

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.

OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE INFORMATION AGE:
A new model

by

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

8 February 2000

20000623 030

Paper directed by
Chairman, Joint Military Operations Department

DRIC QUALITY INSPECTED 4

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE INFORMATION AGE: A new model (U)			
9. Personal Authors: Michael J. Monis, MAJ, USA			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 8 February 2000	
12. Page Count: 25		12A Paper Advisor (if any): Erik J. Dahl, CDR USN	
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Doctrine, Leadership, Operational, Future, Model, Command, Environment, Trends, Styles, Skills			
15. Abstract: This report examines the effects of significant trends in the operational environment to arrive at a clearer picture of the evolving leadership challenges operational commanders face today and in the future. It finds that given the increasing complexity of operations in the information age, operational leaders must become more comfortable operating in a distributed leadership environment, be increasingly outward focused to optimize the environment for success, and create and maintain an increasingly open and flexible command climate. It then reviews how the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines address leadership in their doctrine, discovering great variation and the lack of a sufficient model for thinking about operational leadership. It concludes by proposing the basic framework for a new joint model built on the fundamental assertion that as a leader's situational complexity increases, so too does the need for him to adjust the balance in his leadership approach. The new model offers the services a common perspective on the demands of operational leadership and offers the individual a tool for development as well as for analyzing unique leadership situations and thinking about the most appropriate balance of leadership styles and techniques.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841-6461		20. Office Symbol: C	

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INTRODUCTION

“War may be fought with weapons, but they are won by men.
It is the spirit of the men who follow and of the man who leads that gains the victory.”
- George S. Patton Jr.

Although much has been written about the kinds of material, organizational, and even doctrinal change that America’s military must implement to remain relevant in the information age, far less has been written about the impact of the information age on leadership at the operational level. Significant environmental trends, born of the information age, have resulted in an operational-strategic environment where “our only constants seem to be change, turbulence and high OPTEMPO [Operational Tempo].”¹ This highly dynamic operating environment will require leaders armed with a wide variety of skills, not the least of which is the ability to rapidly adjust their style of leadership to fit the relative complexity of a particular operational situation. With the increasing complexity of the information age, operational leaders must become more comfortable operating in a distributed leadership environment, be increasingly outward focused to optimize the environment for success, and create an increasingly open and flexible command climate. The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps all must develop leaders qualified to lead at the operational level with the requisite skills to foster agility and effectiveness in their organizations.

A significant tool used in the development of qualified officers is the use of doctrine on leadership. While current service level doctrine adequately identifies the values and attributes of a successful leader and describes many of the skills and stylistic approaches, none provide an adequate model for thinking about operational leadership. Separately, these doctrines are either too rigid and prescriptive, or too vague or philosophical to be of

sufficient value in aiding leaders to decide what balance of stylistic leadership approach would serve best in a particular situation.

A new joint model is needed to fill this void and provide a common perspective on operational leadership. Importantly, such a model would offer the services a common target upon which to aim their leadership development efforts. For the operational commander, or those aspiring to be one, it would provide a common vision for what stylistic competencies they need to develop over time. Moreover, a well refined model would offer operational leaders a tool to evaluate, based on the unique level of complexity in their own situation, what balance of leadership approaches holds the greatest potential for success. This report will propose a basic framework upon which just such a model should be built.

INFORMATION AGE AND THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER

There are at least three factors acting to significantly influence and shape the internal and external environment in which operational commanders will plan and execute future operations. Rapid technological innovation, globalization, and the lack of a clear threat to U.S. interests will all present operational commanders with unique challenges in the future. In addition, each reinforces the notion that "Responsiveness and agility are fast becoming the critical attributes for organizations hoping to survive and prosper in the information age."²

Rapid technological innovation is the first and most fundamental factor influencing the world's transition to the information age. In many ways, technology has forever compressed the traditional perceptions of time and space.³ Promises of instantaneous communications are making the distance between leaders and subordinates almost irrelevant as command decisions and guidance can be delivered in almost real time.

