

Military Leadership: A Vital National Strategic Asset

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Military leaders in a battlefield are the most valuable assets and a tool of national power. Loss of a leader in a battlefield is a loss of sense of direction, a loss of more than just money and, at times, a loss of even national reputation.¹ In recent years, the debate over what goes into making a military leader has been stunningly silent and a military leader is generally glossed over as a normal government servant. It is, indeed, an irony and a misaligned perception. Serious questions are being asked about discipline and morale, and the consequences of the actions of officers, both intended and otherwise, by those who do not even understand the complexity of leading men in the face of death. Who should be held accountable: the political leadership, the bureaucracy or the higher military leadership? Military leaders will have to stand up, nurture and protect the most vital resource of national power: “the junior leadership”.

I consider the neglect of soldiers and military leaders as an insult and a national tragedy. The ethos of military leadership is required to be preserved to secure the nation. Erosion in the leadership ethos or an attempt to play one against the other is likely to have a catastrophic impact and may cause irreversible damage to the organisation in particular, and the nation generally.

India is facing an extremely tough period as far as the security scenario is concerned. The internal security situation is worrisome, the proxy war by Pakistan is entering a ‘tipping point’ and the conventional threat is now multi-dimensional. The armed forces are stretched and stressed, with no relief or pause visible in the near future. If I were to be asked what the most vital asset or resource to be a tool to deal with the full spectrum threat is, my answer would be: the “Military Leadership”.

Resources, organisation and technology will always, and every time, be second to leadership.

It is an economic compulsion that the Indian armed forces have always remained deficient in modern weapons, equipment and even in the perks and privileges accorded to soldiers. Therefore, how this vital asset makes up for the inadequacies and deficiencies is an issue that needs to be understood. The single most important factor which has always turned the tide was, and will remain, the leadership, which has always led from the front, be it conventional wars or sub-conventional operations. Though the cost in terms of human sacrifice has been immense, this asset has not allowed the nation to be shamed. It has always stood strong in the hour of need and will remain so, provided this resource is nurtured. The power of the military leadership was best described by *Time Magazine* when it said; "A Marshal (US General) had transformed a second-rate Army into the world's most effective military power" in a relatively short time.² A look back in history will show that the US became a superpower primarily due to its vibrant military leadership.

Every man in the team is as important as the leader.

The dichotomy in understanding the complexity of military ethics and values has arisen because the men in uniform have refused to compromise with their working ethos and steadfastness. Ironically, this is construed as arrogance, but the fact of the matter is that in war, there are no prizes for the runners-up, and military leadership is a ruthless business. In the face of the enemy during combat, a soldier and his leader cannot compromise and accept second place. Similarly, to lead men under extreme conditions and adverse situations, a leader needs to be uncompromising, arrogant and steadfast, or else his men will stop following him. I was taught as a young officer that a soldier must have the arrogance of competence, integrity and an attitude of never say die. A soldier should never behave like a government servant, because if he starts behaving like a servant, he will start accepting the "dominance of circumstances". A soldier and leader should never be a slave of circumstances; he must create circumstances to control the situation. It is said that a military leader must be prepared to throw his men to the wolves to turn adversity into victory. During the Kargil War, the young officers undertook the most difficult tasks and achieved the impossible, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, even at the cost of their lives. That is what needs to be understood in the correct perspective. We are passing through a phase wherein there is a feeling among the uniformed men that they are being deprived of their dignity, and the lack

of gratitude and appreciation by the society and state is making soldiers edgy. It appears that soldiers are being made to feel that equipping them for future conflicts is a favour being done to them rather than a duty of the nation. This is due to the fact that a soldier is being deprived of even such basic items as good quality PT shoes for the last five years. He sees that his counterpart in the Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) is better equipped and better looked after, in spite of the fact that the CAPF personnel face lesser challenge and always look to the armed forces personnel when the chips are down, be it in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the northeast (NE) or even disaster relief operations. A young military leader gets confused about who he is fighting, against or for. That is a cause of great concern.

During the disaster relief operations in Uttarakhand, the victims and their dear and near ones all said that the nation was standing together only because of the armed forces. Some even went further to say that the last and only hope of the people of this nation are the armed forces because they will never let down the people and the nation. It is a huge compliment, but it also gives the additional responsibility to live up to the aspirations of the people. The options are limited to “Evolve or Erode”. To stand united and face the challenge is the way to deal with the societal changes, which are fast and furious as well.

To catapult the nation as a regional power, to secure and protect strategic national interests, the following need to be considered in order to nurture and energise the military leadership:

- The Army which is morally superior will always fight together and survive together. Internal cleansing is imperative to maintain morality in actions and intent.
- Soldiers should not be molycoddled because the military profession is a ruthless one. Train them, feed them and push them beyond human endeavour. Every time you drive them hard, they will return stronger and glorious.
- Make them believe that individuals are not supreme — it is the organisation that is supreme. At the same time, every man in a team is as important as the leader.
- It must be understood that it is not the numbers or strengths that bring victory in war; rather, victory goes to whichever Army goes into battle stronger in soul and resolve — the enemy will be unable to withstand it.³ Build morale, trust and self-confidence among the troops and they will deliver even in adverse situations.

