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Command Conundrum: An Infinite Game



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You must have long-range goals to keep you from being frustrated by short-range failures.

– Major General Charles C Noble

According to James P Carse, we are entwined in a mesh of jobs wherein we can categorise our working culture or ‘Game’ into two contours, namely, Finite and Infinite Game.¹ Why is there a need to call the working culture of the Army as a game? As a way of life in the Army—guided by rules, regulations, and orders—the leaders

Key Points

- The appointment of a Commanding Officer is not only critical for himself or the subordinates, but also the organisation.
- There is a need to examine the ‘Finite and Infinite Game’ and draw parallels for the command.
- Future would be mired with the dynamistic presence of leaders at all levels of army hierarchy, professional disparity, and ‘ethical actions’.
- The essay highlights what the Commanding Officer is likely to keep in mind to create a healthy and professionally efficient team.
- It is imperative to prepare for the appointment to face the future, by attuning one’s own actions in the present.

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in the organisation are expected to deliver results as well as keep the ‘Team’ happy and content – before, during, and after the execution of the task. The leader would have to orchestrate the execution within his myriad resources, which would deem his Team functionally or operationally fit. All this leads to the shots being called by the leader as a coach to organise, train, play, and learn to achieve the desired result i.e. “winning”. As defined by James P Carse, a “Finite Game” is played to win, as it must come to a definitive end, whereas an “Infinite Game” is played continuously to prevent the game from ending. We (as leaders) have been biased with our short-termed finite vision towards the completion of tasks and have failed to realise that our tasks have been entwined in an Infinite model. There is an apt need to identify the real game being played to understand the task at hand and bring forth the optimum set of players. As articulated by Simon Sinek, “Infinite games are played by known and unknown players having an infinite time horizon”.² Our battle/game is not oriented within the immediate temporal space.

In 1932, (then) Captain KM Cariappa passed the Staff College Examination gaining entrance into Quetta—the first

Indian officer to do so. He found himself in an environment which was greatly biased against the officers from colonies. Being shy, he was reluctant to speak. However, things changed when he was asked to comment on the course; wherein in front of the Commandant, he pointed out the limited number of vacancies for Indian officers and raised its implication on the qualitative benchmark of the then Imperial Army. He could have remained a ‘part and parcel’ of the system but he chose to highlight a point. He was later counselled for fuelling ‘politically motivated’ Indianisation³; however, his vision was founded to be that of a true military mind on fostering a long-term vision, which ultimately saw the experience and ability of Indian officers in field areas, to tenet higher prestigious appointments in the British Army. He challenged the status quo of the British Army, as he envisioned a medium to tackle the inertia of British officers. He was not bounded by the rules of the game set in that era. His vision was to witness a better organised Army, which he was able to achieve later by becoming the first Indian Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army.

As and when an officer establishes his footing in the Army service, one starts to

visualise himself donning the appointment of a Commanding Officer (CO) and wearing fantasised “Red Collar Tags”. The dream then furthers to bringing one’s command to the epitome level of functioning and status within the organisation. The question which troubles the thought process is—who are we competing against, is it the environment in which we survive or is it oneself? Our mind starts to believe that the organisational requirements are wired in a manner which bogs down the capability of the team and its leader to execute the assigned task. There is a need to understand that the game of command does not finish on the short rejection by the higher authority nor does it continue by riding on the shoulders of subordinates. As leaders, one would have to groom as also be groomed on the evolving scenarios – because, once the “Rubicon is crossed” and collar tags are worn, the die is cast; however, the understanding of prospective situations, before crossing, should be clear to align one’s own footsteps in the appointment of the CO.

Predicaments in Mind

It keeps on lingering in our minds as to how will the command go? How my troops

would be happy as well as trained fit? How will I be able to quench the intent of the higher commanders? How busy will be the administrative requirements? How will I be able to satisfy the ambitions of subordinates under my command? These are just a few of pondering thoughts which comes to our minds instantly.

