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TUATARA

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ABSTRACT: Since the era dominated by industrial production to the knowledge-based society, the traditional way of choosing leaders has been to change the development of non-traditional leadership skills. In addition to the traditional leadership virtues, taking into account the previously unconventional skills have become extremely important in selecting leaders in a modern army.

Future challenges can only be tackled by adaptive organizations in which individuals have to make much more autonomous decisions, to adapt to the ever-changing environment that management needs to take into account and support.

The generals of the future have to form a strategy in a complex environment, they have to learn how to apply a comprehensive approach, when they have to cooperate with different types of professionals and participants in the possession of visionary, operative and bridge building skills – and this is not easy because different roles require different ways of thinking.

In history, we find examples of such leaders, which in our time are becoming alive, because if organizations are not ready to find rapid answers to the challenges, if their decision-making processes are overwhelmed, no hopeful success is expected. Deeply embedded, centralized command and control in the armed forces is not an appropriate response to extremely complex asymmetric situations, especially when facing critical challenges that require immediate decisions.

Leadership is not the same as power. Non-traditional leaders need to have followers, associates who support their idea and achieve a degree of freedom.

A good example of acquiring the necessary learning and adaptation skills in this world is the convincing example of the success of tuatara, a real living fossil, of evolutionary survival.

KEYWORDS: leadership, tuatara, unconventional leadership

Thomas E. Ricks argued in his recent book¹, that in American history the leadership quality started to deteriorate when the highest-ranking generals became reluctant to fire underperforming generals under their command. He pointed out that the fear made the generals perform better. We tend to disagree with this argument, as we believe that any quality degradation, if it exists, is more likely a result of a leadership gap.

There are several reasons, why this leadership gap is present. First of all, we would like to point out that since the end of WWII (World War II) the political masters have been increasingly influencing who gets removed, which has made the leader selection process and the mind-set of military leaders more conventional. Secondly, during this time the context

¹ Ricks, Th. E. *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*. New York: Penguin Press, 2012.

have changed as well and as we are progressing from an industrial era towards a knowledge-based society, leadership is quite different and more complex. Today the use of fear and an arsenal of other tools of an autocratic leader to motivate seems to be inadequate and has quite the opposite effect from the one that we got used to twenty years ago. The modern toolkit of leaders must be much wider and they need to *develop unconventional leadership skills* as part of their arsenal *to compliment the conventional skills*.

At Exercise Allied Reach², the main theme was Future Security Challenges for the Alliance and the transformation efforts required from NATO countries to be able to counter such challenges. In our opinion the real goal is not to counter future challenges, but rather embrace the uncertainty of the complex environment and build adaptive organizations which proactively influence the future. With the amount of uncertainty all around, it is an almost impossible task to figure out what the future brings, and the key for success is the capability of organizations to quickly adapt to the ever-changing environment. One of the key aspects of adaptation is the unconventional leadership capability within the organization.

THE LEADERSHIP GAP

Thomas Ricks, in his book, formulates an answer³ and it is somewhat similar to the one described by General Krulak in his *Three Block War* concept. Ricks suggests that future generals need not only to understand strategy in a complex environment but they need to learn to fight the war amongst the people, show respect for the population with a cultural sensitivity, use a comprehensive approach (including all services, interagency, indigenous and multinational partners), as well as being able to speak a political language, not just a military one. We have heard about the *Strategic Corporal* before, but what we really need is more generals who are unconventional thinkers and leaders. Hence, this article attempts to answer what unconventional leadership is about.

Maccoby⁴ in his research also points out that in the fast pacing and complex world we need leaders who can mobilize people for the common good. He calls the new era knowledge workers *interactives*, and argues that these people need a flatter, networked working environment and a leader who possesses three leadership qualities: transformational vision, operational obsessiveness and trust-creating bridge building. He also emphasizes that Personality and Strategic Intelligence are the new leadership qualities for the age of knowledge work. *Personality Intelligence* builds more on emotional intelligence⁵, *Strategic Intelligence* more on systems thinking and practical intelligence⁶.

