Joint Special Operations University

Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

Rethinking
Special Operations
Leadership:
Process, Persuasion,
Pre-existing, and
Personality

by

Paul S. Lieber

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About the Author

Paul S. Lieber, Ph.D.
JSOU Resident Senior Fellow

Dr. Paul Lieber is an award-winning scholar and practitioner on global strategic communication. Currently a resident senior fellow at JSOU, he previously served as the command writer for two USSOCOM commanders, as well as strategic communication advisor to the commander of Special Operations Command-Australia. Within academic environs, Dr. Lieber was a member of the graduate faculty at Emerson College, University of South Carolina, and the University of Canberra. Within these roles, he taught across the strategic communication curriculum while authoring more than a dozen peer-reviewed scholarly publications. Within corporate settings, Dr. Lieber led an array of comprehensive organizational improvement, strategic communication, and/or assessment programs for organizations across North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australasia. He has a Ph.D. in communications and public affairs from Louisiana State University.

Rethinking Special Operations Leadership: Process, Persuasion, Pre-existing, and Personality

Introduction

Few will debate the merits of leadership in a successful special operator. It is arguably the most significant, determining factor in an individual's ability to succeed within environments constantly in flux, adversary intentions in tandem. In his guidance on joint education, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, said: "develop[ing] agile and adaptive leaders with the requisite values, strategic vision and critical thinking skills necessary to keep pace with the changing strategic environment."[1]

It therefore comes as little to no surprise that a significant portion of special operations training and education emphasizes leadership curricula as a foundational knowledge goal. An individual who can lead by example, in turn, becomes a better special operator, likewise instills similar traits among those serving alongside and/or reporting to him/her. United States Special Operations Command's (USSOCOM) own education directive declared "education and training the cornerstones of readiness."[2]

This occasional paper details the importance of process, persuasion, pre-existing, and personality nuances on special operations leadership training and execution, likewise additional traits/characteristics necessary for success within them.

Process: Adapting to Innovation

By its nature, special operations must continuously innovate. Echoing these sentiments—and in his fiscal year (FY) 2015-18 Commander's Guidance—USSOCOM Commander General Joseph Votel posited that "innovative new approaches are welcome, and challenging current operational constructs needs to be the rule."[3] Still, organizations conducive to new ideas and practices are also more likely to introduce new error into their systems.

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[1] Department of Defense, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Education Whitepaper* (2012). Retrieved from http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/concepts/white_papers/cjcs_wp_education.pdf.

[2] United States Special Operations Command, *USSOCOM Directive 621-1*, "Special Operations Professional Education" (18 April 2014).

[3] Joseph L. Votel, United States Special Operations Command, "FY15-18 Commander's Training and Education Guidance" (December 2014).

This means it's a risk versus reward balance, where environments ripe for substantial growth knowingly accept risk that existing practices may suffer through near-constant experimental phases. There's also no guarantee that proposed 'innovations' are, in fact, truly innovative, and/or destined for adoption.

Innovation supporters will reason that recognition of the innovative concept is, by itself, a victory. It's a stated desire to move forward, find alternative solutions, and encourage leadership to think along these lines. "In addition to new technologies, a new offset strategy will require innovative thinking, the development of new operational concepts, new ways of organizing, and long-term strategies," said Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work in describing requirements for military minds of the future.[4]

Still, an organization that formally accepts alternative functional models is one that, by its nature, must simultaneously instill a communication environment to support them—meaning leaders must shift attention from protecting best practice to ensuring the near opposite: organizational and communication flexibility capable of enduring near-constant change.

Thus, in innovative spaces, the ideal leader becomes a champion of diversity, a role model whom others look to as a stabilizing force to endure continuous process discomfort. For military and government civilians with decades of training and specialization geared toward perfecting specific craft, an innovative environment can create significant process and personal rift.

This is not to label these individuals as process dinosaurs and/or overly rigid. Within special operations, innovation for the sake of change in itself can be disastrous. It slows down responsiveness, increases aforementioned error rates, and—in its quest to save money, time, and related resources—ends up expending them, en masse.

