Capstone students at Cherry Point.

305th Communications Squadron (Scott H. Spitzer)

Senior Officers and Strategic Leader Development

By MARK A. McGUIRE

Changing demands on the Armed Forces coupled with the rapid pace and increasing frequency of deployments are not only affecting the exercise of strategic leadership but also how the military inculcates the necessary qualities in commanders. This conclusion is based on a study of senior leaders in all five services and several government agencies. By analyzing first-hand accounts of what contributed to personal growth, the research found that while models for developing military leaders are sound, future stresses will severely test their ability to adapt to emerging conditions.

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Concepts of Command

A review of service programs indicates similarities and differences. However, all the services appreciate the importance of developing strategic leaders. The Army leader development model is depicted by three pillars: institutional (formal) education, operational assignments, and self-development initiatives. These pillars are supported by leadership fundamentals that encompass service values and ethics. The Army model prescribes a career-long, progressive, sequential,

and interconnected process. Amplifying on the three pillars, Michael Anastasio describes it as a continuing cycle of "education, training, experience, assessment, feedback, and reinforcement in which responsibility for development lies with both the leader and the leader's superior."[1]

Navy leader development represents a career-long continuum from recruitment to retirement. The system encompasses operational assignments coupled with formal institutional education aimed at ensuring that leaders are technically and tactically trained and educated on the specific system, aircraft, or ship they will be assigned to next. Command leader school reinforces service leadership fundamentals and decisionmaking processes.

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The Marine Corps views leader development as a continuous and progressive process throughout an officer's career. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, *Warfighting*, states that the responsibility for implementing professional development resides with the individual, the commander, and the educational establishment. This mirrors the pillars of the Army model. The institutional education system is intended to build on the base already provided by commanders in their unit development programs as well as through individual study. The Marine Corps University focuses on developing the skills of decisionmaking in the face of uncertainty and fosters creativity through broadening the mind.

The Air Force model is undergoing revision. In 1998 the service published its *Continuum Of Education Framework* which identifies professional military knowledge, skills, and attitudes airmen should possess at key points in their careers. The framework reflects the dynamic and continuous system of Air Force professional military education for officers and links levels of learning with a core curriculum so that each course, school, or program builds on the previous level. Its five core areas are: the professions of arms, military studies, international security, communications, and leadership. The Developing Aerospace Leaders Program, established in 2000, adds a broader developmental perspective. Its objective is to identify the leadership needs of the transforming aerospace force and design a scheme that will develop leaders with the competencies for staff, joint, and operational assignments. This process will require a balance of area expertise, career broadening assignments, training and exercises, deployments, mentoring, and professional education.

The Coast Guard defines leadership development as the system by which an organization grows its work force into leaders. Its model, as described in Coast Guard Commandant Instruction 5251.1, *Coast Guard Leadership Development Program,* prescribes an integrated process emphasizing resident and nonresident training, unit level experience, self-development programs, and assessment instruments for units and individuals. Similar to the Army and Marine Corps models, it emphasizes three common leader development processes: the individual's responsibility for self-awareness and development, the unit's responsibility to provide formal and informal training, and the organization's role in furnishing formal systems for assignments, policy, training, and education.

In the interest of cross-service generalization, this analysis uses the three common developmental tenets—operational assignments, institutional education, and self-development—to solicit feedback from all respondents. A fourth tenet, mentorship, is also included because of its influence as a development process.

Grooming Generals, Raising Admirals

The current system of senior leader development involves placing promising leaders in key assignments to expose them to myriad challenging and educational experiences before they assume roles as strategic leaders. Each service has identified developmental commands and positions where the most promising officers are assigned. In addition to operational assignments, each service provides institutional schools that afford either a specialized or general education. Besides the intermediate and senior service schools, lasting from six to ten months and geared towards mid-grade officers, the services also offer school opportunities tailored towards the organizational level leaders, one and two star officers. Some schools are mandatory in all services, such as the Capstone Course for newly promoted general/flag officers. Others are optional, depending on the individual's future assignment. Each service has an office to schedule and manage general officer attendance at senior schools. Some courses are competitive and attendees are selected by their superiors. Examples are the Joint Flag Air Component Commander and Joint Flag Officers Warfighting Courses. While both are training-focused rather than educational schools per se, they provide valuable instruction for air component and joint task force commanders.

