The Role of The Military Leader in Relieving Stress in Situations of Armed Conflict

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Abstract:
High stress reduces combat readiness by decreasing the performance of the military and increasing the number of casualties due to stress on the battlefield. It is just as normal for leaders to experience fear as it is for younger soldiers, and it is unwise to hide it from subordinates. On the contrary, it is advisable to discuss with them what he is afraid of, but not to let fear prevent him from fulfilling his leadership duties.

Introduction

Professions were created to allow people to specialize in a particular trade or occupation. Professional expertise requires years of study and experiential learning before people are able to practice it effectively. For example, a doctor performing an operation, a lawyer arguing a case in front of the bar, or a commander leading the military as they operate and synchronize complex systems on the battlefield. Members of society depend on these professionals for health, justice and security respectively. Therefore, a profound moral obligation rests upon the profession and its professionals to use their unique capabilities only in the best interests of that society. Military professionals serve the homeland and are morally bound to civil society to acquire the knowledge and expertise to do something that society cannot do for itself, but without which society cannot survive.

Whereas organizations traditionally motivate their employees based on extrinsic factors such as pay, benefits, and promotions, the military professions must rely on more inspirational, largely intrinsic factors such as the lifelong pursuit of specialized knowledge, the privilege and honor of service, the satisfaction of protecting life and enabling society to prosper, and the social status of being a member of an old and honorable professional group that controls its own membership. Thus, true military professionals are personally motivated by the intrinsic aspects of their service rather than the extrinsic benefits of it.

Literature review

In an article, Hannah et.al. provided a general taxonomy for extreme contexts and proposed that researchers should not dichotomize between dangerous and non-hazardous contexts, but that danger can come in many forms, levels of extremity, likelihood of occurrence and other dimensions. They argued that each of these dimensions creates specific contingencies and causalities that influence leadership and therefore should be separated when researching leadership in extreme contexts.

The first dimension noted by Hannah et al. is temporal staggering. They observed a clear distinction between extreme contexts and extreme events. While a conflict zone, for instance, may be considered an extreme context, a soldier's mission within that zone may be punctuated by a series of extreme events, such as episodic periods of direct military operations. A servicemember may alternate between guarding the military base, conducting missions outside of it, and returning to the base. Consequently, leadership in the military environment can vary across different stages: mission preparation, execution of operations, and recovery from hazardous events. What constitutes effective leadership, therefore, may differ from one stage to another. These stages are also interconnected, meaning that a leader's actions in one stage will impact the others. For instance, how a leader manages the psychological and physical recovery of their unit will directly influence the unit's readiness for the next extreme event. Hence, it is essential for leadership theories to address how leadership affects these transitions.

The second and third dimensions of extreme contexts, as proposed by Hannah et al., concern the potential magnitude of consequences that might occur and the likelihood of these consequences actually happening, both of which can vary within extreme contexts. Research indicates that more intense threats may elicit responses such as heightened awareness of mortality, evoke terror, increase stress levels, and lead to other debilitating emotional reactions.

Fourth, Hannah et al. suggested that various extreme contexts differ based on proximity. Proximity can be defined in terms of physical proximity, such as whether someone is on the front line or in a rear echelon. Proximity can also be classified as psychological or social proximity, referring to how close someone feels to the danger and to those affected. Even if individuals are not physically close to the danger, they may experience high levels of extreme risk if those to whom they feel psychologically or socially close are in danger. Differences in proximity across levels of command can also become problematic and may, consequently, negatively impact leadership processes.

For example, a leader in a command center may struggle to empathize with and understand the actions on the front line, while those engaged in the action may feel that the leader is out of touch and does not share their hardships and risks. Those closer to the action will naturally experience a greater magnitude and likelihood of consequences and, as a result, will face intense emotional reactions and other responses that do not affect those farther from the action. This disparity can reduce the flow of information and create social friction as the two groups interact. Those closer to the action will, of course, experience greater consequences and probabilities, leading to emotional and other intense reactions not imposed on those further from the action, potentially diminishing information flow and generating social tensions during interactions between the two groups.

The final dimension is the form or type of threat. Hannah et al. stated that the consequences of extreme events can be "classified as physical (e.g., death, injury, exhaustion), psychological (e.g., post-traumatic stress), or material (e.g., hurricane or fire damage to a city)".

