Historical Influences on the Changing Nature of Leadership Within the Military Environment

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Contemporary reviews of leadership research have called attention to the importance of studying the organizational context in which leadership unfolds. Researchers have also noted the need for increasingly sophisticated studies of leadership processes within complex and challenging environments. These calls have particular relevance for those who study leadership within the military environment. This article summarizes historical changes that have influenced the context of leadership within the military environment. It discusses the implications of these historical events for the content of future research on military leadership.

Studies of leadership have been a main staple within the scientific literature. Though many definitions of leadership exist (e.g., Ciulla, 2002; Kort, 2008; Yukl, 2009), in its simplest form, leadership involves one person influencing another to engage in some purposeful or goal-directed behavior. The U.S. Army defines leadership as "the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization" (Department of the Army, 2006, pp. 1–2). Similarly, the U.S. Air Force defines leadership as "the art and science of influencing and directing people to accomplish the assigned mission" (Department of the Air Force, 2006,

p. 1). Both of these definitions highlight two important elements that are inherent within the leadership process, the mission and the people who accomplish the mission. Bennis (2007) as well as Drath et al. (2008) suggest that "an expression of commitment to the entities (i.e., leaders, followers, common goals) is essential and indispensable to leadership [and note that theories and studies] of leadership must therefore [attend to these factors]" (Drath et al. 2008, p. 635).

Drath et al.'s critique is but one of the many examples of articles calling attention to the importance of studying the context of leadership. As Porter and McLaughlin (2006) have noted, "leadership does not occur in a vacuum" (p. 559). After reviewing contemporary studies of leadership conducted in the past 16 years, they concluded that a "coherent, integrated picture of leadership-context interactions" has yet to emerge from the empirical literature (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006, p. 572). In fact, they found that even in studies that paid attention to some aspect of the organizational context, "very seldom was there an intentional assessment of the impact of any part of the organizational context on the leadership phenomenon under consideration" (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006, p. 573). Day, Gronn, and Salas (2006) have noted similar concerns in studies of teams and team leadership. Osborne and Hunt (2007) recently highlighted the need to recognize that "organizations confront pervasive dynamism, non-linearity, and non-predictability" and suggest that leadership studies examine organizations and their environment from the perspective of Complex Adaptive Systems. Their conclusions acknowledge the multilevel nature of organizations: higher and lower leaders and subordinates do not share the same organizational culture, values, attitudes, or goals. Given this complexity, they suggest that it may be "virtually impossible to develop a single integrated theory of leadership effectiveness" (Osborne & Hunt, 2007, p. 337).

Understanding how the organizational context of leadership influences the leadership processes within complex challenging environments is particularly important for researchers and practitioners studying leadership and leadership processes within the military environment. Given changes in the global political landscape and associated changes in both civilian and military organizations, current formulations of leadership appear to be inadequate to encompass the apparent complexity of the environment within which leadership is now unfolding. Day, Gronn, and Salas (2004) suggested that team leadership research was on the cusp of paradigm shift and foresaw the need to integrate literature on teams and leadership to advance our understanding of the complex nature of leadership within organizations. It is my contention that research on military leadership may be on a similar cusp, due in large part to the increasing focus on organizational and environmental influences on the leadership process. In this article, historical and contextual factors influencing leadership within military organizations are reviewed, and the implications of these factors on future research on leadership within the military environment are discussed.

HISTORICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING LEADERSHIP WITHIN MILITARY ORGANIZATIONS

The past two decades have witnessed a number of significant historical changes that have influenced the national security strategy of the United States. Numerous commentators have spoken about the impact of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as a precursor to increased military involvement in recent years. While these events have certainly changed the course of history, it is important to place recent developments in proper context to understand how historical factors have collectively played a role in leadership within the military environment. The sections that follow provide a brief overview of historical factors influencing U.S. military activities from the early 1970s through the mid-1990s and compare and contrast these factors with more recent events.

