



CHAPTER VII

Leadership in Cohesive Units

THE EFFECTIVE CONTROL OF SOLDIERS in combat and in peace is complex and difficult. The nature of modern war has dictated a significant shift over the past 100 years from methods of control dependent upon physical domination of the soldier to those that rely on internalized discipline within the soldier. Today's warfare no longer allows mass formations to attack under the watchful eyes and control of sergeants and officers. Modern leaders no longer bivouac well before darkness or during periods of fog or low visibility in order to prevent mass desertions. The requirements of leadership have changed significantly since the time when the armies of Frederick the Great marched in Europe. The many requirements for small and independent unit actions have deemphasized strict discipline, rote training, and drill. The dispersion, confusion, danger, and hardship that characterize modern battlefields have made it essential to gain control of the individual soldier through the process of internalizing values and codes of behavior that cause the soldier to act as a reliable member of his unit in combat. Because the source of the soldier's values and codes is the small group and because the only force strong enough to make the soldier willing to advance under fire is his loyalty to

the small group and that group's expectation that he will advance, it becomes the primary task of the organization to control the small fighting group through its leaders.

Training and situation drills assist the leader in building cohesive units. The confidence that characterizes well-trained troops, especially that training validated in combat, is significant; the soldier needs to feel that he is part of a group that can successfully meet and survive most situations found on the battlefield. The drill aspect of training also contributes by helping the soldier overcome the often immobilizing fear experienced in combat operations (e.g., airborne) and by helping him take appropriate actions expected by the group. Outside threats perceived by the group also cause it to coalesce and pull together to face the common danger. It is leadership, however, that is the most critical factor in building cohesive units.¹

Characteristics of Leadership in Cohesive Units

Leadership that is most effective in building cohesive units has several characteristics. Of primary importance is that it is not managerial in approach. Instead, it emphasizes personal, empathic, and continuing face-to-face contact with all soldiers in the unit. Because the leader's ability to develop fully professional relationships is limited to a small number of soldiers, units must necessarily be small if leaders are to have maximum impact. An army's maximum leadership efforts must be focused at the small-unit level where the leader makes the link between the formal organization and the fighting soldier—at the squad, platoon, and company level. Above these levels, more emphasis on a managerial approach is required. The transition from leadership to managerial styles is a problem for some armies. The correct style depends primarily on the level of the organization being led or managed. Many armies tend to adopt one approach and apply it inflexibly at all levels. The most evident example is that of the French Army between the World Wars. Personal leadership and example, along with the spirit of the offense, under the slogan of "Élan!" were thought to be appropriate for all levels, especially among the field grade ranks. As a result, strategy and management were not adequately considered, resulting in the major debacle suffered by the French Army at the hands of the German Wehrmacht in World War II.

Few armies today adequately make the required transition from the major emphasis on leadership required at lower-level units to the very different managerial and strategic emphasis required at higher levels of command. For example, the assumption that because an officer was a first-rate company commander he will also be an outstanding battalion, brigade, or division commander is not warranted. Different skills are required. But in building a cohesive army, leadership skills at company and lower-level units are the most critical and must be given priority.

Leaders at the small-unit level in a cohesive unit should have a degree of charisma—not glibness, but the ability to guide the unit gracefully in repeatedly surviving difficult situations. In battle, nothing succeeds like success. Men in danger become acutely aware of the qualities of their leaders. They desire leadership so their immediate needs can be met and their anxieties controlled.² In this regard, well-trained and respected company grade officers and sergeants relay a sense of competence and security to their soldiers and, if successful over a period of time, gain a degree of influence and control over members of their units often associated with charismatic leaders.

Casualties can significantly weaken group cohesion, especially casualties that are considered “wasteful” by soldiers in the unit and that are attributed to leadership failure or unreasonable missions.³ Such a situation puts the unit leader in a difficult position between his requirement to complete his assigned mission and his duty to maintain the integrity and welfare of the unit. In their linking function between soldier and organization, leaders must be perceived by unit members as protecting them from harassment and unrealistic missions from above.

