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Emotional Intelligence in Military Leadership



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Scholars like Alvin Toffler and Stephen Covey have talked about the evolution of society from 'hunter' to 'agricultural' to 'industrial' to 'information/ knowledge'. Given the flat world of today, our society has not been left untouched by the changes - with an obvious bearing on the human resource that comprise our military. The changes have been marked by proliferation of new technologies leading to unprecedented ways in which media (including the social media) can reach the eyes and mind of the soldier. These changes have led to re-adjustments in how the rank and file stands among each other in the military hierarchy. The service and age of military leaders at the cutting edge, commanding officers, today, are much lesser, their perceptions and styles of functioning therefore different.

Continuous supply of information to the rarely-questioning soldier of today is shaping their minds continuously as never before. A large scale social inclusion of soldiers is underway, courtesy the social media and diminishing socio-economic gap between officers and troops. Leaders in command of troops today stand much more scrutinised than

Key Points

1. The prevalent organisational realities, characterised by enhanced awareness on part of our soldiers and the continuously narrowing socio-economic gap between the troops and the officers have resulted into a tremendous aspirational jump vis-à-vis mindset of a soldier.
2. A mismatch in the respective thought process of the leaders and the team members has often led to undesired consequences, in both long and short term. Such challenges manifest more at the tactical levels owing to direct contact between the leaders and the led.
3. Present leadership at the cutting edge level requires to adapt itself to the changed backdrop, so as to ensure and sustain organisational effectiveness.
4. While not undermining the importance of Intelligence Quotient (IQ), a high degree of Emotional Quotient (EQ) is required in today's leader to make a mark.
5. The paper dwells into facets of Emotional Intelligence (EI) as the most crucial leadership attribute, applicable to our tactical level military leadership. The arguments have been built upon EQ aspects of leadership as propounded by Daniel Goleman, an internationally known psychologist and the New York Times best-selling author of Emotional Intelligence.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think-tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

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earlier. The conventional calling upon the soldier to “yours is but to do and die” is under question. If today’s military leaders have feet of clay and do not ‘walk the talk’ they will stand exposed, sooner or later. Leadership or the lack of it is the common thread that runs through incidents and mishaps like insubordination, soldiers running amok, suicides, fratricides, operational setbacks etc.

Developing functional blindness shall prove to be a bane. As Einstein remarks, “the significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them”.¹ In today’s information (and awareness) age, if we try adopting successful methods of industrial age, the response shall never measure up to the challenge; leading to failure². The aforesaid is equally applicable to the evolving military society that we work in, and an imperative to modify the style of leadership is beyond arguments.

Hollow Symbiosis

Military leadership of past was made to believe that they had to control and manage their command. The transactional, *carrot and stick* motivated philosophy was the guiding principle. The challenge is that the leaders at various levels, by and large, are still sticking to the dictum of bygone era which ill-fits today’s dynamic and aware command composition. The current leadership has been often found wanting on the aspect of understanding the human nature of the command as they end up merely managing them like any other ‘material’. Such an approach insults, alienates and depersonalizes the command; rendering team participation towards the envisioned objectives, unwilling and reluctant³.

When the command is managed like ‘material’, leadership is taken as a position. The followers think that only those in positions of authority should decide what must be done. The team members don’t take initiatives and wait to be told what to do by the person with formal title and then they

respond as directed. Consequently the ownership of responsibility and sense of belongingness amongst the team members (soldiers) suffers and the team (unit) ceases to thrive.

This widespread reluctance to take initiative (by team members) strengthens formal leader’s resolve to manage their soldier- team members. And this cycle quickly develops in a negative co-dependency with each party’s weakness becoming mutually reinforcing. The co-dependent culture that develops is eventually institutionalized to the point that no one takes responsibility. Undoubtedly, in a military environment, the orders for execution have to trickle down from above; however prior to formalising an order, it is warranted that sufficient amount of deliberations are held to solicit willful compliance. Leaders should welcome and take in stride the ‘worthy dissent’ within the team⁴; and once a decision has been arrived at, compliance on part of the team members is expected to be willing and with conviction.

