Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explore the aspects of leadership within the military that set it apart from traditional leadership in the business environment.

Design/method/approach: The approach employed in this paper is a form of critical dialogue analysis. The dialogue is derived from reports from the US and UK military and juxtaposed against the dialogue from the movie “A few Good Men”.

Findings: The analysis leads to a general model of trust pertaining to issues of leadership in a military setting.

Originality/value: This paper addresses a gap in the literature, in which differences of leadership and trust in a military setting have been assumed to be identical with the business environment.

Keywords: Trust; leadership; military leadership.
Introduction

The role of leadership in the military encapsulates a different set of principles than normally occur in the business environment. The famous courtroom scene from the movie "A Few Good Men (Reiner & Brown, 1992)" provides a good example that will be useful in demonstrating these differences. For those readers that may not be familiar with the movie the attorney for the defendants Lieutenant (Lt) Kaffee (played by Tom Cruise) is questioning the witness Colonel (Col) Nathan R. Jessop (played by Jack Nicholson) the interchange and the dialogue provides some interesting insights in to military leadership and the notion of trust.

Lt Kaffee: A moment ago you said that you ordered Lt Kendrick to order his men not to touch Private (Pvt) Santiago.

Col Jessop: That's right.

Lt Kaffee: And Lt Kendrick was clear on what you wanted?

Col Jessop: Crystal.

Lt Kaffee: Any chance Lt Kendrick ignored the order?

Col Jessop: Ignored the order?

Lt Kaffee: Any chance he just forgot about it?

Col Jessop: No.

Lt Kaffee: Any chance Lt Kendrick left your office and said, "The 'old man's wrong"?

Col Jessop: No.

Lt Kaffee: When Lt Kendrick spoke to the platoon and ordered them not to touch Santiago, any chance they ignored him?

Col Jessop: Have you ever spent time in an infantry unit, son?

Lt Kaffee: No sir.

Col Jessop: Ever served in a forward area?

Lt Kaffee: No sir.

Col Jessop: Ever put your life in another man's hands, asked him to put his life in yours?

Lt Kaffee: No sir.

Col Jessop: We follow orders, son. We follow orders or people die. It's that simple. Are we clear?

Lt Kaffee: Yes sir.

Col Jessop: Are we clear?

Lt Kaffee: Crystal.

The inference to be drawn from this exchange is simply that Leadership, at least within the military environment, is inherently an absolute form of authority. The other issue is that trust between all ranks is vital due to the life and death situations that exist in the military. Such is the level of trust that orders are followed without question “we follow orders or people die”.

At this juncture it should be noted that there is a difference between “ask” and “task” that sets an order in the military (or command) apart from the mere requirement to perform routine job duties in an organisational or business environment.
Literature Review

Leadership as a topic of research is extensively covered in the behavioural sciences with emphasis on the social influence the processes exerts over the success of all economic, political, and organizational systems which are inherently dependent upon the effective and efficient guidance of the leaders of these systems (Barrow 1977). Leadership, at least from a business perspective, has been commonly referred to as a skill used to influence followers in an organization to work enthusiastically towards goals specifically identified for the common good (Barrow 1977; Cyert 2006; Plsek and Wilson 2001).

Leadership theories have attempted to explain the complexity of the nature of leadership and its consequences (Bass and Bass 2008). This has led to a focus on the implicit connection between ethics and leadership and within this paradigm the servant leadership theory has emerged which links ethics, virtues, and morality to leadership (Graham 1991; Lanctot and Irving 2010; Parolini et al. 2009; Russell 2001; Whetstone 2002). The servant leadership theory places emphasis on service to others and recognition that the role of organizations is to create people who can build a better tomorrow, however it does not provide specific consideration for the importance of trust with in the relationship between a leader and followers.

Trust in leadership has a long history in the leadership literature, having been covered in books (e.g., Argyris, 1962; Likert, 1967; McGregor, 1967) and research publications (e.g., Mellinger, 1959; Read, 1962). Subsequently, the trust that individuals have in their leaders has been an important concept in applied psychology and related disciplines. For example, the concept is to be found in several leadership theories: Transformational and charismatic leadership in which trust is built in their followers (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Podsakoff, MacKenzie,Moorman, & Fetter, 1990); or where employees’ perceptions of leaders promotes trust (Bass, 1990; Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994); and where trust is inherent in leader-member relationships as espoused by exchange theory (Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999); and where consideration occurs of a leader’s behaviour (Fleishman & Harris, 1962).

The literature pertaining to the concept of trust also includes some variations on defining what the term encompasses. However, the most commonly accepted version is that more associated with leadership is “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another” (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). Mayer et al. (1995, 726) suggested that the level of trust can be compared to the level of perceived risk in any given situation.

