

Next Generation Leadership Development in a Changing and Complex Environment: An Interview With General Martin E. Dempsey

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The world of organizations has gotten more complex, more rapidly changing, more interdependent. Nowhere is this more evident than the challenges confronting the United States Army—an organization staffed by over one million military and civilian men and women, many of whom are extremely young and inexperienced, and find themselves thrust into positions with high levels of responsibility, where their decisions can be subject to public attention and carry significant consequences. Thus, the Army holds many lessons for widely disparate organizations, from the problems it faces and the proposed approaches it is taking.

For this article, we interviewed the United States Army Chief of Staff, General Martin E. Dempsey,¹ about lessons and insights concerning leadership and leadership development drawn from the Army's experiences. His 36 years of Army service have included combat command in Iraq, leadership of the U.S. Central Command (the military's Middle East headquarters), leadership tours in Europe and Saudi Arabia, and, most recently, overseeing the Army's Training and Doctrine Command. In addition to being a West Point graduate, General Dempsey earned a master's degree in English from Duke University after which he returned to West Point as an English professor. He is

known for being a strategic and innovative thinker and leader, including concerning the challenges of modern organizations confronted by rapidly shifting global demands.

QUALITIES NEEDED BY NEXT GENERATION LEADERS

You have written that modern leaders need to be inquisitive, draw on varied inputs, and be intellectually capable and curious. Why do you think these features are especially important, and do they vary across leadership levels?

We are looking at the attributes that we have discovered are necessary for the Army to be an effective *multicore organization* (i.e., exhibiting the flexibility to address issues using different skills and approaches). At the very youngest leader level, we have been examining the idea of inquisitiveness. What does it mean to be inquisitive? At the intermediate level and beyond, we aspire to have adaptability. We want people who, when faced with uncertainty and complexity, can adapt and maybe even innovate as a follow on to that.

So, at the most junior level you want inquisitiveness. At intermediate levels, it becomes adaptability, which I'll roughly define as the ability to see things changing and react. Then at the more senior levels, you need to innovate, which I would suggest is the ability to see things changing before they begin to change, so you can get ahead of it. So, through the course of a career, the attributes we might say are the most important would include being inquisitive, adaptable and, ultimately, innovative.

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¹ Subsequent to the interview and prior to the publication of this article, General Dempsey was nominated and confirmed to serve as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a role responsible for all branches of the United States Military (Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force).

ACQUIRING LEADERSHIP TALENT

These are qualities that are in high demand today. How can the Army compete for highly talented individuals, capable of handling complexity and responsibility, when other sectors (e.g., Wall Street) can pay a high premium for such talent?

We think the Army is the nation's preeminent leadership experience. So what we want to do is not only appeal to young men and women and their sense of patriotism—their need to belong to something—but what we want them to do is see us as a crucible of leadership, a crucible of development; that the institution is committed to developing men and women as leaders for life. It is analogous to Duke's use of the phrase "leaders of consequence."

Given your emphasis on these modern leader characteristics, are you selecting different people? How fine-tuned is your selection process?

Our approach is resonating and working. Our numbers are through the roof on applications for West Point, ROTC, and even basic recruiting. We are hitting our quality marks.

The next step is actually to convince the force we should be articulating, measuring, and rewarding different attributes. We need to revise our periodic evaluation reports to allow a supervisor to measure those attributes among his subordinate leaders. Then we'll have to get our personnel policies lined up to do the kinds of things we talked about. We're into an industrial strength kind of challenge.

For example, our promotion rates to Major and Lieutenant Colonel are above 95%. That rubs uncomfortably because we consider ourselves a profession. As you know, there are 7 or 8 different criteria that define a profession. One of them is certification and selection. Right now, if you are a living, breathing Captain, you are probably going to make Major because we have such an overwhelming demand. When the demand begins to decrease in Iraq and Afghanistan, we intend to drive that down. So I am trying to get ahead of that to have the right instruments in place to do that.