The challenges arising out of negative co-dependency fall into three categories: organisational, relationship and personal. At the organisational level it suppresses human voices and aspirations. Seen from the general perspective, the centralised control philosophy has its root in the bygone age characterized by a society where traits of information age like awareness and rising aspirations had not reached the level, they are at presently. At the relationship level, it has led to fundamental lack of trust, characterised by an environment where team members are groomed being compared to one another, breeding negative competition amongst the peers. At the personal level, the team members feel undervalued, uninspired and not part of the big picture⁵. The leadership becomes ‘transactional’ in nature, as against being ‘transformational’.

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

As per Daniel Goleman, most effective leaders are alike in one crucial way: they all have a high degree

of EI. It's not that IQ is irrelevant, it does matter but as entry level requirement. There has been a great deal of research suggesting that in the long run, EI is a more accurate determinant of successful communications, relationships and leadership than is IQ. EI has set of five skills that enable the best leaders to maximize their own and their followers' performance. These are – self awareness, self regulation, motivation, empathy and social skill⁶. This brief dwells into the components of EI drawn out by Goleman, as it could be applicable to military leadership, especially as the leaders grow in seniority and acquire crucial command assignments starting with sub-unit command.

Self Awareness

This first component of EI amounts to having a deep understanding of one's emotions, strengths and weaknesses. Leaders with strong self awareness are neither overtly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. For them, values and goals are clear and the pack is led accordingly, without any predicament. In order to achieve a short term and superficial gain for the unit, a mode that does not align with the envisioned line will never be tempting. On the contrary, a leader with poor self awareness will fall for dubious ways to achieve a short term gain for his team. And in doing so, he loses his 'role model' image as also the actions of the unit often have far reaching adverse implications in present volatile setting, of say a counterinsurgency milieu.

SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats) analysis is a key tool in military to gauge and improve efficiency and leaders high on self awareness utilize this tool to the optimum as they are comfortable talking about their limitations and strengths, with unbiased attention for constructive criticism. On the other hand, leaders low on self awareness take criticism as a threat or a sign of failure as they suffer from insecurity, breeding from their low self-esteem. They exhibit inclinations for unethical means in the name of efficiency and the

team members indulge in sycophancy; distancing the team from its leader.

Self Regulation

Emotions, although can't be done away with, can certainly be managed. A leader with high quotient of self regulation finds ways to control his emotional impulses and bad moods. Imagine a unit commander who watches one of his teams perform miserably in a formation competition. In the perceived letdown and gloom that follows, the leader could find it tempting to come down heavily on the team in terms of criticism. But, if the leader has high quotient of self regulation, he would take a different approach. He would pick his words carefully, acknowledging the poor performance without jumping on to hasty conclusions and decisions. He would then step back to consider reasons behind the setback. Are they due to lack of efforts or resources? Are there any mitigating factors? What was his role in the debacle? After considering the questions, he would call the team together and offer his views. He, in consultations with the stake holders, would then present his analysis of the problem and propose a well considered solution.

Self regulation matters so much for military leaders for several reasons. Firstly, leaders who are in control of their impulses (i.e. who are reasonable) are able to create an environment of trust and fairness. Team members in such an environment flock together to strive for the team (organisational) goals. All the team members look up to leaders as 'role models'. Secondly, self regulation is crucial in the present times of dynamism in terms of societal transformations and operational fluidity. In face of sudden changes, the leaders do not panic; instead give a well thought through decision suited for the changed setting. As the new set of initiatives move forward, these leaders are able to move with it so as to monitor and exercise course correction without diluting the directive essence of their leadership that continuously trains and empowers the subordinate leaders.

