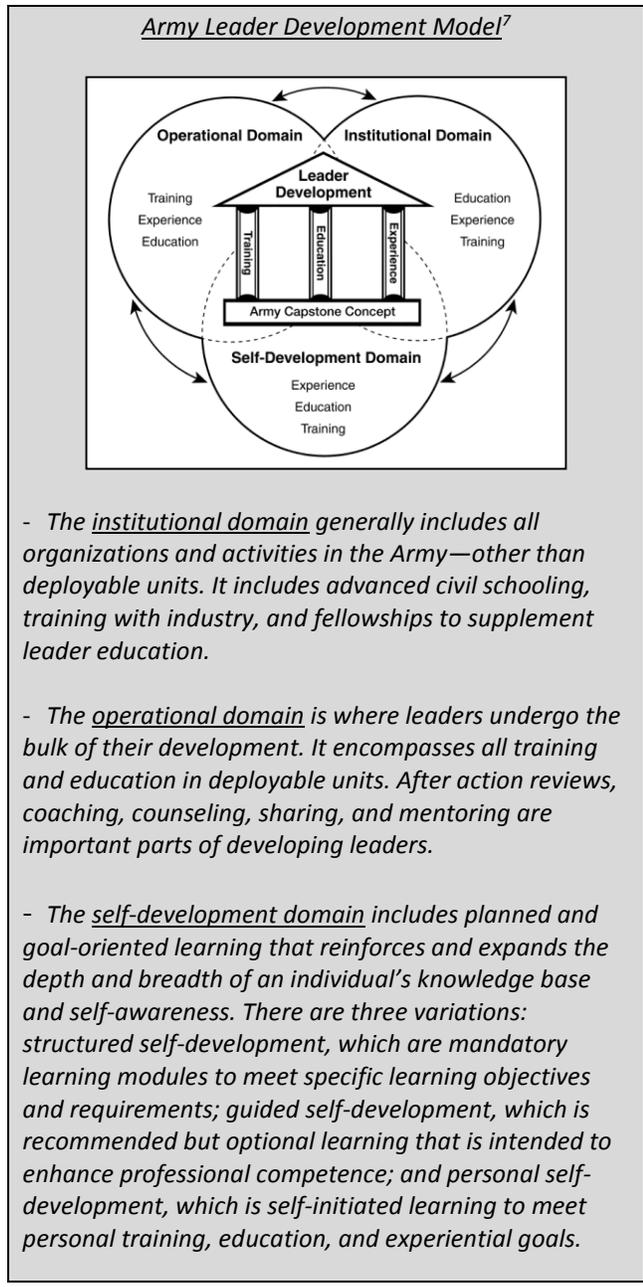
⁵ *2012 CAL Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings Technical Report 2013-1* (April 2013), 66.

⁶ Army News Service, February 12, 2014, *Subj: Odierno: Leader Development No. 1 Priority*.

When asked to assess the Army’s three leader development domains on the same survey, 80 percent of active duty leaders rate the operational domain as the most effective in preparing them to assume new levels of leadership as compared to the domains of self-development (69 percent) and institutional education (61 percent).⁸ Leaders are “learning by doing” according to the CASAL survey through leading others, on-the-job training, and operational experience gained on deployments.⁹ One could conclude from this response that Army leaders are developing in spite of the ineffectual efforts of their superiors.

Leaders Learn from Experience. Why do Army leaders struggle with leader development? Developing others is not a mystery. Leaders learn from experience.¹⁰ This statement might be a blinding flash of the obvious, but it really is that simple—leaders learn from experience. We call it experiential learning, constructing knowledge and meaning from real-life activities and events.¹¹

Organizations struggle with leader development because they fail to understand the importance of experiential learning. Instead of embracing learning experiences, many unit leaders grasp for quick-fix solutions by mimicking the latest leader development programs published in *Military Review* or branch journals. Others ignore leader development completely and concentrate exclusively on accomplishing the mission, believing a “sink or swim” approach to testing leaders is the best form of development.¹² Both approaches lead down the same road. Leaders continue to “learn by doing,” *but not to their full potential.*



⁷ *Army Leader Development Strategy 2013* (June 2013), 11

⁸ *2013 CAL Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings Technical Report 2014-1* (April 2014), 65.

⁹ *2013 CAL Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings Technical Report 2014-1*, 66, 86.

¹⁰ Morgan W. McCall, Jr, “Recasting Leadership Development,” *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Vol 3, Issue 1 (March 2010), 3. McCall draws seven conclusions about the role of experience in leader development. Most significant are the importance of learning from challenging assignments, creating developmental opportunities in everyday activities, intentionally matching developmental needs with developmental opportunities, and providing feedback and coaching to help understand the learning experiences.

¹¹ Sharan B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood*, 2nd ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 221-230.

¹² Morgan W. McCall, Jr, “Recasting Leadership Development,” 7.

