

The Challenge of Systematic Leadership Development in the Singapore Armed Forces¹

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Abstract:

The spectrum of missions that the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has to deal with has expanded in recent years. At the same time, the SAF is transforming itself to exploit the rapidly emerging possibilities presented by networked new technologies. This paper describes two frameworks recently adopted by the SAF to enhance leadership development. These are: a framework for leadership that includes values, competencies, styles, the "self", and the leadership "context", and, a framework for leadership development that includes the "self", "superiors and instructors", "curriculum", "developmental tools", "peers", and a "climate of learning" in the organisation.

About the SAF

When Singapore gained its independence in 1965, one of the first tasks of the government was to establish a credible defence force to secure the sovereignty of our young Nation. In 1967, our government instituted a system of compulsory National Service to form the Army – the National Service system has remained to this day as a cornerstone of the Singapore Armed Forces.

Today, the SAF is the military arm of the broader "Total Defence" strategy of Singapore. It is an integrated military force with three Services – Army, Navy and Air Force, reporting to a Joint Staff commanded by the Chief of Defence. What began as a small force with only two battalions in the 60s has grown into a much larger military force with several Divisions, and a reasonable-sized Air Force and Navy.

Today, all male youth still enlist for military service at the age of 18 where they serve for 2 to 2 ½ years full time, and then "graduate" into the

reserves, or what we call "Operationally-Ready National Service". The total strength of the SAF is 350,000, with full-time regulars forming about less than 10% of the force.

SAF's Changing Spectrum of Operations

Until the 90s, the SAF was largely structured for conventional military operations. However, things have changed since the mid-90s. During the 90s, the SAF found itself increasingly involved in UN peacekeeping missions, especially playing medical or observer/advisor roles – Namibia in 1989, Kuwait from 1991 to 2003, Angola in 91/92, Cambodia in 92/93, Afghanistan in 97/98. In 1999, we provided medical and logistics support as part of a UN-sanctioned international force led by Australia (INTERFET) to stabilise the situation in East Timor which was seeking independence from Indonesia. The total number of personnel who served in INTERFET was about 370 and was our largest contribution at that time (Tan, 2003).

From 2000 to 2002, the SAF continued to support the UN's call to stabilise the transition of East Timor to independence. When the SAF completed its UN operation (UNTAET) in Nov 02, it had deployed up to a company-sized force of armed peacekeepers in Timor Leste. For the SAF, this was a significant milestone in our limited peacekeeping experience as it was our very first deployment of armed peacekeepers (Tan, 2003).

Singapore's security environment also changed greatly since September 11th, 2001. Today, the SAF not only deals with peacekeeping or conventional threats, its spectrum of threats has expanded to include non-conventional threats, most notably, terrorism by global networks and their affiliates.

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The SAF recognises that dealing with such threats requires different capabilities and skills, and a different orientation in mindset. Today, the SAF operates very closely with other security agencies in Singapore. Our troops work closely with the Singapore Police Force to guard our key installations from air, sea and land threats. Our government has also recognised the need to develop new operating concepts and technologies to deal with new scenarios that are very different from what we have been used to (Ministerial Statement, 14 Mar 04).

In 2003, the SAF published two Monographs suggesting some of the “new thinking or concepts” needed in the SAF. One was entitled “Creating the Capacity to Change – Defence Entrepreneurship for the 21st Century” or C2C (Choy et al, 2003), the other was entitled “Integrated Knowledge-based Command and Control” or IKC2 (Lee et al, 2003). The C2C Monograph suggested an approach to create a capacity for internal change to deal with the rapid changes in our security environment -- before these changes were forced upon us from the outside. The IKC2 Monograph described how the SAF could leverage on networks and knowledge to fight with greater speed and precision. The latter recognised with the strong science and technology base in Singapore, we could leverage on our well-educated soldiers to master technologically sophisticated weapons and equipment in the “future-generation” SAF.

Hence, it is clear that the security and operating environments of the SAF have changed, and are expected to change at an ever-increasing rate. Therefore, in 2001, the SAF initiated a major effort to review and enhance its system for leadership development. An important assumption underlying this effort was that we could no longer leave the development of our leaders to chance processes such as passive role modelling, or common-sense notions of “leadership” and “leadership development”. In 2001, a project team was established to map out the scope of leadership thinking or doctrine, and a system for leadership development in the SAF. In 2003, this project team was centralised in the SAF’s Military Institute in an interim organisation called the “Centre of Leadership Development” or CLD, headed by an ex-Army Brigade Commander and staffed with a mix of military officers from the various Services, and

military and civilian behavioural scientists. The interim CLD’s mission is to promote leadership excellence and to spearhead leadership development in the SAF.