The ability to coordinate and direct the actions of subordinate elements is also greatly enhanced. However, this may not always be a good thing. As Air Force LTC Anthony J. Russo appropriately cautions, “The senior leader’s job is to look at the big picture and allow his subordinate leaders to address the details. Because a senior leader *can* have direct contact with the lowest echelon does not mean he *should*.”⁴ Whether a leader does intervene will likely hinge on the relative complexity of the situation and the risks associated with a mistake at the tactical level. To maintain agility, operational leaders will have to “overcome the attractiveness and potential pitfalls of centralized decision making that access to information will appear to make practical.”⁵ Indeed, with increasing situational complexity, operational leaders should adopt General Omar Bradley’s style of command and “issue broad mission objectives and then let subordinate commanders decide how to get there.”⁶ On the other hand, some might argue that empowerment is a weak style of leadership that cannot work in the military. However, empowerment doesn’t have to mean all subordinates get free rein. Arguably, if they perform they should have a free hand, when they falter they should be helped, and when they fail they should be relieved.⁷

An outgrowth of instantaneous communications is the development of real-time global news coverage by media agencies such as CNN. Dubbed by some as the CNN effect, the impact of almost continuous scrutiny and exposure by the international press is a huge factor in shaping the environment in which operational commanders operate. In the past, when relatively isolated events occurred in a remote part of the world, their effects were limited to the immediate area, and governments would often have time to comprehend the situation and decide under limited pressure how to react. In those days, the government was often the first to notify the mass population of a developing situation. Now and in the

future, with the advent of "CNN like" news coverage, almost instantaneous coverage (often for effect) has our politicians and military forces reacting to an increasing number of very complex issues. Often, even government agencies are getting initial intelligence from public news sources before the official system provides detailed information.⁸ Moreover, the American people are less patient than ever and as such, put the government under tremendous pressure to act quickly. Clearly, at the joint operational level, communication skills coupled with a keen understanding of how the media game is played will serve commanders well.

Another key technological advancement is the development of networks and the worldwide web. These new network systems have made the ability to collect and analyze significant amounts of information inexpensive and readily available to individuals and organizations worldwide. "People communicate more, hear more, and know more-- faster than ever before in history."⁹ Moreover, the result of this trend is that rapid access to valuable information is empowering individual soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines to make decisions like never before. The natural resources that defined power in the past have and will increasingly be supplanted by the value of these knowledge resources.¹⁰ Clearly, the importance of human capital, and the operational commander's ability to creatively leverage each individual's knowledge and ideas, will be crucial. Perhaps the arguable extreme of this notion is that, "Effectiveness in leadership can no longer be centered in positions within a rigid hierarchical structure, but must be centered in interdependent relationships in which leadership and power are shared broadly."¹¹ As the complexity of their leadership situation increases, operational leaders will need to focus on shaping the many interdependencies that will need to be formed to ensure mission success. Moreover,

to achieve maximum agility, operational leaders must be willing and able to establish open and trusting command climates, empower their subordinates, and accept the personal risk that may entail.¹²

An additional potential pitfall presented by the abundant availability of information is the risk of information overload for the commander. “The information age provides the leader with unprecedented information from every imaginable source and in mind-numbing detail.”¹³ While it is vital that operational leaders and staffs provide specific guidance on the kind of information required to make decisions, it is imaginable that some leaders may cling to the security of getting additional information and end up analyzing endlessly. At some point, it is a “leader’s perspective, wisdom, courage, and sense of timing that help them know when to decide.”¹⁴ Again, this reinforces the assertion that, whenever and wherever possible, operational leaders must decentralize decision making so as to avoid getting buried in the day to day heat of battle decisions at the cost of maintaining a forward looking perspective.

The second major factor affecting the environment in which operational leaders will operate is globalization. The term globalization reflects the trend toward increased economic and industrial interdependence amongst the countries of the world. As for the future, “the internationalization of world economies will introduce global changes on an unprecedented scale.”¹⁵ This interdependence has been a contributing factor in increasing the likelihood that future U.S. military operations will be conducted as part of a coalition. This development presents the operational commander with the additional challenge of coordination and often negotiation with the other members of the coalition team. Overall, globalization and technology are the catalysts for the introduction of a new level of

complexity in global politics and for the introduction of several new and powerful actors on the world's stage.¹⁶ Companies large and small are increasingly global in nature and as such their loyalty to any one country is diluted. Arguably, "taking sides in conflicts between countries is usually not in these organizations' self-interest."¹⁷ Even more private aid organizations are reaching further and are more likely to be operating in areas experiencing instability.¹⁸ These developments require that operational level commanders have a clear understanding of the global situation and are capable of creatively shaping their operating environment so as to achieve the unity of effort required for success.

