

Developing a Strategic-Level Commander: Requisite Skills and Attributes

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Abstract:

A strategic commander helms the organization by setting the vision, allocating resources to essential areas, and collaborating with the political side and other stakeholders to achieve national goals. This essay will first frame the main challenges of the Contemporary Operating Environment (COE) before highlighting the distinguishing aspects of a strategic-level commander's role and identifying the required personal skills. The success of the organization depends on the strategic commander's ability to tackle any issues that arise, and to ensure that the military remains relevant in the extension of political wills to provide a secure environment for the future.

Keywords: Military Command; Military Leadership; Military Strategy

INTRODUCTION

A strategic-level commander operates at the rank of service chief and above, where his position directly influences national goals and is accountable for the performance of the military organization.¹ A strategic commander helms the organization by setting the vision, allocating resources to essential areas, and collaborating with the political side and other stakeholders to achieve national goals. A successful strategic-level command is an organization that establishes its purpose, upholds its relevance and achieves national goals. The military's actions are the extension of political will and a strategic-level commander has to be cognizant of the desired political end state to decide on the organization's goals. Indeed, the strategic-level commander's role encapsulates both functions of leadership and management.

Despite developing a repertoire of command skills throughout one's military career, there are vital personal skills and enabling attributes necessary for the commander to ensure the enduring success of his organization. The main assumption made is that the strategic commander has undergone the *rites of passage* from tactical to strategic level,

honing his leadership and management skills. As such, this essay will first frame the main challenges of the Contemporary Operating Environment (COE) before highlighting the distinguishing aspects of a strategic-level commander's role and identifying the required personal skills. It will show that these skills build upon those developed through scaling the military ladder of command. It will subsequently identify the corresponding attributes that enhance the effectiveness of those skills. Thereafter, a development process to equip an operational-level commander with the identified skills and attributes required to undertake a strategic-level post is recommended.

FRAMING THE CHALLENGES FACED AT THE STRATEGIC LEVEL

The challenge faced in the COE is that the security landscape is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA),² in which military roles have expanded beyond waging conventional warfare. Intractable problems that are often characterized as "wicked" and defy conventional solutions proliferate the COE.³ Furthermore, the presence of traditional and new media presents a challenge for military action, as outcomes are closely scrutinized and reported,



Exercise Forging Sabre 2011: (Former) Chief of Air Force MG Ng Chee Meng (third from right) chatting with Exercise Director and Commander, Air Combat Command, BG Lim Yeong Kiat (third from left) and other senior military officers after observing the live firing.

and success is often judged by the perceptions of indigenous or global audiences. Consequently, the ability to foresee all outcomes is inhibited, because tactical-level actions may potentially result in strategic ramifications. The greater firepower of modern military units translates into increased repercussions for injudicious employment. In all, there is an increasing demand for the strategic-level commander to make sound decisions in the COE and constantly review the notion of adequately-trained forces that meet the challenges of the evolving security environment.

A strategic commander must possess the cognitive skills to dissect and fully comprehend the causes and effects of “wicked” problems, and strategize and steer the organization through the complexities of an evolving security landscape, all of which require the need for “systems thinking skills.”

The factor that distinguishes a strategic-level commander from those at other levels is that he represents the military in the political arena for the setting of national goals and securing of resources. This emphasis on strategic alignment between the military and the politicians was highlighted by Dreschsler.⁶ Furthermore, management of today’s conflicts requires collaboration with other governments and various non-government agencies.⁷ The onus is on the strategic commander to unite all stakeholders in determining the strategic impetus and direction. He will subsequently approve the corresponding military means for the various levels. This is paramount as “wicked” problems require holistic solutions, some of which might be outside the military’s sphere of influence. In any case, the strategic commander decides on the plan for the organization, while the main role of other levels is to achieve success within their respective areas. In essence, the strategic-level commander accounts for the overall performance, in which he has to make competent decisions, lead effectively and manage efficiently.