A Two-Phase Approach to Leader Development. To maximize leader development in the operational domain, commanders must do two things. The first is to embrace the use of *experience as a developmental tool*. This means creating learning opportunities by placing subordinate leaders into challenging assignments to stretch their thinking and behavior. Challenging experiences are characterized by pressure, complexity, novelty, and uncertainty.¹³ The objective is to treat experience as a means to an end by assessing individual and unit leadership needs and integrating them with organizational learning opportunities to create challenging developmental leadership experiences.

Once this initial phase of creating experiences by aligning needs with learning opportunities occurs, the second and more challenging phase of the leader development process begins, the *meaning-making cycle*. Making sense of an experience requires interpretation of the event to create personal understanding.¹⁴ This process is known as meaning making, which requires observation, feedback, dialogue, and reflection. The Army does not do this well, which helps explain why so many junior leaders feel the chain of command has forsaken their developmental needs.

Our goal in this paper is to provide a conceptual framework for implementing a successful leader development process in organizations. There are no magical solutions or secret checklists because no two organizations are the same. Each unit has unique needs and opportunities, which require purposeful planning to meet the developmental needs of the organization and its people. The framework we describe provides the foundation for this to occur by embracing the use of experience as a developmental tool and processing the experience using a cycle of meaning making to create personal understanding.

To begin our discussion, we need to understand why the Army has fumbled leader development in the operational domain. The reasons are twofold. The first is a mindset of leader development as a series of developmental programs to meet collective leadership needs within organizations instead of an integrative learning process that meets both individual and collective developmental needs. The second reason, which is closely associated with the first, is the belief that addressing individual leadership needs is a self-development responsibility, not a task for the chain of command. Organizational leaders focus on organizational success; individuals determine their own needs and requirements.

HOW WE GOT HERE

During the reception after the change of command ceremony, LTC Simpson briefed his XO, MAJ Conrad, on his leader development discussion with the brigade commander.

MAJ Conrad rolled his eyes. "Sir, I would not worry too much about this issue. We have bigger fish to fry with our JRTC rotation next quarter. Leader development is the CG's "flavor of the month." It will blow over as we ramp up for our training deployment. If you want to get the boss' attention, screw up on a CTC rotation. We all know that no one really cares how many Friday OPD sessions we schedule."

Many leaders stumble out of the starting blocks with leader development in the operational domain by focusing exclusively on collective needs of subordinate leaders within the organization. Commanders establish formal developmental programs, e.g., OPD and non-commissioned officer professional development (NCO PD), to address future organizational requirements such as deployments or CTC rotations, while ignoring the individual developmental needs of leaders. Senior leaders are not being callous; many simply believe individual learning falls within the self-development domain and is a

¹³ Ibid, 6.

¹⁴ ADRP 6-0, *Mission Command*, May 2012, defines understanding as, "...knowledge that has been synthesized and had judgment applied to it to comprehend the situation's inner relationships." 2-40

personal leadership responsibility. Senior leaders see their primary responsibility as providing opportunities for collective learning. While personal learning may occur, it is up to the individual to identify personal needs and integrate them with existing learning opportunities.

Culture of Learning. Unfortunately, episodic or even periodic collective leader development programs do not guarantee sustained improvement or developed leaders within organizations. Accomplishing day-to-day missions and achieving long-term improvement, i.e., improving while operating, requires continuous learning. “Leaders who make it a priority to improve their subordinates lead learning organizations.”¹⁵

*A learning organization fosters a culture of learning that solves problems and improves the organization through a supportive command climate, valuing member involvement in the gaining of knowledge, skills, and processes to modify behavior and get results.*¹⁶

A learning organization, which is foundational for successful leader development in the operational domain, begins with a culture of learning. Members share the belief that leaders value learning, and everyone in the organization plays an active role in the learning process as they strive to achieve their potential. A learning organization develops adaptive and innovative members that solve problems and improve the organization. Members do not view improving while operating as an “either/or” proposition. They see it as an integrative process that provides the organization with learning opportunities in everything it does. These learning opportunities, which are the catalyst for experiential learning, drive leader development within organizations, which the Army defines as, “*The deliberate, continuous, and progressive process—founded in Army values—that grows Soldiers and Army Civilians into competent, committed professional leaders of character.*”¹⁷

Leader Development as a Learning Process. The key word in the Army definition of leader development is *process*, which provides insight into why so many leaders struggle with leader development within their organizations. Without a culture of learning, many leaders, as stated above, view leader development as a formal program to meet the collective leadership needs of the organization. The problem with this “program” perspective is that it fails to see leader development as an integrative and purposeful learning process within the organization that aligns both individual and collective leadership needs with developmental opportunities and meaning-making feedback, dialogue, and reflection. Even worse, it often creates the perception of leader development as a series of stopgap events that commanders use to meet higher headquarters’ requirements for a visible (and inspectable) leader development program.

Organizations stuck in the mindset of leader development as a series of scheduled events have the perfect excuse for not developing members of the organization—“*We do not have enough time.*” This pretext allows leaders to rationalize their actions and fall back on the failsafe justification of focusing on mission requirements. Lack of time is a weak evasion for not developing leaders.

