



# Gardener-Leaders

## A New Paradigm for Developing Adaptive, Creative, and Humble Leaders

Major Joseph Bruhl, U.S. Army

**G**ROWING UP, if I wasn't playing sports I was doing one of two things: building model airplanes or gardening with my father. Both were captivating mental exercises, but for different reasons. Building models was an exacting practice, a drill in precision and attention to detail. Gardening was a labor of love, a complex experiment in give and take. Both developed important skills, but as a leader I return most frequently to the lessons of my father's garden. Leaders who think like gardeners are better equipped to adapt, reason creatively, and approach challenges with humility than those who think like model airplane builders. Unfortunately, many leaders in the military prefer fabricating P-51 Mustangs to nursing tomatoes.

My year-group was among the last to commission into an Army still preparing for a Cold War-style fight. As a young aviation platoon leader, I trained in Battlefield Calculus, a planning process that distills problem solving into a mathematical equation. It begins with an assessment of how many enemy articles may be in an engagement area and how many need destroying. From there, planning is not much more complex than  $A+B=C$ ; matching resources to intended outcome.

I do not suggest the Army abandon the rigorous methodology represented by Battlefield Calculus. Rather, I am suggesting that Army culture is permeated with an  $A+B=C$  mentality; one that affects how we train people, which programs we develop, and how we design force structure.

In many ways, this  $A+B=C$  mentality replicates my childhood hobby of model airplane building. With the right tools assembled and directions carefully studied, work began. From the moment I picked up the first piece to apply paint or glue, nothing was beyond my control. This was my only measure of success: does the model mirror the standard?

As late as the invasion of Iraq in 2003, many in the Army were still applying model airplane reasoning to the "next" fight: assemble the right tools, apply the correct equation, execute with rigor, and the outcome will mirror the standard.

Major Joseph Bruhl is a strategic planner in irregular warfare and security force assistance at the Army's Security Cooperation Plans and Concepts Division. He holds a B.A. from Truman State University and an M.P.A. from Harvard. He is a Next Generation National Security Leader Fellow at the Center for New American Security and lives in Arlington, VA.

PHOTO: From right, U.S. Navy PO2 Derrick Duncan and Marine Corps LCpl Ramon Montoya and LCpl Francis Witt, all embarked aboard the USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC 19), clear land for a garden at Jinhae Hope Children's Home in South Korea, 13 March 2010. (SN Cale Hatch)

Four months before going to war in Iraq, I led my platoon in a capstone desert training event at the National Training Center (NTC). Here, we demonstrated mastery of the standard, applying the mathematics of Battlefield Calculus while fighting in support of armored forces in tank-on-tank battles. Upon completion, our unit was absolutely lethal in combined arms maneuver against an armored force on the move. Clearly, this training helped enable success in the invasion of Iraq and remains critical to what the Army does well. However, where this demanding training fell short was in what we failed to do.

During preparation for the NTC, my company commander developed a training plan for rear area security. Loosely, it was a mission that required Apache helicopters to launch on short notice to defend a division's rear area (we still thought linearly back then) against small, irregular attacks. It incorporated quick reaction force tactics with maneuver techniques for engagements in urban terrain, something which attack aviation doctrine had largely ignored for two decades.

When he presented this training plan to the battalion commander for approval, my company commander requested two things: support in developing quick reaction force tactics, techniques, and procedures, and access to urban training sites. Both were roundly rejected.

Our unit was a prisoner of its own success, built on an ability to replicate doctrine with exactitude. The Army's personnel system had populated the unit with leaders who demonstrated an ability to execute the prescribed methodology, and our handicap was that as an organization we could not think beyond the "directions" given in doctrine.

The result was telling. On 23 March 2003, we flew into a complex, aerial ambush near Ah Hillah expecting to execute a deep attack as prescribed in doctrine. However, nonuniformed combatants, dispersed in urban terrain, combined small arms fire with antiaircraft artillery to repel our attack. The mission was disastrous: the vast majority of our 18 aircraft were so severely damaged they would not fly again for days. Two pilots were shot down and taken prisoners of war.

We had been brilliant model airplane builders, but our gardening skills were nonexistent. In his garden, my father taught me that gardeners

appreciate the unseen and anticipate the undeveloped. Throughout the spring he prepared the soil, watering, training, and fertilizing until plants were strong and ready to bear fruit. I vividly remember his consternation as he surveyed a particular plant that was pest-ridden, sickly, or dying. Accepting the unknown, he adjusted his plan. Watching my dad apply a method, wait for the effect, and adjust the next application, I learned a foundational attribute of leadership: adaptability.