Before identifying the skills necessary for success at this level, it is essential to be cognizant of the competencies being highlighted in the literature for contemporary strategic leaders. The United States (US) Army identified competencies in six areas: *identity, mental agility, cross-cultural savvy, interpersonal maturity, world-class warrior and professional astuteness*;⁸ Hitt highlighted that the strategic leader in the corporate world requires competencies in managing human and social capital.⁹ To this end, developing skills in the domains of cognitive, and inter- and intra-organization effectiveness is vital. Firstly, a strategic commander must possess the cognitive skills to dissect and fully comprehend the causes and effects of “wicked” problems, and strategize and steer the organization through the complexities of an evolving security landscape, all of which require the need for “systems thinking skills.” Next, he must have effective inter-organization communication skills, upwards towards politicians to seek approval for his plans, sideward amongst other agencies to achieve collaboration, and downwards in his organization to inspire his people; these translate to the need for “social adeptness skills.” Lastly, for ensuring success and building durable organizations that meet the challenges of the COE, he must leverage on individual abilities, and simultaneously develop and groom his people holistically; this requires effective “human capital management skills.”

IDENTIFIED REQUISITE SKILLS

“Systems thinking” is defined as the ability to understand the various parts that constitute a problem, the intricate links between them, and the perspectives and demands of every stakeholder involved.¹⁰ This

allows one to unite the various efforts of stakeholders to solve the problem. Likewise, Leonard highlighted that the mental agility competency requires one to scan the environment,¹¹ apply the right perspective to understand the situation, and to envisage the various permutations before deciding on the best solution. Jessie also raised the need to be cognitively inclined to decipher lower order effects in solving problems.¹² Systems thinking is required in the setting of a vision

To elevate the ability to think critically and creatively and function at a system thinking level, one must first ensure that all angles have been covered extensively and meticulously. It was highlighted that one's inherent values might result in the filtering of relevant information, which then obscures the full understanding of the issue.

that remains relevant to the evolving landscape which affects the culture of the organization.¹³ The abundance of information in the COE is a double-edged sword; while it may help to disperse the “fog-of-war,” the failure to pinpoint the salient points within the sea of information may subsequently lead to faulty judgments and analysis. As such, systems thinking facilitates the identification of the desired information as the issue is distilled into a palatable size for in-depth analysis. Systems thinking

can be viewed as higher order critical thinking and creative thinking skills; the former facilitates critique in specific domains, while the latter preaches “thinking out of the box.” System thinking leverages on both skills in the assessment of the internal and external factors, and facilitates the developing of holistic means to tackle “wicked” problems.¹⁴

Social adeptness is the ability to appreciate and work with various cultures, and to build relationships.¹⁵ It is the cornerstone for negotiation and consensus building amongst various stakeholders,¹⁶ both within and outside of military agencies, including foreign ones. Non-military agencies might not be amenable to receiving orders and often possess differing strategic views based on their background,¹⁷ values and vested interests. The strategic commander is thus

required to harmonize the views, requirements, and actions of all involved parties.¹⁸ Social adeptness is similar to interpersonal effectiveness, the difference is the social-cultural aspect that is crucial for effective collaboration with different agencies of distinct cultures, beliefs, mental-models and values. Indeed, the importance at the strategic-level is that misconceived intents engender much greater repercussions and tensions which, hinders the overall collaboration effort. As such, a strategic commander has to first consider the position of the political arena based on their inclination before attempting to convince the politicians of the military's position. Likewise, to collaborate with his peers, other agencies and foreign partners, he must also consider their perceptions and interests. Whereas to build strong and enduring relationships, he has to develop an in-depth understanding of the culture and values that drive their behaviors in order to communicate effectively regardless of their backgrounds and by relating to their needs. Positive relationships will invigorate actions from each stakeholder's end that are also synthesized to the overarching plan. Overall, these underscore the importance of the social adeptness

skill, where the main intent is to build bonds that enhance collaborations between stakeholders to accomplish any given task.

It has also been highlighted that one needs to adopt different engagement styles when addressing the requirements of multinational forces. This means that to achieve consensus, one has to adapt to different operating norms and culture, which might require the compromise of one's beliefs at times.

