

Counter-Balancing the Imbalance: An Army Leader's Role in Balancing Organizational Temperament

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September 10th, 2012

Submitted For:

The General Douglas MacArthur

Military Leadership Writing Competition

CGSC Class 12-02

Refuting Irrefutable Logic

Consider the following illustration of a normal encounter between an Army leader and a subordinate. A CSM (or any other leader or rank) sees the need one day in Afghanistan to correct a Soldier with a minor uniform discrepancy (once again, any minor issue would do). This Soldier has the panache to place his sunglasses on his head as he walks into the DFAC. The next day, the Soldier moves the sunglasses down to hang around his neck, utilizing the lanyard provided by the Army when issuing the eye protection, only to be told that is unacceptable as well. Days three and four involve hooking the sunglasses on the shirt collar and the reflective belt, violations that earn the Soldier more reprimands.

The Soldier, tired of getting in trouble, asks the CSM why it is so important to follow minor uniform regulations. The CSM answers with the universally accepted Army mantra: “If you lose discipline regarding the little things, you’ll lose discipline on the big things, and you’ll get someone killed.” Irrefutable Army logic... *that is completely nonsensical to 62% of the population!* To understand this, let’s evaluate the CSM’s statement through the lenses of the four Keirsey-Bates temperaments, based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).¹

The SJ (Sensing-Judging): Like many senior leaders in the military, the CSM is most likely an SJ. SJs love organization, structure, and institutions. They are the largest temperament group at roughly 38% of the U.S. population. They live procedures, rules, regulations and traditions. To them, the CSM’s logic makes sense – all rules are meant to be followed and bending minor rules is a sign of failing discipline.

The SP (Sensing-Perceiving): The SP is imminently practical and lives in the present. At 35% of the population, they are hands-on, creative, easily bored, and fun-loving. The SP sees no

¹ Keirsey-Bates temperament information for the next four paragraphs comes from Kroeger and Thuesen, Type Talk, 49-61.

connection between the little rule about the sunglasses and a future hypothetical situation about some other rule. To him, the CSM's sudden sunglass fixation is arbitrary and obviously meant to take the fun out of life. The SP may even purposefully break the rule in the future, just to see the veins pop out on the CSM's forehead. Tomorrow he'll either lose the sunglasses since he can't hang them around his neck, or build a sunglasses holder out of duct tape and attach it to his pistol holster.

The NT (iNtuitive-Thinking): NTs represent 12% of the population. They seek competence above all and strive to understand the big picture. NT's learn by asking 'why', questioning authority and challenging the system. The CSM's logic has a reverse effect on the NT. If the CSM thinks that uniform regulations are somehow in the same ballpark as muzzle awareness with a loaded weapon, then the CSM's priorities are out of whack and he is incompetent. It is the duty of the NT to not follow incompetence, so he will henceforth ignore the CSM to include future valid rules and/or input.² An NT can be completely disciplined regarding rules he considers important and at the same time ignore those that he does not.

The NF (iNtuitive-Feeling): NFs are all about people and relationships. They take criticism and correction personally, and want to live in peace and harmony with everyone. Rules matter to the NF if they affect people and relationships. The NF will be frustrated that the CSM is adding to the stress of deployment by yelling at him. Plus, doesn't the CSM know that he is going through some tough stuff at home? The CSM should be getting to know Soldiers personally and supporting them, not acting like the uniform police. The NF will usually personally follow the rules – but will do so to please the CSM. People are important, not rules, so the CSM's logic is meaningless to the NF.

To three of the four temperaments then, the CSM's irrefutable Army logic is invalid. For a

² For purposes of full disclosure, the author is an NT. All MBTI types are equal, but ENTPs are the most equal.

large percentage of the population his statement is meaningless, or even worse, detrimental. Why point this out? Certainly not because there is anything wrong with CSMs, or uniform regulations, or even SJs, but this familiar Army mantra illustrates the effect of temperament and personality type on leadership. Leaders must be aware of the interaction between their own temperament and the temperaments of their subordinates. They must understand that imposing their own personality type on the work environment may be unhelpful or even hostile to other temperaments. Furthermore, when an organization (like the Army) naturally takes on a collective temperament, leaders must be even more aware of how that affects members of the organization who don't match the corporate temperament. As seen below, this is necessary not just for the good of the individual subordinates, but for the good of the organization as a whole.