The rest of this paper aims to describe the SAF’s review of its leadership development system and the development of a new doctrinal framework for leadership and a model of the components of a leadership development system. Both were starting points for us to systematically enhance leadership development in the SAF.

Review of Leadership Development

At this point, it is useful to point out that the SAF did in fact attempt to introduce a more systematic approach to leadership training since the 1990s. In 1995, at the time that the SAF established its tri-service, tri-level military institute called “SAFTI Military Institute” or SAFTI MI, the SAF also published a provisional leadership handbook that introduced a leadership framework, called the Knowledge-Abilities-Qualities or KAQ Model of leadership. The idea behind the KAQ was simple – to break down the concept of leadership into its parts, and thereby, to spell out the knowledge, ability and qualities desired for effective leadership in the SAF. The KAQ Handbook defined leadership as “the process by which a commander applies his knowledge, abilities and qualities to influence others to successfully complete a desired task” (p. 2, *SAF Leadership Handbook*, 1995).

Besides introducing the KAQ as a “common language” and “framework” for commanders and trainers to think and talk about “leadership”, in 1996, the SAF also introduced a set of Core Values as “a unifying force for all members of the SAF” (p. i, *The SAF Core Values*, 1996). The significance of the SAF Core Values was that it was a statement of the shared beliefs of all three Services of the SAF. In a way, the SAF Core Values marked a maturing of the SAF into an integrated and “Joint” military force.

When the KAQ model was developed in the 1990s, the focus of the research was on entry-level leaders in our officer and Specialist/NCO corps. A decision was also made then not to introduce the teaching of “leadership styles” to our 18-20-year old entry-level leadership trainees – because it was felt that they lacked the

experience needed to appreciate the nature and impact of different leadership styles.

Four Leadership Paradigms

The review of leadership development in the SAF in 2001 concluded that it was useful to retain both values and the KAQ or “behavioural competency or skill” approach to describing leadership in the SAF. However, the SAF also felt that it was necessary to introduce the language and study of “leadership styles” to our leaders, especially because we wanted a new leadership framework that could apply to all levels of leaders in the SAF – junior and senior.

Studying the behavioural science literature on leadership, we noted what seemed to be four paradigms in the scientific study of leadership -- each of which focussing on a unique aspect of the nature of leadership, and, each of which having a different approach to leadership *development*. First, we noted the theories of leadership that provided taxonomies of different leadership “styles” or orientations (e.g., Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Yukl, 1989). We also observed that the scientific literature of leadership styles and orientations in the 1960s and 1970s emphasised the importance of understanding the contingencies between different styles with situational factors (e.g., group and task characteristics) in predicting outcomes (e.g., Fiedler, 1967; Blanchard & Hersey, 1969). Each of the leadership style theories had its own method and tools for developing leadership that varied depending on their assumptions about the rigidity of leadership styles. For example, theories assumed that leaders possessed certain styles and it was important to match the leader to the situation. Others assumed that leaders could be trained to be more flexible in their styles and to match the appropriate leadership style to different situations.

Next, there were the leadership “skill” or “competency” approaches to leadership that seemed more commonly applied in the human resource (HR) domain (e.g., Mumford et al, 2000; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Whereas the “style” approach tended to focus on the question “*how* can this leader lead effectively in this situation”, the competency or “skill” approach to leadership focussed on the question “*whether* this leader *is able to* lead given his/her skills?” Along with competency or skill approach came a different approach to leadership development that included

behavioural skills training, leadership coaching and feedback, and the design of performance management systems.

Separately, a less dominant paradigm in the study of leadership that concerned the question “*why* a leader leads”. The theories in this domain of leadership varied greatly from McClelland’s (1961) theory of unconscious needs and motives of leaders, to more recent trait-oriented models of leader motivation (e.g., Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Recently, a Special Issue of the *Leadership Quarterly* (Offerman, Hanges & Day, 2001) called for more research to link leaders, followers and values.

Finally, a fourth leadership paradigm focussed on the “self” aspects of the leader and leadership development. Whereas the “values”, “competency/skill” and style approaches to leadership focussed on the overt, behaviours that leaders displayed or enacted to influence their followers, the self-approach to leadership emphasised the importance of more “inward” actions by the leader to influence him/herself.

