

A Winning Combination: Leadership and Teamwork

Col Ian R. Cartwright

In any future war, commanders at practically every level are going to find it extremely difficult to impress their personality on events once their troops are in contact with the enemy. Operations are expected to be highly mobile and fought by small, self-contained combat teams with weapons which can produce a firepower and shock effect hitherto unknown. These operations will demand excellent command communications in order to achieve the mobility and flexibility necessary to beat a numerically superior enemy. Yet any communications system must be vulnerable if not to enemy electronic warfare then to electromagnetic radiation following a nuclear attack.

If a formation commander cannot control his subordinate tactical units by radio, he will have to depend on the initiative, determination and leadership of his subordinate commanders to follow his prepared contingency plan and act within his overall directive for the operation. Formation commanders will have to impress their personality and their ideas beforehand and then, during the battle, demonstrate complete trust in the ability of their battalion and company commanders to win. At battalion and company level, the leadership and professional qualities of a commander will be more severely tested than ever before as he maneuvers his command to bring to bear his maximum combat power against the opposition at a time of his choosing.

In 1945 Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery described leadership as “the will to dominate and the confidence to inspire.” If commanders are to be successful in the future, they will have to dominate and inspire their subordinates in peacetime because there will be precious little scope for it during the crucial initial stages of the war. A commander is only going to be able to dominate subordinates by impressing on them his personality and views beforehand. Whereas, “inspire” could be understood to suggest developing a relationship of mutual trust and self-confidence which would be expected in any successful team, be it in war, in business or sports.

Col Ian R. Cartwright is a graduate of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst; the Indian Defense Services Staff College; and the US Armed Forces Staff College. He has served in infantry battalions and with the Special Air Service and commanded at platoon, company, and battalion levels.

In fact, military success is so dependent on teamwork that a good battalion or company can be compared to a successful sports team. The coaches and training staff have little real influence once the game starts. Their main input is in the preparation for the game. They will have studied the opposition in great detail and, knowing their own weaknesses and strengths and the personalities involved, will have planned their strategy to win the game. They will have developed their tactics to counter the opposition moves. And they will have trained the team, subunits of the team and individual players in their respective roles until they are well drilled in exactly what is required.

However, the difference between a good team and an outstanding one is “flair”—stereotyped play can be predicted and will be beaten. The good trainer must allow scope for individual flair within his overall plan, but he must remember that a team of stars can always be beaten by excellent teamwork. The coach will have selected those individuals for key positions who have the necessary skill to execute his plan and who have the intelligence to understand exactly what he wants to achieve and how they fit into his overall plan.

A good military commander must, therefore, do the same. He must decide exactly what his purpose is; he must know his enemy in detail; he must know the ground he is to fight over; and, then, knowing the capabilities and limitations of his command, he must plan his operation. He can then dominate his command with his personality when he outlines his plan and ensures that every subunit and individual knows what he expects of them. But, if he is to succeed, he must remember that if his plan is too rigid, it will almost certainly bog down—he must allow scope for the individual flair and initiative of his subordinates. What, then, makes a good planner into a successful commander and leader? Inspiration!

A commander who lacks self-confidence in his own abilities will never inspire the trust and respect of his subordinates. Nobody can be expected to follow a leader he does not trust unless he is motivated by fear or curiosity—both very temporary expedients. To develop that special trust, a commander must win the loyalty of his subordinates. Their loyalty will follow very naturally if the commander offers his undivided loyalty to them in the first place.

At company level and below, the commander may find it easier to lead—to impress his will and to inspire—because he will always be in much closer personal contact with his soldiers. As would a captain of a sports team, he will be on

the field with them. He will have to prove his competence to be a member of the team and that he has that little extra required of a leader.

If we are to prepare ourselves to win the next war, I suggest we approach it exactly as if we are preparing for a major sports competition. I recommend that, whenever it is feasible, a commander must be able to select his immediate subordinates (and staff officers). He must select them knowing they possess the experience and the potential to understand exactly what they are required to do and have the ability to do it. He should, however, remember that it will always be prudent to keep some incumbent team leaders. If he changes a complete level of command, it will take time for him and his new team to establish a relationship with those below them.

The commander must develop a special relationship with his subordinates so that mutual trust and confidence can be achieved. He will need to coach and train them, but he must expect mistakes. If the same mistake is repeated too many times, it suggests that the player does not have the intelligence or skill to appreciate the problem, and he should then be offered up for transfer. But it will be beholden on the commander to ensure his views and instructions are clearly understood, or mutual confidence will not develop; he will not be dominating his subordinates. A commander (and his staff) must be able to produce clear and concise verbal and written instructions. A commander must train himself and his staff to do this.

Particularly at company level and below, the commander should be a “player” as well as captain. He must prove his professional individual skills while proving he has that little extra demanded of the captain. Unless he can prove his professionalism, he will not win the necessary respect. But, in the heat of battle, survival may play a more decisive part than leadership; an individual soldier may be more motivated to fight for himself and those he identifies as his immediate team.

In peacetime, we must make certain that every soldier feels he belongs to a team. Constant moving will make him feel an individual, whereas if he identifies himself with a team or group, he will be more effective. This team spirit can be developed at work and at play—competition fosters interest and a team spirit. It should be introduced at all levels of command. Team games can be used to foster team spirit and an esprit de corps and also to promote fitness. Unfortunately, too many times, only “the gladiators” are catered for.

If games are to be used to best effect, they must be organized so that everyone is involved. For example, in a battalion, if an inter-platoon competition is organized, ideally it should be on a league basis and include several games to be played simultaneously. The competitions could include volleyball, basketball and orienteering. This way, every man in the platoon will be involved.

Another way to foster team spirit is to encourage junior commanders to take their command away on an independent mission, for which they must plan and make all arrangements. This mission could be to a training area or an adventurous training expedition. If the commander is inexperienced, it will be essential that his plan is checked out by a senior officer; otherwise, a disastrous plan could have quite the reverse effect.

However, no really successful team was built overnight. In every professional sports competition, the outstanding team has been carefully built up over a long period. The players are encouraged to feel they have joined a family. They work hard together; they become friends; and they learn to trust each other and their bosses. Then, they go out and beat the opposition.

I know quoting Montgomery is not very acceptable in the US Army. However, in this case, I have deliberately used his words to develop a theme. I believe we could lose the next war if we rely too much on management and place too much reliance on technology. Soldiers win wars—not as individuals, but as a team.