Transformational visionaries are leaders, who communicate vision with a compelling sense of purpose. Operational obsessives are operational leaders, who have the systems thinking to build the organization and infuse the energy that transforms the visions into results. Finally, bridge builders are leaders, who can facilitate the understanding and trust

² Allied Reach is a yearly Strategic exercise for NATO. In 2013 it was organized in Norfolk, Virginia.

³ Ricks, Th. E. *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*. New York: Penguin Press, 2012.

⁴ Maccoby, M. *The Leaders We Need*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007.

⁵ To read more on emotional intelligence read Goleman, D. *Emotional intelligence: Why it can Matter More Than IQ*. New York: Bantam Press, 2006. and Bradberry, T. *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*. New York: Talent Smart, 2009.

⁶ For a description of the difference between analytic, practical and creative intelligence, see Sternberg, R. J. *The Hierarchic Mind: A New theory of Human Intelligence*. New York: Viking, 1988. and Sternberg, R. J. *Successful Intelligence: How Practical and Creative Intelligence Determine Success in Life*. New York: Plume, 1997.

that turns different types of specialists into collaborators. This is a very important piece of leadership, since, we are facing more and more complex problems, and while solving these problems, adaptation and organizational change always create a lot of stress. People's skills are also important during the adaptation process, since people resist a change if they perceive this change as a loss. It is my belief, that the different leadership roles required from modern leaders require different mind-sets, therefore it is quite difficult to obtain all the necessary skills by one individual.

It is clear that the officers who were promoted during the Cold War era were rewarded for showing talent in commanding large manoeuvre units on the conventional battlefield. This conventional mind-set was action oriented, concentrated on producing results with very little thought spent on considering the consequences or people's feelings during the process. In asymmetric conflicts though, which were a dominant form of combat in the last fifty years, a broader range of knowledge was needed, and the military leaders had to rely on unconventional leadership skills as well as conventional ones to be able to successfully engage the enemy in these very complex conflicts. It is not a new phenomenon though, so in this article we use an ancient example of Attila the Hun as well as a modern case study of Special Forces to support our argument and shed some light on the unconventional side of leadership.

There are many ancient examples of unconventional leaders throughout the history, and John Arquilla's book⁷ is an excellent read to study many of them, but we have chosen the Attila, who is often called the Scourge of God for a specific reason. There are relatively few researches on his leadership style and he is mostly misunderstood and portrayed as a bloodthirsty barbarian, instead of a brilliant, unconventional leader. Special Forces also have long been on the forefront of fighting asymmetric conflicts and their importance seems to be steadily rising ever since 11 September. Many of their heroic accomplishments might never see the light⁸, and the full scale of the shadow war might never be revealed, but it is interesting to see the expansion of the role of Special Forces in contemporary conflicts. The establishment of a JSOTF (Joint Special Operations Task Force) in Iraq was an organizational example of unconventional leadership in itself, and Stanley McChrystal's role as an unconventional leader is a perfect example how one person is able to influence an organizational adaptation process and change ages old theories on asymmetric warfare⁹.

We argue that conventional and unconventional leadership styles are quite different and it takes a lot of efforts to master both of them. It is not our purpose to argue which one is better, we just simply want to point out that unconventional leadership is an often neglected and relatively rarely used leadership option, which must be on the repertoire of every leader today.

⁷ Arquilla, J. *Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits: How Masters of Irregular Warfare Have Shaped Our World*. Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2011.

⁸ Kelley, M. "US Special Ops Have Become Much, Much Scarier Since 9/11". Business Insider, 10 May 2013. <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-rise-of-jsoc-in-dirty-wars-2013-4/#ixzz2jtF8yaxV>

⁹ My understanding here is that the ages old theory that "you are not supposed to kill your way into victory" in an asymmetric conflict has changed and through the increasing effectiveness of JSOTF activities in Iraq, the Task Force was able to eliminate so many key insurgent leaders that the insurgent conversion mechanism was unable to create enough replacements.

