Shaping a New Leadership Culture
Development and introduction of a new appraisal system for military cadre

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The Armed Forces in Times of Change

For decades the Swiss Army had been focused on a possible escalation of the Cold War: Expecting an invasion from the East, Switzerland was ready to take up a defensive combat at the border with a militia army numbering over 600,000 troops. Representing a large part of the male population, the army thus was solidly backed by the Swiss society. In the eighties, however, this comfortable position slowly eroded for two main reasons: The former "sacred cow" was perceived more and more as a rather cumbersome and costly organisation, and with the fall of the Iron Curtain the classical image of the enemy began to fade. This view was endorsed in a referendum held in November 1989 when 35.6% of the Swiss electorate wanted to do away with the Swiss Armed Forces.

As a consequence the "Armed Forces 95" reform was initiated, which brought troop strength down to lower levels. Furthermore, traditional military training received a more civilian touch and leadership methods started changing: The training manual "Menschenorientierte Führung" (people-oriented leadership) became the official handbook for military officers. Additionally, a new selection procedure was introduced for professional officers which put much more emphasis on social competences. Political changes and weaknesses in the implementation of "Armed Forces 95" soon triggered another, even more radical, reform which, dubbed "Armed Forces XXI", was the most comprehensive ever undertaken since the start of the Federal Army. The new structures came into force at the beginning of 2004.

Mental Changes

On paper, organisational changes always look impressive if not at least plausible. Its effects can be underpinned by hard facts. What is less tangible and subject to highly complex processes is the change which is brought about in the minds of those concerned. Many people's personal sense of security is undermined by such drastic reforms; and many even reject changes, so that it often takes a while for all the measures to be fully implemented. Such a difficult environment requires leaders and managers who not only carry out the reforms but also play an active role in providing their subordinates with support and guidance. It is thus vital not only to come up with leadership principles but to enhance a military leadership culture and deal with the decisive processes (Hoenle, 1996). How then can the target culture be influenced in such a way as to bring about harmony between what was originally intended and what is perceived by those concerned?

Continuing education can bring about essential conditions; but it seems that this alone is not enough. Only through the setting of examples in a credible and regular fashion can one finally bring about a lasting acceptance of the desired values and norms (Jacobsen, 1996).

Studies on "cultural change" claim that the vital elements of which a culture is composed are transmitted to the members of the organisation by a series of primary processes. The following five elements seem to be important to military life:

1. Everything that is observed, assessed and checked in the organisation
2. Reactions by leaders to problematic events and crises
3. What is being taught and what is being lived
4. Criteria used to attribute reward and status
5. Criteria for recruitment, selection, promotion and dismissal

It can be noticed that three of the above mentioned points (1, 4 and 5) refer to the appraisal process. Therefore, it seems that the applied appraisal procedures are particularly well suited as a starting point to consciously influence leadership culture.

The following consideration shows how important it is to adapt the appraisal criteria to the desired leadership culture: If the Mission Statement of an organisation states that creativity and criticism are welcome, it is counterproductive to require and reward an attitude which is based totally on obedience. Under such circumstances people are unlikely to move into the desired direction.

The importance of the appraisal procedure for the shaping of the desired culture is further emphasized by the fact that communication is the most direct means of influencing culture in an organisation and that communication is a central part of the appraisal process.

Appraisal Process in the Swiss Armed Forces

With the introduction of the Assessment Center (Annen 2003) for the selection of professional officers and NCOs, important and visible steps had been taken. Yet the appraisal procedure in military schools and courses was a different story: The guidelines for the appraisal process, which looked rather outdated when compared with its civilian counterpart, had hardly ever been critically examined by those who applied them. And although it had been the object of various scientific research projects, the well founded suggestions to change the system showed little or no effect.

Looking at these circumstances from a scientific perspective this situation which concerned military cadres had to be changed eventually. Besides the above mentioned fact that the tool of appraisal is one of the few tangible means of influencing leadership culture, it should not be forgotten that via this instrument young NCOs and officers receive targeted feedback on their leadership activities and that by carrying out appraisals themselves they can gain valuable experience and insight using this important leadership tool, which is not without profit in their civilian careers.

