

# Developing the Capacity for Decisive Action



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**M**ARTIAL ARTISTS OFFER leaders an excellent example of how to approach leadership development. Whether engaged in an explosive firefight or reconciling a swirling feud between ethnic factions, military leaders need to embody vertical alignment to maintain their balance and stand their ground. However, this is not enough—leaders do not lead solitary lives. Their actions and decisions directly affect the lives of others. Successful leaders must demonstrate competent horizontal extension to resolve conflict, sustain lives and protect vital interests.

Before martial artists or leaders can make a powerful move to protect and sustain the lives of others, they must have a sense of balance and self. If not, they may fall or be easily knocked off course. Leaders need to develop and maintain a “power base” of inner strength to thrive and sustain growth amid stress, conflict and changing circumstances. This power base of vertical competency has mental, physical and technical elements.

Mentally, leaders need to have self-knowledge and vision. Like a compass, leaders provide direction but to be able to do that, they need their own purpose. They have to know what is important to them and know where they stand. George Bernard Shaw wrote: “This is the true joy of life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.”<sup>1</sup>

As leaders understand their internal true north the constant bearing will consistently provide authentic direction and be effective. All actions originate from this place, and without this kind of solid reference, leaders and followers will veer off course. To better understand personal true north, leaders need to engage in activities that demand honest self-reflection. Before leaders can develop fitting

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strategies and help guide organizations and people forward, they need to clarify what is critical to themselves, their units and their soldiers. For example, the following powerful questions may help leaders better understand their belief system:

1. If you had \$20 million:
  - a. What would you do?
  - b. Where would you go?
  - c. With whom would you spend time?
  - d. What/where/whom would you not choose?
2. If you knew you were going to die in two years:
  - a. What would you do?
  - b. Where would you go?
  - c. With whom would you spend time?
  - d. What/where/whom would you not choose?
3. What is the priority, project, product, or service that you would like to develop?<sup>2</sup>

Through continual self-examination, leaders refine their priorities. A similar analysis that inventories a leader’s strengths, weaknesses and learning style is also important.

Understanding what activities lead a military professional to optimal performance is also important. Many successful musicians, dancers, athletes and military leaders talk about “flow” or “being in the

zone.” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the renowned pioneer of psychology and education, describes flow as “the sense of effortless action [people] feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives.”<sup>3</sup> The Japanese call the flow state “*mushin*,” when the mind

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moves freely and responds to each situation immediately. For leaders it is a relaxed effort yet total immersion that produces rich and satisfying results.

Flow is critical to military leaders. Without it, the leader may freeze up in a firefight or become rigid and inflexible in day-to-day operations. Leaders should reflect on those moments when they experience flow or complete immersion because they indicate vertical alignment between beliefs, thoughts and action. They should dedicate their resources to these activities. This self-reflection will help leaders be in tune with the appropriate unit, mission, and leadership position.

For this quality of alignment and vertical competency, leaders should routinely set aside time for self-reflection. This practice consists of asking themselves what they are learning from their experiences (successes and failures), and where their time, energy and resources are used. Energy follows leaders’ attention, and periodically checking that focus helps align values and actions. By developing this self-discipline, a leader more adeptly manages the organization priorities and helps soldiers do the same. Furthermore, by reflecting on what is important, a leader shows others how to use energy and other resources for important matters.

From such reflection on heartfelt desires and concerns develops a powerful base of balance and direction. As leaders attend to what is important to them, they find the best places to be in the flow and thereby make a more authentic offer of service, which leads to optimal performance and satisfying results. This type of awareness helps leaders find

organizations and assignments suited to their needs and capabilities. This declaration will help leaders uphold the values and principles of the units they lead. When leaders establish well-understood organizational priorities, aligned with personal values and actions, they create elegant harmony, trust and efficiency. Personal alignment between beliefs, vision and action builds a powerful base of vertical competence, which balances and centers the leaders and spurs the optimal performance and operational success.