THE SCOURGE OF GOD

When we think of a King archetype, hardly anyone would mention Attila, the Hun, who is mostly remembered as the Scourge of God. He is widely portrayed as a savage and a bloodthirsty barbarian, and being Hungarian ourselves, we thought that we should do some research, before we buy into this story. What we found out, was quite different from the misconception and was surprisingly revealing at the same time.

In his book *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*¹⁰, Roberts describes timeless lessons in win-directed, take-charge management that best describes Attila's real character. From Roberts we learn that barbaric, husband of four hundred women, cruel, and carnivorous are qualities that typically do not describe the ideal leader: Attila the Hun. Taking over the world is the ultimate challenge for just about any leader, and Attila seems to have accomplished it with poise and grace. Nearly 1,500 years after his reign, some researchers are still studying his strategies, which are applicable to any organization, group, company, or country. This single man initiated and led the transformation of nomadic tribal barbarians into undisputed rulers of the ancient world.

Very few people know that if he was living today, he would be described as an entrepreneur, diplomat, social reformer, statesman, civilizer, brilliant field marshal and host of some outstanding parties. Researchers have found that he dared to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks in his age. He began his rise to power by renewing and developing relationships with tribal chieftains. He lived a very simple life (even when he was 'guest' of the Roman court in his youth) and reformed the strategies of the 700,000-strong Hun army (a loose conglomeration of barbarians) so well that it is still an example of swarming tactics¹¹ this day.

It is important to point out that Roberts defines leadership as the privilege of having responsibility over others' actions and the organization's purpose, all of which can affect the organization's success or failure. The organizational application of unconventional leadership represents a model or system, that also embraces the fact that no one can predict circumstances or situations, and consequently the influence they will have on others.

¹⁰ There are several books on Attila, but by far the most insightful one seems to be Wess Roberts's book: *Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun*. This is the book that reveals the leadership secrets of Attila the Hun - the man who shaped an aimless band of mercenary tribal nomads into the undisputed rulers of the ancient world centuries ago, and who offers us timeless lessons in win-directed, take-charge management today.

¹¹ Swarming is a seemingly amorphous, but deliberately structured, coordinated, strategic way to perform military strikes from all directions. It employs a sustainable pulsing of force and/or fire that is directed from both close-in and stand-off positions. It will work best – perhaps it will only work – if it is designed mainly around the deployment of myriad, small, dispersed, networked manoeuvre units. This calls for an organizational redesign – involving the creation of platoon-like pods joined in company-like clusters – that would keep but retool the most basic military unit structures. It is similar to the corporate redesign principle of flattening, which often removes or redesigns middle layers of management. This has proven successful in the ongoing revolution in business affairs and may prove equally useful in the military realm. From command and control offline units to logistics, profound shifts will have to occur to nurture this new way of war. This study examines the benefits – and also the costs and risks – of engaging in such serious doctrinal change. The emergence of a military doctrine based on swarming pods and clusters requires that defence policymakers develop new approaches to connectivity and control and achieve a new balance between the two. Far more than traditional approaches to battle, swarming clearly depends upon robust information flows. Securing these flows, therefore, can be seen as a necessary condition for successful swarming. This concept is best described in Arquilla, J. and Ronfeldt, D. *Swarming and the Future of Conflict*. Santa Monica: RAND, 2000. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/documented_briefings/2005/RAND_DB311.pdf

Thus, relating it to Attila initially appears difficult. His leadership qualities (many relate to emotional stability and stamina) show that a leader must be loyal, courageous, self-confident, empathetic, and credible. In Robert's book we can also read extensively how he takes care of his Huns and encourages their active participation and through this enables their success.

Attila's leadership style includes a pattern of constant strategies involving the importance of commitment, accountability, standards, and quality. The undoubtedly successful approach of Attila the Hun focuses on continuous improvement and full commitment of the organization, the Huns, but not at the expense of the people's morale. Focusing on quality, Attila created consistently disciplined Huns, who ideally, and realistically, began to discipline one another individually and subordinately. Morale within an army of 700,000 wild creatures is not easy to attain, but through consistent behaviours of his own such as accountability, loyalty, and confidence, Attila maintained this unified purpose.

