



The 16th International Scientific Conference
“DEFENSE RESOURCES MANAGEMENT
IN THE 21st CENTURY”
Braşov, October 28th-29th 2021



DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE MILITARY LEADERSHIP –
THE LONG ROAD FROM FIGHTER TO LEADER

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Abstract:

The development of military leaders is a crucial component of defense resources management in general and of the military education/training system in particular, but also a most challenging process. Leadership is a discipline found in most curricula of military academies, it features in the job requirements of many officer positions, and at the same time it is a very elusive concept. The Romanian White Book of Defense mentions “developing leaders, specialists and fighters” as an objective for the military training/education system, but are the above mentioned terms really synonymous? Developing a military leader is a complex and lengthy process that begins with the identification of basic personality traits in the future leader, and continues with the intricate process of training, education, providing the opportunity for exposure to various situations in order to gain experience etc. The theory of leadership can be taught in academies, but developing leaders requires a lot more than that. Besides the theoretical background, a leader needs controlled exposure to practical situations in order to build experience and self confidence, and a structured system of mentoring and support throughout the officer’s career. The aim of this paper is to analyze the main challenges on the long road of developing fighters into leaders, and to propose some recommendations for a more effective leadership development process.

Key words: *leader, fighter, process, military, challenges*

1. Introduction

The aim of developing an effective leadership is stated in many strategic defense documents, in most of the countries. In Romania, the White Paper of Defense from 2021 states that the aim of military education and training system is “training, educating and ensuring the professional development of leaders, fighters and specialists, able to achieve success in a constantly changing operational environment, with the professional skills necessary to fulfill missions now and in the future” [1].

The above mentioned goal, as worthy as it may seem, raises several interesting challenges in the process of identifying the specific objectives, course of action, measures, tasks and techniques to put it into practice. A major challenge comes from the fact that the definition of the terms is not clarified anywhere in the main programmatic documents, leading to confusion and hindering the clear identification of the way ahead. The civilian and military literature abounds in definitions of leader and leadership, while the term of warfighter and specialist are less well clarified. The oversimplification of the complex interaction between warfighter, leader and specialist, the confusion of definitions and roles can generate undesirable results in terms of the end results of the military education and training process, but also in terms of the functioning of the military system in general.

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process of training, education, providing the opportunity for exposure to various situations in order to gain experience etc. The theory of leadership can be taught in academies, but developing leaders requires a lot more than that. Besides the theoretical background, a leader needs controlled exposure to practical situations in order to build experience and self confidence, and a structured system of mentoring and support throughout the officer's career. The aim of this paper is to analyze the main challenges on the long road of developing fighters into leaders, and to propose some recommendations for a more effective leadership development process.

2. Clarifying the terms of leader, fighter and specialist

The literature offers a variety of approaches and definitions on what means leader and leadership in the military. The US Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 defines *leadership* as “the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization”, and the *leader* as “anyone who by virtue of assumed role or assigned responsibility inspires and influences people to accomplish organizational goals... motivates people both inside and outside the chain of command to pursue actions, exercise diverse thinking, and shape decisions for the greater good of the organization”. [2]

In a national approach, leadership is defined as “power, a authority exerting its influence in order to inspire the conduct of others (individuals and groups) or to determine them to actively participate, on their own volition and with enthusiasm, to the achievement of the set objectives or ...tasks related to a common goal” [3]

Drawing on the various approaches in the literature, a leader is supposed to be endowed with a number of characteristics that make that person able to fulfil its leadership role. Thus, the Australian Army identifies the qualities of an effective leader as: “leadership, professional knowledge, intellect and vision, courage and resolve, integrity and example, judgement and decisiveness, credibility, and adaptability” [4]. A Romanian author considers that a military leader should possess a general understanding of the organization, cognitive abilities, professional competences, the ability to be a team member, a vision regarding the organizations future, the ability to assume risk, the ability to recognize value, moral characteristics such as integrity, equity and courage, progressive thinking [5].

We are going to come back to the features a leader should possess in the second section of this paper, but for now let's focus on clarifying the concepts. The reason why it is important to understand the concepts of leader/commander/warfighter goes beyond the academic or semantic considerations, as it has direct implications on how an organization is led towards the achievement of its goals.

Command is often associated with leadership, as it is exerted by the commanders and staff officers, consisting of leading the personnel at tactical and operational level and leading the organization at strategic level [6]. Nonetheless, the terms should not be considered as synonymous, as there are differences between leader and commander, deriving especially from the source of the authority (the commander has the formal authority while the leader's authority derives from the acceptance from the group members). A commander may have the formal authority, but lack leadership skills, while an informal leader may emerge in the organization without necessarily having the command position.