The “time” excuse fails to recognize the critical shared belief organizations must embrace to implement a successful leader development process—*opportunities for developmental experiences exist in everything we do.* By developmental experiences, we mean challenging activities that fill an assessed leadership need, either individual or collective. The event or activity should be a “stretch” experience in that it requires significant effort but is achievable with the help of a meaning-making cycle consisting of

¹⁵ Department of the Army, ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership*, 7-19.

¹⁶ Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, “Improving while Operating: The Paradox of Learning,” CGSC (August 2014), 4.

¹⁷ Department of the Army, *Army Leader Development Strategy (ALDS)* 2013, 3.

observation, feedback, dialogue, reflection, and corrective adjustments by the individual.¹⁸ Stretch experiences may be deliberately planned events or targets of opportunity such as having a junior leader attend an impromptu meeting for the boss. The goal in creating developmental experiences is ensuring opportunities align with identified developmental needs, e.g., the junior leader attending the meeting is weak in interpersonal tact, and the superior processes the experience through a meaning-making cycle for learning to occur.

The catalyst for learning is the *meaning-making cycle* where leaders make sense of their experiences. It is in the execution of this cycle where leader development breaks down for a very unsurprising reason—a failure to communicate.

A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

“Sir, with all due respect, the XO is not the right person to talk to in the battalion to get a laydown on leader development,” CSM Childress chided. “We have a strong program in the battalion. We have always met or exceeded our quarterly quota for the Warrior Leader Course (WLC) in my 18 months as the battalion sergeant major. Additionally, I have the first sergeants report to me every month on the status of NCO counseling. All NCOs are counseled quarterly, even when deployed. I am a stickler for records; we get the job done,” he said proudly.

LTC Simpson smiled wanly, “That’s good news CSM.”

The commander turned to his operations officer. “Jim, what is your take on leader development in the battalion?”

MAJ Darby, the S3, cleared his throat. He only had three months in the battalion and wanted to make a good impression with his new boss. “Sir, I have a number of good ideas my battalion commander implemented when I was a company commander at Fort Bragg. He was a history buff and we visited Civil War battlefields two or three times a year. We really got a lot out of doing the terrain walks.”

“That’s fine Jim, but I think we are a little short on Civil War battlefields in Hawaii. I want to know what we have in place now in the battalion.”

“Well,” MAJ Darby stammered, “LTC Rogers and MAJ Conrad shared a similar mindset. The best leader development occurs in the field during training. You learn by getting good at your job.”

Based on our analysis of multiple Army leader development surveys and studies conducted over the last eight years, there appears to be a clear perception gap between the occurrence of leader development activities and associated adult learning. Field grade officers in general believe they are developing their subordinate leaders through formal and informal developmental programs and events. As highlighted in the CASAL surveys, subordinates do not share this perception. They believe their leaders are not developing them. This difference is troubling and we struggled with understanding why it existed. Even if organizations fall into the “leader development as a collective program” mindset, should not some learning take place during unit leadership classes such as OPDs?

¹⁸ D. Scott DeRue and Ned Wellman, “Developing Leaders via Experience: The Role of Developmental Challenge, Learning Orientation, and Feedback Availability,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol 94, No. 4 (2009), 859-860.

A clue to this question lies in our earlier observation that many senior leaders see the process of addressing individual leadership needs as solely a self-development responsibility. Leaders with this perspective not only fail to understand leader development in the operational domain, they have little understanding of how adults develop as learners.

Learning in Adulthood. People go through stages of cognitive development as they grow older.²⁴ Thinking patterns change due to a combination of factors primarily linked to the interaction of maturational and environmental variables.²⁵ When Soldiers enter military service in their late teens and early 20s, most have not developed the cognitive skills to think critically, which the Army defines as “the purposeful and reflective judgment about what to believe or what to do in response to observations, experience, verbal or written expressions, or arguments.”²⁶ Nor have they evolved into self-directed learners able to take active responsibility for their personal development.²⁷ It is not a reflection on their intelligence; it is a manifestation of their biological and psychological maturity.

Robert Kegan, a developmental psychologist in adult learning at Harvard, believes most adults do not develop the ability to make sense of their experiences independently of other’s expectations until well into adulthood.²⁸ Until that time, they need assistance and encouragement,²⁹ which takes us back to the issue of leader development and the perception gap between senior leaders and followers.

In Over Our Heads

Robert Kegan’s theory of meaning-making¹⁹ conceptualizes how people make sense of experiences. His 1994 book, *In Over Our Heads*, describes five stages of cognitive development, which he calls “orders.” From an adult learning perspective, the two most critical stages are Orders 3 and 4.

