

Crossing the Rubicon: An Introduction to Organizational-Level Leadership¹

It was a proud moment for MAJ Schmidt as his daughters placed the bright gold epaulettes on his shoulders. He was a field grade officer; he had finally made it! He basked in the kind words of his boss, the praise of his friends, and the love and affection of his family. As he cut the cake at his promotion ceremony, many of his fellow cadre asked the same question:

“How does it feel to be a field grade officer?”

“It feels great!” he responded. *In truth, it felt the same as being a captain but he was not about to admit that to any of his co-workers in the ROTC detachment.*

The next day his boss, LTC Christenson, called him in. “How does it feel to be a field grade officer Brian?”

Here we go again thought Brian. “It feels great, sir!” he said.

“Yes, but does it feel any different?”

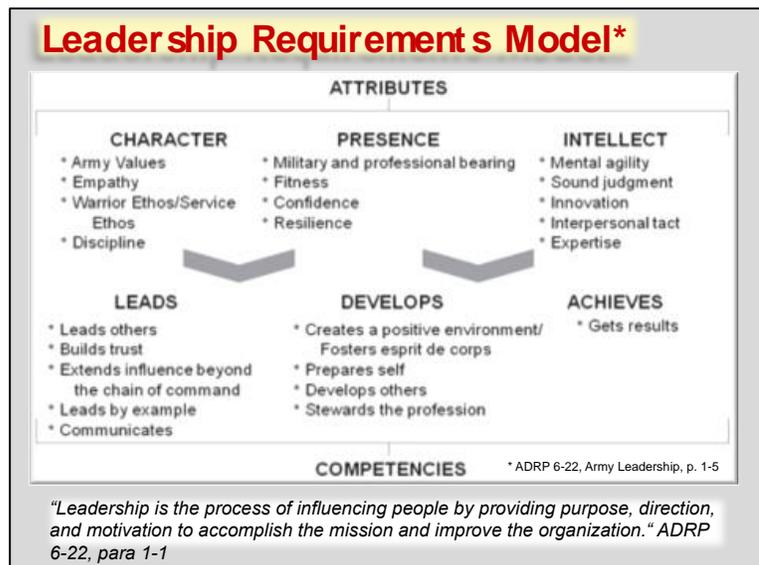
“Different? Not really. I mean I have to get used to thinking of myself as a major and not screwing up my rank when I answer the phone. But job-wise, I’m still in a captain’s position. I was your operations officer and assistant PMS yesterday and will continue in that position until I attend CGSC at Fort Leavenworth in three months,” he replied.

LTC Christenson smiled. “Are you disappointed? Did you think you would wake up with a frontal lobotomy and a desire to spew invectives at the Corps of Cadets while leading them on a 20-mile road march? Or maybe you thought you would step into my job this morning?”

“Sir, you know what I mean. I realize this is a milestone in my career. My life is going to change and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little nervous about it. Senior leaders spend a lot of time talking about ‘iron majors’ and young field grade officers driving operations in divisions and BCTs. That seems like a big leap from where I am right now.”

“You think so? Let me ask, what made you successful as a company-grade officer?”

MAJ Schmidt considered this for a moment. “Well, basic leadership skills for one—leading from the front, setting the example, taking care of Soldiers, and being technically and tactically proficient. The same leadership skills and competencies we preach to our cadets. They really work.”



¹ By Carey W. Walker and Robert J. Rielly, the Department of Command and Leadership for the CGSC - not to be further reproduced, August 2013. Revised August 2015

“Exactly,” said LTC Christenson. “And do those skills and competencies apply to field grade officers as well?”



FIXED OR GROWTH MINDSET?

- Your abilities are carved in stone
- You must prove yourself over and over
- “It is all about judging yourself and others”

➤ Your abilities can be cultivated through effort

➤ A person's true potential is unknowable

➤ “It is all about learning and improving.”

*Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, by Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D

Dr. Carol Dweck, a Stanford University psychologist, argues in her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, that the perspective you adopt for yourself and others profoundly affects the way you lead your life and influence others.² In her research, she discovered people generally fall into two categories of thinking, fixed or growth. Fixed thinkers believe they are born with a certain intellectual capacity and tend to avoid challenges outside their proven capabilities. People with growth perspectives see their intellectual capabilities as an untapped reservoir they can develop and grow, and embrace challenges as learning opportunities. People form a mindset preference early in life based on culture and upbringing. Most adults have elements of both mindsets, and they are typically associated with specific events or circumstances. The challenge for leaders is recognizing the trappings of the fixed mindset—the tendency to tie one’s self-image with one’s success. This creates a deep-rooted fear that affects all facets of one’s thinking and performance.

“Of course. Just because you are a field grade doesn’t mean you stop leading.” Suddenly the light bulb clicked on for MAJ Schmidt.

“I think I get your point. Leadership is leadership. If I keep doing what I’ve been doing and continue to gain more experience, my career will take care of itself.”

“Yes and no,” said LTC Christenson. “Leadership, the process of influencing others to do what is required, is timeless.³ The leadership attributes and competencies from ADRP 6-22 that we focus on with the cadets are universal in that they apply to all leaders, but the emphasis changes as we move up in rank. If you think and act like a company commander on a corps or division-level staff as a major, you are in for a rude awakening.”

MAJ Schmidt looked uncomfortable. “I was a pretty good company commander. In fact, my commander said I was the best maneuver company commander in the brigade. Plus, I have four deployments under my belt. That has to count for something,” he said vehemently.

“Relax Brian, this isn’t a personal attack. If you weren’t a good company commander, you wouldn’t be going to CGSC. This is about how your thinking and behavior have

to shift as a field grade officer. Think about your leadership style as a platoon leader and company commander. I bet you were very action focused and task oriented.”

² Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), 6.

³ Department of the Army, ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1 August 2012), para. 1-2.

“Of course,” said MAJ Schmidt. “I had a job to do and my Soldiers excelled under my ‘take charge’ leadership style. I was able to think on my feet and adapt to almost any situation.”

“That’s good, but will that same approach work at division and corps when you are attempting to influence fellow majors, lieutenant colonels, and a big guy with stars on his ACUs?” LTC Christenson proffered.

MAJ Schmidt was a little uncertain. “It should. Like you said, leadership is timeless and the competencies are universal.”

“But it’s not ‘one size fits all’ either. A bull in a china shop breaks a lot of glass. There is a place and time for being a hard-ass but it usually doesn’t endear you with your peers and bosses on a high-level staff. ‘Iron majors’ excel because they are analytical and focused thinkers; they do not rush to judgment. They are open to ideas and alternate points of view. They persuade others with reason and logic while maintaining courtesy and respect. When they reach into their kit bag, it has more than just different size hammers,” LTC Christenson concluded.

I think I was just scolded, MAJ Schmidt thought. I don’t think he is giving me much credit for what I know. “I realize organizational-level leadership is not the same as leading at the direct level. It requires a broader skill set.”

“You are right,” LTC Christenson responded. “Direct-level leadership is face-to-face or first-line leadership. These leaders develop subordinates one-on-one and influence the organization indirectly through subordinates. The focus is typically on events and behaviors.”⁵

Organizational-Level leadership

The environment of the organizational level is more complex than at direct level. Organizational-level leaders face ill-structured problems and longer planning and implementation timelines. They have less direct monitoring and control and must work with and through other leaders. In a sense, organizational level leadership is about “leading leaders.” For example, a division commander leads brigade commanders who are successful leaders in their own right. This requires a more nuanced form of leadership.

Direct-level leaders generally gather facts, execute plans, motivate people, fix problems, and supervise. At the organizational level, leaders have to analyze the facts, make decisions with partial or incomplete information, explain the decision for others to execute—often not knowing if the solution will fix the problem—and then make adjustment decisions based on information and assessments from others.

