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Lessons in leadership

Written by **Dr Ian Stewart and David W Mellor** on 1 November 2013 in **Feature**

Ian Stewart and David W Mellor set out what organisations can learn from the Army's approach to preparing leaders at Sandhurst



In 2012, the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst celebrated 200 years of preparing officers for the British Army. Its former cadets include Winston Churchill, King Hussein of Jordan and, more recently, Princes William and Harry. A national institution - the epithet 'Sandhurst' is something of a synonym for preparing leaders - the academy attracts attention from all manner of organisations: foreign militaries, the public services and a great number from the private sector. But whatever the nature of the organisations or the context in which they operate, the question they all pose is the same: what lessons can we learn from Sandhurst about developing leaders?

Enquiries about Sandhurst from professional trainers often begin with a request to see the academy's 'leadership model' or perhaps its leadership competency framework. This is a reasonable request; HR and L&D specialists toil long and hard to develop such tools. And across the Army, like any other big organisation, similar documents and statements exist. But Sandhurst has tended to stand slightly apart from these processes. While much has been written about the academy - and various key texts are required reading for the cadets - there is no leadership 'model' as such, at least not in the sense of a codified statement.

What does exist at Sandhurst, however, is a powerful shared knowledge of how to prepare leaders, an understanding rooted in an identifiable methodological approach and informed by a set of explicit - and implicit - principles.

The Sandhurst approach is, in part, a masterclass in developmental intervention: individuals are placed in an unfamiliar and challenging environment in which their usual skills and knowledge aren't sufficient, where they must forge new and qualitatively different relationships and in which they must arrive at judgment and action - demonstrated in the high levels of self-discipline, self-regulation and personal resilience that Sandhurst graduates exhibit.

There are also a range of leadership 'tools' and techniques that have been developed to guide and support leadership - 'mission command' (a way of empowering subordinates while holding them accountable) and various problem-solving tools that are used to make sense of complex and ambiguous situations.

But, while these and other aspects of the training deserve to be studied, the key to Sandhurst's success may lie in a set of underlying principles that drive its unique combination of profound personal and professional development, the acquisition of key technical skills and knowledge, and organisational acculturation. These principles have become so deeply embedded in the academy's daily practice that they have become business as usual.

This article is a modest attempt to identify some of these principles and reveal the lessons they may hold for training and development in the commercial sector.

Principle 1: Being a leader comes first

While the year-long Sandhurst course introduces and develops the professional knowledge, skills and art of soldiery, this knowledge and these skills are understood as vehicles through which leadership is exercised. Leadership, the cadet learns, is the key to applying these skills wisely in the best interests of the organisation. So far, so obvious, we might say, but privileging 'leadership' in this way is not what the newly minted manager in a commercial environment often experiences. More usually, he (having already demonstrated knowledge and skills important to the business) now finds himself promoted to a position of responsibility for others. At this stage, and only if the business is willing to invest, might his formal 'leadership development' begin. As one senior manager put it, "I'm now being asked to do some leading, but I'm not sure how to lead and, anyway, I'm an accountant not a leader".

For a Sandhurst cadet, his professional identity as soldier *and* leader is forged simultaneously. Taking up that leadership identity is the key because with this identity comes a clear sense of his role and responsibilities, which are reinforced constantly during his training, in formal periods of instruction and also in the extensive simulations in which they take part.

These simulations are primarily in the form of field exercises. A cadet will spend around a third of his training on exercises during which he will rehearse core military skills and will also develop his sense of what leadership means in the Army. This won't be confined to leadership at the junior officer level. In the course of his year at Sandhurst, the cadet will play the parts of a range of ranks from private soldier to senior officer. And these role plays won't be confined to technical military knowledge and

“*The Sandhurst approach is, in part, a masterclass in developmental intervention*”

skills: many hours are devoted to rehearsing the conduct of personnel interviews, dealing with welfare issues and developing general man management skills.

For the Army, leadership is an *input*: a well-articulated set of priorities and values that are expressly commissioned to drive the organisation forward in specific ways. For many businesses, leadership is, perhaps, more often seen as an *outcome* - recognition that senior posts come with increased responsibilities around decision-making, staff welfare, communication etc and that this will require these managers be schooled and developed to exercise the leadership the business needs.

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Principle 2: Create stewards who will promote and protect the best of your organisation's traditions and values

Visitors to Sandhurst are struck by its architecture, ritual, uniformity and tradition: walls are decorated with images of campaigns stretching back four centuries; the names of former officers are prominent and well-studied; the staff and cadets you encounter are smartly dressed and go out of their way to welcome you.

This environment plays an important role in developing a collective, shared understanding of the Army's culture, identity and traditions. To lead soldiers, officers must be acculturated to the Army's values (both formal and informal), its daily practices and codes of conduct, and subscribe to its outlook. In developing their sense of continuing a tradition of leaders, cadets become stewards with the responsibility to promote and protect the best of the Army's culture and practices.