The third environmental factor affecting operational leaders is the perceived disappearance of a clear monolithic threat to America's vital interests. One could argue that ambiguity surrounding the composition and intent of our future potential adversaries is the greatest threat to our national security. Still, convinced of the lack of a threat, our political leadership is increasingly using the military in non-traditional roles in order to get increased return on the dollars invested. In the wake of the cold war, the likelihood of the services being tasked to participate in a wider variety of operations other than war (OOTW) is on the rise.¹⁹ Moreover, jointness, while a relatively new concept, is now gaining momentum.²⁰ Without question, the inherent complexity of OOTW and increasingly joint operations will represent a significant challenge for operational leaders involved. One reason OOTW operations are more complex is that, in most cases, the military will operate in a support role with one or more civilian organizations in the lead. From a leadership perspective, this kind of operating environment requires the commander to increasingly focus on shaping the environment through close coordination and collaboration with peer and supervisory organizational leaders. The skills needed to effectively integrate themselves, influence

objectives, and facilitate harmony among team members include (but are not limited to), consensus building, negotiations, active listening, and self-restraint. Another factor making OOTW operations more complex is that their non-linear nature often requires forces to operate very independently. This makes detailed operational planning much more complicated. In fact, experience in Somalia shows that the clear communication of intent and broad sweeping objectives along with empowering subordinates to plan and execute at a local level seems to work best.²¹ For some, this notion will present a significant shift in their paradigm of roles of military leaders and followers.

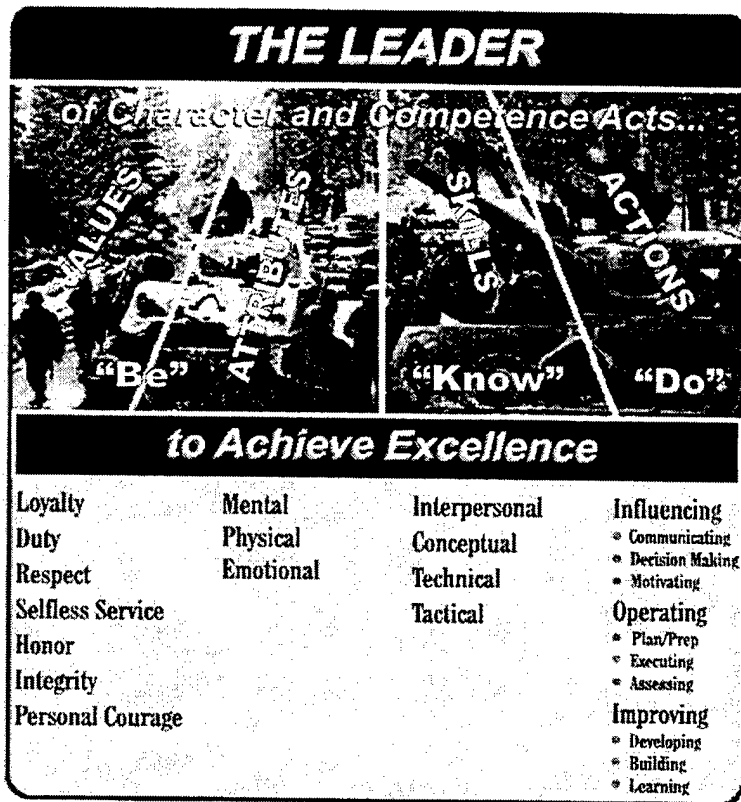
This environmental analysis highlights some of the new realities that will challenge operational leaders in the years ahead. In the future, each new crisis situation will bring it own level of complexity based on the relative impact of the many forces operating in the information age. Depending on the situation, the scope and complexity of an operational commander's role in a crisis may vary widely. To thrive, operational leaders will have to quickly assess their challenge and decide what leadership style and techniques will work best in the situation they are presented. As the relative complexity of the situation increases, so too will their need to be comfortable with a distributed leadership environment, to be increasingly outward focused to optimize their environment for success, and to create and maintain an increasingly open and flexible command climate.