Organizational-level leaders develop programs, plans, and policies. They make complex concepts understandable for the organization. They anticipate organizational friction points and mitigate them – sometimes for events that will not occur during their tenure due to long implementation timelines.

In the civilian world, author John Maxwell describes those working at the organizational level as “360 Degree Leaders.”⁴ As in the military, they not only lead and influence subordinates, but peers and bosses alike. Many times the individuals they must influence are not in their direct chain of command. This requires a broad skill set that includes influence techniques, managing conflict, prioritizing limited resources, timely decision-making, and developing others.

Most importantly, organizational-level leaders realize that the world does not revolve around them or their unit. It is about being part of a larger team. They see themselves as an enabler for their higher headquarters, the “Big Army,” and the profession of arms. They embrace the concept of “improving while operating”—meeting daily commitments while improving the organization for the future.

⁴ John C. Maxwell, *The 360° Leader* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Business, 2005)

⁵ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 52.

The Seasoned Executive's Decision-Making Style*

		INFORMATION USE	
		Satisficing	Maximizing
NUMBER OF OPTIONS	Single focus	DECISIVE Thinking: <i>Direct, efficient, fast, and firm.</i> Leading: Style comes across as <i>action-focused and task oriented.</i>	HIERARCHIC Thinking: <i>Highly analytical and focused, no rush to judgment.</i> Leading: Style comes across as <i>highly intellectual.</i>
	Multifocus	FLEXIBLE Thinking: <i>Focuses on speed and adaptability.</i> Leading: Style comes across as <i>highly social and responsive.</i>	INTEGRATIVE Thinking: <i>Focuses on framing problems broadly, input from many sources, and involves multiple courses of action.</i> Leading: Style comes across as <i>highly participative.</i>

*Harvard Business Review, Feb 06

The Feb 06 Harvard Business Review Article, "The Seasoned Executive's Decision Making Style," illustrates the challenge leaders face as they transition from the direct to organizational level.⁶ Using a database of over 120,000 executives, the researchers concluded that managers climbing the corporate ladder needed new skills and behaviors when assuming more senior leadership positions. They had to change the way they used information and the way they created and evaluated options. This meant becoming more analytical and "information hungry" in their thinking (hierarchic and integrative quadrants on the chart) and open and receptive in their leadership style (flexible quadrant). In essence, they had to flip-flop their approach to decision making. Those who could not make the transition and continued functioning like first-line supervisors were either fired or forced out.

To equate it to the military, successful direct-level or junior leaders are very flexible in their thinking and decisive in their leadership style. They quickly select the best course of action based on available information and maintain a strong task focus.

Conversely, organizational-level leaders typically deal with more complex and drawn-out issues and have more time in their decision making. Therefore, they are much more analytical in their thinking, gathering as much information as possible and not rushing to judgment. Their flexible leadership style attempts to close the perception gap ("the boss is out of touch with reality") that naturally occurs between senior and junior ranks. They encourage the flow of ideas, practice active listening, and emphasize information sharing to gain understanding, as well as foster a positive climate.

Conversely, an organizational leader works through several levels of subordinates. They deal with added complexity, more people, greater uncertainty, and unintended consequences. They influence through policymaking and systems integration more so than face-to-face contact.⁷ They lead other leaders."

"Now don't get me wrong," he added. "Field grades still use direct-level leadership skills; it's a daily necessity when trying to influence others. But it is their critical thinking and sound judgment that makes the difference."

"Critical thinking," MAJ Schmidt snorted. "Now that might be the most overused word in the TRADOC vocabulary. Heck, it's even in our recruiting pitch: *Army ROTC will enhance your leadership skills and critical thinking abilities.*

"So you think we are just blowing smoke when we talk critical thinking?"

"Come on, sir. You know me better than that. I just think the term is a little overrated. I wouldn't have made major if I didn't know how to think critically."