In Order 3, “meaning-makers co-construct their sense of meaning with other persons and sources,”²⁰ which means the opinions and expectations of others strongly influence how they interpret events. They fuse these ideas from others into their own to create personal understanding. A majority of adults fall into the Order 3 category.²¹

Conversely, Order 4 individuals, whom we would describe as self-directed critical thinkers, are able to “self-author”²² their meaning-making conceptualizations. They still use input from others but internalize it as one of multiple points of view. As a result, they construct an independent theory of self. About 35 percent of the adult population falls into this category.²³

In our opinion, the principles of mission command are structured for self-directed, Order 4 leaders. The majority of junior leaders in the Army have not yet achieved this level of cognitive development. To ensure junior leaders are not “in over their heads,” senior leaders must help them form their judgment and make sense of their experiences through observation, feedback, and dialogue.

¹⁹ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 7.

²⁰ Michael Ignelzi, “Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 82, 7

²¹ Peter W. Pruyan, *An Overview of Constructive Developmental Theory (CDT)*, developmentalobserver.blog.com

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sharan B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood*, 2nd ed., 166.

²⁵ Ibid, 139.

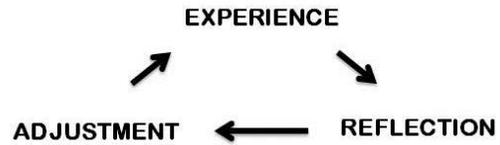
²⁶ Department of the Army, ADRP 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2012), 1-40.

²⁷ Michael Ignelzi, “Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 82 (Summer 2000), 10.

²⁸ Sharan B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood*, 2nd ed., 155.

²⁹ Michael Ignelzi, “Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 82, 8.

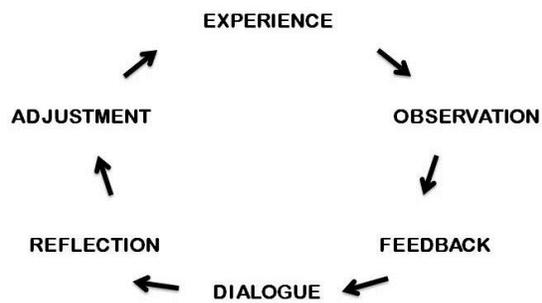
What Senior Leaders Perceive. Many senior leaders believe leader development is happening because they are setting the conditions for it to occur through scheduled activities such as OPD sessions, staff rides, directed reading lists, and major training events. Because they are setting the conditions for successful meaning making, senior leaders believe subordinates should be able to reflect on the experiences and take appropriate action to adjust their behavior and thinking—the epitome of personal self-development.



This is a flawed mental model albeit not an unusual one.

People tend to believe that similar individuals, (i.e., fellow Soldiers), think the same way they do with comparable opinions, beliefs, preferences, values, and habits. Psychologists call this cognitive bias or flaw in thinking the false-consensus effect.³⁰ “If I was able to reflect on and learn from my experiences, why can’t others?” The answer is they may not be at the same level of cognitive development.

What Junior Leaders Need. As discussed earlier, making sense of an experience requires interpretation of the event to create personal understanding. When the event involves a new and challenging experience, individuals lacking well-developed critical thinking skills struggle. They have no point of reference to analyze the situation. The result, more often than not, is to discount or ignore the experience because it does not fit existing schema or representations of reality. The junior leaders are making meaning—people always make meaning—but it is incomplete. This is why more seasoned leaders, especially unit commanders, must be committed to the learning process within the organization. Commanders have the position and personal power to fill this meaning-making void, which Kegan calls “the zone of mediation.”³¹ Leaders do this by providing observation, feedback, and dialogue. When combined with reflection and subsequent adjustment decisions by subordinate leaders on needed changes to behavior and thinking, these steps become a completed meaning making cycle for learning.



Now that we have a better understanding of the challenges associated with leader development, let us look more closely at the two phases of a successful leader development process.

³⁰ Donald C. Pennington, *Social Cognition*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 47.

³¹ Robert Kegan, *Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Develop*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2.

ASSESSMENT & INTEGRATION PHASE

LTC Simpson was surprised by the disparate responses of his field grades and CSM on leader development. Their remarks left him uneasy. He decided the best approach for assessing leader development and getting “ground truth” on what was happening was by talking to his junior leaders.

After PT the following morning, he joined four NCOs from B Co stretching in the quad. The squad leaders and platoon sergeant were surprised when LTC Simpson asked them about leader development in the unit.

“You mean unit training, sir?” SFC Richards asked.

“No, not exactly,” LTC Simpson replied. “I am talking about challenging events or activities in your platoon or company that have helped develop you personally to do your job or to prepare you to assume the next higher job.”

After a moment of silence, SSG Gonzales spoke up. “SFC Richards talks to all the squad leaders after PT everyday, sir. He lets us know how we are doing and what things we have to work on. Is that what you mean, sir?”

“Thanks SSG Gonzales. I think you are on the right track. SFC Richards, what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of your squad leaders?” LTC Simpson asked.

SFC Richards smiled, “Sir, it is all good. I have the best squad leaders in the battalion.”

LTC Simpson smiled back. “I expected that answer. I know we have top quality NCOs in the battalion, but how do you know what to focus on from a leader development standpoint? How do you challenge your NCOs to improve?”