REVIEW OF SERVICE SPECIFIC DOCTRINE

A review of service specific leadership doctrine indicates, as one might expect, that the doctrinal content varies and that each reflects its service's unique culture and ethos. While some may view this non-uniformity as a negative, it can also be argued that this is an opportunity to leverage the benefits of diversity and develop a joint model to facilitate a

common understanding of the unique and increasingly complex nature of operational leadership.

The Army's handling of military leadership is the most comprehensive of all the services, followed closely by the Marines. While the Air Force and Navy remain heavily



Leaders of character and competence act to achieve excellence by developing a force that can fight and win the nation's wars and serve the common defense of the United States.

Figure 1 The Army Leadership Framework

individual must strive to maintain as a leader. They are all described in FM 22-100 in great detail and are characterized as “internal qualities: you possess them all the time, alone and with others. They define who you are; they give you a solid footing.”²² The Army’s model then recognizes that there are requisite competencies, the “KNOW,” and requisite habits, the “DO” that are important enablers for individuals to thrive as leaders. The Army then defines three levels of leadership: direct leadership, organizational leadership, and strategic

platform focused, there are indications that both are making an effort to change. The Army’s fundamental philosophy is that leaders must “BE,” “KNOW,” and “DO” certain things in order to obtain excellence in themselves and the people they lead.

The “BE” portion of the model is the core values and attributes that an

leadership. While direct leadership is clearly defined to be at the tactical level of war, the organizational level of leadership starts at brigade through corps level. Interestingly, the skills and actions encompassed by these two levels are described as differing only “in degree, but not in kind.”²³ The strategic level is defined as the Commander in Chief (CINC) level and up. This is first time the Army recognizes the need for the skills and actions that make them effective “in an uncertain environment of highly complex problems that affect and are affected by events and organizations outside the Army.”²⁴

The Army’s doctrinal model for leadership excellence, while comprehensive and well articulated, is arguably a too prescriptive and linear. In particular, the three levels of leadership, while useful in laying out the plethora of skills required of leaders from the direct to strategic level, is too inflexible for use in a model for thinking about operational leadership. As touched on in the environmental review, the increased likelihood of military participation in operations other than war may very well place lower level commanders, traditionally referred to as organizational level, in a strategic level situation. One could argue then, that given the dynamic environment and the varied nature of operations likely in the years ahead, officers from all services need to develop the strategic level skills defined by the Army much earlier in their careers. A joint model for operational leadership should not be limited by the confines of specific rank or organizational hierarchy, but rather should be predicated on the relationship between situational complexity and the balance of skills and stylistic approach that should be employed. In the end, the Army’s fundamental premise that “Leaders of Character and competence act to achieve excellence”²⁵ is strong, and many of the required skills and actions at the organizational and strategic level are very

appropriate for integration in a joint model for thinking about leadership at the operational level.

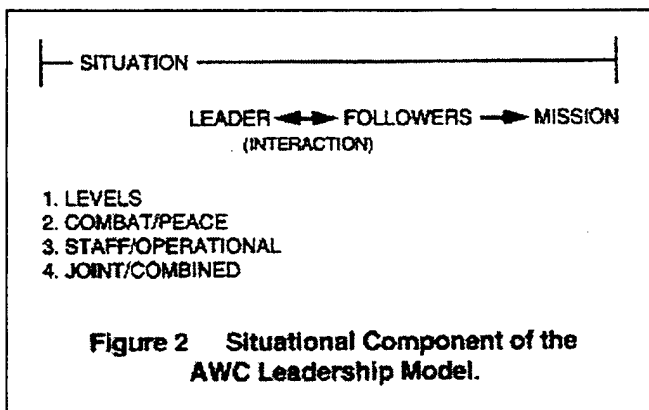
Like the Army, the Marine Corps handling of leadership in its doctrine is quite extensive. However, in contrast to the Army, it is far less prescriptive and is arguably most empowering of its leaders. In its doctrine, it is evident that “the most fundamental element of leading Marines is to understand what it is to be a Marine.”²⁶ The Marine Corps has for years relied heavily on ethos and a common understanding of several core values, leadership traits, and leadership principles in lieu of a structured model for leadership. This is likely a contributing factor to the Marine Corps success in achieving its aim to “adapt to changing circumstances and exploit opportunities as they arise, rather than adhering insistently to predetermined plans that have outlived their usefulness.”²⁷ Another repeated emphasis is the Marine’s perspective that “command from the front should not equate to over supervision of subordinates.”²⁸