In the context of armed combat, threats can be multidimensional. A soldier may face death or injury, but also potential psychological threats, such as post-traumatic stress, while simultaneously needing to strike a balance between escalating force to limit civilian infrastructure damage, fulfilling the mission, and protecting their own forces. However, each form of threat can impose distinct effects. Physical danger alone, for instance, is likely to create a heightened awareness of mortality, instilling a fear of death in both leaders and their subordinates.

Another perspective on leadership in wartime addresses the issue of battlefield stress. Stress is the body's response to repeated demands placed upon it. These demands can be physical (cold, injuries, illnesses) or mental (fear, conflict, pressure). Stress also arises when soldiers believe they cannot meet the demands they are expected to face. Sometimes, soldiers overestimate the difficulty of a task or mission, while other times they underestimate their own abilities. Leaders must use their experience and influence to provide their subordinates with a clearer understanding of mission requirements and confidence in their actual abilities. Stress is usually regarded as a destructive force that harms performance. This is only partially true. If stress levels are not too high, stress can be positive and enhance performance. In fact, it can help soldiers endure and overcome unpleasant or painful situations. It can also be the positive force that motivates soldiers to act selflessly and heroically in combat. However, stress can diminish soldiers' performance if its intensity is sufficiently high. For a leader, stress becomes a problem only when it negatively impacts performance. Discipline and personal example are absolutely essential in such moments. Leaders who cannot control themselves or become indecisive cause soldiers to lose confidence. It is crucial for subordinates to have trust in their leader's leadership in order to succeed in battle. Soldiers who lack confidence in their leaders are hesitant to respond promptly and appropriately to orders. The loss of trust is devastating to morale, reducing battlefield performance and further increasing stress levels.

Post-traumatic stress syndrome is a psycho-neurotic reaction that can develop in an individual as a result of stress in the combat environment. Each individual has a different capacity to personally cope with traumatic stress, whether it stems from an external physical factor, such as an enemy threat, or an internal factor, such as guilt. Physical and mental conditioning help soldiers endure stress, but fear and other unpleasant emotions will naturally be present before, during, and after combat. As a leader, it is unlikely to predict either your own resilience or that of your subordinates in resisting post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Weather, terrain, and the day-night cycle form the basic framework for all military operations. This framework, along with equipment, affects firepower, maneuverability, force protection, and the leadership of units in battle. It is essential for a leader to recognize the effects that combat itself has on soldiers. The danger, destruction, and confusion of battle, the impact of weapons and obstacles on the terrain, and the chaos associated with the unpredictable make simple tasks increasingly difficult.

Extreme temperatures, wind, precipitation, mud, and dust combine in various ways to impact soldier efficiency and limit the use of weapons and equipment. Leading soldiers becomes more challenging in adverse weather and difficult terrain. The time and effort required to interact with troops increase during bad weather. Securing positions and formations becomes harder to maintain, and successful operations demand more meticulous planning. Additionally, the demands of continuous operations exacerbate the normal stress of combat that soldiers must endure.

The CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear) threat is a major source of stress. The fear of the unknown and the awareness of the lethality of CBRN weapons cause significant psychological stress. Unsupported rumors exacerbate this stress, and it is the leader's responsibility to ensure that accurate information flows through the chain of command to every soldier.

Influence is the ability to persuade, motivate, inspire, and judiciously use power to positively impact others. It is generally not the kind of authority derived from leveraging titles, positions, or regulations. After all, the ability to influence others is an important aspect of leadership, both in good times and bad. The power of influence appears to be a useful leadership skill regardless of the individual leader's style (some managers are more inclusive, while others are more autocratic in their approach). The difference lies not in the importance of influence as a leadership capability but rather in the specific context of the crisis itself—an emotional crucible that distills the components of influence into a powerful concentrate of three key elements: communication, clarity of vision and values, and care. Crisis leadership is a unique case where these specific tools of influence play a critical role. In a crisis, deadlines become more pressing. There is less time for reflection, and quick decision-making combined with a stronger call to action becomes the norm.

More recent reaserch has shown that for soldiers to be able to face the harsh stress they go under, more and more trups have started to introduce mindfulness methods for stress resilience (Panda, Chatterjee, Srivastava, Chauhan, & Yadav, 2024). Stress resilience has many forms and can be „ attacked" at the individual, external and stressor levels with different methods. Methods such as yoga, can benefit soldiers expecially being integrated as a rountine training to enhance physical readiness and adress the stressor level. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and psychological first aid training are used more and more in different countries to be able to improve the individual level and are evidence- based methods. For the external level studies have shown hat effective leadership and mentoring aare methodes that benefit the soldiers and help them be sble to control their stress level (Panda, Chatterjee, Srivastava, Chauhan, & Yadav, 2024). Thrust between the soldiers and communication are key factors for stress resilience. Soldiers thst have a strong support system have shown lower distress and it all goes back to leadership and how much on an important role a good leader plays in the health of a soilder (Paxton Willing, Nevers, Nofziger, Rogers, & Riggs, 2024).