“Sir,” SFC Richards responded, “isn’t that why we have a training schedule? It tells us what to focus on.”

The purpose of the assessment and integration phase of the leader development process is to create challenging developmental experiences for leaders by integrating individual needs and unit leadership requirements with unit learning opportunities.



Individual Needs. Assessing individual needs is a collaborative effort involving supervisors and subordinate leaders. Discussions, which should occur as part of a developmental counseling process,³² focus on two areas: the individual’s current competency level (strengths and weaknesses) and personal development goals and desires.

The competency discussion is a two-way conversation that covers knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with the individual’s current and prospective jobs in the organization. Topics generally focus on technical/tactical knowledge, interpersonal skills, and cognitive ability. Supervisors use their judgment to guide the discussion based on their knowledge and experience with their subordinate’s job and overall

³² See the Army’s new techniques publication, ATP 6-22.1, *The Counseling Process*, 1 July 2014, for guidance on performance counseling and professional growth counseling.

performance. Ideally, they served in a similar assignment in the past and are familiar with the leadership challenges associated with the position. The Leadership Requirements Model (LRM) from ADRP 6-22 is a useful reference for the supervisor to use in preparing for the conversation, but its generic list of attributes and competencies should serve only as a general guide. The purpose of the two-way discussion is to assess the overall competence of the junior leader, not to measure individual competencies.³³

The second aspect of individual needs—personal development goals and desires—can be very private in nature so supervisors must have a solid foundation of trust established with junior leaders to initiate the conversation. The need for trust underscores the importance of learning organizations and the shared beliefs that leaders are committed to organizational learning and all members of the organization have a voice in the learning process. Unless these beliefs are part of the unit psyche, a meaningful conversation on personal goals and desires probably will not occur.

A discussion of personal goals could lead to areas that appear to have little military relevance (a love of art or a desire to attend law school for example). It would be easy for a supervisor to dismiss these ideas and focus on competency development associated with the Soldier's military occupational specialty. This would be shortsighted. Supervisors should acknowledge and document goals and desires, maintaining a record in case learning opportunities arise that call for these unique talents. More importantly, from the perspective of life-long learning, supervisors have the responsibility to assist junior leaders in developing personal self-development plans that recognize and integrate their goals and desires. This includes discussions on potential broadening opportunities for training, education, and future assignments.

Unit Leadership Requirements. Unit leadership requirements generally fall into three categories. The first is an overarching need for adaptive, innovative, and self-directed leaders who think critically and creatively. This means leaders who embrace the principles of mission command and operate independently in a dynamic environment, responding effectively to changing situations with new and creative ideas to solve problems.³⁴ In other words, these are what Kegan describes as “Order 4” leaders, comfortable with complexity and change.

The second category focuses on collectively shared leader competencies identified and assessed by commanders to meet explicit organizational needs or goals associated with mission-essential tasks, leader certification programs, or other unit requirements. Units typically address these leader competencies with structured learning opportunities such as leader classes for CTC rotations, certification programs for new unit officers, or battalion professional reading programs.

The third category is more explicit. It is the need for filling critical command and staff positions within the organization with competent leaders. Filling open billets requires careful thought and planning by commanders. They must balance short-term operational demands within the organization with long-term developmental needs of subordinates, i.e., improving while operating. It is not an either/or proposition. Achieving this balance between individual needs and unit leadership requirements is the ultimate challenge of the assessment and integration phase of leader development.

³³ Dr. Morgan W. McCall, Jr., professor at the Marshall School of Business, USC, is a strong opponent of competency models. In his 2010 article from *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 3-19, *Recasting Leadership Development*, he states, “A single set of competencies applied to all leaders can create a common language for talking about leadership and even an integrated system of HR policies and practices. But to the extent that there is no one “best” way to lead and that experience drives development, this approach focuses development effort in the wrong place.”

³⁴ Department of the Army, *Army Leader Development Strategy (ALDS)*, 5 & 10.

Learning Opportunities. Learning opportunities are experiential assignments and activities superiors leverage to meet individual needs and unit leadership requirements. They are typically associated with personnel manning, unit training, administrative functions, and mission support operations. *Only a small minority of these opportunities are leader development “events” such as formal classes, which superiors use to meet individual needs collectively shared by subordinate leaders.* The vast majority of learning opportunities are activities associated with *day-to-day operations*.

Assessment and integration means aligning individual needs and unit leadership requirements with learning opportunities to create experiential learning. Ideally, superiors do this in a purposeful and deliberate manner, meaning they create or take advantage of an existing learning opportunity to improve an identified weakness or other individual need in a subordinate leader. Realistically, however, integration also occurs informally when superiors observe subordinate leaders in day-to-day activities and use the opportunity to discuss existing needs or identify additional areas the subordinates need to improve. Since learning opportunities exist in everything the organization does, both approaches—deliberate and informal—allow leaders to integrate individual and collective leadership needs with learning opportunities.