Besides a base of personal alignment and self-knowledge, a leader needs a calm mind and clear focus. Effective leaders stay focused under pressure by containing potentially disruptive emotions and exercising self-control. Like self-knowledge, self-control demands practice. Meditation, as a regular practice, can help develop self-regulation, and according to management consultant Peter Senge, “leaders committed to continually developing mastery practice some form of meditation.”<sup>4</sup> Many scientific studies show that meditation can help people achieve calmness and focus. These well-documented experiments demonstrate that meditation helps heighten perception and improves responses to stress.<sup>5</sup> Renowned sports psychologist Jim Loehr has worked with world-class athletes, pilots and FBI Special Weapons and Tactics teams. He prescribes meditation to his clients to strengthen the “capacity for . . . calmness of the mind and precise concentration.”<sup>6</sup> The empirical evidence is clear that these practices can powerfully effect a leader’s composure and focus, which are vital to organizational effectiveness.

In addition to understanding the mental components of vertical competence, a leader needs to develop the physical capacity for leadership. Physically, leaders need to be able to handle stress, change and other challenges. Physical stamina has other benefits. According to Loehr, “if you quickly experience physical fatigue, you’ll quickly tire mentally and emotionally as well . . . [therefore] actively seeking exposure to stress through exercise can deepen your stress capacity.”<sup>7</sup> Just like the martial artists takes an occasional hit, military leaders must be able to handle physical and psychological danger. Stepping in harm’s way to protect others requires physical preparation. Having a physical practice becomes important in developing a military leader’s body or vessel.

These practices can take on various forms. Physi-



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cal fitness has three facets: endurance, strength and flexibility. Aerobic and cardiovascular activities such as running and cycling build endurance; weight training is an example of a strength practice; stretching and yoga help improve flexibility. Ideally, a physical practice should encompass all three facets and be part of a leader's daily schedule. Having an enjoyable regular practice will help develop the capacity to deal with stress, and provide energy and enthusiasm in day-to-day living.

Physical fitness has deep meaning for the military leader. As leaders strengthen their bodies, "[they] connect physically and tangibly with their capacity for acting with choice, intention and discipline to attain goals. The feelings of effectiveness and control that they have working with their body open the possibility for acting more boldly . . . and see the interrelatedness between mind and body."<sup>8</sup> The body is the vital vessel that carries leadership

into battle or the fray between disputing factions. Developing and sustaining physical practices helps build a powerful base from which leaders will successfully engage their environment and effectively lead organizations.

The third component of vertical competence is tactical and technical proficiency. Practices that lead to mastering a leader's hard skills are critical. Leaders need to be skilled in the technical aspects of their profession to build confidence in themselves, instill confidence in others and accomplish the mission.

Professional development as a practice is a personal and organizational challenge that ties in with the idea of priorities and vision. If technical competence is an important aspect of a unit's vision, then a leader will commit to practice and allocate resources to develop it. Leaders attend conferences, read professional journals and ensure that their soldiers have the opportunity to learn as well. They also

develop detailed individual and collective training strategies to shape their units' competence to attain the organization's vision.

Through the dedicated practice of developing and implementing training strategies, leaders create an

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organizational culture that values learning and regular practice as distinct from simply accumulating knowledge. Leadership expert, Warren Bennis, believes that "the leader hasn't simply practiced his vocation or profession. He's mastered it . . . Such mastery requires absolute concentration."<sup>9</sup> Leaders strive to master the skills that will make them and their units more effective. A leader dedicated to mastering vertical competency and organizational excellence needs to focus on lifelong learning.

Vertical competency, as a goal and practice, provides leaders with lifelong learning opportunities. Regular practices that focus on building a centered base of physical and mental capabilities and professional expertise build a powerful vessel of leadership. Consistent and sustained self-reflection, self-control and physical training, when aligned with a leader's deep beliefs and organizational goals, embody vertical competency necessary for successful leadership despite uncertainty and constant change.

