



**STRATEGY
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THE ARMY AS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

BY

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ABSTRACT

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Currently, the Army's conception of a learning organization is one in which people learn. The purpose of this essay is to argue that being a learning organization involves much more. I argue that although the Army is clearly on the right course in its goal to become a learning organization, at the end of the day the Army is not a learning organization, and more importantly, doesn't know what one looks like or how to get there.

This paper describes a learning organization in detail and then, based on the organizational change and culture literature, offers a way that the Army can transition to a learning organization using the Army leader development model and the Officer Evaluation Report.

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THE ARMY AS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Joint Vision 2020 asserts that the United States military's ability to achieve full spectrum dominance in the year 2020 will be strongly influenced by our capacity for intellectual and technical innovation. JV 2020 goes on to mandate a military force that focuses on continuous learning as a means to cope with uncertainty in a rapidly changing environment.¹ Similarly, the results of the Army Training and Leader Development (ATLDP) Officer Study concluded that in order to train leaders who will thrive in a complex, ambiguous environment the Army "must commit to being a learning organization that institutionalizes the organization's learning philosophy."² My contention is that although the Army has been at the forefront of instituting processes to facilitate organizational learning, at the end of the day the Army is not a learning organization, and more importantly, we don't really understand what one looks like or more significantly, how to get there.

The purpose of this paper will be: first, to accentuate the need for the Army to take the final, giant steps to transition to a learning organization; second, to define a learning organization in terms of its ability to create knowledge and facilitate innovation; and third, to offer ideas on how senior leaders can lead the Army through this significant cultural change. Throughout this paper I will focus on the Army Officer Corps, as opposed to the enlisted or civilian ranks, because I believe the officer corps is the engine of cultural change in the Army.

THE DILEMMA

Studies have identified essential competencies for 21st century leaders. They have typically included an ability to deal with cognitive complexity, tolerance of ambiguity, intellectual flexibility, a meaningful level of self-awareness, and an enhanced understanding of the relationships among organizational sub-systems that collectively construct the prevailing organizational climate.³ JV 2020 amplifies these competency requirements by asserting that innovation in the next twenty years requires leaders who provide accurate feedback, have a reasonable tolerance for errors which will allow innovation, and who are able to assess the efficacy of new ideas in the context of an evolving and uncertain environment.⁴

Compare this description of a 21st Century leader to the results of the ATLDP study. This study describes an Army culture that is seen to be out of balance with the leader competencies listed above. Specifically, officers perceive top-down training directives and strategies combined with brief leader development experiences for junior officers that leads to a perception that micromanagement is pervasive. Young officers do not believe they are being

afforded sufficient opportunities to learn from the results of their own decisions and actions. Finally, they perceive that inexperienced officers, a high operational pace, and associated high standards of achievement encourage senior officers to be more directive in their leadership and less tolerant of mistakes.”⁵ These observations would describe an organization that has a long way to go to become a learning organization.

The ATLDP study goes on to assert that there is a lack of trust between junior and senior officers because there is a strong perception by junior leaders that their senior leaders want to be invulnerable to criticism and therefore use micromanagement to block opportunities for subordinates to learn through leadership experiences.⁶ This dilemma exists all the way up the chain of command. Through discussions with officers involved in the IBCT creation process, it appears there is a strong tendency to acquiesce to the ideas of senior General Officers as opposed to asserting their own thoughts. I think if the Army was honest with itself it would realize that oftentimes organizational learning is strongly hindered by the climate and culture created by its senior leaders. More importantly, there is a perception by junior officers that autocratic, micromanaging leadership is what gets rewarded.

I believe that not only does the Army not reward units that strive to be learning organizations, it does not know how to recognize the ones that have developed a climate of organizational learning. This assertion is supported in an article by LTG (R) Walt Ulmer who posits, “Our monitoring system reacts promptly to selected misbehaviors such as driving under the influence or misusing a government sedan. But our sensors and mechanisms for responding to arrogant, abusive leaders who have not created a public spectacle are less well developed.”⁷ In a lecture to the Army War College Class of 2002, a distinguished retired General asserted that recent battalion level climate surveys demonstrate a significant disparity in the climates of battalions; however, it was clear from the data that senior leaders are not able to discern the good from the bad units.⁸

This introduction points to an Army that has espoused a goal of becoming a learning organization but in practice has no system in place to identify and reward leaders that attempt to achieve this espoused goal. In the next section I will lay out my concept of a learning organization. I will then discuss what the Army needs to do to achieve this state.