A leadership theory that focussed on the “self” was the theory of “self-leadership” by Manz (1983, 1986). Recently, London (2002) published a book entitled “*Leadership Development*” that emphasised the importance of the “self”. In the same year, Daniel Goleman published a book entitled “*The New Leaders*” linking this theory of “emotional intelligence” to leadership, in which he described two constructs: self-awareness and self-management that were considered vital to effective leadership. In the SAF’s KAQ Model of Leadership, “Knowing oneself” was in fact identified as one of the important qualities desired of leaders in the SAF. In a 2001 Study published by the US Army, “self-awareness” was in fact identified as a “meta-competency” needed to sustain life-long learning and effectiveness in dynamically changing military environments. The concept of a meta-competency was introduced by Hall (1999) to refer to a competency that “grows” other competencies.

A New Doctrinal Framework

Having identified the four paradigms of leadership that could scope the nature of leadership thinking in the SAF, the next challenge was to capture in a doctrinal

framework what was unique to leadership in the SAF. We were highly aware that a complete understanding of SAF leadership should include an appreciation of the context in which SAF leaders were expected to lead. Indeed, it was the SAF's military context that would make the leadership framework a doctrine about *military* leadership, rather than merely an academic leadership model. For this purpose, three contextual domains were identified that could guide the nature, specification and manifestation of leadership in the SAF. These were: the SAF's Mission and Purpose, the Operating Environment, and the Desired Outcomes of the SAF.

Mission and Purpose. First, unlike the corporate world where results can be directly translated into dollars and cents, leadership in the SAF is about influencing soldiers to achieve the SAF mission – a responsibility without a tangible bottomline. Unlike the employees in the civilian world, our soldiers are ultimately expected to die for their country if necessary – what Sir John Hackett (1963) referred to as the "unlimited liability" of the soldier. Leadership in the SAF is therefore a sacred duty and a privilege because of the intangible and paradoxical nature of the SAF's mission – our soldiers train hard everyday to prevent the very thing that they ultimately train to do - to fight and to defeat the aggressor. Hence, it is vital that SAF leaders understand their sacred mission to defend the country and to communicate the specific intent or purpose underlying any assigned SAF mission or task, if they are to influence their soldiers effectively to accomplish the mission.

Operating Environment. Second, leadership in the SAF is also unique because of the complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of the environment in which our leaders operated. Each operating environment demands from leaders, the flexible employment of a wide range of leadership styles and competencies. The complexity of leadership in the SAF also increases as each SAF leader moved through a variety of assignments and organisations and units in the SAF. The dimensions of the SAF leader's operating environment include: (a) the social context – the SAF is largely a National Service-based military force and a reflection of Singapore's multi-racial, multi-religious population; (b) the "temporal dimension" – today's security context is one that rapidly

changes across a wide spectrum of operations and our leaders must therefore understand the different requirements of military leadership as they shift from one type of operation to the next. (c) The level of leadership – we felt it was vital that our leadership doctrine recognised the different responsibilities and challenges of leadership as the leader progressed up the organisational hierarchy (cf. Jacobs & Jacques, 1990). (d) The Socio-technical context – SAF leaders must understand the different requirements of leadership in different technological contexts if they are to lead effectively.

Desired Outcomes. Besides the mission, purpose and operating environment, leadership in the SAF is also unique because of the complex nature of the desired outcomes in the SAF. For example, in order to achieve the SAF's mission, SAF leaders are required to lead in a manner that not only leverages on technology to get the job done, but also to constantly build and maintain the followers' motivation or will to fight. Like any other organisation, the SAF has to compete in the job market to ensure that it recruits and retains only the best as regulars. The SAF also has to keep its regulars and national servicemen feeling engaged and involved in their assignments. Moreover, just like any organisation, the SAF has to stay relevant in a changing world. For example, SAF leaders must lead people in a manner that ensures constant organisational learning. Hence, the kind of leadership required in the SAF is one that must balance a host of outcomes that matter -- not only to the SAF -- but also to the individuals who serve with them.

Framework. With the above in mind, the SAF decided to adopt a new framework for leadership in the SAF as shown in Figure 1. The triangle in Figure 1 provides a framework for specifying "what SAF leaders need" for effective leadership in the SAF. The hierarchy of building blocks says values must always form the basic foundation, upon which competencies and a full range of styles are best employed in leadership. "Self-awareness, self-management and personal mastery" is most difficult to attain, and consists of a good understanding of one's own values, competencies and styles. The hierarchy does not prescribe a sequence for development or imply that some building blocks are more important than others. The circle in Figure 1 emphasises

that SAF leaders must influence people with a good understanding of the SAF's mission & purpose, the operating environment, and desired outcomes. It is the SAF's mission & purpose, operating environment and desired outcomes that shape the specific contents of the doctrinal framework, i.e., the specific styles, competencies, values desired in a Service or level of leadership.

