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Officer Qualities

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Summary

The qualities of an officer have been analyzed and defined countless times, over many centuries. Probably, there is no single accurate description which can encompass completely these myriad views and opinions. This presentation will be a *personal* view on officer qualities by a UK officer with 2 five-year experiences in selecting officer cadets and then training them during their initial officer training.

Discussion will revolve around the *qualities* of an officer and will try to differentiate the true, effective leader from those who sometimes wear the trappings of rank without, perhaps, having many real leadership qualities.

There is often confusion between Management and Leadership and so the differences between the 2 styles will be briefly analyzed. Listed also for consideration will be the leadership qualities which are regarded as important by 4 separate NATO military academies. Clearly, these lists are for the ideal, generic officer and it is interesting to note the difference in emphasis between the various lists of the different training establishments.

The paper will finally move on to Officer Selection and highlight some of the qualities, raw or potential, which can be identified and assessed during an officer selection process.

What is Leadership?

Most officers lead a complex, technical life, with many highly-specialized duties to perform. These duties are his responsibilities as an individual, and as a highly-trained, responsible member of an exacting profession. In addition, an officer has to lead his men. An officer does not exist for his individual, personal value, but for his ability to show the way and make his men want to follow. This is indeed the *core* of the officer's existence and, without it, no hope exists of grappling with the tasks of command. It is seen at its simplest in warlike operations, but the power to lead smoothes the way of every task in every branch of a military organization, whether in war or peace. It breathes that vitality into an organization that will take a collection of men, buildings and machines, and waken them to purposeful, effective life. How is this done? First, and perhaps ideally, by innate force of character. Clearly, people are not all born with the same characteristics, and some from their earliest years have felt the power to show others the way, and to influence their minds. We call them *born leaders*, and they are just that; born with strong, independent, assertive minds just as some individuals are born with a good, natural physique. But this is not to say that the characteristics of effective leadership cannot be taught and acquired, just as a good physique can be cultivated with suitable effort.

In all of the words spoken and written about leadership, one fundamental point continually emerges; namely that, for most, the skills and qualities of leadership are not normally acquired instantly. The training of a leader, whether it be formal or through experiences, takes many years. Appropriate experiences are necessary, both to build and develop the leader's own force of character, and also to increase his ability to influence others.

So, what is Leadership? In the simplest of terms, Leadership can be defined as "getting things done" or, perhaps, the combination of *example*, *persuasion* and *compulsion* that makes the military subordinate do what is wanted of him. Clearly, in a military environment, things have to be done, but leadership is not just getting things done, but getting them done in the way in which the leader wants them done, in all conditions, and with the consent of the team, however grudging that consent may be.

Some, if not many, military leaders do not *lead* effectively. They hold a title and they are figureheads at the head of the pack. However, their leadership is a facade and there is little of substance behind the mask of authority defined by the badge of rank. Clothes of authority, however, cannot in themselves generate either ability or effectiveness as a leader. Clearly also, the abilities and effectiveness of any leader are only as strong as are perceived by those who are led.

Most military organizations have a highly-structured bureaucracy. Unfortunately, in peacetime, these bureaucracies are often able to develop and promote the 'Empty Suits', an appropriate euphemism which describes individuals who dress and present well, who are able to identify the right, vital progressive routes for themselves, but who have very limited raw and genuine skills of leadership, save for one essential facet, that of not putting their feet wrong. Such individuals are, in essence, light-weight 'polystyrenes', they merely fill a place. However, they remain clean-coated and trouble free, and thus they progress, whilst those with more genuine substance depart, often out of frustration. Unfortunately, polystyrene cannot "rock a boat", it cannot step out of line, it cannot stimulate change, it does not take risks and, certainly, it cannot inspire. In times of peace, the 'polystyrene' empty suits remain the guardians of the *status quo*, the keepers of the book of rules and the stiflers of energy and initiative. Their reliability is without question, but so is their predictability. Simply, their leadership is mundane.