A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The current Army literature on a learning organization either assumes we are already a learning organization or that leaders know how to take us there. FM 22-100, Army Leadership,

asserts, "The Army is a learning organization, one that harnesses the experience of its people and organizations to improve the way it does business. Based on their experiences, learning organizations adopt new techniques and procedures that get the job done more efficiently or effectively."⁹ There is very little other guidance in the manual, or in the Army literature that really gets to the meat of a learning organization. This is a clear doctrinal shortfall for an Army that considers itself a learning organization. I will address this issue later in my recommendations. Battalion and brigade commanders not only need to know that Army leaders are expected to welcome change and learn from their experiences, they need to know how to create a climate that encourages change and learning. Without this information, Army leaders will not effectively create the necessary changes required of a learning organization. I believe the "how" component is firmly embedded in my definition of a learning organization: *A learning organization is one in which organizational thought, whether it be routine planning or high-level decision making, is conducted by teams led by leaders that facilitate a dialogue that values reflective thought, new patterns of thinking and a suspension of assumptions.* This definition is based on the current literature on learning organizations as described below. It clearly goes to a level of analysis much deeper than the Army literature referenced above. Given this definition, what then, does a learning organization really look like?

A DESCRIPTION OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

A shift from a traditional organization to a learning organization requires a significant change in the way people, and especially leaders, interact and think collectively. My conception of a learning organization is derived from a combination of three sources: Peter Senge's The Fifth Discipline,¹⁰ Chris Argyris' Overcoming Organizational Defenses,¹¹ and the psychological literature on information processing and social cognition. A learning organization obviously is a multi-level concept; however, I posit that the Center of Gravity of being a learning organization occurs at the Group level. The Group level is where the key interactions take place that define a learning organization. It will therefore be my focus. For this paper, the group level is best exemplified by interactions that occur at routine meetings such as command and staff meetings or in-process reviews for process action teams.

Referring back to my definition of a learning organization, you will see terms such as dialogue, reflection, and suspension of assumptions to describe the process through which learning organizations create new knowledge. What do these terms mean? How are they different from the way the Army currently operates? I will answer these questions by

comparing the way groups, and the individuals composing the group, learn and decide in a traditional organization versus a learning organization. For those readers familiar with Senge's work, Senge categorizes aspects of a learning organization pertinent to this discussion under the disciplines of mental models and team learning. I do not find this categorization particularly useful. His conceptions of team learning and mental models are oftentimes indistinguishable. I feel an Army officer can develop a better understanding of a learning organization by looking at the specific group processes that are evident in a learning organization. I will try to present these processes by integrating the information processing and social cognition literature with Argyris' work on organizational defenses.

Traditional Organizations

How do groups, and the individuals in the group, think, learn, and decide in a typical organization? To understand the cognitive processes of groups, it is first necessary to understand similarities in the way people process information. Research on social cognition and information processing strongly suggest that these activities typically occur in a manner that minimizes cognitive effort. This is not meant to be a negative assertion; rather, it is simply a result of the brain attempting to take control and make sense of the overwhelming amount of information it is bombarded with every minute.

There are numerous ways the brain does this. First, when a person receives information, the individual typically tries to categorize the information. If at a meeting, for instance, the battalion commander tells his subordinates that a last minute tasking came down requiring the battalion to provide a guard force for an event, subordinates immediately attempt to categorize this new requirement. One company commander may think, "this will be just like Ammunition Supply Point guard;" another may think, "I did something like that at my last assignment; it should take 60 soldiers." We make these categorizations to reduce the amount of work our brain has to do by making the uncertain and ambiguous familiar. Everybody does this and there is nothing wrong with it. In fact, if we did not do it, we would become cognitively overwhelmed and incapable of productive thought. The problem is, of course, by always categorizing new information and requirements into known categories, we limit the range of possible solutions and alternatives that might be applied to an issue. We will also end up making many decisions with limited data or after having focused on minor aspects of the data available. A plethora of recent articles by senior level DOD leaders has stressed the importance

of thinking "out of the box," especially in operations such as Enduring Freedom.¹² An ability to think "out of the box" is one of the clear benefits of a learning organization.

A second concept that goes along with categorization is a schema. Much like Senge's concept of mental models, schemas are hypothetical images comprising organized knowledge for the way we think the world works; they influence how we perceive, organize, and remember information.¹³ We have schemas for almost everything in our lives. We have a schema for the characteristics of an effective army officer, a schema for the rituals we go through to get ready for work in the morning, and a schema for the proper way to conduct a Command and Staff meeting. Therefore, when the battalion commander says that the battalion will conduct a deliberate defense, we immediately attempt to categorize "deliberate defense" into an existing schema. Schemas are developed as we progress through life. Research tends to show, however, that once developed, schemas are very resistant to change. This is why the early experiences of a young lieutenant are so important. If, for instance, a new lieutenant spends her first year in a company where officers make all the training decisions, to include individual training, when that lieutenant moves to a new organization she will have already developed an entrenched schema for training management that focuses on significant officer involvement at all levels. She will carry this schema with her for the rest of her career unless she is taught otherwise. Once a schema is entrenched, however, a significantly greater amount of work is required to change the schema than to create the schema initially. This is one of the main reasons why change is so difficult for individuals, and in turn, why change is also difficult to effect in any organization.

