

## Command Challenges at Unit Level

Lieutenant Colonel Ashish Raisinghani@

### Introduction

Reams have been written on this subject and a number of 'leadership models' have been suggested. This heady mixture of definitions, theories and models is beguiling and intriguing by its sheer variety. It may not be within the scope of this topic to burrow deep in to the intricacies of research of command. However, while trying to identify the parameters for effective command in the 21st Century, one has to first objectively locate the key factor, which matters the most for evaluating the leader. The essence of military leadership is obtaining positive results for the organisation. It is the process of identifying and planning goals and achieving them through followers by providing direction and motivation.

Taking charge and establishing yourself as the commander is not something that can be imposed on an organisation. It is a shared process; a process which involves the commander, his subordinates, and his superiors. Taking charge of a unit is often described as winning the trust, confidence, and respect of superiors and subordinates alike. It requires mastery of the tactical, technical, administrative and leadership aspects of the job to establish the leader.<sup>1</sup>

### Environmental Changes that are Impacting Command

#### Macro-environmental Changes

Perhaps the single greatest difference to the environment affecting command philosophies, is that both leader and 'led' are increasingly reflecting a diverging set of values and beliefs, to those traditionally held by the Indian Army. In the last 20 years, there have been dynamic political, economic, socio-cultural and technological changes within society and, as a result, society is more 'permissive,' with the emphasis now on individual rights rather than responsibility towards the community or traditional organisations such as Armed Forces.

Therefore, the greatest challenge facing the Indian Army is that today's young officers and soldiers may simply not be willing to accept the traditional command principles of the past. The power to make life or death decisions over subordinates runs contrary to the increasing emphasis on the rights of the individual, expressed by the society from which recruits are drawn.<sup>2</sup>

#### What is Changing?

"Change is the only constant" is a cliché but it is important to identify the factors which are changing to emerge as challenges before the military leadership of tomorrow. These are as under:-

- (a) **Nature of Manpower.** The Indian Armed Forces have an unblemished tradition of voluntary recruitment for men and selection for officers. The officers have been 'leaders' and the men 'followers' in the classical sense.<sup>3</sup>
  - (i) **Officer Cadre.** The typical youngster vying for a career as an officer in the Services today predominantly comes from a middle class background, probably after exhausting options of other lucrative careers. Nevertheless, most young men who join the officer cadre today are better qualified, ambitious, competitive and calculative than their seniors who joined decades ago.
  - (ii) **Rank and File.** The effects of societal and economic transformation of our nation can be most vividly seen in the comparison of recruitment of the past and present. The typical recruit of yesteryears hailed from a rural milieu with an average academic qualification of matriculation. Most hopefuls today are the educated unemployed youth who turn towards military for acquiring early financial and social security with an average educational qualification of 10+2. The fact to be noted is that the average recruit of today is decently educated, aware, ambitious, often more conscious of his rights than obligations.
- (b) **Societal Transformation.** The Armed Forces are awakening to the reality that more the nation develops socially and economically; less will be the quality of manpower that they will attract. The deep penetration of the electronic media and their frequent indulgence in sensational reporting has insured that the romanticism surrounding military life has been demolished only to bare the hazards of combat.
- (c) **Advancement in Technology.** Today's age is described as the age of information Technology (IT), microchips, lasers and satellite applications. Information is regarded as the fifth dimension of warfare after land, sea, air and space.
- (d) **Nature of Warfare.** There is a general consensus that the nature of warfare in the 21st Century will become increasingly complex. Within 50 years, from an era of face- to-face (visual range) combat we have come to the age of nuclear ballistic missiles, 'smart' bombs, drones and cruise missiles. Moreover, myriad groups with vested interests and even nation states are resorting to innovative and unconventional methods of warfare described by terms like Low Intensity Conflict, Proxy War, Low Intensity Maritime Operations, Asymmetric Warfare and so on.<sup>4</sup>

### Challenges for a Commanding Officer at Unit Level

#### Organisational Level Shortcomings

**Hierarchical Barriers.** In spite of the inherent value of multiple perspectives and feedback, perceptions about the potentially adverse impact of follower feedback on command authority have, in large measure, blocked the introduction of formal subordinate feedback systems and open dialogue in organisations. Participation in decision-making by junior

officers not only allows them to become part of the solution to problems, but also presents opportunities to develop their own leadership and command skills.

