Critical Skills For Army Leader Development

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U.S. Army recognizes the need to develop “agile and adaptive leaders” \(^1\) (Army Warfighting Challenge #10)

Soldiers at all levels need to be able to solve complex, ambiguous, and unfamiliar problems

To ensure readiness, the Army needs strategic thinkers who can anticipate potential futures

Difficult to predict specifics; need to focus on developing the skills needed to solve problems to maintain readiness of the force

“...our solemn commitment must always be to never send [our Soldiers] into harm’s way untrained, poorly led, undermanned, or with less than the best equipment we can provide.” \(^2\)

– General Mark A. Milley, CSA
ARI conducted research investigating strategic thinking in the Army³

Research Objectives

– Determine what Army leaders do in their jobs that requires them to use strategic thinking
– Identify the competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities) needed to think strategically in the Army
– Determine how Army leaders are currently being developed as strategic thinkers and determine the best practices for developing strategic thinkers
– Determine the effects of Army culture and values on developing strategic thinkers

Strategic thinking

• Idea-based cognitive activity, emphasizing synthesis, creativity, intuition, and innovation
• Generates insight into the present and foresight regarding the future
• Messy process of informal learning

Strategic Thinking Tasks

Examples of broad military tasks that require strategic thinking

- Develop an understanding of **complex, dynamic environments**; create historical framework; **scan the environment** to understand cultural/political landscape, policy, economics, diplomacy, etc.; diagnose the nature of conflict; **actively seek multiple and opposing points of view**; synthesize pieces of the problem into a coherent picture; **fill information gaps**; sort signal from noise

- Lead strategic intellectual efforts with diverse actors while incorporating learning, group reflection, and various problem solving methods; **explore, question, and test a wide range of options**; take time for reflection and do not rush into action

- **Determine key stakeholders**; identify stakeholders’ agendas, power sources, authorities, responsibilities, inter-relationships, religions; identify SMEs; build rapport, trust, relationships, alliances

- Translate political policy; interpret and operate with insufficient guidance on implications and assumptions; make assumptions explicit; **check assumptions**

- Conduct information operations; create culturally appropriate narratives; amplify the vision; **understand the audience**; operate through others (e.g., Joint Council of COLs, Interagency partners)

- Build diverse teams; **identify and utilize SMEs with divergent viewpoints**; manage group dynamics; build alliances and trust; **create and manage a climate of collaboration**
## Strategic Thinking Competencies

### Comprehensive Information Gathering
- Scanning the environment
- Seeking information from disparate sources
- Open mindedness, suspension of judgment
- Considering other perspectives
- Research skills
- Active listening

### Learning
- Iterative testing, continuous learning
- Reflection and metacognition
- Conceptual ability
- Agility
- Adaptability
- Information/knowledge management

### Critical Thinking
- Identifying the central and peripheral elements of a situation
- Questioning, challenging assumptions
- Comfort with nuance
- Understanding meaningful connections and distinctions
- Understanding limits of data
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Thinking Competencies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Innovative Thinking</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Generating creative and novel ideas and approaches</td>
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<td>• Reframing understanding when existing concepts falter</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Re-evaluating and challenging conventional norms</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Thinking in Time</strong></td>
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<td>• Understanding historical and contemporary contexts</td>
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<td>• Pattern recognition</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Maintaining a long-term future perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Anticipating 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} order effects</td>
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<td><strong>Systems Thinking</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Identifying and comprehending complex and dynamic interdependencies between entities</td>
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<td>• Holistic perspective, synthesizing interdependencies into a concept of a comprehensive whole</td>
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Strategic Thinking Enablers

Knowledge

- Broad general knowledge forming a foundation of awareness, e.g., of general history, global trends, geo-politics, socio-cultural forces, economics, military, technology, etc.
- Deep knowledge of the context of a strategic problem, e.g., relevant groups, stakeholders, cultures, relationships, regional history, capabilities, processes, public opinion, etc.