In contrast to the Marine and Army, the Navy’s handling of leadership in its doctrine is consciously limited. Historically more platform focused, the idea of documenting things such as leadership in doctrine does not appear to be greatly emphasized. In addition, “Because units have historically operated in widely dispersed locations and, in earlier days, many out of range of controlling authorities, the service has been and still is predisposed to a mindset of operating independently with a great deal of unit flexibility.”²⁹ One central theme to the Navy’s informal leadership model is the idea of command by negation. This is the idea that “naval operations have been viewed as the prerogative of an Officer in Tactical Command (OTC) whose subordinate, and very separate, warfare area commanders had responsibility for execution of the various tactical missions (CWC

concept).³⁰ At the individual ship level, the relative simplicity of processes required to direct action on an individual ship, lends itself to a much more directive and transactional leadership style. So, while top-level leadership doctrine is mostly informal, the Navy clearly recognizes the relationship between situational complexity and a need to balance leadership approaches.

While the Air Force model for leadership is fairly comprehensive, it too had traditionally not been heavily documented. Similar to the Navy, the Air Force has for years been more platform focused and didn't commit its leadership models to paper beyond select course materials for specific training programs. That is, until recently. As this report is being written, the Air Force is in the process of final coordination on an extensive document that addresses its philosophy on leadership. Air Force Doctrine Document 1-3 contains about seventy- five pages of guidance with regard to the basic values, attributes and skills required of effective Air Force leaders.³¹ After review, it could be argued that this document is part of the Expeditionary Air Force change initiative that specifically aims to change the Air Force's culture. Like the Marine's doctrinal material, this publication does not contain a specific model or structure for thinking about leadership.

In addition to the recently emerging doctrine, the Air War College uses a model



called the “Situational Leadership Model for Military Leaders”³² (See Figure 2) that is organized around the fundamental interaction of leader, followers and the mission. A real strength of this model is its very

straightforward approach to a complicated issue. In it however, it makes a few critical points about the dynamics of leadership interactions.

First, note that the arrow from followers to mission is unidirectional. That suggests that it is the followers, not the leaders, who actually do the work and accomplish the mission. While the leader may get his or her "hands dirty" occasionally, the followers do the work. It is also the followers who provide feedback to the leader on their progress in accomplishing the mission. For that reason, among others, communication between leader and follower needs to be free flowing, unencumbered as much as possible by administrative obstacles and psychological barriers. The bi-directional arrow between leader and followers makes this point. Communication between the leader and the followers must be in the form of a dialogue, not a monologue.³³

The model then is expanded to address leadership not in the unit level, as in the Army model, but rather as a universe of skills that are more or less required and/or effective while leading at various levels of war, in combat or peace, while leading staff or operational units, and lastly in either a single service, joint or combined setting. Furthermore, the Air Force's model appropriately recognizes that one can only discuss the applicability of these skills along a continuum and that none operate only in the domain of any particular level of leadership. This is helpful as the model suggests that the application of leadership styles operate along a continuum in response to several specific factors affecting the situation.

A NEW MODEL OF OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Armed with a review of each service's perspective on leadership and an understanding of some of the frameworks they use to help train future leaders, one begins to develop a model for thinking about operational leadership. While total refinement of this model is beyond the scope of this report, it is proposed that a fully refined version built on the framework presented would, at a minimum, serve as a functional aid in training and, at best, be a practical tool for leaders to quickly assess the situational complexity of new

assignments and assist them in making the mental adjustments required to their leadership approach.

The analysis of the future operational environment and the assessment of each of the service perspectives on leadership suggest three goals that a joint model might accomplish. First, the model should sufficiently account for the inherently broad range of conditions under which an operational leader may be required to lead. Second, it should recognize that the application of various leadership styles is not an “either or” process and that in any given situation there will likely only be a bias toward the effectiveness of one style which will not obviate an occasional need for others. And third, the model should be a tool for thinking about the unique nature of operational leadership and not overly prescriptive. The model below meets these criteria.

