

# The Creative Leader

## Lt Comdr Anthony Kendall

To be prepared professionally and intellectually is one of the greatest challenges facing the military officer. However, there is a tendency to ignore or mitigate this challenge and to develop only to that level which meets today's minimum requirements. Although this generalization may be unfair to some, there is no question that a number of officers have learned to anticipate only routine demands and have been conditioned to react, not to act. The purpose of the armed forces is not to perform routine tasks but to promptly and adequately respond to crises with maximal efficiency.

The emphasis of this article is on the nature of creativity: how to recognize it, its purpose and relationship to the officer corps, and the need for it. By recognizing and encouraging creative talent, the military can increase its efficiency, which ultimately contributes to the country's welfare. Nuclear, conventional, and unconventional warfare will indeed be challenging, but the flexible and *thinking* officer can meet this challenge by using creative leadership.

Successful leaders must possess two types of creativity in order to lead and to make sound judgments. The first is *intuitive creativity*—short-term, tactical creativity. This type of creativity may be a key element in combat leadership. The second type is *reflective creativity*—long-term, strategic creativity. Without reflective creativity, an officer will lack insight and will probably be unable to perceive the future. This article will explore both types of creativity and what happens when either is lacking in the officer corps.

Time and time again, the officer corps of all services has been stunned when wars or major crises have broken out. In a crisis, the demand curve shifts and marginal performers become a liability, especially if they hold responsible positions. An Army general fell victim to the "routine" at the Battle of St. Vith when his command was decimated by a fierce German counter attack.

A middle-aged man, he had spent his whole life—a quarter of a century of it—preparing for war. Year in, year out, when the Army had been thought of as a refuge for fools or work-shys, he had plodded

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through morning parades in the harsh sun of Texas, hiked through the dusk of midwestern maneuvers, faced the sullen resentful eyes of the two generations of young soldiers whom he had gigged for cursing-out a sergeant or failing to salute, listened to the same old chatter a hundred times at officer clubs—to find out in one short week that he was a failure.<sup>1</sup>

After Pearl Harbor, as with many other wars and crises, there was a great exodus of officers who had spent their lives in the military, but retired when they were needed the most; the war found them unprepared intellectually to cope with the realities of the unexpected. It can be said that the onslaught of war is like the first snowstorm of a bitter winter—the weakest branches fall from the tree, but the strong ones survive. An example of a strong officer who adapted, survived, and showed reflective creativity is Lt F. H. Michaelis (a future admiral). After the unexpected attack on Pearl Harbor, Michaelis reevaluated his career and goals and overcame his fixation for battleship warfare. He became a naval aviator and was quite successful in his new role.<sup>2</sup> However, the fast-paced nature of nuclear warfare and terrorism may not be so "forgiving," as to allow unprepared officers who cannot perceive the future accurately the time that Michaelis had to change and adapt.

The problem facing junior and senior officers alike is not nuclear warfare or the emergence of terrorism, but being able to deal with the unexpected—the element of "surprise." Over a hundred years ago, Carl von Clausewitz identified surprise as one of the key elements of warfare, and yet we still fall prey to it as we did at Pearl Harbor and in Beirut with the bombing of our Marine barracks. Obviously, the principles of Clausewitz are well known to the Soviets and their terrorist surrogates.

Terrorism, almost by definition, involves an unexpected act. Vice Adm William P. Lawrence, chief of Naval Personnel, stated that one of the challenges facing the Navy is learning how to deal with international terrorism.<sup>3</sup> But, too often, the answer is a one-week course with a practical exercise at the end. Promulgating standard operating procedures (SOP) and instructions and erecting barricades at military facilities throughout the world are only superficial, somewhat hysterical solutions to the real problem. Nor are more modified rules of engagement or computer programs, which are only automated man-made algorithms designed to think for the officer, part of the solution. No amount of training or reprimands, or the "slaying of scapegoats," will teach officers to deal with the unexpected.