**Need for More Effective Performance Evaluation.** The persistence of command climate problems is due, in part, to insufficient and ineffective performance evaluation. While trends in productivity provide some indications about command climate, so many additional factors affect productivity that climate alone is not a reliable measure. The Army needs to consider defining, assessing, and reporting organisational effectiveness in terms of mission accomplishment (reliability, quality, efficiency, etc.) and organisational growth (team cohesion, trust in leadership, morale, and commitment, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

### Individual Level Shortcomings

**Commander's Self-Awareness.** Self-awareness is defined as the ability to assess abilities and determine strengths and weaknesses in an operational environment, and learn how to sustain strengths and correct weaknesses. In other words, a Commanding Officer must be self-aware, knowing self and how to lead self so he can know and therefore lead others.<sup>6</sup>

**Need for Improving Reinforcement.** Command climate problems persist, in part, because the emphasis placed on a Commanding Officer's ability to develop an effective organisation and to create a healthy unit, pales by comparison to the priority placed on assessing his individual performance in terms of mission accomplishment. A Commanding Officer's developmental aptitude is measured best by those being developed, and best revealed by the overall effectiveness of the organisation.

### The Interaction of Commanding Officer and Unit

The Army puts a premium on operational experience, as learning by doing is a hallmark of the military profession. There is insufficient feedback from higher to lower and lower to higher. Open dialogue is necessary for the growth of individuals and the organisation as a whole. Leaders, themselves, also have a large role in guiding their own professional development. Self-development is poorly operationalised in the Army, and it includes looking inward at one's own behaviour, and focusing on ways to improve the climate of the organisation.<sup>7</sup>

### Stress factors in the Army

There are the classical stress management approaches, mainly directed at leadership, unit cohesion, identification of external stressors and general morale boosting measures. It is widely accepted that soldiers have different physical abilities and that training and assignment has to take this into account. In practice, however too little attention is still paid to the problem of the personal mental resistance. It's known that people, due to their particular genetics, life experience and sensitivities react to stress in different ways, at different times towards different stressors. Physical experiences are more universal than the mental stress and thus easier to extrapolate from personal experience to those of fellow-soldiers.<sup>8</sup>

## Meeting the Challenges

### A New Approach

To date, the military style of command training (and doctrine) has often focused on 'hard' skills such as planning, organising and directing, all within an impersonal hierarchical structure. However, current thinking (from both the corporate world and academia) is now shifting towards an increase in the importance of 'soft' skills such as communication and motivation. To undergo the necessary transformation in command philosophies and, therefore, to provide the relevant training, Commanding Officers will now have to accept the feasibility of working alliances with subordinates who question old practices and propose new solutions, and to think of the link between them, as essential as the link between strategy and operations.<sup>9</sup>

### Meeting the Challenges

How will the Commanding Officer navigate his way towards the ultimate objective – success in mission? What measures can he take to address the issues being thrown up by the changing environment? Some measures are enumerated in succeeding paragraphs.

**Managing Technology.** Contrary to what some people believe, technological innovations will not reduce the importance of initiative at subordinate levels but increase it. In our context, the dominance of technology in the anticipated nature of warfare will be gradual, and few key areas that need attention are:-

(a) **Training.** Repeated exposure of officers and men to technological advancements related to their profession could help in smooth assimilation. Induction of state of the art simulators and training aids (like computer aided instruction packages) at academies, regimental centres and professional schools has to be a continuous process to ensure that training is as realistic and current.

(b) **Assimilation.** Already modern day advancements in military technology are trickling down to the end user in the Armed Forces. Equipments like global positioning system (GPS) sets, night vision devices, radars, digital communication sets, satellite receivers, personal protection equipment and so on have reached the man in the field. The onus of educating their men about the correct use, retention and preventive maintenance lies with the unit level leaders.

