

Be-Know-Do: Leadership the Army Way

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What can nonprofit organizations learn from the U.S. Army? *Be-Know-Do: Leadership the Army Way* describes how the Army builds leaders who can carry out a mission in hostile and rapidly changing circumstances. While few nonprofits face life and death situations, many experience unanticipated events where the ability to respond quickly and appropriately can make the difference between success and failure. Learning from the Army's way of developing leaders may help nonprofits prepare for these eventualities.

Be-Know-Do has some surprising lessons for leaders of nonprofit organizations. To me, the salient points are:

- Anticipate that you *will*, at some point, confront a VUCA event: volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.
- The foundation of leadership is values. Leaders must live the values of the organization.
- Leaders must exist at every level. Everyone is a potential leader.
- The leader's intent must be known and supported, so that people can act effectively even when the leader is not there.
- Leaders must "lead from the front."
- Organizations should function as teams within teams.
- Professional development must be ongoing, an integral part of the organization's culture, not just an extra activity that is nice but not essential.

These points are more fully explained below.

Here are some key questions to keep in mind as you read this book:

- Are your own values clear and compelling?
- Do the leaders in your organization embody its mission and values – and do others see them this way?
- Do you appreciate the worth and dignity of people and treat them accordingly?
- What are your leadership strengths? What needs to be strengthened?
- Is leadership development a priority at all levels in your organization?
- Do you lead from the front?
- Do you anticipate changes or simply react to crises?
- Do you communicate effectively and do people really hear what is said?
- Have you developed effective teams comprised of people who put team and organization goals ahead of personal agendas?

Following the attacks on 9/11 I wrote a management briefing, “Designing Nimble Organizations for a Changing World.” The lessons in that briefing continue to hold. A nimble organization, when faced with an unanticipated challenge or opportunity, is able to respond quickly while staying true to its mission. Leaders of nimble organizations must have people who know how to take risks. A nimble organization must have an inclusive yet quick decision making process, a culture that encourages people to learn from mistakes, and resources held in reserve for the unexpected.

Be-Know-Do provides much to think about for leaders who want to create and sustain nimble, responsive organizations.

I. The VUCA Environment

The Army assumes that it must operate in what it has labeled a VUCA environment, standing for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity:

- **Volatility:** change today is surprising, unpredictable, and discontinuous.
- **Uncertainty:** we can never be sure we have the right data, or that we have interpreted it correctly; and, we do not have the luxury of time to find out.
- **Complexity:** each event and variable is imbedded in a web of interconnecting factors.
- **Ambiguity:** change often brings paradox – seemingly contradictory “facts” appear to be equally true.

Even in a VUCA environment, the basics of leadership remain the same.

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Has your organization been disrupted by a VUCA event. Hurricane Katrina is the most salient recent example of disruption, but there are many others, and they seem to be increasing. Does your organization know how to respond to volatile, unexpected, complex and ambiguous events? Convene a meeting of your leadership group(s) for board and staff. Discuss the concept of a VUCA environment, and develop a number of “what if” scenarios. This is a “thinking” exercise to get the leaders accustomed to making decisions and taking actions when change comes quickly.

II. Leadership

In the Army, leadership is the ability to manage for the mission and mobilize people around the mission. Leadership is a matter of *how to be*, not how to do. The Army disperses leadership throughout the organization. You never know when someone will be required to step up and take charge. Thus, everyone is trained to be a leader. That is, everyone is trained in not only what to do, but more importantly in *how to be*.

Of course, not every soldier lives up to the values, as wartime atrocities attest. Indeed, because soldiers must perform in VUCA environments, being grounded in a well defined set of values is essential.

Leadership starts with focusing on oneself, on one's own values, attributes and skills. Leaders then devise means to inculcate the elements of leadership among all people in the organization.

Army Values

- Loyalty – to mission, to people
- Duty – fulfill your obligations to the best of your abilities
- Respect – treat people as they should be treated; seek to understand their backgrounds
- Selfless service – put the welfare of the nation and subordinates before your own
- Honor – live up to Army values; be an “honorable person; have a moral compass; take responsibility for your personal conduct.
- Integrity – do what is right, legally and morally.
- Personal courage – face fear, danger and adversity; rather than ignoring fear, develop the ability to put fear aside and do what is necessary.