What then is the solution? Over 40 years ago, Adm Ernest Joseph King provided a clue in his well-known order prior to World War II:

There will be neither time nor opportunity to do more than prescribe the several tasks of the several subordinates . . . if they are reluctant to act because they are accustomed to detailed orders and instruction—if they are not habituated to think, to judge, to decide, and to act for themselves in their several echelons of command—we shall be in a sorry case when the time of “active operations” arrives.<sup>4</sup>

There are many characteristics which separate a successful leader from an unsuccessful one, such as moral outlook, intelligence, and determination. However, the distinction is actually relates to one’s level of creativity. Gen George Brinton McClellan, for example, was very intelligent and highly respected by his men; on the other hand, Gen Robert E. Lee was creative. Lee realized that nineteenth century technology had changed some aspects of warfare, whereas McClellan failed to take full advantage of technology, such as the use of railroads for increased mobility of forces.

Creative leaders take what less creative men call *threats* and use them as opportunities and challenges. Creativeness will not assure success in adapting to new or modified “rules of warfare,” but a noncreative, inflexible officer will almost certainly be doomed to failure. Creativity, then, is not limited to the author or artist, nor is it limited to the theoretical, though that is its origin.

### What Is Creativity?

In order to discuss creativity and how its encouragement can be a pragmatic approach to improving the quality of the officer corps, it must first be defined. Psychologists have described creativity in many different ways, but they basically agree that it is *any process by which something new is produced—an idea or an object, including a new form or arrangement of old elements. And the new creation must contribute to the solution of the problem.*<sup>5</sup>

The process itself is classically divided into four basic stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification.

**Preparation** is perhaps the most important stage in the creative process. Without it, the other stages would not be possible. It is a period when raw data is gathered on a particular subject. The process is also referred to as immersion; the thinker is literally immersed in a flood of data.<sup>6</sup> The non-creative person may experience the same phenomenon, but the creative person has the ability to separate the significant from the insignificant. Albert Einstein was purported to have said that it took him a year after graduation before he could be creative because he had to sort out the real facts from the great quantity of useless information and untruths that he had received in college.<sup>7</sup> Gen Douglas MacArthur spent his earlier years in the Philippines and the Far East gaining experience that served him well during the “crisis years.” For the young officer today, the academies, OCS, or ROTC provide the foundation for data gathering. Applying this to the Navy, a young officer’s experiences during midshipman cruises

should serve him well in the twenty-first century if he is able to discern the useful from the worthless.<sup>8</sup>

**Incubation** is the least understood and most controversial stage of creativity. Literally, incubation means to hatch, to develop, or to take form. The meaning suggests a time of unconscious work or a period away from the problem. (This facilitates the shedding of preconceptions or fixations concerning the method of solution.)<sup>9</sup>

Intuitively, incubation does seem to be present, although there is no solid evidence to support this claim. There have been several unsuccessful attempts to prove the existence of incubation. One study tested for the existence of several possible factors related to incubation.<sup>10</sup> These included *free incubation*, pausing from trying to solve the problem; *demanding cognitive work*, shifting a person’s direction to other concerns; *active review*, a belief that incubation occurs because absence from a problem forces a thinker to remember forgotten but important ideas; *set breaking*, breaking an unproductive set or overcoming fixation; *stress reduction*, failing to solve a problem because of too much pressure or motivation; and *visual analogies*, a claim that incubation occurs because an event is analogous to the solution of the problem. (Example: Seeing a cat trying to get a bird out of a cage gave Eli Whitney the idea for the cotton gin.) Therefore, the quiet officer may not be unproductive after all; he may be developing principles that will someday contribute to the well-being of the country and the armed services.