A combination of political and military factors led to a shift in U.S. involvement in the Vietnam conflict. By the mid-1970s U.S. military involvement in Vietnam had been significantly reduced and military activities refocused on the main strategic threat, the U.S.S.R. Nuclear deterrence was a mainstay of the nation's military strategy, but there was a continuing concern with Soviet conventional force and its potential to exert influence within Western Europe. At the same time, the U.S. military shifted from a conscript force to an all-volunteer force. The military's shift toward an all-volunteer force introduced a level of stability in personnel that brought with it a renewed emphasis on the training and long-term development of the military profession. Within military training bases and schools, a structured approach to the identification of training needs became institutionalized and was applied not only to technical training but also to more complex skill-sets such as leadership (Department of Defense, 2001). Key tasks were linked, albeit loosely at times, to units' Mission Essential Task Lists (METL), which took into account a unit's war plans and any additional directives to refine these plans (Department of the Army, 1988). Accordingly, the primary driver for thinking about military training was the national military strategy that was designed to counter the Soviet threat.

The global political landscape changed with the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. under Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985 to 1991. President George H. W. Bush began to downsize the U.S. military in response to the lowering Soviet threat in Western Europe. The downsizing was briefly interrupted by the "Gulf War" in the early 1990s (i.e., Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm). Subsequent military involvement in various " peacemaking" or " peacekeeping" operations in Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo did little to reorient the military's shift away from major conflicts. Rather than preparing to fight the Soviet Union, we prepared to fight the ghost of the Soviet Union. Operation Desert Storm, in which U.S. military forces fought against Soviet-trained and Soviet-equipped forces, was taken as a validation of this approach, whereas peacekeeping missions of the 1990s

were interpreted as anomalies (Davis, 2008). Nevertheless, considerable attention was focused on the Army's experience during peacekeeping missions in Haiti and Bosnia (e.g., Broom, 1997; Reimer, 1997).

Discussions of future threats led to a reformulation of Army readiness as capabilities-based rather than threat-based (e.g., Sullivan, 1995). One aspect that gained the attention of many senior leaders was the promise of information technology to modernize warfare. Major emphasis was placed on command decision making and command-and-control, all supported by high-speed, high-volume information sharing (e.g., Alberts, Garstka, & Stein, 1999). It was around this time that Ullman and Wade (1996) introduced the concept of "shock and awe," even as some authors cautioned that high-technology weapons systems could not fundamentally alter the Army's role in future conflicts (e.g., Grau, 1997). In fact, General Fred Franks, who commanded the Army's VII Corps in Desert Storm, in the afterword written to Ulman and Wade's (1996) proposal, argued that land forces must still be prepared to control a territory that has been defeated through shock and awe tactics.

The military developed in the 1980s–1990s served us well during the early stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2003. Following a preliminary "softening" of Iraqi forces by Air Force and Navy assets, the Army and Marine units invading from Kuwait overcame all organized military resistance in less than four weeks. Within a few months, however, there began to be signs of armed resistance to U.S. and Coalition forces. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan a U.S.- and NATO-assisted civil war removed the ruling Taliban government. In both countries, the role of U.S. military forces morphed from combat to peacekeeping to nation building. However, the ongoing resistance ensured that physical violence was an ever-present reality, which influenced not only political and military leaders of the Coalition forces, but also individual soldiers on street patrol and everyone in that soldier's chain of command.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADER SKILLS

One could argue that today's military challenge is no more complex than that of the 1970s and 1980s. Certainly, the defense of Western Europe against an attack from the Eastern Bloc countries would have been an incredibly complex undertaking; however, that complexity would have been evident in the difficulty of coordinating the defense. The individuals and units knew the tasks they needed to accomplish and were skilled in those tasks. The complexity faced today stems from an uncertainty of opponent and mission: we cannot know against who we need to prepare to fight, nor indeed can we know when we will be called upon to assume any of many other roles rather than fighting (Leonard, Polich, Peterson, Sortor, & Moore, 2006).