The term *fighter* (luptător), mentioned in programmatic documents at strategic level, such as the Romanian White Book of Defence, in the context of modernizing the military educational



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system, but also in doctrines and planning documents at the level of educational institutions is well defined, overlapping with the meaning of the term “military”. In the case of officers, a graduate of a service level Academy is trained to be a fighter, in the sense that he/she has to master the basic fighter skills and necessary knowledge such as handling of the service weapons, using a gas mask, achieving a specific fitness level, general military knowledge. The training is aimed at develop a basic set of military skills, abilities and values, such as teamwork and cohesion, good working habits, physical and mental tenacity, confidence, military skills, and discipline.[7] This is the first step on the long road from fighter to effective leader, as the education and training of the young officer is usually also geared towards the development of leadership skills required by the military profession, through theoretical and practical approaches. Of course, having the theoretical background and a basic level of leadership experience will not magically turn the young fighter into an effective leader, as a lot more exposure to various practical situations is required for the achievement of that objective. We may say that after fulfilling this stage, the officer is a fighter with competences in his specialty, with command competences and the potential of becoming an effective leader.

The term fighter, with the meaning outlined above, is part of the classical approach to developing the future officers of a country’s military and is valid for Romania, but also many other countries. More recently, a new buzzword emerged in the United States, as a replacement for the term service-person (a member of the US armed forces, regardless of the branch), namely the term *warfighter*. [8] The term captured the attention of the defense officials and of the general public with its martial connotations, and is defined as “a person, especially a member of one of the US armed services, deployed to an area of conflict, who is responsible for making decisions involving the use of military force” [9]. One of the initial uses of the term was to make a difference between the members of the combat forces and the support forces, but the term has gradually come to designate all members of the armed forces, regardless of whether they were deployed in an area of conflict or not. Now it is mentioned in the context of cyber-defense - “the Defense Department’s information technology efforts are focused on maintaining the warfighters’ edge and supporting national defense priorities” [10], health “DOD warfighter brain health draft plan has six priorities” [11] or even resources management “warfighter support: Dod needs a complete picture of the military services' prepositioning programs” [12].

The term is seldom used outside the United States, but it is worth analyzing the implications of using it to designate all or part of the members of the armed forces. The term may be beneficial, as it may provide a common sense of collective identity, especially among services, by blurring the divisions and sectarian differences between branches. But it can also be misleading, especially if it is equated with a specific image promoted by the media, as it offers a false heroic narrative and paints a distorted picture of the personality and abilities of a member of the armed services. Not every military fits the personality traits, abilities and training of a movie-like heroic warfighter, and neither should they. An effective modern military does not mean an armed force composed solely from alpha type personalities, it is the one who derives maximum combat power from the resources available – human resources, material resources, financial resources, technical sophistication, sociological characteristics, an effective planning and management system, political capital, effective leaders, morale, to mention but a few factors. Fields such cyber-defense, space defense, strategic communication, to name but a few, require fighters (in the sense discussed above, of military officers and NCO’s), but not necessarily



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warfighters (in the sense of the above definition), yet are crucial in ensuring the national defense in the current operational environment.

The term is a buzzword, probably soon to be replaced by other similar fancy term, but is has prompted the author of this paper to consider its interesting implications on the way an officer is educated and trained for various positions requiring various leadership skills, expertise and personal attributes. A logistics officer specialized in cost estimation is a fighter, in the sense that it has the appropriate training as an officer, but does that officer have what it takes to command troops in an urban fight, inspire them to risk their lives, or not cave under the stress of seeing a best friend get killed? The initial training as fighter cannot cover all these aspects, but that officer, without qualifying to be called a warfighter, may yet have a crucial role in providing the resources required for military operations.

Warfighters may not thrive in peacetime, as they require combat to test their abilities, but much of an armed forces' strength is obtained during peacetime, through activities like building planning, training, developing capabilities etc. These activities may require additional skills and abilities than those traditionally assigned to warfighters, such as managerial skills, understanding of the complex interactions within the military system and with other government structures, interpersonal skills, communication skills, critical thinking, creativity, empathy. What does it mean then to be a fighter, a commander, a warfighter, a leader?

3. From fighter to an effective leader

Fighters come in many shapes and sizes and each country has to define its own demands on what are the personality attributes, skills, abilities and expertise a fighter should have, depending on their branch and rank, with common and specific features. The development of a fighter into an effective leader requires more than assigning a fighter with to a position of command, as the leadership skills and knowledge may be appropriate for that position, but effective leadership depends on a more complex mixture of understanding the specific demands of a particular environment, on practical experience and abilities.

The difference highlighted above between fighter and warfighter generates also differences in how the subsequent training, education and experience required by an officer should be managed, throughout his/her career, in order to make sure they have the expertise, skills and abilities best suited to become effective leaders in their field.