Holding every member of any sized organization accountable for their actions and ensuring reliability and consistency in their behaviour is a must for a king who wants to rule his realm for extensive periods of time. Again, and again he stresses the importance of individual quality performance and commitment. He understood that if at the basic, single level, you cannot rely on one person, then your army will not be successful, therefore he gave a lot of freedom to his chieftains, but held each of them accountable for their actions and the actions of their subordinates as well.

If he was able to talk about leader development today, Attila would surely say that leaders must encourage creativity, freedom of action and innovation among their subordinates, as long as these efforts are consistent with the goals of the tribe or nation.

THE MASTER OF DESTRUCTION

The recent book of General Stanley McChrystal¹², who has been the JSOTF Commander in Iraq, and several recent articles published in open sources and magazines, shed some light on the organization and leadership used to track down and eliminate a highly elusive and networked enemy in Iraq.

In order to make the JSOTF more effective, McChrystal partnered with agencies to fuse intelligence, and synchronize operations. Together they redesigned the bureaucratic ways information travelled up in a pipeline, and developed a real-time information sharing environment. It was not enough though, so in the next phase of organizational transformation they combined all elements of intelligence (finding the enemy); drone operators and SIGINT (Signals Intelligence) specialists (who fixed the target); various teams of Special Forces operators (for finishing); as well as analysts and experts in exploitation and crime scene investigation (who pulled immediate information and exploited it in order to feed it back to the cycle for further analysis) in order to carry out the full cycle of the operations that was called F3EA (find, fix, finish, exploit and analyse). From a leadership point of view, the linear and cumbersome bureaucratic conventional methods were replaced by a shared informational and operational environment. As a result of this process, there was a shift in mind-set and organizational culture as well through the shared consciousness among the various organizations.

¹² McChrystal, S. A. *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*. Boston: Portfolio, 2013.

These changes meant a whole lot more than just an experiment. This was a game changer in modern warfare and had a real strategic effect as well. As it was published in *Foreign Policy*¹³ and in *Foreign Affairs*¹⁴ as well, the old COIN (counter – insurgence) adage, stating that it is not effective to attack the insurgent fighters as they will be replaced soon enough was proved wrong. With the help of some technological adjustments but mainly by reorganizing and changing the leadership mentality the newly organized teams were able to turn the F3EA cycle around three times a night! This meant that while in 2004 in all of Iraq the task force did 18 raids; two years later, by August 2006 they carried out up to 300 raids a month. This meant that the network was operating at speeds that had never been seen before and all that was enabled through a new leadership approach which encouraged decentralizing decision making.

Although the teams included more organizations, many of them being unconventional actors, they valued competency above all else. The overall result was not just a lot of captured and killed enemy fighters, but since the enemy network was hit in many places simultaneously, it had a very difficult time to regenerate. This had a decisive strategic effect¹⁵ and the disruption of the enemy network reached a previously unseen proportion.

This organizational adaptation process of becoming a network for the JSOTF has not only technological and organizational components, but leadership ones as well, and the leadership aspects seem to be the hardest to achieve. McChrystal points out in his interview¹⁶ that “if organizations aren’t ready to move faster, their decision-making processes become overwhelmed by the information flow around them”. For JSOTF to be successful it was not enough to survive, but they needed to thrive.

The concept of adaptation arises from scientific efforts to understand biological evolution¹⁷, the necessary changes in the way military leaders think of asymmetric challenges require a completely different mind-set, which is the organizational equivalent of biological thriving¹⁸.

