Flexing organisational values to enable effective leadership decision-making in the British Army

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The British Army's doctrine of Mission Command demands agile and disruptive thinking and is underpinned by a common approach to decision making at all levels of command. The Estimate process, in one of its three guises, is taught to all non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and officers and is applied in all operational settings, from the tactical immediacy of combat to the strategic level. Having experienced this structure over nearly two decades of military decision making, it is worth reflecting on whether the complex decisions military commanders make are truly framed by the Estimate or whether ethos and values have a far more central role, especially when facing the moral tensions that often define the contemporary operational environment. This challenge is mirrored in other contexts, for example around the short-term costs but the long-term reputational advantages of organisations operating ethically in extreme contexts such as corrupt environments (Velamuri et al., 2017).

The academic literature on leadership is increasingly emphasising diffused, collaborative, horizontal and empowered structures (Spreitzer, 1996; Bolden, 2011; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), although it is recognised that this is not necessarily true in all contexts (Lord et al., 2001) and can present an overly romantic view of leadership (Collinson et al., 2017). Empirically, we found the notions of Officership, that the moral and human dimensions of operational decision making are delivered by a shared and uncompromising ethos, which can lead to decisions being made by commanders that might not have been supported by the Estimate process.

'ADP – Operations' (2010) describes making timely decisions as a commander's primary purpose. This translates to leadership driving a culture in which the philosophy of Mission Command has been central since 1987. The principles of unity of effort, an understanding of higher commanders' intentions and freedom of action frame Army decision-making and the Estimate's three forms are designed to deliver clarity, interrogate context and to encourage divergent thinking. However, they do not explicitly explore the moral environment outside of formal ethical and legal structures, despite the centrality of such understanding in sustaining legitimacy and psychological wellbeing. There are important parallels between diffusing the power and influence of the commander and the

growing emphasis on moving away from hierarchical conceptions of leadership to more dynamic, social and relational forms of leadership (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Donna Ladkin proposes that "the ability to make ethical decisions amongst competing versions of 'what is right' calls for more than the application of abstract ethical principles. It requires wisdom" (2010, p.153). So, from where do commanders draw such wisdom to decide what is more right in a given situation?

The first author, Justin Featherstone, describes an incident on operations in 2004 in Southern Iraq.

At this time, I was the Officer Commanding, Y Company of the 1ˢᵗ Battalion The Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment Battle Group on a tour of Maysan Province. My Company was primarily located in the former governor's residence in the provincial capital, Al Amarah. Named CIMIC House, our base was situated in the heart of the city, eight kilometres away from the rest of the Battle Group. During the tour, there was a large insurgent uprising under the banner of the Mehdi Army and this led to my Company finding itself fighting for sixteen weeks and besieged for three.

On one night in June, we were experiencing just another night of mortar fire against our location and I was able to observe the firing point across the river Tigris, just under two kilometres away. Its location meant vehicle or foot follow-up was not an option, as by the time troops could deploy there by these means, the vehicle-mounted enemy team would have been long gone, leaving any soldiers exposed to ambush when we crossed either one of the only two bridges we would have had to use to cross the Tigris. On this night, I had air assets available to me, in the form of an American AC130 Spectre gunship, whose use was coordinated through the Tactical Air Control Party at Battle Group headquarters.

As the enemy mortar continued to engage my location, I visually checked that the area was clear of civilians and then called it an airstrike. As the enemy vehicle was struck, the ammunition it was carrying exploded and I knew that the mission had been successful; the enemy indirect fire fell silent for the rest of that night.

I thought little of the incident until the next morning when my chief interpreter, Ali, came to see me. He told me that a man from the Al Karmamah city quarter had told him that three people had been killed when the enemy's ammunition exploded: an old man, a woman and a

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six-month-old baby and the community were asking to see me. The area in question had both a strong militia and a significant Mehdi Army presence.

My immediate reaction was that I would go and speak to the community that afternoon to deliver an apology for the consequences of my actions. I informed Battle Group headquarters of the situation and my intended action. Within a couple of hours, the Divisional Legal Team told me I was not to apologise and ideally, I should not visit the community at this time, as such actions might compromise our liability and impede the defined investigative process, which might take many weeks to complete.

I considered the direction and then called my Commanding Officer (CO), Lieutenant Colonel Matthew Maer. I explained that I had made clear to my soldiers that all our actions on this tour would be defined by what I had termed the 'grandchild test.' Namely, that all of us should return from the tour and in years to come be able to look our grandchildren in the eyes and upon reflection be proud of how we had acted. If any potential action might fail this test, it was almost certainly inappropriate. In addition, I believed that our Core Values compelled me to act against the will of the Legal team. Two of these values were my principal criteria for this situation: Courage and Respect for Others. I always considered moral courage to be an essential attribute for every officer and the second value, I usually referred to simply as 'humanity', as I believed that embodying its fundamental meaning and maintaining this was essential to the wellbeing of men and women such as me who are propelled in to the maelstrom of combat operations. As a result, my sense of humanity and empathy meant that I had to visit the community as I had originally planned and I was prepared to accept any consequences and censure that followed.