**Developing Human Resource.** A military force is said to be only as good as the leadership. At the same time, the days of 'follow me' are neither over nor will they ever be, as long as human beings are involved in warfare. There have been enough instances of friendly fire, desertion, refusal, indiscipline and stress related problems in conflicts. American

troops involved in Iraq is a vivid example of this truth. Let us try to identify the scope for developing human resource for the 21st century Indian Army. The areas are:-

- (a) **Addressing Aspirations.** As seen earlier, entrants at all stages, be it officer or soldiers, are better educated and well informed as compared to those of yesteryears. Rising awareness and education has increased aspirations and expectations. Soldiers today look beyond pay, food, the Patiala peg and a bedroll. Men are becoming increasingly perceptive about dignity and self esteem. Commanding Officers will have to consciously do away with unsoldierly tasks and mundane employment of men.<sup>10</sup>
- (b) **Altering Attitudes.** An attitudinal shift is required at two levels, with the first being from the senior leadership. It pertains to enhanced empowerment of Commanding Officers, especially those involved in combat related command assignments. The same allowance of space should also extend to administration and logistics related decision making which affects the morale of men. The second attitudinal shift relates to Commanding Officers and their relationship with the men. They need to view their men as repositories of rich experience and involve them in the scheme of things. This process already exists to some extent in many organisations but needs to be strengthened.
- (c) **Regaining the Advantage.** It has been a tradition in our forces to ensure 'institutional welfare', which means fulfilling all basic needs of the serving personnel in order to derive benefit from the resultant high motivation levels. Somewhere down the years, this tradition, handed over from the British days has been diluted. Commanding Officers will have to involve themselves actively to ensure that the levels of morale and motivation in their men remain high. They will have to come up with new ideas and solutions to reassure their men about their identity as members of an honourable profession.<sup>11</sup>

### Specific Anti Stress Measures

It is more realistic to continuously assess and select people according to their actual stress state than to dream of a 'one for all' solution to the stress problem. Two of the most important issues in stress management at unit level for a commanding officer are continuous stress detection and its prevention.<sup>12</sup> These are explained below :-

- (a) **Continuous Stress Detection.** Stress detection is a continuous problem for a unit, and it can be done on three levels in the unit:-
  - (i) **Buddy level.** Usually it's the friends and comrades who notice changes in an individual's mood and behaviour first. They have to be trained to mention their observations to the hierarchy.
  - (ii) **JCOs and NCOs level.** The junior leaders know their troops and can easily spot deficiencies. It helps to explain to them what to look for : changes of mood and/or behaviour, and to get them to report their observations in time to their Commanding Officer.
  - (iii) **Command level.** An experienced commander usually picks up things fast. It helps if command organises formal "stress-briefings" and explains to the staff the importance of mentioning, in time, deviation of mood or behaviour that they observe around them.
- (b) **Continuous Stress Prevention.** The armed forces have the advantage of being well organised and a structured organisation. This allows them to work preventively on the individual and on the unit level as under :-
  - (i) At individual level. The most difficult of propositions but in the long term the most promising new approach is the systematic 'relaxation' training of individuals. After identifying each individual's stress level, different relaxation techniques are possible, such as sports, gymnastics, yoga and meditation.
  - (ii) **At unit level.**
    - (aa) Keep the happenings in the unit transparent, along with the pros and cons of different procedures followed.
    - (ab) The Armed Forces, and often each regiment, have their own rituals like parades, religious functions, badakhana etc. These rituals soothe the mind and create a feeling of belonging.
    - (ac) Always keep the mind and body of soldiers occupied positively. It is at empty moments that people start to brood and imagine stressful events.
    - (ad) A healthy balance of 'rest & recreation' goes a long way in keeping the stress under control.

### Command Philosophy

The most important and sacred responsibility entrusted to an officer of the Indian Armed Forces is the privilege of commanding a unit. Commanding soldiers and being charged with the responsibility of their professional development, and possibly their lives, is a big trust, and the soldiers understand this fact. No organisation can progress without this framework and, this forms the command philosophy - a framework which guides the commanding officers to operate in all environments. For any command philosophy to work, it must stand on its own merits, easily understood by all, and it must be the basic leadership standards which guide the organisation. The Commanding Officer must always keep in mind the importance of establishing high yet realistic standards which are met. The "four pillars" of command philosophy are discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.<sup>13</sup>

### Leadership Style

The old axiom, “Lead by Example”, will always serve you well. Commanders are constantly being scrutinised by others, especially their subordinates. They cannot have different standards for the troops, JCOs/NCOs and the officers. Effective two-way communication is essential to any organisation’s success. It is essential to make subordinates feel part of the team by keeping them informed and involved. Commanding Officers who identify with their troops and the unit will have a better appreciation for the strengths and weaknesses of the unit.

