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## Training Small Unit Leader Adaptive Thinking Skills:

Lessons Learned from Combat Training Center Exercises

### *Why Change the Way We Think?*

One of the best descriptors of the current national security environment is asymmetric – or unconventional. As the events since 9/11 have shown, the operational realities require our military leaders to put aside, or considerably revise, their traditional ways of thinking and planning. Increasingly, military leaders at all levels are being challenged to engage in “out-of-the-box” thinking to fully understand and respond to these new asymmetric threats.

Military strategists have defined asymmetric warfare as: *Acting, organizing, and thinking differently than opponents in order to maximize one's own advantages, exploit an opponent's weaknesses, attain the initiative, or gain greater freedom of action.*

Asymmetric approaches attempt to disrupt and undermine a leader's ability to direct and control rational and deliberate actions. They seek to disorient, misdirect, and deny the core competencies and critical processes that the Army teaches so leaders can provide effective leadership. The primary intent of these approaches is to maximize uncertainty and ambiguity for the leader and the led.

The multifaceted nature of asymmetric warfare demands that leaders demonstrate a high level of **mental adaptability** – an intellectual agility and a “competence adaptability” to adjust rapidly across a wide variety of operations. To that end, it is critically important that we understand the nature of these adaptive requirements, identify areas of strengths and weakness, and determine training and development solutions to improve capabilities for leading in these uncertain and increasingly ambiguous situations.

### **Research Objectives**

The U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI) has been involved in a number of research efforts to

### **What is Mental Adaptability?**

Mental adaptability has been defined by White et al (2004) as: *adjusting one's thinking in new situations to overcome obstacles or improve effectiveness.* Mental adaptability includes things like handling emergency or crisis situations, handling stress, learning new things, (new tasks, technologies, and procedures), and creative problem solving.

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better understand adaptive performance. Recently, ARI's Fort Benning Research Unit conducted a series of in-depth interviews with Observer/Controllers (O/Cs) at the Army's Joint Readiness Training Center on a number of issues relevant to small unit leader (squad/platoon) adaptive thinking and decision-making. O/Cs were interviewed on the following topics:

- Common problems small unit leaders have in thinking and making judgments
- Skill areas on which leaders need to improve their ability to think and act more adaptively
- What units can do at home station to improve leader (squad/platoon) adaptability



issue centered on the lack of time available for platoon leaders who, once they received the company operation order, could do little more than restate the same order. The lack of planning time at platoon level seriously impacted the development and subsequent rehearsal of contingency plans. However, O/Cs felt there were some problems that additional time alone would not resolve.

As might be expected with more junior leaders, many of the thinking errors that were identified could be attributed to inexperience. For example, failures to monitor the situation or respond to cues were due to the fact that new platoon leaders were not clear on what cues were most important. And, even if critical cues were identified, the implications of what these cues meant, in terms of what specific actions to take, were not well understood by the inexperienced junior leaders.

### Findings

Table 1 summarizes the most common thinking and judgment problems that have occurred at the platoon-leader level during training exercises.

**Table 1**  
**Common Thinking and Judgment Problems Observed in Small Unit Leaders**

|  |
|--|
| Difficulty reacting to novel situations – unable or slow to “think on your feet”                       |
| Overly reactive. Difficulty in thinking like the enemy   |
| Focused on making quick decisions before fully analyzing the situation                                 |
| Inadequate monitoring of the situation or responding to cues in the environment                        |
| Difficulty translating orders from higher echelons into actions  |
| Tunnel vision  |
| Overly focused on distracters; not on the big picture  |
| Difficulty shifting roles (e.g., combat to mediation within the same mission)                          |
| Limited cultural awareness and necessary communication skills (specifically in dealing with civilians) |

Interviews identified clear examples both of thinking that was adaptive and thinking that was not. However, positive examples were less frequent. Systemic problems in the planning process were identified as a major factor slowing the development of adaptive thinking skills in new platoon leaders. The primary

Platoon leaders, at times, had difficulty trying to stay focused on the “big picture.” Attention was often diverted by various distracters (e.g., civilians in the area, small disturbances). Tunnel vision was an issue as platoon leaders stayed too focused on executing the mission one way (the one instructed from higher) despite subsequent changes in the environment. Another common issue identified by O/Cs, was the difficulty platoon leaders had in taking the perspective of the enemy or being able to “think like the enemy.” Once again inexperience was viewed as the primary reason.

An additional problem area identified at the small-team level was that leaders have trouble shifting roles within a mission. The most frequent example was the squad leader who at one moment is involved in a violent building clearing operation and then several minutes later is talking to the populace to attempt to gain information about a specific religious leader. The ability to rapidly switch mindsets from “aggressor” to “mediator” has not, until recently, been a required skill. As a result, small unit

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leaders have not received much training on how to do this. To effectively assume the role as mediator requires an understanding of the local culture, the social infrastructure (i.e., knowing the key players in a society), and how to communicate with them to make interactions run more smoothly and effectively. These are examples of *interpersonal adaptability skills* that are now critical abilities that small unit leaders need to rapidly shift roles and work effectively in the current contemporary operating environment.

### Strategies for Improving Small Unit Leader Adaptive Thinking Skills

The O/Cs we interviewed proposed a number of different approaches for improving adaptive thinking skills in small unit leaders. The key, in their view, was to provide junior leaders with a variety of relevant experiences that emphasize and demonstrate adaptive thinking and performance. A number of O/Cs stressed the importance of starting the process early - Primary Leader Development Course for noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) for commissioned officers. Specific training approaches they suggested are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Adaptive Thinking Training Strategies

| Classroom   | Field  | Examples of Courses Stressing Adaptability                |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Stress adaptive thinking – define, discuss, reinforce</p> <p>Conduct situational judgment exercises</p> <p>Provide Realistic case studies</p> <p>Conduct tactical decision games with increasing time constraints</p> <p>Include sand table exercises to rehearse the orders process with live OPFOR</p> | <p>Leader Reaction Course – novel situations, time constraints, other stressors</p> <p>Role play (PL/SL/TL switch roles or eliminate key leaders so subordinates must take over mission)</p> <p>Battle drills with unexpected events</p> | <p>Rangers</p> <p>Special Forces Qualification Course</p> |

Based on our interviews, some of these strategies are being used; however, additional emphasis, exercises, and drills are needed for the training to effectively improve mental and interpersonal adaptability. The courses specified in Table 2 were examples of existing training that O/Cs felt already stressed adaptability and they recommended sending as many Soldiers as possible to these courses. Unfortunately, many Soldiers would not qualify for these courses so O/Cs recommended that training developers use the Rangers and the Special Forces Q-Course as models and borrow aspects of these courses to better train adaptive performance.

### Conclusions

Adaptive thinking and planning includes extensive and thorough contingency planning. Such planning is proactive, anticipates possible enemy reactions and mission aversive events, and develops possible responses. Time management skills are critical to allow for adequate rehearsal of plans. Adaptive platoon leaders make extensive use of their platoon sergeants and squad leaders to assist in situation awareness and analysis and the development of possible courses of actions. Adaptability in mission execution depends upon the platoon leader's ability to gain information and remain open to information and events while staying focused on mission objectives.

The information identified in this research can improve the development of small unit leader adaptive thinking skills so leaders will function more effectively in today's contemporary operating environment. These results have been incorporated into the ARI-Fort Benning research program, addressing ways to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of Army institutional training. Current research efforts are working with the newly-created Maneuver Captains Career Course, the Infantry Basic Non-Commissioned Officer's Course, and Basic Combat Training.

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