Risk has been identified as being the key variable underlying the need for trust, the proposition being that trust only exists in risky situations (Clark & Payne, 2006). Boon and Holmes (1991, 194) defined trust as ‘a state involving confident positive expectations about another’s motives with respect to oneself in situations entailing risk’. In the military the ultimate risk is that of getting injured or killed and thus trust in a military leader carries far greater risk in terms of more serious consequences than risk pertaining to trust in a civilian leader.

Obeying orders in the military requires that there be trust in the leader since individuals are expected to give up their right to self-determination and follow orders (Collins & Jacobs, 2002). Refusal to obey an order carries consequences not only does it put the individual soldier’s life at risk, it also endangers the life of his or her team members and leaders.

To summarise the, the key variable to the establishment of trust is risk. Risk and trust are positively correlated in far as the higher the level of risk the greater the level of trust that needs to exist. The other variables that either act as intervening or moderating variables in the trust between a follower and a leader may be classified as follows. From the perspective of a follower, the propensity to trust, the confidence n the leader, and the level of commitment to a cause or defence situation. From the perspective of a leader, the rank, the experience or expertise, and the competence of the leader.
It is interesting to note that within the literature it has been suggested that trust in leadership tends to operate in the form of a social exchange process (e.g., Konovsky & Pugh, 1994; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). In this process followers perceive the relationship with their leader as going beyond the standard economic contract and the parties then operate on the basis of trust, goodwill, and the perception of mutual obligations (Blau, 1964). This view is certainly more aligned with the military setting since the economic contract (the payment of wages for services) is hardly a driving factor when tasks are issued in the form of commands or orders. A meta-analysis of trust in the confines of leadership by Ferrin and Dirks (2002) produced a model that identified the various variables and constructs and had trust in the leader as the centre piece. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) also developed a model though their model was concerned with trust in an organisational setting. Sim & Vucetic (2018) extended the work by adapting it to trust in an auditor of corporate financial reports. Taking these models and further adjusting and merging the concepts has provided a basis for a model that is more aligned with the issues of trust, risk and leadership within the military setting are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:**
*Modified Framework for Trust in Leader in Military Setting*

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Leader
- Rank of Leader
- Experience/Expertise of Leader
- Competence of Leader

Follower
- Confidence in Leader
- Commitment to Cause/Defence
- Perception of Risk Level
- Propensity to Trust

Trust in Leader
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Returning to the opening quote from the court room scene the literature basically is consistent with the points raised by Col Jessep specifically:

**Col Jessep:** Ever put your life in another man's hands, asked him to put his life in yours?

**Col Jessep:** We follow orders, son. We follow orders or people die. It's that simple. Are we clear?

Of course, in the movie this statement by Col Jessep contradicts an earlier statement he made under oath and one which would inevitably lead to the court room confrontation for which the movie is remembered:

**Lt Kaffee:** Colonel, when you learned of Pvt Santiago's letter to the NIS, you had a meeting with your two senior officers, is that right?

**Col Jessep:** Yes.
Lt Kaffee: The executive officer Lt Jonathan Kendrick, and the Company Commander Lt Col Matthew Markinson.

Col Jessep: Yes.

Lt Kaffee: Colonel, at the time of this meeting, you gave Lt Kendrick an order, is that right?

Col Jessep: I told Lt Kendrick to tell his men that Pvt Santiago was not to be touched.

Lt Kaffee: And did you give an order to Lt Col Markinson?

Col Jessep: I ordered Lt Col Markinson to have Pvt Santiago transferred off the base immediately.

Lt Kaffee: Why?

Col Jessep: I felt that his life might be in danger once word of the letter got out.

Lt Kaffee: Grave danger?

Col Jessep: Is there any other kind?

Whilst this does not follow the actual sequence of events that occur in the movie, the argument starts to unravel because of this statement and culminates in the famous confrontation:

Lt Kaffee: Colonel, if you gave an order that Santiago was not to be touched, and your orders are always followed, then why would he be in danger? Why would it be necessary to transfer him off the base?

Col Jessep: Private Santiago was a sub-standard marine. He was being transferred off the base because --

Lt Kaffee: But that is not what you said. You said he was being transferred because he was in grave danger.

Col Jessep: Yes. That's correct but --

Lt Kaffee: You said, “He was in danger”. I said “grave danger”. You said --

Col Jessep: Sometimes men take matters into their own hands.

Lt Kaffee: No Sir. You made it clear just a moment ago that your men never take matters into their own hands. Your men follow orders or people die. So Santiago shouldn’t have been in any danger at all, should he have Colonel?