Based on this evidence three research issues have to be discussed:

1. What should a modern qualification system for militia cadres look like in order to contribute to a leadership culture as well as the development of a leadership personality?
2. How can the quality of an appraisal system be assessed and how good is the new support-oriented appraisal instrument?
3. Which factors play a role during the process of change?

Doing research to bring about change

Since the beginning of the seventies, several attempts had been made to adjust the appraisal instrument to current requirements, but each attempt to implement change eventually failed. Therefore, *action research* was finally chosen as a strategy aimed at bringing noticeable change in the field of practice.

Basically, all systematic methods of action research comprise two phases: First they diagnose "how things are", and then they suggest "how to proceed" (Prengel, 1997).This sequence of reflection and action is quite frequently portrayed as a linear process. However, this does not do justice to consistently applied action research – and if one speaks of a cyclical procedure, this gives rise to a false impression of revolving in circles. It is only when the strategy of procedure is understood in the sense of Stringer (1996) as a spiral, that the salient characteristics of action research oriented procedure becomes clear: progress in cyclical actions.
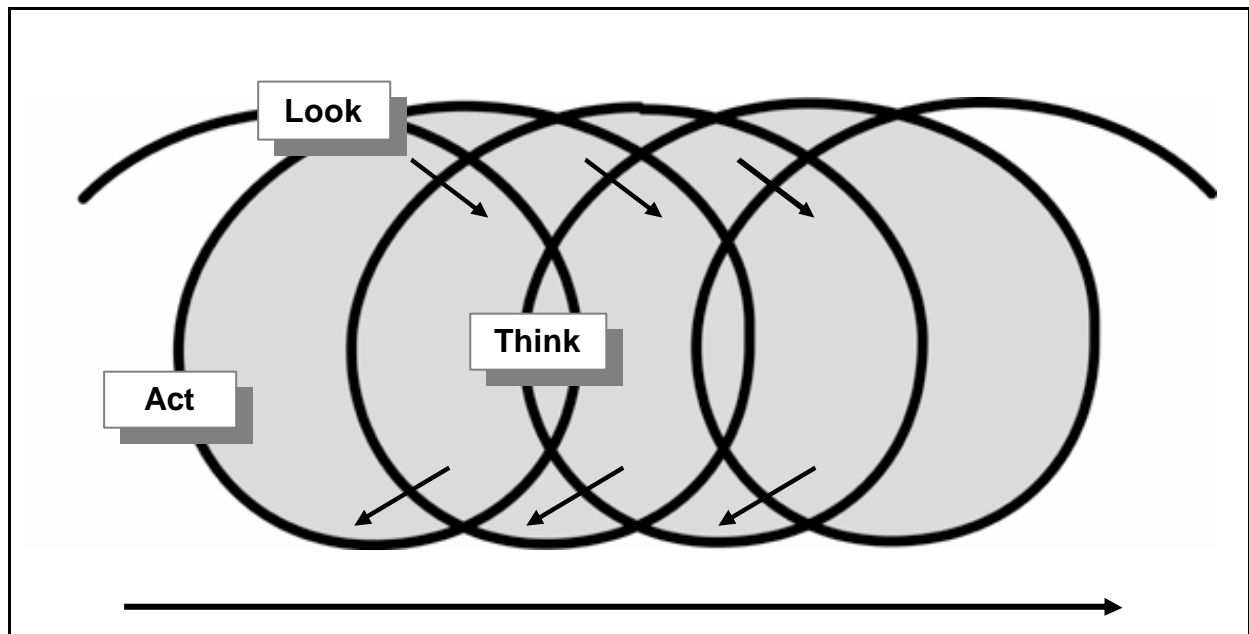

Fig. 1: Action research oriented procedure (Annen, 2000; 2002)

While considering the above mentioned methodological guidelines and quality criteria, various data collection techniques such as the *questionnaire*, *interview*, *expert rating* and *analysis of documents* were applied. Without giving a detailed account of the (tentative) results, the main goal of the following chapter is to show what consequences have been drawn regarding the further procedure.