We are always fine-tuning our accessions policy. We do know that there are certain attributes that generally are predictive of whether young men or women are likely to succeed in the Army. We've got a list of those. The most interesting thing to me is that the attribute that tends to rise to the top in any discussion about that is trust. There are people who are just not capable of entering a trust relationship. We do have some instruments where

we try to measure their willingness to enter into a trust relationship, which is especially important in a profession like ours that is founded on trust.

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DEPTH AND BREADTH AS A KEY TO DEVELOPING LEADERS OF THE FUTURE

How does the Army currently cultivate inquisitive, adaptable, and innovative leaders? To develop talent going forward, what kinds of experiences should they have?

I personally believe that what made me adaptive was being pulled out of my comfort zone. The Army does some of that when it moves us around, so we have a bit of built-in adaptability. The experience is so dynamic that you do become adaptable. In addition, while conflict is a horrible thing, it does do some things for you in building adaptability: It does test your mettle. You can actually determine who is courageous and who is not, who is adaptive and who is not. In the absence of conflict, we have to develop ways to impose an environment that would generate adaptability. We're looking at a couple of things.

Put someone in a completely new environment, and they will have to adapt. Ori Brafman is writing a new book and he has almost convinced me that in leader development, chaos is an imperative. Think about that—the idea that you would deliberately introduce chaos into leadership experiences and see how different leaders react to it. I have to be careful with that idea because some would argue our lives are already chaotic enough. But Ori has about convinced me. It is a compelling idea.

Should we allow officers to take a sabbatical from the Army? They might go to work in industry; go into academia; potentially at their own expense, or potentially at our expense. So it is a lateral exit and reentry to get at exactly what you talked about. Many young officers matriculate out at as senior Captain or junior Major at 10 years or so. They'll turn up in industry, in government, and

in think tanks. I can't tell you how often I am at a meeting and they say "I would really like to come back in." But, currently that's very difficult.

Among the things we should state explicitly is that the Army has the goal of being the nation's preeminent leadership experience. No one would challenge that while we're at war. But what happens when we are not in conflict? During those periods between conflicts, how do we live up to that goal of being a leadership experience? We've got some very interesting ideas about how to develop regional expertise by having organizations where you might be in CONUS [the Continental United States] for a period, then the Middle East, back to CONUS, back to the Middle East. So we develop a depth of expertise upon which we can draw when we need to. So we have a core that specializes in Africa, a core that is Pacific, a core that is Indian Ocean-centric, a core that is Atlantic and Alliance centric. We're doing a lot of study on defining what constitutes a broadening experience. Is it service on Capitol Hill as a legislative liaison? Or is it a fellowship in the White House? It is certainly all of those, but it is not limited to those experiences. How do we define broadening?

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If you are trying to develop a new generation of "broader" leaders by encouraging individuals to step out of the service for a period and being able to reenter without losing rank, or maybe even gaining rank because of the external service, isn't that a pretty radical idea?

It is. I don't have much support for it yet, but let me tell you why we are seriously considering it. When I look back on my career of 37 years, the most broadening experience I had was 2 years at Duke and 3 years teaching at West Point—something that is not inherently military. In fact it was inherently not-military. I came back in a clearer thinker, a better communicator. I came to the conclusion that this career was right for me because I had seen other possibilities; interacted with some of the best and brightest of America; and came to the conclusion that I thought that Army was right for me. I happen to believe that

were we to do what we are describing, we'd have young men and women in the second decade of their careers apply a different kind of passion to it. I have to figure out how to afford to do it. There are always financial implications, but I think as a goal, it is a worthy goal.

It seems to be a positive version of the revolving door that's often mentioned in Washington as a negative. The negative version presumes self-interest, a lack of character, and a lack of expertise. But you are talking about it in a way that is positive.

Yes. I am talking about it as one instrument of leader development; not to build the entire leader development paradigm around it, rather having it as one option on a menu of options. We want to keep our best and brightest junior leaders at roughly the 10-year mark of their careers. If we had a menu of broadening opportunities and gave them some ability to collaborate on it, we'd be in a better position. Right now we fundamentally assign people tasks. There will always be some of that. But it would be nice if we could find a way—at least for the top 40% of our population—which gets at this idea of talent management. If we could have a menu of options for this top 40%, some of which were internal to Army, some of which would be internal to government, and some of which might be outside in the private sector—then we would be on our way to laying claim to being called the nation's preeminent leadership experience.