In his book Leadership in Organizations, Gary Yukl lists several influence tactics that people commonly use. Among these, he includes ingratiation, exchange, coalition-building, inspirational and personal appeals, consultation, rational persuasion, and pressure. His description of these tactics suggests that leaders can classify them (and others may perceive them) as either positive or negative in practice. For instance, using pressure and micromanagement to achieve results (such as frequently checking on the progress of a specific task) can have a negative impact even in the best of times and especially during a crisis. On the other hand, personal appeals based on a legitimate relationship between leaders and subordinates—one built not only on rank and position but also on shared interests and vision—can also yield results and are more effective during a crisis.

All these general influencing tactics are useful for a leader before, during, and after a crisis. Alongside these tactics, there are personal influencing methods that leaders can practice, which can also be highly effective during a crisis. These personal methods can be grouped into skills, traits, and perspectives. Leaders can develop their skills through training and experiences such as problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution. Leaders can refine their

traits (individual characteristics) by paying attention to areas such as integrity, courage, and risk-taking. Each skill, trait, and perspective is a valuable tool for leading during a crisis. However, they are even more effective when integrated into a single crisis leadership strategy.

As for leadership styles, in the military field there are many styles used, but we considered this three to be the most efficent in this times: Transformational leadership is seen as the most used one, as it does focus on supporting grwoth and focuses on inspiring others. Creating a shared commitment to organizational growth and goal achievement is the main objective of transformational leadership (Byrd, 2019). Transformational leadership is said to also create charistmatic and inspirational leaders. These leaders focus on explaining why a subordinate is asked to do something instead of just demanding it (Sadulski, 2022).

Situational leadership is often used by military leaders as well, as it is about the ability to adapt, something that is cruicial in thies field. A good leader is able to transform for any situation and adapt to what is needed in order for his team to win. Something that is also crucial in situational leadership is to know when to ask for guidance from your team as well as when to offer it. Situational leadership offers four sides: telling, selling, participating and delegating, something that a great leader should always know.

The last leadership style is path-goal oriented leadership, which focuses on being able as a leader to align with what your team neeeds. With this style, the leader guides, explains and creates a support system for his team, which we know is essencial for building stress resilience in the soldiers (Byrd, 2019).

Research methodology

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

What do you think about

1. The role of communication between the leader and subordinates in an operational theater?

2. The role of the leader's vision?

3. The leader's care for their subordinates?

4. A personal example of participating alongside their subordinates?

5. The leader's integrity and treating subordinates with dignity?

6. The competence of leaders for the position they hold?

7. The leader's courage to speak and make decisions in difficult circumstances?

8. The role of the decisions made by the leader?

9. Adaptability to change?

10. The role of rewards offered by the leader?

I applied this questionnaire to a number of 40 military veterans of operational theaters.

Results and discussions

Communication;
Well-developed communication is essential and critical for reducing stress in any organization, especially during armed conflict. Additionally, leaders can refine their personal communication skills to become more effective in such situations. These communication skills include clear, concrete, and precise orders that consider the tone of voice and the pace of delivering the command. Another important aspect is active listening, which involves maintaining constant eye contact, using receptive gestures, refraining from interrupting, and repeating key points to ensure understanding.

The clarity of vision and values;
Having a clear vision and a well-defined value system (whether personal or organizational) that can be conveyed to subordinates in a way they can understand and embrace is a powerful tool of influence. However, the clarity of vision is effective only if it is paired with a set of values that clarify what is important to the organization and what is not. During an armed conflict, a leader can leverage a credible vision and value system as a means of providing stability to personnel shaken by events, thereby reducing stress.

Care for subordinates;
A sincere interest and constant concern for subordinates greatly contribute to meeting the emotional needs of individuals in an armed conflict zone. When subordinates are emotionally healthy and do not feel the stress of the conflict zone, and when they are treated with respect, dignity, approval, appreciation, attention, importance, value, and trust, they will generally respond in kind.