When a group of people in an organization tend to categorize new information into similarly held schemas, assumptions will develop or be reinforced. Assumptions are value-laden beliefs that when reinforced by shared schema of organizational members are no longer questioned and therefore become less and less open to discussion. As an example, the Army has an assumption that officers should handle complicated and important tasks. In turn, each of us possesses many schemas consistent with this assumption. For instance, our schema of the conduct of a meeting attended by officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) is that the officers will generally run the meeting and the NCOs will fill a more passive role. A schema inconsistent event would be to walk into a brigade Tactical Operations Center during the heat of battle and find a staff sergeant on the phones and radios attempting to provide direction to subordinate units in accordance with the commander's intent. We would expect to see a battle captain doing this.

Therefore, in terms of information processing, a traditional organization tends to make decisions in a somewhat automatic mode. An issue is surfaced or presented, constraints such as time, information overload, and a set of deeply held assumptions lead participants to categorize the new information into existing schemas. These schemas then provide the basis for possible courses of action, and a decision is made without reflection upon relevant new information. Most of the time, this process is acceptable; in fact, it's clearly desired, especially in stressful, combat situations. However, innovation and significant organizational change will only occur when leaders step out of the automatic mode.

In addition to affecting the way the issue or problem is processed, schemas and assumptions also have a strong effect on the way the group interacts. Everyone in the Army has schemas and assumptions for the way a commander interacts with his staff and subordinate commanders. These schemas probably involve a hierarchical, position power based interaction in which the staff and subordinate commanders provide input and the senior commander makes the decision. Everyone in the room knows who is in charge and typically statements and assertions are made in a manner that attempts to prevent other attendees, especially the senior commander, from feeling uncomfortable. Everyone at the meeting knows who outranks who, who writes who's Officer Evaluation Report (OER), and who, especially when it is the senior officer, tends to verbally assault subordinates. Current and existing schemas and assumptions about group interaction are probably the Army's biggest obstacle to becoming a learning organization. As I discussed previously, schemas are a necessary element of organizational life; the trick to becoming a learning organization is to figure out when schemas are dysfunctional or limiting and to change or get rid of them.

Learning Organizations

How does a learning organization differ from a traditional organization thus enabling it to create new knowledge during the decision making process? First, members in a learning organization, especially leaders, understand that we all operate in accordance with our underlying assumptions and schemas for the way the world works. Individuals have been taught the tendencies of schema-based information processing. They understand that we tend to categorize information rapidly into existing schemas based on our prior assumptions of the world. These categorizations are often "leaps of abstraction" in the sense that we often categorize and generalize a single data point without testing the logic of a categorization. Whereas in a traditional organization the cognitive processes are not addressed, in a learning

organization it is very important for all members to understand these tendencies and then use them to create new knowledge.

Second, in a learning organization everyone understands that knowledge is created because leaders and subordinates focus on reflection and inquiry. In terms of reflection, leaders and subordinates in this type of organization take the time to analyze their own reasoning and views. They ask themselves questions such as: "What assumptions am I using to form my view?" "What data did I use to base my assumption?" "Did I make an early categorization that prevented me from looking at other relevant viewpoints?" "What schema do I rely on to make my understanding of this complicated issue less complicated?" "Is the schema really relevant?" Only through this type of reflection can a leader or subordinate in a learning organization come to the table ready to create new knowledge. As mentioned earlier, this type of reflection is not something that should occur hourly; if it did, we would never get anything done. Rather, it's a conscious process that should be conducted when the main purpose of a group's interaction is to solve a problem or create a new solution.

Having now come to the table as a reflective participant, the most important characteristic of a learning organization now becomes salient - inquiry. By inquiry I mean three things. First, the spirit of inquiry focuses on the techniques of dialogue instead of discussion. In a discussion, different views are presented and defended, and eventually a decision is made. In dialogue, group members explore complex difficult issues from many points of view with an intent of discovering a new view.¹⁴ In dialogue, the group does not seek a decision; rather, the group seeks a richer grasp of complex issues.¹⁵

This new view, however, can only be achieved if several things happen. First, participants need to suspend their assumptions and reflect upon them. As a reflective participant, each individual now presents his assumptions for examination by the group. Instead of picking a position and defending it, participants state their assumptions and data upon which their assumption is based.

Maybe an example will clarify this concept. Suppose senior level decision makers in TRADOC are meeting to propose changes to the Army's institutional learning structure. An example of dialogue would be if a General stood up and said, "I'm operating off the assumption that 'Ft. Humma Humma' will be a main player in our future school location process because we just built new barracks, a PX, and a hospital there; is this a correct assumption?" Notice that the General has not only stated an assumption, he has also provided the data upon which the assumption is based. Another General might then say, "I was under the impression, based on our letter from General Smith, that this committee was starting with a clean slate, that no prior

decisions should affect our thought processes.” By surfacing people’s assumptions up front, the process of dialogue can begin and new knowledge can be created.

