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Leadership in Challenging Situations



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Developing Senior Leaders: Challenges, Methodologies, and Dilemmas

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The abundance of literature on leadership emphasizes its relevance. The topic of leadership has continued to concern researchers for centuries, and the literature attests to its changing, complex nature. In recent years, there has been a need for further distinctions between different levels in the hierarchy of leadership. In that connection, several questions arise: How is senior leadership different from junior leadership? Are the teaching methods used to educate senior officers different from those used to train younger officers? What professional perspectives affect the development of senior leaders? And what methodological difficulties and challenges are encountered by military colleges in the process of developing senior leaders?

1. The Task Environment of Senior Commanders: The Changing Face of Warfare

Senior commanders operate in an environment that has become increasingly complex. Today, wars continue for a relatively long time, and they are similar to cultural wars of attrition which are directed at the arena of national consciousness. Giora Eiland (2007) analyzed six dimensions of change in the nature of warfare, which have affected the environment in which senior commanders operate:

- There has been a change in analysis and adaptation of variables in a-symmetric wars, which take place in densely populated civilian areas. That issue has posed three challenges. One challenge relates to intelligence – not only determining where the enemy is, but who the enemy is. Another challenge relates to identifying an enemy, when the enemy may alter in light of rapid changes in diplomatic relationships and political definitions. The third challenge relates to characterization of a relevant target. The enemy is not a standing target, nor does it stay in one place for long. Rather, it is constantly moving, and its location can change within a matter of minutes and even seconds.
- There has been a change in the relationship between the political and military systems. In traditional wars, the political system notifies the military that it is expected to win the war, and the politicians deal with its outcomes. The definition of victory is usually clear, and can be interpreted in military terms. It is demarcated in terms of its area, time frame, and political framework. In a low

intensity conflict, the boundaries between the political and military systems are sometimes blurred. It is not always clear what goals should be achieved, and strategic objectives are not always properly defined. In this situation, there is a need for a different type of dialogue, which is not based on hierarchy. It is important to discuss not only how to attack, but to question whether it is right to attack. Toward that end, frequent discussions are held between military and political officials. Every political action has implications for security, and vice-versa. Officials at both levels need to meet more frequently in order to discuss the current state of reality. In addition, there is a growing connection between opportunism in the political leadership and public loss of faith in the government, its leaders and its institutions, as well as a growing sense that political leaders are sometimes involved in corrupt decision-making processes (Ben-Yishai, 2007). In light of these developments, there is an increasing need to create a new leadership in the field of national security. Those leaders should be committed to moral values, and should emphasize the responsibilities of senior officers in the defense establishment – especially military commanders.

- Implementing organizational and procedural change, with emphasis on achieving jointness. Current wars are no longer characterized by a clear definition of total peace or all-out combat. There are countless situations that require a different type of division of authority and coordination between various entities. For example, in the United States, an interagency dialogue was held on the topic of Homeland Security after the Twin Towers attack in 2001. Similarly, in Israel, an alternative type of dialogue was required to fight terror. In that process, the leading security agents (the 'Mossad', the Military Intelligence Directorate, and the General Security Services) were called on to establish new mutual domains of responsibility. This was important, because some of the coordination in these domains transcends institutional boundaries. Clearly, the responsibility for establishing this kind of dialogue lies with the senior officials in the national security system.
- Coping with the challenges of new information technology. More advanced, destructive technologies are not always effective. In fact, sometimes the opposite is the case: technologies need to be adapted to the new threat, where the goal is not necessarily to achieve maximal destruction. On the contrary, there is need to use less lethal technologies such as small unmanned aerial vehicles.
- Proper and wise use of the media. The senior commander is influential, and manages an environment in which there is intensive media coverage. In that context, it is important to promote a dialogue with civilians – especially in order to gain national and international legitimacy for military operations. That kind of dialogue will allow for freedom of action, and sometimes enable the military

operation to be prolonged if necessary. It is critical for the senior officer to be familiar with the media and competent in conveying and understanding messages through the media.

