



THE ELECTRON THEORY OF LEADERSHIP

Enabling Senior Leaders to Really See Their Organizations

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It is the vicinity of Bayji, Iraq, and the company charged with defending the forward operating base (FOB) is staging a mounted combat patrol to conduct a counter-reconnaissance mission. The brigade commander, a colonel, has decided to participate in the patrol to assess the overall security of the FOB and to see first-hand whether subordinate commanders have adhered to his guidance and intent regarding standards and troop leading procedures. Though the company commander and platoon leader are in the patrol, a young staff sergeant leads the patrol and executes the mission superbly, expertly meeting all standards with a by-the-book application of troop leading procedures.

The colonel walks away impressed with the quality of the mission, but unsure of whether the mission was an anomaly. Troubled, he returns to the tactical operations center. As he reflects on the success of the mission, the professionalism and discipline of the junior leaders, and how well planned the missions was, he is still bothered knowing he did not have the time to go on every patrol.

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PHOTO: Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Sweeney, 81st Brigade Combat Team, Washington Army National Guard, speaks to brigade soldiers during training at Contingency Operating Base Q-West, Iraq, 6 February 2009. (U.S. Army)

THE “ELECTRON THEORY of Leadership” is something of a mix of elementary physics and lessons learned as leaders across the Army have progressed through increasing levels of authority, responsibility, and accountability. As noted in Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*, one of the key responsibilities of a leader is to have trust and build trust. A tangible way to do this is to have a true understanding of what is happening at the lowest organizational level—the tip of the spear, the edge, or where the rubber meets the road, to apply the most banal analogies.

Electrons and Leadership

What does this have to with electrons? Electrons are the building blocks of atoms, as subordinate units are the building blocks of the military. In a general physics course, the instructor informs the students that science does not allow us to see an electron in its natural state; it is invisible to us. The only way we can see it is to shine a light on it. Unfortunately, the application of light to an electron alters its state. Similarly, when a senior commander visits a subordinate unit, his or her very presence, much like the light to the electron, alters the unit from its natural state. Commanders must understand and mitigate this phenomenon to see through a potential “dog and pony” show and still get an accurate assessment (ground truth) of the unit.

One successful brigade commander described this skill as discernment—a vital meta-competency for senior leaders.

Discernment:

The activity of determining the value and quality of a certain subject or event.

(Wikipedia)

The quality of being able to grasp and comprehend that which is obscure .

(Merriam-Webster)

The ability to judge people well.

(Cambridge Dictionary Online)

The following are five methods a unit commander can use to help assess subordinate units without “disturbing the electrons”:

Continual presence. The “continual presence” solution involves continuous iterative actions on the part of the senior leader where the leader’s presence is so frequent it no longer creates the “agitation of light on the electron”—the leader’s presence becomes part of the environment. At this point, the leader has gained the ability to see the unit in its natural state. The obvious difficulty with this solution is that it is not sustainable. Continual presence demands too much of the leader’s time, and will inevitably result in some units being left out or the leader’s neglect of other important responsibilities.

Use of bellwether units. An alternative to the constant presence solution is the selection of bellwether units. A bellwether unit is an organization that, because of its mission, location, or any other specific and appropriate dynamic, would serve to represent a larger number of units. Thus, through inference, the bellwether unit would allow the leader to “see” more units that he or she can actually visit. Clearly, the leader must exercise great caution and judgment in the selection of bellwether units because the units should represent the composition, character, and nature of other units.

Use of surrogates. A third solution to the presence problem is for a leader to allow a surrogate

to serve as the eyes and ears at the units. Leaders have often used sergeants major, chaplains, or inspectors general to perform this role, but these representatives face the same problem of agitation or “dog and pony show” by their presence. The ability of a surrogate to truly “see” a unit is often dependent on what happens after they leave. If the visit is routinely followed by some sort of negative outcome, the subordinate command or unit’s openness and trust will evaporate, and the surrogate will be no better able to see the unit than the senior leader. Here, transparency is key.

One proven successful technique is to have relatively junior soldiers help the senior leader see the units. For example, a number of senior leaders have used their drivers to go out and talk to people to try to get a feel for the unit. Drivers are easily recognized by their position and association with “the boss”—it is common for soldiers to open up to them. Often, junior soldiers take advantage of this opportunity to get a message to the boss without having to actually see the boss using an “open door” policy or other opportunity.