There was a pause, before the CO said simply "I will come with you." Although subsequently, this proved impossible, his support was invaluable. Shortly after lunch, I took a large patrol in to the Al Karmamah quarter and soon was surrounded by a number of local people, including some suspected Mehdi Army members. I said simply "I am the man responsible for your loss and I have come to offer my deepest apology. Although I cannot end your grief, I have come to ask you what you want from me now."

My reasoning was simple, how could any concerns over my career influence a decision that centred on the deaths of three people that I had caused, no matter how legitimate my actions? The Core Values made the course of action clear to me, despite the tension between loyalty to my chain-of-command and loyalty to the people of the city we operated in. I did not base the decision primarily on force protection, which would have been a factor in the Estimate, but on the need to reinforce Y Company's collective humanity. By using the six values, this wicked problem, which cannot be solved but can be tamed (Camillus, 2008), had only one solution for me and it did not take long to understand this.

The response was immediate. 'Sit down and take some coffee with us, Major Justin. We understand that there will be a process that follows but that is not for now. Thank you for behaving with honour. There is nothing more to be said.' The relationship that the Company fostered with this community remained so strong, that on occasion its own militia fought against insurgents from outside of the city and I believe that such actions bolstered the Company's legitimacy and mental resilience. When we left, we were visited by a forty-strong delegation from across the city, including senior members of the Mehdi Army. The people came to say thank you for our efforts to bring security and a start to the rebuilding of the city's infrastructure, while the insurgents had come to show their respect to those they deemed an honourable foe.

The example above suggests that although tactical decision-making is traditionally described by clearly defined processes, as habitus it might be far more influenced by identity and supporting values than is fully realised. In this narrative, there is a clear desire to maintain a sense of humanity and be seen to do so and this compulsion is reflected in US Army psychiatrist, Dave Grossman's (1995, p.227) sentiments:

> "Those who value human life and dignity must recognize from whence they draw their strength, and if they are forced to make war they must do so with as much concern for innocent lives as humanly possible."

Colin Gray (2009, p. 136) provides a different perspective of the inherent risks of approaches dominated by virtue:

> "Moral impulse, ethical imperatives, a commitment to spread virtue; these are dangerous phenomena. If undisciplined by strategic

> calculation and behaviour they are more than just dangerous, they are well nigh certain to lead to disaster. To repeat, statecraft and strategy are not a morality tale."

This tension between the expression of identity and the disassociated objectivity required to swiftly defeat the enemy is articulated by Major General, later Lieutenant General, Graeme Lamb (2006) when he addressed Sandhurst's Officer Cadets:

> "To lead and prepare soldiers to operate here (on operations), takes men and women of character, people who are not debased by what they do and are not inclined to slip the boundaries of decency by lowering their standards of morality… when the blast of war blows in our ears and the situation is bloody dangerous, you need…instinctive, exemplary, innovative and inspirational leadership. Such heart-led leadership is a touch unsafe and risky. Such officers can just as easily deliver unqualified success, or catastrophic failure but they can change institutionalised rules and challenge that which is taught."

The environment of military operations regularly give rise to ill-structured problems that defy assessment without a true exploration of their moral dimension. It is for this reason, it is proposed that the use of those values that permeate every facet of Army life to directly inform tactical leadership, whether as a conscious construct or not, is perhaps common, if not widespread.

Alignment of organisational values and individual values has been shown to be important in other empirical contexts (Harvey et al., 2017). If there is a major gap between the organisation's values and the values demonstrated by its members through their behaviour then this will typically lead to a crisis. Even when there is a significant gap between what the organisation espouses and what members believe and show through their behaviour then this requires remediation, otherwise the organisation's legitimacy and reputation will be brought into question by different stakeholders. Importantly, organisational members need to believe in their organisational values, otherwise there will be a disconnect between what the organisation seeks to project, how members behave and how different stakeholders perceive that organisation. In the example above, the fact that the Mehdi Army and insurgents came to show their respect to the British Army shows the possibilities for other leaders in different organisations of how they can engage with a much wider group of stakeholders. This is not without its risks, but can have major long-term positive outcomes.

In summary, it is important to ensure from the outset that the creation of values is co-created between leaders and its members. As the example above demonstrates, organisational values should have the capacity to be applied flexibly by its members because complex environments change rapidly. At the same time, flexibility can only go so far because too much licence to interpret values can quickly lead to behaviours which could question or even undermine the organisation's values. Effective decision-making requires leaders to walk a precarious tightrope where careful consideration and application of the organisation's values is required in a rapidly changing environment.

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