- **Debunking myths.** In the context of modern wars, some myths are shattered. One myth relates to definitions of the duration of war. For example, Major General Eiland notes: "If we defeated four armies in six days in 1967, then how many days do we need to defeat only a few thousand Hezbollah fighters?" Another myth relates to the number of casualties in war. Some confrontations are 'wars of choice'. In those contexts, there is an unrealistic expectation that our side will win the war without endangering our soldiers, because we have sophisticated weapons that can attack from a distance. A third myth relates to the ability to avoid harming innocent civilians. We will support an all-out war with the Hamas as long as the casualties are solely enemy soldiers. But when television shows horrific pictures of children who have been killed, we begin to have profound doubts and reservations. In those cases, we criticize ourselves and ask disconcerting questions about the justification of military action. A typical question raised in Israel is: "What happened to us?" It's not always clear why we're here and what we're fighting for; whether the price is worthwhile. A fourth myth relates to the ability to achieve a decisive victory. We are prepared to pay the price of war if we achieve a decisive, clear victory where the enemy surrenders or gives up the will to fight. However, in the new war the perception of victory depends on one's world view, and is based on a narrative that is difficult to change.

In light of that situation, senior officers are called on to win the new types of wars that characterize the 21st century. They need to prepare for different types of conflicts by showing flexibility and versatility in the use of security systems, and to recognize limitations in the use of military force. In the effort to gain enhanced legitimacy from society, they need to employ a strategy that recognizes the possibility that there will be violent confrontations and that people will be killed. They also need to be attentive to critical voices, which question the justification for their approach and the purity of arms in every instance. In addition, they need to be able to explain the actions of the military and gain support through a dialogue with citizens and soldiers from the entire political spectrum of society.

2. The Characteristics of Senior Officers

In light of the changing security situation, it appears that the characteristics of senior commanders – some of which have been characterized and defined in numerous studies (e.g., Altman, 1999) are more relevant now than ever:

- Maintaining a growing physical distance in relationships with subordinates. Due to the distance, which intensifies psychological projection and attribution, the senior commander impacts his subordinates through symbolic leadership. Units are split into sub-systems, and rarely operate as an organic whole. In this context, the challenge for the commander is how to enable his soldiers to simulate an organic and yet individual framework, and how to maintain an atmosphere of learning and cohesion (Kaplinksky, 2007).
- Attaining desired outcomes through other managerial levels. Because the leader operates through intermediaries and intermediate level staffs, he needs to be able to develop systems to influence his subordinates. In that context, he needs to choose – or at least be involved in choosing – managers who will know how to convey his messages to the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy.
- Understanding the limitations of control. The senior officer is responsible for the handling of a tremendous volume of information and knowledge. In an environment where the mission involves complex tasks characterized by feedback, dependence, and unclear cause-effect relationships, the senior officer grapples with abstract ideas based on open questions, concepts and symbols.
- Establishing 'jointness'. Senior officers need to work with social networks and build partnerships based on relationships between different units and organizations. In light of this situation, there are several characteristics that are essential for working in those environments and dealing with those challenges. Above all, senior officers need to develop abilities for strategic thinking and to cope with ambiguity. They need to think in terms of complementary opposites, taking into account a complex network of causes and effects, and the emergence of processes over time. They also need to identify patterns that will enable them to understand and operate in a complex arena. In that context, it is essential to perform multidimensional tasks, which might even be contradictory and inconsistent (e.g., there may be conflicts between political, legal, military, and economic perspectives). Senior officers also need to know how to operate in unfamiliar situations where clear instructions are not always given, and how to make rapid transitions between different agencies and functions in a constant process of integration and learning. At the level of learning, senior officers have to be able to interpret situations in terms of regional and global trends. Toward this end, it is necessary to engage in strategic and innovative thinking, to construct new paradigms of reality, and break into a given sphere of influence, in addition to constructing new conceptual frameworks and constantly introducing innovative ideas (Ben-Ishai, 2007), as well as developing analytical tools, and formulating organizational goals in a dynamic world. Commanders need to be able to manage

complex emotional situations, as well as to cope with ambiguity and isolation, and to bear the heavy personal burden of managing those processes. They also need to manage and influence multiple networks. This includes working in a political environment, as well as developing collaborations, strategic agreements, and alliances. In those contexts, the commanders need to have sensors to detect hidden agendas and underlying inter-organizational developments. In addition, they need to be able to manage teams of experts who specialize in areas where the commanders lack specific knowledge.

