
Training the Army's Senior Leadership

Kamal Khanna

When India gained independence, the British doubted the Indians' ability to maintain quality in the armed forces. We are doing whatever we can to prove them right. Having saved Kashmir in 1947-48, we claimed to have proved them wrong, overlooking that this was only against tribesmen and the Pakistan Army whose condition was no better than ours. The 1962 conflict exposed major weaknesses in our higher direction of war, for the first time. Shocked that *Hindi-Chini* was not *Bhai-Bhai*, we did not use the Indian Air Force (IAF) despite having a distinct advantage over the Chinese (presuming that the IAF was prepared). Operations were badly conducted; there is no record of strikes at the long and vulnerable lines of communications of the Chinese by staying behind or infiltrating groups; we accepted a ceasefire in November when the Chinese would have had to withdraw across the passes in any case. The conduct of external affairs and higher defence was poor.

However, we took immediate corrective measures. The rapid expansion of the armed forces helped us to win two major victories within the next decade, both against Pakistan, where the leadership had deteriorated faster than ours. Due to misrule and indifferent administration, there were insurgencies in different regions at different times. The causes were ignored; the responsibility and accountability of the civil services was also never questioned. The Indian Army helped restore normalcy in all these states. In Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) too, from the volatile situation of 1989-90, the situation in 1996 enabled free and fair elections to the Parliament and to the state Assembly. A popular government was sworn in. What else was expected from the army? It was time to restore total normalcy through non-military

Lieutenant General **Kamal Khanna** (Retd) is former Commandant, Indian Military Academy, Dehradun.

measures. However, that is another matter. Let us focus on the subject of leadership.

The greatest dilution of standards took place between 1962 and 1965, when we had to expand suddenly to make up for past neglect. Quality was sacrificed for the sake of quantity. (Most names that have appeared in various negative incidents such as "Tehelka" are of those who have been commissioned after 1962). Though the strength of the Indian Army still remains our junior leadership, you need wise, mature, professional and upright formation commanders to train, guide, motivate and groom future leaders. If you have good generals, these young officers will 'bring you the moon'. If not, you will experience many Operation

Pawans. Even during Operation Vijay, the difference in performance of different formations was glaring. Performance of most senior officers reminded us of the Chinese saying, "*It is easy to find ten thousand soldiers, but difficult to find a single general.*" A few more examples from military history may help understand the importance of senior military leadership.

The *Charge of the Light Brigade* has immortalised the glory of blind obedience of orders at all costs. But did the situation warrant such a costly attack? The action highlights how brave disciplined soldiers can be wasted by mediocre generalship. On the other hand, look at Gen Model. In January 1942, he took over the Ninth German Army in the Central Front in Russia, completely surrounded after Stalin's winter offensive. Without any additional resources, he led this demoralised army from a hopeless situation to clear victory, defeating and destroying a number of Russian Armies, simply by his own bold, charismatic leadership.

Manstein achieved great success in Crimea as commander-in-chief (C-in-C) of the Eleventh Army, but is famous for his brilliant counter-stroke at Kharkov in March 1943, even while withdrawing after losing an army at Stalingrad. He not only halted the advancing Russians but seized the initiative and destroyed a large number of pursuing Russian Armies, using a full Panzer Army that he had pulled back in reserve earlier. Rommel, in command of the Afrika Korps, was admired by his troops and respected by his adversaries. The Inchon Landings in Korea are famous for the audacity of Gen Douglas MacArthur. Only a leader like him could take the risks to achieve 'surprise'. In his spectacular victory, he saved the lives of

Though the strength of the Indian Army still remains our junior leadership, you need wise, mature, professional and upright formation commanders to train, guide, motivate and groom future leaders.

thousands of soldiers who would have died in a more expected frontal assault. Our brief history after independence has not been without sparks of brilliance. The capture of Haji Pir, and link up of Uri–Poonch through Haji Pir was a great victory in 1965. Both the Pakistan Army and Indian Army used armoured divisions during the conflict. Our leaders did a great job of it. On the other hand, look at what happened to the Pakistan armoured division at Khem Karan. Pakistan had modern Patton tanks whereas we still used World War II vintage equipment. A similar story was seen in the air, and on the sea. While Pakistan was better equipped, we had better leadership. At the national level, our leaders moulded public opinion. Our forces had overwhelming support of the public, particularly in Punjab. Our morale was sky high.

