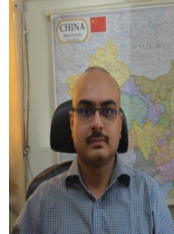




No. 276

March 2021

Leadership Lessons for Tactical Commanders during a Pandemic



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Introduction

The objective of this article is to highlight leadership lessons that the tactical commanders in uniformed services need to learn in order to face unconventional challenges in complex scenarios. One such scenario is the incumbent COVID-19 crisis that continues to grip global nations. The crisis is a ripe example, as most militaries have been called for support by respective nations and besides being one of primary humanitarian actors on the ground, they continue to share equal responsibility with the partner agencies.

Frontline workers may not necessarily be limited to the borders or to the land with unknown elements, instead they exist on every road, every alley in every town, city, and state—from evacuation to medical assistance, delivery of

essential services to maintaining order—they are the bulwark of government initiatives against any and all threats. So, how prepared are the tactical commanders in the face of challenges that are unconventional and complex?

Key Points

- COVID-19 is a recent example where militaries have been deployed to assist local law enforcement agencies on humanitarian initiatives.
- A tactical commander deployed at such initiatives, must be prepared to counter unconventional, complex challenges.
- Besides being an effective planner, he must have a thorough social knowledge, train smartly, establish trust, take risks, be fluid and adapt to all environments, communicate clearly, and maintain focus.
- The qualities are not restricted but are essential for a tactical commander, especially those appointed in unconventional scenarios.
- His/her ability to prepare and communicate with the troops and his directive style of command is important for success of any operation.



The author aims to address primarily the tactical commanders, irrespective of the ranks, who are in-charge of a body of troops deployed on ground for executing a given task.

Tactical commanders, are however 'the tip of the spear' in every military unit countering asymmetric threats. Going through rounds of training in conventional, unconventional, proxy warfare along with aid to civil authority, among others, they are pincers to an effective strategy. So, how effective should tactical commanders be in complex emergencies? What qualities should they possess?

For distinct answers and further clarity, the author interviewed numerous military leaders (from NCOs to Unit Commanders) deployed during humanitarian missions in roughly all over the globe. They did not hail from any one particular country but shared vivid responsibilities during this pandemic. According to them, a tactical commander must be prepared (with a 360-degree approach), possess the ability to thoroughly assess risks & identify vulnerabilities, must be adaptive and must communicate clearly.¹ S/he should remain fluid and be adaptive to all scenarios irrespective of its complexity. Since unconventional challenges are time sensitive and needs to be addressed effectively, tactical leaders should be quick thinkers and must possess ability to take calculated risks.

Qualities of a good Commander: A preview

Be an Effective Planner. The operation's success depends on the tactical commander's preparation. No matter how complex the scenarios are, a commander should be ready to face both conventional and unconventional challenges. In order to have a holistic knowledge of technical and legal issues involved with respect to any particular task, it is always beneficial to interact with subject matter experts. Also, it is important to study the psychology of the local population along with their local customs and behavioural patterns, before planning various population control measures. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the tactical commander to ensure that the operation area is thoroughly studied, individual roles & responsibilities are sufficiently practiced and understood, before launching the final operation. Remember the words of the *ustad* or the training JCO— individual and collective training, detailed planning, cooperation, and coordination amongst all stake holders makes an operation successful.²

Social Knowledge. A tactical commander is in-charge of planning systematic sequences of an operation and therefore must simulate expected/probable challenges and identify alternate response mechanisms to credible threats. It is only possible when the commander attains sufficient know-how, along with vital tactical preview of the field. To attain this, the commander needs to have an intimate understanding of the topography, architectural layout,



and additional humanistic elements which could possibly interfere with the operation, and in accordance with sociologists, commanders must adhere to, what they call as a 'Six Step Analytical Framework'.³ This analytical framework is used by sociologists to comprehend external factors affecting the environment and identify challenges that may emanate from topography, socio-economics, ethnography, mechanisation, bionomics, and politics— hence, providing an in-depth analysis before deployment.⁴ However, for tactical purposes, a commander may not find all segments particular to his/her needs, but could seek some form of enlightenment from this six-step analytical framework and gain maximum information of his/her operational vicinity.

Train Smartly. As stated by almost every *ustad* in training academies across the globe, training is the epitome of all success. Preparing the troops for unforeseen challenges effectively and keeping a clear head, will ensure seamless conduct of the operation.⁵ Can a commander ensure that his/her troop is able to deploy quickly, take positions, provide security (proximity cover), communicate clearly, identify threats, secure civilians, call for reinforcements or evacuate dead and other casualties? His/her leadership role should further be enhanced by rounds of training sessions depending upon operational requirements and future deployment scenarios. Thus, before s/he becomes a commander, s/he needs to become a teacher, as it is the steppingstone to a strong leadership. S/he must train troops under varied scenarios in an effort to understand their reactions under intensive stress and adopt methods to maintain their emotional balance.

Establish Trust. Trust between a commander and his/her men are as essential as training since it establishes a relationship, a 'camaraderie' between a leader, his/her men and among them.⁶ Respect is mutual and applicable equally to each one, and it must have its foundations on dependability, truthfulness, and trustworthiness. Dependability of a leader is echoed during scenarios with complex engagements; truthfulness highlights moral character which is an epitome of military leadership and further reinforces his/her reliability as a leader at each stage; trustworthiness highlights the true behaviour and personality of a commander during operations (rapport, compassion, forthright, impartial, sincere, bold, resourceful, daring, magnetic, devoted). Hence, the aforementioned traits of a commander are likely to be appreciated more within troops as also amongst the targeted population.⁷

Take Risks. Prior to taking over tactical leadership, the officer should have operational experience in the field and must possess the ability to identify the risks involved in various scenarios pertaining to troop deployment and must also be able to take tough decisions, under stress, as well as be ready to face extreme consequences.⁸ He must remain calm



underall scenarios in an effort to make rational decisions. These qualities should be further reinforced by his prior experiences. Questions like is fatigue keeping them from operating effectively? Are they communicating clearly and working together during efficiently? —needs to be thought of every time during the course of training or during operations. If that is not the case, then either the operation is planned to achieve over ambitious objectives or it is not at all sufficiently planned, or the troops are either ill equipped, untrained, or ill lead. Based on the known behaviour of various target population, own response and dealing with them needs to be discussed and trained for. This would also enable each team member to take appropriate measures even in the unforeseen eventualities and prepare them for ‘tolerance of ambiguity’.

