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14. ABSTRACT Published almost sixty years ago, Frank Herbert's science fiction novel <i>Dune</i> has many leadership lessons for the military today. Four excerpts address the concepts of getting buy-in, knowing how to lead people for whom a leader is responsible, delegating down, and embracing risk when needed. These lessons are difficult to implement but are crucial to effective leadership and organizational success.					
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***Dune* Leadership Lessons**

Introduction

Frank Herbert published his epic science fiction novel *Dune* in 1965. Though the novel is set in a distant world and a distant future, its lessons are applicable across a broad spectrum of conflict. Examined through different lenses, *Dune* can provide insight into the United States' war in Afghanistan or the rapidly evolving world of cyber warfare. *Dune* delivers commentary on the danger of underestimating technologically inferior people, particularly those with a united purpose or cause. *Dune* examines the problematic nature of colonialism and the consequences of oppression in the name of a commodity. *Dune* can help understand great power competition as two powerful families in the novel both, in their own way, strive for advantage and finite resources. Though nearly sixty years old, *Dune's* many leadership lessons apply to military command and leadership at various organizational levels today.

Dune is powerful because it addresses many of the questions that military members ask themselves today, particularly about leadership. What makes a good or effective leader? What are the characteristics of those that others wish to follow? What distinguishes a healthy and high-functioning organization from a toxic and ineffective one? *Dune's* lessons are simple yet broadly applicable from a story that encompasses great power rivalries and political intrigue, insurgency, the interactions of disparate cultures, and the power of ideology. Four excerpts in *Dune* provide leadership lessons relevant to the U.S. military today from the smaller organizational to the larger bureaucratic headquarters. These lessons contextualize the importance of persuasion rather than compulsion to get people's buy-in, knowing your people well enough to know how to effectively lead them, avoiding giving orders unless it is truly needed, and embracing risk rather than defaulting to the safer path that ultimately leads to stagnation.

Leadership Lesson One: Persuade Rather than Compel

The first leadership lesson occurs early in the book and highlights the importance of earning the buy-in of your people. At the beginning of the book, a Reverend Mother visits the Atreides household before they assume control of the fiefdom of planet Arrakis, or Dune. The Reverend Mother is a powerful and influential figure as the lead advisor to the emperor and she comes to meet and test Paul Atreides, the son and heir of Duke Leto Atreides. The Reverend Mother tells Paul that “a ruler must learn to persuade and not to compel.”¹ Just because a leader or a commander can order, force, or compel someone to do something does not mean that the leader should. Time and mission permitting, a military leader will always have more buy-in and support if people are convinced or persuaded that the proposed course of action is correct. More buy-in will lead not only to less resistance but almost certainly to better implementation. People who are personally invested will be empowered and motivated to improve the original initiative and identify and correct weaknesses that the leader may have missed. They better understand and support the desired end state and may apply their unique efforts to achieve it. These individuals may creatively adapt to unforeseen challenges. Once people are persuaded that a plan of action is the best one, those people can become a force multiplier to achieve the objective.

But choosing to persuade when one can compel is difficult to do for several reasons. Persuasion can be difficult, time-consuming, and ultimately ineffective. It requires patience on the part of the leader and trust between the leader and the led. To effectively persuade, the leader must comprehend their people well enough to know how to convince them and what will persuade them. Individuals are influenced by their backgrounds and interests, and what is persuasive to one will not be convincing to another. Persuasion is also not always appropriate; if

¹ Frank Herbert, *Dune*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), 39.

a leader cannot persuade, they may have to compel their people. In the military, this is especially true with time-sensitive objectives. But this is another reason why building up trust by regularly persuading rather than compelling is essential.

Regularly trying to persuade rather than compel is worthwhile because it establishes a baseline of mutual trust and understanding in an organization that will pay dividends, especially when compliance is necessary. By trying to persuade, a leader establishes a dialogue with their people. Taking the time and effort to persuade may, in turn, create an environment where the people of an organization feel heard and respected, even if the leader decides on a proposal with which the people disagree. It also creates the opportunity for a humble leader to reassess their proposal and possibly alter their desired course of action based on the inputs of the members they were trying to persuade. Taking the time to explain and persuade also provides an opportunity for a leader to better understand their own perspective and offer insights about the context for a proposal or decision. This can have the added benefit of shedding light on a leader's decision-making process, which can be hugely beneficial for an organization's members as they grow into leadership positions themselves. There are few better ways to ensure subordinates act as their commanders would want than for a commander to clearly articulate not only what they want to achieve but why. Persuasion can make an organization stronger and more cohesive in addition to demonstrating to future leaders the power of getting buy-in, even when compulsion might appear to yield the same results.