The human capital management skill aims to leverage on individual expertise, and to develop the organization by grooming future strategic commanders. The complex environment requires people with different expertise, of which a strategic commander may be professional-inclined, but not an expert in areas outside the military sphere; even within the organization, he will be more of a



SAF Humanitarian Assistance for New Zealand: Former Chief of Defence Force LG Neo Kian Hong speaking to the SAF team at the reception.

generalist. It is highlighted that human capital is the strategic resource that drives the knowledge-based organizations operating in the COE.¹⁹ Concomitantly, the wealth of knowledge and expertise that each individual possesses, within and out of the organization, must be harnessed to solve issues. They will supplement the strategic commander with the capabilities that he lacks. The COE has also often illustrated the intricate inter-connection between the strategic and tactical-level, where injudicious tactical actions may create strategic implications.²⁰ Hence, the gravity lies in grooming the operational commanders to understand the strategic intents; he will be the conduit that transmits this down to the other levels to foster a common understanding, as well as ensure that they can relate to the *bigger* picture. One will desire a strategic commander that possesses *Level 5* leadership to build an organization that continues to achieve results even beyond his tenure.²¹ On this note, a strategic commander is appointed from within the military organization as intimate knowledge is required to helm the organization. Hence, it is essential that the strategic commander grooms competent successors.²² To this end, a strategic commander must not only be a skilful manager of human capital who is able to build effective teams that fully harness the abilities of its members, but he must also be able to groom his successors and prepare them adequately for future strategic positions.

IDENTIFIED REQUISITE ATTRIBUTES

With the skills required by a strategic level commander identified, the next step will be to identify the attributes. First, meticulousness and astuteness are a complementary set of attributes crucial for systems thinking. A meticulous person is one who shows extreme care when considering facts and details. It has been mentioned that critical and creative thinking will be honed prior to succeeding as a strategic commander. To elevate the ability to think critically and creatively and function at a system thinking level, one must first ensure that all angles have been covered extensively and meticulously.

It was highlighted that one's inherent values might result in the filtering of relevant information, which then obscures the full understanding of the issue. Hence, being meticulous is paramount in the COE as all facts, considerations, perceptions, linkages, causes and effects have to be examined in finer detail. This attribute works hand-in-glove with astuteness as often the underlying causes might not be forthright or might reside outside the limits of one's knowledge. This then requires one to be astute in rationalizing the crux of all factors that constitute to a "wicked" problem so as to identify the crucial information that is required. Both meticulousness and astuteness are attributes that ensure the overall issue is deliberated extensively in terms of the intricate underlying and accompanying issues. This facilitates the identification of the root causes within the system, which allows one to conceptualize a holistic solution to tackle all plausible ramifications.

To be socially adaptable, one must possess the attributes of cultural sensitivity and tactfulness. Cultural sensitivity is important since a strategic commander has to often operate at the inter-organization level where the organizational culture varies. One has to take into account the vested interests of different parties, as well as the interpretation of one's actions by those who are not imbued with the same culture, especially when dealing with the media.²⁵ Tactfulness is required to build relationships, because thoughtful handling of the engagement engenders trust and respect, which are the bedrock for creating robust relationships.²⁶ This is paramount in inter-organizational dealings as the reporting chains and agendas differ. It has also been highlighted that one needs to adopt different engagement styles when addressing the requirements of multinational forces.²⁷ This means that to achieve consensus, one has to adapt to different operating norms and culture, which might require the compromise of one's beliefs at times. As such, tactfulness coupled with the ability to understand and handle different cultures and their perceptions, facilitate the construction of trusting relationships. To this end,



Chief Guards Officer COL Nelson Yau (right) handing out Guards berets to graduates at the parade.

these attributes engender social adeptness, as one will seek to reach a consensus rather than impose one's will, which is especially important in the COE as it often requires collaborations to deal with "wicked" problems.