It is a really interesting notion too, because some of those people will not choose to reenter. Those who do choose to reenter are doing it with their eyes open, and they are bringing a lot more back to the organization. But is there also a benefit to the Army from those who choose not to reenter?

One of the other things we worry about is that we remain very well connected to America. Right now that connection is on the back of a conflict—when we are at conflict, the nation understands what we are doing. So there is a very positive connection. But, when we are between conflicts, there is always a bit of a challenge to stay connected. This would allow us to stay connected to America.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXTUAL LEADERSHIP

One of the things you have focused on is what we call "contextual leadership," the sense-making role of the leader. Surprisingly few leaders address this well even as they describe it as important. But you have built upon the Army's

concept of “Commander’s Intent” and taken it further into organizational doctrine and training. Can you provide some insight about how this developed in the Army and how and why you are stressing this for the Army’s development of effective leadership?

We include the “Commander’s Intent” as a paragraph in our decision process. Now, we have practiced it for some time, but it became a formal part of what we call military decision-making process, or MDMP, in the late 80s. By the way, though, we’re adapting this process based on lessons we’ve learned in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Army has been at the forefront of creating what is sometimes referred to as “edge organizations.” Why did this approach emerge and how does it affect the kind of leaders the Army needs to develop—and how it supports those leaders?

A conflict against a traditional foe or a near peer competitor will tend to be somewhat centralized. So authority and capability and responsibility tend to be withheld at the upper echelons of command as a hedge against uncertainty. The more uncertain you feel against an adversary, the more capability you withhold at higher echelons. So you make contact with the smallest force possible, and then you pile on.

In the other kind of conflict, the one like Iraq and Afghanistan, we’re really imposing security over a wide area, and then doing things like assisting governments, civil authorities, building partners’ security capacity. What we tend to do in that environment is dramatically decentralized, and we push authority, capability, and responsibility to the edge. For the last 10 years we’ve continued to push as much as possible to the edge. What we’ve learned is that the edge knows more about what’s going on than we do, hence the desire and the requirement for this sort of contextual leadership at every level, but notably from the bottom up.

That notion is counterintuitive to a lot of people; that the edge knows more than the center. So in some sense the center may have the wisdom and the broader perspective, but they don’t have the information. And the wisdom and broader perspective may be wrong—the world may have changed, and the edge finds that out first. Are there examples today of where the edge is taking the lead?

There are. We’ve been trying to find a phrase that “sticks” (to use a phrase from Chip and Dan Heath) to help this idea to take hold. We’ve played with a phrase, “co-creation of context.” It captures that our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are only understandable if leaders at every echelon share the responsibility to co-create the context. It is sticking in some circles. We do have a part of the force that is probably happy with the current terminology, and for those parts of the force, “co-creation of context” completely unnerves them. But there is a very thoughtful part of the force, especially the younger part of the force, who believe we got that about right. It is starting to resonate with them.

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CULTIVATING UPWARD AND LATERAL LEADERSHIP

The military is far less hierarchical than outsiders think it is, but it is still quite structured and formal in many respects. How does one prepare individuals to effectively exercise upward leadership under such circumstances?

When I was growing up in the Army, even at the O6 [Colonel] level 12 years ago, the advice you would receive from mentors was to focus down and everything else will take care of itself. You were considered disloyal if you were focusing upward. You were considered excessively ambitious if you did that. But we’ve learned a lot in the past 10 years.

To live up to our responsibility to the nation, we must be able to accomplish two key tasks. In the first task, we’ve got to maneuver to seize the initiative—to seize terrain, defeat an opposing force, or unseat a regime. That part of any conflict generally involves maneuver, the movement to seize the initiative. That part of our responsibility lends itself to more hierarchical centralized solutions. But having seized the initiative, you then have the task of consolidating your gains. You have to protect the gains you’ve made, and that requires what we call security over wide areas. You have to im-

pose a security umbrella or security foundation to consolidate the gains you've made and then do things like building indigenous security forces, establishing local governance, facilitating economic development and so on.