Imbalance Leads to Greater Imbalance

The Army is naturally an imbalanced organization in terms of collective temperament. One could make an educated and fairly accurate guess as to the group type of the Army by looking at the short descriptions of the temperaments above. The SJ temperament jumps out immediately; people who love organization, structure, and institutions and live procedures, rules, regulations and traditions naturally gravitate to the military. People of this temperament want to belong to meaningful organizations, they are dutiful and dependable, and they enjoy the clearly-defined lifestyle. It is no wonder that a temperament nicknamed 'The Guardian' would seek out and excel in the military.

It is not necessary to just guess as to the group type of the Army since research and experience provide support for this thesis. Although the Army does not use or track MBTI across the board, a variety of studies show that SJs are overrepresented in the military. A War

College survey of 1755 officers in 1997 identified roughly 62% of them as SJs – much higher than the national average of 38%.³ The same imbalance was also identified in large surveys in the late 1980's and early 1990's and a 2009 paper states that over 50% of War College students are even more narrowly defined STJs (which would only be 20% of the national population).⁴ A study at the Naval Academy shows a 60% SJ population⁵ and a smaller CGSC study shows an SJ preference over 50%.⁶ Although too small to be statistically reliable, current group types in staff groups 2A and 2B reflect this trend, as did the author's Career Course. Otto Krueger, one of the main proponents of the MBTI who has worked with the Army, points at the military as a career choice of SJs, especially ISTJs.⁷ One could also factor in the impact of the NTJs in these studies, another 12-20% of the military population, and realize that not only is the Army leaning toward the SJ temperament, it is leaning away from the F and P types.

The fact that the Army naturally attracts SJs is neither good nor bad, it just is. Most career fields show a group type imbalance, as people self select occupations in line with their personalities and interests. However, both War College studies cited above conclude that the Army furthers the SJ imbalance through systemic processes such as promotion and retention. The Army would need to do long term studies that tracked personnel from initial entry through separation to know the specific extent of this effect, but it is once again a natural and obvious result in any organization with a strong group type.

The opening illustration of this essay involved a minor and insignificant incident, but analogous incidents happen to every member of the Army almost every day. It is all too easy to

³ Walck, *Integrating Staff Elements, Personality Type and Groupthink*, 16.

⁴ Allen, *Creative Thinking for Individuals and Teams*, 3.

⁵ Roush and Atwater, *Using the MBTI to Understand Transformational Leadership and Self-Perception Accuracy*, 34.

⁶ Russel, *Relationship Between Army Officer Personality Type, Combat Identifier, Leadership Style, And Career Satisfaction*, 42.

⁷ Kroeger and Thuesen, *Type Talk*, 194.

imagine (and experientially and anecdotally verify) the effect of SJ imbalance on the other personality types. The NT soldier gets frustrated with the seeming incompetence of his superiors and the constraining environment of authority and either leaves the Army or becomes an officer or Special Forces soldier. The SP soldier gets frustrated trying to keep up with all the rules and either finds a technical MOS where she can ‘just do stuff’ or gets out of the Army (and then regrets that spur of the moment decision and seeks to get back in a few years later). The NF soldier gets frustrated with the fact that rules and plans seem to be more important than people, and either moves into a service MOS like the medical corps or leaves the Army.

Even in the officer corps, this process works out through separations, promotions, and branch choices. It is quite easy to look at the correlation between branch and temperament in staff groups 2A and 2B, and realize that most non-SJ personality types have gravitated toward functional areas and non-movement and maneuver branches. Just as the War College studies show, the SJ imbalance in the Army leads to greater SJ imbalance in the Army.