Signs of self regulation are – an inclination for reflection, intellect & thoughtfulness, tolerance for ambiguity and integrity. Many of the undesirables that surface in units are a function of impulsive behavior on part of the leadership, manifesting into cascades of cover-ups. Factors like superficially thought and planned decisions, lack of seriousness to improve the unit health and abuse of power for selfish motives seep into the work culture. In the given scenario, an opportunity for leaders with weak ‘impulse control’ presents itself, encouraging ‘yes-manship’, wherein the team members speak what the leaders want to hear.

Attentiveness and *Responsibility* are the two most crucial qualities in a leader to achieve high indices of self regulation. As leaders, we need to have a complete grasp of the situation, which in turn warrants complete attention to command. By genuinely listening to the point of view of a subordinate, the leader makes the subordinate feel important, adding to his self esteem and making him a willing collaborator towards the team goal. Attentiveness extends the leader’s understanding beyond the obvious and accelerates the OODA loop. Towards the aspect of Responsibility, leaders must voluntarily fulfill their duties and obligations to best of their abilities. It becomes a question of self discipline, with leaders taking additional responsibilities and assuming informal accountability, even in ambiguous situations⁷.

Motivation

This is the most important trait for a leader. The leaders with high levels of motivation are driven to achieve beyond expectations. Motivation for a leader high on Emotional Quotient (EQ) comes from internal factors rather than from external ones which are invariably ‘transactional’ in nature. The first sign for such levels of motivation is a passion and pride for the profession. Such leaders display extraordinary zeal to do things better and are ‘anti-status quoist’.

Teams led by leaders with high motivation remain optimistic even during tough conditions. Self regulation combined with motivation overcome frustrations and depression that follows a setback. For example, a unit suffering a setback in an operational area shall look for an opportunity to prove that it has the capability to bounce back. Lessons are learnt and worked upon, by teams to eventually emerge victorious. Motivation to achieve translates into strong leadership and vice versa, creating a working environment of optimism and organisational commitment. In such an overall atmosphere of positivity, the (soldiers) team mates look forward to the task⁸.

Empathy

This is the most easily recognizable trait of EI. However when it comes to military, leaders with empathy are rarely encouraged or praised. The very word seems un-military amidst the tough realities of military realm. For a leader, empathy should not mean becoming a populist by adopting others’ emotions. Rather, it implies thoughtful consideration of team members’ point of view as one of the factors, while making sensible decisions. For example, in operational areas, proliferation of cellular phones has become a huge distraction for the troops. Owing to their ease of carriage and utility, troops indulge in its abuse, thus jeopardizing the operational commitments. For the unit commander, enforcing a ban on usage of cellular phones poses a formidable challenge. Troops are likely to find ways and means to defy orders and thereby setting a wrong precedence. Instead, if the troops are educated on the aspects of concern, supervised by the junior leadership – a viable breakthrough that is participatory in nature, could be achieved.

In a unit, with myriad of team members, working towards the goal of team effectiveness; mindsets and opinions are bound to vary and more often than not are likely to be at cross purpose. A leader must be able to sense and understand the viewpoints of

all and then with his experience and position be able to steer the charge of members in a synchronised manner. In a scenario of conflicting opinions and views, an empathetic leader makes the difference by having a series of one-on-one sessions to listen to everyone in the team. The team is then directed accordingly after cobwebs of communication gaps and perceptions are cleared.

Sustaining motivation in a team can only be achieved if leader empathises with the led and prepares them. Given the high demands of the profession, the subordinates need to be groomed for a longer haul, wherein their thought process is shaped in manner that it empowers them adjust to the dynamics in a desirable manner. Leaders require empathy to develop team members in face of higher stakes. The good old concept of 'mentoring' sadly has receded from the present day landscape of military unit life. Mentoring can work best in conditions of sound inter personal relationship. Also, high quotient of empathy in the leader enables him to vary his approach of dealing with each of the mind he or the designated mentor addresses.