Academically, a tactical military leader must keep in mind all protocols, probabilities, and alternatives that could assist him in making tough decisions.⁹ Importantly, a commander must be well versed with the domestic and international (in case operating in an out of area contingency) humanitarian law and should also allow his troops to enroll themselves in vivid academic courses for their own development. The objective needs to be achieved successfully, so a commander must ensure the safety of his men and maintain collateral damages to as minimum as possible. He must carry out a thorough analysis and evaluate all possible options before employing force. Thus, the commander and his/her men must also have a vivid understanding of the law of armed conflict and at the same time apply it to various scenarios, irrespective of its complexity. To summarise, the commander must mix training routine with theoretical study and practical simulation, followed by observations from an experienced instructor, and finally a specific case study discussion thus enabling them to prepare for both the known & the unknown.¹⁰

Be Fluid and Adaptive to all Environments. Before COVID-19, the biggest deployment of military resources (in previous decades) was carried out in Iraq to combat a ‘conventional’ enemy.¹¹ During the pandemic, for the first time in history, military units were employed extensively at home fronts. Troops with extensive combat experience were deployed in familiar localities, some even standing guard at check posts adjacent to familiar residential neighbourhoods, thus making it difficult for them to take tough rational decisions when the situation calls.¹² It is critical for tactical commanders to adapt to unconventional/complex scenarios quickly, especially when it involves civilian response and crowd control/management, where threats could emanate in the form of misinformation, angry protesters and desperate masses seeking assistance and similarly train his troops. As per behavioural experts, acquisition of knowledge, reasoning, social-cognitive theory of achieving motivation, ready to hear new ideas and ability to make uncoerced decisions, are



some of the critical factors which makes a team functionally effective and operationally efficient.¹³

Communicate Clearly. Leadership can be understood as the ‘art of inculcating purpose in the hearts and minds of the people and giving them a new focus, stimulation/inspiration to successfully achieve a task and open new doors of change within the organisation’¹⁴, which is possible only by frequent and clear communication between a commander and his/her troops. Further, a commander must always try keep the channels of communication with his troops open, in order to avoid miscommunication of any manner, thereby strengthening the foundations of a relationship (which is built on trust). The flow of communication must be collective, detailed, and reciprocal. For example, a commander must not hesitate to ask alternate solutions to a challenge, such a step would lead to strengthening of trust between the commander and his/her troops.¹⁵

It is imperative for a commander to have a strong pluralistic understanding of the area of operations. He /she should be proficient in diverse multi-cultural interactions, possess the right knowledge, and innovative enough to develop a strong communication with diverse ethno-cultural societies.¹⁶ By displaying empathy and possessing the card of humility, a tactical commander will be able to communicate with the civil agencies and the masses directly, effectively and work efficiently with partnered non-government organisations as well as military/law enforcement partners. If required then the leadership should also be able to initiate measures to encourage local civil leadership to establish a civil society organisation, for a better and organised way of passage of information and instructions. The social media available in the area should, also be used to keep the population informed of the population control measures, precautions to be taken as also the contact details of the authority who can provide any assistance and answers to their queries. Through robust and regular communication, a commander will be able to establish strong relationship between his/her troops and develop the ability to share mutual thoughts on what to do and how to do, etc. To summarise, communication is critical, not only for a commander but more for his/her troops, as it reflects their collective ability to achieve a target.

Maintain Focus. While leading troops in any operation, a commander must ensure that his/her troops are focused. This ability to keep the troops focused emerges from their ability to practice intensively for the mission at hand. This means that, the commander must set a much higher standard than the traditional rule book in awareness and preparation, especially during humanitarian centric missions, which are quite subjective and ‘rulebook’ centric.¹⁷



A typical mission in urban setting cannot be limited only to scenarios involving conventional or non-conventional situations. Open streets, multiple corners, sky rise buildings, residential neighbourhood, makes the scenario very complex for a commander to apprehend the perpetrators, let alone isolating them, and maintain strong control over the area of operations.¹⁸

Hence, a commander must reintroduce momentum through motivation in an effort to retain focus of the troops to the objective and highlight the impact of the objective and positive outcomes of it. It falls on the commander to retain his/her troops' focus on the objective and maintain a momentum. This issue may also be addressed by having reserves or by rotating troops.

Conclusion

The aforementioned qualities are not limited to the appointment of a tactical commander only; certain qualities including exemplary career record, leadership qualities, charismatic persona, dominance in the field, tolerance to ambiguity, etc. needs to be also considered. Moreover, all the leadership qualities advocated by various professionals also continue to be relevant. That being said, the aforementioned qualities are essential for a tactical commander especially those having leadership appointments in unconventional operations. During employment, interaction will not only be limited to regular troops, but the commander may interact jointly with other law enforcement and sister units along with government, non-government and civil agencies. Therefore, s/he must work jointly with his troops, which is an essentiality as far as the operational field is concerned.

End Notes

¹ During interviews, the author requested all military leaders to list leadership traits which according to them are critical in a crisis.

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