Leadership therefore becomes essential to ensure attempts at innovation are both appropriate and have a clear goal in mind. In describing this marriage between organization and leadership, Abdullah Bas and Mert Aktan stated: "firms need the management innovation that refers to non-technological innovation, and the transformational leaders play a trigger role in order to realize the management innovation."[5]

Still, the military decision making process at large culturally endorses hierarchical briefs followed by staff reviews and ultimately decision points rooted in unintentionally biased courses of action. Ironically, the process to formalize innovation is the exact opposite to lean principles prescriptive of the innovation concept. As far back as 10 October 2001, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld warned of this Department of Defense, anti-innovation reality: "They must be systematically dumbing down all proposals that anyone creative is coming up with to the point that they block every idea except cruise missiles and bombers."[6]

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[4] Bob Work, "NDU Students Should Become 'Strategic-level Leaders,'" Defense.gov (August 2014). Retrieved from http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=122842.
[5] Abdullah Bas and Mert Aktan, "Role of Management Innovation and Transformational Leadership in Gaining and Sustaining Competitive Advantage," Proceedings of the Multidisciplinary Academic Conference (2013), 1-8.
[6] Donald Rumsfeld, "What Will Be the Military Role in the War on Terrorism?" Rumsfeld Archives of Department of Defense Working Paper (20 October 2001).

Importantly, within special operations environments most conducive to gain from innovation, innovation review stages and/or required authorities (to include legal, contractual, personnel, etc.) can slow down innovation adoption to render the seeming improvement near-useless. By the time an innovation survives lengthy review, said innovation may no longer remotely resemble its original concept. Too many reviews, too many edits, and too many cooks in the kitchen can produce a sanitized 'innovation' that is no longer innovative. Related—and especially salient for special operations—the proposed innovation may emerge from review too late and becomes outdated. The enemy, of course, does not stand still for innovation review.

Thus and in sum: to overcome these process obstacles, special operations leadership must be creative not only in thought but also in shepherding ideas through cumbersome decision and authority systems. This includes how information is presented to sister leadership to ensure both expedient but also prudent decision making. Likewise, this leadership should nurture a staff continuously willing to present innovative process alternatives, survive process review, and also keep the faith during seemingly never-ending trial and error periods.

Persuasion: Understanding the Masses

Innovation, of course, is only as useful as a leader's ability to consensus build toward others adopting a proposed change. Within special operations, successful coalition formation requires precise understanding of pre-existing group communication norms, also leadership tendencies for those on the receiving ends of messages. While there's a robust amount of literature on cultural nuances for specific societies and/or populations, these discussions very rarely deviate into explorations about the communication phenomena at its core.[7] There is a great deal to learn from history and prior context; the data picture, however, does not end there.

To explain—and in patriarchal, traditional societies dominated by elders—Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory[8] is of significant

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[7] Cagla Aydin and Stephen Ceci, "The Role of Culture and Language in Avoiding Misinformation: Pilot Findings," *Behavioral Sciences & The Law* (September/October 2013), Vol. 31: 5, 559-573.
[8] Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion-Our Social Skin,* University of Chicago Press (1993).

utility for special operators. This theory posits that individuals who perceive themselves of majority opinion are more likely to voice said opinion and/or display overt support for a compatible idea. The reverse holds true for outliers, where minority opinions tend to slink into the shadows for fear of reprisal and/or isolation from the majority. For tribal societies, this can be devastating if majority viewpoints are in stark contrast to elder wishes. Spiral of silence effects are alive and well across all society types.[9]

Logically, these effects only increase exponentially. Meaning, the more one perceives him/herself to be of majority opinion, the more likely this individual is to express said belief systems and advocate on their behalf. The same occurs for reverse minority offerings.[10] Calculating this nexus can very well determine the likelihood of success for extra-group concepts.

This calculation can literally save lives. Majority opinion can grow quickly, sometimes toward dangerous outcomes. An out-of-control spiral of silence can produce homegrown riots, uprisings, and widespread acts of violence. For special operators, a near-continuous (even informal), considered analysis of group opinion dynamics can yield invaluable threat identification insights. Gauging threats solely by word choice ignores an omnipresent reality that spoken words underlie considerably more potent group perceptions.