Group energy comes from just cause and moral bonding.

- Young leaders must be encouraged to bypass conventions. Let them take calculated risks and overlook the slippages, if there are any.
- Praise and reward without prejudice, make both punishment and praise rare and unexpected. Overlook minor mistakes which are unintended. Soldiers and leaders in such an environment prosper and will emerge stronger, and tougher.
- Remind them of their responsibilities, accountability and commitments. This will prevent a leader from being 'reckless and careless'. A leader will remain focussed if he is reminded of his responsibility, accountability and commitment to the cause.
- Don't ask, or allow, a junior leader to do an immoral or unethical task. You erode one leader and he will erode thousands. Making a soldier or junior leader undertake an unethical job or task is treason. Physical harm to a group of soldiers can be alleviated, but erosion in morality is irreversible.
- There is limitation of energy and skills; they can take us only up to a specific distance. But this energy can be increased by vitalising group energy. This group energy comes from a just cause, trust among the group, and moral bonding.

In battle, it is understood that you give your word of honour to not let your fear stop you from doing your duty.⁴ Leadership is all about control of fear of men, and channelising one's fears into anger against the enemy. Great leaders are not those who lead a great Army — great leaders are those who channelise the group energy to achieve military objectives in war. To achieve this, leading the men to victory is one aspect, and creating leaders for the next war is another.

In the recent past, the officer-men relationship has come in for sharp criticism. This is a serious question and needs immediate resolution. The first and most important issue is that a young officer must be made to realise that he doesn't become a leader by wearing the rank uniform. He has to understand, learn and prove that he has the traits to be a good leader. In the past, an officer was made to start his career rubbing shoulders with the men. This taught an officer to know his men, learn the art of junior leadership, and acquire basic competence to lead men in a particular situation. We have reached a point where we need to go "back to basics". But how do we overcome this complex problem when the units are operating at a hard scale? Which means that running a unit will become difficult

if the number of officers drops down below that scale. Certain steps which must be taken to set the course right are as under:

- The officers must sweat together to bleed together. Officers have no option but to train together and compete to command the men.
- Train together to fight together. Mutual respect and trust between men and officers is the hallmark of leading men in war. No soldier worth his salt will leave behind his comrades and leaders in the battlefield if there is a bond between them. This bond can only be created when the soldiers and officers train together to fight together.
- The warrior code was a bond between the men and leaders to fight till the last man standing, for a just cause. The concept of warrior code is an ethical line which restrains soldiers from doing wrong and, at the same time, forces them to do what is expected of them under extremely hostile conditions.
- There is no authority which is absolute. Trespassing of limits is definitely going to have an adverse impact on command. Men will respond to their leader as long as he remains within the limit of command. Most of the trouble, in both history and in the prevailing situation, has occurred due to leaders crossing the limit of command/ authority.
- The soldier is not a slave, he is a comrade. Junior officers at times commit the mistake of treating the soldier as a slave of legitimate or illegitimate orders of their leaders. A soldier is a most trusted companion of a military leader, since it is he who is closest to his leader and vice versa when the going gets really tough.
- The welfare, training and motivation of soldiers is the sole responsibility of a military leader. Men will cross limits of human endeavour if they are convinced that their leader is going to take care of their welfare and that of their families. Similarly, training provides confidence and competence to the men. This will lead to motivation of command.
- Share pleasant moments and leisure time with the men. Being a part of them is indeed leading them.

Conclusion

Combat is scary but exciting. Military leadership is most challenging because “honour is earned under fire and threat to life”.⁵ A balance has to be maintained between welfare and legitimate command, — going too far or being short is an imbalance. According to Confucius, “To go too far is as bad as falling short”.⁶ There can be no compromise during the training for, and execution of, a legitimate

task. As a leader, one must be benevolent, sympathetic but not weak or fickle. If a leader is soft and sympathetic to his command he loses the power to command. Military leaders comprise a vital national asset that can convert an ordinary nation into a powerful one. Soldiers deserve all the respect and appreciation for the job they are doing on behalf of the people and for the people in the service of the nation. Let's do our duty to ourselves and show our nation that we respect it enough to know that we can stand up to the scrutiny it deserves.⁷ Norman Schwarzkopf had said, "When placed in command, take charge." Leadership is all about taking charge of men, resources and situations. Let no one have to remind us soldiers what our responsibilities and commitment to the nation are.

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Notes

1. David Rothkopf, "A New Challenge for Our Military: Honest Introspection," *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2012.
2. US At War: Last of the First, *Time Magazine*, August 7, 1944.
3. Xenophon, Quotes, The Persian Expedition (Circa 455- 355 BC), www.goodreads.com.
4. Paul R Allen, *A US Soldier Wounded in Combat, The Warrior Code of Honour* at <http://www.militarycodeofhonor.com>.
5. Ibid.
6. Confucius (Quote) (Circa 551- 479?).
7. David Rothkopf, "It's Time to Hold the Generals Accountable for Afghanistan and Iraq," *JK Alternative Viewpoint*, March 20, 2012.