I’ve referred several times to the concept of new knowledge creation. What exactly does this mean? New knowledge creation is the product of generative learning.¹⁶ It occurs when a group of individuals learn together to create something new. In the previous TRADOC example, for instance, generative learning might occur after all assumptions and supporting data are surfaced and dialogued. Free from assumption-driven constraints, a member of the committee might suggest a new model for institutional development. This new innovation did not exist in anyone’s mind prior to the meeting. This is new knowledge creation.

A second requirement in inquiry is a need to break through our schemas about the way people should interact. This really comes down to Argyris’s concept of overcoming organizational defenses. Argyris posits that in traditional organizations members interact based on a schema that basically says, “Don’t elevate a serious issue or problem if there’s a reasonable risk that doing so might hurt someone’s feelings.” The premise behind this assertion is that negative feedback is uncomfortable to give or receive, so it should be avoided. Argyris recommends the left-hand column technique to overcome this schema driven problem.¹⁷ In this technique, organizational members in an interaction write down in the right-hand column what they say; in the left-hand column they write what they think. This technique focuses on understanding how schemas cause us to manipulate situations to avoid dealing with how we actually think and feel. On the group level, such avoidance behavior often prevents improvement of bad situations. In a traditional organization there is a big disparity between the contents of the columns. In a learning organization the contents in the columns should be the same.

For instance, if the brigade commander asks a battalion commander what he thinks about the brigade commander’s “great idea” to do an 8 mile run in complete chemical protective gear with gas mask and boots, and the battalion commander responds, “Hooah sir,” the “Hooah sir” goes in the right-hand column. If, however, the battalion commander was thinking to himself, “this run will destroy the already weak cohesion throughout the brigade,” this would go in the left-hand column. The clear, and yet common, disparity between the two columns will lead to a poor decision and action. In terms of dialogue, the lack of complete candidness will cause the group to go down a road that most members of the group think is the wrong way, but are afraid to say it. As I’ll discuss in my recommendations, I think the main reason this issue exists in the Army culture is the OER system. In a learning organization, unlike the Army today,

leaders continually pester subordinates to, "tell me what's in your left, as opposed to right, hand column."

The third, and last characteristic of inquiry involves the role of the leader. Of all the changes required to transition to a learning organization, this is the most difficult. In a learning organization the leader needs to make an extremely conscientious effort to give away a great deal of his position power. What this means is that none of the subordinates should interact with the leader with thoughts like, "This statement could hurt my OER," or "I hope he doesn't yell at me for bringing this up." The senior-subordinate relationship in a learning organization is at times, less hierarchical, and almost collegial. Senge posits, "Dialogue can occur only when a group of people see each other as colleagues in mutual quest for deeper insight and clarity."¹⁸ *This concept goes against centuries of military tradition on senior-subordinate relationships.* It requires that leaders have enough confidence and self-esteem to truly empower their subordinates. Nobody really likes to give away power, yet knowledge creation is severely hindered by rigid, autocratic interactions. In this sense, the leader takes on the important role of facilitator. He guides the dialogue, ensures assumptions are surfaced and explored, and probes participants for the truth as a means to develop a deeper understanding of the issue. This doesn't imply that leaders spend all their time being consensus builders and non-hierarchical facilitators. Rather, a climate needs to exist in which subordinates feel free to disagree or offer conflicting viewpoints (until a decision is made at which time they need to support it 100%).

These processes at the group level are the backbone of a learning organization. They are clearly different from the techniques of a traditional organization and today's Army. The ATLDP officer study posited that self-awareness and adaptability are the Army's enduring strategy-based competencies of the 21st century. Adaptability is the ability to recognize changes to the environment, to determine what is new, what must be learned to be effective, and includes the learning process that follows that determination.¹⁹ The adaptive leader of the 21st century should have the ability to discern those situations where creative thinking is appropriate and when it is not. They then need to create the climate where the subordinates can switch modes as needed. This will be a challenging change for leaders and subordinates.

ANALYZING THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Having described a traditional and a learning organization, the question to be answered is whether or not the Army is a learning organization? I believe the pervasive micromanagement and fear of failure discussed in the ATLDP results clearly show we are not a

learning organization. The question then becomes, "should the Army transition to a learning organization?"

The first thing to do in analyzing the question, "should the Army transition to a learning organization?" is to develop an understanding of the reasons why corporate America thinks this transition is important and then decide if the challenges facing the Army are so different from the corporate world that corporate trends are irrelevant. From a corporate perspective, the concept of a learning organization is framed as one of the only sustainable competitive advantages. In the high-tech, fast-paced 21st century, knowledge creation, whether it is from a specific person or a corporate subdivision, will not occur if that person or subdivision is tenuously connected to the day-to-day operations of the organization. Senge comments, "It's just not possible any longer to 'figure it out' from the top, and have everyone else following the orders of the grand strategist.' The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization."²⁰ In order to be competitive, organizations need to consistently practice the tenets of a learning organization previously described. Only in this manner will socially constructed barriers be removed through a dialogue that will then enable the development and implementation of new ideas, frameworks, and strategies from all levels in the organization.

