

Finabel



The 5 must-have qualities of a tactical leader in urban warfare



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European Army Interoperability Center

Through this paper, Finabel aims at identifying the qualities a tactical leader should possess in general and with a specific focus on combat operation in an urban environment. In this report it is assumed that a tactical leader corresponds to a junior officer with the rank of sub-lieutenant or lieutenant and is in charge of a platoon of approximately 30 soldiers during operations.

As post-modern, unconventional urban warfare has become the norm in today's conflicts, tactical leaders have to cope with its specific features: quarter to quarter combat, blurred distinction between combatants and civilians, improvised explosive devices (IED), ambushes, short-range visibility, proximity with local population, restraints in the use of force, postmodern weaponry like drones, etc.

The qualities presented hereafter – namely preparation, risk assessment, adaptability, communication and focus – do not radically differ from the ones required in conventional warfare. However, a tactical leader may need to demonstrate them interchangeably during combat situations. Indeed, unconventional warfare brings challenges that require to be apprehended and processed quickly at the operational level.

PREPARATION

The success of an operation hugely relies on its preparation, even if unexpected elements are inevitable. It is the task of the tactical leader to ensure an operation is sufficiently prepared before to be launched. Preparation is three-fold and comprises planning, training and team building.

Planning – a tactical leader is required to plan the sequence of the operation and to anticipate possible scenarios in order to elaborate alternative responses. It requires a sufficient knowledge of the operation field. To have a correct grasp of the geographical, infrastructural or human factors affecting a specific environment, economists use the DESTEP approach. DESTEP stands for demographics, economics, social/cultural, technological, ecological and political and suggests a prior analysis of different aspects of an environment before to operate in it. Although all elements are not equally relevant for military purposes, tactical leader might inspire from this 6-step approach to have a sufficient background knowledge of a specific environment. A good understanding of the operation's environment is all the more important in urban warfare in which combatants are hidden, civilians vulnerable and the objective less apparent.





Training – Needless to say, training is key. Keeping troops ready to face any expected situation efficiently and with a cool head will allow the operations to run smoothly and will relieve the leader of extra stress. Are troops able to achieve all the tasks of the operation (move fast, fight, secure an area, decipher codes, detect targets, protect a population, evacuate dead, wounded or prisoners)? Are they stress-resistant? Are they able to work efficiently as a group? If not, it means that the operation is either too ambitious, not planned correctly, or that troops are not equipped or trained enough.

Team building is closely related to training but also comprises actions aiming at increasing trust between the leader and its troops as well as between the men among each other. Obedience does not rest on hierarchy alone, and must also be built on necessity, legitimacy and trust. Necessity comes with the level of risk of a determined situation, legitimacy is linked with the experience and reputation of the leader as someone capable and trust will depend on the personality and behavior of the chief (empathic, honest, fair, smart, brave, charismatic, loyal). Thus, specific profiles are more likely to be respected as commanders than others.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Before being upgraded to be a tactical military leader, the officer should have the experience background on the field to be able to first recognize a situation of risk where his men and he could be under pressure and then evaluate how to face it. He should have developed the capacity to keep a cool head on any circumstance in order to be the most likely to make the fitting call. All of these qualifications would be acquired through its sufficient experience and multiple former missions.

Trainings and practice on the field would make him the most likely leader as long as he is inclined to share its professional background. Hence, teaching shall be one of the qualifications an exemplary leader has to develop. He needs to endeavour to elaborate a good balance between the need to put the team under pressure to prevent real situations of stress and teaching how to get emotions under control in order to stay focused.

In a more academic way, a tactical military leader shall have in mind the procedures, the possibilities, the choices that he can make when his team and himself are in danger. Rigorous formations and/or courses shall be

organised and followed by the leader and the team. The Law of Armed Conflicts must be respected by each military officer on the field. That is the reason why a tactical leader must be capable to take decisions fast on the short-term and under pressure that are in accordance with the several norms and principles applicable to wars and conflicts, such as distinction, proportionality, military necessity and unnecessary suffering (Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Convention, 1949). The role of a tactical leader is to fulfil his mission so as to reduce losses within his platoon but also among civilians. He has to be able to analyse the situation and to evaluate the necessity or not to respond by force. Those principles of international law shall be inculcated to the leader and all the men under his supervision with no exception and it must be the role of the leader to uphold them. In this way their entire training shall be based on theory and practice, experience and case-study and would prepare the team for what is waiting for them on the field.

ADAPTABILITY

The largest military operations in past decades have been partly – or fully unconventional. In “the war on terror”, leading to the invasion of Afghanistan, the

main threat, that of the Taliban, has been in a guerrilla setting. The distinction between Taliban or civilians has been difficult to notice for allied military personnel, making it more complex to win wars (Salas, Priest, Wilson, and Burke, 2006). For military leaders it is of the utmost importance to adapt to unknown situations where every civilian could be a potential threat that can lay around every corner.

