

## **Contrarian Leadership through Self-Education**

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When Henry David Thoreau went to the woods, he understood the value of solitude and the possibility that nature could serve as a catalyst to nurture his genius. In *Walden*, Thoreau remarks that “millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive.”

This quote rang out in my head throughout one of the many long runs I have tackled during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing requires solitude, and for me, running is the best form. During that run, as I remembered Thoreau’s proclamation about intellectual neglect, I thought deeply about the many leaders, peers, and subordinates with whom I’ve had the pleasure of serving. I thought about the neglected assets of reflection and deep thought. I also thought about taking time to appreciate the often-ignored idea that despite one’s station in life, a person’s value and the cultivation of their individual talent transcends any fabricated power structure.

If there is one thing that the current pandemic has taught us, it is the value of time, and, for some, the luxury of choice. If you are reading this, you have the privilege of having time to think. This often overlooked but essential leadership trait is the linchpin for harnessing creativity and leveraging efficiency. In my case, the most challenging aspect of Army leadership is the development of diverse groups of people with varied goals and diverse perceptions of themselves and the organization’s vision.

Early in the COVID-19 crisis, Dr. Gary Gregg, the Mitch McConnell Chair of Leadership at the University of Louisville’s McConnell Center, agreed to facilitate a Zoom discussion with members of my Cavalry Squadron. His theme was simple: Self-Education. Dr. Gregg discussed the power of history and suggested several books to glean leadership examples from previous pandemics. Perhaps the most profound mention was Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Although COVID-19 is not the Athenian plague of 430 BC, the social actions of Athenians

and Americans alike can be characterized by societal fear and risk of vulnerability. Dr. Gregg emphasized that “there is nothing new under the sun” and encouraged us to reflect, study, and act. He also challenged young thinkers to take a moment to identify the “omnipresent keys of success” from historical example.

For leaders, the COVID pandemic can be viewed as a crisis of opportunity. The pandemic offers a moment to pause and reflect, to help others and focus on family, and a unique opportunity to engage with teams about the importance of self-knowledge. Thoreau’s concept of intellectual exertion is vital here. Running is one way to foster thought, but many other acts of solitude exist. I’d like to share a couple of practical exercises that assist me in co-opting thoughtful service members into agents of change within the profession of arms.

I believe that leaders must have an understanding themselves prior to attempting to lead others. When junior leaders and young enlisted soldiers join the military profession, their identity is in flux. The Army’s ethic of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage must be inculcated alongside the realization that death may be the consequence of defending freedom. For some, this idea of sacrifice is understood; for others, it requires nurturing. Professionals largely neglect the psychological gymnastics necessary to function simultaneously in multiple worlds; in other words, leaders must often transition attention from self to service member and back again throughout their leadership experience. This constant paradigm shift requires a method, and leaders would be wise to identify their own leadership philosophy as an anchor throughout their practice of leader development.

Leaders in the Army may often struggle to take the time to nurture their minds, especially in this time of confusion and social distancing. Efforts to maintain momentum and migrate to virtual communication platforms requires heightened focus. Unless we capture moments of introspection ourselves, our time will be co-opted by others.

Here’s how I do it:

## **Write your obituary!**

Something profound happens when we contemplate our mortality. We begin to think about what’s really important to us and our significant others. Author Stephen Covey writes, “How different our lives are when we really know what is deeply important to us, and keeping that

picture in mind, we manage ourselves each day to be and to know what matters most.” Knowing ourselves and understanding what is important is essential to fulfilling endeavors and cultivating relationships. When I challenge junior leaders to write their obituary, I force them to contemplate their close relationships and their legacy. Junior leaders often spend a significant amount of time meditating on their perceived legacy and a holistic perspective of their life goals. This is often the first time many of them have deliberately taken advantage of their privilege to think. Although contrarian, the obituary is nothing more than a heuristic to facilitate self-education.

What is it about contemplating mortality that seemingly frees us from the stress of living up to someone else's expectations? The truth is that many young people avoid thinking of death. Those occupied with daily rituals of email correspondence, social media, and to-do lists are often distracted and miss opportunities for self-growth. Most of us spend 70% of our time trying to figure out what someone else is doing, and the other 30% of the time attempting to communicate that to someone we assume cares. Most don't care; we say “row well and live!” and keep working.

Questions about identity are seldom contemplated in our profession because we are too busy trying to finish work. The fact is that we'll never finish the work! A deeper understanding of selfless service reveals that our daily efforts are directly connected to the quality of work our organization produces. When Plato proclaimed that man is society *writ* large, he was suggesting that any one member of a social organization represents the whole. A single Army soldier to a citizen *is* the Army. If realized, the soldier's behavior changes because they understand that they represent something bigger than themselves. If realized, this conscientious responsibility forces change in the identity of the soldier *writ* large. Soldiers are therefore at a fault line of identity transformation, and their negotiation with the Army's ethic, the moral principles that guide the execution of mission and daily life, is not intuitive. Soldiers and leaders must be nurtured and developed by other leaders of character who understand themselves—leaders who understand their own strengths, weaknesses, interests, and passions. They must emulate greatness but must be able to recognize it first.

The most challenging aspect of organizational leadership is detaching from the systems and understanding the *people* who work to realize your vision. These are the blue-collar grunts, plebes, soldiers, lieutenants, troopers, and more. They are the executors who, on any given day,

couldn't care less about the muddled strategic goals, despite the fact that they are essential to mission success. These grunts and their junior leaders must all understand and buy into the vision, but more importantly, they must believe. They must believe in their leaders and the people they rely on to create multipliers in their organization. In the Army, just as in any other professional institution, a leader's measure of effectiveness directly correlates to their subordinates' understanding of the vision and the effectiveness of execution. This is even more important in circumstances in which conflict is imminent and the requirement to maintain readiness transcends personal endeavor. When leaders get tangled up in the bureaucracy and the systems they've created to improve efficiency, they lose themselves; that is, if they understood themselves to begin with.