Together, the four building blocks that form the triangle and three "leadership contexts" in the circle spell out the scope of concerns of the leadership development system in the SAF. In other words, when we think of "leadership development in the SAF", this includes education and training in the domain of values, behavioural competencies, styles, self-awareness and management, and in the mission and purpose of the SAF, the SAF's operating environments, and its desired outcomes.

Definition of leadership. Whereas the SAF's 1995 definition of leadership focussed primarily on task accomplishment, a decision was made in consultation with the SAF's senior leadership to re-define leadership as *a process of influencing others to accomplish the mission, inspiring their commitment, and improving the organisation.* The new definition presented a balanced view of leadership that was not only mission or task-focussed, but also concerned with the

commitment of the followers, and the long-term improvement of the organisation.

A Systems Approach to Leadership Development

Having developed the new Definition and Framework that collectively addressed the question "What Is Leadership" in the SAF, the next step was to derive a set of principles to guide system-level thinking on "How to develop leadership in the SAF".

Until the Review, the common tendency in the SAF was to think of leadership development or training in terms of lessons and periods in a training curriculum. However, leadership development practitioners in the commercial world and the academic literature have suggested that it is important to take a process approach to leadership development. The basic developmental processes in leadership development are the best summarised in the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1983) and vicarious learning processes (e.g., role modelling, learning by observation) described in the social learning literature. Recent scientific literature also showed that leadership development should also engage aspects of the individual trainee or learner.



Figure 1. The SAF Leadership Framework.

For example, in his study of the many different approaches to formal leadership training and development, Conger (1992) found that effective leadership training included elements of conceptual development, personal growth (including challenge, risk taking, self-discovery), skill-building and feedback. He concluded that ultimately, the primary contribution of formal leadership training (e.g., in courses/schools) is "awareness-building". Time and actual on-the-job leadership experience are needed for mastery of leadership. He also found that leadership training also depended on the individual's motivation, ability and opportunity to learn, reflect and change (e.g., defensive people find it harder to change, learning is enhanced in a supportive workplace that provides coaching, and where bosses do not feel threatened by subordinate leaders, etc).

Similarly, in its *Handbook of Leadership Development* (McCauley, 2000), the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) defined leadership development as the expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes. From its experience and research, CCL argued that any developmental experience must have three elements to have an impact: *Assessment* to provide accurate and constructive feedback; *Challenge* that stretches the individual; and *Support* that encourages and allows the person to make mistakes.

The SAF therefore decided to think of leadership development from a systems perspective that involves the six components as follows (see Figure 2):

(a) *Component 1: The Self*. The Self is at the core of the leadership development. This component refers to the trainee's personal involvement in the developmental process. An important assumption in leadership development is that the trainee is motivated to lead and motivated to learn in the first place. Although selection procedures (e.g., "expressed interest") may be used to identify leadership trainees who are motivated to lead and to learn, these should be complemented by training processes that strengthen the trainees' personal commitment to improve themselves and to grow as a leader. It is vital that all leadership trainees take ownership of the developmental process, if they are to benefit from it.

(b) *Component 2: The Environment*. This refers to immediate organisational culture and climate and the extent to which it is conducive for personal learning, growth and change. The ideal climate for leadership development is one that is not only "open", but one that has the capacities and disciplines for organisational learning. The learning climate should be grounded in a learning organisational culture - with personal and social practices and disciplines that facilitate individual, team and organisational-level learning, e.g., check-in/check-out, rules for quality conversations, deep listening, reflection, understanding the ladder of inference, etc.