Integrating leader development needs and learning opportunities for an entire organization requires a concerted effort at both the direct and organizational-level of leadership. At the direct level, all leaders, be it squad leaders or division commanders, are responsible for developing direct reports.³⁵ This means identifying leader development needs of immediate subordinates and *creating concrete plans*, with subordinate input, for addressing these needs using assignments, daily activities, or specially designed events to provide challenging, experiential learning experiences.

To achieve the greatest benefit from an experience, subordinate leaders must understand the purpose of the assignments or activities, and the superior’s expectations for success. This could happen before the experience or later during the meaning-making cycle, depending on the learning objectives for the event. Too often, superiors throw subordinates into demanding activities to “test” their capabilities with no explanation before or after the event. This “sink or swim” mentality serves little purpose except to frustrate subordinate leaders and increase their learning anxiety.³⁶

At the organizational-level, commanders are responsible for setting the conditions for the purposeful execution of a leader development process. Setting the conditions means anchoring within the organization norms and values on the importance of learning and leader development. As discussed earlier, these norms and values compose three critical shared beliefs: *leaders are committed to organizational learning, all members of the organization have a voice in the learning process, and opportunities for developmental experiences exist in everything we do.*

³⁵ Many officers believe Army doctrine and regulation make them responsible for directly developing subordinate leaders they senior rate. It does not. ADRP 7-0, *Army Training and Leader Development*, states in paragraph 2-27 “subordinate leaders develop their own subordinates.” The individual with the greatest influence over a subordinate is the immediate supervisor. The primary responsibility of the senior rater is to set the conditions for the success of their subordinates’ leader development efforts by establishing a culture of learning and a climate of psychological safety within the organization. Army doctrine does not preclude senior leaders from being involved in the learning process two-levels down, especially at brigade level and below, but it does highlight that responsibility, authority, and accountability for leader development rests with the immediate supervisor.

³⁶ Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, “Improving while Operating: The Paradox of Learning,” 6.

Anchoring these shared beliefs within the psyche of an organization is fundamental to creating a culture of learning and a successful leader development process. Psychologist Edgar Schein, in his book *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, identifies six primary “embedding mechanisms” for integrating the leader’s values and beliefs into the culture of an organization (see footnote 38). These six mechanisms focus on concrete actions commanders can take to establish priorities, set standards, communicate expectations, allocate rewards, and issue punishments within the organization.³⁸ For leader development to take hold and thrive, commanders must use the embedding mechanisms to shape group norms and values within the organization while creating a supportive command climate.

A supportive command climate is of special importance from a leader development perspective because developmental learning experiences should occur in a safe-fail environment. This means a climate that creates psychological safety for the learner. The superior must be willing to accept failure in the experiential activity so the subordinate can learn from the experience. For this to occur, the superior must ensure failure is not catastrophic to the individual or organization. Establishing a safe-fail environment is challenging. Many leaders experienced risk-averse environments early in their careers and have an ingrained fear of failure. Safe-fail means accepting prudent risk, a principle of mission command that focuses on creating opportunities rather than simply preventing defeat.³⁹

Once the integration phase is complete, you now have an *experience*, something that has happened to you. What you learn and do with that experience depends on the meaning you make from it.

Making It Stick³⁷

Leaders use Schein’s six embedding mechanisms to shape thinking and behavior within organizations. To reinforce these ideas, leaders apply secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanisms to make them stick within one’s thinking and become inculcated in the organization’s culture. They include:

- Organizational design and structure
- Organizational systems and procedures
- Rites and rituals
- Design of physical space
- Stories about important events and people
- Formal statements of philosophy and vision

These mechanisms are powerful tools when used in conjunction with Schein’s six primary embedding mechanisms. Many leaders fail in their efforts to shape organizational culture because they default to reinforcement mechanisms in lieu of Schein’s embedding mechanisms. For example, organizations institute new policies that have little impact because they fail to motivate followers to embrace the values and beliefs of the leader. Without the leader’s priorities, articulated through the primary embedding mechanisms, secondary mechanisms have little influence on motivating an organization.

³⁷ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 250-257.

³⁸ Ibid, 236. The following is a list Schein’s six embedding mechanisms. See the paper, “Improving while Operating: The Paradox of Learning” for a complete description of each. 1) *What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis*; 2) *How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises*; 3) *How leaders allocate resources*; 4) *Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching*; 5) *How leaders allocate rewards and status*; and 6) *How leaders recruit, select, promote, and excommunicate*.

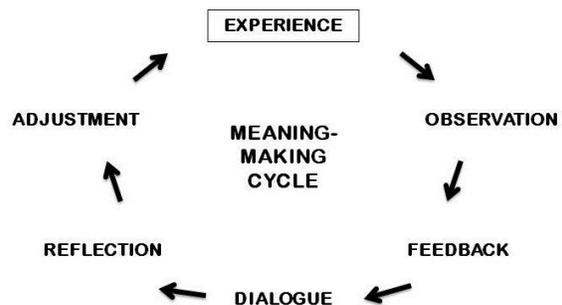
³⁹ Department of the Army, ADRP 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2012), 2-25.