It was LTC Christenson's turn to snort. "You think so Brian? What qualifies someone as a critical thinker? Successful company command? Four deployments? There's been a lot of *successful* officers with much more experience than you splashed across the front page of every major newspaper in the U.S. the last few years for their less than stellar behavior. I'm sure they thought they were good critical thinkers too."

⁶ Kenneth R. Brousseau, Michael J. Driver, Gary Hourihan, and Rikard Larsson, "The Seasoned Executive's Decision-Making Style," Harvard Business Review (February 2006): 110-120.

⁷ ADRP 6-22, para. 2-33.

“Sir, I think you are mixing apples and oranges. You’re talking ethics and morality, I’m talking critical thinking.”

“That’s exactly my point. Critical thinking does not exist in some kind of glass vial with a sign that says, ‘*Break When Needed.*’ It’s a mindset as well as a process. It’s not supposed to go into hibernation when your emotions get charged up.”

It was obvious from MAJ Schmidt’s blank stare that his point was not sinking in.

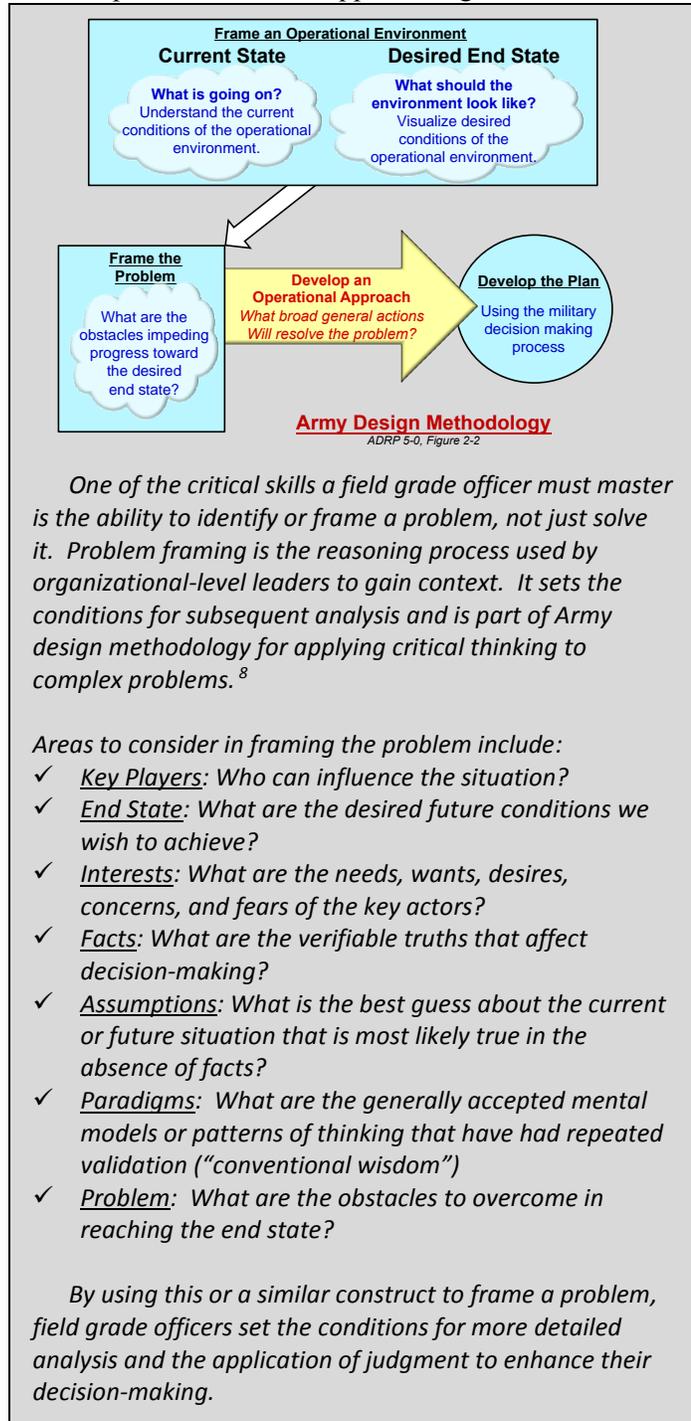
“When I say mindset, I mean that critical thinking provides a perspective for how to look at issues. It is about not rushing to judgment through black and white thinking. It means understanding and managing your biases, prejudices, and emotions. It requires asking questions, searching for facts, recognizing assumptions, listening to arguments, considering other points of view, and using judgment to draw sound conclusions. It’s a way of thinking that takes a lot of hard work and self-discipline. We all like to think we do it but it is far easier said than done,” LTC Christenson concluded.

