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Military leadership development strategies: implications for training in non-military organizations

Michael Kirchner and Mesut Akdere

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to explore how branches of the USA military conduct leadership development of their members to build on existing knowledge of effective approaches. The military, often credited for its ability to develop leadership competencies, has been overlooked and offers a new context for consideration in training. Training strategies presented may offer organization leaders new insight into enhancing current leadership development programs.*

Design/methodology/approach – *A review of accessible military doctrine in recent decades was conducted to determine leadership development methodology for possible transferability into industry.*

Findings – *The military's diverse perspectives on service member leadership development offered insightful methods for application in commercial training. Four development strategies were identified and are discussed.*

Research limitations/implications – *The purpose of the military is unique from non-military organizations and, as such, each of the leadership development training approaches may not be applicable or feasible for traditional employees. Further exploration of leadership development in the US military is required to better understand the impact of the training.*

Originality/value – *A review of existing literature revealed little evidence of examining the military's approach to developing leaders, even though employers claim to hire veterans because of their leadership abilities. Each of the identified development components are distinguishable from traditional leadership programs and present readers a series of opportunities to consider.*

Keywords *Training, Leadership development, Military, Technology and innovation*

Paper type *General review*

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Developing and maintaining a deep pool of leaders remains a top priority for management in many organizations. Today's companies have demonstrated through their training investments their understanding of the impact effective leadership can have on the financial and personnel components of the workplace (Bersin by Deloitte, 2014; Hotho and Dowling, 2010). As research has revealed, expenditures in leadership development continue to command higher percentages of training and development budgets than any other area (Bersin by Deloitte, 2014). In 2013 alone, 15.5 billion dollars were spent by US companies on leadership development (Bersin by Deloitte, 2014). Across each of the five branches of the US military, significant resources have been invested in recent years to develop service member leadership competencies. These programs have yet to be explored for possible integration into non-military organizations to enhance and streamline organizational efforts for developing effective leadership strategies and practices.

Organizations argue leadership development is one of their top priorities over the next decade and the military's model for leadership development and programming may provide new insights into developing employee leadership competencies (Development Dimensions International, 2014). This paper examines the US military's leadership development programs and analyzes their potential implementation and relevance in civilian organizations. The paper further explores leadership development strategies within the context of technology and innovation, while providing

recommendation for practice to organization leaders. It is important to note early in the paper that we do not position the military to be superior in its ability to develop leadership competencies; instead, we emphasize on the importance and potential implications of military's specific practices for civilian settings in which improving employee leadership competencies and overall organizational performance are key components for organizational success.

Existing perceptions about leadership development programs invite exploration into new approaches for building leadership competencies. More than a decade ago, Fegley (2006) reported the number one concern of human resource directors was to identify leaders and improve leadership development. Nearly ten years later, little had changed as only 25 percent of HR professionals viewed their organization's leaders as high-quality (Development Dimensions International, 2014). Additionally, only 37 percent of organizational leaders rated their leadership development programs as effective – a percentage that remained constant for seven years (2014). The military is an underexplored provider of leadership development training and linkages are likely to emerge. "Although there are few constructive differences between the mindsets of military and civilian leaders, those that do exist are usually a result of the particularities of military structure and composition" (Peterson, 2012, p. 43). Organizations concerned about their training effectiveness need to consider all leadership development approaches. Current viewpoints about a veteran's ability to contribute to the workplace further support study of US military leadership development.

Military leaders have a history of successfully transitioning into non-military positions. Harrell and Berglass (2012) conducted an extensive study with 87 representatives from 69 companies and sought to understand the motivators for why organizations hire veterans. Participants noted veteran's leadership and teamwork skills, character, discipline, effectiveness, proven success, resiliency, loyalty, and ability to make decisions in rapidly changing environments as their key motivators – each of which is likely tied to an organization's definition of a good employee and leader (2012). The findings transcend across service branches and service member job functions, suggesting a more-deeply engrained leader development program may exist within the US military.

