STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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FEEDBACK: A CRITICAL LEADERSHIP RESOURCE

BY

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FEEDBACK: A CRITICAL LEADERSHIP RESOURCE

by

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ABSTRACT

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Feedback has long been suggested to be a very important resource for the self-regulation of behavior, and adaptation to one's environment. The feedback process is a very complex issue and one that is not well understood by many leaders and managers. At all leadership levels, feedback is becoming one of the most important resources concerning job related performance. Additionally, feedback will be a key tool for the development of the interpersonal relationships critical for building effective teams and coalitions in the multi-cultural and multi-national operational environment of the future. The environmental and organizational conditions that are changing the leadership paradigm, suggesting an expanded set of leadership competencies are discussed. A common element in these competencies seems to be the notion of feedback, particularly from peers. Feedback is described and the key aspects of feedback and the feedback process are reviewed. Recommendations for developing a better

feedback process for leader development in the U.S. Army are presented.

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I pray you school yourself.
(Learn constantly). Macbeth, Act IV, Scene 2

Why, what a wasp-fool art thou ..... tying thine ear to no tongue but thine own!
(Listen to others. And learn). Henry IV, Act I, Scene 3

Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice.
(Listen). Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3

Madmen have not ears.
(Beware of those who do not listen). Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 3

Shakespeare on Leadership

Introduction

One might quickly ask .... what does Shakespeare have to do with leadership and the notions of feedback? One would hardly characterize William Shakespeare, in a traditional sense, as a great leader. Nevertheless, these words, extracted from several of Shakespeare's most significant works, provide some important insights for strategic leaders of the 21st Century. The ability ***to listen***, ***to be reflective***, and ***to learn from others*** will be some of the key behaviors required of leaders in the future. Particularly, the willingness to solicit, accept, and use feedback may well become one of the most important competencies of future strategic leaders.

In order to describe the importance of feedback as a leadership resource, it is essential to first understand the environmental and organizational conditions that are changing and suggesting new leadership challenges and an expanded set of competencies for the strategic leader. A common element in these competencies is the notion of feedback. Feedback will be described and the key aspects of feedback and the feedback

process will be reviewed. Recommendations for developing a better feedback process for leader development in the U.S. Army will be presented.

Trends and Changes Affecting Leadership

> The decade ahead demands a new set of (leader) competencies and a revamping of leader training methods. (Conger 1993, 46)

Dramatic changes in the environmental landscape are forcing us to re-look existing organizational structures and associated paradigms of thought and action, as we address the needs of the future. The operational environment of the strategic leader is growing more complex as Information Age technological advancements rapidly change the landscape of military operations.[1] Within this context, the 21st Century Army has been described as:

> ..... a force that meets the needs of the 21st Century by leveraging technology so that America can better accommodate the vastly changing geopolitical landscape. We live in a volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous world that demands a force capable of performing missions across the full spectrum of conflict and operations other than war..... an Army that is not only versatile and responsive, but one that can adapt effectively to that changing world ....
> (U.S. Army, Force XXI 1995, 1)

This "new force" concept suggests the need for leaders with additional competencies and capabilities to meet these new operational requirements. But what are these future requirements and what conditions are driving these changes? Additionally, what are the leadership challenges that these conditions present, particularly as they are related to the notion of feedback as a strategic leadership resource?

Environmental Conditions

Arlo Gutherie may have said it best, in his late 1960's folk tune made famous at Woodstock, " ..... the times they are changing ....." This simple phrase succinctly describes the environmental landscape of the future, one of unprecedented and unpredictable change. As futurists Alvin and Heidi Toffler suggest, we are moving into the "Information Age,"[2] in which the ability to control and process information is becoming the dominant view of warfighting and fueling the belief in the existence of a "military-technical revolution."[3] The Army's force structure is now beginning to reorganize around this information revolution and its associated technologies. This reorganization is changing our fundamental view of the conduct of warfare and the leadership required to be successful.[4] The digitization initiative around the X-Force brigade at Ft. Hood, Texas is an example of the beginning of this information age transition.

Although warfighting is still the Army's primary focus, the number and variety of "other missions" are increasing dramatically. The Force XXI campaign requires not only compellance (war fighting), but now includes deterrence, reassurance, and support, in addition to peace time operations. This view of the necessary capabilities and requirements of the Army and implicitly its leaders, differs substantially from the image associated with the Army of the past.[5] The strategic leader of the future will need an increased level of cognitive skills, particularly a highly developed reflective capacity. Future leaders will have to be continuous learners, with the emotional maturity and flexibility to be able to change ways of thinking in response to a rapidly changing world.

These forces are also creating the conditions for tremendous change in military organizational structure and function.