“And CGSC will teach me this?” MAJ Schmidt said with a smile on his face.

“No one will ‘teach you’ to be a critical thinker, Brian. You must continue to develop and prepare yourself. CGSC will provide you tools, opportunities, and context for growing and enhancing your thinking skills, but the onus is on you. It’s not their job to tell you how to suck an egg. They set the conditions; you provide the disciplined initiative. Isn’t that what we preach to the cadets?”

“Sure, but these ideas you are talking about on critical thinking apply to all officers, not just field grades.”

“Yes, but what separates field grade officers from company grade officers?” LTC Christenson asked.



⁸ Department of the Army, ADRP 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 17 May 2012), para. 2-25 to 2-26 and 2-30 to 2-43.

Improving While Operating

One of the most daunting tasks of an organizational-level leader is to improve the organization while simultaneously accomplishing day-to-day missions. This is a shift in focus for most new field grade officers and requires a change in thinking. Simply accomplishing the mission is no longer good enough. As stewards of the profession, they must envision a process for long-term development and continual adaptation.

This means establishing programs and activities to improve the organization's capacity and capability to accomplish existing and future goals, objectives, and expectations.⁹ All organizations have a designed capability to perform a series of functions and missions. In other words, they have the potential ability to achieve a certain outcome. The goal of long-term development is to exploit that potential and achieve full capacity, the maximum amount of possible output. By focusing on and developing potential, leaders can expand the capacity of organizations beyond initial design capabilities, a critical necessity when operating in complex and uncertain environments.

At the strategic level, the Army's process for long-term development is DOTMLPF (Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership and Education, Personnel, and Facilities), a problem-solving construct for assessing current capabilities and managing change.¹⁰ At the organizational level, leaders achieve long-term development by implementing a vision, a picture of the future framed by a value-based purpose that creates a path to drive behavior, change, and motivation.¹¹ It describes where the organization must go, what it will look like, and how it will get there.

To implement an organizational-level vision process, leaders require a fundamental understanding of the concepts, processes, and practices that shape and influence military organizations. These include the relationship between power and influence, the challenges of leading change, the culture that shapes organizations, the leaders' role in establishing a positive organizational climate within the culture, the processes and practices of organizational learning, the role of stress and resilience, the necessity for building teams, and the challenges of developing an ethically aligned organization.

“Lots of things,” MAJ Schmidt replied. “Age, maturity, experience, education, responsibilities... these seem the most obvious.”

“Excellent. I think you are right on the mark, especially with experience and education because they help shape your judgment. Remember, judgment is the blending of analytical and intuitive decision-making skills to assess situations shrewdly and draw sound conclusions. The key word is ‘blending.’ Rational thought drives your analytical thinking; experience forms your intuitive skills. When you balance the two, you form your judgment.” LTC Christenson was excited now, pacing the room as he talked.

MAJ Schmidt was feeling the energy from his boss. “So what you are telling me, sir, is that we are all charged with critical thinking but field grade officers, given their extensive experience and education, earn their pay by demonstrating sound judgment.”

“Yes! Everyone uses some level of judgment in their decision-making; however, the expectation for field grades is much higher. But that is only half the equation. The concept of using judgment applies to your thinking. We also need to talk about what you do as a field grade.”