A *real* leader must be an agent for change, an inspirer and developer who is able to show the way forward, integrate people and ideas and be prepared to instigate rapidly the most effective option. Particularly, in times of tension or war, an effective leader will have to be able to bring both colleagues and subordinates along in a way that is *at once* identified as pragmatic, meaningful and militarily cost-effective.

Military and naval history is full of effective leaders such as Washington, Wellington, Nelson, Bonaparte, Montgomery and Rommel who rose to the top, not by preferment or substantial support from acolytes, but simply because of their abilities, both strategic and personal, which enabled them to inspire their men and, most importantly, achieve military success.

In past conflicts, battles and wars were usually lengthy. Incompetent or irrelevant leaders could be, and usually were, identified, replaced and sometimes they were even shot! Inspirational leaders could develop their forte and earn recognition by success. However, most recent, international wars have lasted for just a few weeks, and future wars can be expected to follow this trend. NATO planners are well aware that they will have to fight with the men and materiel that they have to hand and in stock. Perhaps even more significantly though, battles will have to be directed and fought by the leaders already appointed and in place. The 'polystyrene', empty-suit commander would be found wanting and no doubt would be identified in the aftermath during the soul-searching of 'Lessons Learned' – but at what cost?

It almost goes without saying that, in war, a leader should not have to compromise. In war, it is unlikely that a *real* leader would accept compromise. Yet the 'Empty Suit', whose life and career had developed out of frequent compromise and assent, would probably find the transition to the warrior's outlook in times of conflict an impossible hurdle.

Leaders and Managers

The differentiation between a good leader and an effective manager is, to many, nebulous. Simply however, managers are usually measured by their performance within set, pre-determined parameters. Leaders should be judged by higher requirements, often not pre-set and, especially in times of conflict, usually surprising. That said, it is difficult to imagine that an effective manager would not have some skills of leadership within his persona. Similarly, it would be surprising to find an effective leader who was bereft of management skills. However, the fundamental, singular difference between Management and Leadership is that Leadership particularly is about effective change-making and the single-minded application and enforcement of that change, however unpalatable the change may be.

Military leaders, overall, must have a breadth of long-term vision, be decisive and independent, act and stand firm, be a *warrior*, speak openly, plainly and frankly, learn quickly from defeats and mistakes, go forward with unswerving fortitude, and know and appreciate the requirements and interests of subordinates. The qualities and skills of a leader are unlikely to be totally intrinsic and they would have to be developed over many years and with much, appropriate experience. Yet, to a great extent, there would have to be an innate and solid foundation, coupled also with flair and charisma. Sometimes the qualities of leadership would be natural, but mostly they would metamorphose by effective, early nurturing and constant, later development.

Conversely, management skills can be taught more easily and they can also be learned. That said, management is not necessarily a routine process. Management problems vary considerably and a pre-set formula for effective management would rarely work. However, management can be effective without flair or charisma; genuine leadership, particularly at higher levels, cannot. *De facto*, leadership has to be flexible and imaginative with positive and often urgent, effective reaction to the unexpected.

In summary, Leadership requires extraordinary attributes above and beyond those of management and the simple, efficient organization of the *status quo*. However, that is not to suggest or infer that management is easy and leadership is necessarily difficult. The required capabilities, however, are different and can be summed up by the following list:

The Leader

Inspires
Thinks
Motivates
Initiates change
Challenges
Creates
Proacts
Shapes actions
Dictates
Takes decisions
Sets objectives
Sets the pace
Driving force
Unmethodical
Front of camera
Inspires loyalty
Apart from others
Self sufficient

The Manager

Controls
Does
Organizes
Adjusts to change
Accepts current practice
Administers
Reacts
Responds to circumstances
Follows through
Implements decisions
Gets results
Concentrates on procedure
Coordinator
Methodical
Back stage
Motivated by discipline
Involved with others
Depends on organization

The Assessment of Leadership Qualities for Selection

Over the years, every military organization concerned with leadership training and development has developed its own list of 'Leadership Qualities'. The following lists are just 4 examples from many: These lists were obtained some 5-6 years ago. It is possible that the lists have changed since and so, the sources have not been attributed. They are useful, however, in highlighting the differences of emphasis between differing armed forces and nations.