Again, this becomes a matter of trust between leaders. Senior leaders should be open to insights from sources of information such as these while at the same time tempering their responses until they have sufficient understanding of the context, usually gained in discussion with the unit leaders. As is the case in most operational environments, overreaction based on a single data point can sometimes be worse than no reaction at all.

A commander within the Army Training and Doctrine Command and with basic combat training used to travel to different posts with “drill sergeants of the year.” After arriving at a training base, the post leadership would often escort the commander, but the drill sergeants were able to get out, explore, talk to their peers, and then report what they saw, heard, and perceived. This feedback was timely and priceless.

Another common technique for a senior leader trying to see reality in their units is to require some sort of standardized presentation, probably PowerPoint, where subordinate leaders brief their “charts.” We have all sat through training briefs with a multitude of slides that measure all things senior leaders need to see and know. The briefings often include key readiness indicators—qualified crews,



(U.S. Army, Sgt. Amanda Hillis)

From left, U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Terwan D. Crawley, the combined joint operations command noncommissioned officer in charge at Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division; Command Sgt. Maj. Thomas R. Capel, center, the incoming command sergeant major of the International Security Assistance Force; and Command Sgt. Maj. Bryant C. Lambert, the 82nd Airborne Division and Regional Command (South) command sergeant major, talk on 16 January 2012.

manning levels, deployability status, etc.,—but often grow into other measures with questionable relationship to the subject at hand—Association of the United States Army Memberships, Army Family Team Building participation, public school partnerships, or the number of specialists being recommended for promotion. These briefings can and do have a place for senior leaders, but only when what is being measured and briefed is important and relevant to the subject at hand and the amount of information and guidance exchanged is worthy of the time invested.

Focused telescope. A further potential solution to the problem of being able to truly see subunits in their natural state is the “focused telescope” approach. This technique is the process where a senior leader selects a key data point or event that is representative of a larger picture of the unit. The leader uses this technique as a lens to examine a specific item or event to “see” many units quickly. Here, it is important to ensure the leader focuses on the right thing—whatever is selected should serve

as a true indicator of what the leader really wants to see—and know. As an example, observing an after action review is often a great indicator of the overall performance of a unit.

Learning what to look for. Finally, given that a senior leader does not have time to visit each unit frequently enough to become an invisible part of the environment (another electron, maybe), the leader should truly see and feel a unit, even when it is not in its natural state. So while subordinate leaders are introducing the senior leader to great soldiers, the senior leader seeks out soldiers in the shadows. When the subordinate commander shows an arms room, the senior leader insists on visiting another arms room or supply room, selected randomly. When briefed on a successful mission, the senior leader asks about an unsuccessful mission and what changes the unit made based on the lessons learned. The senior leader can sit in on an orders brief, a rehearsal, a training event, or an after action review. Importantly, the visit should not be scheduled or planned. The leader must show up unannounced.

There will be many forces at work to keep this unannounced visit from happening. Subordinate leaders will do their very best to get back on the planned agenda, making the most of all limited opportunities. The aide-de-camp—if the senior leader has one—will be calling ahead to make sure the leader’s time is not wasted. By establishing a climate of trust and communicating clear guidance, the leader will help subordinates overcome their natural resistance to show the total picture—good and bad.

Senior leaders who really want to “see” their subordinate units will use some combination of all these potential methods. While presence is important, constant visits are informative but very difficult. Surrogates expand the leader’s range but must have both the senior leader’s and the subordinates’ complete trust—or the surrogates will not be able to see any more than the commander will. Standardized briefings are useful and can enable identification of organizational and systemic

problems; but they can become onerous “oxygen suckers” when they become encyclopedic and extraneous. Bellwether units may offer a senior leader an appropriate representative sample, but all soldiers and subordinates deserve the attention of the leader’s personal time and all the benefits derived from personal interaction. Finally, developing the skills that enable a leader to see the true essence and heart of a unit amidst the artificiality of an official visit is difficult, and leaders learn this ability to discern only by experience.

The leader who can see subordinate units in their natural state will enjoy better situational awareness and be able to tie the strategic, operational, and tactical levels together more seamlessly. The leader will more accurately assess whether his or her guidance and intent is reaching all levels of the command. Through understanding the agitating effect of the “light” provided by their own presence, senior leaders can take the steps described in this paper to “see” their own electrons. **MR**

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