Leader Attributes

- Mental attributes
 - Will – inner drive and perseverance, especially when things go badly.
 - Self-discipline – keeping cool in tense meetings; answering the emotional outbursts of others calmly so that they can regain control; staying focused on objectives; changing your behavior when you ask others to change.
 - Initiative – acting when there are no clear instructions; adapting to changing situations; the desire to make things happen.
 - Judgment – ability to quickly size up a situation, determine what is important and decide what needs to be done.
 - Self-confidence – faith that you will act correctly in any situation, even when you are under stress without all the information you would like to have.
 - Intelligence – absorbing and applying new information; being curious and open to new knowledge; some people are smarter than others, but we all have untapped capacity for intelligence.
 - Cultural awareness – willingness to accept contributions from people with backgrounds different than your own.
 - Authenticity – consistency in your behavior toward the people with whom you deal; consistency across time; expressing genuine values.
 - Ethical – living up to the Army's core values, taking prompt action to correct discrepancies between the current ethical climate and the highest standards of belief and behavior.

- Physical Attributes
 - Stamina and vitality; physical fitness is critical in stressful situations.
 - Commitment to promoting physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of your employees.
 - Awareness that leaders should look, and carry themselves, like leaders.
- Emotional attributes
 - Emotional maturity; aware of one's own strengths and weaknesses
 - Self control; displaying the appropriate emotion for the situation
 - Aware of the emotions of others
 - Levelheadedness under pressure and fatigue; calm in the face of danger.

Leadership Skills

- Interpersonal skills – ability to coach, teach, counsel, motivate, and empower people, build teams and guide others toward a goal.
- Conceptual skills – thinking creatively, reasoning analytically, critically, and ethically; using sound judgment.
- Operating skills – capacity to develop detailed, realistic plans and then execute those plans; desire to take care of your people, and responsibly manage resources.
- Technical skills – expertise regarding specific tasks and functions.
- Tactical skills – ability to negotiate, establish budgets.
- Development skills – drive and vision to increase organization's capacity; willingness to invest time and effort to develop individual leaders.

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Nonprofit leaders should purposefully and explicitly model the values and behavior expected of people in their organization. Leaders should be able to state clearly the organization's values, and the attributes and skills they expect of the Executive Director, and members of the staff and the board. Without such clarity, it will be difficult to build the kind of organization that functions effectively in times of change. Leaders should speak about and model the values, attributes and skills.

If you have not already done so, your organization should go through a rigorous process to discover and articulate its values. Contact Qm² for tools and a procedure for accomplishing this.

III. The Leader's Intent

In order to carry out the mission successfully, the people need to know the leader's intent. The leader must be able to state clearly: "Here is where we are headed, why we're going there, and how we're going to get there." This is how the leader translates the

organization's mission, goals and strategies, so that those charged with carrying out the work know what they need to achieve, why they are doing it, and what the general approach and constraints are for getting the work done. People must know what is expected of them. Indeed, they want clear direction from the leader.

Stating intent and ensuring that it is heard and embraced may require persuasion on the part of a leader. Leaders must be open to discussing their own position and have a positive attitude toward dissenting views. This will diffuse tension and ultimately save time. For subordinates to transform the leader's intent into reality, they must support the intent, but more importantly they must have confidence in and respect for the leader. Being open to discussing alternative views builds that confidence and respect.

The leader must also create a positive, 'can do' climate, and provide necessary training and support. They must then let them execute without interference, while letting them know that (1) they are available; and (2) they care about the results. Knowledge of the mission and intent allows subordinates to take initiative when circumstances change.

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Does your staff know your intent? Can they state it succinctly? Do they know where the organization is headed, why, and how? Do they know what you expect of them? Do they agree with the direction you have set? Do they fully support it? If not, you must bring everyone together to address these questions.

