Establishing A Framework of Transformational Grassroots Military Leadership: Lessons from High-Intensity, High-Risk Operational Environments

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Today’s institutions and organizations, especially, the military in the recent security scenario, are faced with complex, dynamic, and turbulent environments. This empirical study, based on operational military environments, draws upon contextual learning through grounded research, which could hold prescriptive guidelines for leaders required to operate in extreme contexts. The research specifically studies junior and middle level military leadership in “high-intensity, high-risk operational combat environments” over extended time duration, as they go about establishing transformational paradigms to face up to their professional demands.

From this empirical research-in-progress, a nine-factor leader framework emerges, which defines successful grassroots transformational leadership appropriate for this emerging environment, characterized by increasing complexity of work-environment, changing nature of team-/collaborative- work, and the followers’ needs for affiliation, achievement, and empowerment.

The emergent leader framework enumerates the following characteristics for a successful leader:

- Strive for professional excellence and competence in team-building
- ‘Grounded’ visionary
- Lead by personal example
- Empower the subordinates
- Sincerity of purpose
- Impeccable moral integrity
- Genuine care and concern for the command
- Compassionate approach towards all in general
- Self-sacrificing and self-effacing personal qualities.

The findings incorporate a large variety of converging and overlapping behaviours at multiple levels, seeking to engage the followers continuously towards professional excellence, greater empowerment, and self-leadership.

The paper concludes that both leadership and followership are in the process of being fundamentally redefined, egged on by the curious mix of technological progress and social change, emerging environmental turbulence, and increasing individual self-awareness. It also proposes a measurement instrument for further operationalization of the leader framework. One promising direction for future investigation is the study of emerging leader frameworks in the context of wider social and cultural change.
Today’s organizations are faced with complex, dynamic, and turbulent environments (Bass et al., 2003; Waldman, 1994; Weick, 1996). This organizational environment has been described as being in a “constant state of flux, with quickly changing customer demands and competition coupled with rapidly evolving technologies” (Waldman, 1994: 85) and where “[p]eople are often thrust into unfamiliar roles to fulfil difficult tasks, and small mistakes can combine into something monstrous. Faced with sudden crises, organizations that seem quite sturdy can collapse” (Weick, 1996, p. 144).

Leaders operating in these complex environments, pitted against difficult environmental realities over extended duration, must maintain constant vigil and continue to innovate to keep their organizations moving successfully in the direction of their long-term vision (Snook, 2000; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999).

In this empirical study, based on operational military environments, where examples of extraordinary leadership are to be found, the focus is on drawing upon their learning, which could well hold prescriptive guidelines for leaders in other similar environments as well. Military leaders operating in high-intensity, high-risk combat situations, for extended durations (as prevailing in certain regions on India’s borders and elsewhere, in recent times), are required to lead literally on the edge and face complexities which make their task extremely challenging. Their professionalism, commitment to the cause, depth of involvement and self-sacrifice, in working to bring about change for the better, by taking up critical tasks, is extraordinary, particularly, as they do so, sometimes, in the face of general organizational and societal inertia, in an unresponsive environment. These leaders display specific characteristics and employ unique techniques to overcome this inertia and unresponsiveness prevalent in their contexts so as to motivate and rally their followers around to the larger cause over slog periods, eventually going on to make a real difference.

Leadership research has been around for nearly one hundred years, during which there have been several paradigm shifts and a voluminous body of knowledge has emerged (Antonakis, Ciancio, & Sternberg, 2004a; Gaughan, 2001; Horner, 1997). It has been researched from a variety of perspectives and is a large and diverse area of study (Antonakis, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2004; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). However, despite these efforts, much about this critical process remains unclear (Smircich & Morgan, 2002). In fact, there seem to be as many theories of leadership as researchers (Antonakis et al., 2004). One reason for this is that each research is placed in a different context and analysed from a unique set of perspectives and outcomes. Opinions differ irreconcilably on leadership effectiveness, in terms of both process and outcomes. Hence, though leadership is one of the most widely studied phenomena, yet there seem to be no clear answers about much of the questions that it raises. The interest in leadership research is explained by the belief that a better understanding of the leadership phenomena and process will help in designing interventions to develop and improve leadership in organizations (Horner, 1997). Some of the newer theories of leadership that are gaining currency are information-processing (Brown, Scott, & Lewis, 2004), transformational-transactional leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985), and superleadership or empowering leadership (Antonakis et al., 2004a; Pearce et al., 2003). Also, since most leadership research is US-centric or directed, this naturally raises questions about its universal applicability across diverse cultures, stages of development, and contexts (Gaughan, 2001; Hartog & Dickson, 2004; House, 1995; Hunter 1998).

In partial response to above, this empirical research of a select set of highly motivated and enterprising military leaders from the Indian Parachute (Special Forces) Regiment proposes a new model for understanding transformational leadership processes appropriate for the emerging environment—an environment that is characterized by the increasing complexity and challenges of professional work demands, changing nature of team-or collaborative-work, and the followers’ needs for affiliation, achievement, and empowerment. It takes a holistic look at successful leader-follower interactions in an extreme operational environment (see section “Environment at the Edge”), and proposes that the nature of emerging leadership is complex and dynamic, centred around professional expertise and practice orientation, seeking to engage followers continuously towards greater empowerment and team- or distributed-leadership, building up an organizational culture which supports shared vision, and, rooted strongly in ethics, trust, and human values. It also proposes a survey instrument, derived from focus-group based learning initiatives, to help take this research further forward towards broader generalization.
CONTEXT OF THE STUDY IN CURRENT LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORKS

Both the broader contextual environment and the nature of work in organizations are changing today, requiring much more “innovation, creativity, and individual thought and initiative” (Horner, 1997). Leadership requirements in this emerging environment cannot be the same as were applicable even a few decades back. Comprehending the role of these leaders requires “looking at what happens within these individuals, not just observing their behaviour” (Nygren & Levine, as cited in Horner, 1997, p. 282) and understanding the reasons for the same.