Operating with a decentralized decision making within the military is hard enough. The hierarchical decision-making process implies that the leader at every level of the pyramid is the person in charge of deciding and directing everything below him. By proxy the highest-ranking individual is the one, who always has the best answers, the deepest understanding and the best solutions. This process is very deeply entrenched in the military, but it is un-

¹³ McChrystal, S. A. “It takes a Network”. *Foreign Policy*, 21 February 2011. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/22/it_takes_a_network

¹⁴ McChrystal, S. A. and Rose, G. “Generation Kill: A conversation with General Stanley McChrystal”. *Foreign Affairs* 92/2. 2013. 2-8. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/discussions/interviews/generation-kill?page=show>

¹⁵ Robert H. Scales wrote that “as head of the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command, McChrystal oversaw the development of a precision killing machine unprecedented in the history of modern warfare,” one whose “scope and genius” will be fully appreciated only “in later decades, once the veil of secrecy has been removed”. Scales, R. H. “The quality of Command: The wrong way and the right way to make better generals”. *Foreign Affairs* 91/6. 2012. 137-143. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/quality-command>

¹⁶ McChrystal and Rose. “Generation Kill...”

¹⁷ See Mayr, E. *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology: Observations of an Evolutionist*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1988.

¹⁸ Biological evolution conforms to laws of survival, organizations, however, generate purposes beyond survival. Thriving in biological terms means that the species is fruitful and by multiplying and protecting its own kind it succeeds in passing on its gene pool. Thriving is much more than simple survival, it eventually leads to a vastly expanded range of living.

suitable for highly complex asymmetric situations, especially when we are facing adaptive and critical challenges which are changing minute by minute.

Decentralizing C2 (Command and Control) is just the first step on a long road towards adaptation. Synchronizing and fusing different service cultures to finally become a learning organization (one that is able to constantly adapt) and providing a unifying vision for all this effort is quite an endeavour. Using unconventional leadership during this adaptation process is a must.

UNCONVENTIONAL LEADERSHIP

As we could see in the two case studies, unconventional leadership takes place in the context of problems and complex challenges. In fact, it makes little sense of even thinking about leadership, when everyone is on the same sheet of music and all we need to do is to coordinate routine activities. Leaders step up, when a tough or complex problem arises and they need to be tackled; therefore, mostly while we are in the zone of learning.

The root cause of not being able to lead in an unconventional manner is our conventional military training, which is based on following orders, and on a clearly defined chain of command. But as we could see in our case studies, people without formal authority can practice leadership on any given issue at any given time. We have all seen cases in our lives when people had formal authority, thus a following per se, but they did not lead. Unconventional leaders operate without anyone experiencing anything remotely similar to the conventional experience of following¹⁹.

Before we define unconventional leadership, we must answer the questions: who is a leader, and where does leadership take place? There is very much debate in academic circles regarding the definition of a leader, but I believe that a leader is someone people follow. This somewhat simplistic definition captures the essence of leadership, emphasizing the main component: followers. Leadership always implies a relationship between a leader and those who are led, and that relationship exists within a context. This context can be very different in many cases. Corporate bureaucracies thrive in a stable, predictable environment, where people are mostly in their comfort zone and these organizations are best led by conventional leadership. But when complex problems arise, these organizations seem to be less effective to cope with the situation.

So according to our definition: Unconventional leadership moves beyond conventional leadership territory and is presented beyond managing technical problems crossing the line into boldly facing complex adaptive or critical problems, and in most cases, it means going beyond your authority in order to tackle the problems at hand in order to orchestrate solutions to unresolved problems. Unconventional leadership results in organizational or procedural changes, and most importantly, changes people's mind-sets within the organization.

Adaptive and critical challenges also demand constant learning from unconventional leaders. This learning process however, is reaching a lot farther than just collecting information. Those lessons that we gathered in the past are to be applied so that it could be stated that we have learned from them. This makes a critical difference in organizations between lessons identified and lessons learned. In the comfort zone model, we can only close the gap

¹⁹ Heifetz, R. A. "Anchoring leadership in the work of adaptive progress". In Hesselbein, F. and Goldsmith, M. (eds.), *Leader of the Future 2: Visions Strategies, and Practices for the New Era*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006. 74.

between our aspirations and the reality if we learn in new ways and are able to constantly adapt. This in turn requires a new approach in leadership education as well.