Once a General Officer, in the presence of his daughter, hauled up the Quarter Master of a regiment for displaying disregard to the mules – by making the animals wait, as the exercise timelines had changed – to which his CO objected and he further referred to the General as it is he who commands the regiment—it was therefore the General’s order, not that of the Quarter Master. This created an everlasting impression on the mind of the young Quarter Master, who happened to later rise to be Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw.⁴ The uniqueness of the Army lies in the fact that there is a leader at all level, right from the detachment to the Army Headquarter. One rises in the system according to one’s aptitude and professional capability. The leader, at all level, must cross through the “ascertained yardsticks” to enable him to reach the next level of command. The leader at a higher level needs to give freedom to the subordinate leaders,



to exercise their command with the intent of executing the higher commander's orders. The complex system becomes compounding for the 'middle placed' leader who is stuck between the subordinate commander and the higher commander. It is instilled and drilled into the minds of a soldier to follow orders and execute the assigned task. As this is seen by the growing leader, it seems that the system is a command-driven model wherein the orders are to be executed. However, when there is a need to draw a line by the subordinate in the paradigm of "Professional Disparity", it may be observed as an act of insubordination by not following the dictated orders. How is it that leaders at various levels observe the same task both as essential and non-essential in nature. More so as these "ethical" actions being carried out repeatedly in the name of organisation, might also get a normalised tinge – the real quandary exists on the requirement of the said task. However, Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, throughout his service career, was able to imbibe the quality of having professional disparity with his higher commanders, whenever a situation arose.

'Trust' is truly a binary function—either you have or you don't. The issue is not to

sustain such an environment which yields better team, but is to create one wherein the personal and professional ambitions are satisfied. Paltan is a resilient organism wherein, it can absorb toxic leaders; however, if one is not able to rely on its leader or team, the Paltan will still survive but not the way it is supposed to, which will lead to a dissatisfied and an unhappy team. The stigma of "What Next, What More and What Else" will always loom in the mind of the CO – as it is majorly queried, "What Else" can be done by the team. The battle of relevance always worries the leader and this leads to keep the 'ambition' alive. The universal truth lies in the fact that, all leaders want their team to outshine others and rise to the 'intended' occasion. Ambition remains the concealed key which has the ability to make the leader fall prey to it, by using it to unlock the "game" for the future. Therefore, intense motivation of the leader is likely to have its own share of disadvantages.

Over the service career, certain cliched catch phrases are used which defeats the purpose for which it would have been initiated thereby, further vitiating the command. To define that in a service period, an individual has to work extremely hard especially

during his “Adequately Exercised” period, hence being called as an AE Major, needs some re-thought. Why create an unruly atmosphere by defining which person will work for his report and who will not? The ambition and ACR culture needs a denovo look.

Visualisation of the Future Game

We need to accept the fact that, ambition is fuel for the majority and it would be foolish to deny this element. We are playing an Infinite Game which will not cease to exist on the relinquishment of command or even on the next upcoming promotion or rejection. A catch-22 choice remains alive – either to choose a clearer shorter vision vis-à-vis to a mystified long-term one. Infinite Game will sometime constitute certain Finite Games as well. These needs to be identified in the overall scheme of the command’s line of effort and be played upon, wherein the complete vision is to keep the game, in its entirety, perpetual. In no manner, it is a Machiavellian thought process of employing unethical rule book to stay in the seat of power, but more of a graduated approach to achieve what

is desired—a happy and a united team which is capable of executing tasks professionally.

There is no set piece Standard Operating Procedures, drill or scheme to play the Infinite Game. To win, the leader would have to create an environment wherein, he can breed the required players to sustain the Paltan. The unification of command has to occur not by fear of ranks or order, but by willing acceptance to the desired thought process of CO. To lead the team to the desired level, the leader would have to first identify, then clearly define his espoused ideal of the future, to his team. An ideal so established, that each member of the team is inspired to achieve it, even by making self-sacrifices to help the team advance towards the espoused vision. It should be such a vision, which pushes others to carry on with the legacy and not just dump it when it becomes feasible. The idea of creating a vision is to reignite the ideology of the team as being under one banner of the Paltan which is inclusive of its traditions and customs, but not a slave to it. The team should be able to passionately toil for the future. Broad ideals of being the best battalion would not accrue any advantage,



as it is vague. The future should strive to be better from the present state with an agenda to achieve it. Being best is just thrust to the desired vision—it should not be the vision in itself. The intent of the leader should be to raise a team which loves its job more than just following orders.