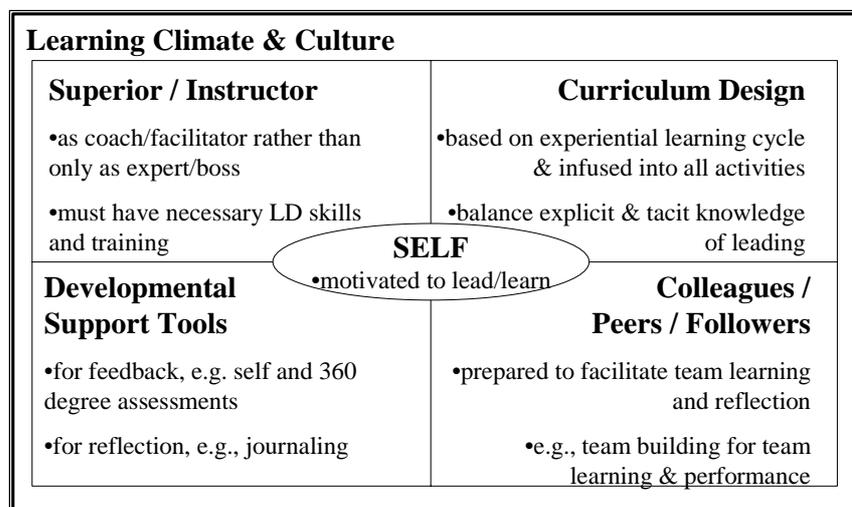


Figure 2. Components of a Leadership Development System.

(c) *Component 3: Superiors and Instructors who are Coaches and Facilitators.* Superiors and instructors have direct influence over their trainees and subordinates, and therefore have natural impact on their leadership development. To date, the SAF has emphasised role modelling as a primary mechanism for superiors and instructors to influence their subordinates/trainees. While role modelling or learning by observation is effective, it is also a relatively passive method of leadership development, especially when it is at the level of behaviours rather than values or purpose. Superiors and leadership instructors need to actively role model values and a sense of purpose and commitment. They should also play the role of coaches and facilitators if they are to actively assist in the leadership development of their subordinates and trainees. For this to happen, all superiors and instructors must be equipped with the necessary skills and tools to coach and facilitate development, and for active (rather than passive) role modelling.

(d) *Component 4: Peers, Colleagues & Subordinates.* Leadership is a social activity. Hence, besides individualised reflection and learning processes, leadership development is also more effective when there is team learning and feedback. Peers and subordinates can act as a "Hall of Mirrors" to facilitate leadership development among trainees and leaders on the job. For this to happen, it is necessary to facilitate team building for team learning in all learning syndicates in schools. Team building should also be introduced in units not only for team performance but also to encourage team learning of leadership and team processes.

(e) *Component 5: Curriculum Design.* A key process in leadership development is the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1983), which calls for leadership development to be infused into everyday life activities in our training schools and units, rather than as isolated events or activities. We should try as far as possible to design training curricula to connect abstract concepts with active experimentation, concrete experience, and reflective observation. We should also

incorporate the Centre for Creative Leadership principles of challenge, assessments/feedback and social support in the design of leadership development activities/curricula. Finally, leadership training should incorporate a balance of the explicit and the tacit knowledge of leadership in our military context.

(f) *Component 6: Developmental Tools & Procedures.* Besides the social components (e.g., instructors/superiors, colleagues/peers) of the leadership development system, it is also necessary to design some basic tools and procedures to support leadership development. These would include psychological assessment tools to be used to provide feedback for the individual (e.g., self-assessments, peer appraisal, 360-degree feedback), as well as tools to facilitate team and personal reflection (e.g., personal journal, team journal). The "tools" can also include procedures that facilitate leadership or command effectiveness and development – for example, processes that facilitate the preparation for command and command transition, and the facilitation of learning through after action reviews, etc.

Conclusion

For the SAF, the process to systematically enhance leadership development has only just begun. This paper has described two guiding frameworks in the SAF's recent initiative to systematically enhance leadership development. An important assumption underlying this effort was that we could no longer leave the development of our leaders to chance processes such as passive role modelling, or common-sense notions of "leadership" and "leadership development".

The broad frameworks described in this paper were developed to scope and establish a shared, organisation-wide thinking or doctrine on leadership. We have also tried to identify the organisational processes that need to be enhanced, if we are to be more systematic about leadership development in the SAF.

For us, the next challenge will be to move from theory to practice and application. In this regard, it is interesting to note a recent review of the scientific literature on leadership development

concluded: "the practice of leadership development is far ahead of its scientific understanding", and, that "there are few extant theories of leadership development to test scientifically" (p. 12, Day & O'Connor, 2003). We therefore expect to meet further challenges, for example, in the measurement of change and impact of or leadership development methods. We will also have to take a cautious, creative and experimental approach as we attempt to implement changes to the system. Finally, it will also be a challenge for the system as a whole to balance its emphasis on technical/vocational military training with the more behavioural aspects of leadership development development.

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