In executing the wide area security task you really have to think differently about where you place your capabilities, your authorities, and your responsibilities. Because that is where you have to do things in a way that is far more decentralized. So the way we're trying to convince the force and its leaders not to become too unsettled by the notion of co-creation of context is by pointing out to them that there are times when we very much want things to be withheld and centralized. And there are other times when we very much want things to be decentralized and distributed. You shouldn't put the institution in a false dichotomy of having to pick Peter or Paul. You've got to be able to do both. The reason isn't that we're focused on the co-creation idea. As a very practical matter, we've got to address it. Taken that way, I think the way we're going about it is to show people that it's not that we're abandoning one particular paradigm or another. We're just reflecting reality, and this is what we need to do today. We might have to do something different tomorrow.

Traditionally, if two of us are in different chains of command and wanted to talk, we would go through our bosses even if you needed to give me direct feedback on how I need to do things differently. For example, you may have an insight about me and one of my people, or about an issue I am dealing with. Isn't leading laterally like this also hard to encourage?

You are right. That is hard, but not hopeless. One thing that makes it harder is that we are a profession and ours is an up or out system. You either continue to develop and are promoted at certain points along the way, or you leave. So what does that generate? It generates competition. What does competition generate? It generally works against lateral leadership. So bottom up and top down is generally not as threatening as lateral leadership where you are competing. That is not going to change. It could change on the margins, but there is also something beneficial about that competition.

That said, I will tell you some things we are doing. One of them is social networking. There were a couple of Captains (now Lieutenant Colonels) who, several years ago, put together this site called CompanyCommand.com. They are actually quite famous for it. It is a forum in which this lateral coordination and collaboration occurs. It is powerful. The

other thing we are toying with—and this is in basic combat training—is peer-to-peer instruction. That appears to have enormous potential. You identify certain informal leaders very early on and instead of having the 40-year-old Drill Sergeant bludgeoning the learning into you, you allow peer-to-peer learning to take place, overseen of course, by the expert. Those are two places where we are starting to think about this idea of lateral leadership, but we are not very far down the path.

BROAD IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

What we have been discussing is a variety of new ways that you need and want to encourage people to lead. Being inquisitive. Embracing new career paths. Leading from the edge. Leading up and laterally. All of these imply significant changes in how you select and develop leaders. But the challenges you seem to be responding to are ones many organizations in other domains are also facing, so the lessons extend much further than the Army in term of the needs for organizations to think about leadership differently in the future.

It is a change. What you are really challenging is our culture. There are some who think our culture cannot accept what we are talking about. I have been involved in conversations about that—this idea of decentralization. Some think you are just barking up the wrong cultural tree and we are not capable of that. I don't think that is true. I think we are capable of it, particularly if we can convince folks not to force us into an either-or paradigm. So far, it seems to be resonating reasonably well.

To fulfill the commitments we make to the nation, the Army must develop its leaders. A 2010 *New York Times* editorial by David Brooks titled "Drilling for Certainty" described the events leading to the well explosion in the Gulf. He claims that a combination of failures led to the incident. On one level, it was a failure of processes and a failure of systems. He also implies, however, that on another level it was a failure of leader development. As he reports, corporate executives failed to recognize the conditions of increasing complexity in which their subordinates were operating. The act of drilling at 5,000 feet is exponentially more difficult than drilling at 1,000 feet. Yet as complexity was building, risk was pushed to the platform.

There is a lesson here for us. We have said that the operating environment in which we ask our leaders to perform is complex, but some of our assumptions about how risk is managed are linear. We have learned and continue to learn that risk and complex-

ity are exponentially growing over time. This notion must inform our leader development strategies.

Our discourse on the profession will allow us to weave together our programs and converge on our fundamentals, to reexamine and recommit to the professional military ethic, roles, and responsibilities and to review how we are doing in developing leaders. Being mindful of the challenges presented by the 21st-century security environment, we will make institutional adaptation a part of our fabric and begin to set a foundation for a campaign of learning that is enduring.



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General Martin E. Dempsey