### **Leadership Practices— Horizontal Competency**

Once leaders establish a power base of vertical competency and the practices to sustain it, they turn their attention to influencing and coordinating with organizational members. Too often, leaders "can be seduced by this power and forget that it's a foundation on which to build a more profound relationship with the world, others" and themselves.<sup>10</sup> Many gifted military leaders are well developed from a vertical competency perspective but have interpersonal difficulties. Both vertical and horizontal com-

petencies are critical, complementary necessities that leaders must develop to lead effectively. These practices include establishing trust with others, coaching, developing organizational flow and building negotiation skills.

First, a leader needs to establish a climate of trust within the organization to influence others convincingly. Leaders must practice developing integrity. As simple as it may sound, leaders need to practice telling the truth. Choosing the harder right over the easier wrong requires practice. Leaders can start by honoring their words with their actions, following through and being on time for appointments, meetings and deadlines. Consistently upholding commitments, as small as they may seem, will build the habit and show that leaders care about the people they lead. Buddha stated this concept wisely, "The thought manifests as the word; the word manifests as the deed; the deed develops into habit; and habit hardens into character. So watch the thought and its way with care."<sup>11</sup>

Leaders practice keeping their word and behave in a way that is consistent with what they say. By fulfilling all promises, leaders practice being reliable and dependable which inspires confidence in the leader and promotes a cooperative environment. By truthfully and consistently extending to others, a leader builds the capacity for horizontal competency, which leads to a climate of trust.

Another way of practicing integrity and building trust is the practice of coaching. Tied to the individual and organizational practice of sustained learning, regularly providing and receiving feedback are practical and beneficial ways to practice integrity, while promoting professional development. During coaching, leaders deal directly with their team members and maintain open lines of communication. By taking the time to counsel soldiers regularly, leaders model care and concern. Since professional development is important to a leader's vision, actively promoting it is a visible and meaningful tool to build credibility. Coaching provides leaders active ways to develop trust and improve communications, thereby building and sustaining horizontal competency.

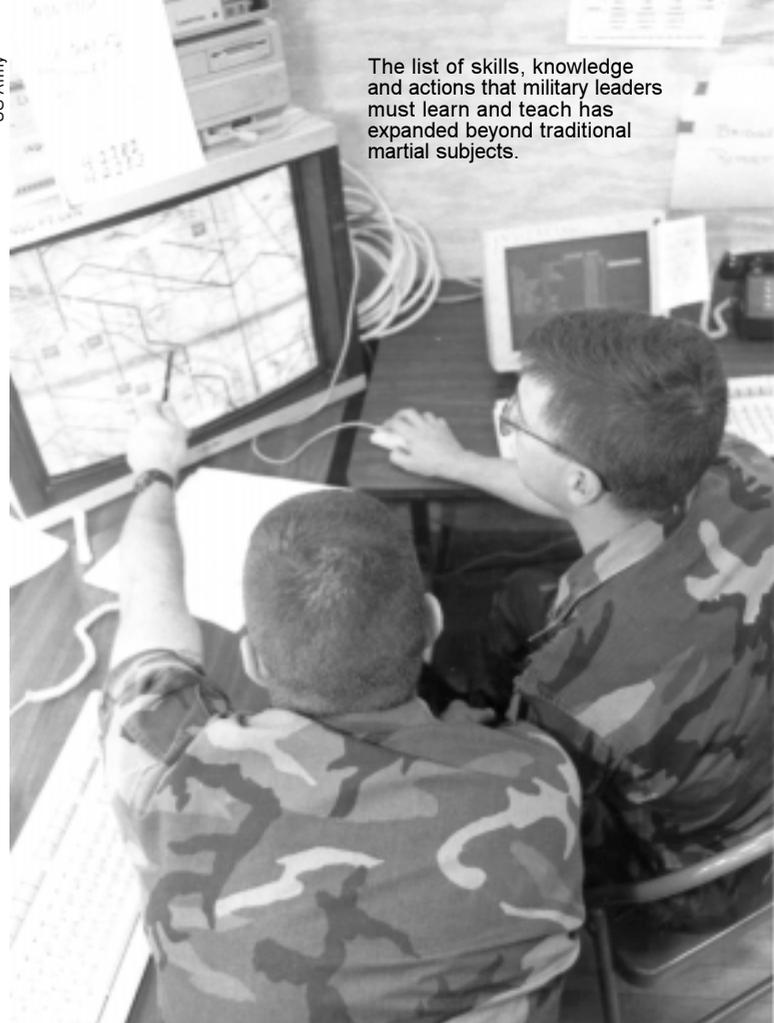
To practice coaching and honor the commitment of professional development, a leader should periodically evaluate performance. This process allows team members to learn what they did well, could do better and would have done differently. Before starting, leaders should encourage teammates to ask