Other educational opportunities include fellowships and attendance at civilian and government schools to study such subjects as national security, leadership, legal affairs, media relations,

U.S. Coast Guard (Daniel Tremper)

Coordinating support, Enduring Freedom.

systems acquisition management, equal opportunity, aviation safety, information warfare, and installation command. There is also a one-week Leadership at the Peak and Leadership Development Course, run by the Center for Creative Leadership. Classes are designed to enhance self-awareness through feedback on personal leadership style, team problem solving, and other exercises.

There are also informal methods. Mentoring, through which senior or retired officers can help develop general/flag officers in their service and for the joint chain of command, is the most common. Informal self-development also includes such initiatives as professional reading lists and subscribing to journals. Each service attaches a different emphasis to this area, though in general mentorship and self-development appear to be much less formally emphasized in the services, if they are at all, than institutional schools and operational assignments. Since there are few formal systems for self-development, its use depends primarily on the individual.

The Right Stuff

Knowing the requisite skills, knowledge, and capacities of senior leaders and understanding how they are used as officers progress in their careers is only part of the solution. An equally difficult question is determining how senior leaders acquire the faculty for executive leadership. How does a direct leader, a battalion/squadron/ship commander, develop into a four star strategic visionary? Stratified systems theory provides a general framework for understanding this process.[2] It postulates that conceptual capacity is created only as leaders are pushed beyond their current frame of reference.

There is common agreement that strategic leader development requires a stimulus that challenges the leader's capacity to rethink and reorganize frameworks in solving increasingly complex problems under conditions of ambiguity. Research suggests that operational assignments are the most vital aspect of developing senior leaders. One survey of the literature found that the "most important influence on long term growth is the interaction that occurs between commanders and subordinate officers during operational assignments."[3] Further, on-the-job training is more developmental than institutional education. Mentoring, coaching, self-evaluation, and reflection are only marginally helpful in enhancing operational experience.

On the other hand, some researchers contend that the arrival of interactive simulation holds great promise for allowing institutional instruction to train future senior commanders. By integrating simulation and the classroom, institutions expose students to multiple points of view, engage them in questioning existing frames of reference, challenge them with real world complexity and uncertainty, involve them with collaborative tasks that build interpersonal skill, present exercises that include synthesis as well as analysis, and provide time for reading, reflection, discussion, and writing. Richard Chilcoat's discussion of strategic crisis exercises offers one example. These drills create a representative strategic politico-military environment that raises the sights of students and confronts them with higher-level processes before they deal with them in the real world.[4]

Others contend that while institutional schools are getting better at replicating the realism of the strategic environment, they are still

not as good as the real thing. Using both domains as complementary developmental processes may be the best solution, a notion supported by Chilcoat's argument that no leader development domain is intended to be the sole process but that the synergistic effect of formal and on-the-job experiences most enhances leader development.

Testing the Waters

The research behind this article suggests that current scholarship on the effectiveness of leader development tools is about right, a conclusion derived from a survey of 48 senior leaders on three grade levels.

Participants were asked to identify, rank, and explain the five developmental processes (a fifth process of *other developmental experiences* was added) in accordance with their criticality to success (the lower the score, the higher the perceived importance). Answers from the brigade command selected group (direct leaders) were ranked by their average scores: operational assignments 1.4, institutional education 2.8, mentorship 3.1, other developmental experiences 3.5, and self-development 3.7.

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While the responses and accompanying narratives confirmed that operational assignments are the most critical elements for developing leader skills, institutional schools also proved important in providing time to ponder the last job and consider how to improve future performance. Also, attesting to the variation in response to the same stimulus, one of the 15 in this group ranked self-development as the most critical factor.