Organizational Conditions

In March, 1994, General Gordon Sullivan, then the Army Chief of Staff, initiated the Force XXI process in response to these changing circumstances. He stated that it was now time to re-design the force, to take advantage of the informational and technological revolution.[6] Military organizations are loosing their bureaucratic "stovepiped" structure, and are becoming "flatter" and more organic, characterized by decentralized decision making, increased spans of control, and a lower reliance on formal authority and hierarchical leadership. Hierarchically based leadership is becoming quite the exception as the information revolution is creating knowledge-based organizations in which distributed leadership will become more the rule.[7]

Military organizations will also need to become more receptive and adaptive to change by adopting new characteristics, particularly those associated with a "learning organization." A learning organization is one that is "skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights."[8] These type organizations are built around people who are *empowered* with knowledge, and *enabled* to lead themselves.[9] As Gary Yukl, noted leadership theorist, suggests:

> Unprecedented changes such as globilization, new technologies, changing socio-cultural values, increased diversity of the work force, changing population demographics, increased environmental concerns, downsizing, and the emergence of new forms of organizations will make leadership in the Twenty-first Century even more difficult than in the current one. (Yukl 1996, 2)

Not only are military organizations in a current state of revolutionary transformation, but, as noted by Yukl, the leadership requirements will be more complex, suggesting new leadership challenges and additional leadership requirements for future strategic leaders.

Leadership Challenges

The leadership challenges associated with these changes in environmental and organizational conditions are substantial. Leadership is being transformed, requiring leaders to dispense with old beliefs and practices, such as authority based, hierarchical leadership. They will need to develop a new set of beliefs and behaviors, integrated with the new information-based technologies, suggesting a fundamental shift in the relationship between the leader and the follower. Current leadership thought generally focuses solely on the contingent relationship between the focal leader and the subordinate.

Emerging research suggests that leaders are now spending considerable time with persons other than the direct subordinates or bosses.[10] As organizational structures 'flatten," the network of relationships required for effective organizational operations will expand. Leadership will occur more frequently, if not exclusively, across national, cultural and organizational boundaries. Leaders will have to have to have tremendous interpersonal knowledge, skills and abilities. They will have to be culturally aware and understand diversity to be effective in many complex military, political and ideological contexts. Simply stated, strategic leaders of the future will have to master three key leadership challenges in these rapidly changing circumstances: create the future, lead and

manage constant change and continuously build effective teams.[11] These challenges will place several key requirements on these leaders.

Leadership Requirements of the Future

What this says about strategic leadership is that it will be a more complex business, creating leadership challenges that will require some additional behavioral competencies for strategic leaders. These competencies include: **continuous, life long learning, critically reflective thinking**, and the ability to **effectively lead, implement and manage change.** Each of these requirements has, at its core, the notion of performance related feedback.

Continuous, Life Long Learning

Within the context of distributed leadership and knowledge-based organizations, strategic leaders will not be able to know everything, nor do everything. They will have to effectively engage others and elicit participation because the tasks will be too complex, and will have to be executed under an extremely time compressed decision cycle. The effective leader of the future will have to consistently ask, learn, follow-up and grow.[12]

"Asking" involves the notion of consistently soliciting feedback and new ideas, from all key organizational stakeholders, particularly peers, subordinates and superiors. This behavior opens the doors to a wealth of valuable information, and provides a role model of effective leader behavior. "Sincere asking demonstrates a willingness to learn, a desire to serve, and a humility that can be an inspiration for the entire organization."[13] Next, in line with the notions suggested by Peter Senge about the need for learning organizations, leaders must become constant learners.[14]

"Learning" must become a way of life at the individual, team and organizational levels. It includes self-development through reflection, and team learning based on the notions of 360 feedback, where leaders solicit information from multiple sources.[15] Strategic leaders must demonstrate a willingness to solicit feedback, learn from it, accept responsibility for the feedback, and become accountable for implementing needed change. Those leaders who are successful in these behaviors, will grow in their leadership capabilities and significantly influence the growth and empowerment of subordinates.

LTG (Ret) Walt Ulmer, in a recent presentation at the United States Army War College (October 1996), suggested that the strategic leadership required in the future has now progressed well beyond the simple notion of situation and the task, as described in most contingency based models of leadership. He suggests that a "self" dimension of leadership must be added. This "self" includes the need for increased self awareness, growth, and learning which are essential elements for increased individual and organizational effectiveness. This awareness of self is best illuminated through feedback that is received from others.[16]

This notion of learning, focused on self-awareness, is also clearly reflected in the Leadership Action Cycle (LAC) that has been proposed by Gordon Sullivan and Michael Harper as an appropriate model of strategic leadership.[17] In this leadership process, leaders observe, reflect, decide, and act in a continuous cycle of action based learning. Not only is continuous learning essential, but in nearly every leader development model reviewed in this context, critical reflection is also an essential element.

Critically Reflective Thinking

Reflection refers to the process of examining the assumptions, the taken-for-granted beliefs, we have about our world, that frame how we think, act, and drives our behavior.[18] Reflection becomes critical when we truly use it, in a productive manner, to reframe how we think and behave. This activity is an essential, more adaptive response process that must be mastered by leaders in order to successfully meet the demands of the future.[19] Marilyn Daudelin also suggests that it is not enough to have challenging and "stretching" learning experiences, but there must also be a mechanism in place to help process the experience. This mechanism, critical reflection, not only occurs as an individual mental activity, but in interaction and dialogue with others through feedback.[20] "Seeing how we think and work through different lenses is the core process of reflective practice."[21]

John Kotter in his book, Leading Change, suggests the senior executives [leaders] of the 21st Century must develop a habit of life long learning. This habit is characterized by a willingness to regularly and honestly reflect on successes and failures. Additionally, these leaders will need to solicit the opinions of others, have a propensity for careful listening to feedback, and an increased openness to new ideas.[22] This notion is further reinforced by Gordon Sullivan and Michael Harper in their book, HOPE is Not a Method. They characterize reflection as leader power, including reflective thinking as a critical component in their Leader Action Cycle.