Balance Brings Greater Balance

While many in the Army may dismiss this imbalance as a natural occurrence, or even view it as good, most research on temperament and type diversity in group settings indicate that imbalance is detrimental. In the well known *Challenger* scenario, over 80% of NASA senior leaders were Js and the typological imbalance proved to be a factor in the disaster. Staying on schedule and sticking to decisions are important to Js, and these bents were part of the reason later data that may have prevented the disaster was overlooked.⁸

Because of the SJ leaning of the Army, researchers like Charles Allen question whether the Army is a learning organization that can be creative and think outside the box. According to

⁸ Kroeger and Thuesen, *Type Talk*, 99.

him, the typical SJ sees himself as an efficient problem solver, but not a creative problem solver.⁹ Survey results in Military Review show that only 31% of junior officers believe that the Army values innovation.¹⁰ The Army has struggled in the past decade to adjust to the ‘softer’, more relational aspects of COIN and winning hearts and minds. With creativity more normally associated with SPs (nicknamed ‘Artisans’) and NTPs (most highly represented among entrepreneurs), and relational skills most clearly linked to NF (the least represented in the Army), are these concerns at all surprising?

Diversity of temperament is especially important in problem solving and planning forums. According to a variety of studies,¹¹ diverse groups “perform significantly better and more consistently than similar groups” and “group synergy was far greater for the diverse groups.” This comes at a price though – homogenous groups worked more quickly, even though diverse groups produced significantly higher quality solutions, especially on ambiguous, complex tasks. As well, diverse groups had a lower quality of presentation even though their solutions were superior. An SJ organization that values efficiency and quality presentation (PowerPoint!) may be willing to sacrifice innovative better solutions for efficient solutions packaged well.

Despite that tendency, balance and diversity would benefit the Army in the long run. In a strategic environment that calls for hybrid warriors that can fight a conventional army, rebuild a sewer system, provide logistics for natural disaster response, and build relationships with local villagers all in the same week, diversity of skill and temperament is necessary. In an era of austerity, innovation and creativity are a must. During a time of stress and high Army PTSD, mental health, and suicide rates, relational skills are in constant demand. A well balanced Army would retain and attract a better balance of temperaments, and with that balance of temperaments

⁹ Allen, *Creative Thinking for Individuals and Teams*, 6.

¹⁰ Bruhl, *Gardener-Leaders*, 43.

¹¹ Studies cited in Myers et al., *MBTI Manual*, 351.

would come a wider range of skills and abilities.

Leaders Provide Counterbalance

This is where the Army leader comes in. The only way to correct imbalance is to provide counterbalance. The Army leader must intentionally identify detrimental imbalance and purposefully attempt to counterbalance it. Leaders must be aware of their own temperaments and preferences and seek the input and perspective of other temperaments in order to avoid alienating and disenfranchising differing types of people. This is especially true of SJ leaders in the Army, because they fit nicely into the Army system and may be unaware of the discomfort and frustration experienced in the Army by the other three temperaments.

Practically speaking, what does this look like? How do leaders provide counterbalance in an organization that naturally attracts and retains certain personality types? The following suggestions will assist the Army leader to avoid misapplications of counterbalance, understand how to provide balance through individual leadership, and envision institutional changes that could address systemic imbalance. These suggestions are purposefully broad, recognizing that there are no simplistic answers and that there is a need for more thought and research. They are largely tailored to SJ leaders, but are easily transferrable to leaders of every temperament.

What Leaders Do Not Need To Do

1. Fundamentally and completely correct the imbalance of the Army. By nature, SJs will be attracted to and loyal to this great organization and the Army needs SJs – with apologies to the NCO Corps, it is really SJs that are the backbone of the Army. The Army must continue to be about duty, respect and standards (SJ characteristics) and will always need people who can provide detailed planning and organization (natural SJ abilities).

2. Stereotype SJs as non-creative people lacking relationship skills. The beauty of the MBTI is that it speaks to preferences, not to abilities. There are many SJs in the Army who have strong relational skills, display phenomenal creativity and understand the big picture. However, these things may not be their 'default' setting, and will more naturally come to the other three temperaments, especially in times of crisis.

3. Use temperament or type selection for recruiting or building teams. Leaders must not use MBTI as a discriminator or screening criteria for selecting, promoting, recruiting or building teams. Since MBTI measures preference and not ability, promotion and selection should continue to be about performance and potential, not personality.