Indeed, Leonard et al. (2006) note that more recent operations "require widespread interaction with civilian populations, coalition forces, civilian agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) . . . [and that in such situations leaders must learn] to strike a balance between persuasion and use of force . . . [as] future leaders [at all levels of the military may] need . . . to act as civil servants, diplomats, mayors, city managers, negotiators, and police chiefs . . . [and as such they must be able] to transition from supervising a city council meeting to conducting raids on suspected enemy headquarters" on short notice (p. 30). In a similar vein, Montgomery (2007) argues that "success in the future Army environment will be measured by the leader's ability to build relationships with various governmental intra-agency, military multinational and non-governmental organizations" (p. 2). Similarly, Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, and Harms (2008) note that "today's leaders face unprecedented challenges as organizations struggle to adapt to ever-accelerating rates of change both internally and with the external environment in which they are embedded" (p. 669).

One of the implications of these changes, then, is that, as the military role becomes broader and more complex, it becomes more difficult to specify with any degree of certainty what knowledge and skills are required of military leaders. Even if it were feasible to analyze all knowledge, skills, and abilities required of military leaders in the 21st century and identify the demands and characteristics of the leadership context within the contemporary military environment, it would not be feasible to provide the necessary training, education, and experience to fully prepare every leader for his or her next leadership role. In fact, Hayes (2008) has argued that "the Navy has been unable to reconcile the symbiotic relationship among training, education, and experience, and this inability has left it unprepared to meet the challenges inherent in the vision of the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) 'to develop 21st century leaders.'" This assessment is probably as valid for the other branches of the military to greater or lesser degree.

As Spreitzer, McCall, and Mahoney (1997) note, because "future demands may require skills that differ from skills valued today, the ability to learn from experience may prove to be more important in the long run than a high rating in a currently valued competency" (p. 6). In keeping with this notion, Wong (2004) noted the importance of adaptability among young Army officers, and many in the military have called for the development of more innovative and adaptive leaders at all levels of the military (e.g., Whiffen, 2007). Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, and Plamondon (2000) developed an adaptive performance taxonomy, and training for adaptive performance within specific contexts has now been developed (Mueller-Hanson, White, Dorsey, & Pulakos, 2005). However, in many ways, the notion of adaptive behavior poses a formidable challenge to conventional military functioning. It is not uncommon for senior military officers to voice concerns with regard to adaptability of military personnel—"I don't know if I want my junior personnel

to be adaptive. I want them to do the jobs they are trained to do, the way they are trained to do them."

Williams (2009) points out that innovation is not without its costs. Innovation as a process requires "leaders to understand multiple complex systems [and have multiple skills to include] building consensus and preventing interference or sabotage from risk-averse or hostile players . . . [and] . . . requires an understanding of differing frames of reference, intricate structures, and diverse control and boundary systems" (p. 60). He argues that "abuses and leadership failures at Abu Ghraib represent a glaring contemporary example of uncontrolled innovative [i.e., adaptive] behavior . . . [because] control systems such as rules of engagement, when perceived as obstacles, risk circumvention in the name of expediency or perceived noble ends" (Williams, 2009, p. 65).

One of the special context considerations that come into play when considering military leadership is that members of a military force are consciously putting themselves into harm's way; this is true whether the operational context is a deliberate attack on a known enemy or a peacekeeping patrol in an area with insurgents. A number of researchers, particularly those associated with the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy (West Point), have been exploring the implications of what Kolditz has labeled as *In Extremis* leadership (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009; Kolditz, 2007). The taxonomy of extreme contexts developed by Hannah et al. (2009) provides a framework for research in this domain, but to date there have been very few empirical studies that have been able to overcome the conceptual and methodological barriers to such research.