John Redding and Ralph Catalanello, in their well received work, Strategic Readiness, suggest that reflection is often the missing link between thinking-planning,

and acting-implementing activities in the organizational change process.[23] From their perspective, reflection has received little attention, yet is the most important phase of the learning cycle. But, one must develop a reflective capacity which includes creating on-going opportunities for reflection, the key ingredient being the ability to explore different viewpoints through feedback gathered from active dialogue with others. Critical reflection on one's behavior begins alone, but it is ultimately a collective endeavor. The ability to judge whether good leadership is happening is highly related to the extent that leaders are willing to solicit feedback on their behavior from peers and subordinates.[24]

Henry Mintzberg, in an article written in the Harvard Business Review nearly twenty years ago, stated that:

> Study after study has shown that managers [leaders] work at an unrelenting pace, that their activities are characterized by brevity, variety and discontinuity, and they are strongly action oriented, and dislike reflective activities. (Daudelin 1996, 38)

Like the business world, this is also true in the military where leaders tend to place a higher value on action than on reflection. The notion of reflection is often anathema to the Army culture, where operating at high operational tempo and doing "many things" is often considered more important than slowing down, doing less and taking the time for thinking and reflection.[25] Unfortunately, there are many short term forces and requirements that work against any leader's ability to stop, reflect and think about what they are doing.

Now that we understand the need for continuous learners, whose behavior is characterized by critical reflection, we have established the key ingredients for the third strategic leader requirement, the ability to lead, implement and manage constant change.

Leading, Implementing and Managing Change

James Kouzes and Barry Posner, in their book The Leadership Challenge, describe what they feel are the five fundamental practices of exemplary strategic leadership essential for leading, implementing and managing change: challenge the process, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, model the way, and encourage the heart. The key ones, in the context of feedback and strategic leadership, are enabling others to act and modeling the way. Leaders will be in the business of building effective teams, and enabling and empowering others to act. The empowering of subordinates to perform their responsibilities requires that leaders delegate authority, express confidence and demonstrate trust.[26]

The foundation of trust is built through feedback, that is modeled through dialogue with subordinates, peers and colleagues. Leaders build trusting relationships in their organizations by their willingness to solicit and listen to alternative viewpoints, ideas and criticisms. Then, they must make use of this information to change both their behavior, and the direction of the organization. Trust, built in this manner, is considered one of the most significant predictors of personal satisfaction and organizational effectiveness.[27]

Trust is built when leaders make themselves vulnerable to others by their willingness to ask for feedback on their behavior. But, before leaders can ask that others trust them, they must demonstrate trust for others, by disclosing concerns, values, hopes and fears in the feedback process. Building effective teams is achieved through open and constant dialogue with peers and subordinates, which creates trust and empowerment.

This demonstration and building of trust is associated with the ability and willingness to listen to others, and reflect on what is said in attentive and thoughtful ways.

From these perspectives, it is clear that feedback will serve as a significant behavior for strategic leaders to meet the key strategic leadership requirements of the future. With this as a foundation, it is now necessary to discuss feedback as an important construct, by addressing the key aspects of feedback as they relate to leadership.

Feedback as an Important Resource

Based on an increasing level of interest in the military, business and academic literature, feedback is becoming an increasingly more important and valued behavior. It is well known that feedback about one's behavior generally enhances both performance and motivation, and is associated with many measures of organizational effectiveness.[28] On the other hand, the absence of feedback on behavior can lead to anxiety, inaccurate self-evaluations and a diversion of effort from task performance, to feedback gathering activities.[29]

Susan Taylor, Cynthia Fischer & Daniel Ilgen define feedback as "information about the effectiveness of one's work behavior."[30] Feedback has also been defined in terms of adaptation and self-regulation, as individuals work to secure information about the appropriateness of their behavior for the attainment of personally and organizationally relevant goals. Feedback is gathered from many sources, such as the task, the self, the organization and others. The manner in which it is perceived and used is effected by many variables. Feedback is a complex process, with both organizational and individual implications.

Feedback on performance is one of the primary mechanisms used by organizations to influence individual and group level behavior. The positive effect of feedback on performance has been one of the most studied and accepted psychological principles in organizational research.[31] As an organizational resource, feedback is used to transmit information on rules, roles and norms of behavior and is a key element in the socialization process by transmitting and maintaining the essential elements of climate and culture required for effective group and organizational performance. It is a tool that organizational leaders use to motivate, direct, instruct and otherwise shape subordinate member behavior in directions consistent with the accomplishment of organizational goals and achievement of desired outcomes.[32] Feedback is also a valuable resource for individuals throughout their tenure in an organization.