Collaborative Orientation

- Team building (e.g., team composition, identifying and balancing strengths and weaknesses)
- Team leadership, managing conflict, interpersonal dynamics, climate, trust, consensus
- Networking and relationship building
- Organization, project management
Strategic Thinking Enablers

Communication Skills
- Message tailoring, understanding the audience, creating narratives
- Effective oral, written, and visual communication skills
- Interpersonal tact and professionalism, especially during debate or disagreement
- Candor and self-confidence
- Concisely communicating complex issues
- Narrative ability, storytelling, engaging an audience
- Influence skills, persuasion, negotiation

Emotional Regulation
- Self-awareness and self-control
- Respectful of others
- Intellectual humility, controlling the impact of personal biases, self-interest, and values
- Understanding limits of control and responsibility
# How Army Leaders are Developed: PME

## Leader Development Framework:

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<td>Practicing Desired Skills</td>
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<td>Practical Exercises</td>
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Conger (1992); Allen & Hartman (2008)

- **Conceptual Understanding**: strongest aspect of Army PME (history, case studies, definitions, frameworks, and process)
- **Personal Growth**: some content reflection; little time spent on individual and group reflection about premise and process
- **Feedback**: Not enough, primarily focused on individual and not group, some focused on enablers instead of thinking (e.g., writing skill)
- **Skill building**: “creation” as a learning objective is limited; “review, analyze, comprehend” predominate; need more “develop, create, formulate, practice”

*All four approaches should be used over the course of a leadership development program to maximize effectiveness*
# Development outside PME

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<td>Exposure to GOs</td>
<td>Joint and Interagency</td>
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<td>Working with another culture</td>
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<td>Fellowships*</td>
<td>Strategic-level assignments</td>
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*Civilian education and fellowships may vary greatly depending on institution and program*  
Conger (1992); Allen & Hartman (2008)
Recommendations

- Develop a shared lexicon
  - Enable Army leaders to more clearly and insightfully share their stories of strategic thinking success in action, increasing the value placed on strategic thinking in Army culture
  - Adopt a common understanding of strategic thinking KSAs to aid in developing strategic thinking

- Start developing strategic thinking earlier
  - Strategic thinking skills develop over time; can’t just flip a switch at a certain level
  - Evolution of the internet can present tactical and operational decisions and actions to an international audience

- Ensure comprehensive leader development that includes conceptual understanding, skill building, feedback, and personal growth through reflection (Conger, 1992)
Recommendations

• Leaders can create climates that promote strategic thinking by valuing and promoting:
  – Reflection and learning
  – Questioning
  – Innovation
  – Thinking long-term, future oriented
  – Exploring alternatives
  – Thinking broadly
  – Being proactive, not only reactive
Talent Management Recommendations

• Create incentives to promote strategic thinking

• Ensure selection boards value important strategic thinking developmental experiences
  – Broadening assignments, teaching, and advanced civilian education
  – Diversity of assignments

• Develop strategic thinking assessments
  – Inform promotion decisions
  – Serve as self-development tools for Army leaders

• Ensure strategic thinkers are placed and utilized in assignments that leverage strategic thinking
QUESTIONS?

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# Developing Skills Associated with Strategic Thinking

**BLUF**

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Conger (1992); Allen & Hartman (2008)

Based on the gap in skill building, ARI created four exercises to provide Army leaders with practice in skills that underpin strategic thinking ability:

1. **Reflecting on the Environment**
2. **Questioning for Deeper Learning**
3. **Telling a Story: An exercise in connecting the dots**
4. **Envisioning Potential Futures**

Conducted preliminary evaluation to determine perceived value; areas for improvement
# Strategic Thinking Skill-Building Exercises