MEANING MAKING PHASE: THE HEART OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

LTC Simpson spent the morning with CPT Miller, the Bravo company commander, in the Kahuku Training Area off the North Shore, observing platoons enter and clear buildings at the MOUT site. CPT Miller was being resourceful, rotating one platoon as the OPFOR in a round robin training cycle.

LTC Simpson liked how CPT Miller and his first sergeant conducted a short platoon AAR after each phase of the operations process (plan—prepare—execute) during the training. The only troubling point came midway through the morning during an AAR of 2nd platoon's clearing operations rehearsal. The platoon leader, 2LT Parnell, performed very poorly during the rehearsal. He was unable to control his formation and manage the tempo of the operation. CPT Miller's anger was evident in the AAR where he provided very pointed criticism of Parnell's performance. He concluded the session by admonishing the entire platoon over their performance and left them with the guidance of, "Do it again, but do it right this time!"

As stated earlier, making sense of an experience requires interpretation of the event to create personal understanding. This interpretation occurs in the second phase of the leader development process, the meaning-making cycle. Meaning making is not formal developmental counseling.⁴⁰ It is a method of learning that uses a supportive command climate to capture knowledge and apply judgment to create understanding from the experience. The five steps that follow are not a new invention.⁴¹ They are a common sense approach for helping leaders improve while operating. What makes this process unique is that only about half of immediate superiors take time to talk to subordinates about how they could improve their duty performance.⁴² The following is a short summary of each step.



Observation. Meaning making begins with some form of data or information collection, which typically comes from observers of the activity. Be it superiors, peers, or followers, someone is watching, even for unscheduled, ad hoc events (remember, learning opportunities exist in everything the organization does). Leaders often have to fight for feedback, especially from subordinates who may be reluctant to provide unvarnished comments to a superior.

Feedback. Observers share comments on what they saw. The superior should put the comments in context with the purpose of the activity and the expected outcomes. If it is a collective activity, the feedback will most likely come in the form of an AAR. Comments from peers and subordinates are just as valuable and may uncover problems not identified in the initial needs assessment.

⁴⁰ While meaning making is not formal developmental counseling, it may occur during the counseling process depending on the existence and quality of the observation, feedback, and dialogue. According to AR 623-3, leaders conduct initial counseling within 30 days after the beginning of a rating period, and quarterly thereafter for NCOs, WO1s, CW2s, LTs, and CPTs. Counseling for all other grades is on an as-needed basis.

⁴¹ You can correlate the first three steps of the meaning-making cycle to the first three steps of achieving understanding as described in ADRP 6-0, Fig. 2-1. Data from observation is transformed into information in the form of feedback. During dialogue, the information is analyzed and refined as knowledge for the subordinate leader. The final step, understanding, occurs during reflection with the application of judgment.

⁴² 2013 CAL Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings Technical Report 2014-1, 76.

Dialogue. Dialogue means two-way communication, and includes active listening to reach shared understanding.⁴³ Dialogue ensures feedback is not a one-way transmission from superior to subordinate. “Without interaction, learning is sterile and passive, never fundamentally changing the learner.”⁴⁴ Interactive discussions are productive in answering questions, clarifying learning points, and increasing the subordinate leader’s knowledge of what occurred during the event. This is especially important if the experience is completely new and the leader has no point of reference to judge behavior or thinking.

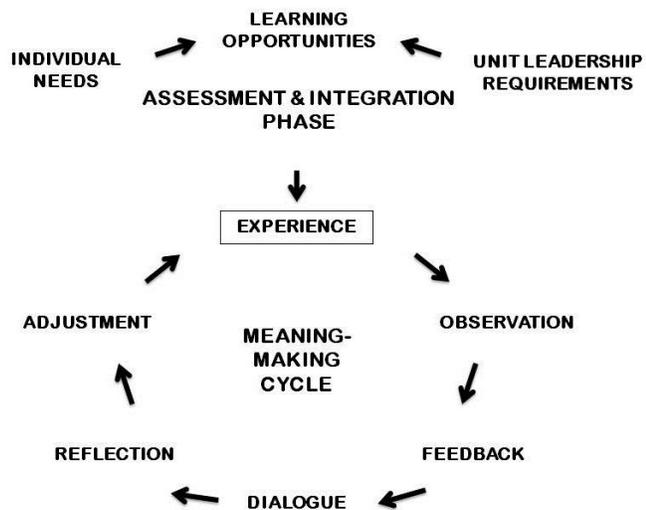
Reflection. During reflection, subordinate leaders process the information received in the feedback and dialogue steps to determine the necessity for making changes to thinking and behavior. This often involves questioning one’s assumptions and mental models, especially when dealing with new and unique situations. Reflection is critical because it “enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving.”⁴⁵

Adjustment. The purpose of the meaning-making cycle is to learn from experience. The subordinate leader demonstrates this learning in the form of adjustment decisions to change one’s thinking and/or behavior. Some changes occur quickly, especially those associated with behavior. Changes in thinking typically occur more slowly with the learners’ level of cognitive development greatly influencing the process. Superiors need to demonstrate patience as they implement this phase of leader development.