If considered in approach, group dynamics can be nuanced to maximize spiral of silence tendencies. Special operators can gently shift majority/minority perception toward a desired compass point, and with it increase likelihood of success. In delicate negotiation settings, this is especially salient. For information operations, spiral of silence analysis can elucidate where a majority/minority divide lies. This knowledge can help predict the efficacy of messages aimed at group opinion change within target populations.

Spiral of silence isn't limited to life or death situations. Looking internally—and building upon earlier discussion on both innovation process environments and personality task assignment —understanding majority/minority opinion on important issues is prescriptive for group buy-in. A considered special operations leader could gauge group sentiment on issues of greatest importance, while noting majority/minority opinion effect on likelihood of voicing it.

This knowledge will create both better leaders and reporting structures. A leader can nuance messages and training to reinforce spiral of silence majority effects toward positive learning outcomes. They can also push undesirable perspectives and accompanying habits to extreme ends of the minority opinion spectrum as to render them obsolete. In turn, those on the receiving end will embrace a leader deliberately guiding a team toward consensus building via best practice.

A leader can nuance messages and training to reinforce spiral of silence majority effects toward positive learning outcomes.

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[9] Jorg Matthes, Andrew Hayes, Hernando Rojas, Fei Shen, Seong-Jae Min and Ivan Dyloko, "Exemplifying a Dispositional Approach to Cross-Cultural Spiral of Silence Research: Fear of Social Isolation and the Inclination to Self-Censor," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* (Autumn 2012), Vol. 24:3, 287-305.
[10] Jorg Matthes, "Observing the 'Spiral' in the Spiral of Silence," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* (Summer 2015), Vol. 27:2, 155-176.

Pre-existing: Schemata

In many instances, failed leadership attempts reside in audience schemata, or pre-existing notions that combine for an individual's perceptions on the world around him/her.[11] As it stands to reason, combine all schemata in a room, and—noting similarities/differences on a particular topic—one is on his/her way to determining group sentiment. This concept logically marries well to spiral of silence theory, where knowledge of group sentiment empowers analysis of supporting majority/minority opinion separation lines on an issue.

Schema formation, in theory, is a fairly straightforward concept. Individuals combine life experiences—for better or worse—to create schemata of the world around them. These schemata serve as pre-existing frames for which all future messaging/behaviors will find a home. There are good schema and bad schema. For example, closed societies adopt schemata that both insulate and protect them. These same schemata are vulnerable to prejudicial viewpoints and behaviors stemming from limited exposure.

As could be expected, messages that challenge a schema produces what Leon Festinger termed 'cognitive dissonance.'[12] This dissonance, as its name entails, equates to mental discomfort from challenging an individual's core, protective belief system. Akin to spiral of silence, the more a message deviates from an existing schema, the greater the effect of cognitive dissonance. Decades of research finds individuals willing to go to great lengths to avoid challenging a schema, likewise to remove the cognitive dissonance sensation.

A unique aspect of the special operations mission set is the extreme diversity of Global SOF Network of partners—individuals united toward a similar desired outcome.[13] Closer to home, even interagency organizations differ substantially based on granted authorities and overlying ethos. These authorities and ethos form intellectual schema for how these individuals approach problems, as well as expectations for partner interactions. Building on the above and to be successful, special operations leadership must respect these nuances and deliberately adjust messages and proposed solutions accordingly. "We must know our inter-agency partners' authorities and how to use them to enhance our whole of government approach to partnering," said