What about the Army? Some might argue that the current lack of a near-term strategic threat to America makes the costs of a transition to a learning organization too expensive. I would argue that the uncertain, asymmetric environment we're currently facing should only accelerate the requirement to transition the Army Culture to that of a learning organization. The events of September 11th, along with the current Army Transformation to the Objective Force seem to align the army's environment and challenges with the corporate world more than ever before. If a learning organization is framed as a change in the structure, leadership, and interaction norms of the organization in order to better achieve a quest for accurate and new knowledge, the alternative is to remain on our current path of slow, incremental change that is focused on the periphery of the organization and involves a decision making process that thrives on the status quo.

When faced with these alternatives, even an organization in a non-competitive industry would probably opt for the learning organization route. Additionally, the incredible complexity characteristic of the Army's low intensity operations mandates a need for knowledge creation at all levels of the organization. A scenario becoming much too common is to see a new infantry battalion commander, with only several months on the job, deploy his battalion to a complex, uncertain operation such as Kosovo or Afghanistan. Oftentimes, this officer only has a year's

experience at battalion or brigade level (as an Executive Officer or Operations Officer) in the last six or seven years. (Although OPMS is addressing some of this issue in terms of getting majors in the operational track more time with troops, the world and the Army are too complicated to ever think that a preponderance of the important information exists solely at the top of an organization). In this environment it seems obvious that the battalion commander will not possess many of the answers to serious problems. These answers will exist at the multitude of layers in the battalion. If this new commander hasn't created a learning organization, most of the good and innovative ideas will never surface or be implemented and the effectiveness of the leader and the organization will be limited or impaired. This point is not meant to assert that the military decision making process (MDMP) is a waste of time; rather, it is an excellent tool for decision making and to guide group norms. However, in a learning organization, the leader, based on robust adaptation skills, can discern when the norms of a learning organization are more beneficial than the MDMP and use the techniques and norms of the learning organization (that he has created) to develop creative solutions to difficult problems, either within or outside the MDMP framework.

TRANSITIONING TO A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Having described the details of a learning organization and argued for its implementation in the Army, the key concern that arises is how to go about implementing the change. Throughout this section I will use Schein's work on organizational culture as the primary framework to implement change.²¹ Becoming a learning organization is a significant cultural shift for the Army. For this to occur, Schein's model of how cultures are created is extremely relevant. Schein's model focuses on two levels of culture creation. At the fundamental level, leaders use *embedding mechanisms* as the primary means to create and sustain a new organizational culture. Schein posits five primary embedding mechanisms. They are: (1) what leaders pay attention to, measure, and control, (2) how leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises, (3) deliberate role modeling and coaching, (4) criteria for the allocation of rewards and status, and (5) operational criteria for recruitment, selection and promotion.

At a secondary level, leaders use *reinforcing mechanisms* as tools that facilitate the establishment of a culture, but by themselves will not create a culture. These mechanisms are: (1) organization's design and structure, (2) organizational systems and procedures, (3) design of physical space, facades, and buildings, (4) stories, legends, myths, and symbols, and (5) formal statements of organizational philosophy, creeds, and charters.

Maybe an analogy will help clarify the different impacts between embedding and reinforcing mechanisms. Picture a father of a family of four who decides his New Year's resolution is to change his family from a couch potato, Nintendo focused family to one that values a lifetime of physical fitness. He takes several actions to facilitate the accomplishment of his goal. First, he takes the family to the store and buys everyone new running sneakers, two sweat suits, and a pair of wristbands. He then purchases a lifetime family membership at a health club. Finally, he brings the family together and communicates his "lifetime of physical fitness" motto. In fact, what this father has done is to only focus on Schein's reinforcing mechanisms as a means to change his family's physical fitness level. We all know that telling someone you want to get in shape, buying the high-speed work-out outfits, and joining a health club are a superficial, and easy, means to convince yourself that you are fostering change. In reality, the physical fitness of the family is yet unchanged. If you really want to alter the fitness level of the family, you need to look at the embedding mechanisms.

As the father in this example, you need to get yourself out of the house religiously to exercise (role modeling); you need to put a chart up on the refrigerator that tracks each family member's workouts. Along with that you need to ask the family at dinner what exercise they've accomplished on that day and what they plan on doing tomorrow (what leaders pay attention to and control). The father needs to strongly reinforce desired exercise-oriented behaviors by family members (criteria for allocation of rewards). Finally, the next time the father sees his daughter head out in the rain to go for a run instead of playing Nintendo with her friends, he needs to make a big deal out of her persistence to relatives and friends (reaction to critical incidents). Only through this emphasis on embedding mechanisms can a real culture of physical fitness develop. The reinforcing mechanisms described previously will surely help the father in achieving his goal, but by themselves never address the fundamental assumptions underlying the resistance to change within the family.