Col Jessep: You want answers?

Lt Kaffee: I want the truth!

Col Jessep: You can’t handle the truth!

We use words like honor, code, loyalty - we use these words as the backbone of a life spent defending something. You use them as a punchline.

Here are the very terms that resonate with those used in the literature to describe the American military culture and how it places emphasis on confidence, courage and a sense of duty (Fors Brandebo, Sjöberg, Larsson, Eid & Olsen, 2013; St. Denis, 2001).

Analysis and Commentary

Having developed the framework, as presented in Figure 1, the next stage involves examining existing attempts to establish the notion of leadership in a military setting by the military. Interestingly, these military regulations and training guidelines define leadership and include the need to establish trust within the rank and file given the nature of any military
structure this is certainly a necessary aspect. The various exerts, which follow, are derived from the United States Army Regulation 600-100 Army Profession and Leadership Policy (2017):

1-5. c. The Army defines leadership as the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization. The Army defines a leader as anyone who by virtue of assumed role or assigned responsibility inspires and influences people to accomplish organizational goals. Army leaders motivate 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.

This definition of leadership is closely aligned with the literature “a skill used to influence followers in an organization to work enthusiastically towards goals specifically identified for the common good (Barrow 1977; Cyert 2006; Plsek and Wilson 2001)”.

1-5. d. The Army Profession contributes honorable service, military expertise, responsible stewardship, and courageous esprit de corps. These essential characteristics reinforce the sacred bond of trust within the Total Army and with the American people.

This definition echoes the types of skills, expertise, and competence expected of a leader and raises the issue of trust between the leader and follower which is consistent with the literature in general and servant leadership theory in particular.

(6) c. The Army seeks to execute mission command, both as a philosophy of command and as a warfighting function. As defined by Army Doctrinal Publication, mission command is the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations. Trust, critical to mission command, is the bedrock of our profession. It is the internal organizing principle of the Army, and is what enables the decentralized decision making by subordinates to operate within the commander’s intent. Leader actions consistent with the Army Ethic strengthen mutual trust and build cohesive teams, enabling successful mission command. However, if leaders allow disconnects between word and deed, between professed values and actual practices, they breed cynicism, compromise mutual trust, and degrade organizational esprit de corps and individual morale.

This definition conceptualises the various aspects of trust and leadership. The very essence of the relationship as described in this statement is consistent with the model as presented in Figure1.

Similar concepts and terminology are also present in the British Army Leadership Code and are summarized in the Army Leadership Code: An Introductory Guide UK (2015).

Our war fighting doctrine is based on mission command. This is based on mutual trust between leaders and those they lead. Leaders have a duty to provide the guidance, including resources and constraints that allow subordinates to use their initiative and judgment. In return subordinates have a duty to act with loyalty and discipline. Trust is a two-way process that is guaranteed by every soldier, whether leader or led, living our Values and Standards and setting an appropriate example - it is about doing as you would be done by.

Postscript

Leadership in extreme environments where there is a risk of getting injured or killed is more dependent on trust and loyalty than leadership in more normal civilian organisations (Kolditz, 2007). However, A study conducted by Sweeney (2010) on seventy-two soldiers in the Iraqi combat zone found that the majority of soldiers reconsidered the trust they placed in their
leaders prior to combat operations. The leaders’ abilities in terms of competence and character to meet the greater demands of leading in combat emerged as the most influential factors in the development of trust in the high-vulnerability context of combat. Notably, a significant number of recruits, even in the ranks, were graduates for whom blind obedience was not a default function!

The concept of leadership; obedience; life at risk; and trust are entirely relevant during times of conflict and particularly for the Army where the battles are often ‘nose’ to ‘nose’ experiences. However, this is perhaps less so during periods of prolonged peace and from personal experience in the Royal Air Force(UK) even during the Falklands War there was much more room for consultative processes/problem solving/decision making. The RAF’s ‘distance’ from battle is the distinguishing factor being due to the difference between dropping a bomb or firing an Exocet missile as compared to hand to hand combat.

The issues associated with leadership; life at risk; and trust during times of peace require a different mindset and approach based on the specifics of the ‘situation’. For example, the Scandinavian military has ‘the peacekeeper’ role, requiring a different style of ‘leadership’, one that is somewhat more inclusive and this is characterized by a mindset more concerned with modesty and friendliness (Fors Brandbo et al, 2013).

Technology and a more highly educated recruit base are also factors that inevitably require a different style of ‘leadership’, and this will continue to evolve. These are issues that can be examined by future research.

References

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