IV. It Takes Teamwork

The Army stresses that teamwork is not merely a choice; it is a necessity at every level. The Army has teams within teams. Every team has a leader, and everyone on a team has the potential to step in to become the team's leader. Teamwork and leadership go hand in hand.

In Army teams no soldier is left behind. This is true on the field of combat, where soldiers often do heroic deeds to save a comrade. It is also true in peacetime. Team leaders do not focus only on the "stars;" rather they strive to improve everyone through supervising, mentoring and coaching.

Benefits and Characteristics of Teams

- Takes advantage of the different skills and talents of the members
- Members feel accountable not only to the organization but also to one another; they do not want to let their buddies down.
- Provides peer and self discipline
- Trust begins with action; trust happens when a leader demonstrates discipline and competence, and leads from the front

- Disciplined and rigorous training prepares members to respond to the will of the leader, even during a leader's absence; through training members develop habitual and reasoned obedience.
- Discipline and shared hardship pull people together; they feel a part of something important and compelling, camaraderie, esprit de corps
- Strong communication: members share as much information as possible; the leader is able to work through controversy with persuasion and openness.

The Stages of Team Building

- Formation
 - Reception of new members: It is the responsibility of the leader to ensure positive first impressions.
 - Orientation: The leader and other team members make sure that the new member meets others, learns how the team functions and is structured. Assign a buddy to the new member.
- Enrichment
 - This is a time to build trust among the members. The leader listens, follows up, establishes clear lines of authority, and sets standards.
 - Training is most important; the team participates in training together.
- Sustainment
 - In time the team becomes "our team." The members are proud of the team and feel responsible to one another.
 - Continuous training reinforces team cohesion.

Team Leader's Role

Make decisions

- Modify decision making process to fit the situation: direct when situations are in doubt, risks are high, and time is short; consult when there is time.

Communicate

- Never safe to assume you have been understood; verify
- Get accurate information
- Listen – verbal and non verbal; be aware of your own barriers to listening

Supervise

- Under-supervising can lead to failure
- Check things that are critical to the mission; or tasks that are at the limit of what a subordinate has accomplished before
- Train, give resources and authority, then get out of the way, but be available to offer guidance
- Give praise; be direct about poor performance or inappropriate behavior
- Never humiliate; avoid public reprimand

- Be on the lookout to develop subordinates

Mentor and Counsel

- Coach everyone, not just the stars or high-potentials.
- Help everyone to be the best they can be
- Concern for the whole person – provide family support
- Set the right example; role model is a powerful teaching tool
- Tough love: create a disciplined environment where people can learn and grow, hold them to high standards.
- Ensure they know where they stand and what they should do to improve
- Spend time developing leaders
- Reverse mentoring: ask a new comer to mentor you

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What is your experience with teams? Does your organization function like a team of teams, at all levels? Do you practice team building? Do you link team building to leadership development? Explore the management briefings on www.qm2.org for insights on strengthening teamwork in your organization.

V. Leading from the Front

The Army knows that effective leaders are visible. Effective leaders practice direct, face-to-face, one-on-one leadership.

Leading from the front has many advantages for the leader and the team:

- Subordinates become used to seeing the leader, which tells them the leader is interested and concerned about their work. It shows that the leader is serious about his or her intent.
- The leader sees first hand how things are going. Observing and talking with subordinates is a good way to get useful, reliable information.
- The leader sets an example of expected behavior: “You must be seen to be heard.”
- To inspire them, the leader must understand them and speak their language.
- The leader’s presence can help them deal with stress, builds trust and cuts rumors

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Do you lead from the front? Are you visible? Do you know what is going on? Do you inspire staff by being present and engaged, showing interest, giving genuine praise?

VI. Training and Continuous Learning

The Army's mission is to prepare for war. Hence, it takes training very seriously. The Army understands that regular training can lead to improvement and to effective performance during action. The Army spends significant time and resources to provide training that is realistic, rigorous, and as much like combat as is safe. Such training can prevent paralysis in the face of difficult and dangerous circumstances.

Army leaders state explicitly that everyone is expected to acquire new skills and knowledge. Leaders talk openly and often about their own learning. They emphasize personal learning – improving interpersonal and technical skills. They also discuss organizational learning – acquiring new knowledge and methods to improve systems and processes.