- Another interesting dimension that has emerged in recent years is the ability to communicate in multiple languages – to convey messages and influence people through speeches and statements, using tactical, systemic, political, strategic, media, and civilian semantics that are adapted to the target audience. Most importantly, the commander must have a high level of self-awareness, where he understands the need to clarify himself and recognizes his personal style and his own strengths and weaknesses. In that context, he should be able to identify hidden assumptions, know how to pose difficult questions, show modesty, and recognize the limitations of his own knowledge. Finally, the commander should know how to develop a source of internal authority.

3. Values Unique to Senior Leadership

In light of the above, one of the essential core characteristics of the senior officer's role is his involvement in shaping an ethical operational environment in the military. In that context, one of the officer's major concerns is to maintain the moral image of the army. Because morals and values are a fundamental part of combat, anti-terrorism warfare generates a conflict and arouses complex dilemmas on several levels: how to protect the lives of innocent civilians and restrain power when necessary; how to preserve soldiers' lives and still protect your civilian population; and, no less important, how to establish tenacity of purpose in performing the mission. Although all of the values of the armed forces are relevant to any combatant, it seems that three main values are most characteristic of the activity of senior leaders:

- **Responsibility:** Responsibility means contributing to events, processes, methods, and results. In contrast to younger ranks, it is especially important for senior commanders to assume personal responsibility for the outcomes, as well as responsibility for promoting and implementing ideas, and for the people and agencies that engage in the mission. Senior commanders assume responsibility for maintaining relevance and innovation in learning, as well as for engaging in a

dialogue with the agencies that collaborate with the national security system. In addition, the senior commanders represent the military vis-à-vis the civilian system – including cases in which they personally disagree with the decisions made at the political level. Perhaps most important are the leader's value priorities for operating in complex, ambiguous environments.

- Personal example: setting a personal example is an important value for any kind of leadership. Senior officers, more than soldiers or commanders at any other level, should serve as a role model of collegiality, honesty, loyalty, and moral integrity in decision-making. They should be role models for constructing and operating the military force. The role model is expressed through serving as a personal example at the level of the littlest things. Due to the impact of symbolic leadership this value is enhanced even more.
- Professionalism. Professional practice involves the following elements: a systematic body of relevant knowledge; systematic proficiency in solving relevant problems; constant improvement of relevant knowledge; local understanding of the claims of knowledge and methods; global understanding of the nature of the system of knowledge and proficiency (ethics). Not only is the senior commander responsible for promoting all of these aspects, but he is also required to master a new realm of knowledge due to the operational and strategic mission. In that context, the officer aspires to achieve excellence, as well as to broaden his local and global understanding. The leader must learn to develop a professional language appropriate for the mediation between the strategic and tactical levels. However, he must be careful not to create misunderstandings, and must make an effort to initiate a dialogue without upsetting the hierarchy of command. (Kasher, 2005)

4. Senior Leaders and the Learning Process: Characteristics and Challenges

4.1 The Paradox

Even though it is clear that such complex behavior requires formal education and learning, it is paradoxical that the higher the commanders' level of seniority, the more barriers they face in the learning process. Meaningful learning poses challenges, as the individual confronts gaps or lacunae in his own knowledge. Therefore, senior leaders often have difficulty assuming the role of students – perhaps because they are unconsciously leaving a situation in which they are in control, and admitting that something is lacking. Most of the knowledge is not acquired on the premise that it is 'Studies in Progress'. In general, learning does not take place in the courses per se. Rather, the courses facilitate the learning process. For most senior officers, learning

takes place 'between the lines', and not always in the formal setting of programs at military colleges. In addition, meaningful learning does not depend on what the lecturer or instructor says. Rather, it depends on the significance that the participants in courses attribute to the knowledge. Sometimes, spontaneous learning events are perceived as more critical, interesting, and memorable than experiences that are anticipated and planned. However, because of role responsibilities, loneliness and emotional isolation which commanders encounter in their role, it is important to establish planned, formal educational settings on the one hand, while on the other giving the participants in those settings room for creativity and exploration. Therefore, it is important to consider the needs of senior leaders as part of a world view that guides the development of curricula for that population.