What Leaders Must Do

1. Know their subordinates and actively seek input from other temperaments. Give the NT permission to bring the group out of the weeds and back to the big picture during MDMP. Turn to the NF at the end of a training meeting and ask him how the training schedule will affect the Soldiers. Hand an SP a practical problem that requires a creative solution and ask her to bring you three 'outside the box' ideas.

2. Decide what is most important, and stick to it even when uncomfortable. If the best solution to a problem is the goal, accept the messiness that comes from a diverse group problem-solving session. Is it more important to have everything beautifully laid out in the correct 26 pt. font, or is it acceptable to spend formatting time on developing a better solution?

3. Adapt your personality to give other temperaments some latitude and accommodation, because that is what the SJ Army asks of them. When the NF Soldier takes criticism from an SJ personally, the Army expects him to get thicker skin. However, when an NT officer questions her SJ commander and the commander gets upset, no one tells the SJ leader to get thicker skin.

Both are cases of natural temperamental tendencies. SJ leaders need to realize that the SP Soldier in the motor pool doesn't roll his sleeves up because he lacks discipline and wants to tick off the CSM; he does it because it's comfortable and practical and keeps his sleeves clean. They need to realize that when an NT subordinate disagrees with them, she is not disrespecting their position or authority; she naturally asks the question why and values competence over rank. SJ leaders need to realize that NFs are not soft or emotional; they just have a different logic system – one built around the value of people and relational connections.

What The Army Should Do

1. Realize that loosening up doesn't always mean becoming undisciplined. The Army retains many rules and traditions based on reasons that are now overcome by events. Some of these rules and regulations are illogical (not allowing Soldiers to use a sunglass restraining strap that the Army paid for and issued) or even detrimental to Soldiers (sun exposure and skin cancer because the boonie cap is not authorized in garrison). If someone suggested that the Army loosen haircut grooming standards, allow civilian backpacks to be utilized, and discontinue installation decals on cars, many leaders would decry the changing Army's loss of discipline and professionalism. However, these are all logical steps taken by the British Army for force protection reasons, so that Soldiers are less easily identified when off base and off duty!

2. Overhaul the MDMP process. The MDMP model is a largely SJ model.¹² It moves from part to whole (S), follows a fairly lock-step process with little room for creativity (J), and is too often focused on well-presented briefings and products. As one SAMS monograph succinctly puts it “less than two-thirds of the officers who use this process trust it, and only one in four believe that it consistently produces the best solution to a given problem. In short, we are using a

¹² See Danikowski, *Personality and the Planning Process*, for a more in-depth study of how temperament interacts with and influences the planning process.

process that we do not really believe in to produce results that we think are sub-optimal.”¹³

Recent emphasis on Design has been a breath of fresh air for big picture NTs, but the Army will need to further refine the relationship between Design and MDMP and will need to ensure that Design is not co-opted to become another rigid and highly defined process like MDMP.

3. Institute long term longitudinal studies of the relationship between temperament, career satisfaction, promotion and attrition. Unfortunately, the data needed to fully validate or invalidate the thrust of this paper is not readily accessible (if it exists). The multiple SAMS/MMAS monographs referenced had access to only single-class voluntary survey samples. No source mentioned any NCO or enlisted demographics. Studies at the USAWC take the temperament imbalance in the Army most seriously, but focus on the narrow scope of senior leadership. Overall, these works have addressed the issue of an SJ (and/or TJ) imbalance in the Army from a leadership and problem-solving perspective, but no comprehensive initiative addresses the detrimental impact on the organization as a whole, especially in regards to retention, promotion and attrition.

In conclusion, three truths should be clear. First, the Army is an imbalanced organization, leaning heavily toward the Sensing-Judging temperament with a strong Thinking emphasis. Second, because diversity and balance are good for an organization and for problem-solving, this imbalance has potentially detrimental side effects. Finally, Army leaders can and should provide a counter-balance by intentionally addressing this issue through individual efforts and systemic initiatives.

¹³ Walck, *Integrating Staff Elements, Personality Type and Groupthink*, 31.

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