Case Study: Leader-Follower Principle At Sea

The traditional Leader-Follower principle is used in Navies around the world, however with each younger generation requiring more motivation, is there a better way to lead? The following report discusses the challenges of leading a warship consisting of over 190 personnel in a highly challenging, flexible, unforgiving and relentless environment.

Life at Sea

Sailing the seas in an almost 4000-tonne grey warship, bristling with armaments and technology is an exciting prospect. At just over 118 meters in length, 15 meters wide at her greatest breadth, and over 190 personnel embarked; conditions are cramped, work is unending, decisions are made on your behalf and there is whole other world outside the steel hull that cannot be experienced due to poor connectivity.

Sleeping arrangements range from single berths for the Commanding Officer and Heads of Department to spaces accommodating up to 16 people to sleep and often only 4 heads (toilets) and showers shared between 30+ people. Recreational spaces are limited and divided between officers, sailors and then by rank.

A warship runs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and there is no downtime. At sea, a warship never sleeps and must remain fully operational to ensure the safety of the crew and the ship to achieve the mission. For those lucky enough to be “day hands”, a term given to those who do not watchkeep, the day usually starts at 0640 and does not end until late into the evening. Watchkeepers on the other hand work shifts, usually 4 hours on and 8 hours off, but their off-watch time still requires them to complete their ancillary jobs.

There is a common saying for those in the Navy and that is “remain flexible”, which summarises the idea that the plan is ever-evolving, and what was planned yesterday is nothing like what it looks like today. A warships mission or scheduled activities constantly changes, resulting in changing of departure and return dates.

The notation that the Navy operates on the term 'For Queen and Country' is not evident by younger generations. Their motivations are significantly different from previous generations; a combination of self-interest and a perceived lack of understanding of a common good, such as experienced by those in the World Wars. To lead the younger generations a new approach may need to be taken.

Leaders and Followers

All militaries are built on the premise that leadership is about controlling people, dividing people into two groups: leaders and followers. The Leader-Follower principle has been extremely effective over centuries for physical work but is not ideal for more cognitive work or people who enjoy thinking. When people are treated as followers, they act like followers; limited decision-making authority, little incentive to utilise their intellect or provide alternate means.

In the context of running a warship, the Leader-Follower principle is critically viewed for following a standard operating procedure such as to recover a person in the water or to fight a fire within an engineering space. A leader placed in a position of power, namely by rank or position in the crew provides the orders/guidance and everyone else follows. This has been the basis behind all militaries across the world and is ingrained in everyday duties. A regimental approach provides discipline, structure and is decisive in achieving the mission, or so it was thought.

Followership is described as the ability to take direction well, to get in line behind a program, to be part of a team and to deliver on what is expected of you (McCallum, 2013). Barbara Kellerman (2007) provides a topology for five types of followers, each unique in their own right and within the Navy. Followers need to be managed appropriately, understanding how each follower is motivated is critical in ensuring a cohesive Leader-Follower team. The question remains, is the Leader-Follower principle still valid in the modern Navy?

In the book Turn the Ship Around: A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders by David Marquet (2015), he discusses a Leader-Leader principle; truly empowering and providing responsibility to all ranks by allowing each person to take control of their responsibilities and metrics, refocusing their efforts to complete work that will benefit the end goal/mission and play to each person’s strengths. The principle is based on four primary objectives:

Control: Leaders must give control to followers, which can be quite hard as certain positions within a ship are burdened with higher headquarter requirements and the acceptance of risk on behalf of the Ship. Giving control, and allowing employees to develop their metrics to reach a goal or mission takes the pressure off the leader and puts accountability on each person of the crew. This provides each crew member with the power to meet their own goals that they define and a stronger sense of accomplishment in achieving the mission.

Competence: Provide the crew with the tools they need to be competent in their roles. By identifying and evaluating all the tools available to the crew will allow them a chance to succeed. This means reviewing current training, technology assets and personal effects the Navy has to offer for each crew member. Providing the best tools will provide a higher success rate for each crew member as a leader in their scope of work.

Clarity: Provide clear and concise goals or missions and then repeat the message and goals over and over. The repetition will enforce certain behaviours that are needed to drive each crew member to meet their goals and mission. From the top-down, the leadership team must be open and transparent with their actions and provide clear direction for the crew to succeed. It is also just as important to recognise each crew member when they are working towards the same ultimate goal or mission, and that each and everyone's actions are equally as important.

Courage: Changing to a Leader-Leader principle requires courage from every member of the crew and those outside the ship. The transfer of trust starts from the moment each crew member is engaged and provided with the necessary tools to succeed. Altering from a well-defined Leader-Follower principle to a Leader-Leader principle will not be issue-free, but the ability to recognise issues and develop ways to overcome them is key. The critical piece for leaders is to trust the process, adapt to the changes, and continue to let each crew member govern their achievement.

Adopting the Leader-Leader principle would truly empower all ranks within the ship to meet the mission head-on, promoting dynamic thinking and ownership of problems. This would remove the followership mentality from the crew, alleviating many of the limitation's followership described by Barbara Kellerman (2007).

Motivation, Mentoring and Coaching

In the Leader-Leader principle, one of the key requirements is providing the team members with tools to successfully meet their goals and the mission. While tools might refer to their skillsets or assets available to them, one area that is often overlooked is motivation and coaching.

In 1985, Deci & Ryan developed the Self -Determination Theory (SDT); a context for the study of human motivation and personality, by providing a formal theory that defines intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation.

Intrinsic motivation represents behaviour that is driven by internal rewards controlled by inherent interests, enjoyment and satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation or controlled motivation are activities that produce specific outcomes in terms of rewards or avoided punishments.

Understanding what motivates someone is critical in understanding how to best lead them into achieving their goals and the mission. The Leader-Follower principle in the military relies heavily on extrinsic motivation, however transitioning to a Leader-Leader principle would elicit more intrinsic motivations, resulting in the crew wishing to lead themselves.

For intrinsic motivations to be elicited from younger generations, a more humanistic and personable leader needs to be developed. The first step in this change is by providing formal education to Naval Officers and Senior Sailors in coaching and mentoring techniques. There are multiple Navy delivered leadership courses, there is however extremely limited courses on coaching and mentoring.

Coaching and mentoring would enable the humanistic approach to leadership; affording current leaders the ability to understand the motivations of followers. Once identified, leaders can tailor the empowerment of each crew member enabling a sense of worth and ownership. This can be as simple as allowing sailors to identify problems and then allowing them to solve the problem; much easier said than done in a Leader-Follower driven organisation.

Providing each crew member with a sense of self-worth and the ability to take actions that contribute to their goals, and the ultimate goal and mission of the ship is the key to a Leader-Leader lead Navy.

Summary

The Navy has survived since inception on the Leader-Follower principle, tried and tested through war and peacetime operations. This report has examined the complications of operating a warship under the Leader-Follower principle with younger generations and has explored the alternate Leader-Leader principle enabled through coaching and mentoring.

References

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