Gardeners do not possess complete control. Their craft is an interchange where action and counteraction are affected by a host of things beyond their control. Gardeners anticipate, wait, and watch for change. They separate the addition of pesticide from rain and see if it holds. They add fertilizer, but not too much. The gardener is always the student, never the master.

This is the type of leader the Army should cultivate. Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, asserts that leaders must "rapidly adapt cognitively and emotionally to the perplexing challenges . . . and master new competencies as well as new contexts."<sup>1</sup>

Like the gardener, counterinsurgency leaders understand that progress is affected by a host of things beyond their control: historic feuds, dysfunctional institutions, and even past mistakes by U.S. forces. Host a *shura*, extend trust, watch for change. Build a road, secure the population, and see if trust holds. Attack with overwhelming force, but do it carefully. A counterinsurgency leader is always the student, never the master.

However, adaptive leadership is not limited to the counterinsurgency fight. It remains a timeless military model. In recognition of this, the Army is evolving the concepts of operational adaptability and mission command, both designed to institutionalize creative, integrated, and flexible problem solving. These are a good start.

***...gardeners appreciate the unseen and anticipate the undeveloped.***



(U.S. Marine Corps, SSG William Greason)

Haji Hamadulha Helmand speaks with U.S. Marine Corps LtCol William McCollough, commander of 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, during a civil affairs group patrol in the Nawa District of Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 30 July 2009.

## Next Steps

To support the development of “gardener-leaders,” the Army should do three things: develop a profession that values thinking, writing, and education; adapt its personnel system to support diverse experience; and renew mentorship as a foundation to its profession.

### **Valuing education, thinking, and writing.**

Over the last decade, the most important thing in an officer’s development was operational duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. This experience is critical, but to prepare leaders for an increasingly complex operating environment, the Army needs to enhance the value of education, thinking, and writing in its leaders.<sup>2</sup>

We need to dramatically increase access to civilian education for both officers and NCOs. According to a recent Harvard study, only 31 percent of junior military officers believe that the military promotes innovation.<sup>3</sup> Education is a key to changing this perception and the reality it represents. Education develops a leader’s identity, mental agility, cross-cultural savvy, and interpersonal maturity.<sup>4</sup> This is why universities are often compared to gardens, where minds are cultivated and ideas are the harvest.

Increase the importance of nondivisional assignments in an officer’s professional development by making them mandatory for promotion to lieutenant colonel. Assignments to the Army Staff, the Combined Arms Center, and branch schoolhouses are not “take a knee” assignments; they are investments in the institutions that support our profession and broaden a leader’s vision.<sup>5</sup>

Encourage officers and NCOs to write and publish. In a necessarily hierarchical organization like the Army, officers and NCOs enhance their profession through thoughtful publication while providing senior leaders access to unique and relevant ideas outside normal channels. Admiral James Stavridis recently challenged young officers to publish, taking the same kind of personal risk in shaping their profession as they do on the battlefield.<sup>6</sup> In his article, Admiral Stavridis offers some “common sense guidelines” to consider when writing. Army leaders, following these guidelines, should be pushing folks to write and share. There is a wealth of untapped wisdom that will add richness to the Army’s intellectual debates.

**Adapt the personnel system to support diverse experience.** To promote a gardening mentality, the Army should change its personnel system from an industrial-age model that views leaders as interchangeable parts to one that manages talent on an individual basis.<sup>7</sup> Model airplane builders are most comfortable with conformity and rigid process. Gardeners understand that diverse experience is required to master their craft. In the absence of a complete personnel system overhaul, the Army should allow officers who self-select for civilian education, teaching, or internships to “slip back” a year group or two in order to avoid missing key developmental jobs in their operational specialty.

Today’s prescribed timeline for officers leaves little space for variation in a career. When an officer is selected early for promotion, this timeline compresses even more. As a result, the Army is forcing its best officers to make a binary choice too early in their career: stay in operational assignments and remain competitive for command, or pursue broadening experiences at their professional peril.

By adapting its personnel system to allow officers to pursue opportunities that develop “gardener-leader” skills without hampering competitiveness for command, the Army encourages its best officers to broaden their experience. When officers who pursue opportunities outside traditional career paths command more frequently, the Army demonstrates a new set of values to junior officers.