Leadership Lesson Two: Know Your People Well Enough to Lead Them

The second leadership lesson is knowing the people under your command and understanding how to lead them. Stilgar is one of the leaders of the Fremen, the native population of Arrakis. Stilgar and his sietch, or community, take in Paul and his mother, Jessica,

after attacks kill most of their household and drive Paul and Jessica into the desert. Soon after Jessica and Paul are found by the Fremens, Stilgar discusses his leadership of Sietch Tabr with Jessica. Stilgar specifically considers the younger men in his troop, the hotheads, and acknowledges that he needs to lead them through their time of high emotions and violence, discouraging or preventing them from challenging him for the position of “leader” by combat. Stilgar says this not out of self-interested preservation of his power but because he is confident that he would beat them in combat and that their resulting deaths would not be in the best interest of the sietch. Stilgar tells Jessica that “a leader, you see, is one of the things that distinguishes a mob from a people. He maintains the level of individuals. Too few individuals, and a people reverts to a mob.”² This excerpt highlights the critical importance of the oft-touted “know your people.”

Stilgar understood what was necessary and unnecessary for the overall good of the tribe. The survival and flourishing of his community were his ultimate objective. He also understood the human nature of those he led. And as an effective leader, Stilgar deliberately tried to manage and work with their human nature. It can be difficult to lead people as they are, to recognize and maintain their individuality. The U.S. military, like many large organizations, tends to favor uniformity and standardization. Sometimes leaders fall into the trap of trying to lead their people as they wish they would be or think they should be, not as they are. These leaders often have the best of intentions and the poorest of results.

Complementary to the first leadership lesson about persuasion rather than compulsion, Stilgar understood that he needed to guide the younger men with a deft hand rather than force them. This was the most effective way to achieve the desired objective of retaining their strength

² Herbert, 371.

and capability of the sietch after their hot-tempered days of youth had passed. Stilgar internalized the importance of his leadership responsibilities, without which the sietch could lapse into a disorganized mob. He also knew the importance of treating individuals as individuals rather than viewing the entire sietch like a single organism or the youth as a monolith. Stilgar was an effective leader because he recognized individualism and knew what the individual people in his sietch needed from him, working with those needs rather than fighting them for the greater good of the organization.

Leadership Lesson Three: Avoid Giving Orders Unless Necessary

As Paul integrated with the Fremen and began to rally them as an insurgent force, he remembered what his father once told him: "Give as few orders as possible...once you've given orders on a subject, you must always give orders on that subject."³ Paul noted that the Fremen instinctively understood this and that there were few orders given, yet many necessary tasks were accomplished in sync and as needed. Many leaders in the military, from the small organizational level to the larger bureaucratic, struggle with this and end up micromanaging. But these leaders seem to fail to understand how damaging micromanaging can be for the members of an organization as well as the overarching strategic aim.

Micromanaging slows processes and erodes morale. This quote from *Dune* fully embodies this idea. If an organization's people know what needs to be done and are trained and equipped to do it, the best course of action for that leader is to let them do it. Whether consciously or not, many military leaders force their organizations to run everything through them either for information or approval. Not only does this erode the trust within an organization, but it can lead to extreme inefficiencies. There is also an opportunity cost for

³ Herbert, 489.

leaders that micromanage when they should be focusing on the larger tactical or operational context.

Once a leader has shown that they want to give an order on a subject, their organization will always expect them to give an order on that subject. This can cripple an organization, fostering a climate where individuals default to seeking orders for most things rather than operating within guidance toward a commonly understood objective. While leaders of all ages and experiences may devolve into leadership by micromanaging, those who have recently transitioned from their roles as a tactical expert or action officer to a leadership position may be particularly susceptible because of relative inexperience with leadership by delegation.

Delegation and trust are crucial. The most effective leader will delegate authority as far down as possible, a principle often discussed in the military but infrequently executed. Micromanaging is not only bad for the organization, it is bad for the leader as well. Giving orders takes time and attention, both finite resources for leaders and commanders. In a future fight against a peer competitor, these resources will be precious. The ability to delegate will be a key component of success, allowing the U.S. military to plan and execute faster and more effectively. Organizations with empowered individuals who are accustomed to taking initiative will succeed. Organizations that are conditioned to constantly circle back to its leadership for orders or direction will fall behind.