Training at the Air Mobility Warfare Center.

305th Communications Squadron (Scott H. Spitzer)

The survey responses from 16 general officers attending Capstone (organizational leaders in transition from direct to strategic leadership) varied from the views of the direct leader group. The average rankings were operational assignments 1.2, mentorship 2.4, institutional education 2.6, self-development 3.6, and other developmental experiences 4.2. Narrative responses from the group included: "Key operational assignments are most effective; they are where the rubber meets the road; you learn how to do it; there is no substitute for experience."

Institutional education was not ranked second in criticality for the newly minted general officer group as projected. Having an informal mentoring relationship with a senior leader ranked higher. While this ordering is relatively close between mentorship and institutional education, the reversal in priority from the direct leaders may indicate a trend toward valuing mentorship more as leaders progress in their careers.

Finally, both groups supported the premise that self-development is the least critical process. Responses verifying this finding included statements that the pace of operations is too high to devote attention to self-development. Speaking to the interconnectedness of leader development, one respondent confessed that he could not separate self-development from the other processes.

Responses from 17 strategic leaders (senior general officers) were operational assignments 1.6, self-development 2.5, mentorship 2.9, institutional education 3.3, and other developmental experiences 4.2. Strategic leaders, like the direct and organizational groups, considered operational assignments the most critical. Notably, this group put self-development in second place, defying predictions and the scholarly literature and contrasting sharply with the low ranking other groups gave it.

Answers and Questions

These findings raise significant issues for each component of the military leader development model.

Operational assignments. The most important factor for all three groups was perceived to be operational assignments. Few disagreed that on-the-job training was the foundation for growing strong leaders. Operational assignments, as presented in the literature and described by respondents, were viewed as the most challenging experiences and hence as providing the best opportunity for altering a leader's frame of reference. Therefore, the services should continue to manage the progression of operational assignments as the most critical developmental experience.

While field and fleet positions have the most powerful influence among all the development

U.S. Navy (Charles M. Abell)

Participating in NATO mission planning.

processes, operational and personnel demands may prohibit the services from optimizing the experience offered by deliberate assignment policies. In short, operational demands always place mission first and leader development second. A solution may be for the services to employ the other pillars to compensate for shortfalls in career assignment opportunities.

Institutional education. Findings reveal a gradual decrease in the perceived importance of institutional education as careers progress. The schoolhouse slowly gives way to mentorship or self-study. The reason may be that institutions cannot replicate the environmental demands and experiences strategic leaders encounter in actual assignments. Another explanation could be experiential bias. Strategic level respondents have generally not attended educational institutions for several years and may remember recent assignments and mentors more sharply, attaching greater relevance to them. Leaders who attended school recently perceive their institutional education as more critical. Perhaps the difference is that the two groups either don't completely understand the requirements on strategic leaders or educational institutions have improved or both. A case could be made that schoolhouses over the past decade have shifted focus to preparing students for higher-level leadership. The challenge for military institutions is to build on this success and continue enhancing experiential exercises and simulations.

Mentorship. Although all three groups rated mentorship as a secondary or tertiary developmental process, the study found confusion over what the term actually means. This uncertainty biases the perceived criticality of mentorship and hence its ranking. In retrospect, a clearer definition might have reduced the diversity of opinions. For example, several respondents in all three groups referred to their commander's actions and advice as critical to their development. These responses might have been better categorized as value achieved from operational assignments. Such confusion is mirrored in service doctrines that rarely define the scope and purpose of mentorship. Clarification would be the first step in strengthening the role of mentoring.

Self-development. The most significant finding from the study is the importance strategic level leaders place on self-development or individual study, in contrast to the first two groups. This is an especially alarming result. Most officers in operational assignments have little time to enhance their own professional education, given the increasing tempo and frequency of military operations.