**Illumination** is a sudden insight into the problem. Elements that precipitate insight include intense but unsuccessful work on the problem, a time interval between working on the problem and final, illumination, and finally, a chance moment of reflection which brings the person back to the previous problem. This hiatus can sometimes bring startlingly dramatic results. People have responded to illumination with exclamations such as “Aha!” “Eureka!” and “Of course!” James Watt worked unsuccessfully for two years on the development of a condenser for the Newcomen steam engine. Then one day, while taking a Sunday walk, Watt came up with the solution in a matter of minutes.<sup>11</sup> Before the Battle of Midway, Comdr Joseph J. Rochefort Jr., of the Combat Intelligence Unit at Pearl Harbor, came up with the idea of sending a clear-text bogus message which would be intercepted by the Japanese saying that Midway’s freshwater machinery had broken down. From intercepted and decoded messages, it was discovered that the Japanese were planning an attack on the nebulous “AF.” The Navy confirmed “AF” meant Midway when a subsequent Japanese message, in reaction to the fake message, reported that “AF” was low on fresh water.<sup>12</sup> This small creative act contributed to the final victory at Midway.

**Verification** is essential because it brings an idea from the theory of the mind to the rigors of reality. Verification tests the value of the solution. Unfortunately, verification may come too late. December 7, 1941, verified in a tragic manner what some officers had been saying for years—that Pearl Harbor was vulnerable to an air attack.

## Nurturing Creativity

Behaviorists believe the best way to increase creativity is by constructing an environment that nurtures and encourages it. Creativity can be fostered by “reinforcement of selected behaviors and shaping them to progressively higher levels.”<sup>13</sup> Superiors can provide leadership not only by example but also by being teachers. Some officers confuse enigmata with leadership. But, when the situation permits, a true leader should foster creative behavior by explaining his own decisionmaking processes. He should aggressively seek and critique subordinates’ creative processes and, in turn, encourage them to develop the same in their subordinates. SOP, instructions, and regulations are not providing junior officers the needed “reinforcement of selected behaviors.” Teachers, not cult leaders, are needed to prepare today’s junior officers to be tomorrow’s leaders.

A major hindrance to creativity is conformity. Conformity is defined as the *loss of self-reliance and the undermining of creative powers by emphasizing the outer environment over the individual’s own thought process and imagination*. A commanding officer warns that we must not have a corps of officers who “. . . know how to conform but not create, interpret but not innovate.”<sup>14</sup>

Conformity could be one reason why officers generally score low in creativity tests. Research tends to substantiate this hypothesis. Officers are usually high in conformity and low in creative ability.<sup>15</sup> Officers also scored low in resistance or independence (approximation of nonconformity).<sup>16</sup>

Officers who are nonconformists often do not advance in their careers because nonconformity in an officer is often confused with counterconformity. Nonconformists are not rebels. Creative, nonconformist officers do not strive for the superficial goal of change for its own sake or for notoriety. Generally, they are not martyrs, but are pragmatists who seek change to improve the organization.<sup>17</sup> Researchers report that creative people tend to have a high tolerance for ambiguity, unusual problem-solving skills, and nonconformist approaches to problem solving.<sup>18</sup>

Organizational structure can be a negative environmental influence and can “institutionalize” conformity. Creativity is impeded when too much emphasis is placed on the following elements:

### Specialization

In striving for efficiency and stability, the military tends to go to the extreme and isolates officers from the “big picture.”

### Departmentalization

This is good to a certain extent; however, it can also limit channels of information. An empirical study concluded that departmental organizations create many managers who can detect and solve problems relating only to their specific jobs.<sup>19</sup>

## Structuralization

A military structure is needed, but it can exert great pressure on individuals to perform, thus reducing creativity.<sup>20</sup>

Even if the environment is not truly conformist, it can still be detrimental if the officer feels that the surroundings warrant conformance. Thus, the officer spends a lot of time trying to conform. Conformity can alienate the creative individual from the group and, in so doing, limit information channels.<sup>21</sup>

## Is Creativity Needed in the Military?

Is creative talent really needed in the military, and is it easily recognized? Historically, people have failed to recognize creative individuals. Research found that a group of future teachers generally rejected a list of certain traits when presented to them. They believed them to be undesirable, and yet, the list was developed by using examples from people identified as being very creative.<sup>22</sup>

Military leaders are teachers, but they can also fail to recognize or appreciate creative potential. A former superintendent of a military academy, responsible for the creative development of future leaders, states: “Success or failure in battle with the fleet is in no way dependent upon a knowledge of biology, geology, ethics, social science, the literature of foreign languages, or the fine arts.”<sup>23</sup> Years ago, a superior officer of Adm Alfred Mahan stated in reference to Mahan, “It is not the business of a Naval officer to write books.”<sup>24</sup> If Mahan had been encouraged more by his superiors, how many more young junior officers might he have inspired to greatness?