Leadership Lesson Four: Embrace Risk Rather Than Safe Stagnation

Near the end of the book, Paul confronts the Spacing Guild. Perhaps the most influential organization within the book, the Guild controls interstellar travel and banking. Guild navigators are the only beings capable of conducting interstellar travel, and their ability to do so is dependent on the spice found only on the planet Arrakis. Consumption of the spice gives the

Guild navigators limited prescience. Paul notes that this ability to see into the future led the Guild navigators to “the fatal decision: they'd chosen always the clear, safe course that leads ever downward into stagnation.”⁴ The Guild can see some of the future and, because of their insight, consistently chose the safest option based on what they saw. While beneficial in the short term, this type of decision-making inevitably led to stagnation because risks were always avoided rather than embraced. In avoiding risk, the Guild worked inexorably toward the entrenched status quo. The urge to prefer safety to risk is a natural tendency. But it proved catastrophic for the Guild and is similarly dangerous for national security professionals and leaders.

Many military leaders are risk-averse and are more likely to choose a clear, safe course. The reasoning for this is myriad but ranges from the natural human tendency to careerism and self-interest. However, this excerpt shows there is danger in stagnation. It makes the military less capable of adapting and defending the nation in future conflicts. Risk aversion and stagnation also result in one of the most frustrating defining characteristics of the larger military bureaucracy. Entrenched and seemingly immovable, the bureaucracy rejects risk and change. The phrase “this is how it has always been done” is a clear indicator of risk aversion. To change is risky, but it is the only way to evolve and grow. Risk is often necessary. Deviating from the 'clear, safe course' is often required. This is why calculated risk acceptance and mitigation, rather than total risk avoidance, is a component of sound planning. The danger of avoiding risk entirely is stagnation and status quo as the world moves forward. This may not be catastrophic for some areas of life, but it can be disastrous in the military or defense industry. Risk can be difficult and painful. It can be personally and professionally threatening. Risk should not be taken on blindly, but it must be embraced rather than rejected or avoided entirely.

⁴ Herbert, 596.

Conclusion

These excerpts are as relevant today as when Herbert first published *Dune*. They highlight leadership principles that are often discussed or proclaimed but are less often implemented. While recognizing these leadership principles is easy, enacting them is difficult because they take time, effort, patience, empathy, and prioritization of organizational needs over a leader's desires or inclinations. They also require leaders to take personal and professional risk by pushing back against organizational dogma and service cultures which tend to reward status quo and meeting metrics. But to win in a future fight against a peer adversary, the U.S. military must adapt. It must delegate and decentralize. Concepts like "mission command" are crucial to military success in future wars. But they cannot be made real by leaders that are personally motivated and risk-averse.

These lessons from *Dune* show why leadership is most effective when its motivation is selflessly motivated and apply broadly to leadership at any level. The effectiveness of getting buy-in by persuading rather than compelling is as true for raising children as it is for leading an organization. Understanding the people of an organization, what motivates them and what levers move them, and providing the leadership style that an individual or an organization needs instead of the one that is most natural or convenient for the leader is crucial. Recognizing individuals and empowering the members of an organization via effective delegation rather than micromanaging them will result in an environment of trust, respect, and responsibility at the lowest levels. This environment will, in turn, produce results that far outstrip anything the leader could have achieved via compulsion or centralized control and execution. Thoughtfully and deliberately embracing risk, rather than avoiding it, are critical components of leading people and creating an effective organization built on trust.

These four lessons from *Dune* are not new or innovative. Today's members of the profession of arms are not unique from prior generations in their desire to be treated as individuals, understand the why, or be trusted by their leadership to execute a mission or implement a course of action free of micromanagement. What has changed, perhaps, is the organizational recognition or understanding of the compounding benefits of leading by persuasion instead of compellence. Another change might include the ongoing emphasis from the most senior levels of defense leadership on taking the right risks and fighting bureaucratic inertia and intransigence. These lessons from *Dune* also resonate with many recent leadership publications proposing that individuals and individuality do not have to threaten an organization but can be harnessed to improve an organization. It can be exceedingly difficult to translate this talk into reality. Even the best-intended military leader will struggle to balance the short-term effectiveness of compellence, micromanaging, and risk-aversion against their longer-term consequences. As *Dune* highlights, these lessons are about leadership struggles as well as human nature.