In addition to building upon success, the unit leader must act to neutralize the effects of failure. In success or failure, the leader uses the perception of outside threat or difficult challenges to mobilize and coalesce the unit. The effects of failure can vary considerably, depending upon whether the unit is in the front line or in the rear.⁴ When cohesion has been seriously impaired, soldiers will still fight for survival, and this need can be used by the unit leader as a basis for rebuilding cohesion. The soldier’s individual need for self-preservation affects his relations within his unit. He recognizes that his chances of survival are greater if he shares the

danger within a limited range of tasks that must be accomplished to improve overall unit chances for survival.⁵

The Effect of Ideology

Indoctrination or civic education is most effective in getting the soldier to the battle and in assisting him to withstand further combat after the battle. During the battle, ideology appears to have significantly less influence in controlling a soldier's behavior.⁶ Additionally, there is some evidence that soldiers well versed in ideology are better able to resist and to stop the spread of demoralization.⁷ Whatever the ultimate effect of ideology or civic education, it is dependent upon unit leaders. Successful and competent leaders who make certain that all unit members share equally in the hardship and danger facing the unit and who set the example will be successful in imparting ideology. In many cases, broad ideological slogans and goals have become specific operational rules of behavior within small units.⁸

An essential requirement is that first-line leaders have authority to implement the policies and procedures necessary for the creation of cohesive units. If authority is centralized at higher levels of command for political or economic reasons, small-unit leaders often are left without the means to execute their responsibility. As a result, soldiers quickly see that the sources of good things in their life are not controlled by their immediate leaders. Promotions, pay, leave, passes, job assignments, billeting, and messing policies are sources of influence for small-unit leaders. When control of these personnel actions is removed from the leader, his ability to create cohesive units becomes significantly impaired.⁹

On Understanding Leadership and Cohesion

Many approaches to and definitions of leadership have been offered. The purpose here is not to offer another but to relate leadership to cohesion in military units by synthesizing available knowledge about the individual soldier, the small group, the organization, and the leadership itself.

Military leadership involves enduring—and primary—personal relationships between a leader and soldiers. Many officers

appear to believe that inspiring talks and appearances by brigadiers and colonels offer the best examples of leadership. On the contrary, the vital leadership role is consistent competence at the squad, platoon, and company levels by company grade sergeants and officers. It is at this level where the phenomenon of leadership takes place because it is here that the individual soldier is persuaded to pursue goals that are often in direct conflict with his own best interests. The individual's need for cover from enemy fire, for example, is in direct conflict with the organizational requirement to advance toward an enemy position and defeat it. The primary function of small-unit leadership is to bring about congruence between the requirements of the organization and the needs of the individual soldier. The leader must bring about internalized values and discipline within the soldier to enable him to overcome his fear and expose himself to enemy fire. To accomplish this task, the leader must create and accommodate the soldier's needs by developing a group within his unit whose norms and procedures are strongly congruent with organizational objectives. Ideally, the soldier will pursue Army goals in satisfying his individual needs. The key is similarity of values among soldier, leader, and organization so that such values become the primary guide for the soldier's day-to-day behavior. Therefore, units organized on the basis of similar values have a much better chance at congruence with organizational objectives. If this is not possible, extensive efforts must be made to socialize all soldiers into the desired value system of the group. The greater the effectiveness of these efforts the less formal controls will be required within the unit.¹⁰

The Leadership Model

The following model describes the leadership function for achieving congruence of primary values among soldiers, leaders, and organization. See figure 1.

Leadership, then, may be defined as the phenomenon that occurs when the influence of A (the leader) causes B (the group) to perform C (goal-directed behavior) when B would not have performed C had it not been for the influence of A.¹¹

Interaction between the leader (A) and the group (B) is signified by the two arrows and indicates the exercise of influence

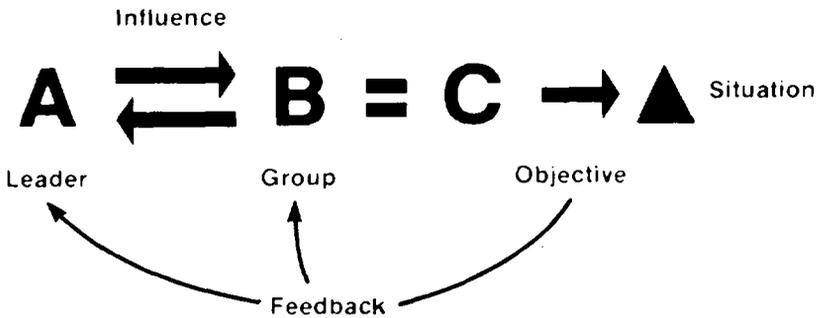


Figure 1. Leadership Model.

through which the leader creates and uses norms for directing behavior within the group. The arrows also indicate the leader's perceptions of group needs upon which the norms are based. The behavior depicted by C is mission-oriented activity desired by the leader, as the agent of the organization, and performed by the group. Feedback enables the leader and the group to adjust their behavior and activities over time as the situation changes.

