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Whatever happened to mission command in the CAF?

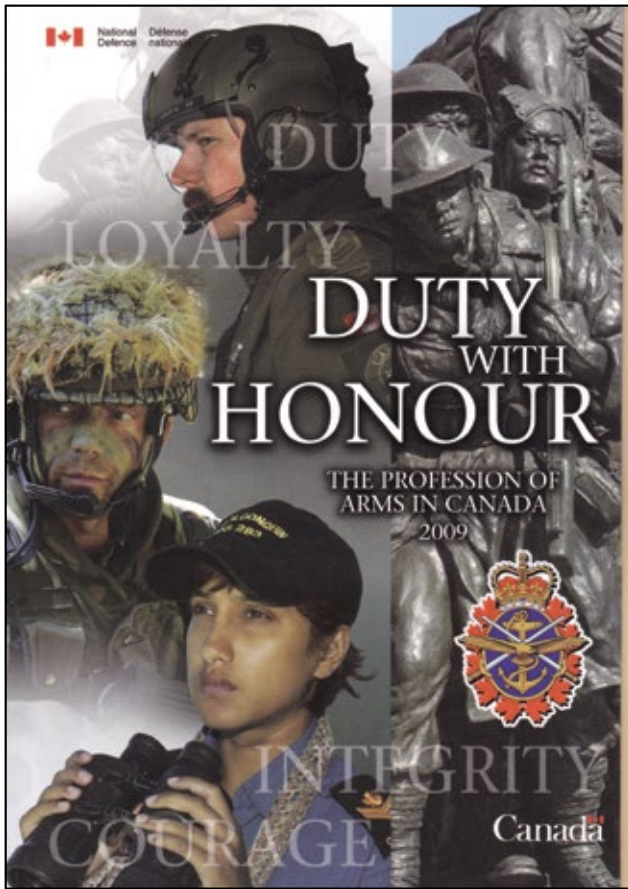
by Allan English

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has arguably the best leadership and profession of arms doctrine in the world. Unlike the sterile doctrine manuals and turgid theoretical tomes that proliferate in this field, *Duty with Honour* and *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations* deftly combine theory and the experience of the Canadian military to provide essential guidance on professional practice for leaders in the CAF.¹

Why then have so many CAF members complained that this guidance is not being followed? Over the past year, I have heard an increasing number of complaints, from corporals to brigadier generals, that they are being constantly ‘micromanaged,’ and that their superiors are not following the tenets of mission command and distributed leadership, two key concepts in CAF leadership doctrine. Not all leaders are acting this way, but the situation now seems to be more acute than in the recent past. Therefore, I offer the following thoughts, based upon my 25 years of experience in the CAF and on my 25 years teaching subjects related to leadership, command, and ethics and the military profession at both Royal Military College of Canada and the Canadian Forces College.

There are many reasons why the tenets of mission command and distributed leadership are not being followed today, but two that stand out for me are that: 1) in the CAF, like all armed forces winding down from intensive combat operations and with training budgets being cut, empty time is often filled with what Israeli Defence Force psychologist Ben Shalit called formal or “chickenshit” activities instead of functional activities, i.e., those related to the task at hand,² and 2) budget cuts have led to ‘fiscal responsibility’ being used as a justification for extreme forms of micromanagement.

Some may ask if it really matters what leadership philosophy guides military leaders. CAF doctrine answers this question clearly, telling us that a principal reason for practising mission command and distributed leadership is that in the modern world, “accelerated decision-making, initiative, and co-ordinated independent action” are required “at increasingly lower levels of responsibility and authority.” CAF doctrine also advocates a values-based leadership approach, which discourages authoritarian or directive leadership styles, and cultivates and reinforces a transformational style of leadership characterized by “exemplary personal commitment to the mission, motivating others through ideas and ideals, and individualized consideration of others.”³



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Successful transformational leadership occurs when “people are encouraged to engage in broad inquiry, to think critically, and to venture and debate new ideas in the interests of contributing to collective effectiveness.”⁴ And transformational leadership is optimized when leaders ensure that all members of the CAF can lead, that leadership is a function which is shared, that subordinates are provided with maximum freedom of action to accomplish their missions consistent with clearly articulated commander’s intent, and that leaders provide opportunities for subordinates’ leadership development, as well as to create an ‘open culture’ that supports all of these activities.⁵