Need

The need to develop leadership capacities is recognized globally by both public and private sector organizations (Hotho and Dowling, 2010). Programs aimed at building employee leadership competencies are still being developed for efficacy and the overall impact varies (Cheng and Hampson, 2008). Leadership development is a process used to build leadership competencies, which are then transferred to the workplace (Tyler, 2004). Whereas the type of training initiative varies depending on the company or industry, leadership development has become increasingly vital for organizations in any field (Hotho and Dowling, 2010). The existing literature does not consider how the US military's leadership development system can be applied in rapidly evolving organizations of the twenty-first century (Kirchner and Akdere, 2014a; Kohnke and Gonda, 2013). Technological and innovative advancements require human resource development (HRD) scholars to consider the appropriateness and application of military leadership development strategies in non-military organizations. Leveraging these advancements for the benefit of commercial leadership development programs. Leadership development has not changed all that much in recent years and the HRD community could benefit from new approaches (Petrie, 2014). A majority of companies with veteran hiring initiatives credit military leaders for their ability to develop leadership competencies in service members (Harrell and Berglass, 2012). In fact, the attribute employer's claim makes veterans most employable is their leadership qualities (2012).

While leadership development in civilian organizations may emphasize particular employees or positions filled, the Army uses a long term, continuous, and consistent approach to developing leadership competencies for all of its members. "Leadership is expected from everyone in the Army regardless of designated authority or recognized position of responsibility" (Department of the Army, 2012, p. 3). Army leader development is achieved through lifelong synthesizing of knowledge, skills and abilities from a combination of education, training, and experience (Department of the Army, 2013). The process presents a holistic model for the development of all employees, regardless of organization (Kirchner and Akdere, 2017).

Significance

Research on leadership development practices has grown substantially in recent decades, except for in the military. The necessity, strengthened by public perception that veterans are strong leaders, supports the existing research gap (Harrell and Berglass, 2012). Although the number of leadership development methods has increased, they are widely based on time-tested, classroom-based approaches (Hay Group, 2014). More interactive approaches such as mentoring, coaching, 360-feedback, role-plays, action learning, and developmental assignments potentially offer more-effective methods of leadership development (Development Dimensions International, 2014) and most non-military organizations currently utilize a combination of approaches; however, a percentage of leadership development programs are limited to a series of training initiatives that may not fully-meet the needs of the employer or employee.

The military's emphasis on continuous leader development regardless of rank, job title, or assigned responsibilities, is unique to that of some non-military organizations (Kirchner and Akdere, 2016a). For instance, few organizations intentionally develop leadership competencies in new employees and an even smaller number task superior to train subordinates how to perform their job. Though each service branch has distinct leadership development strategies, they all are steadfast in their commitment to building leadership competencies of their members. By understanding how the military approaches leader development, organization leaders can have an additional set of tools to help ensure positive returns on leadership development investments and support overall sustainability (Avolio *et al.*, 2010).

The military's commitment to developing leaders is reflective of the concerns many organizations express about likely shortages of employees prepared to lead in the future (Development Dimensions International, 2014). Globalization, technological advancements, and rapid changes in organizations present challenges that are unique to today's leaders from those of previous generations (Bawany, 2016). Businesses are operating in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) times (Development Dimensions International, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2014). The Army first coined the VUCA term, and trains soldiers to be prepared to perform under any VUCA circumstance (Lawrence and Steck, 1991). Veterans frequently demonstrate their ability to successfully transition between workforces and early research has suggested they may even outperform their civilian counterparts (Kropp, 2013). As such, examining the approaches to leader development currently in use in the US military may lead to the integration of new strategies in non-military organizations.