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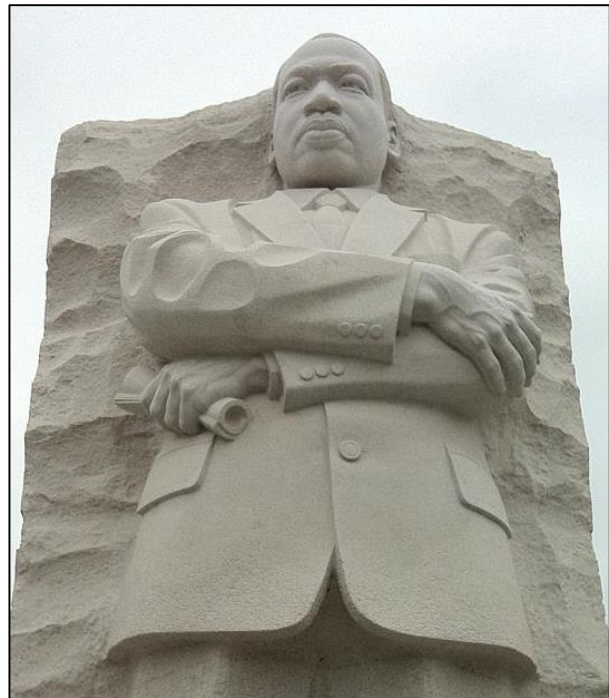
[11] David Rumelhart, *Schemata: The building blocks of cognition*, in R.J. Spiro, B.C. Bruce & W.F. Brewer (Eds.) Theoretical Issues in reading comprehension, Hillsdale, NJ: Elbaum (1980).
[12] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,* Stanford University Press (1957).
[13] United States Special Operations Command, "SOCOM 2020: Forging the Tip of the Spear" (2014).

former USSOCOM Command Sergeant Major Chris Faris.[14] Ignoring this reality will bog down joint efforts, fail to build trust, and, most importantly, share these negative effects with additional partners to whom both groups are trying to positively impact.

Schema challenges multiply exponentially once said partners are added to the mix. Within their strategic engagements, special operations leadership must now avoid cognitive dissonance not only amongst interagency representatives, but also any/all additional partners. Yet they must not over-avoid as to produce meaningless interactions and relationships.

This is a very deliberate and delicate effort, as cognitive dissonance effect—and levels of it—will ebb and flow as new partners/individuals are added to the equation.[15] Nowhere is this more evident than in building a coalition composed of otherwise or former adversaries. In these persuasive instances and independent of disclosure limitations, special operations leadership must recognize each partner nation carries with it unique agreements/expectations with other partners and interagency representatives. While there is no perfect formula to avoiding cognitive dissonance, it is nevertheless important for special operations leadership to view this phenomenon as omnipresent. Ideally, it should be front and center when designing a strategic engagement strategy.

Personality: The Land of Verts

Even an innovative message—factoring in group dynamics and compatible with existing schemata—can ultimately fail. The most talented and informed leader still cannot control how individuals on the receiving end of a message will play amongst themselves.

To address this shortcoming—and noting the uniqueness of special operators based on service, role, and gender—personality traits emerged as a hot topic. In recent years, the flavor du jour for personality assessment within special operations environments is the Myers-Briggs introvert/extrovert determinant.[16] Still, no personality test—even standardized ones derived from the best in social and natural science theory—is bullet proof. All predictive instruments are intended as but one more data source to inform a much bigger knowledge space.

[14] Chris Faris, "A case for changing the professional military education paradigm" (October 2013). Retrieved from http://www.dvidshub.net/news/113386/case-changing-professional-military-education-paradigm#.VMpEIqEo4sU.
[15] Kathryn Stanchi, "What Cognitive Dissonance Tells Us About Tone in Persuasion," *Journal of Law & Policy* (2013) Vol. 22, 93-133.
[16] Isabel Briggs Myers and Peter B. Myers, *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type*, CPP (1995).

These disclaimers aside, it stands to reason that a successful special operations leader will lean toward extreme extrovert tendencies, as he/she will naturally adopt an outward communication posture of problem solving and leading by example. A simple glance at any historical text will regale and revel in stories about extrovert military leaders. These individuals possess a shared characteristic indicative of a long-standing military leadership stereotype: a willingness to speak eloquently on behalf of colleagues, also someone unafraid to face recourse from spoken words and corresponding actions.

In contrast, introverts are celebrated as worker bees, individuals behind the scenes of every successful extrovert. These rock star action officers aspire toward careers as precise masters of specific task execution, foundations for extrovert leaders to lead their flocks across the desert to water.

Of course, such simplified storytelling and role assignment is just that. There is no truly definitive (think '10' on a 10-point scale) intro- or extrovert. Also, over-reliance on personality characteristics as a data point can lead those on the receiving end to self-fulfilling prophecies of underperformance derived from a seeming genetic predisposition—the tail wagging the dog, if you will. An extrovert simply can't grasp precision, for instance. Or an introvert will fail at functions requiring excessive group interaction.