one another for feedback. Once they open up the listening space, leaders must ensure that their team members illustrate or reinforce their feedback and conclusions with data, facts, events or incidents. Such references also enhance the coach's authenticity and create more trust. By developing the habit of coaching, leaders practice active listening, articulate communication, and promote learning and trust which builds horizontal competency in a leaders' ability to effectively lead.

As part of horizontal competency training, authentic coaching supports the collective practices of self-reflection and lifelong learning. Leaders look for opportunities to learn from their interactions with others and mission outcomes. What did the leader learn from obstacles or resistance? What did the team do well? What could the team have done differently? As in self-reflection, regularly setting aside time for horizontal-competency learning becomes critical to improve performance and complete organizational learning. The practice of collective learning from successes and failures build stronger teams for subsequent missions and projects. A competent and effective leader will also support collective learning.

To develop horizontal competency further, leaders should also constantly look for opportunities to learn. Bennis states that "leaders differ from others in their constant appetite for knowledge and experience."<sup>12</sup> Education does not end with a graduate degree, the US Army Command and General Staff College or the Army War College. Learning does not come solely from the academic environment, either. Military leaders must listen to their soldiers and others associated with their units regardless of their position or experience to understand what is happening and know how best to allocate resources and provide leadership. Some of the best ideas come from the youngest, most inexperienced team members because they offer fresh perspectives. In a climate of trust and open communication sustained by organizational practices, leaders can gain new ideas and learn about the impact of their decisions. Successful leaders practice being open to learning from others daily.

Sustainment of lifelong learning and practice requires expert guidance and supervision. Athletes, martial artists and other professionals dedicated to lifelong learning have teachers. Military leaders need to seek performance feedback as well. Seeking out coaches or mentors is an excellent way of



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maintaining personal and professional development. Bennis writes, "I know of no leader in any era who hasn't had at least one mentor: a teacher who found things in him he didn't know were there, a parent, a senior associate who showed him the way to be, in some cases, not to be, or demanded more from him than he knew he had to give."<sup>13</sup> These coaches may come from within the organization or from the outside. Having both is helpful. Successful coaches have a history of learning from their academic and professional experiences, enjoy a mutual respect with their students and demonstrate empathy and patience with them. Mentors help leaders maintain accountability for their actions and serve as support mechanisms and sounding boards for new ideas and actions.

Military professionals also need the ability to work effectively with those that are not supportive.

A look at martial arts, successful sports teams, cohesive military units and successful negotiators sheds important light on beneficial practices.

Aikido is an effective and practical Japanese martial art that stresses harmony. Aikido offers its students “the ability to blend, both physically and mentally, with the movement and energy of your partner . . . [it is] the study of good communication.”<sup>14</sup> Practitioners of this discipline look at ways of using the

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opponent’s forces against him. Forcing and straining is futile. Aikido teaches students to maintain their stand, coordinate with multiple opponents and maintain their dignity.