I believe if we analyze the Army's current attempt to transition to a learning organization we will see that it has only focused on these reinforcing mechanisms. As stated earlier, the Army has attempted to communicate in writing a shift to a learning organization in posture and vision statements along with Field Manuals (formal statements of organizational philosophy); it has created agencies in TRADOC (organization's design and structure) and other processes (AARs) to facilitate the movement of the Army into the 21st Century. The problem is, of course, the structures and processes one creates to move the Army into the 21st Century do not define the Army as a learning organization. This is especially true if the assumption and schema driven processes described earlier are absent in most organizational interactions in

these new structures, and units in the Army. In the words of the former Department of the Army Chief of Personnel, LTG Stroup, "Cultural assumptions will always be best reflected not by written statements or procedures, but by how we as leaders act."²²

If the Army's current technique is inadequate and ineffective, how should the Army make this transition? Schein's embedding mechanisms provide the key. If we want to change the Army to a learning organization or make any significant cultural changes in general, leaders at all levels need to understand these mechanisms and their impact. I would argue that transitioning to a learning organization can't occur unless senior leaders initiate the change process. It's very hard for a brigade commander to operate as a learning leader with his subordinates if two hours later he attends a meeting in which interactions and processes are aligned with the traditional Army model. For change to occur, senior leaders need to understand and communicate the need for change and then actually create the climate that develops a learning organization to ensure that subordinates understand what all this learning organization stuff is all about. Most importantly, senior leaders need to be the first people to empower their subordinates in the manner described earlier in this paper.

Below I will discuss one possible solution that revolves around the OER. I don't want to imply that this solution could be successfully conducted in a vacuum. Rather, I think the pillars of the Army Leadership Development System (self-development, organization, institution) all will have to be altered to change the Army culture. Specifically, officers should be expected to read about learning organization topics such as schemas, assumptions, and automatic processing, along with culture, and organizational change on their own (self-development). Also, Army schools need to teach classes on what a learning organization is to ensure that officers have the skills and knowledge to conduct this cultural transformation (institutional focus). However, I think the key focus needs to be the organization via a change to the OER process.

ONE SOLUTION

Several of Schein's embedding mechanisms point to a fundamental conclusion that cultures can be changed if promotions, pay, and other rewards are linked inextricably to the desired cultural change. My position is that to accomplish significant change in the Army, the change has to be linked to the Officer Evaluation Report. More so than almost any performance appraisal instrument in any other organization, the OER process in the Army has a larger effect on the behavior of its officers than almost any other institutional process. This impact exists for several reasons. First, the nature of a centralized selection system creates an atmosphere in

which the OER's main contribution is to enable boards to discriminate among officers for promotion and schooling; the developmental aspect of the OER is seldom used. Second, the centralized selection system leads to a situation whereby the only information that is used to discriminate is the OER. At civilian companies, and even in the other services, current chain of command and other senior level input can negate negative performance appraisals. Not only does the OER matter, key OERs matter more (e.g., company command, Major-level BQ jobs, etc.). This is what causes our current culture to be anti-learning; if you disagree with your rater you set yourself up for a weak OER who may end your career. Quite truthfully, it's even more salient than that. In the Army an officer that disagrees with his boss can eventually be transferred to a new duty location, a significant issue for spouses and kids. The amount of power a senior officer possesses to affect all aspects of a subordinate's life is much greater in the military than corporate America. Therefore, I posit that the best way to affect officer behavior is to tie desired behaviors to the OER. This assertion is in line with Schein's embedding mechanisms. If you look at the OER, the behaviors or values the Army places on the actual document is a way to emphasize what leaders pay attention to and measure. The OER also captures how leaders react to critical incidents (in the narrative). Most importantly, the OER is the key criteria for the allocation of rewards (financial and esteem rewards associated with promotion) and is the operational criteria for selection and promotion. The bottom line is that the OER is the most effective tool to influence Army's organizational culture.

OER INFLUENCED BEHAVIORS

There are several ways the Army can influence learning organization behaviors with the OER. First, the Army could take the desired behaviors for a learning organization and place them on the front side of the OER as they've done with other characteristics in the past. I think 95% of all officers would agree that this is completely ineffective. In a quick sampling of my peers at the War College, I've discovered that most officers don't even know what the behaviors are that are listed on the front side of the current OER; they clearly have never influenced officer behavior. I believe the characteristics of a learning leader need to be listed on the OER as a reference, but not on the front side; rather, they should be listed in the senior rater portion.