Development of a new appraisal instrument

Phase 1

Look
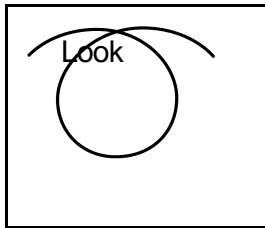
Establishing the facts

Methods:
- Analysis of documents (current appraisal system)
- Written survey (in all recruit and officer schools; n = 1082)
- Semi-structured interview (with school commanders)

Findings

The current appraisal system is well accepted by those involved. People welcome enhancement, but without expressing an urgent need for something new.

Leadership is often perceived differently from what is intended. Consequently, people who carry out the appraisal assess the procedure in a significantly more positive way than those who are appraised.

When it comes to the 360°-feedback and the importance of the feedback session, the fear of a time consuming procedure and a partial limitation of the power of the former single "appraiser" become evident.
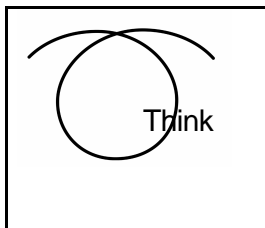
Consequences

Some effort has to be made to convince people to introduce and apply this new procedure.

A better transparency and a higher participation in the appraisal process is needed.

A practical tool had to be developed, which clearly showed the advantages of additional appraisal perspectives.
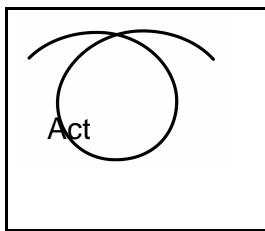
Phase 2

Think

Planning and development

Methods
- Group discussion (with professional officers and NGOs)
- Analysis of documents (modern appraisal instruments in different settings)
- Member check (submitting the new forms to practitioners "for approval")

Procedure

A new appraisal system was created in cooperation with professional cadres of five military bases. The result was an open appraisal form which clearly distinguishes between behavioural dimensions and measurable achievements. The person who carries out the appraisal has to set down and assess certain concrete examples of behaviour. Additionally there is enough space to list hints which would support the desired behaviour. The subordinate fills in the same form as self-appraisal. At the feedback session, the two sides compare their notes and the hints for support can be transformed into concrete measures.

Phase 3

First round

Methods

- instruction / evaluation meeting (with all the officers who are involved in the project)
- statistical data (systematic evaluation of the completed new forms)
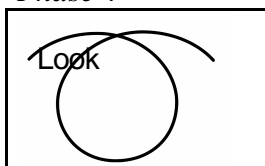- written survey (in addition to evaluation meeting)

Procedure

The new appraisal system was used and evaluated in the officers' and recruits' schools which took part in the test.

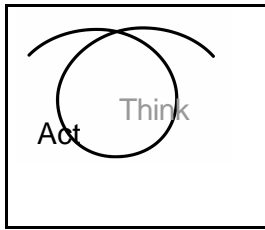| *Findings*	*Consequences*
It was confirmed that self-appraisal is not of lesser quality than appraisal carried out by a superior. The data showed a certain self-criticism and an astonishingly stable self-image.	Self-appraisal will continue to be part of the appraisal process.
The feedback session went very well according to the persons involved.	There is a need to practice the feedback session; enough time should be allotted.
Talks with the users and a questionnaire furnished information concerning social validity. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, but not better than for former procedures. The chances of this enlarged instrument were only partially recognized and the procedure was considered to be very time-consuming.	The time for the procedure must be reduced without jeopardizing qualitative aims. Further effort to convince the persons involved is still required.

Phase 4

Reflection

Methods

- analysis of documents (completed forms and feedback questionnaires
- member check (results are discussed with the practitioners involved)

Findings	*Consequences*
At the discussion with the professional NCOs and officers, reduction of the time needed for the new system was a central issue.	A document with suggestions of formulations was added, while the part with the hints for support was simplified.

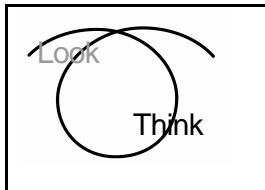| *Phase 5*	*Methods*
Second round	- instruction / evaluation meetings (with all those concerned) - statistical data (systematic evaluation of the new completed forms) - written survey (in addition to evaluation meeting)

Findings	*Consequences*
Feedbacks by those involved were similar to the first round: They were mostly positive, appreciated the chances for self-appraisal and commented favourably on the frankness and honesty at the feedback session.	There is no need to fundamentally change the form or content.
The efforts aimed at reducing time did not prove effective.	The time load has to be considered carefully.