Human beings are goal-directed, feedback seeking organisms, where feedback is an important resource for the self-regulation of behavior, and serves several important functions.[33] First of all, **feedback has an uncertainty reducing function**. The value of feedback increases as a function of the uncertainty an individual experiences around issues surrounding goal attainment. In the VUCA world, where uncertainty is increasing feedback on ones' behavior, either provided by the task, the organization, or others, will have an important role in influencing individual and organization effectiveness. Thus, feedback will be an important resource in the resolution of uncertainty.

Secondly, **feedback has a signaling or cueing function.** Beyond reducing uncertainty, feedback also signals or cues individuals concerning the relative importance of goals, both personally relevant goals, and those relevant to organizational

effectiveness. Self-regulation of individual behavior is accomplished through the setting of goals which serve as the foundation for motivation. Feedback, combined with goal setting behavior, serves to motivate the direction of effort, energy, attention and persistence in the regulation of behavior.[34] In an organizational context, feedback cues those goals and behaviors most valued by the organization.[35]

Finally, **feedback has a competence creating function**. Feedback provides information for environmental mastery. For example, one of the most important issues surrounding motivated behavior and effective performance is the notion of self-efficacy. This refers to feelings of control over one's life and the level of confidence one feels in the ability to satisfactorily respond to external demands. Self-efficacy serves as an important regulator between individual performance and the ability to adjust goal directed behaviors through the allocation of energy, effort and persistence (often referred to as motivational capacity). Feedback is a critical input to feelings of self-efficacy, and serves as a mechanism to help us "be all that we can be."

Feedback Sources

Now that the relevance of feedback as a strategic leadership resource has been discussed, it is important to review the key sources of feedback. As mentioned earlier, feedback comes from multiple sources, to include: the self, the task, others (superiors, peers/colleagues, and subordinates), and from the organization. Although all of these information sources have value for the leader, not all of these sources of feedback are equivalent. Some may be more useful in informational value than others. Peer feedback, among all these sources, could be one of the most relevant for the strategic leader.

Feedback from Task, Self and the Organization

Feedback from the tasks performed, in general, is a valuable source of information on behavior. But, as one moves up in the leadership hierarchy, leadership becomes more indirect and the task environment becomes much more complex, with outcomes that occur in the long term. Immediate feedback on behavior, based on task accomplishment, is infrequent, if not non-existent. This is particularly true at the strategic level, where indirect leadership is the norm and direct control of the task environment becomes problematic. Task accomplishment, because of it long term outcome perspective, and the influence of many other intervening variables, provides little direct feedback about leader performance.

Additionally, at the strategic leadership level, the leader's task is more one of building than operating.[36] Yet, it is at the operating level that most immediate task related feedback occurs. Strategic leaders deal in broad, visionary processes, with long term outcomes. In the military, these outcomes may extend well beyond the tenure of any give leader, as a result of our high personnel turnover. Therefore, feedback, as a result of task accomplishment, may not be readily available or forthcoming in a strategic context.

Feedback from self is also a source of information on behavior and performance. Self assessment and self reflection are important behaviors required of strategic leaders.[37] Unfortunately, this source of information can be quite misleading if relied upon as a sole source of information on behavior. It is misleading because of powerful, learned behavioral mechanisms called biases, which protect self-esteem. These biases tend to

drive individuals toward perceiving information in a manner that enhances their sense of self.

For example, positive information is perceived as good, and is viewed as indicative of successful performance, often regardless of actual causal influences. Negative information about behavior, which often has the most 'informational value," is often discounted, ignored or attributed to external causes. Additionally, confirmatory biases tend to guide individuals to seek out information that reinforces the well established sense of self. The research strongly suggests that individuals tend to have very inaccurate, specifically overinflated, views of their own behavior.[38] Thus, as Stephen Brookfield suggests, we can get caught inside our own self-schemas and perspective, and deny other valuable sources of information on our behavior.[39]

This is a particular problem in the military due to the inflated, positive spin that is associated with our performance evaluation system. We become very used to being told how good we are, particularly by our bosses, that we may come to believe that we are always right, and the best judge of the effectiveness of our behavior. We are not often amenable to receiving feedback from others, particularly from those who do not directly influence our evaluations. But, our bosses have a very limited view of our behavior, and are often not in a position to render accurate, more organizationally relevant, feedback. This becomes more problematic as organizations flatten out, we become more and more separated from our supervisors, and we have to rely more on others for accurate information on our behavior.

Finally, feedback on behavior also comes from the organization. As mentioned earlier, it is a powerful source of information on what behaviors the organization values. It can direct the allocation of motivational capacity to achieve desired organizational outcomes. Unfortunately, organizational feedback, like task feedback, is not frequent. At the strategic level, it is often very broad based. It does not supply specific information about leader behavior that is readily interpretable and subsequently useful. One of the most useful sources of information seems to be that which is actively sought from others.