Another element of the military leadership context that has gained special attention is the need for greater attention to cross-cultural skills. However, most of the relevant research in this area is based on work with expatriates who live and work under very different conditions and face very different challenges than deployed military personnel. Lessons learned in Operation Just Cause in 1989 revealed a difficulty in distinguishing friends from foes (Yates, 2002). Very restrictive rules of engagement minimized the number of civilian casualties in this operation, but was little follow-up on these lessons. However, U.S. involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo raised significant concerns about the need for greater preparation in this respect. First, these operations required large numbers of military officers and senior non-commissioned officers to work with allied forces on a daily basis. Limitations in cross-cultural communication skills based on a lack of cultural understanding seemed to reduce U.S. military efficiency and effectiveness in this environment (Karrasch, 2003; Riedel & Karrasch, 2002). Thus, the process of exerting influence on others to achieve a common goal is not only important when working with subordinates but also comes into play when working with peers and superiors from allied nations. The second and more widespread issue is related to the role of military patrols in peacekeeping operations. Peacekeepers,

much like police on a beat, need to maintain a presence. As police have found with community policing programs, it can be more effective if that presence is not aloof from the general population.

Studies conducted by the Army Research Institute identified a range of region-specific knowledge and cultural-general skills that would appear to be important for military personnel conducting checkpoints or patrols, or interacting with local leaders or host-nation military (Abbe, Gulick, & Herman, 2007; Abbe, 2008). A recent study by Ramsden Zbylut et al. (2009), based on extensive data from personnel who had served as advisors with Iraqi or Afghani units, serves to validate some of the interpersonal and cultural aspects of the advisory role found by Abbe (2008) and point to key leader development needs.

One aspect of the change in the context of military leadership that has not received a great deal of attention is the devolution of authority to lower organizational levels. The traditional approach to military education and training is an incremental layering of knowledge and skills. The junior officers are given limited responsibility; as they rise through the ranks, they are given additional training and education to prepare them for the increased responsibilities they will be expected to take on. Under this model, cultural knowledge and related skills, for example, would be gradually developed over an officer's career. By the time the officer achieved battalion or brigade command in the Army, for example, they would be well equipped to handle those responsibilities. However, the operational environment in Iraq or Afghanistan, for example, resulted in the dispersion of forces, with relatively junior officers expected to take initiative and/or respond to local events with minimal guidance from those higher in the chain of command.

There have been efforts to address the issue of preparing relatively junior officers for relatively senior responsibilities (e.g., Hill et al., 2008), but larger issues remain to be resolved. The changing role of and greater responsibilities for relatively junior personnel reflect a potential shift in military leadership from strict hierarchical authority to something that more resembles shared leadership (Hiller, Day, & Vance, 2006; Lindsey, Day, & Halpin, this issue; Pearce & Conger, 2003), relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006), or collective leadership (Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009). A second critical issue is the potential loss of authority if there is an explicit or implicit shift in the military leadership and command process. Sweeny, Thompson, and Blanton (2009) recently suggested that followers' trust in their leader and/or their perceptions of their leader's credibility seem to determine how much influence a leader can exert. Followers' perceptions of their leaders appear to be based on competence and character, not necessarily on assigned position. They also found a significant impact of a perception of "cooperative interdependence," which would seem to indicate tolerance for, if not acceptance of, a form of shared leadership that belies the traditional military model.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There is an increasing concern with the role of context in the investigation of leadership. Some have concluded that the varied domains, paradigms, and variables included across the studies found in the general organizational leadership literature are so diverse that it is unlikely that a meaningful integrated theory of leadership effectiveness can be developed in the foreseeable future (Osborn & Hunt, 2007). This predicament may also be true for the field of military leadership, within which a variety of unconnected research interests are being pursued in complex environments. However, while changes in the global political and military situation over the last two decades have introduced, if anything, added complexity to military leadership, those same changes have helped to highlight and crystallize understanding of key contextual variables impacting the practice of military leadership. This in turn has helped to identify new issues (cross-culture skills, shared leadership) and highlight continuing issues (ethical leadership, communications, dispersed leadership), and other aspects of the contemporary environment not discussed here. It is an accepted premise within the military leadership community that these challenges will facilitate future growth, and the community will grow in response to these challenges.

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