A second technique would be to develop a 360-degree performance appraisal system that would provide subordinate and peer ratings of learning organization-type behaviors of target officers to promotion boards (in addition to rater and senior rater comments). This approach is strongly recommended by LTG Ulmer²³, and most recently, by LTC Mike Galloucic

in an Army Magazine article. In his article, he recommends that 360 feedback "be visible to future Headquarters, Department of the Army boards."²⁴

My belief is that a 360-degree performance appraisal that has visibility with promotion boards will not be accepted by the Army, and probably for good reason. The Army's primary mission is to fight and win the nation's wars. Leaders who send soldiers into combat need to make many tough decisions that oftentimes are not pleasing to their subordinates. If we directly tie promotion decisions to subordinate and peer ratings, leaders may stop focusing on emphasizing tough, realistic training if they perceive that this is not desired by their subordinates.

Additional literature (ALTDP studies) recommend using 360 degree feedback as a means to increase the self-awareness of leaders as a means to adapt their leadership style towards becoming a leader of a learning organization. This approach moves away from linking 360-degree feedback to the OER and more on 360-degree feedback as a developmental tool. My contention is that this won't work. A growing body of literature demonstrates that people who may need feedback the most because they are not performing well or have an inflated view of their effectiveness are least receptive to 360 degree feedback and find it least useful.²⁵ There are also studies that show that leaders who receive negative feedback from subordinates decreased their liking of subordinates in the future.²⁶ I personally believe this is only common sense and just another reason that the ATLDP recommendations won't work.

My recommendation on how to change the Army to a learning organization draws from the 360-degree feedback literature and our current OER system and is rooted in all three pillars of officer development. I believe the best way to change the behaviors of leaders is to first identify the desired behaviors of a leader in a learning organization and then teach these qualities through officer education and self-development programs. I think these behaviors would obviously include a leader who is value-driven, self-aware, adaptive, reflective, open to feedback, decisive, mentoring, confident, humble, and an open communicator.

As mentioned earlier, the Army won't be able to transition to a learning organization until a foundation of knowledge is built in the officer corps on the tenets of a learning organization. Both in pre-commissioning and basic courses, officers should be taught lessons on systems thinking, schemas, assumptions, and the difference between discussion and dialogue. Ambiguous case studies should be created that allow officers to see issues from multiple perspectives and then facilitate the questioning of their peers to understand the assumptions and schemas brought to the issue by their peers. Career Course and CGSC students ought to be familiarized with culture, automatic processing, and organizational change and also be

forced to engage in case studies that develop their ability to facilitate dialogue with their subordinates. Finally, at the Senior Service College level, students should be immersed with case studies and classes on culture, organizational change, and a learning organization. Additionally, throughout an officer's career they should be required to read about all these topics on their own (self-development). Once knowledge of a learning organization is prevalent, the Army can start to evaluate and provide feedback to officers on their ability to create a learning environment.

This should be done by taking the learning organization behaviors from above and codifying them into a 360-degree feedback instrument electronically. Whenever an OER is due for an officer in a branch qualifying position (company commander, battalion executive officer, battalion commander, etc.), the subordinates and peers of the target officer will fill out this brief, electronic questionnaire that rates the target officer on the desired characteristics. The results of these evaluations (which should take no more than 2 minutes) will be electronically forwarded to the senior rater and then aggregated electronically or by the S-1. When the senior rater completes his portion of the OER (same OER system we currently have) he will have access to the 360-degree evaluations of the target officer that he can use in forming his word picture and in his block check. The input from subordinates and peers will stop at the senior rater level. They will not be on any form, nor be forwarded to PERSCOM. Additionally, the rated officer will not be provided a copy of the peer and subordinate ratings.

I chose this course of action for several reasons. First, it's relatively easy. The Army could develop the list of traits very quickly and then develop the software to support it (I would assume rather quickly). The trick will be to ensure senior Army leadership understands that they will change the culture of the Army based on the traits chosen. Also, by only focusing on branch qualifying jobs, the amount of administration will be significantly reduced.

Second, it will affect behaviors. If leaders know that their senior rater will have access to information that tells them whether they listen to their subordinates, etc., it will affect their behavior. If it doesn't, that's fine. The senior rater would use it to discriminate among the average and the above average officers so that the officers who don't line up their behaviors with the Army's desired characteristics will not be promoted. If the OER doesn't affect behaviors, it will weed out officers that don't support a learning organization so that the culture of the Army will change in the long run. The Army will obviously need to figure out how a senior rater can rate some officers with the additional information from the 360-degree feedback (a company commander) along with a staff officer who did not have a 360-degree assessment conducted. I don't see this as a big obstacle.

Third, it won't cause leaders to focus their efforts on pleasing their subordinates and peers. Since no written results of the evaluations will exist, ratees need to assume that senior raters have enough experience to discriminate between an officer that is rated poorly because he is a micromanaging tyrant as opposed to the officer who is rated poorly just because he's a demanding leader. This quality of my recommendation addresses the earlier assertion that there is a significant disparity in command climates, but senior raters aren't able to identify the good from the bad. This system will allow them to do that.