“What I do?” said MAJ Schmidt. “I do the missions assigned to me.”

“We always do the mission,” LTC Christenson chided, “but your perspective has to be much broader now. It’s not about simply knocking down 25-meter targets. One of your primary charges as a field grade is to improve the organization while knocking down the targets. That means you have to balance short-term demands with the

⁹ Bill McCollum, Ed.D. and Billy Miller, “Organizational Development: US Army Guidance for Consistency,” CGSC (August 2007), 2.

¹⁰ What is DOTMLPF?, <http://www.arcic.army.mil/about-arcic-dotmlpf.aspx> (May 2013).

¹¹ Carey W. Walker and Matthew J. Bonnot, “The Vision Process: Seven Steps to a Better Organization,” CGSC (August 2012), 2.

long-term developmental needs of your organization.”

“Sure, I understand that, sir. It’s called quarterly and annual training guidance. It’s what drives the train in organizations.”

LTC Christenson smiled. “If it was only that easy. Training guidance is the tip of the iceberg. Both improving and operating require a commitment to learning. That means having processes and practices in place for the organization to learn and grow. We call this a learning organization, which is founded on the shared belief that learning is fundamental to a unit’s success. Leaders and followers are mutually responsible for solving problems and achieving results by being adaptive and innovative in their thinking and behavior. Creating a culture of learning within an organization can be tough and requires leaders adept at leading change.”

“That’s true, sir. When you learn new ideas, it often requires changing the way you do business, and most people do not like that,” MAJ Schmidt added.

“Leading change is never easy but it is a critical challenge of organizational-level leadership. You are charged with moving the organization forward, not maintaining the status quo. If you are standing in place, you are losing ground because your environment is not static. That means forming new teams, developing leaders, capturing lessons learned, strengthening resilience, sustaining an ethical climate, training your organization, and accomplishing your mission.” LTC Christenson smiled again. “Improving while operating is no simple chore.”

“I guess I never looked at it that way,” MAJ Schmidt said. “It helps explain why the brigade staff officers always seem to be running around with their hair on fire.”

“Well, running an organization can be a complex undertaking but it does not have to be chaotic. Commanders have a valuable tool that, if used properly, can bring purpose and direction to the process. It’s called the organizational-level vision process,” LTC Christenson said.

MAJ Schmidt smirked. “A vision statement! I’ve read quite a few and can’t say too many provided me much clarity.”

“Does that include my vision for the ROTC detachment, Brian?” LTC Christenson queried.

Wow. I stepped right into that one, didn’t I? “No sir,” MAJ Schmidt said sheepishly.

“I will admit a lot of people do not do it very well. An organizational-level vision is a process, not a piece of paper or slogan. It’s not rocket science but does take a lot of thought and reflection. It requires knowing where you want to go—this is your future state or ‘what’—understanding your purpose for going there—the ‘why’—determining what is blocking your path—this is your assessment—and figuring out how to take down the obstacles—the ‘how.’ If you follow this methodology to build a vision for your organization and, more importantly, get your leaders to own it, you are on the path to being a very good field grade officer and organizational-level leader, Brian.”

“If it’s not rocket science,” MAJ Schmidt said, “why don’t more leaders do it?”

“First of all, most of the good leaders are doing it. Secondly, it’s incredibly easy to lose your focus as the ankle-biters mount, your boss starts yelling, and short-term demands overwhelm your time. But the key is getting your leaders to commit to it; then you are not in it alone. That’s why it is an organizational-level vision; it does not belong to a single person.”

“Does all this make sense to you?” LTC Christenson asked.

MAJ Schmidt thought about it for a moment. “I think I’ve just had my first developmental counseling as a field grade officer.”

“And hopefully not your last,” LTC Christenson replied. “I’ve given you a lot to chew on. You will have time at CGSC to reflect on the challenges of being a field grade officer and an organizational-level leader. Take advantage of it. As for now, you’re still my operations officer and we have a detachment to run. Let’s get back to work!”