Phase 6	*Methods*
Reflection and outcome	- analysis of documents - member check - research report (comprehensive conclusions and recommendations to introduce the system to all the armed forces)

Findings	*Consequences*
see phase 5	In order to reduce the time load substantially, each behavioural dimension in the form was illustrated with concrete examples, which were generated from the qualitative evaluation of the forms filled in so far. Thus, the appraisers are relieved of a load of written work.

Finally, the problem of time was not a main concern, and the positive elements of the new system were better noticed. By the same token, the content of the form can be considered as a job profile for the cadres of the Swiss Armed Forces.

The new „support-oriented appraisal"-instrument

Two years after the start of the project we have come up with an appraisal system for military cadres which puts more emphasis on the evaluation of social competences and thus takes into account the idea of a person-oriented leadership. It also compares favourably with modern civilian appraisal tools.

The direct user will notice the following changes (Annen, 2000):

- Content and layout of the form: The appraisal dimensions are further defined by behavioural characteristics, which clearly leads away from the former procedure which was focused on traits. There is enough space on the form to add further personal

remarks for each dimension, and at the bottom there is space reserved for a list of possible support-oriented measures.

- Self-appraisal: Those who are appraised are asked to write down their behaviour and performance on a similar form and to take it with them to the feedback session.

- Importance of the feedback session: The above mentioned conditions prevent a one-way communication by the superior. What ensues is a dialogue the success of which is that the subordinate also assumes a level of responsibility.

The „support-oriented appraisal" has not only become an integral part of the schools which took part in the test phase, at the initiative of the school commanders, it was also introduced at three more military bases. Thereafter, detailed instructional material was produced; and the new manual for qualification in the Swiss Armed Forces, which came into force in January 2004, now integrates the core elements of a "support-oriented appraisal".

Detailed evaluation results have already been published and are thus open to scientific discussion. Since one aim of this paper is to illustrate the effectiveness of action research oriented procedure regarding processes of change, findings pertaining to that field will be discussed in the following passage.

Factors of the process of change
Processes of change contain some fundamental characteristics the consideration of which has proved useful for similar projects:
- *Top-down:* The highest level of command has to be favourable to the project, so that the researcher can receive the necessary leeway.
- *Commitment:* The practitioners at the front must be willing to actively cooperate and add their thoughts. They must be willing to spend extra time and take the view of the user seriously.
- *Visible effects:* The involvement of the users mustn't be a pro forma thing. Only those who are taken seriously and whose contributions are taken into consideration will identify fully with the project.
- *Communication:* In order to bridge the gap between science and a system in practice, the researcher needs good communication and negotiation skills, he has to be familiar with the environment and persevering enough to keep the project running.
- *Guidelines:* The principles and guidelines of action research are a valuable help when obstacles from the side of the users tend to distract the view of the full picture.

It must be added that the official introduction of the new appraisal procedure did not go off without a hitch. Many practitioners, especially those who were not involved in the development stage, showed reactions from incomprehension to even open resistance. These reactions were not unexpected as the issuing of the regulation did not follow the "look - think – act" pattern. Many users thus were badly prepared for the fundamental changes. Arguments against the new tool were similar to those voiced during the project phase. The experience thus gained helped to react in a systematic and effective way. Targeted information and training helped to ease tensions. It should be said that those who welcomed the reforms of "Armed Forces XXI" also generally showed a more positive attitude towards the new appraisal system: They seized the opportunity the new system presents and implemented it at once in a constructive way.

Conclusion

Appraisal procedures are not only an important leadership tool; they also have a massive influence on leadership culture. The present paper has shown how an appraisal tool has to be shaped so that it can contribute to a desirable leadership culture. The development and the testing of a new procedure also exemplify how new tools, which are aimed at shaping leadership culture, can find their way into everyday practice. The shaping of a special culture requires a sound scientific basis, but it is wise to consider from the start how new procedures can be implemented "at the front". Leadership culture is not a matter of mission statements but of viable procedures as well as the committed and dedicated leadership of those who work as credible role models "at the front".

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