An effective human capital manager requires the attributes of humility and conviction in order to harness and groom his men, which is necessary to prevail in the COE. The tasks of today are often complex, and a strategic commander will potentially lead people in professions he might be unfamiliar with. Consequently, he needs to empower his men to leverage their knowledge and skills.²⁸ Humility allows one to acknowledge the limit of one's abilities and understand the need to share one's power in order to achieve the overarching goal—to complete the task effectively and efficiently. Empowerment facilitates a learning environment where people develop their competencies through experiential learning. It is also noted that a *level 5* leader possesses humility

and the "professional will" that are instrumental to build a successful and enduring organization.²⁹ A *level 5* leader prioritizes organizational success at the forefront, and thus will endeavor to groom his successors to maintain the growth of the organization beyond his tenure. One will concede that developing and grooming are tedious, time-consuming processes that involve both mentoring and coaching roles; this is exacerbated by the fact that strategic commanders are primarily occupied in performing their roles at the strategic-level. As such, conviction is an important attribute because it motivates one to create opportunities and devote time to this important function. Moreover, empowerment involves risks and the strategic commander will be accountable for any failures. Conviction is thus required to undertake mitigated risks, so as to groom his men for the greater good and thus, build a successful and enduring organization. Furthermore, it is also this conviction that ensures insights and experiences are shared to enrich the minds of his men. In all, the attributes

empower the management of human capital by first leveraging on individual abilities to deliver the task, and second, ensuring that people are groomed to assure the enduring success of the organization.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC LEVEL COMMANDER

After the identification of the requisite skills and attributes, a holistic development process is required to prepare the operational commander for the demanding role at the strategic level. The first approach is using education to develop the mentality and understanding of the various identified disciplines.³⁰ In this sense, it is important to institutionalize a strategic-level course that broadens their horizons to meet the increased demands at the strategic-level.³¹ Under the ambit of the proposed course, the theories as well as the methodologies for systemic thinking, social dynamics, and human capital management are taught and practiced. Attributes such as meticulousness and astuteness can be honed through simulated scenarios weaved into the curriculum. Another recommendation is the pursuit of an education at civilian institutes such as strategic studies institutions. The value proposition is the integration with non-military students, where discourses facilitate the gathering of insights with respect to the civilian's views and interests when dealing with issues.³² Understanding and appreciating the different perspectives will aid in strengthening the systems thinking skill in terms of the consideration of non-military perceptions. It will also enhance the awareness of different cultural motivational factors, as well as expand communication and relationship-building skills beyond the military domain.

The other developmental approach is training; specifically, to facilitate the application of skills. In this respect, an operational commander should serve tours in joint headquarters, civil agencies, and if

possible, multinational operations, which will allow him to experience a diversity of cultures.³³ All options will facilitate the growth in cultural sensitivity and tactfulness in managing people from distinct backgrounds entrenched with different value-sets. Furthermore, these experiences contribute to the humility attribute, since one is extracted from one's comfort zone and placed to operate in an unfamiliar environment. The challenges of leading and managing people from outside the organization, coupled with the distinctively different knowledge and skills required in the recommended options, will also enforce one's conviction to ensure one's successor is adequately trained and groomed to assume one's role in the future. Being an aide to the strategic commander for specific exercises will allow the operational commander to be directly trained by him. In addition, chairing tasks outside the military context, such as national or international events, will hone his social adeptness skill in managing the different stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

A number of skills are crucial for a strategic commander to achieve success in a contemporary VUCA environment. One essential skill is the ability to exercise systems thinking to solve the "wicked" problems of today. All aspects must be considered before deciding on the course of action that might require collaborations with other agencies to ensure that it is addressed holistically. This prevents repercussions from arising as "wicked" problems that are not holistically addressed might incite other contentious problems. As such, the strategic commander has to inspire his men to surmount the challenges faced in the COE, as well as orchestrate an organized effort amongst all stakeholders when required. This exemplifies the importance of consensus building, negotiation and relationship skills, of which

social adeptness is the essential skill that enables one to effectively perform those skills. The final essential skill is the effective management of human capital. One needs to leverage on the capabilities of one's men to accomplish the challenging tasks in the COE, as well as to develop their understanding of the strategic intents in order to align efforts through the various levels. Furthermore, ensuring that the strategic commander successor is adequately groomed to meet the demands of a strategic-level role cannot be understated. As for the attributes that are required of a strategic commander, they form the crux in enabling the effective application of the identified skills. To achieve all that has been mentioned, a holistic development process, couched under the ambit of education and training to prepare a future strategic commander is recommended. The focus is on acquiring the identified requisite skills and the enabling attributes. Overall, success of the organization depends on the strategic commander's ability to tackle any issues that arise, and to ensure that the military remains relevant in the extension of political wills to provide a secure environment for the future. 🌐

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