Feedback From Others

Most of the feedback we receive, either through observation, or through direct solicitation, comes from others. These 'others' include our bosses, peers and subordinates. But the feedback that we receive from these sources is not equivalent, and varies in its value and accuracy as a function of the power, structural and interpersonal relationships that we have with each of these informational sources. Additionally, soliciting feedback from these constituencies is not free, but may have an associated cost, particularly as it impacts on our self-schema, and sense of self esteem.

The most frequently used feedback exchange is between the senior and subordinate. In our predominately hierarchical military organizations, the senior - subordinate relationship is the most important, particularly from a performance appraisal perspective. Supervisors are the holders of the reward contingencies in any organization. They have tremendous influence in determining who is hired, promoted, and fired based on the evaluations they render. But the relationship between seniors and subordinates is

often problematic and the ratings rendered are not often accurate representations of performance. There are several reasons why this is true.

Current top-down evaluations systems are very archaic. There is a form, a boss and an interview, and that is the way it has been for many years.[40] Supervisory ratings, by their nature, are often biased, and at their very worst, are simplistic, not very accurate, and often quite political.[41] Additionally, supervisors have to deal with a tremendous amount of role conflict, in trying to do the right thing in terms of development of subordinates, yet provide ratings of performance which are used for selection and promotion criteria. Therefore, supervisors tend to avoid the use of negative information, which might be the most useful in terms of improvement, and error on the side of providing neutral or positive information. This tactic avoids any sort of confrontation with the subordinates, or the need for accountability in justifying the rating.

Additionally, there are many other problems that are associated with senior to subordinate performance feedback. Subordinates are often guilty of self-presentation bias. They will act differently around their bosses so that they can facilitate positive assessments of performance and behavior. Because this is manipulated by the subordinate as an upward influence tactic, it may result in no real information on performance.[42] Since feedback also generates uncertainty and anxiety between seniors and subordinates, it is often used for impression management. Subordinates will deflect blame for negative feedback, and will accept positive feedback in a self-promoting, often ingratiating manner.

So, although supervisory relationships can produce feedback, there are several issues around the usefulness of that information. John Milliman and colleagues, in a recent article in Personnel Journal, go as far as to say that "the days of traditional supervisor-subordinate performance evaluations are numbered."[43] As our organizations change to reflect a flattened, more organic structure, and interact across national and cultural boundaries, relationships in the work place between the leader and the led, will dramatically change. Traditional senior subordinate relationships are no longer seen as the predominant mechanism for information on performance. Knowledge-based organizations, centered on teams and autonomous work groups are moving to multi-source feedback systems, often referred to as 360, with particular emphasis on peer feedback.

Peer Feedback

> For an increasing number of workers, the [performance review] ritual is changing. From factory floors to office suites, these workers ..... are being reviewed by a jury of their peers, who may know their work better than the boss does. (Barclay and Dobbins 1995, 39)

It becoming increasingly evident that feedback from peers may be one of the most important, yet untapped sources of feedback on behavior and performance. In a recent survey of major U.S. companies, many are using some form of peer feedback.[44] Donald Petersen, former CEO of Ford, suggests that in order to assess whether someone is a true team player it is essential to gather information from peers and subordinates.[45] Additionally, there are many who suggest that you can change behavior more with the

feedback from peers, than you can through managerial, and other forms of feedback.[46] So, why is peer feedback such a relevant resource for the leader?

First of all, in many circumstances, peers have closer and more frequent contact with a given individual than does the leader. This will be even more the rule, rather than the exception, as the military looses organizational structure to information technology, and the remaining structure flattens and becomes more dispersed. Because of this closer and more frequent contact, peers will have access to information on a wider range of performance dimensions than a single supervisory perspective.[47] In a major review of the peer performance appraisal literature, it was concluded that the information possessed by peers about other co-workers may in fact be more accurate than that information possessed by any other rater.[48] This is further supported by findings that the predictive validity and reliability of peer ratings has been well established.[49]

Secondly, peer feedback has a high degree of credibility with other peers. Anecdotal and research information supports the view that peer feedback is believed more by others, than is information received directly from superiors. People generally have more contact with their colleagues and peers, and often wish to maintain the trust and respect with these peers to a higher degree than with their boss.[50] Finally, because peer feedback has high credibility, it is more positively motivating and stimulates more behavioral change. Peer pressure may be one of the most powerful motivators of behavior within organizations.

Current Status

It is arguable that feedback, particularly feedback from peers, will be an important resource in the emerging leadership requirements of the 21st century. Unfortunately, feedback does not play a prominent place, in general, in the current Army leadership paradigm. Although the Army has made considerable strides in providing operational and tactical feedback through the After Action Review process. This process has not generalized, to a great degree, into the development and evaluation process in our personnel systems, especially associated with our performance appraisal process. Our current leader develop system does not emphasize the importance of feedback in general, particularly feedback from peers.

This is readily understandable in that, from my perspective, little attention is spent in our leader development process in educating Army leaders on feedback. Unless one takes a course in counseling in an undergraduate or graduate educational program, one will not receive much exposure to feedback as an important behavioral phenomenon, and critical leadership skill. Most of the knowledge about feedback is learned tacitly through practical experience on the job. This experience is nonexistent at worst, and uneven at best.