Moreover, placing too much stock in introvert/extrovert tendencies assumes a one-size-fits-all between task and personality match; for example, assigning projects ripe with progress updates only to extroverts, or—conversely—designating those featuring watchful eye requirements exclusively to introverts. This task to personality match will neuter any semblance of innovation before it has a chance to emerge. Teams become nothing short of glorified assembly lines, where roles are predetermined based on extreme personality constructs.

Third and inevitably, organizations/areas overly wedded to intro- and extrovert definitions for team assignments will serve as breeding grounds to poor morale. Segmenting a workforce predominantly by personality style can create an unhealthy rivalry between intro- and extroverts. Introverts might assume extroverts as all style but no substance. Extroverts may label introverts as lazy, inflexible colleagues. Lines in the sand can quickly emerge, as one group might refuse to complete tasks seemingly tailor made for colleagues better equipped to execute them.

Still, clever special operations leaders can benefit from personality definitions via deliberately forming diverse personality tendency teams sans excessive role assignment. In noting personality tendencies as guideposts versus definitive, an array of personality types and problem solving approaches can produce unique solutions invaluable within special operations environments. Research seconds this, in that introvert-extrovert relationships are most successful when opposites stop focusing on dissimilarities and instead adopt approaches that steer toward results.[17] This becomes even more useful if/when unprecedented situations emerge. In these instances, original solutions can bubble to the surface as teams creating them are intentionally non-

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[17] Deborah Bigelow, "The Genius of Opposites: How Introverts and Extroverts Achieve Extraordinary Results Together," *Library Journal* (July 2015), Vol. 140: 12.

prescriptive. It's a problem-solving versus personality playbook, one favoring individual expression toward group solutions.[18]

Conclusion

While most leadership training and education emphasizes the importance of the individual presenting the message, far too often it ignores the value in considering those on the other side of message receipt. In the special operations community, the ever-adapting and gregarious leader often stands as the archetype for others to follow. This simplification, however, fails to explain why and when leaders fail at their efforts.

This occasional paper is but a snapshot of an enormously vast body of literature on foundational reasons for potential leadership success. It explored organizational dynamics via innovative philosophy and adaptation, majority and minority opinion

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segmentation, acceptance and challenge allowances to leadership propositions, and finally personality characteristics and work assignments. Ideally, this discussion broadens the scope of expanding leadership study to include other concentric circles of mass communication, industrial organizational psychology, and sister social science disciplines. Operational planning teams—a sometimes controversial concept implemented by former USSOCOM Commander Admiral William McRaven—offer a potential means to test this concept within a confined space.[19]

Looking ahead—and as global special operations challenges reach into unprecedented spaces—it becomes imperative to continuously explore means and methods to craft more effective leaders. "Examining the cultural and contextual factors involved in global leadership will allow for a deeper understanding of both the similarities and differences that exist between global and domestic change,"[20] said leadership researcher Edward Finn. While wicked problems necessitate expedient solutions, in the absence of sound leadership approaches, these solutions will not persevere.

Thus—and in leadership training for both officers and senior enlisted within the special operations community—there is a glaring need to go beyond traditional military definitions and valuation for what is or isn't leadership material. This includes closer looks in determining how it selects and rewards leaders in the community, and also what knowledge it wants them to embed within their reports—in essence, the legacy of special operations leadership of the future.

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[18] Jean Kummerow and Mary Maguire, "Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Framework with an Adlerian Perspective to Increase Collaborative Problem Solving in an Organization," *Journal of Individual Psychology* (Summer 2010), Vol. 66: 2, 188-200.

[19] Navy Air/Sea PEA Forum, "Planning the SOF Global Network," *KMI* (October 2013). Retrieved from: http://www.kmimediagroup.com/navy-air-sea-peo-forum/424-articles-gif/planning-the-sof-global-network.

[20] Edward Finn III, "Global Leadership in a Changing World," *Insights to a Changing World Journal* (2012) Issue 4, 18-10.

Joint Special Operations University
Center for Special Operations Studies and Research
7701 Tampa Point Blvd.
MacDill AFB, FL 33621