## **Training**

Commanding Officers must take an innovative approach to training while still concentrating on the basic soldier’s skills and battle drills at all levels. Training must be meticulously planned, innovative and challenging in its approach, and should be oriented to accomplish mission oriented tasks. It goes without saying that physical fitness is paramount to a successful training programme, as physical fitness is one of the greatest force multipliers on the battlefield. Good, challenging, realistic training promotes harmony and teamwork. A unit which possesses the confidence to execute their mission under any conditions, has competent leadership, and has exerted itself in training, will survive on the battlefield.<sup>14</sup>

## **Maintenance**

Maintenance, property accountability and resource management must be integrated into combat operations by the Commanding Officers. Well trained operators and supervisors who know how to conduct ‘before’, ‘during’, and ‘after operations’ checks and services on equipment, are the foundation to any effective maintenance programme. A sound maintenance programme is a direct result of properly trained operators and direct leader interest and supervision. The best trained and best led unit in the Army will still fail, if the equipment will not support them in war.

## **Caring**

Caring for soldiers for a Commanding Officer is ensuring that they know and perform their duties, possess discipline of high standards, and are trained well enough to accomplish the mission while ensuring their survivability on the battlefield. It also means to ensure they are provided the best leadership possible and that they are recognised for their efforts and rewarded. The maintenance of fighting edge and a high degree of combat readiness are the main challenges and these are directly linked to soldiers’ morale. It is the chain of command’s responsibility to assist in the resolution of soldier’s personal and family problems. Caring for soldiers begins the day they join the unit and an effective commander must understand this fact.

## **Conclusion**

The work place is changing at a rapid pace, greatly influenced by shifting societal trends, technology and globalisation. These trends cannot be treated as separate issues; their interdependent effects will continue to exert powerful influences on the Armed Forces, its culture and how command is viewed and practised. Therefore, proactively adapting command philosophies to meet these challenges will enhance the overall effectiveness of the Army. Transformation of the Indian Army in the 21st century cannot occur without a command climate which ensures that the Army as an organisation is combat ready and effective. Effective command climate will not take root until effective measures and accountability are imposed.<sup>11</sup>

The best leadership will not generate followers; it will generate other leaders. Thus, the main objective of an effective and successful commander will be to produce change, often dramatically and when highly needed. Commanders must transform people and organisations by defining and articulating a clear vision, and implementing effective strategies that inspire others by enabling them to reach their full potential.<sup>15</sup>

## **End Notes**

1. William Steele and Robert Walters, ‘21st Century Leadership Competencies’, 2001.
2. L Stabb Strategic Research Project on ‘Transforming Army Leadership – The Key to Officer Retention’, US Army War College, 2001.
3. Maj Gen VK Singh, ‘Leadership in the Indian Army’, 2005.
4. Lieutenant Colonel GA Roman, ‘The Command and Control Dilemma: when Technology and Organizational Orientation Collide’, US Air War College, 1997.
5. R Isaac, handbook of ‘Organisational Culture: Some New Perspectives’.
6. WG Bennis, ‘Becoming a Leader’, 1988.
7. ‘The Battalion Commander’s Handbook’ of US Army War College, 1996.
8. Roderick Magee, ‘Strategic Leadership Primer’, US Army War College, Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, 1998.
9. Roger H Nye, ‘The Challenge of Command’, 1986.
10. Ronald Downey, ‘Development of a Measure of Army Leadership Climate: The Military Behaviour Survey’, 1974.
11. Col Steven M Jones, US Army, Paper on ‘Improving Accountability for Effective Command Climate: A Strategic Imperative’.

12. US Army Field Manual 'Leader's Manual for Combat Stress Control', 1994.
13. Dr Rebecca J Johnson, Paper on 'How Can Leaders Maintain Ethical Command Climates'.
14. US Army Research Institute for Behavioural Sciences, Paper on 'Command Climate Survey and Training'
15. Walter Ulmer, 'Military Leadership into the 21st Century: Another Bridge Too Far', 1998.

**@Lieutenant Colonel Ashish Raisinghani** was commissioned into the Corps of Engineers on 12 Dec 1998. Presently, he is posted as Instructor at College of Military Engineering, Pune.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIV, No. 595, January-March 2014.