4.2 Learning Attributes of Senior Commanders

Senior commanders have several attributes that are drastically different from those of junior officers (based on the theories of Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998):

- They have extensive life experience, which is organized into existing schemata and is part of their self-identity. As learners, they seek to identify the connections between the learned material and their past experience, and they expect their experience to be recognized. Failure to acknowledge their experience is tantamount to disregarding their identity.
- Senior commanders have a sense of psychological seniority and maturity, and they prefer to decide on their own future path, destiny and activities. They have a deep psychological need for independence, and do things that are consistent with their status as adults.
- Senior commanders have a practical, pragmatic perspective. They look for immediate relevance in the learning process, and weigh its contribution against their professional and personal development. They need to know why they are learning a specific topic, and what it means for them.
- They have intrinsic motivation and are driven toward self-fulfillment. As such, they are influenced less by external factors. Adult learning theory assumes that the basis for learning is a functional need. However, differences in needs are varied: There are those who learn for the sake of future roles, those who seek to achieve a certain goal, or simply out of love of knowledge. Pedagogic emphasis should be placed on intrinsic motivations such as self-fulfillment and self-esteem, in contrast to external factors such as sanctions.
- As autonomous, critical adults, they have a skeptical attitude about ideas presented to them in the learning process. Therefore, learning should be based as

much as possible on dialectical, critical thinking. In addition, management of educational programs for senior commanders should focus on creating a different learning environment characterized by respect, mutuality, and pleasantness. Those aspects are the foundations of situations and learning environments that are appropriate for adults.

- Senior commanders learn best through activity, involvement, and solution of practical problems relating to the organization they are affiliated with and to their jobs. They learn best when the material has personal significance for them, and when they are presented with challenges that they undertake to deal with.
- Senior commanders have a well-developed sense of 'wasting time'. They have a low stimulus threshold when it comes to activities that they perceive as lasting too long or being inefficient.
- The adult student is a source of knowledge in a group, in addition to the teacher. Therefore, peer learning is an effective learning technique for adults.
- Egalitarianism and fostering egalitarian relationships between the instructors and students is a basic principle of adult education. In that context, the instructors encourage students and involve them in setting the goals, content, and methods of learning, as well as in evaluating the learning process and its outcomes. That is, the curriculum of the course will be designed according to the needs and interests of all groups. In addition, the participants in the course will be invited to engage and take part in facilitating the learning process itself.
- It is assumed that the group of participants in the course will be heterogeneous in terms of their job positions, personal styles, age, organizational tracks, and geographic background. Therefore, they should be given opportunities for social interaction in the learning process, they should work in small groups, and they should be given space to choose the pedagogic and thematic tracks and issues that interest them.

5. Programs for the Development of Senior Leaders: Methodology and Main perspectives

In light of the above, a curriculum designed for senior officers should be based on a range of considerations which encourage the participants to learn in an environment that emphasizes three principles:

- Maximal involvement and active learning: Giving senior officers an incentive to assume responsibility and control, to choose and influence the learning process, and to bring some of their own material to discuss in class. In that way learning is not based on passive processes where the curricular content cannot be challenged. Rather, it is based on analysis and interpretation of material, where the

participant is involved in setting the goals of the educational process, and learning is independent and exploratory. In that context, the program facilitators are also responsible for arranging frequent meetings between the Chief of Staff and senior board and the participants, as well as inviting the learners to participate in planning the agenda of the meetings.

- Utilizing a variety of methods in the program: In light of the broad range of needs and expectations of the participants, and considering that they have a wide array of interests, it is important to integrate theory and practice in the program. In addition, the training program should incorporate experiences and models, group work, reading material, case studies, personal self-inquiry questionnaires, meetings with senior officers, and meetings with inspirational political leaders. All of these methods combine a dialogical environment and constant interaction between theory and traditional knowledge on the one hand, with skepticism, practice, and conceptualization on the other.
- Promoting a critical, creative study atmosphere: The program needs to let the 'stormy winds' of the environment blow into the classroom, and open the door on new perspectives, even if the atmosphere in the classroom might become turbulent at some points. The participants have an opportunity to express meaningful ideas that undermine existing paradigms. Nonetheless, the facilitators are called on to maintain an atmosphere of tolerance, which encourages and respects processes of change and the extension of the 'comfort zone'. Additionally, the program should emphasize ethical dilemmas, with the understanding that even leaders in high positions don't always have clear answers to every situation (Raviv, 2003).