Figure 3 contains a graphical representation of some of the factors to consider when analyzing the relative complexity of a particular operational leadership situation.³⁴

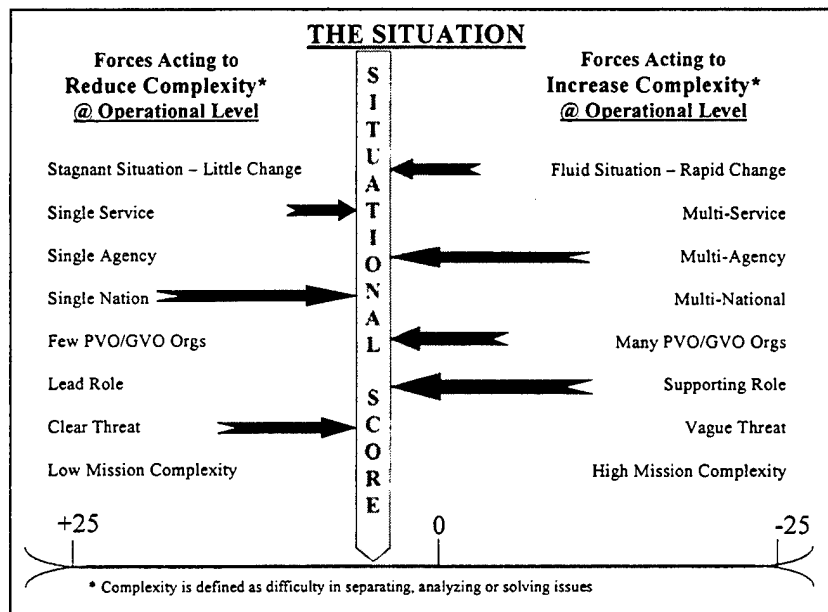


Figure 3

While this model is not intended to be scientific in nature, it is offered to create an improved understanding of the common forces acting to increase or decrease the level of complexity in an operational leader's environment. Complexity is defined as the level of difficulty in separating, analyzing, and/or solving issues at the leader's level in the command and control structure. Standing vertically in the center of this chart is a rectangle that graphically represents a given operational commander's situation. At the bottom of this rectangle is a horizontal line that contains a numbered scale from -25 to +25. The result of the analysis will move the wall somewhere along that scale as a net result of the forces acting on it. The forces on the left act to reduce the complexity while those on the right act to increase it. Obviously, these lists are not all inclusive of forces and as such should be added to or deleted as required to capture the most significant forces acting upon the leader's situation. As a training aid, this model offers a clear picture of the relatively complex nature of the operational environment and unique forces acting in any current or historical situation. To arrive at a relative complexity score, one would reflect on a given set of circumstances and assign a relative strength score to each of the forces acting in the environment. For example, one might assign values between -3 and +3 to each factor representing the strongest forces for reducing complexity and increasing complexity respectively. Next, one tallies the assigned values and arrives at a situation specific complexity score. This score is then noted and used in the next step to get a graphical sense for what stylistic approaches will likely be more appropriate for the given situation.

After arriving at a relative complexity score for the specific operational situation, Figure 4 is instrumental in helping draw some general conclusions about the overall style of leadership that will likely serve best under the circumstances that exist.³⁵ On the left hand

side of Figure 4 is the vertically arranged scale reflecting the same situational complexity scale found in Figure 3. To the right of that scale are three wide arrows representing three of