This means a clear identification not only of the job requirements, but also of the fundamental qualities various types of military personnel have. There are, for example, a lot of studies focused on the fundamental qualities of military personnel from branches with specifics that bring them closer to the warfighter described above, namely the high risk operational personnel, such as SOF operators, fighter pilots, intelligence operatives, combat divers.

For example, Special Operations Forces operators are described with the term “elite warrior”, possessing three fundamental qualities that set them aside from other soldiers: they are warriors, are creative, and are flexible [13], while other materials in the literature highlight such SOF personnel requirements as versatility, agility, effectiveness, speed and surprise, working both independently and in direct support to others [14]. One study focused on such type of personnel found six attribute common among them, which make them effective at performing their missions: emotional stability, adaptability, teamwork abilities, physical stamina and fitness, sound judgment and decision-making, and intrinsic motivation. [15]



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A successful fighter pilot needs advanced cognitive ability, unwavering emotional stability, the will and motivation to achieve a goal. The US Air Force pilots that were subject of the study scored relative strengths in extraversion and lower scores on neuroticism and agreeableness, as compared to the average sample of members of the armed forces [16]. A successful finance officer has to follow the principles of responsiveness, improvisation, and economy [17]. The main characteristics of a leader in the US Marine Corps are identified in the official documents as bearing, courage, decisiveness, dependability, endurance, enthusiasm, integrity, judgement, knowledge, tact, unselfishness [18]

One conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that, due to the specific characteristics of fighters in various branches, they tend to have specific abilities that may or not be suited for other leadership positions. Effective leaders, regardless of the area of activity or level, do share many attributes (such as effective communication skills, accountability and responsibility, long-term thinking, self-motivation, confidence, people skills, emotional stability and many others), but depending on the specific position and level of leadership, specific skills may be required. These specifics have to be understood and cultivated through education, training and building experience, in order to turn proficient fighters into effective leaders. For example, one such difference is given by the attribute of agreeableness. A study on the Norwegian Special Operations Forces highlighted the fact that “compared to applicants for basic officer training in the conventional forces, SOF-operators were less extroverted, less agreeable and to a certain extent more emotionally stable”. [19] A SOF leader does not need to be very agreeable, considering the specifics of his line of work, but that officer may be less suited for a higher position in the Ministry of Defense, for example in the Department for Defense Policy and Planning, where the feature of agreeableness is a requirement.

Other branches also have specific qualities and abilities that are desirable for their leaders, which should be clearly identified and cultivated. For example, the required characteristics of finance officers in leadership position, such as Financial Managers, should be as follows: “these leaders must be all of the following: proficient in their core competencies; broad enough to operate throughout unified land operations; able to operate in JIIM (joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational) action environments and leverage Financial Management capabilities in achieving the commander’s desired end-state; culturally astute and able to use this awareness and understanding to exploit opportunities in the conduct of operations; and grounded in Army Values and the Warrior Ethos” by following three main principles of responsiveness.” [20]

The time resource that can be dedicated for education and training during an officer’s career is limited, and for this reason, an effective human resource management system has to identify the precise education and training requirements for each position. For instance, the probability for an IT officer to command troops in the field, in a high intensity operation, is quite low, so the basic training that meets the requirements for a fighter (in the above sense) is sufficient. An infantry officer should have, in addition, a more in-depth training on first aid or psychology, in order to be able to be able to perform his duties effectively.

The path from fighter to effective leader passes unavoidably through command, but being assigned to a command position does not automatically make an officer an effective leader. A military leader is able to inspire and influence people to act in a cohesive way in order to achieve the mission / the organization’s objectives and goals, but his/her job is not limited to the subordinated personnel, as a leader has to interact insider and outside the chain of command



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(with other military personnel of various ranks, civilian personnel, personnel from other structures). The command position alone will not suffice to shape decisions, convince and motivate people outside the officer/s authority to contribute to the achievement of the mission/goals. What is required are true leadership skills, which have to be educated, trained and perfected.

The professional development of the officer consists of the formal education and training he/she attended, the informal education resulting from the lifelong learning process influenced by the environment and daily experience, but also from the self-education, in military and non-military subjects. While the formal education is by definition structured and its curricula is controlled by the military system, with the purpose of tailoring it after its requirements, the informal education is often less closely managed from a systemic point of view. An effective human resources management system should take into consideration the need to draft very clear job requirements (required officer characteristics, skills, abilities and expertise), for every leadership and follower position in the military, and to outline a clear career path for the officer to follow, for all ranks. This career path should outline the basic formal educational requirements, but also the life-long educational and training programs the officer should attend, the key developmental positions the officer should have in mind in order to advance his/her career, but also the developmental and broadening assignments that are not compulsory, but contribute significantly to the acquisition of expertise and essentially, of the leadership skills, abilities and experience required to become an effective leader. Leadership positions in joint and/or multinational environments, for example, can contribute significantly to the development of skills and abilities to be an effective leader, through the development of greater awareness and understanding of varied work cultures and nationalities.