Sources of Leader Influence

Leaders of cohesive units have several bases of power that are the sources of the influence necessary to control and direct the group.¹² These may be placed into several categories evident at the squad, platoon, and company levels: (1) reward and coercive power, (2) legitimate power, (3) referent power, and (4) expert power.

Reward and Coercive Power

Reward and coercive powers are available to all armies. They may be defined as the ability to exert influence in personal relationships based upon the ability to reward and punish. To be of maximum effectiveness in cohesive units, reward and punishment must be related to group norms. Both the action and the reward or punishment itself must be congruent with group norms. Material rewards and the ability to punish a soldier physically should also be available to the leader, but such devices must be viewed as complementary to reward and punishment through the group. In other words, reward and punishment must be related to the sol-

dier's relationship with the group. The leader's ability to focus group pressures and acceptance or sanctioning of an individual is a source of tremendous power. It can threaten or heighten the soldier's sense of security, and source of affection and recognition, in such a manner that significant pressures become focused on the soldier to conform to group rules and procedures. In cohesive armies, awards and commendations as well as restriction and criticism are rooted strongly within the group and are implemented within full view of the unit.

Legitimate Power

Legitimate power in cohesive units may be defined as compliance with orders because of attitudes or beliefs that have their basis in a feeling of internalized "oughtness"—a sense of what is right and wrong that, in turn, is based on learned cultural values. Legitimate power tends to be the most impersonal source of power. It is dependent upon cultural value congruence among members of the unit and between leader and subordinates. Leader reliance on legitimate power is usually greater during the earlier period of a soldier's service or after defeat or extreme hardship when other sources of power are not as effective. In addition to arising from cultural values, legitimate power can also derive from the reputation of the organization the leader represents. For example, in Vietnam, an unknown US Army lieutenant tended to have more influence within the same unit than did an equally unknown Vietnamese lieutenant. Legitimate power reaches its most potent influence when the leader becomes a surrogate for authority figures held in greatest respect by unit members. Soldiers respond to legitimate power much in the same manner that citizens respond to a policeman or that a parishioner responds to a priest.

Referent Power

Referent power is most dependent on close, personal relationships between leaders and subordinate soldiers. Its great influence stems directly from the intense identification of the soldier with his immediate leader. Often, the leader approaches the stature of a loved and respected parent or of the charismatic leader who demonstrates consistently the Weberian quality of "grace," or the ability to consistently handle difficult situations well. Such

referent power is based on the satisfaction of the soldier's personal needs for affection, recognition, and security through strong identification with a respected leader who has successfully led his unit through situations of danger and hardship. Leaders who maximize their referent power know the personal history and circumstances of all their subordinates. They know the aspirations, fears, capabilities, and attitudes of their soldiers in great detail and build relationships on these facts. In cohesive armies, the formation of such close ties between soldiers and leaders is not a matter of individual initiative or chance but of official policy.

Expert Power

Expert power may be defined as the soldier's compliance with a leader's orders because the leader is perceived as having superior knowledge and ability important to the soldier and his unit in the context of a current or expected situation. In hardship situations and in combat especially, leadership expertise that allows the leader to cope successfully with the situation is a significant source of power. The proven ability to carry out a tactical plan, to arrange for and adjust artillery, to demonstrate professional expertise with weapons, to navigate well, and to provide medical care and supplies are all significant sources of power. Just possessing information transmitted via radio, telephone, or messenger that is vital to the unit is a proven source of power. Armies desiring cohesive units must ensure that unit leaders are professionally trained and prepared. Leaders of front line units must be viewed as "men of steel" professionally equal to meeting all tasks demanded by the situation.

Leadership is probably the most important consideration in building cohesive units, and it requires extended and intensive face-to-face contact between leaders and soldiers. Leaders in cohesive units

1. are perceived by the group as professionally competent to meet successfully the situation and environment faced by the unit;

2. are not managerial in approach, but emphasize personal and continuing face-to-face contact with all soldiers in the leader's unit;
3. are found at the small-unit level, at squad, platoon, and company;
4. possess a degree of charisma (the ability to gracefully and repeatedly survive difficult situations) or act to neutralize the effects of failure. In either case the leader will use the perception of outside threat or difficult challenges to mobilize and coalesce the unit;
5. utilize the effects of indoctrination or civic education to maximize leadership influence;
6. emphasize, through professional ethics, that all members of the unit and especially the leaders share equally all hardship and danger;
7. are granted sufficient authority to control events or actions within the unit in order to meet their responsibility for building a cohesive unit;
8. will make use of all sources of power and influence within the group, including the power to reward, the power to coerce, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power.