In the past, leaders who have used inappropriate techniques, such as group punishment; failing to keep subordinates adequately informed; failing to engage subordinates actively with organizational goals; inundating subordinates with changing directives and rules; and using regulations and technicalities to avoid responsibility, have faced combat refusals, disobedience, and, in extreme cases, have been attacked by their own troops.⁶ To help CAF members avoid these outcomes, *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations* has distilled best practices from theory and past experience, while providing historical examples of exemplary leadership. While these documents are “the primary source for the development of leader training and education programmes” in the CAF,⁷ it is essential for military professionals, as with other professionals, to learn how to apply best practices in their daily work. This can be done in the context of the CAF’s Professional Development System in the Self-Development phase by using available resources (a number of which are cited below)



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VIEWS AND OPINIONS

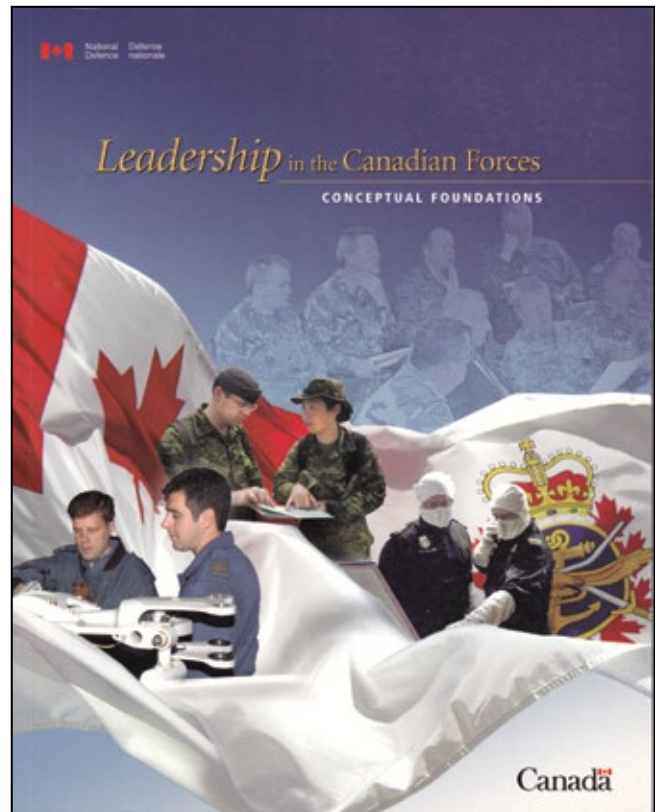
to identify best practices to add to one's own repertoire of leadership techniques, and then to apply them in the Experience phase.⁸

The application of these best practices can be combined with leaders' responsibility to fully develop subordinates' potential, by giving them opportunities to practice appropriate leadership tasks under supervision, because if you attempt to use mission command with "people who don't really understand it," you risk chaos.⁹ Subordinates' capabilities for independent action should be developed by giving them "as much authority as they can competently and responsibly handle," and sometimes "very challenging duties and correspondingly greater authority (so-called 'stretch' assignments)."¹⁰

For example, instead of time-wasting 'chickenshit' activities, leaders could conduct small group unit-level professional development initiatives focussed upon improving subordinates' leadership capabilities. Leaders could discuss their goals with subordinates and how they can work together to achieve them; solicit feedback; engage subordinates in problem solving to address challenges the unit faces; delegate, where subordinates are able, portions of the leadership task; and, where subordinates are *not yet* able, develop their capabilities. Throughout this process, subordinates' performance must be "monitored, energized, re-directed, facilitated, or corrected as necessary."¹¹ The leader's focus should be upon fostering values-based leadership by monitoring outcomes, not micromanaging process, i.e., assign a task to achieve a balanced budget within the rules, rather than scrutinizing every single expense, no matter how minor.

None of what I have said is new. However, since 'institutional memory' is only as good as the training and professional education that each generation receives, it is worth repeating these best practices from time to time, lest they be forgotten.

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NOTES

- 1 Duty with Honour: The Profession of Arms in Canada (Kingston, ON: CF Leadership Institute, 2009); and DND, Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy, 2005).
- 2 Ben Shalit in Anthony Kellett, *Combat Motivation* (Boston: Kluwer, 1982), pp. 333–336.
- 3 Conceptual Foundations, p. 124.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 130–131.
- 6 See the three volume Canadian Defence Academy (CDA) series on mutinies, for example, Howard G. Coombs, (ed.), *The Insubordinate and the Noncompliant: Case Studies of Canadian Mutiny and Disobedience: 1920 to Present* (Toronto & Kingston, ON: Dundurn Group and CDA Press, 2007).
- 7 DND, "Canadian Armed Forces Professional Development – Conceptual Foundations" at <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/training-prof-dev/index.page?>, accessed 31 Oct 2013.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Keith Stewart, "Mission Command: Problem Bounding or Problem Solving?" in *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2009, p. 48.
- 10 Conceptual Foundations, p. 125.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 125–126.