**Renew Mentorship as a Foundation to the Profession of Arms.** In a culture that values “gardener-leaders,” mentorship is critical. Model airplane building provides step-by-step instructions for the novice to follow. Gardening is something that can only be learned through experience and tutelage.

Army mentorship is difficult to measure. In business, employee engagement (mentorship) is tied directly to financial performance. Companies with low employee engagement tend to lose money while those with high employee engagement tend to make money.<sup>8</sup> There is no such measure of effectiveness in the Army. Yet, lack of mentorship appears near the top of many surveys to explain the decision of junior officers to leave.

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To reverse this trend, the Army should include mentorship in its holistic review of the Profession of Arms. The pamphlet, *Army: Profession of Arms*, defines the Army’s ethic, and its values and ideals, but the word “mentor” is not mentioned.<sup>9</sup> Yet what better way is there to build adaptive, creative, and humble leaders who reflect Army values than by active and genuine mentorship?

This is not a “hand-wave” suggestion. The implications of three generations serving concurrently make mentorship complicated. Millennials (born after 1978) are deeply committed to community and teamwork, easily adaptable, and comfortable with ambiguity.<sup>10</sup> In short, they are more naturally inclined to “garden” than the two generations that preceded them. However, studies suggest that millennials are not as well prepared to operate in military command and control structures, resolve conflict, or safeguard classified information.<sup>11</sup>

True mentorship cannot be an exercise in mirroring. Instead, it leverages the inherent strengths of this new generation while imparting timeless values and skills required of our profession.

Mentorship’s importance grows as the Army reintroduces the rigors of garrison and reduces promotion rates to align force structure with decreased end-strength. In a protracted garrison environment, experienced young officers will bristle at the loss of freedom they experienced in combat. Still, there is value in some of the “lost arts” of garrison. Mentorship during this transition supports two-way communication as the Army determines which aspects of the “old garrison” to keep and which to let go. In addition, as promotion rates decrease, mentorship is crucial to keep the best officers encouraged and provide safeguards against a return to a “zero-defect” culture.

## The Test

Transitioning the Army from producing “model airplane builders” to “gardener leaders” requires culture change. However, simply talking about cultural change does not change it. Nor will the suggestions of this article alone change the culture.

Ultimately, the Army must change “the test” it uses to recruit, retain, and promote its leaders. By first identifying the “gardener” as the type of leader it wants to cultivate, the Army can adapt its processes and incentives to increase the number of adaptive, creative, and humble leaders within its ranks.

Increasing access to civilian education and encouraging leaders to take intellectual risks equips them to think in new ways. Providing space to pursue broadening experiences demonstrates that the Army values both operational and intellectual experience. Mentorship provides fertile soil for growth. Young leaders explore new ideas, take risk, and learn through the best method available: trial and error.

These steps cultivate a culture where leaders are not wedded to “the way we do things,” but are encouraged to adapt, think creatively, and approach challenges with humility. These are “must haves” if the Army expects to apply the right lessons from the last decade and build a force ready for tomorrow’s challenges.

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### NOTES

1. U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, December, 2006) 7-1.

2. David Barno, “Dave Barno’s top 10 tasks for General Dempsey, the new Army chief of staff,” posted by Thomas E. Ricks on “The Best Defense, Tom Ricks’s Daily Take on National Security,” 21 January 2011, <[http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/21/dave\\_barno\\_s\\_top\\_10\\_tasks\\_for\\_general\\_dempsey\\_the\\_new\\_army\\_chief\\_of\\_staff?page=0,1](http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/21/dave_barno_s_top_10_tasks_for_general_dempsey_the_new_army_chief_of_staff?page=0,1)>.

3. Sayce Falk and Sasha Rogers, “Junior Military Officer Retention: Challenges and Opportunities” (Public Policy Exercise, Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, March 2011).

4. Leonard Wong, Stephen Gerras, William Kidd, Robert Pricone, Richard Swengros, “Strategic Leadership Competencies” (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, September 2003).

5. Barno.

6. ADM James Stavridis, “Professionals Write, Whispers on a Wall” *Marine Corps Gazette* (May 2011): 83.

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9. Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, *Army: Profession of Arms* (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, October 2010), 2.

10. Art Fritzsos, Lloyd W. Howell, Jr., and Dov S. Zakheim, “Military of Millennials,” *Strategy+Business* 49 (Winter 2007).

11. *Ibid.*