LePine (2003) argues that teams with higher cognitive abilities, goal orientation, openness to situations and autonomy perform better. In Afghanistan for example there are different tribes in every region with different customs and habits, leaders can profit from the situation by winning the trust of the local population. Openness in that sense promotes trust between the civilians and the military personnel which can lead to intelligence and the safety and well-being of troops in the area and village. However, making sure that tribes maintain friendly ties with military personnel is difficult, the situation might not always be how it appears. A village may be clean one day and the next day scattered with IED's or it might even be the site for an ambush. The constant threat is something military leaders should be prepared for and adapt to since the methods of the opponent are ever changing and devel-



oping. For example, in Syria non-combatant drones have been transformed into custom made air-borne IED's used to target their opponents. When military leaders have prepared their troops on the basis of most recent intelligence the leader and the troops will be able to adapt quicker because of their cognitive abilities and will be more efficient during deployment. The more leaders prepare troops to act independently the more effective and efficient soldiers are in a hostile environment and during combat.

In urban warfare military leaders should be aware of the measures which can be taken to counter the inventive methods of their opponents. Subsequently, it should be taken into account that counter-IED measures have an impact on resources and the progress speed of an operation. A military leader should be able to assess which equipment is most suitable for a specific operation. Good intelligence and reconnaissance make the judgement of the platoon commander more accurate but he himself will have to cope with the consequences of his preferences. A platoon commander may have the opportunity to prepare for every situation possible, but equipping for every possible situation would make for a slow and unworkable operation. Therefore, a leader should be able to adapt on the basis of the information available and solve problems creatively, be able to deal with uncertain situations and he must adapt culturally. Conclusively, a military leader has to make a choice between the progression speed of the operation and safety of his personnel.

COMMUNICATION

Leadership, defined as *"the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization"*, cannot occur without decent communication between the leader and his platoon.

Consequently, a good leader must communicate properly by making himself understood with the fewest possible sources of misunderstanding and the best possible basis for establishing trust. To this end, he should be conscious of the importance of body language and manner of transmitting content.

Furthermore, he has to collect important information from his co-workers and the people he interacts with. In this regard, listening actively is essential and communication within the platoon must be interactive, in

other words, characterised by continuous vertical and horizontal feedback. For instance, the leader should not hesitate to ask a subordinate for input, it will show acknowledgement and respect for his experience, while improving situational understanding.

Moreover, a good leader will also need strong cross-cultural competences, considered as the knowledge, skills and motivation that enable him to adapt effectively in cross-cultural environments. Recent conflicts have highlighted the potential problems that emerge when operations require a high level of contact with the local population. By being sensitive to cultural factors in communication, the tactical leader will be more able to understand and interact effectively with local population or to work collaboratively with coalition partners.

Through all these communication skills, the platoon leader will establish a bond within his team, create a shared and clear understanding of what needs to be done and why and interact more efficiently with his environment.

Altogether, this can be decisive for the life of the officer himself, his personnel, and their ability to succeed in operations.

FOCUS / KEEPING TROOPS FOCUSED

When it comes to leading soldiers to combat missions in a urban environment, keeping the troops focused is essential. Obviously, focus comes with preparation. Focusing the troops on the objectives implies keeping a high level of awareness and preparedness, particularly when it comes to patrol missions, more subject to routine and a lower focus.

The main particularity of an urban environment is that it favours ambushes and IEDs. Numerous streets, floors, windows, roofs, etc. makes it more difficult for a tactical leader to apprehend threats and keep control of the battlefield. According to Sun Tsu in «the Art of War», surprise is the worst element that a commanding officer can face. With surprise comes disorganization, improvisation, high levels of stress, and out-of-the-book reactions. Thus, surprise must be avoided at all costs. And this cost is constant focus and awareness for soldiers on the field, which is of the responsibility of their commanding officers.



It is of the responsibility of the officer in charge to keep the troops focused on the objective of the mission and the likely threats. It is the only way to lower the risks of casualties.

Considering the modern framework of urban warfare, as conventional forces have witnessed it in the recent battles of Mosul (Iraqi forces) and Afrin (Turkish forces), threats and enemy fire can come from everywhere. Every civilian, every corner street, every window should be perceived as a potential threat. The main characteristic of insurgency is that they have a lasting power. This is why focus and concentration are essential.

Even with training and conventional preparation, any combat mission will expose military personnel to high levels of stress. It can be the best ally and the worst enemy of a soldier. When controlled and kept to a reasonable level, stress provides increased focus and concentration to operating forces. It is of the duty of the tactical leader to keep his troops to a reasonable level of stress and high level of concentration. This can only be achieved by preparation, communication, and adaptability to any threat the unit can face.

CONCLUSION

This list developed above is not exclusive and other characteristics are relevant for the position of tactical leader, such as exemplarity, interpersonal tact or charisma. However, the five qualities presented here appear as essential while having the command in a dangerous environment. On the field, they intertwine all the time: a leader's ability to adapt heavily relies on his preparation, just like his communication skills make him able to keep his troops focused during an operation. These qualities could be considered as the fundamental must-have for the selection of tactical officers.

Today, selection criteria are established internally by the national military administration and few – if any – information or research on the topic has been disclosed or published. In face of the increasing operational cooperation – and even integration, in the case of EU battlegroups –, it becomes important to open this kind of debates to the EU or NATO level. Having common criteria and requirement level for tactical leaders would definitely push forward interoperability among NATO/EU forces.

In this respect, this food for thought paper constitutes a first attempt by FINABEL to foster common reflection and share practices on the topic.

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- Promoting interoperability and cooperation of armies, while seeking to bring together concepts, doctrines and procedures;
- Contributing to a common European understanding of land defence issues. Finabel focuses on doctrines, trainings, and the joint environment.

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