The sense of purpose should not just be aligned to result-oriented work. It should have the ability to improve the health of the Paltan, making it more resilient and stronger. The health of the unit will automatically define its integral ‘Tartib’, giving the necessary boost to assigned tasks and generating the deemed results. It should be clearly understood that results are not the purpose but only milestones to the desired destination of making a sturdier team. However, this purpose is not to be just felt and acted upon by hierarchy alone, but by the complete rank and file of Paltan. The CO should be able to create an “Umbrella of Trust”, to cultivate an atmosphere of true efficiency, therefore, allowing subordinate leaders to feel psychologically safe, ready to expose their chinks in the armour without the fear of being struck. There is a need to feel comfortable on the aspects of walking up

to the leader and discuss issues which are keeping the organisation (Paltan/team) at bay – the reality check needs to be displayed. The challenges as perceived by the leaders at various levels would be different—the higher level of leaders should be able to address the challenges of a subordinate leader to allow him to manoeuvre in his sphere of influence with ease. This freedom of trust will permit him to exploit the success and take a calculative risk at his level or even at his expense, to achieve the allocated task.

If a finite mindset is kept while in an Infinite Game, the leader would be mired with limited will and resource at hand. The morale is not just created by materialistic possessions – rather it comes with the sense of belongingness to the Paltan, which has to be achieved at all levels. A transactional relationship has its woes, wherein it kills the fervour of a subordinate to work for the team as he parallels his desires at a higher pedestal. Rewards or privilege to an individual will not gel with the actual pride of the team, it motivates for a limited “transactional time period” which has a labelled expiry on it. An idealistic environment would suggest that the team,

together in a unifocal approach, achieves the desired result, albeit the utopian world does not exist. Targets, aims, and goals to be achieved are made keeping in mind the overall design to create a portrait, the achievement of which intensifies the bond within the team. Creation of favourite pieces of players in the game will surely keep the team afloat, but would deliver the rest of the team out of the so-called “belongingness boat”.

Ambitions are not purely the “pool restricted to top members” of team, even the junior most member would have some aspirations, if not equable ambition to those of the leaders. The CO would have to recognise the professional or personal desires of the team and should shape some of the future plans of action in accordance with these. The CO should try, as far as possible, to deliver into these aspirations to keep the lower base of the pyramidal structure happy, stable, and resilient through tough times. If all members of the team are made to feel that the task being carried out is for a bigger purpose than oneself, then it would surely bring in pride within the edifice of the Paltan. All this would have to be conducted within

the paradigm of ethical leadership and not with a malicious design to exploit these ideals.

Conclusion

The swimmer can reveal the taste of water only when he submerges himself in the water, but the swimmer with his experience should be capable to evaluate the kind of currents he would have to face in upcoming laps. Being the CO of the Battalion is an honoured step which needs to be analysed even before dawning the appointment. The step is surely not a switch which would transient a Company Commander or Staff Officer into the shoes of the CO. One would have to train his mind to be able to live up to the eyes of the command and the intent of the higher commanders. It is known that complete command would not be playing on a level field with optimum desired rules. Everyday would be a discovery of a new kind of hypothesis in the playfield, which was not visualised in the past. During these times it will not be the lone survivor, by the means of CO, who would handle the playing technique of the Paltan – it would be the team created by him, which would be all



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hands onto the playfield supporting the execution of the game. We need to decide which kind of game are we playing?

Notes

1. James P Carse, *Finite and Infinite Game*, 1986, p. 6.
2. Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 2019, p. 7.
3. General VK Singh, 'Leadership in the Indian Army', *Biographies of Twelve Soldiers*, 2018, p. 26.
4. Hanadi Falki, Field Marshall Sam Manekshaw, 2017, p. 87.

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