When I direct a young leader to draft their obituary, I set into motion a professional relationship that culminates in introspection and a discussion of a five-year plan. For that young leader, drafting an obituary serves as a catalyst for their own introspection and further serves as a springboard for the evolution of new personal and professional relationships.

Three things happen during the drafting of an obituary:

1. We re-prioritize our life activities and goals;
2. We take time to think; and
3. We realign our efforts with our beliefs and morals.

Well before pen hits paper, I know that the leaders charged with drafting their obituary have to get past the idea that this is silly. They think it's a game, a ploy, or an intimidation tactic, at least until they realize that they *own* the assignment; there is no script or doctrine for it. At this moment they think that they are being evaluated and begin to take the task seriously. Each obituary is different, and when taken seriously, becomes a blueprint for a five-year plan that synchronizes each individual's value system with opportunities in the profession of arms. The leader must think about the things that they've often never taken the time to contemplate such as:

- Who will be impacted by my death?
- How do I want to be remembered?
- What do I want to accomplish and why?
- How long do I plan to stay in the military?
- Are there other professional goals I'd like to achieve?
- Do I need a bucket list?

The obituary assignment is a hit every time, and it places the responsibility on the subject to practice introspection. It is also completely dependent on trust, and the immediate result of completing it is the clarity and reflection that comes from identifying passion and purpose. Some leaders may not be as transparent as others during this assignment, which often results in stagnation or dissonance in the long run. If done correctly, the writer of the obituary feels compelled to explain why he/she made certain decisions, why they chose to be remembered a particular way. When leaders listen to these choices, we are able to ascertain character, commitment, and concern. We are also able to understand the level of thought that the writer placed in the assignment and by extension, themselves.

### **Do Nothing—Think!**

The obituary also drives its writer to a thoughtful state of being. It's almost mind-numbing to sit and do nothing—to simply think. Our lives are saturated by noise and we've forgotten just how loud silence actually is. Questions about identity, integrity, purpose, and passion often linger in our minds without due consideration; we make decisions or evaluate ourselves in direct comparison to the perceptions of other people. When we do this, our actions are guided by opinion. Thinking about and writing an obituary forces thought and is often the tip of a larger introspection iceberg. You must make your subconscious your friend, and this is done through deliberate thought. This often occurs in times of rest and in times of silence.

Mindfulness is about being in the moment. When we are able to concentrate on ourselves and our surroundings, we realize the agency in seemingly inanimate things. We also acknowledge the hidden talents of our team members when considering the diverse perspectives that they hold. When we do nothing, when we enter into a restful state, we allow our subconscious the time to process our experiences. This explains the epiphany moments when we are engaged in mundane activities like showering, running, driving, etc. Doing nothing does not equate to passivity.

### **Paranalysis...Who Are You?**

The prefix para- comes from Greek and equates to a sense of "going beyond." Analysis is a detailed examination of the elements or structure of something. When that something is "the self," "paranalysis" means to go beyond oneself to explore purpose. A thorough and frequent

examination of self enables the mastery of life! A good friend to Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Know thyself, every heart beats to the iron string.” I think Emerson was trying to convey the importance of self-confidence alongside self-mastery. “Know thyself!”

Following the submission of the obituary, I ask the writer one simple question: Who are you? Often perplexed, the writer and I exchange dead stares before I elaborate on the purpose of the next exercise. I explain, “Think about the five things that are important to you, the five things you think about on a daily basis without having to spend time conjuring them up. These five things are your functions, the aspects of your life that you spend more thought on than others. If you ask me the simple question, “Who are you?” I’d tell you that I’m a father, friend, husband, soldier, and scholar. Without thought, these are the five functions that I think about every day.

Once you have these functions, take a blank sheet of paper, write your name neatly at the center and circle it. Now create a web with those five functions. Once complete, spend some time thinking about why you chose that function and jot down adjectives to describe it. For example, since I define myself as a soldier, my adjectives include “fit, energetic, active listener, inquisitive, etc.” I tell the young leader, “Be honest with yourself, and I think you’ll find something profound. This exercise will force you to think about people and aspects of your life that you often neglect. You will question the life decisions you’ve made to this point and you’ll have a deeper appreciation for those people who’ve helped you get to where you are. This exercise is designed to self-educate and, if taken seriously, might morph into a personal affirmation of success and a 5-10 year goal blueprint.” This is perhaps the most impactful exercise I’ve completed in my career, and the genesis of it had everything to do with asking those three words: Who are you?

This exercise also forces a conversation about identity and the importance of people within an organization. If people are honest and transparent during these exercises, I am able to identify what drives my subordinates and peers alike. I am better able to access talent and exploit that talent for the benefit of the team. I am able to think deeply and consider the passions and goals of my team. This allows the team to leverage personal power and creativity to accomplish tasks. Self-education requires introspection and introspection requires time. Critical self-education

should be deliberate and consistent with one outcome in mind: self-consciousness, knowledge of who we are, what we believe in, and what we want.

A conversation between people about personal goals, desires, passions, and perspective only enhances relationships and environments. Furthermore, these methods of introspection offer pragmatic solutions to problems of self-worth and identity. What Henry David Thoreau achieved by going to the woods was to “live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if [he] could not learn what it had to teach. . .” Perhaps writing one’s obituary and spending some time rediscovering self are as necessary as they are rare. The solitude afforded us by Mother Nature in the form of COVID-19 must not be neglected. This contrarian leadership technique might offer you a way, method, or means to examine purpose and grow your organization.

**The views presented in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of DoD or its components.**