Another interesting factor is the people-centric approach of unconventional leaders. Leadership is not the same as authority. Exceeding authority is not, by itself, leadership. A compelling vision is not enough either. Unconventional leaders need to get followers, collaborators who support their vision and buy into it. What is interesting, unconventional leaders can also mobilize those, who are opposed to their ideas or just fence sitting. This is an essential skill in facing complex challenges.

Adaptive and critical challenges often require a shift in responsibility from the shoulders of the authority figures and the authority structure to the stakeholders themselves²⁰. In contrast with the technical challenges, where experts can solve our problems, in the zone of challenge, facing critical challenges, a different kind of responsibility-taking and leadership mentality are required. This is where unconventional leadership can thrive. If we are looking for authority figures in these kinds of situations, it means that we are treating critical challenges just as if they were technical ones, and approaching them with a conventional leadership mind-set and in most cases this can be really damaging.

Finally, we have to mention the time factor, as it is most likely one of the most critical parts of the military decision-making process. Adaptive challenges require significantly more time for people to develop innovative solutions and learn, than technical challenges. Moreover, critical challenges are even worse from the perspective of time, as they do not have a cookie-cutter ready to apply solutions, but generally we do not have time to take, as it would be the case in the case of an adaptive challenge. Overall, organizations need time to make cultural changes in order to adapt, but in the contemporary, 21st century VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) context we do not have that luxury any more.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As Heifetz suggests in his article²¹, “*our language fails us in many aspects of our lives*”. This is why we have chosen the Maori word *tuatara* for the title of our article. Tuatara are reptiles that are endemic to New Zealand. They are often referred to as living dinosaurs, as have largely not changed physically over very long periods of evolution going back millions of years. Tuatara is the only survivor of an ancient group of reptiles that lived at the same time as dinosaurs. The last relatives of tuatara died out about 60 million years ago which is why tuatara is called a ‘living fossil’.

But tuatara at the same time have broken records for DNA evolution as well. A discovery that has astonished New Zealand scientists proves that “the tuatara has the highest molecular evolutionary rate that anyone has measured”²². The new research also support-

²⁰ Heifetz, R. A. “Anchoring Leadership in the Work of Adaptive Progress”. In Hesselbein, F. and Goldsmith, M. (eds.), *Leader of the Future 2: Visions Strategies, and Practices for the New Era*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006. 76.

²¹ Heifetz, R. A. “Anchoring Leadership in the Work of Adaptive Progress”. In Hesselbein, F. and Goldsmith, M. (eds.), *Leader of the Future 2: Visions Strategies, and Practices for the New Era*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006. 73.

²² Hay, J. M. et al. “Rapid Molecular Evolution in a Living Fossil”. *Trends in Genetics* 24/3. 2008. 106-109.; DOI: [10.0.3.248/j.tig.2007.12.002](https://doi.org/10.0.3.248/j.tig.2007.12.002)

ed a hypothesis by the evolutionary biologist Allan Wilson, that the rate of molecular evolution was uncoupled from the rate of morphological evolution. This basically means that the tuatara is capable of remarkable rates of adaptation, yet it has hardly changed for ages.

Tuatara in the local Maori language also indicates *tapu* (the borders of what is sacred and restricted) beyond which there is *mana* (meaning there could be serious consequences if that boundary is crossed). In our example when a leader decides to walk the line and venture out from the comfort zone (of traditional autocratic command and control leadership) to tackle complex challenges, he is surely setting himself up for a lot of pushing back from others as he disturbs the organizational equilibrium. Anyone, who has done it before, is aware of the personal and professional vulnerabilities of this endeavour. But with the great danger, there are great opportunities presented as well.

Leadership in the contemporary security context is very different to what we have been trained to as military personnel in the last century. Most of the time our training included known scenarios, and as we trained for certainty, we learned the *science* of war. But in the context of new complex challenges we also need to educate our leaders for *uncertainty* and teach them the *art* of war. The brave option is to embrace uncertainty, as it has a reason; it pushes us to reach out and by learning and adapting, develops our leaders personally, as well as creates remarkable organizations, not just good ones.

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