Taking the case of 1971, for instance, the liberation of Bangladesh has no parallel post World War II; and needs no elucidation. As professionals, we need to appreciate our achievements on the Western Front as well. Since these are not so well known, let me recount a few. “Strategic Defence” on the Western Front was executed admirably. In J&K we battled terrain, climate and the enemy. In the month of December, we captured high altitude areas in Turtuk, Kargil, and Gurez sectors. The only foothold the Pakistan Army had on the Shamshabari Range at Tut Mari Gali (TMG), again in high altitude, was captured. One shudders to think of what could have happened had this pass been under Pakistan’s occupation in the 1990s. We lost Chhamb since we were preparing to launch an offensive. Before we could launch, Pakistan’s 7 Infantry Division, with an armoured brigade, came into Chhamb to capture Akhnoor. Our intelligence had no clue. Nevertheless, we halted the offensive at the Munnawar Tawi and prevented further ingress, which would have cut off communications to the Rajouri–Poonch sector. As professionals, we must admire the brilliant live-wire Pakistani general, who led this offensive. He was killed around December 10, 1971, or so. Such leaders win victories for their nations.

We captured a large chunk of territory in the Shakargarh Bulge, basically to safeguard NH1A, our communication into the rest of J&K. This was despite Pakistan having an armoured division in that sector. Our army captured some areas in Punjab, and a large amount of territory in the desert. Very few know or remember that we had only one armoured division in 1971, whereas Pakistan had two. It would be obvious that the utilisation of resources was better by our senior leadership, on both fronts.

These leaders were professionals. Professionalism is not acquired overnight. The army has to maintain a tradition of professionalism and quality to produce leaders at the right time. The process starts with the

selection of the raw material and continues throughout the service. Connected is the importance of correct selection for promotion based on objective reporting. Professionals breed professionalism. But at present, the spiral appears to be going down.

Selection

Selection is a matter of supply and demand. Applicants are aplenty. The shortage is of quality candidates. For every entry, we take the top few of a merit list. If higher grade applicants apply, we would get better material. Our selection process is so reliable that the candidates' employability in the corporate world improves if he is selected by the Services Selection Board (SSB). So some candidates apply to clear the SSB and then join a civil firm. For some entries, vacancies remain unfilled as the quality is too low.

Taking the case of 1971, for instance, the liberation of Bangladesh has no parallel post World War II; and needs no elucidation. As professionals, we need to appreciate our achievements on the Western Front as well.

Pre-Commission Training

The foundation of military leaders is laid at the training academies. This training is crucial, being the first exposure to the armed forces for most cadets and because of their impressionable age. The British realised this. Prior to independence, one finds regular visits to the Military Academy by the commanders-in-chief in India, and heads of states. Even during the War, Field Marshal Auchinleck could find time to visit the academy at least twice a year.

The aim of pre-commission training is to develop the personalities of cadets who come from different backgrounds, to become disciplined military leaders of high character, who are both highly professional and good human beings. It is not only physical and mental development that is important but the development of the complete personality, learning leadership skills. Building of character qualities is most important. Leadership training involves learning to train subordinate leaders, and not just followers. If we lay greater emphasis on character qualities and leadership skills, we would get better senior leaders when these batches come up.

Cadets imbibe more from what they observe than from theoretical lessons. They observe the conduct and behaviour of all the officers posted at the

academies, instructors and non-instructors. If pre-commission training is seen as a key result area (KRA), senior officers should be hand-picked for the academies. The behaviour of the platoon and company commanders is directly influenced by the commanding officers (COs) who initiate their reports. If the battalion commanders are mediocre, the output of the young officers will be no better. The need for high grade senior officers at the academies should be obvious.

Post-Commission Training

The behaviour of young officers at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), who are the best in the Indian Army, displays the grooming in the units where the officers spend the first few years. From what I have seen, it is a cause for worry in most arms and Services. The CO is responsible to 'groom' young officers. What grooming can he do when the basic training is inadequate? With a tremendous shortage of officers, he is tempted to launch the officer into operations straightaway. With formation commanders looking for 'results', grooming is low priority. In peace stations, the routine is crammed with formation activities and formation requirements. These keep the junior leaders away from their sub-units. Formation events take priority over the training of junior leaders! I don't blame the COs; the atmosphere in the formation leaves the CO with no choice. Instructions are issued, on paper, to leave COs to train their units. Very few can ensure implementation.