Fourth, the senior rater won't know which subordinates or peers provided negative evaluation. The system will only work if senior raters provide broad feedback to target officers without saying things such as, "your subordinates think you're a jerk." This is probably the hardest part of the recommendation. It is clearly best if the target officer receives feedback from the process, but it will be counterproductive if the target officer leaves the feedback session ignoring the feedback because he doesn't think his subordinates understand, or worse, taking out any negative feedback on his subordinates.

A fifth benefit of this system is it mediates potential negative input on a target officer from the rater to the senior rater. Many of us have seen situations where an extremely talented officer gets a weak OER because he had a personality conflict with his rater. The rater then identifies this target officer to the senior rater as a weak officer, and since the senior rater has limited encounters with the target officer, he aligns his perceptions with the rater. This recommendation will provide the senior rater with more data points on the capabilities of the target officer. Not only will this cause higher validity in the promotion system, it will also cause target officers to feel like they got a fairer evaluation (unless they're well-liked by their rater and hated by their peers and subordinates).

The process described above is one way I think the Army can complete the transition to a true learning organization. Clearly there are other ways leaders can use cultural embedding mechanisms to change the culture of the Army, but I would argue that any change will need to include the OER as an embedding mechanism. Regardless of how it is done, the Army will need to change leader development along all three pillars (self-development, operational experience, institutional) at all levels to successfully effect this change.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

My purpose in this paper was to fill a void throughout the Army on the details of a learning organization and what I think can be done to transform the Army into a learning

organization. Right now I think the Army espouses to be a learning organization and has taken steps on the periphery to become one, but I don't think the Army has taken the final giant leap, in terms of cultural change, to become a learning organization. The events of September 11th, along with the Army's current transformation dictate that the Army develops a culture focused on intelligent change and adaptability. My thought is the best way to accommodate the uncertain, ambiguous environment of the 21st Century is to develop leaders and an organization that thrive on innovation while simultaneously preserving those key values that make our Army great. This can best be accomplished by becoming a learning organization. Not only will this lead to knowledge creation, innovation and better decision making, it will lead to intellectually challenged subordinate/learners that feel that they are simultaneously making a contribution to the Army and receiving something in return. I think this paper has described not only what a learning organization is all about, but also put forth a theoretically supported avenue to bring about this change. Schein's embedding mechanisms serve as a foundation for the recommendations I've put forth. As a powerful embedding mechanism, the Army's OER process is an important way to bring about the significant change required to become a learning organization. Without this significant shift in the culture of the Army, I believe we will be ill prepared to face the challenges of the 21st Century.

Word Count: 7991

ENDNOTES

¹General Henry H. Shelton, Joint Vision 2020 (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, June 2000), 10.

²William M. Steele and Robert P. Walters, "21st Century Leadership Competencies," Army Magazine, August 2001, 32.

³Walter F. Ulmer, "Military Leadership into the 21st Century: Another 'Bridge Too Far?'" Parameters 38 (Spring 1998):7.

⁴Shelton, 11.

⁵The Army Training and Leader Development Panel Officer Study Report to The Army, 25 May 2001 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), 2.

⁶Ibid, 9.

⁷Ulmer, 10.

⁸This statement is based on remarks made by a speaker participating in the Commandant's Lecture Series.

⁹Department of the Army, Army Leadership, FM 22-100 (Washington, D.C.:U.S. Department of the Army, 31 August 1999), 5-25.

¹⁰Peter M. Senge, The Fifth Discipline (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

¹¹Chris Argyris, Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1990).

¹²Vince Crawley, "War in Afghanistan marks shift in military culture," Army Times, 10 December 2001, 22.

¹³Robert G. Lord and Karen J. Maher, "Cognitive Theory in Industrial and Organizational Psychology," in Handbook of Industrial & Organizational Psychology, ed. Marvin D. Dunnette and Leaetta M. Hough, (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1991), 1.

¹⁴Senge, 241.

¹⁵Ibid, 247.

¹⁶For a great discussion of knowledge creation, see Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, The Knowledge Creating Company (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁷Argyris, 17.

¹⁸Senge, 245.

¹⁹Steele, 31.

²⁰Ibid, 4.

²¹Edgar H. Schein, Organizational Culture and Leadership (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1997),1.

²²Theodore G. Stroup Jr., "Leadership and organizational culture: Actions speak louder than words," Military Review 76 (January-February 1996), 49.

²³Ulmer, 15.

²⁴Mike Galloucis, "Is it Time for a 360-Degree Officer Evaluation System?" Army Magazine , November 2001, 47.

²⁵Joan F. Brett and Leanne E. Atwater, "360 Degree Feedback: Accuracy, Reactions, and Perceptions of Usefulness," Journal of Applied Psychology 86, no 5 (2001): 930

²⁶Ibid, 930.

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