In several focus group interviews and group discussions at the U.S. Army War College, most senior officers in these discussions admitted that they had rarely received performance or developmental feedback in their careers, and hardly ever sought feedback from peers or subordinates.[51] Most feedback was reviewed only in the context of the annual performance appraisal process, and that feedback provided only summary

information on performance, and very few specifics. This type feedback is often based only on general assessments of behavior grounded in overall impressions, and never with any detailed discussions, particularly on inappropriate, or ineffective behaviors.

We need a better system of education and development on the notion of feedback as an important leadership resource. Jay Conger, in his recent article entitled "The Brave New World of Leadership Training," states that the "magnitude of today's changes will demand not only more leadership but newer forms of leadership."[52] These newer forms, particularly at the strategic leader level, will have to include feedback. So, what can be done to facilitate the development of feedback as an important leader behavior?

Recommendations

Increasing leader knowledge on the value of feedback has both an educational and an experiential component. The educational component should include instruction in the behavioral science aspects of feedback that goes beyond the mere presentation of either positive or negative information. The experiential component would include capitalizing on the many structured and unstructured experiential opportunities available for the use of feedback to significantly improve performance.

Educational Component

Feedback has affective, cognitive and behavioral dimensions, each of which has an important impact on how feedback is received, and the value that it ultimately has for the receiver. For feedback to be an effective leadership resource, the behavioral science aspect of these dimensions must be understood. Some of these dimensions include: feedback sign (whether it is positive or negative), feedback sequence and timing, and the

characteristics of the feedback giver and the receiver. Knowledge of these and other dimensions is critical for understanding feedback and insuring that its use improves performance.

For example, the sequence of feedback information effects its perceived accuracy and usefulness to a great degree. The first element of the feedback message significantly effects the processing of the second part of the message, particularly if the initial part is negative.[53] Negative information can quickly illicit defensive behavior on the part of the receiver, and almost certainly terminating effective communication.

Feedback timing is also critical. If feedback is provided too late, then its value for the receiver tends to decrease. This is true since the recipient does not often know when the behavior occurred, and cannot associate the feedback with its context.[54] This creates a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty around the feedback message's content. How many of us have received feedback during our annual performance evaluation interviews and often have no idea where the information on our behavior came from? Not only is sequence and timing of feedback critical, but an understanding of the characteristics of the giver and receiver of feedback if also essential.

There are tremendous individual differences in the manner in which feedback is given and perceived. Not everyone will respond in the same way to a given feedback message. Differences in variables such as self-esteem, locus of control, need for achievement, and tolerance for ambiguity, will have dramatic effects on the manner in which feedback is given and received, and ultimately on its value and ability to influence behavior. Leaders must clearly understand personality characteristics and individual

differences in feedback propensity, to be effective in their use of feedback, and in their own receipt of feedback. This type knowledge and understanding needs to be woven into the fabric of our educational curriculum, from accession training, in the Officer Basic course (OBC), through the Army War College, the most senior former schooling in the Army educational system.

Once this knowledge is obtained, practice in giving and receiving feedback, particularly from peers, could be integrated in many of the school educational and training experiences. Learning how to give and receive feedback, in non-defensive and productive ways, is an acquired skill that must be firmly based in behavioral science knowledge, and regular training in skills application. The counseling course taught at West Point is an illustrative model of how this education and training could be conducted. But, education in the science and the skill of feedback is not enough. The educational component must be reinforced by the leader's operational experiences.

Experiential Component

Within the operational context, there are many opportunities, in both structured and unstructured ways, to exercise the use of feedback and capitalize upon its utility as a significant leadership resource. The Army's formal performance appraisal system, and the use of the DA Form 67-1 performance objective developmental process, are key structured frameworks for feedback on behavior. Not only does this allow for feedback between a senior and subordinate, but this information could also be shared with peers, who could provide additional sources of information on behavior and performance. Leaders, at all levels, could establish regularly, scheduled opportunities to share

developmental feedback, anchored in the performance goals that are established in the 67-1 developmental process.

This could also be done in the context of one-on-one relationships between peers. Arthur Costa and Bena Kallich, in their article "Through the Eyes of a Critical Friend," suggest that every leader needs a trusted person who can become an unbiased, provocative observer of behavior.[55] This "friend" could provide assessment and critique of leader behavior on a periodically scheduled basis. This assessment and critique will require critical reflection on the part of the observer and the feedback perceiver. A second order effect of these "critical friend" type relationships would be the building of trust and understanding and facilitate the overall enhancement of unit level trust and cohesion. It would also set the preconditions for successful organizational change and adaptation, another of the key leader behaviors for strategic leadership in the 21st Century.

Feedback on behavior could also occur as a part of the already established after action review system that has been an offshoot of the Combat Maneuver Training Center experience. Although this system is mostly focused on tactical issues, leadership related behaviors could also be made explicit in this process, and become a part of the feedback that is provided. Leadership related behaviors could be assessed (an application of 360 feedback), time for critical reflection could occur, and then follow-up meetings could be scheduled to turn this reflection (maybe done with the critical friend) into actual learning and behavior.