A

1. Bearing
2. Courage
(Physical and Moral)
3. Decisiveness
4. Endurance
5. Initiative
6. Integrity
7. Judgement
8. Justice
9. Loyalty
10. Tact
11. Unselfishness

B

1. Confidence
2. Determination
3. Initiative
4. Awareness
5. Effective Intelligence
6. Decisiveness
7. Manner
8. Self-analysis

C

1. Loyalty
2. Professional
Competence
3. Courage
4. Honesty
5. Common Sense
6. Good Judgement
7. Confidence
8. Initiative
9. Tact

D

1. Integrity
2. Knowledge
3. Courage
4. Decisiveness
5. Dependability
6. Initiative
7. Tact
8. Justice
9. Enthusiasm

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| 10. Self Control | 10. Bearing |
| 11. Humour | 11. Endurance |
| 12. Personal Example | 12. Unselfishness |
| 13. Energy | 13. Loyalty |
| 14. Enthusiasm | 14. Judgement |
| 15. Perseverance | |
| 16. Decisiveness | |
| 17. Justice | |

None of the lists are complete, yet none of the lists are inadequate. Opinions obviously vary as to qualities needed by a military leader and the particular emphasis placed on them. Clearly, the 'great' leader would have most of the qualities in substantial strength, perhaps out of an amalgam from these lists. However, most leaders will be short of some of them. It can be seen that some qualities are common to nearly all lists, and they are the fundamental requirements for the military leader, to a certain extent regardless of rank. Significantly, you will note that none of the lists include *flair*, although *initiative*, perhaps in this case meaning the same, is in all of them. Similarly, none of the lists include *charisma*, which is sometimes difficult to define, but an easily identifiable quality seen in so many great leaders. *Confidence*, a vital quality in a leader, is omitted from some of the lists. Not that this is necessarily surprising or significant however, because it would be easy to argue that any leader with a substantial number of the qualities within any of the lists would, inherently, possess appropriate self-confidence. Confidence, however, *has* to be a vital quality and one promoted more by the leader than by anybody else. If the leader is certain of his own ability to lead, and this facet can certainly be developed and strengthened by training, and confirmed by experience, then the leader will also be able to generate confidence within the team, which also is so vital to success.

In recognizing and accepting that no list of leadership qualities is likely to be complete, lists could probably be reduced without losing too much in the way of positive effect. Field Marshal Lord Harding, a British commander in World War 2, listed the qualities he regarded as essential in a leader in the simple, following terms:

Absolute Fitness
Complete Integrity
Enduring Courage
Daring Initiative
Undaunted Willpower
Knowledge
Judgement
Team Spirit

Are all Officers Leaders?

It would be an understandable misconception if all military officers were expected and required to be genuine *leaders*. Whilst true leadership, for some officers, is a paramount pre-requisite, in other officers, raw leadership skills are much less important. As the roles of the officer vary enormously, so does the preferred list of qualities required by the individual.

However, the closer the officer is to the battle, with the consequent, greater risk to life, then the more *dynamic* and *decisive* the leader will need to be. Even in times of war, the rear echelons and the support staff, because of their comparatively, risk-free existence, will not usually need quite the abundance of raw qualities required by the warrior under fire. It follows therefore that, when identifying officer potential during the selection process, due regard should be given to the individual's planned future employment as an officer. For instance, the quality requirements for the potential platoon commander, fighter pilot or submariner will certainly be different to those pre-requisite qualities for the engineer or logistician.

Officer Selection

Whilst the differing roles of an officer will usually require a different emphasis on particular qualities most, if not all, NATO officer selection systems can aim to identify *generic* potential only. Later, professional training will then identify and develop the specific qualities to type. The word *potential* is significant. A selection system, by its very nature, has to have a programme which, at best, runs for just a few days. Whilst some true

qualities in a candidate may possibly emerge and be identified during the selection process, an effective assessment system has to be geared to look more for *potential* in a candidate than inherent attributes.

