

Army 21 Through a Learning Environment

by CPT Marcus Tan Wee Kian

When I try to envisage what an Army that learns will be like, I always seem to be caught up in the process or concept rather than the creation. And in this case, the creation is a "Learning Army". But what do we really want? Peter Senge wrote, "Learning Organisations are organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together."¹ So what then are our desired results? Is it 100% in the Logistic Readiness Inspection (LRI) inspection? Is it 100% in the General Staff Inspectorate (GSI) portion of the Best Unit Competition (BUC)? Or even REDCON 1 in the Army Training Evaluation Centre (ATEC) evaluation? Are these really our desired results? Or should it be: - "Yes, I want 100% in LRI because it shows that I have a logistic system that works and that when the times comes for war, it will not fail me." "Yes, I want 100% in the GSI portion of BUC so that I am sure that the soldiers under my command are training safely and their parents can be assured of their well-being." So don't these processes lead to a higher goal?

Let's review the Army 21 Vision to understand what are our desired results or higher goals. The Army 21 Vision "The Decisive Force", is that the Army will be a ready and capable force to achieve a swift and decisive victory should deterrence fail. Army 21 will be a first-class Army with the highest professional standards and also a leading national institution that our citizens are proud of. Army 21 will be a People-Centred Organisation that cares for our servicemen and their families.² Now if this is what we want, we must be able to cultivate an environment in the Army to achieve its ultimate vision of being a decisive force. This is where the Learning Organisation plays an important part. It is the way to achieve maximum results. However, if the principles are not instilled and lived out, the Learning Organisation does not get us any closer to what we want and if it does not get us better results, then all the efforts will be in vain. To get the results and produce a Learning Army, we need to take a look at the five disciplines of a Learning Organisation and structure our system to attain them.

Personal Mastery

Everyone knows Beethoven for the beautiful classical music scores that he has written like "Symphony No. 9 in D minor (1824)" and "Waltz In D for piano (1825)". But few paid attention to find out that out of the five symphonies, one piano concerto and nine piano sonatas composed, he wrote one complete symphony, one incomplete symphony, three piano sonatas, diabelli variations and Missa Solemnis when he was completely deaf. How can anyone possibly write music without even being able to hear what he was playing? Well, Beethoven could. He heard the music in his mind; he had envisaged the entire symphony to know how to write it. Creators start at the end.³ Beethoven had articulated his personal visions and what was the current reality and with creative tension, achieved results we would have thought impossible.

In an organisation like the SAF, everyone has his or her own aspirations and visions, be it related to the organisation or not. However, not everyone will be able to bring their current reality to where they aspire to be. With creative tension, even if we do not achieve our aspirations, we will be a lot closer to them. How then can the organisation help the individuals be committed to their own learning to attain their aspirations and hence develop SAF into a Learning Organisation?

People with high levels of personal mastery are more committed. They take more initiative. They have a broader and deeper sense of responsibility in their work. They learn faster. For all these reasons, a great many organisations espouse a commitment to foster personal growth among their employees because they believe it will make the organisation stronger.⁴ In order that personal mastery is in every one of our core servicemen, mainly the regular officers, the SAF has to be committed to having a structure or system that allows and encourages personal growth.

Currently scholarships are seen as a means of recruitment rather than for the personal development of a serviceman. In a way, it is rightfully so as this is the message communicated to the serviceman. It is because of his commitment to join the SAF that he may be given the scholarship. Whether the scholarship is a Local Study Award (LSA), Academic Training Award (ATA) or any other award, it serves this purpose. The higher the education attained, the more the exposure, the better one can contribute to the organisation. But funding constraints place a limit on the number of scholarships awarded. Therefore, not everyone is given an opportunity for personal growth in this area. Although this limitation is understandable, we may have to re-look at this constraint if we really value the personal development of our soldiers and not just focus attention on the minority. Consideration should be given to majority of the soldiers in general for their personal development to enhance their personal mastery. Another aspect relating to the award of scholarships is that they are currently awarded on a request basis. If we can change that to an organisation-driven system where servicemen who have met a certain set of criteria are offered the opportunity by the organisation for personal development, leaving the decision to the serviceman, this will give a strong indication of the desire of the organisation to develop its soldiers to being more committed soldiers. For soldiers who have personal mastery, signing a Moral Obligatory Service (MOS) will not be seen as a bond because they are dedicated and committed to the SAF in the first place. As long as they are given the opportunity, they will be raring to go.