Confucius' immortal words outline three ways to gain wisdom "First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest." This approach is valid also for leadership skills and abilities, which means the officer should start his/her career as a fighter with the necessary knowledge theoretical knowledge, but also with skills such as critical thinking and capacity to analyze, that would allow him/her to learn by reflection, meaning by identifying and eventually learning the lessons gathered from the everyday activity, the experience of other colleagues or superiors. Finally, the "bitter" experience of finding out on their own the best way to lead people (through exposure to as many situations as possible, by making mistakes and correcting them) is perhaps the most valuable way to learn.

But all the above mentioned methods would be a lot more effective, from the systemic point of view, if they were controlled (at least partially), through mentorship, specific, pre-determined assignments fitted for the specific personality traits, branch, interests, abilities and education for each individual officer. This generates the need for the establishment of a professional development system for the officers, that should cover the entire career path, and not only through compulsory post-graduate educational/training programs and compulsory assignments. The reality is that not all young lieutenants will become generals or colonels in positions of high authority, there are specific leadership challenges in every positions and some officers are naturally more suited to become leaders than others. But all officers can be educated, trained and formed to become effective leaders at their maximum level of personal expertise, abilities and skills, and this is what the goal of such a system should be.

The concept of mentoring can play a very important role in the development of an effective leader. Mentoring is "a developmental relationship in which a more experienced person



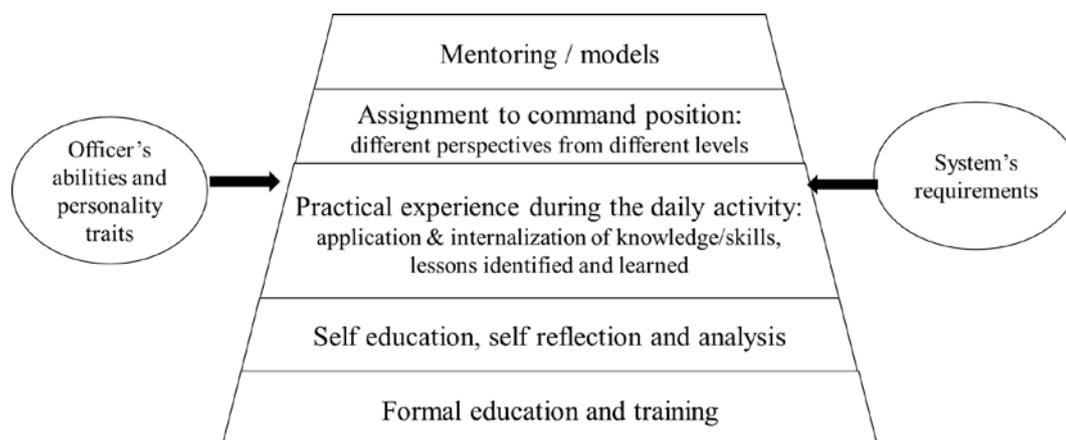
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serves as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor for a less experienced person—usually in the same organization. A mentor typically becomes invested in the career progression and development of the protégé or mentee and often provides such essential functions as counsel, challenge, and support” [21]. Mentors can play a very important role in transferring knowledge and experience, improving communication, ensuring leadership continuity, identifying and encouraging the promotion of performant personnel. Studies have highlighted that in the military, successful flag officers have benefited from the mentorship of senior officers, at crucial points of their career. [22]

Despite the potential beneficial effects of mentoring, the concept is applied on an incidental basis in the Romanian military, more often by specific individuals who are themselves effective leaders and understand its value. There is no formal, structured process through which young officers can benefit from mentoring, on various stages of their career, that would align the mentoring activity with the long term objectives of the military organization in general and the officer’s career path in particular.

The pre-requisites for the development of an effective leader are outlined in the following model, with the caveat that the model proposed is a simplified view that did not detail several internal and external factors (such as internal and organizational motivation) that may provide influence. This model is valid for all the ranks and stages of development of an officer, as all the steps below build upon each other and are not limited to junior officer ranks. It is not one-of-a-time model, applicable only in the beginning of an officer’s career. Even colonels that may be promoted generals need formal education and training, self-education etc, practical experience, mentoring, adjusted of course to the time limitations and the specific demands of their respective positions.



4. Conclusion

There are three main categories of factors that influence the professional development of an officer: the education and training received in academies, training schools, and other E&T institutions, the practical experience gained through the everyday activity, exposure to different situations and environments, and the concept of mentoring, the transfer of knowledge and lessons learned from the experience of senior officers. The development of a fighter into an effective leader relies upon all these three categories, but they are not often integrated into a



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cohesive and functional system, focused on the individual officer, in correlation with the requirements of the system. An effective leader is both born and made, but the leader development process is optimized when it is achieved in a structured manner, in a less subjective and random manner.

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