THE CENTRE FOR ARMY LEADERSHIP

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

No.3 August 2017

The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and so further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. ***Leadership Insights*** *are published periodically by the CAL to feed and shape the leadership debate in the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership. The CAL actively seeks new authors for its Leadership Insights.*

What The Hell Do We Do Now, Sir?

by Capt Luke Wilson

On the theme of 'Moral Courage and Human Behaviours In Leadership'

Picture a leader under pressure. Go on. Are you thinking of that scene in *Saving Private Ryan* – the one where they're under fire on Omaha beach and a soldier grabs Tom Hanks and yells 'What the hell do we do now, sir?' If not, I suspect you're imagining something similar: a resolute figure making hard decisions and giving orders as all hell breaks loose. This image should come easily to Army leaders, because it captures our experience of training. Our leadership courses test students under pressure, forcing them to make tough choices in challenging situations. This produces leaders who are ready to step up and command when it counts the most. But does this focus on crisis leadership also teach a false lesson? Does it obscure the fact that performance during a crisis may depend on leadership *before* the crisis – the kind of leadership we rarely see on screen? Consider these two examples:

US Airways Flight 1549 (15 January 2009)

Captain Chelsey 'Sully' Sullenberger faced an unprecedented crisis when his aircraft struck a flock of geese shortly after take-off, losing both engines only 3000ft above the suburbs of New

York. The fate of all 155 people aboard would be determined by the decisions Sully made over the next 208 seconds. First, he took control of the aircraft from his co-pilot and broadcast a mayday message on the radio. Next, he directed his co-pilot to begin the engine restart procedure while he assessed his options for an emergency landing. Finally, he made the bold decision to land on the nearby river Hudson. It was the right call: everyone survived the ditching and investigators later proved that any other course of action would have ended in disaster. Sully's judgement and skill were matched only by his composure: during those 208 seconds he never raised his voice, hesitated, or even swore. It was a perfect example of calm, decisive, Tom Hanks-y leadership (portrayed very accurately by Hanks in the movie *Sully*).

United Airlines Flight 173 (28 December 1978)

Almost exactly thirty years before the 'miracle on the Hudson', Captain Malburn McBroom was seconds away from touching down at Portland International Airport when a slew of warning lights indicated a serious landing gear malfunction. Like Sully, McBroom acted decisively: he assessed the situation, took control of the aircraft, alerted air traffic control and made the crucial decision to abort the landing. He then put the aircraft into a holding pattern so that he and his crew could investigate the problem. McBroom continued to issue calm, detailed direction as he prepared the aircraft, the passengers and the emergency services on the ground for a potential crash landing. Tragically, all this work did not lead to a miracle landing, but to a disaster. Flight 173 ploughed into a suburb just outside the airport, destroying two houses and acres of woodland. Thanks to some skilful flying, all but 10 of the 189 people on board survived. Yet unlike Sully, McBroom was not hailed as a hero, but quietly stripped of his pilot's licence. The crash hadn't been caused by the landing gear: McBroom had spent so long preparing for the landing that he simply ran out of fuel.

Charm School

McBroom and Sully were both superb pilots; experienced, decisive, and cool as ice under pressure. The difference wasn't down to skill or judgement: it was all about leadership. McBroom simply couldn't delegate. There was no need for him to focus on fixing the landing gear, briefing the passengers or even flying the plane when he had engineers, stewards and co-pilots on his crew. Yet he insisted on micro-managing these tasks, becoming so involved that he lost track of time and fuel. By contrast, Sully let his cabin crew deal with his passengers and let his co-pilot work on his engines. This approach left him free to focus on his only critical task: deciding where and how to land the plane.

These examples reflect a fundamental change in pilot training that has important implications for Army leadership courses. Back in the 1970s, McBroom's highly directive leadership style was the norm, and a series of eerily-similar crashes had been caused by distracted, micromanaging pilots. Airlines had tried to fix the problem by training pilots to delegate more under pressure, with little success. After United 173, they decided to try something different. The Crew Resource Management (CRM) programme was designed to improve performance in crisis situations, but unlike previous initiatives it did not teach pilots or crews how to react to emergencies. Instead, the course focussed entirely on 'interpersonal skills' and leadership during routine flying. Pilots hated CRM, referring to it as 'charm school'. Imagine how an experienced Army leader would react to being told that their team would perform better under fire if they worked on their active listening skills; now multiply that by a pilot's ego.

But CRM worked. The programme was based on a crucial insight: a leader's performance during a crisis depends on the culture he creates *before* the crisis. CRM training established one simple new rule for air crew: it is not professional to lead without listening or follow without questioning. Thanks to this rule, pilots became less authoritarian, and it became normal for crews to act on their own initiative, allowing the kind of teamwork that ultimately saved Flight 1549. As Sully put it, CRM training had given them 'a shared sense of responsibility for the outcome'. The real difference between the two examples is this: when the crisis came, Sully knew his crew would get to work; McBroom knew his crew would turn to him and say 'what the hell do we do now, sir?'

The Crisis Bias in Leadership Training

This may seem familiar: we're talking about transformational leadership, right? Army Leadership Doctrine already says that we should use transactional leadership under pressure, and use transformational styles for long-term team development. Well, that's what we preach – but is it what we teach? Our leadership courses have many different tests of professional knowledge and physical fitness, but there's only one pass/fail test of leadership: the command appointment. Recall your own training. During your command appointment, which leadership styles did you use? I'm going to guess directive, with a little bit of pacesetting if you ever used the words 'follow me!' Which makes sense: transformational leadership usually takes time, so it has little place in a frantic training serial. But this means students are never assessed on their capacity for participative, coaching, affiliative, or visionary leadership. If Sully and McBroom had been on your last leadership course, who would have scored higher? Both had excellent 'command presence' and 'response to stress'. McBroom would have lost marks for

'time management' – but would Sully have lost more for 'failure to supervise and grip subordinates'?

If we don't test it, we don't learn it. If we only assess our leaders in crisis conditions, we reinforce that shallow Hollywood image of leadership that springs so easily to mind: heroic, Tom Hanks-y, directive. This crisis bias creates a false separation between leadership in barracks and leadership "when it counts". Just like those cocky 1970s pilots, we're more likely to dismiss the 'charm school' skills of listening, communicating and team-building if we don't see how they prepare us for performance under stress. The effects of this can be found anywhere soldiers and junior leaders feel disempowered, under-valued, or ignored; none of us would struggle to think of an Army leader who could use a little 'charm school'.

We can't fix this just by preaching the doctrine. Leaders in training need opportunities to practise transformational leadership skills and see their value. These opportunities can be found without making radical changes; your answers to the questions below may suggest some start points. Just as importantly, we need to change the way we present transformational leadership and the interpersonal skills that support it. They aren't just for managing change, or raising morale, or giving management consultants something to talk about; they are the foundation of operational performance. In short, transformational leadership is not the opposite of crisis leadership; it's how we prepare our teams for the crisis. And you won't learn that from Tom Hanks.

Questions:

1. Does the leadership training you run focus too narrowly on crisis leadership?
2. CRM students practise transformational leadership skills in role-playing exercises and team-building tasks. Do you do this enough in the leadership training you run?
3. When you present leadership case studies, do you ask 'what would you do in this situation?', or 'how would you prepare your team for this situation'?
4. Do you do enough to develop transformational leadership skills in your subordinates?
5. When you write annual reports do you focus on if the leader achieved crisis tasks or if they built their team to deal with crises? What use is a leader that does one but not the other?

For an example of CRM training watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AtyMuYEk9M