In the Bible, the book of Proverbs 21:16 it is written, "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." This is the heartbeat of mentoring that one person sharpens the skills, the thinking, the values and the character of another. Mentoring has been identified as an important way of developing our officers in the SAF. Systems are in place such that a selected group is under the mentoring care of a senior officer who will give career and professional advice when required. It is also a form of coaching as the mentored learn from their mentors. This is a good start. However, in order not to limit the benefits that can be derived from mentoring by just applying it with a select group of officers, we can evaluate and re-structure the system to encompass everyone. Currently within battalions, commanders would mentor their subordinates informally on their own accord. No structured system is in place. If we value every single soldier and their contribution, then we may need to formalise a proper mentoring system. It cannot be left to the flexibility of the commanders to handle their subordinates, as the quality of the mentorship may differ for various reasons, e.g. assessment biasness, and the full benefits of mentoring will not come about.

"To multiply, add growth, lead followers."

When the structure allows for personal mastery, it allows personal visions to be established and only with personal visions, do we see shared visions develop.

Shared Vision

Just imagine yourself driving through the rural areas of New Zealand. Everything you saw was so beautiful and then suddenly you were captivated by a view and it simply took your breath away. You carefully took a picture of this view to show it to your wife. When you returned from the trip, you were so excited about the view that you started describing it to your wife and all she did was patronise you with a smile. It was only after she saw the photograph that she connected with the view you have seen. That was when both of you talked about the beautiful view as though you were there together.

A vision is truly shared when people have a similar picture and we are committed to one another for it. It is not just each of us, having an individual vision and moving towards it but all of us, with a common vision, committed to achieving it together. When people truly share a vision, they are connected, bound together by a common aspiration.⁵ Shared vision provides the focus, which inevitably generates learning. When everyone sees the picture, the excitement and energy causes him or her to strive to achieve whatever end state they see.

In the Army, we have Army 21 Vision as our picture. But have we truly internalised the Army 21 Vision or have we like good obedient soldiers complied with what our commanders have directed us? How have we

communicated our vision and how close have we brought our soldiers to see the "beautiful picture"? In the Army, we have an advantage or a disadvantage depending on our perspective, when compared to other organisations. We are soldiers and as soldiers, we are mostly compliant, probably more so for regular soldiers. Personally, I never thought being compliant was a bad thing until I learnt about the difference between enrolment, commitment and compliance.

The committed person brings energy, passion and excitement that cannot be generated if you are only compliant. The committed person does not play by the "rules of the game". He is responsible for the game. If the rules of the game stand in the way of achieving the vision, he will find ways to change the rules.⁶ What I see as a difference is that committed soldiers are those who willingly sacrifice everything to see a better Army, but a compliant soldier will follow instructions blindly because at the back of his mind are issues of promotion and ranking that are driving him. These people accept the vision but do they really own it? A committed soldier will have the moral courage to voice out to higher authority if the process or ideas put forth are not getting us nearer to our vision. Are we ready for committed soldiers? Are we ready for soldiers to question the rationale for things like "No right turns in and out of camps in the SAF"? And when questioned, would we simply just brush them off or take time to re-evaluate the system. Not disputing the fact that there are times when a situation may call for complete compliance, more often than not, it is better for the organisation to have soldiers who believe in the system and live it out. In this example, a better solution to enhance our soldiers' safety may be to train our drivers better or improve the traffic system in and out of camps instead of having our soldiers follow the instructions blindly. Although it is a good preventive measure and it reduces risk, a better way could be considered and implemented than to have a quick "fix". All this boils down to communication. We need to examine how we have communicated our vision as well as our process leading to our vision.