Personal example;
Most subordinates tend to mimic the behavior of individuals they respect, regardless of their official position. Effective leaders capitalize on this tendency. All leaders would benefit from becoming more aware of the significant impact their words have and the stress they can generate in an armed conflict situation. Seeking feedback from others (not during an armed conflict, but in normal periods) is an excellent way to evaluate how others perceive and respond to the example they set.

The character;
Similar to integrity, this trait of conscious moral behavior defines a person when no one is watching. It requires the leader to tell the truth, be consistent in words and actions, treat people with dignity, avoid actions that even hint at inappropriate behavior in an armed conflict situation, and exercise self-control in matters of morality and self-indulgence. Subordinates are likely to tolerate honest mistakes, but major moral lapses may be harder to accept, especially if they lead to losses and insecurity. These lapses can have a lasting negative impact on reputation, erode the ability to lead, and increase subordinate stress.

Competence;

Leaders should be technically capable of handling their functions, especially in an armed conflict situation. No personality type, practical skills, or presence of mind can mask or overcome a deficiency in technical competence and basic leadership. And almost nothing can increase subordinate anxiety more or reduce their trust, heighten stress, especially during an armed conflict, when the leader is perceived as marginally competent. Competent leaders instill confidence, reduce stress, and eliminate doubts and fears.

The courage;

It takes a great deal of courage to tell the truth in difficult circumstances, especially in armed conflict situations, to make tough decisions, to answer difficult questions, to face an unhappy crowd, and to accept responsibility. Subordinates will want to know that their leader will fight for them and do what is right, regardless of the consequences. A leader without courage inspires stress and approaches disaster in an armed conflict. To amplify the level of courage, leaders can first develop a clear code of values, ethics, and personal standards. They can then relate each situation or decision to this code and follow their conscience to do what is right in those circumstances and reduce stress.

Determination;

During an armed conflict, even a wrong decision that promotes action and eliminates stress is better than the absence of any decision. Making influential decisions means gathering information as quickly as possible, understanding that not all necessary information is available to make a decision, accepting inherent risks, obtaining recommendations from those around you, and listening to feelings.

There are many other skills, traits, and perspectives that leaders can develop and refine to enhance their personal influence, making them more effective during routine operations and in times of crisis.

Following the applied questionnaire, we interviewed two military veterans of the theaters of operations and discussed about their experiences in the theaters of operations on the role of military leadership in reducing stress in situations of armed conflict.

They both fondly remember their commanders with whom they served in theaters of operations.

One of them was keen to explain the courage and dedication of the leader regarding the effective decision he made at the time.

"The whole crew looked up to him as a saint", and his decision in that situation in a time crunch and under the pressure of theater conditions was an efficient one and the whole crew succeeded in accomplishing the mission given to them.

The second military veteran of the theater of operations explained the role of the personal example of the leader to participate with his crew and how to communicate with his subordinates, he emphasized how to talk with subordinates, as well as how to treat subordinates and his ability to adapt subordinates to the unknown, uncertainty, unforeseen situations and possible vulnerabilities.

The two explained the reward system which is the effective means for leaders to develop and maintain the motivation of military members to perform their duties under stress and uncertainty.

They strongly supported the idea that without effective communication between leader and crew, leader competence, leader courage, dedication and personal example a mission cannot be accomplished in a theater of operations.

Conclusions

Based on the analyses presented above, I propose a plan for leaders to consider in armed conflict situations to reduce stress:

The leader must:

- Make the work of subordinates fulfilling;

- Build trust between the members of the organization they lead, as well as between the leader and subordinates;

- Maintain constant and adequate communication with subordinates, as well as among them within the organization;

- Effectively inform subordinates, no matter how difficult it may be;

- Build stable structures that subordinates perceive as secure;

- Get involved in events related to subordinates' issues and show interest in the progress and functioning of the organization they command;

- Motivate subordinates through rewards for their achievements;

- Set objectives and priorities for subordinates;

- Establish clear directions and execution plans for subordinates;

- Provide appropriate guidance, direction, and technical consultations for subordinates;

- Encourage the constant involvement of subordinates;

- Publicly acknowledge their achievements and ongoing concerns.

The leader's ability to achieve stability objectives is determined by their professional competence, mastery of their own emotions in an armed conflict situation, and awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. Sensing the emotions of subordinates, understanding them, and actively engaging with their concerns increases subordinates' trust in the leader and eliminates stress.

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