The Army creates a climate of continuous learning. Everyone comes to understand why learning is important and how it leads to improved performance. Learning becomes second nature, a part of the way in which the Army conducts its work. Through mentoring, subordinates recognize that they can learn from more experienced leaders, and that this is the way that they, too, can become proficient leaders.

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Do you treat professional development strategically? Are you open to learning? Do you admit your mistakes?

Have you created a climate where everyone is eager to learn?

- Be explicit about the value of learning. Make learning an expectation of everyone. Learning should be a performance expectation, tied to performance reviews.
- Make the training realistic, as close to a real situation as possible. Indeed, use a real situation that the organization has faced or is facing. Avoid hypothetical cases.
- Train as a team. Provide professional development to teams, not just to individuals.
- Identify institutional, team and individual learning goals. Make learning regular, not a one-time, one-project affair. Socialize people into the profession through life-long learning.
- Make the training rigorous and disciplined. Make it challenging. Get the team engaged in complex issues that require critical thinking and innovation. Have them devise and implement solutions based on clear standards and objectives.
- Design the training to build confidence in individual and team performance; to develop mutual accountability and trust.

VII. After Action Reviews

The Army has developed a straightforward process for continuous learning. After Action Reviews (AAR) are a routine method for assessing performance during an action and learning how to perform better the next time.

Army leaders tolerate honest mistakes that are not the result of negligence. They use mistakes as an opportunity to reinforce expectations and standards, as well as to learn. In some cases, of course, mistakes are not permissible, especially when a mistake puts someone's life at risk. Leaders make it clear when "zero defects" are expected.

It takes courage to admit your mistakes. Leaders set the tone for honest sharing of experiences by acknowledging that not all experiences are successful, and by giving examples of when they, themselves, have made mistakes and learned from them.

An AAR is a professional discussion of an event by everyone who was involved. The discussion focuses on performance standards. The participants seek to discover for themselves what happened, why, and how to improve.

The discussion is non-hierarchical. There are clear ground rules to promote candor. The process allows for honest reflection of collective and individual performance. There are no sacred cows.

How to conduct an AAR

General guidelines:

- Conducted immediately, or soon, after an event – when it is fresh. Ask people to make notes to aid their memory.
- Spend no more than one or two hours.
- Discuss intended objectives, related to specific standards; discuss performance against these standards.
- Discuss individual and team performance—what went well and what might be done differently in the future.
- Discuss leader performance
- This is not an evaluation; performance is not graded; this is analysis to determine how to improve. Analyze, don't grade.
- Involve all participants in the discussion; no one has all the information or answers
- Use open-ended questions
- Determine strengths and weaknesses; what worked well and what did not
- Link performance to subsequent training
- Learning takes place as a group
- Group decides how to improve

Process:

1. Introduce the topic

- The leader introduces the topic and goes over the guidelines
- Emphasize the fact that it is permissible to disagree

- Remind everyone that the focus is learning and expressing honest opinions
 - Step back, entering the discussion only when necessary
 - When necessary, guide the discussion through open ended and leading questions
2. Review the events objectives and intent
 - The leader describes the objective and intent, or
 - (Option) The leader asks subordinates to describe the intent and objective to see if their understanding matches the leader's intent
 3. Discussion

Open ended questions – allow people to reply to questions based on what they see as significant. Open ended questions are less likely to put people on the defensive

 - Make a public list of key issues or differences of opinion on a flip chart
 4. Analysis of Key Issues – choose one of these approaches
 - Follow the chronological order of the event
 - Examine each relevant function and system
 - Focus on key decision points, themes and issues
 - Be specific
 - Be thorough
 - Do not dwell on unrelated issues (make a note for future discussion)
 - Focus on actions
 - Relate performance to training
 - Identify corrective action for areas of weakness
 - Continually summarize
 5. Concluding summary
 - End on positive note, linking conclusions to future training
 - Document and maintain record of conclusions and decisions.
 6. Follow up
 - Assignments
 - Training
 - Set example
 - Revise standards and expectations