At the birth of the Army 21 Vision, I was in the battalion as an OC and the vision was well communicated to the battalion HQ and company HQs. We had a presentation on video and notes that defined clearly what the vision is all about. But since then, we have had no follow-up on it through forum or otherwise; to give an indication on how much closer we have gone from current reality to vision. A vision is something you have to be constantly reminded of and it should be measured from time to time to check if we have progressed from compliance with the vision to commitment to the vision. Even if we are not fully aware of what the vision is about, at least we need to know the purpose of our existence, of being in the SAF, namely to ensure that no one takes away our home, Singapore, and to exercise the governing ideas for our vision the seven core values of the SAF. This cannot be left to individuals' willingness to learn on their own but a system has to be in place to encourage the fulfilment of the vision and the application of the values.

Currently we have systems or structures in place to build on our cause. As part of National Education, we have highlighted the importance of the SAF, its functions and its vision. In leadership training, we are constantly instilling in our future leaders the core values that have been our guiding principles all this while, even before the birth of Army 21 Vision.

It was once written, "The greatest monument of a man is not a pyramid, but a record of service built upon a foundation of solid virtues: honesty, purpose, application, study, work and kindness." In a way, what sort of a "monument" the Army can give to this nation is probably an Army whose service is anchored in the seven core values of the SAF. We have been able to communicate all these at a very broad level but we probably need to go on a more personal basis. Mentoring may be able to meet this purpose.

If our leadership were all mentored, we have a chance to ensure close to perfect communication of Army 21 Vision. It may not be the only way but it can be one of the ways. At least we are able to always keep in check with one another, the alignment of our own vision to that of the Army's and remind each other on the guiding principles of our organisation, which in this case are the seven core values.

As an organisation, how does this even help our nation? Committed soldiers are committed citizens. When our soldiers recognise the importance of the Army's vision, purpose and guiding principles, they recognise the importance of defence and the sovereignty of the nation. The guiding ideas will also be part of their daily lives and will benefit the nation as a whole.

Mental Models

We all form mental models in our minds that dictate our behaviour. It is important for us to keep our minds open in order to reflect upon, inquire, evaluate and improve on our approaches. As it is once said, "Minds are like parachutes, they function only when they are open." And it has to be a constant practice.

As an OC, the Applied Behavioural Science Department (ABSD)'s survey done for the company with reference to my command was helpful for me to keep tabs on my management of my company and to determine whether there were any problems or issues I should pay attention to. And through this survey, I also had an opportunity to know the men's view of the commanders under me. Although I am usually told to view this survey with a pinch of salt, it nevertheless reinforces prior views I have of certain commanders or platoons. And in certain categories that may seem unfavourable, I adopt the "seeing it objectively" approach. If at my level, as a sub-unit commander, I have certain inclinations in my responses, I am sure that at the commander's level, there will be even more mental pictures formed. These surveys are meant to help and they do but perhaps the way the results of the survey are presented needs to be looked into. Trained psychologists will probably need to assist commanders at all levels to reflect on the feedback by their subordinates. And through this, hopefully, generative learning ensues.

Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* looked at how organisations like Hanover Insurance established a learning environment and in one of Hanover's Credo on Mental Models, it was mentioned in the third Credo, "Self concluding discussions result in deeper convictions and more effective implementation."⁷ In the Army that had always had a more traditional hierarchical approach to things, it is sometimes quite unavoidable to arrive at a decision through the top-down approach. This is usually due to the time sensitivity of the matter. This approach is adopted in handling appraisals. A better way would be to have the serviceman come to his own conclusion in agreement with his superiors i.e. self-conclusion. This approach will help the serviceman identify and be convicted in the areas that he requires to learn. Our capacity to learn should never be bounded by our rank, our age, our superiors or even ourselves.