CONCLUSION

After a week of walking around and talking to members of his organization, LTC Simpson felt he had enough information to respond to the brigade commander’s request on leader development. He did not think COL Redman would like what he had to say. Leader development was not a priority within the battalion. It was not even a secondary consideration. It seemed to rank somewhere between AR 350-1 training requirements and IG inspections. He knew he had to say this in a diplomatic way since the problems in his unit were most likely systemic to the entire brigade.

He concluded the best approach for presenting his recommendations to his boss was by focusing on what the organization should do for leader development rather than what it was not doing. As a result, he created this diagram to explain conceptually how the leader development process is supposed to work within an organization.



⁴³ Department of the Army, ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership*, 6-77.

⁴⁴ Carol Rodgers, “Defining Reflection: Another Look at John Dewey and Reflective Thinking,” *Teachers College Record*, vol 104, no. 4 (June 2002), 847.

⁴⁵ Jack Mezirow and Associates, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1990), 1.

The leader development process does not occur by happenstance. It requires a culture of learning within organizations. A “culture of learning” is not a series of buzzwords; it is a way of thinking and behaving. It means all leaders within the organization are committed to the importance of learning, members have a voice in the learning process, and everyone views day-to-day unit activities as opportunities to learn. Without a culture of learning, organizations tend to view leader development as a command-directed program from higher headquarters that must compete with an already packed training schedule.

Fostering a culture of learning reinforces the importance of learning from experience gained through real-life activities and events. These experiences foster experiential learning, which drives the leader development process. To maximize leader development in the operational domain, commanders embrace the use of experience as a developmental tool by aligning individual needs of subordinate leaders and unit leadership requirements with organizational learning opportunities to create challenging developmental leadership experiences.

Once an experience “occurs,” the hard work of making sense of the experience and creating personal understanding begins. This is the meaning making cycle. The critical point to remember is that meaning making does not occur in a vacuum; it requires input from others. If subordinate leaders are simply reflecting on personal experience and adjusting their behavior or thinking on their own, they may not be achieving their full potential. Instead, if subordinate leaders are reflecting on and responding to observations, feedback, and dialogue from superiors, peers, and subordinates, then they have a much deeper cycle of meaning making that better stimulates personal growth and development.

Implementing this two-phase approach to leader development requires significant effort. At the organizational level, commanders set the conditions for the purposeful execution of a leader development process by anchoring their beliefs and values on the importance of learning and leader development within the culture of the organization. Edgar Schein’s embedding mechanisms are an excellent tool for doing this. At the direct level, the challenges are equally demanding. There are no short cuts for developing leaders because each subordinate leader requires the personal attention of one’s superior to identify individual needs based on personal strengths and weaknesses. Remember, superiors develop subordinates one leader at a time. No two people are the same.

Talking a Good Game

Many senior leaders talk a good game when describing the leader development process in their organization. They emphasize the importance of an “integrative learning process,” and how “leader development is part of everything we do.” The trouble is their actions speak louder than their words. “Everything we do” turns into nothing more than formal OPD and NCOPD sessions prominently placed on training schedules. Some get “creative” and add reading programs, officer PT sessions, and staff rides.

Why do so many senior leaders limit leader development to collective practices that the CASAL survey has repeatedly highlighted have little impact on learning?⁴⁶ They do it because leader development is incredibly hard to assess from an individual learning perspective. Based on our experience, you can ask two fundamental questions to determine how well supervisors are meeting the individual needs of subordinate leaders:

1) “What are you doing to develop your subordinates?” Answering this simple, but pointed, question requires an understanding of the subordinate’s specific developmental needs as well as the purposeful plan for addressing them.

2) “What happened and what have you learned from this experience?” While the question focuses on the subordinate, the response highlights the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the meaning-making process.

⁴⁶ 2013 CAL Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings Technical Report 2014-1, 86.

Our goal was to provide you a conceptual framework for implementing a successful leader development process in the operational domain. The two-phase approach we describe provides the foundation by using experience as a developmental tool, and processing the experience using a cycle of meaning making to create personal understanding.

Your challenge now is to move these ideas from theory to practice, which returns us one last time to LTC Simpson...

LTC Simpson felt a trickle of sweat roll down his back as COL Redman sat stone-faced during his leader development presentation. He was either deeply upset or concentrating very hard.

At the conclusion of LTC Simpson's remarks, COL Redman, a commander who seemed to thrive on hyperbole, leapt to his feet. "Simpson, this is brilliant. I finally understand the big picture for leader development. Now answer some questions for me. How will you implement this process within your battalion and, more importantly, how do I take this concept and implement it within the brigade? We have one week until the QTB. I want to present these ideas to the CG. Tell me how we can do it."