When creativity is either scorned or not recognized, the results can be disastrous:

- Alfred Mahan: Ignored by many (excluding Theodore Roosevelt), but not the Japanese, who used many of his principles to America’s grief. His writings also influenced Kaiser Wilhelm II’s decision to build a powerful German navy.
- Robert Goddard: Ridiculed as a “moon man” in this country, Goddard’s early plans aided the Germans in the development of the V2 rocket.
- Charles de Gaulle: French military leaders didn’t bother to read his book, *The Army of the Future*, in which he outlines the theory of mechanized warfare. Needless to say, the Germans read and used it.

## Recommendations

It is recognized that there are many talented officers and that all services have made efforts to encourage creative production. The following is a list of policies which the Navy should continue to support, as well as additional recommendation that could nurture and increase creative output in all services:

## Sponsor Creativity

Creative people often fail to communicate their results because they are not necessarily skillful in verbal communication. A superior officer can use his power as a sponsor and advocate. He can also act aggressively and decisively as a “teacher” help develop a junior officer’s communications skills.

## Halt or Slow Down the Increasing Specialization in War Colleges and Graduate Schools

Creativity flourishes in a theoretical environment; emphasis should be placed on the idea behind the “hardware,” not the hardware itself. Much of the needed specialized training should be taught in specialized courses *before* the officer enters war college or graduate school.

## Constantly Reevaluate the Organizational Structure in Terms of the Promotion of Creativity

Without violating the chain of command, encourage informal communication between the departments at the squadron or ship level. Frequently, a junior officer may only have one or two jobs in his first tour; however, a good skipper will ensure that the junior officer learns about the tasks and responsibilities of other departments. The commanding officer should avoid “rewarding” the outstanding junior officer by keeping him in one billet during his entire tour.

## Study the Effects of Officer Training (Academy, OCS, ROTC) on Creativity

Identify when conformity is essential and eliminate it when it is not. Also, determine at what point “standardization” is being carried too far.

## Invest in Creative Production by Allowing for Short Periods of Time for Special Projects

Idle time is an essential element in creativity. If all an officer’s time is devoted to working on the mundane and the routine, the mundane and the routine will probably be all he produces. A commanding officer should encourage creative production by assigning a promising junior officer two weeks to do anything that the junior officer believes will aid squadron or ship operations. This unstructured task will challenge the junior officer to think. Perhaps the ship’s operations could be improved by the infusion of new ideas. The commanding officer or the executive officer could also develop nonroutine scenarios that require command decisions to challenge junior officers to come up with solutions. This will encourage them to solve problems and make critical judgments. The commanding officer could also learn from the exercise.

## Prevent Information Channels from Being Restricted

Reevaluate the “need to know” principle. Be less concerned with money when scheduling officers to attend important conferences; send junior officers to important meetings—if only to listen and learn. Also develop and distribute more biographical data, both *intracommunity* and *intercommunity*. The Navy should continue to sponsor and to encourage the use of tactical journals among the warfare communities.

## Recognize Creative Officers

The United States must never lose one of its major military advantages over the Soviets—the fact that American officers are more imaginative and creative than their often inflexible Soviet counterparts.

Ultimately, the government approves defense policy, but it is extremely dependent upon wise counsel from the services. Unfortunately, conformity and the lack of insight resulted in military leadership failing to provide the government with an accurate picture of the situation during the Vietnam War, the Iranian hostage situation, and the Beirut bombing. Conformists work nicely in the military system, but they fall apart in a crisis. A crisis is usually unexpected, a surprise that causes an upheaval in the very system they depend upon for guidance. An officer, no matter what his rank, who has a myopic view of the world is neither an asset nor a leader. The United States officer corps must not fail in an ever-changing world because, if it fails, the leadership will fail, for leadership and officership are synonymous.

## Notes

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