Psychologist Richard Strozzi Heckler is a 5th degree black belt in Aikido. He pioneered blending Aikido with psychology. His clients have included disturbed children, inner city gangs, professional athletes, psychologists, several branches of the military and corporate executives. Recently, the commander in chief, US Army Special Operations Command, and the commandant, US Marine Corps, asked Heckler to introduce his Aikido-influenced training approach to the Special Operations Command and the US Marine Corps leader development programs.

Heckler trains leaders on simple Aikido movements to help them actively coordinate, resolve conflicts, make and decline offers and develop cohesive teams. Heckler’s students and clients do not just talk or think about these concerns. By being physically active learners, they gain a deeper understanding of leadership and the concept of flow. For leaders already competent in resolving conflict, Heckler’s training offers a complementary cross-training advantage. Like swimmers who benefit from running, leaders deepen their horizontal competency by approaching embodied learning from different perspectives.

A look at professional sports teams and special

operations forces reveals critical common skills that leaders could incorporate into their interpersonal practices to produce flow. For example, these successful organizations methodically practice together. They build up their individual skills and then slowly incorporate small units until they can run full-dress rehearsals. Leaders use role-playing, simulations and rehearsals to prepare for difficult or complicated operations. Orchestras, special operations units, professional athletic teams—all cohesive organizations that perform well together—understand that practicing together produces synchronized and synergistic flow.

The business world understands this concept, too. In its quest to build the 767 airplane, Boeing used full-scale mock-ups and ran full-scale supply operations rehearsals with their Japanese counterparts before actual aircraft assembly. At one point, Boeing insisted that scale models of all fuselage sections be built and carried along the proposed routes.<sup>15</sup> Businesses involved in complex and risky ventures value realistic rehearsals to develop coordination, communication and cohesion. Just like martial artists and military leaders who apply the concept of flow to training, business leaders also see that, while in the flow, training and practice overtake conscious striving and produce optimal, satisfying performance.

To help improve their organization’s performance and increase soldier satisfaction, leaders must set conditions for flow states of optimal performance. Leaders must ensure that “goals are clear, feedback relevant and challenges and skills are in balance” so that “attention becomes ordered and fully invested.”<sup>16</sup> Such focused training allows concentration to manage self-consciousness because there is no room for distracting thoughts. To actualize this concept, leaders need to offer clear standards, teach proper techniques, allow time for practice and coach along the way. Rehearsing critical events with essential players should become a standing operating procedure. Planning, brainstorming without evaluation, modeling and simulations help teams build a creative learning process that leads to success. Successful high-risk ventures such as aircraft production, combat operations, and professional musical and athletic performances do not happen without systematic team rehearsals to play out scenarios. Developing training and operations with the concept of flow in mind is critical to organizational cohe-

sion and success. Sustaining practices that support the organizational flow states build horizontal competency and team effectiveness.

This kind of horizontal competency training requires patience and allowing people to learn from their mistakes. The zero-defect mentality does not work in this environment. Leaders define their criteria for success and satisfaction, offer resources and support, and run interference so their teams can “play with reality” without worrying about the consequences of mistakes. This will help teams find the best solutions, build confidence in their abilities and develop cohesion. As leaders provide conditions for this type of horizontal learning environment, flow, increased satisfaction and higher performance levels will develop.

Martial artists, professional sports teams and other trainers who teach flow and embodied learning understand that leaders learn kinesthetically, as well as through visual and auditory means. To understand how it feels in the body to coordinate and resolve a conflict, and not just talk about it, takes learning to a deeper level. Still, leaders do not have to practice a martial art or be great athletes. The goal is to learn practices that exercise the mind and body in different ways that help leaders develop new approaches to problem solving and learn to lead with more breadth. By incorporating active practices that meet specific organizational needs and require people to physically participate, leaders can build organizational cohesion and horizontal competency.