When these above mentioned systems are in place, then feedback would slowly become part of the leadership and organizational culture. It could lead to substantial behavioral change in that leaders will learn to actively seek developmental feedback on their behavior because it is rewarded, useful, and is a recognized and valued activity that leads to better performance. When these habits are developed, then feedback related behavior could occur in any organizational activity, and not the result of some scheduled opportunity.

Conclusions

Given the pace of change today, it is clear that leaders of the future will be operating under a new organizational paradigm, characterized by flatter organizational structures, more organic than bureaucratic, with more decentralized and distributed leadership. The strategic leaders, in the new structures, will have to be continuous learners, critically reflective thinkers, and be able to effectively lead, implement and manage organizational change. Feedback will be an essential tool for the mastery of these key leadership competencies.

But, it is important to recognize that there is also a "downside" to feedback. Feedback can be threatening, both to give and to receive. It often "hurts" and can threaten relationships between individuals if it is seen as criticism, and not as helpful comments intended to improve behavior. Additionally, it can be administratively burdensome. It takes time to gather feedback, process it, reflect on it, and then convert the feedback into useful information which can be shared, and used in accountable and productive ways. One must develop the required measurement tools, train the skills and

then allocate the additional time to execute the feedback program. All this, conducted in an environment already characterized by an extremely high operational tempo. It could be perceived as just another requirement, or burden, without any value. But, there is an old saying, "you treasure what you measure." Feedback can be gathered, it can be made useful, it can be an effective strategic leadership tool, and it will be the foundation of key future strategic leaders competencies.

The Army War College is probably the last place to begin the development of the behavioral skills necessary to capitalize on the tremendous leader resource available in feedback. The effective use of feedback as a leadership resource is cultivated over a life time of education, training and practice. If feedback is to become an important leadership tool for the strategic leader in the 21st century, it must be tool that is developed and used at the earliest opportunities. It must become an integral part of our training and education system, and when practiced in operational assignments, it would become a valuable part of our military culture.

END NOTES

[1] Stephen Zaccaro. Social Complexity and Executive Leadership: The Role of Social Competencies and the Development of Effective Organizational Vision (Washington, DC: DCSPER, U.S. Army, 1996), 1.

[2] Alvin and Heidi Toffler. War and Anti-War: Survival at the Dawn of the 21st Century (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1993)

[3] There are number of writers, to include former National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, who believe that we are under going a revolution in military affairs. For specifics, see: Eliot Cohen," A Revolution in Warfare." Foreign Affairs 75 (March-April 1996): 52-54, and Dan Goure, "Is There a Military-Technical Revolution in America's Future?" Washington Quarterly 16 (Autumn 1993): 182.

[4] Gary Yukl, Leadership Issues and Challenges for the New Army: Some Preliminary Ideas and Observations (Washington, DC: DCSPER, U.S. Army, 1996), 9.

[5] Robert R. Hooijberg, Craig Bullis and James Hunt. Behavioral Complexity and the Development of Military Leadership for the Twenty First Century (Leadership Challenges Symposium, Chicago, IL: DCSPER, U.S. Army, 1996), 3.

[6] Morris J. Boyd and Michael Woodard, "Force XXI Operations," Military Review (November 1994): 17.

[7] Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, and Richard Beckhard, ed., The Leader of the Future (New York: The Drucker Foundation Future Series, 1996). This notion is a recurrent theme in many of the articles written that are included in this edited work. The information age technologies are making information of all kinds accessible to everyone in the organization almost simultaneously. Subordinates know as much, if not more, than the organizationally appointed leaders. This would suggest knowledge, what you know based on information access, will become as relevant to organizational success as the organizationally appointed leader. As the information revolution compresses time, those with the knowledge will have to make decisions, due to tightened decision and action cycles. They will have to emerge as leaders, thus making leadership a more distributed behavior.

[8] John C. Redding and Ralph F. Catalanello, Strategic Readiness: The Making of a Learning Organization (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994), 3.

[9] This is the key theme in Ron Heifitz's Leadership Without Easy Answers (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1994). Heifitz suggests, and convincingly argues, that authority based leadership (based on position power) is no longer the most effective way to think about the leadership function. Successful leaders enable others to lead themselves. They empower, and cause the leadership function to be distributed.

[10] Gary Yukl, "Managerial Leadership: A Review of Theory and Research," Journal of Management 15, no. 2 (1989): 251-289.

[11] Gordon R. Sullivan and Michael V. Harper, Hope is Not a Method (New York: Random House, 1996), 44.

[12] Marshall Goldsmith, "Ask, Learn, Follow Up, and Grow," in The Leader of the Future, ed. Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, and Richard Beckhard (New York: The Drucker Foundation Future Series, 1996), 227-237.

[13] Goldsmith, 231.

[14] This is a constant theme in many of the writings describing the leader of the future. This notion was made popular in Peter Senge's The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994), 7. To have a learning organization, which is suggested to be the most effective type organization to meet the VUCA demands of the future environmental landscape, it must be populated by leaders with a learning orientation.