## What skills do the exercises address?

<table>
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<th>Primary Skill Addressed</th>
<th>Secondary Skills Addressed</th>
<th>Estimated time</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reflecting on the Environment</td>
<td>Reflective thinking</td>
<td>Systems thinking, self-awareness</td>
<td>2-2¼ hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questioning to Deepen Learning</td>
<td>Questioning, information gathering</td>
<td>Systems thinking, synthesis, self-awareness</td>
<td>2½ hours (Phase 1); 1¼ hours (Phase 2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telling a Story: An Exercise in Connecting the Dots</td>
<td>Systems thinking, synthesis/creation</td>
<td>Hypothesis generation, cognitive flexibility, sensegiving/ communicating</td>
<td>3½ hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Envisioning Potential Futures</td>
<td>Thinking in time, strategic foresight</td>
<td>Questioning and testing, systems thinking, visualizing, sensegiving/ communicating</td>
<td>3¼ hours (Phase 1); 1½ hours (Phase 2)</td>
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QUESTIONS?

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BACK-UP SLIDES
Research Methods

- Reviewed academic, business, and military literature to determine models of strategic thinking
- Reviewed Programs of Instruction (POI; e.g., CGSC, SAMS, Army War College, UFMCS)
- Interviewed commanders, staff, and civilians with operational experience in strategic-level planning and faculty and staff
  - Semi-structured interview protocol
    - Critical Incident Methodology - Describe a time when you had to think strategically about a complex, unfamiliar problem
    - Skills and personal characteristics associated with strategic thinking
    - Most critical development opportunities
    - Methods to assess strategic thinking
    - How Army culture enhances/inhibits strategic thinking
- Independent content analysis of qualitative data
How Army Leaders are Developed: Advanced Civilian Education

Advanced civilian education

– Academic rigor
– Exposure to perspectives outside the military
– Increased amount of feedback
– Time for reflection
– Army can mimic these benefits
  • Increasing academic rigor in PME
  • Emphasizing diversity of perspectives in classroom
  • Increasing exposure to perspectives outside the military through broadening experiences
How Army Leaders are Developed: Assignments

Assignments

- Diversity of assignments develops strategic thinking
  - Broaden perspectives
  - Provide exposure to different processes, organizations, leaders
- Most commonly cited as developing strategic thinking ability:
  - Teaching
  - Joint and Interagency assignments
  - Exposure to General Officers
  - Strategic-level assignments
  - Exposure to strategic and/or complex problems (e.g., combat experience in a complex environment, dealing with complex and/or strategic problems on an Army staff, doing strategic planning, etc.)
- Developmental characteristics of assignments:
  - Time for reflection
  - Allowed to take risks
  - Dealing with resource constraints
  - Often occur early in career and shape leaders from then on
How Army Leaders are Developed: Assignments

Teaching

- Only assignment that provides opportunities for all four of Conger’s (1992) leader development approaches
  - Develops deep knowledge of a topic area
  - Provides opportunities to build and practice a wide variety of strategic thinking KSAs
  - Feedback is inherent in the teaching process
  - Allows time for reflection (unlike most assignments)
- Teaching also occurs outside the classroom (e.g., at the training centers, when serving as an advisor)
- Climate at educational institutions increases conceptual understanding because of the exposure to different perspectives
How Army Leaders are Developed

**Mentorship**
- Not emphasized as much in interviews
- Provides opportunities for all four of Conger’s (1992) leader development approaches
  - Unique emphasis on feedback
  - Allows access to others’ perspectives and thought processes

**Other Experiences**
- Self-Development
  - Reading broadly
  - Studying history
  - Interacting with diverse people
- Exposure to other cultures

*Overall, participants expressed that strategic thinking ability should be developed earlier*
Exercise Overview

Who will benefit from the exercises?

• Designed to be adaptable for use with a range of participants and in a variety of contexts
  – Intended for use by instructors, unit commanders, and others who wish to provide instruction and practice in strategic thinking skills
  – Participants can range from young officers to experienced NCOs, to mid-rank officers and above
  – Used in the field or embedded in a course

• The exercises can be practiced individually, as stand-alone exercises, or in combination for a more comprehensive developmental program

• Three of the exercises require a facilitator; one of them (*Reflecting on the Environment*) can be implemented with or without a facilitator as a self-development exercise

• All are conducive to repetition, providing varied material and topics that yield benefits from recurring practice