These curricula often provide a genuine opportunity for organizations to develop valuable knowledge. That kind of learning, which occurs away from the battlefield and daily problems, invites participants to concentrate and to experience 'being' rather than just 'doing'. In this pedagogical environment, latent knowledge is transformed into articulated knowledge. If the programs are properly managed, they allow space for an examination of phenomena which are seemingly marginal or still unnoticed in the organization. These research activities and 'think tanks' have the potential to be transformed into practical models that can be utilized in the country's defense system. In national defense colleges, special care is given to new interagency models that are developed from non-sectorial learning situations. However, this organizational knowledge is only one important part of learning. The most profound pivotal event that has to take place in the program is the development of an individual sense of self efficacy and understanding, in addition to moving the participants into a position of influence, change, and self-awareness.

6. Classic Methods of Teaching in Courses for Senior Leaders

There are many teaching methods that can be valuable in different kinds of learning situations. However, some have proven to be more appropriate or more effective for the population of senior leaders. The following are a few examples:

- **Leadership and Management Workshops in Small Groups**
 - Workshops that combine personal diagnostic questionnaires for leaders and 360° feedback systems combined with personal coaching. The challenge here is to offer added value to what the officer has learned on his own through his past military career.
 - Workshops that allow participants to discover personal values or to challenge values that exist, are lacking, or are partially hidden.
 - Consultation peer groups that deal with personal dilemmas related to leadership: members of these groups discuss dilemmas with each other, offer advice and solutions based on their own experience.
 - Experiential workshops in nature, i.e., in field conditions. In those workshops, the participants can experience and conceptualize leadership and team work in a setting that is fun and challenging.
 - Role analysis workshops, which enable exploration of relationships between 'the self', 'the role', and 'the organization'. This is a strong tool which enables and allows participants to explore personal fixations and potential regressive patterns that dominate them from early states.
 - Business theater – enables analysis of real-life situations in management. This kind of workshop is conducive to implicational learning and simulates work situations through role playing. In these contexts, situations and responses are analyzed through the medium of drama.
 - Explorational dialogue on a leadership phenomenon.
- **Lectures**
 - Renowned academic experts will present strategic, organizational and social models.
 - Key speakers and business leaders will lecture on decision-making topics and parallel management challenges in similar defense institutions or business sectors.
 - Directors from the organization – at senior levels or retired directors – will present a role model for senior leadership, with emphasis on managing crisis situations or managing change.
 - Panels will be held, where participants present divergent and conflicting perspectives on dealing with the problem.

- Case Studies
 - Analyses of complex phenomena in the context of the real world, which enable experiential learning based on the life of the organization in laboratory conditions. The analysis touches on issues at the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels, using systemic, interdisciplinary thinking. This method prepares the course participants for a world that requires critical thinking and formulation of persuasive arguments, in a limited time frame and with incomplete information (Raviv, 2008).
- Simulations
 - Creating reduced and abstract schemata of reality which reflect complex phenomena. The simulations enable participants to experience policy-making, planning, and decision-making, in addition to reconstructing critical and strategic events while developing alternatives that are not revealed in other circumstances. The method challenges latent assumptions and attitudes, enabling participants to experience change and gain new insights (Poulka & Raviv, 2007).
- Coaching and Personal Counseling
 - Choosing development-oriented counseling in a protected situation where the counselor is a personal resource for deliberating and testing reality.
- Mentoring from Senior Leaders
 - Indirect instruction from a senior leader who is not the direct supervisor, e.g., from a retired senior leader in the organization who serves as a model for learning and working, and who has extensive experience that is relevant to coping with reality.
- Meetings with Other Audiences – Benchmarking
 - Meetings with senior leaders from parallel or different organizations, aimed at enhancing the participants' repertoire of insights into other organizational cultures, with emphasis on case studies.
- Tours
 - Emphasis on the level of values and identity: Tours that bring senior leaders closer to the roots of their national, social, and religious identity and to the sources of their faith. The tours enhance the robustness of values and deepen the leader's knowledge of the country, its population, its social backbone, and its social fabric which construct the leader's unique identity and sense of purpose.