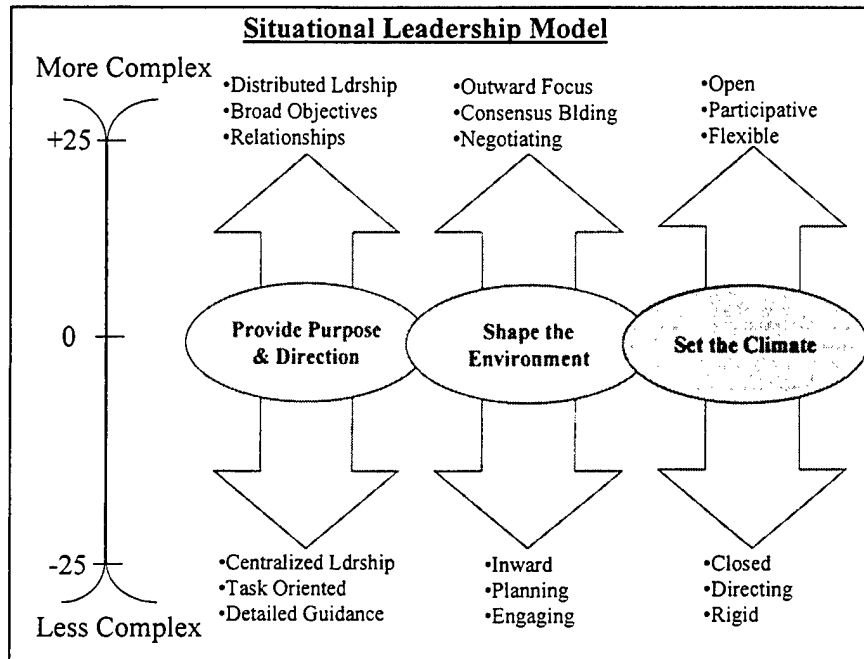


Figure 4

the principal operational level leadership functions. The first group emphasizes how important it is that operational leaders provide purpose and direction for their organization. The second reinforces that they must work to shape the internal and/or external environment to optimize it for successful operations. And the third group, stresses the importance of setting a healthy command climate. These three principal tasks represent groups of actions that are more specifically reflected in the various service specific doctrines and will not be elaborated on here. It is again important to note that with further refinement, other major tasks could be added. Above and below each of the three principal tasks are listings of descriptive terms that either reflect a specific skill or a short adjective describing the nature of the stylistic approach in executing the various actions reflected in the macro task area.

As with any model based on a continuum, it is helpful to analyze it from the perspective of the two logical extremes and then the middle range. In the first extreme, the

lower you get on the complexity scale, the more acceptable it is to exercise centralized leadership providing detailed objectives and specific guidance to subordinate elements. Moreover, leadership efforts to shape the environment are most appropriately focused internally on planning, engaging operating systems, and developing subordinates. And lastly, a leader can afford to have a command climate that is less open, more rigid, and dominated by directive decision-making.

On the other extreme, as complexity scores increase and approach the relative extreme of +25, leading from a perspective of distributed leadership, providing followers with broad intent and goals for an operation will be much more effective. An external focus coupled with skills such as influencing others, negotiation, and consensus building will serve well in shaping the external geopolitical environment to optimize it for success. Moreover, as one moves closer to the extreme in complexity, a heavy stylistic bias toward developing an open, flexible, participatory climate encourage and facilitate organizational agility required to effectively deal with the complexities of the situation.

CONCLUSION

The new operational-strategic environment, as shaped by the information age, promises to challenge leadership for years to come. New operational realities, such as our increased involvement in operations other than war; the military increasingly operating in support and as a part of a joint, multi-agency, or multi-national teams; and the speed and prevalence of change are all significant factors operating to increase the complexity of the situation for tomorrow's operational leaders. To succeed in the information age, operational leaders must become more comfortable operating in a distributed leadership

environment, be increasingly outward focused to optimize their environment for success, and create and maintain an increasingly open and flexible command climate.

Service doctrine, while presenting important values, attributes, and skills requisite for success, fails to offer leaders a common framework for assessing the relative complexity of situations and thinking about what stylistic approach holds the greatest promise for success. As such, there is an opportunity for improvement by offering a model at the joint level that would offer a common perspective on operational leadership.

This new model will assist leaders in assessing the relative complexity of a particular set of circumstances and thinking about how best to adjust the balance in their leadership style between a rigid, inwardly focused, centralized leadership approach and one characterized by an open climate, outwardly focused efforts, and distributed leadership. And lastly, with further refinement, this model has the potential to offer specific tactics and techniques that will advance their efforts in achieving it.

NOTES

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¹⁸ Knowledge obtained from seminar discussion and the tape on operations in Somalia.

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- ²¹ Comment from Marine General Zinnia during video on Somalia.
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- ²⁴ *ibid.*, 1-47
- ²⁵ *ibid.*, 1-3
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- ³¹ Department of the Air Force, Leadership and Command, (Air Force Doctrine Document 1-3, DRAFT ONLY) (Washington, D.C.: XX December 1999)
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- ³³ *ibid.*. 5
- ³⁴ The basic graphical construct of Figure 3 was inspired by a model for identifying and influencing forces acting for and against a particular management change initiative. Only the graphical construct has been used to build the model depicted in Figure 3. The Author is developed the methodology and design of the total model depicted in figure 3 and 4.

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