Benevolence, Humility, Justice and Tolerance are some of the attributes that constitute overall empathy. Benevolence is giving to the team mates without having any return as motive. Humility is a modest or 'low' view of one's importance, but is not low self esteem. It amounts to sharing credit with the team and taking responsibility in face of failures. Justice is the concept of moral right based on ethics, rationality, law and equity along with the reward of punishment upon breach of ethics. For a leader, being fair and appearing to be fair are equally important. Tolerance has three perspectives. Firstly it is the mindset that willingly accepts beliefs of others; secondly it is about realising that people possess varying levels of characters and are at varying levels of personality development; and thirdly it is about being open to ambiguity i.e. ability to perceive gaps in information and to continue to plan and execute in the absence of orders, fearlessly.

Social Skill

The culmination of rest of the components of EI manifest in sound social skills. After all, the leader's task is to get work done through other people, and social skills make that possible. The leader puts EI to work through social skills by converting his leadership style into a conceivable form. Since it is the outcome of the other dimensions of EI, social skill is recognizable on the job in many ways. Socially skilled leaders are good at leading their team due to attributes of empathy in them. Similarly, they are expert persuaders – a manifestation of self awareness, self regulation and empathy combined. *Attitude* and *Enthusiasm* are the harbingers to cultivate sound social skills. A leader's poor attitude has the potential to become team's greatest liability. Enthusiasm has to be initiated and nurtured by a leader through regular interaction with the team mates. The leader ought to be more focused on having a conversation than on announcing or positioning himself⁹.

With good social skills comes in the quality of building healthy rapport with other team members. When the sub components like empathy and motivation become publicly visible, the leader's passion for work spreads within unit, leading to enhanced team effectiveness. In nutshell, social skills are nothing but communication skills manifesting into – selling ideas, talking the talk & walking the talk, influencing and persuasion.

Conclusion

We have never needed enlightened leadership as much as we do now. It would be foolish to assert that good old fashioned IQ and technical ability are not important ingredients in a strong leadership. But the recipe would not be complete without EQ. Leadership with high EQ is becoming more critical than ever in present times of peculiar conditions in the military and civil realm where we operate and belong to, respectively. The challenge today is to innovate and adopt where one needs different

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perspectives from varied backgrounds on the drawingboard. It was once thought that components of EQ were 'nice to have' in leaders but now these can be said as 'need to have'. It is fortunate that EI can be learned, though the process takes time and commitment. But the benefits that accrue from well developed EI, both for the leader and the organization, make it worth the effort. Graduating higher, scholar philosophers also argue in favour

of 'spiritual intelligence' and 'bigger minds' for a leader. The bottom-line of any variety of leadership that we think of, shall have to be transformational in nature wherein the leaders address the attitude and thought process of the team members. Leaders who exhibit heightened levels of EI may be more likely to engage in transformational leadership behaviours than those who possess lower levels of EI¹⁰.

Notes

1. Covey, Stephen, "The 8th Habit - From Effectiveness to Greatness," (Simon & Schuster, 2004), p.18.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. "Research Shows that the Decisions of a Group as a Whole Are More Thoughtful and Creative When There is Minority Dissent Than When it is Absent."

— Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*
5. Ibid.
6. Goleman, Daniel, 'What Makes a Leader', 'On Leadership,' (Harvard Business Review Press, 2011).
7. Vishwasrao, Sanjay, 'Lage Raho Leadership Skills', 'Lage Raho Leadership', (APK Publishers, 2015).
8. Ibid.
9. Schwartz, Tony, 'Women in Leadership Roles and the Confidence Gap', *The Hindu*, 01 July 2015.
10. Barling, J. Slater, F. & Kelloway, E. K, 'Transformational Leadership and Emotional Intelligence: An Exploratory Study', *The Leadership and Organizational Development Journal*, 21, 157-161, 2000.

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