Team Learning

"A team never wins championship if its players have different agendas."⁸ A group of talented individual learners will not necessarily produce a learning team, any more than a group of talented athletes will produce a great sports team. Learning teams learn how to learn together.⁹ If a team were to learn, there must be a common agenda, a shared vision and that is when a team begins to learn together.

In the Army, with the implementation of the After Action Review (AAR) recently, we have recognised dialogues and discussions as important components to team learning. Through the use of AAR, opportunities are given to everyone who participates in an activity to share one's views so that the team will be able to learn from one's experiences. One important aspect covered by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* is this issue on defensiveness. "It is not the absence of defensiveness that characterises learning teams but the way defensiveness is faced." The one who leads the AAR plays a very important role in this aspect. Usually the commander who leads the AAR sets the tone for discussion. If the commander adopts a "finger pointing" approach while doing an AAR, this would discourage constructive participation in the discussion. Instead, the men would go into their defence routine of "building a brick wall".

We have the means, which is the structure, in place for dialogue and discussions. This has been and will continue to be an effective tool for the Army to learn. However, we need to tackle the issue of hierarchy. As stated in *The Fifth Discipline*, "Everyone involved must truly want the benefits of dialogue more than he wants to hold onto his privileges of rank. If one person is used to having his view prevail because he is most senior person, then that privilege must be surrendered in dialogue. If one person is used to withholding his views because he is more junior, then that security of non disclosure must also be surrendered. Fear and judgement must give way. Dialogue is 'playful'; it requires the willingness to play with new ideas, to examine them and test them. As soon as we become overly concerned with 'who said what' or 'not saying something stupid', the playfulness will evaporate."¹⁰

System Thinking

In a HDB block, the letterboxes are centralised at the void decks for the convenience of the postman to deliver letters. Unfortunately, residents also receive numerous advertisements from companies who make use of this "convenience" to mass deliver their pamphlets. However, that is not the issue. The issue arises when the residents choose to dump these mails onto the floor next to the letterboxes and create a mess. The solution by the town council was initially to place rubbish bins near the letterboxes to encourage residents to dispose their unwanted mails but this did not help. Residents continued to litter. Town councils then built a drain-like feature in front of the letterboxes to allow the resident to sweep their unwanted mails into the "drain". It looked like a sound solution but if we were to examine it, it did not address the issue of inconsideration. Although most residents confine their disposal of the mail to the "drain", there are still others who simply do not care if they have dumped their unwanted mails out of the "drain". This measure has only encouraged residents to feel that it is all right to litter since the town council will clean up the mess.

System thinking allows understanding of systems, structures and the inter-relationships that directs our behaviour. Having this capacity, we will be able to see complex and detailed patterns that help us build a learning structure.

The Army has fallen into the trap of quick fixes. And this is not because we are looking for an easy way out but because at times our operational readiness is so time sensitive that we cannot afford to wait for a better solution or for someone to repeat the mistake for everyone to learn.

The example "No Right Turns", illustrated under the Personal Mastery section, is a quick fix. It was an accident caused by a soldier trying to turn right into the camp and so subsequently all vehicles were stopped from turning right. The idea does have an immediate effect of reducing the risk of accidents caused by vehicles turning right. However, this should just be a temporary fix. A long-term fix may be to look into the traffic system of the camps or even re-look at the training and selection of drivers. Vehicles that turned right were not the root cause of the problem and stopping everyone from doing so does not solve the risk of accidents. As a result of this "No Right Turn" rule, some drivers may have to travel further to reach their destination and this exposes them to a greater risk of having an accident.

In recent years, ATEC reports have always reflected that junior commanders are weak in command and control. This opinion is agreed by most that have held senior appointments. However, on reflection, have we not been culprits of this phenomenon of the junior commanders? When a section commander cannot command his section, we send our platoon sergeant to take over, when a platoon sergeant cannot conduct an inspection during battle procedures, we send our Company Sergeant Major to take over. Have we not taken away the learning opportunity from the one who really needs it? By doing this, we are only compounding the problem, which will be exposed sooner or later like when the Battalion Proficiency Test (BPT) is held. The worse effect is that when we get someone else to take on the job, that someone has less time for his own primary task.