No selection process can ensure a substantial, guaranteed end-product. The period of examination will invariably be short and it will sometimes provide only a snapshot of the candidate's potential. However, past history, and the candidate's record of development, will also be a very useful initial guide. Aptitude testing can give notice of the candidate's suitability for an aptitude-dependant branch and then further assessment, by interview and additional exercises, will help to ascertain the candidate's overall profile. At interview, close examination of the candidate should reveal the following qualities and traits:

1. Apperance and Bearing. The candidate's appearance, bearing, grooming, distinguishing features and general presentation should be readily apparent within the first impressions formed at interview.
2. Manner and Impact. The candidate's conduct throughout the interview, along with his courtesy, tact, confidence, force of personality, presence, poise, polish, humour and alertness will add to the overall impact.
3. Speech and Powers of Expression. Dialogue with the candidate will elicit his ability to communicate. The quality of grammar, vocabulary, diction, general fluency, logic, projection and animation will all indicate the overall effectiveness of spoken expression.
4. Activities and Interests. The well-rounded candidate should have had a varied, interesting and fulfilling lifestyle. Whilst it is important to bear in mind the individual's background (that is, general opportunities and financial limitations) the range and extent of spare-time activities are important to indicate signs of commitment, depth of involvement, achievement, level of responsibility, spirit of adventure, determination, initiative, enterprise and self-reliance within an overall balance of interests and pursuits.
5. Academic Level and Potential. Whilst minimum levels of academic qualifications will be set, the manner and ease of obtaining qualifications, together with the level of commitment, diligence and attitude towards study will all give indications of the individual's further academic potential.
6. Breadth and Depth of Outlook. The candidate's general awareness of military matters and current affairs should confirm a maturity of outlook and a general ability to reason, giving also some indications of general intellect.
7. Motivation. The candidate's determination towards his military goals should be ascertained. Sometimes the motivation will have previous substantiation. It will be important to ascertain that the candidate is clear about, and would relish, the commitment and dedication demanded of the officer corps.

Beyond the interview, individual tasks, or group exercises with other candidates, will give further opportunities to observe additional qualities and indications of potential:

1. Manner. Again, the candidate's manner can be assessed within group exercises. Enthusiasm, confidence within the group, openness and a lack of pretence, humour, tact, tolerance and reaction to pressure may be observed during further assessment beyond the interview.
2. Teamwork. The extent to which the candidate acts for the common good, the willingness to tackle tasks and the contributions towards the team and the set goals can be observed within the group.
3. Physical Characteristics. General fitness is an important officer quality and there should be opportunities to place the candidate in physically-demanding situations in order to note the physical determination, robustness, energy and stamina of the individual.
4. Leadership Potential. Tasks to elicit leadership *potential* should test the individual's drive, decisiveness, influence, receptiveness and assertiveness within the team. General presence, a sense of purpose and persistence, coupled with the ability to gain the support and respect of other candidates, should be apparent under further testing.
5. Effective Intelligence. General perception, that is an ability to assimilate relevant information and form a logical plan with sensible judgement, and the wherewithal to recognize what is important when faced with a

mass of detail can be identified under further scrutiny. The ability to think ahead, and plan for problems before they arise, reacting quickly and accurately when faced with unexpected events should indicate an effective brain. The basic ability to reason, with a capacity to understand, *and* the mental ability to process the information and ideas, can further indicate useful intellect.

Clearly though, not all of the skills, qualities and potential mentioned are likely to be manifested during any assessment period. What has been mentioned is the ideal. However, any assessment process must be sufficiently in-depth to ensure that the candidate has the opportunity to demonstrate a good cross-section of such qualities or, indeed, highlight unrectifiable or untrainable weaknesses which would be an unacceptable risk during officer training and development.

Conclusion

The qualities required of the officer are numerous. It takes an amalgam of qualities to make an effective officer and the overall mix of the qualities is very much dependant on the role which the officer is expected to play. Sometimes, these qualities will be inherent but, more often, they will form and develop over years and experience and training. Selection of officer candidates must look more for *potential* and trainability rather than raw, developed qualities. Finally, the good officer in our world's society is a rare breed and that is rightly and *essentially* so.