Negotiation training is another active way leaders can build horizontal competency. After all, “negotiating is a way of life for managers.”<sup>17</sup> Many courses in mediation and negotiations are available and should be part of a leader’s professional development program. Leaders need to put this training into action by actively using a negotiation framework in their daily lives. By purposefully seeking mutual interests and creative alternatives, leaders will hone their emphatic listening and authentic articulation skills. Practicing negotiations by consistently using an organized framework for simple and complex agreements will help leaders become more proficient in persuasion, coordination and dealing with obstacles.

Negotiation provides excellent leadership training. In any given negotiation, managers have to analyze problems, determine interests and develop options to address those needs. These tasks provide a

great chance to hone listening and speaking skills, coordinate in a fluid environment, resolve conflicts and implement outcomes. Providing feedback and developing lessons learned from the negotiations for

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future projects completes the horizontal leadership practice loop. Negotiation training improves communications, helps resolve conflict and produces more effective leaders.

Effective leaders develop and sustain horizontal competency by coaching, establishing trust with others, building negotiation skills and developing the flow conditions of optimal performance. This embodied knowledge will allow leaders to successfully fulfill their commitments and implement their strategies through, with and for others. The ability to extend and blend with other people while maintaining perspective is an important leadership capability. Consistent interpersonal practices will develop the horizontal competency to lead effective organizations.

### **Service as the Linchpin**

The sense of selfless service binds vertical and horizontal competency together and provides dignity and responsibility. The seriousness of defending the US Constitution and leading troops into battle signifies that military leaders should not operate out of selfish motives. Authentic military leadership exists only when it is used for the sake of protecting lives and vital interests.

This sense of care and service needs to be practiced and embodied, just as the other competencies of leadership. Leaders must approach all tasks with a sense of service, reminding themselves that everything they do is for the sake of protecting lives and defending the Constitution. This attitude grows out of the knowledge that “every action taken has the potential to change the world, leave it cold with

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indifference, or perhaps, more commonly, nudge it infinitesimally in the direction of good and evil.<sup>18</sup>

Leaders who practice service know that there is no such thing as an unimportant decision. Poor leaders may trivialize decisions, but authentic leaders know whatever they say or do not say, do or do not do, has an impact. They care about developing the horizontal and vertical competencies that align them with a sense of service. Caring, authentic leaders practice moving through the world with purposeful intent and thoughtful action, knowing that they embody the warrior's ethos to protect, defend and sustain lives.

A genuine sense of care and service, a common thread in the vertical and horizontal competencies, must be embodied in the areas of practice. Concern for vertical competency leads to self-reflection and self-knowledge. Care for horizontal competency shows up in active listening, coordination, structuring and resourcing for opportunity and higher levels of performance. If soldiers do not believe their

leadership cares for them, commitment and performance will suffer and the bonds of trust will be broken. Given a power base of vertical and horizontal competencies, an attitude of service helps blend leadership practices, build trust and align the values and actions of protecting and sustaining vital interests and concerns.

Like other professionals, leaders must master and embody their art. Leaders, just like martial artists, need practices that will help them stay on the path of self-knowledge, inner strength and demonstrated achievement. Like athletes dedicated to team sports, leaders need practices that promote success with, through and for people.

For leaders to experience authentic transformation and serve society, they must dedicate themselves to lifelong vertical and horizontal practices, that involve the whole person based on a value system and guided by coaches. The offer of leadership as a service to others brings the horizontal and vertical competencies together. Close examination and implementation of physical, mental and interpersonal practices benefit organizations and embody thoughtful leadership. Like the martial artist master who deftly handles multiple attacks, the properly developed military leader adapts to complex situations. To lead organizations, authentic leaders, through embodied practices, become "as hard as a diamond, flexible as a willow, smooth-flowing like water or as empty as space."<sup>19</sup> **MR**

#### NOTES

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