Coming from the Officer Cadet School, I know the importance of inter-personal relationships. If we train officers who do not fulfil their roles as platoon commanders, we can never get well-trained soldiers. That is the reason that there can be no compromise in training. It becomes a vicious cycle. Imagine a company that allows manipulation of scores to take place in an Advanced Trainfire Programme (ATP) shoot just to achieve results of good marksmanship without actual skills. The company will merely have the temporary elation of having good results on paper. However NS companies that come under these cadets, who are later commissioned as officers, will tend to seek the easy way to achieve results. Are we able to rely on such companies in times of war? The consequences may be realised much later, but by then it will be too late for regrets.

It is encouraging to note that a recent directive from G6 Army has shown that the Army has moved a step towards to being a Learning Organisation. This directive is on the use of blanks for live-firing rehearsals. We used to use blanks for live-firing rehearsals until it was banned due to an incident of mixing live and blank ammunition. The immediate quick fix was to ban use of blanks in live firing pending the investigation. This

was a good arrangement. Once the investigation was over, the ban was lifted and new regulations to the use of blanks were issued. Much thought has been given to the incident and what we have now is a more realistic rehearsal for live-firing and better safety measures to eliminate the chances of mixing live and blank ammunition.

We must recognise that the organisation and its system are inter-linked and changes or measures cannot be implemented in isolation. If we should erroneously do that, the learning process is short-circuited.

Conclusion

As part of the Army, we must recognise that there are obstacles like hierarchy that at times restrict openness in learning and how our mental models affect our behaviour, but it is not without solutions. More importantly, we know the importance of having a learning culture in the Army in order to achieve the results that matter the most to us: Army 21. And achieving this shared vision begins with our personal mastery. Mentoring, in my opinion has a key role to play in aligning our personal goals with our Army's vision. Many of the other issues mentioned are related to mindsets that constrain us. We must get past these mindsets that restrict our learning.

All these take time to change. Developing the Army into a Learning Organisation will not be an overnight affair. Many of the disciplines come with lots of practice and application. It takes time for the principles to take root. Just like the roots of a vineyard; it takes years for it to have a strong hold. Idealistically, one day we will all see our roles in the Army as a higher calling than just national service or a career.

This essay won a Merit Award in the 4th COA Essay Competition 2001.

Endnotes

- 1. *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge, Pg 3**
- 2. Army 21 vision statement**
- 3. *The Path of Least Resistance* by Robert Fritz, Pg 51**
- 4. *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge, Pg 143**
- 5. Ibid. Pg 206**
- 6. Ibid. Pg 221**
- 7. Ibid. Pg 190**
- 8. *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, Follow them and People will Follow You* by John C. Maxwell, Pg 161**
- 9. *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge, Pg 257**
- 10. Ibid. Pg 245**

Bibliography

- 1. *The Fifth Discipline The Art & Practice of The Learning Organisation*, Peter M. Senge (1990) Reprinted by Random House Business Books, London 1999**

2. Be a People Person *Effective Leadership Through Interpersonal Relationships*, John C. Maxwell (1989)

3. *Disciples are Made Not Born*, Walter A. Henrichsen (1974) 31st printing by Victor Books, Wheaton 1989

**4. *Iron Sharpens Iron Building Character in a Mentoring Relationship*, Howard & William Hendricks (1995)
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5. *Words of Wisdom, Philanthropic Service for Institutions* (1993) Printed by Gramercy Books, New York 1998

**6. *Built to Last Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras (1994) First
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**7. *The Path of Least Resistance Learning to Become the Creative Force in Your Own Life*, Robert Fritz (1984)
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**8. *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership Follow Them and People Will Follow You*, John C. Maxwell (1998)
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