- Independent self-directed Learning
 - Curriculum design that puts formal emphasis on self-directed learning, time for independent learning, reading texts, and interpretation of texts as a mutual process within the learning groups.
 - Inviting the participants to teach the parts of the curricular units, and to gain a monopoly on knowledge in those topics as true experts.
- Open Space
 - Opportunities to explore and spearhead topics that are important to senior leaders, to their future, and to the future of the organization. This is a technology that allows for spontaneity and independent organization, from a position of passion and influence.

Of course, not all of these methodologies can be introduced in one curriculum. However, multiple teaching methods create that synergy of effective development. Those methods should be constructed as part of a coherent rationale that is consistent with current needs and recent events, as well as with the characteristics of the unique group and the goals of training.

7. Some Concluding Thoughts Regarding the Challenges faced by the 'Israel Defence Forces' (IDF)

Notwithstanding the processes discussed above, there is a dispute on the question of whether it is possible to improve moral conduct through teaching (Talerud, 2007). It also seems that the challenges of teaching senior officers are so great today that it is nearly impossible to succeed in accomplishing that pedagogical mission. Furthermore, although many of the suggestions raised in the article have already been implemented in the curriculum for senior officers in the IDF, we are still far from achieving the objectives. Can we learn something from the experience of the IDF in that mission?

The IDF is at the core of public discourse as a people's army. In that context, issues related to the morality of combat have been raised, such as the questions that were posed after the Operation Cast Lead (the 2008 Gaza Campaign): Did the commanders demonstrate moral discretion? Did they preserve the sanctity of life? Is the IDF still 'the most moral army in the world', as it claims? In contrast to the biased image that has been portrayed in the media, senior commanders in the IDF give top priority to the value of investigating the truth and learning about the operations that were carried out. It is well known that most of the combat took place in densely populated residential areas. Although the Palestinian side sustained hundreds of

casualties, the senior commanders who led the mission made concerted efforts to preserve the rights of civilians in the war zone. The operation was initiated as a response to tens of thousands of rockets that were deliberately positioned behind a human shield of civilians and fired for months at the heart of Israeli cities. The IDF took extraordinary measures to inform the civilians in Gaza about the targeted areas in order to enable them to escape, in addition to allowing huge amounts of humanitarian aid to be brought into Gaza. Israel had no choice but to defend itself. However, mistakes in war do happen, and should be dealt with through profound debriefing and other measures. At the same time, commanders need to disclose phenomena that violate norms and deal harshly with them, whereas phenomena such as heroic acts need to be reinforced and strengthened. In that process, mistakes, deviations, and ethical dilemmas should be incorporated in the curriculum in subsequent years as case studies that the soldiers can learn from. It should also be noted that senior officers in the IDF face problems within their own forces. Recently, for example, religious Jewish soldiers have threatened to disobey orders if they are commanded to evacuate Jewish settlements or illegal outposts in Northern Samaria. The brigade commanders should deal harshly with any disobedience and toxic political debate that starts to penetrate the professional military world.

These are just some of the complex challenges that IDF commanders have to contend with. If they go astray or make morally biased decisions, they are treated with extremely severity and are forced to leave the service. That is because high ranking commanders play a vital role in sustaining the moral backbone of the army and even the nation.

Commanders in the IDF operate in a conflictual reality, where they are confronted with questions at home and outside, and where they grapple with the task of clarifying the boundaries between what is allowed and what is prohibited, as well as with clarifying norms in their task environment. In light of the differences between individuals in terms of values, the level of clarity in commands should increase at the lower ranks of the military hierarchy. Moreover, the presence of commanders in the battlefield is critical, because they are the ones who point the younger soldiers in the right direction, and because the main way of instilling values is through providing a role model for them to follow.

In sum, senior commanders have to develop uncompromising confidence in the justness of their professional actions and the *raison d'être* of the military and state in which they operate. Will military colleges fully succeed in developing such an excellent senior navigator who will lead the soldiers effectively through the stormy oceans they face? This question has yet to be answered.

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