Overview of military leadership development

The US military is an ensemble of five service branches with various perspectives on leadership development, though each emphasizes the need for developing service member leadership competencies. The branches maintain leadership development training centers and provide guidance to unit leaders on effective methods of development within their respective organizations. The Army, in particular, views leader development as fundamental to the organization and a lifelong process beginning soon after enlistment (Department of the Army, 2013). Three training domains – institutional, operational, and self-development – guide the soldier development process (Department of the Army, 2013). Each domain offers a unique contribution toward the service branch's leader development model. Army leader development is a deliberate, continuous, sequential, and progressive process grounded in Army values (Department of the Army, 2013). Leader development involves recruiting, accessing, developing, and promoting soldiers while challenging them with greater responsibility (McEntire and Greene-Shortridge, 2011). The Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard emphasize leadership development similarly and organization members are expected to abide by a series of leadership principles and traits reflective of the values of each service branch (Department of the Air Force, 1985; TECOM, 2008; USA Coast Guard, 1997; USA Marine Corps, 2015).

The Army, possibly because they are the largest service branch, offers an extensive list of training and resources for its members. The Air Force Global Strike Command offers the AFGSC Leadership Enhancement Course to officers moving into their first official leadership position but highlights the importance of developing associated competencies ahead of time (USA Air Force, n.d.).

A lesser number of Marine Corps leadership development programs were identified in this examination, though the Marine Corps Counseling Program and the Marine Corps Mentoring Program demonstrate a concerted effort to developing leadership competencies.

In the Army, soldiers are routinely placed in leadership positions where they facilitate training sessions, lead physical fitness, and guide unit missions. Group sizes vary but the continuous exposure to leadership may enable soldiers to develop their understanding of effective leadership. The Marine Corps develops leadership competencies in their members through practices similar to the Armies and utilizes leadership reaction courses. These courses or sets of challenges and obstacles are completed by five-person teams in which each member is required to take the role of fire team leader (USMC Officer, 2014) which offer marines the opportunity to apply their training (Peterson, 2012). Service members from other branches are afforded similar opportunities to reflect and learn from their actions as leaders. Although employees in non-military organizations may be both presented and encouraged to lead committees or projects, the intended outcome is likely the successful completion of assigned tasks, as opposed to the intentional development of a set of competencies. The military introduces a potential opportunity to fully-integrate leadership development into the workplace.

Military leadership development strategies

Technological advancements present opportunities for employers to examine their methods for developing leadership competencies in their employees. Similar to the military's revised training programs in response to a new type of warfare for service members in Iraq and Afghanistan, employers may benefit from considering how technology and innovation offers new strategies for leadership development programs. Four military leadership development methods: e-learning, participant selection, supervisor-employee relationship, and core values are presented and discussed.

In 1999, retired Army Lieutenant General William Campbell and Chief Information Officer of the Army, recognized traditional training methods were not keeping up with swift advancements in the information technology industry and committed to expanding e-learning programs (Real Army, n.d.). Through the Army's Distributed Learning Center, more than 2.5 million soldiers have completed at least one of the more than 2,000 free training courses offered, including more than 100 opportunities in effective leadership and management (Army Distributed Learning Center, n.d.; Real Army, n.d.). Course topics range from time management to leading change and motivating employees and often require three to five hours of work (Distributed Learning Center, n.d.). For every five hours completed, promotion points are offered to increase a soldier's incentive to participate in their own development (Real Army, n.d.). Transitioning leadership development programming to online formats is not unprecedented as many companies offer courses to their employees. Still, the expansive approach involving hundreds of options supported by an award system is an underutilized development approach in non-military organizations. Integration of extensive e-learning leadership development opportunities may offer employees more autonomy to complete classes on their own time and contribute toward an increased understanding of essential leadership principles.

At the same time, leadership development programs have historically been selective with their participants. Whether utilizing a new employee rotational program, enrolling new managers in training or developing executives' leadership competencies, employees are often individually selected to participate in training. The military, however, has introduced perhaps a more encompassing approach which exposes all service members to leadership growth opportunities (Kirchner and Akdere, 2015). The Army has particularly invested in developing leadership capacities early in a soldier's career. All soldiers are challenged to lead their peers and subordinates at one point or another during their term of service – unique from employees who may never be in a position to lead others. Peterson (2012) noted similar development in the marines, and how the roles of "point" persons and patrol leaders contribute toward marine development. Whereas the point person must be completely focused on the outside environment, i.e. their surroundings, the patrol leader must be attentive to the internal team structures, the individual members, and group objectives (Peterson, 2012). By rotating marines

through these roles, they build competencies and confidence in their ability to manage and effectively navigate challenging situations through distinct perspectives and experiences.