Training and Selection of Senior Leaders

To train senior leaders, we conduct a few courses and orientation programmes. Though all these are very useful, the quality of senior officers cannot improve by attending them. High grade senior officers can only develop in a professional atmosphere under better quality seniors. A tradition of excellence has to be maintained, with periodic feedback. The five and seven star cultures that have crept in have been accepted, if not encouraged, by the seniors. Officers utilising these lose moral authority to preach austerity or simplicity. Similarly, parochialism has been on the rise, even at the highest level. The situation has deteriorated so much that most junior officers do not take seniors' moral lectures seriously. A major KRA of the senior officers should be to ensure the right atmosphere in formations and units below them.

The instructions on interaction with the media are quite clear, yet we find some officers projecting themselves rather than the organisations. "Service before Self" is not their motto. It is a good thing that this normally backfires and

you find these very officers being criticised by the media after some time. Yet their successors come and repeat the same mistake.

Our officers are promoted to executive and directional levels too late. The navy manages this better than the other two Services. This can be rectified only by restricting selection rates. When we promote by the dozen, as we have been doing lately, we delay promotions and dilute standards. By the time a division or corps commander settles down to really contribute, his tenure is over. Younger COs and formation commanders will do wonders for the army due to their ages and longer tenures. However, promotions at a younger age mean lowering the selection rates. Since the organisation cannot absorb so many officers who would get rejected, there has to be lateral absorption in the ranks they hold. This can be easily organised by the government, if it has the will. We cannot find an answer in-house.

Some senior officers are 'paper tigers', people who play safe. They believe that issuing of orders and standard operating procedures (SOPs) ends their responsibility. They do not have confidence that their verbal instructions would be followed. Too many instructions also curb the initiative of the juniors and lead to demotivation. Luckily, in operational conditions, mutual trust is higher, and paper work less. E-mail has still not become popular. The more senior an officer, the more is the effort required to ensure implementation of instructions. Implementation is also low when juniors feel that most senior officers are not serious about their instructions. Some instructions are given only to impress.

One sure way of improving leadership is to get assessment by juniors as well. Not only will it promote professionalism and functioning in happier teams, it will save a lot of embarrassment to the Service by providing safety valves. Senior officers who have nothing to hide would support this. When discussing improvement of the higher direction of war (and peace), we must also think of training civilians handling defence affairs. This would reduce damage due to their ignorance.

To Summarise

The importance of senior leadership must be realised. We are lucky to have had excellent professional and upright senior officers in the past. It is vital for the armed forces that we have these in the future too. Building of character and leadership skills must receive the highest priority during pre-commission training. For this, high grade senior officers must be posted to the training academies.

Post-commission development of officers in units must be a KRA in formations. Formation commanders must be responsible to ensure this within units. It is essential to maintain a clean, professional atmosphere in formations.

Character qualities can be developed only by the exemplary behaviour of senior officers. To reduce the age of officers at the executive and directional levels, lateral absorption on deputation or assured employment elsewhere is essential. If the government shirks this responsibility, the ages cannot be reduced. The most effective measure to improve the quality of senior officers would be to formalise a system of feedback from juniors. It would help if civilian officers posted to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) or serving within the Services are given some orientation training to improve their awareness of the Services.

Conclusion

I wish to clarify that while nobody is perfect, most senior officers are still high grade. The worry is that despite going through so many selections, the inadequate ones are there and worse that the number is increasing. Being better than the civil services and the politicians is no consolation. The industry does not spend much time in training senior managers. They can throw out the bad ones and recruit the good ones at every level. The same is not possible in the armed forces that must produce their own senior leadership. Senior leaders cannot be produced suddenly in senior ranks; the process starts right from the selection, goes through pre and post-commission training, and then development during the whole career. Deliberate and positive steps, explained earlier, are essential to improve quality at every stage. Only then will we be able to maintain quality in the armed forces, of whom the nation has been proud so far. Service conditions have to be made more attractive to attract the quality youth and look after them throughout their service and even after retirement. If the government cannot do this, the nation must be informed that the responsibility for the consequences rests with them.