With ever quickening operational tempo, why do so many strategic leaders espouse self-development? Perhaps they have made time for self-study and seen its benefits. Several officers from this group claimed to be avid readers—and not just in military subjects. Perhaps more deliberate effort should be made to build in the time and resources for self-study.

Implementing additions to leader development programs will be tough. There appears to be no relief in sight for the current operational and personnel tempo. The demands of mission accomplishment will continue to inhibit commanders from conducting unit programs and individuals from opting for self-study programs while on operational assignments.

What can be done? Developmental exercises will certainly have to be scheduled around or in partnership with mission exercises and deployments. It will take very creative unit commanders to exploit these opportunities. For example, an *Army Times* article reported that one division commander sequestered his battalion commanders for a few days and ran them through group exercises challenging their tactical and leadership abilities. Other leader development initiatives include battlefield staff rides, tactical exercises without troops, professional reading programs, book reports and presentations, writing papers, map exercises, feedback assessments, and keeping journals of lessons learned. Currently, the services are aligning their performance evaluation reports with the requirement to develop subordinate leaders, as evidenced in the Army's revised officer evaluation report. Such initiatives should help focus commanders on this challenge.

Training exercise in Litohoro, Greece.

U.S. Navy (Martin Maddock)

The School Solution

Regardless of the number of development techniques used in the field and fleet, the fact remains that there are limited opportunities to employ them. There is even less occasion for self-analysis. Along with the challenge of missions and deployments, time for reflection is crucial to leadership development. This leaves institutional education as the primary vehicle in which to process the experiences encountered in operational assignments and synthesize new frameworks for the future. Thus the placement of institutional education that complements and enhances operational assignments will be critical.

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Several respondents recommended conducting professional military education earlier in officers' careers to provide an enhanced awareness of national and international security strategy. One proposal is to send officers to war college before rather than after mid-level command.

Capstone and other general/flag programs help officers gain a global perspective, but they come late in a career and there are no mandatory subsequent courses for strategic leaders. Perhaps an institutional education process between assignments is unnecessary on the strategic level. Leader conferences and other interactions may already provide those benefits. The question is whether there is sufficient time or opportunity on the job for strategic leader discussion, reflection, integration, and synthesis of concepts.

One source of help is experienced senior officers. Many retired strategic leaders are involved in professional military education. Are there additional opportunities? One possibility is an institutional setting where retirees can periodically exchange information with active duty general/flag officers in a nonoperational environment. The services should also explore how simulations technology can develop and enhance these relationships.

Other respondent suggestions included taking advantage of graduate education at civilian institutions in international affairs, exposing leaders to the dynamics of civil-military relations and congressional affairs, establishing partnerships with industry, and spending more time with senior leaders in other services. Such initiatives could be accomplished within the context of a more robust institutional development program.

Although the services have effective senior leader development programs, there is cause for concern. Given increasing mission demands coupled with the broadening complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity of the global environment, the Armed Forces must continuously strive to improve professional development, ensuring that leaders are prepared to meet future challenges. There are no easy options, but there are clearly requirements for additional initiatives to offset the effects of a relentless operational tempo. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Michael A. Anastasio, "Leader Development: Direction for the Future," *Military Review,* vol. 71, no. 5 (May 1991), pp. 10–19.

[2] Philip Lewis and T. Owen Jacobs, "Individual Differences in Strategic Leadership Capacity: A Constructive/Developmental View," *Strategic Leadership: A Multiorganizational-level Perspective*, edited by Robert L. Phillips and James G. Hunt (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1992), p. 136.

[3] Mark D. Rocke and Thomas W. Hayden, "Officer Development: A Doctrinal Imperative," *Military Review,* vol. 73, no. 1 (January 1993), p. 27.

[4] Richard A. Chilcoat, "Fourth Army War College: Preparing Strategic Leaders for the Next Century," *Parameters,* vol. 25, no. 4 (Winter 1995–96), p. 19.