An additional innovative strategy relates to the role each service member plays in the development of lower-ranking personnel. The US Army expects all soldiers to learn the jobs of their superiors and train subordinates to fill their own roles. The approach uses higher level thinking to develop soldier leadership competence. Soldiers, during training exercises, explain the procedures for successfully completing tasks and demonstrate for subordinates how their jobs are executed. An outline for “training up” soldiers to learn their superior’s role has not been provided by the Army; instead, the sharing of knowledge and competencies from leader to subordinates may be more-reflective of the general culture and expectations of Army leadership (Kirchner, 2016). The Army expects soldiers to learn the roles of unit members to ensure missions are not impeded in the event of casualties.

Many companies identify core values that guide the direction, actions, and behaviors of the organization. Each branch provides both principles and traits that their service members are expected to follow and develop. For example, the Marine Corps’ list of leadership traits is identical to the Navy and forms the “JJ-DIDTIEBUCKLE” acronym. Judgement, integrity, dependability, and knowledge are four traits that guide Marine and seaman training and development (TECOM, 2008). The Air Force identifies six similar but distinct leadership traits: integrity, loyalty, commitment, energy, decisiveness, and selflessness (Department of the Air Force, 1985). Military doctrine defines and explanations each leadership trait required (Department of the Air Force, 1985; TECOM, 2008).

Discussion

This paper explores military leader development for HR employees and organization leaders to consider. The four leadership development strategies discussed offer organization leaders perspective on how the military introduces and develops service member leadership competencies. Human resource departments may find value in establishing a set of principles upon which employees live by and are trained on during orientation (Kirchner and Akdere, 2016b). Whether through emails, displays, or other forms of communication, continuous exposure to the principles may establish a culture of leadership practice and active growth.

These principles can be complimented by expecting employees to learn the role of their supervisor – part of an employee’s vertical development. Vertical development refers to developing competencies by presenting more complex stages to participants (Petrie, 2014). Petrie (2014) discussed how traditional leadership development programs stress horizontal development or the development of new skills, behaviors, and abilities, but neglect progressive growth which builds on prior knowledge. While allocating resources to intentionally develop competencies in all employees presents a unique set of challenges, the military’s application of leadership development contributes toward scholar and practitioner understanding of leadership training.

Conclusion

New technologies, innovations, and globalization are changing the workplace and creating an environment of interdependence (Browne, 2003). Rapidly evolving companies are increasing the need for leaders who can successfully navigate their organizations and teams. Such is the case for HRD where technology-driven and innovative leadership development strategies will become the norm to better predict and prepare organization leaders. HRD scholars are equipped to research and present innovative development processes. Innovation through leadership development may help facilitate HRD functions and organizational goals while contributing to an organization’s bottom line (Kirchner and Akdere, 2014b; Loewenberger, 2013; Waite, 2013). As mentioned, the military and non-military organizations have commonalities in their approaches toward developing leadership competencies. This paper attempts to further the discussion and highlight potential growth opportunities for leadership training in non-military organizations. Further research is need for organization leaders to gain new strategies for effectively developing leadership (Table I).

Table I Summary of leadership development strategies

E-learning	Offer free leadership development courses online and reward participation
Train all Employees	Expose all employees to leadership development training opportunities
Train-Up	All employees train and demonstrate for subordinates how they successfully perform their jobs
Core Values	Identify and promote core values that guide the direction, action, and behavior of the organization

Note: An abstract of this paper was presented at the 2016 Academy of Human Resource Development International Conference in the Americas

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