A key aspect of this is upholding the Army's values and standards. Sandhurst places values at the front and centre of its daily practice. A cadet is unlikely to lose his place because he can't read a map, or at least he'll be given plenty of time to develop the skill, but a lack of integrity can see him dismissed instantly.

The most important assessment of his progress is against his record of living out the values.

The foregrounding of values - rarely does a lesson not involve a consideration of values in some way - serves to create a culture in which values are actively accessed and referenced. Indeed, they are often used to support acts of leadership or followership; the 'peer policing' that is so evident at the academy is often leveraged around a value being ignored or not lived out to the observer's satisfaction. This contrasts somewhat with commercial life, where often 'values' never get beyond a bland statement of generic positive statements and where personal values are often kept firmly in the private sphere.

The military learned long ago the advantages of a distinctive set of values around which service life and personal motives and behaviour could be ordered, organised and understood. The current appetite for authenticity and a healthy overlap of mutually supportive personal and organisational values would appear to be evidence that the commercial sector is learning the same lesson.

Principle 3: Develop leadership alongside developing leaders, and develop the leadership your organisation needs right now

A key question when considering leadership development is whether the primary intention is to develop individual leaders or to create a collective leadership. Is the key task to invest in developing the human capital of individuals or the social capital that a group of leaders offers? Both are valid and, in any programme, both will be attended to; it is a question of balance.

Sandhurst is, primarily, an investment in the *social* capital of a collective leadership: a community of leaders that share a common understanding of the organisation and its objectives, and that can be relied on to make reference to the same set of core values and priorities. This provides the organisation with a powerful means by which to support, maintain or, if required, change its culture and practices.

Sandhurst provides the Army with a means of managing its culture. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan forced Sandhurst to reflect on the 'constants and variables' of preparing the next generation of officers: to differentiate between those priorities and practices, skills and knowledge that must be retained and refreshed and those that need to be reconfigured or replaced. This is a difficult and complex process. While an army, like any business, must respond to changes in its operating environment, it, like the most successful businesses, must be ahead of the competition.

Sandhurst's emphasis on developing a collective leadership is rather different from much commercial practice where the emphasis is squarely on the individual - a plethora of psychometrics, 360° surveys, personal coaching and mentoring interventions. While both the individual and collective need to be attended to, Sandhurst reminds us that an overly individual-centred approach may not be the right one where a business needs a clear and consistent cadre of leaders sharing a set of goals and priorities in order to lead the culture consistently.

Principle 4: Don't leave leadership development entirely to trainers

At Sandhurst, the training and development of cadets is not left to generalist trainers or facilitators. Carefully chosen men and women skilled in the organisation's core activity - war fighting - serve as instructors and role models. There are some exceptions. Where specialist knowledge is required, specialists - academics, medics, lawyers etc - provide that input.

The effect is to pass on not only the required skills and know-how, but also to role-model leadership behaviours. Many of the key instructors are non-commissioned officers, who the cadet will out-rank the day he is commissioned, but, during his training, will pass on key military skills as well as providing the soldier's viewpoint.

This blend of practitioner leaders, technical operators and subject matter experts to teach novice leaders ensures the quality, relevance and credibility of the training, a lesson for those commissioning developmental interventions in the commercial world.

Principle 5: Embed the enduring priority of leadership

Building a leadership capability rests on being able to articulate the kind of leadership your business requires. And leadership is fundamentally about priorities. Not only does a leader have an obligation to help 'make sense' of a situation, he also has an obligation to give it 'meaning', to communicate through word and deed what is most important and why.

The overriding priority of the Sandhurst graduate is articulated in the academy's motto 'serve to lead'. It is a simple and potent message: the men and women you are responsible for are your first priority; their needs and interests come before yours. This constantly reinforces a simple, enduring truth: only by leading through others can the endeavour succeed. It is a lesson that is easily crowded out in a large enterprise in which leaders are invariably 'results' driven; it's easy to overlook the relationships that not only 'get the job done' but maintain and develop the culture and practices of the business.

Maintaining and developing the culture helps explain the consistent emphasis on leadership behaviours such as taking responsibility, showing a sense of purpose and being decisive, as well as personal qualities of showing 'grace under fire' and maintaining a sense of humour and perspective.

Principle 6: It is just plain you

Viscount Slim, who served with great distinction in both world wars, once defined leadership as "that mixture of example, persuasion and compulsion which makes men do what you want them to do. ...I should say it is the projection of personality. It is the most intensely personal thing in the world, because it is just plain you" .

Sandhurst graduates, who've learned of the centrality of leadership in their every decision, who've become accustomed to playing a part in a collective endeavour that has a clear organisational purpose, and for whom their personal values and those of the service have become so deeply enmeshed as to become indistinguishable, may well agree

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