[15] Redding and Catalanello, 137-143. What is also important here is the notion of 360 feedback. This mechanism gathers feedback from multiple sources (peers, subordinates, customers, etc.), collates it, finds consistencies, and present the information for use by the target leader for subsequent use.

[16] Sullivan, 1993, 5.

[17] Sullivan and Harper, 49-52.

[18] Stephen D. Brookfield, Becoming a Critically Reflective Thinker (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995): 2-3.

[19] Marilyn W. Daudeline, "Learning From Experience Through Reflection," Organizational Dynamics (Winter 1996): 36-37.

[20] Brookfield, 29-30.

[21] Ibid., xiii.

[22] John P. Kotter, Leading Change (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 182-185.

[23] Redding and Catalanello, 90-91.

[24] Ibid., 160-184 (Chapter on the Collective Nature of Feedback).

[25] This information was gathered in many informal discussions with many fellow War College colleagues.

[26] Yukl, 1996, 4.

[27] James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, The Leadership Challenge (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995).

[28] Susan J. Ashford, "Feedback Seeking in Individual Adaptation: A Resource Perspective," The Academy of Management Journal, 29 (1986): 465-466.

[29] Susan M. Taylor, Cynthia D. Fisher and Daniel R. Ilgen, "Individuals' Reactions to Performance Feedback in Organizations: A Control Theory Perspective." In Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management (Vol 2), ed. K.M. Rowlan and G.R. Ferris (Greenwhich, CT: JAI Press, 1984), 220.

[30] Ibid., 218.

[31] This point had been made in several research studies. Specifically: Susan J. Ashford and L.L. Cummings, "Feedback as an Individual Resource: Personal Strategies for Creating Information," Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 32 (1983): 370; and A. Chapanis, "Knowledge of Performance as an Incentive of User Acceptance of Peer Evaluations," Personnel Psychology, 33 (1980): 264.

[32] Ashford and Cummings, 371.

[33] This is the general framework used in Ashford and Cummings with some modifications based on current literature.

[34] This is the accepted value of feedback for both personal behavior and behavior within an organizational context. See Donald B. Fedor, " Recipient Responses to Performance Feedback: A Proposed Model and Implications," in Research in Personnel and Human Resources (Vol. 7), ed. GR. Ferris and K.M.Rowland (Greenwhich, CT: JAI Press, 1994).

[35] Ashford and Cummings, 375.

[36] This comment was made by LTG (Ret) Walter Ulmer in a discussion with Army War College students in October, 1996.

[37] This is a common theme that is seen in the literature on reflective thinking. See prior citations from Daudeline and Brookfield.

[38] P.A. Mabe, and S. G. Wilson, "Validity of Self-Evaluation of Ability: A Review and Meta Analysis." Personnel Psychology, 40 (1987): 285.

[39] Brookfield, 40.

[40] Catherine Romano, " Conquering the FEAR of Feedback." Management Review (March 1994): 9-10.

[41] Mark R. Edwards, "Accurate Performance Measurement Tools." Human Resources Magazine (June 1991): 95-98.

[42] Joyce E. Santora, "Rating the Boss at Chrysler." Personnel Journal (May 1992): 38-45.

[43] John F. Milliman, et. al., "Companies Evaluate Employees From All Perspectives." Personnel Journal (November 1994): 99.

[44] Julie H. Barclay and Lynn K. Harland," Peer Performance Appraisals: The Impact of Rater Competencies, Rater Location and Rater Correctability on Fairness Perceptions." Group & Organizational Management, 20, no. 1 (March 1995): 40.

[45] D.E. Petersen and J. Hillkirk. A Better Idea. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 67.

[46] Milliman, et. al., 100.

[47] Edwards, 96. This point has also been made by W. C. Borman , " The Rating of Individuals in Organizations: An Alternate Approach." Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 12 (1974): 105-124.

[48] K.N. Wexley and R. J. Klimoski, "Performance Appraisal: An Update." In Research in Personnel and Human Resources (Vol. 2), ed. K. Rowland and G. Ferris (Greenwhich, CT: JAI, 1984): 35-79. This issue has also been supported R. Klimoski and M. London, "Role of the Rater in Performance Appraisal." Journal of Applied Psychology, 59 (1974): 445-451.

[49] This comment in supported in the research reviews of : J.S. Kane and E.E. Lawler, "Methods of Peer Assessment." Psychological Bulletin, 85 (1978): 555-586; and Fedor, 1996.

[50] Edwards, 95.

[51] This information was gathered from the period Jan-Feb, 1997 with three informal, focus groups of U.S. Army War College students. Students were asked questions on the feedback process and allowed to describe their experiences.

[52] Jay A. Conger, "The Brave New World of Leadership Training." Organizational Dynamics (Winter 1996): 46.

[53] Fedor, 1992.

[54] Joel Moses, George P. Hollenbeck, and Melving Sorcher, "Other People's Expectations." Human Resources Management 32, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 1993): 283-285.

[55] Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kalick, "Through the Lens of a Critical Friend." Educational Leadership (October 1993): 49.

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