Like many other areas of human endeavour and social values (Seeger et al., 2003), leadership studies have also “changed in some basic way” in the wake of the 9/11 tragedies (Bennis, 2004). Leadership has become “central to the public conversation” and there has been “evidence of a shift in the very idea of leadership – a return to a more heroic, more inspirational definition than had been the fashion for decades. In the rubble of Ground Zero, people did not want a leader who could organize cross-functional teams; they longed for a leader for the ages, a sage and saviour to lead them out of hell” (Bennis, 2004, p. 332). So, it becomes pertinent to ask ourselves, “What are the times we are headed for?” and, “Who are going to provide the leadership in this hour?” The contextual leadership theory, enjoying a resurgence of interest lately, also conceptualizes the interplay of leadership with “the four contexts of stability, crisis, dynamic equilibrium, and edge of chaos” (Hunt, 2004, p. 43). Our evolving understanding and interpretations of self-management and empowering leadership are also redefining traditional meanings associated with leadership. It is in this context that this current research is empirically grounded, and seeks answers to the question as to what kind of leadership needs to emerge to be successful in the uncertain, crisis-ridden, turbulent times ahead of us (Avolio, 2007; Bennis, 2007).

Notwithstanding the above arguments, leadership in extreme contexts, specifically, in the military, has been around for decades; yet, not much attention seems to have been given to it. Wong, Bliese, & McGurk (2003, p. 677) speak of lack of research in this area: “The context where the least amount of leadership research has been conducted is deployment/combat mission contexts. These environments are very unpredictable for both leaders and researchers, and access to units conducting deployment and combat missions is very limited, particularly in the early stages of engagement (e.g. Wong, Kolditz, Millen, & Potter, 2003).”

Besides, most studies of military leadership tend to focus on successful military commanders of comparatively senior ranks, who have achieved more strategic objectives using large formations at their disposal, for example, then-Generals Cariappa, Manekshaw, and Sundarji, in the Indian military context. However, this does not tell us much about what operational military leaders do in extreme environments. Hannah et al. (2009) state, “Yet, in a recent review of the literature, Porter and McLaughlin (2006, p. 573) note that ‘it is apparent that the impact of organization context on leadership is an under-researched area.’ Ultimately, substantial research in extreme contexts will be required to advance our knowledge in this critically important area of leadership research – perhaps the area where leadership is needed most.” (p. 898)

These calls to leadership research have provided the incentive for this study to adopt a rigorous empirical approach to discovering and proposing a framework of “transformational grassroots military leadership characteristics,” which are grounded in and relevant to the Indian context (and possibly, by extension, to the Asian cultures). Past studies of leadership have also been restricted in terms of the time-span spent observing and identifying leadership characteristics, processes, outcomes, etc. By laying an unduly greater stress on survey-based research to validate factors and their predictive power, the understanding and identification of deeper meaning of the leadership process could possibly have been diluted in the process (Antonakis et al., 2004b; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This drawback is also sought to be mitigated in this empirical research, which seeks to draw upon the cumulative learning and experience over the years of successful military leaders operating in these environments.

Taking the discussion deeper into the context of the Indian Army’s Parachute (Special Forces) Regiment, in which this research is situated, leadership, at different levels, has a different connotation, even though there are some commonalities across the spectrum. The nature of leadership within the organization has been changing along with the rapid shifts in the socio-economic backgrounds of its personnel (Roychowdhury, 2006). A recent official publication on leadership (ARTRAC, 2004)
deals with leadership at two levels: (1) individual leadership, and (2) higher command. It prescribes a structured behavioural model for development of leadership through a sustained regimen of practical activity comprising basically of three facets: self-development exercises, professional self-study, and systemized self-introspection. The importance of operative level leadership, though, comes out clearly in a former Chief of the Indian Army, Roychowdhury’s (2006) comments: “… it is also important to remember that the leadership span in the army extends seamlessly over the entire spectrum of command, with its sharpest edge at the junior most level where battles are actually fought and who play critical roles at various levels, especially in these times of officer shortages.” The focus of this research, therefore, is squarely on gaining insights into successful military leadership at these operational levels, where they are engaged with the complexities of ongoing combat against a wily adversary, over extended durations, thereby, increasing the stress levels ever further.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Historically, leadership research has been primarily dominated by quantitative research methods (Antonakis et al., 2004b; Gaughan, 2001). In recent times, some leadership researchers have suggested the use of qualitative techniques to facilitate better understanding of the subject (Conger, 1998; Gaughan, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Parry, 1998). Avolio, Bass, & Jung (1999) also recommend the use of “methodologies other than surveys to examine leadership. Specifically, there has been very little effort to confirm survey evaluations of leaders with alternative methodologies such as observation and/or interviews” (p. 459). In-depth observational studies and getting a practitioner’s real-world perspective of leadership complexities are more likely to make it possible to “get a better handle on discriminating among these respective leadership factors” (Avolio et al., 1999). Researchers, such as, Wong et al. (2003) and others (e.g., Hannah et al., 2009) have also advised context-relevant research on military leaders: “The first alternative is to focus on studies that use military samples to test theories that have applicability across a broad range of organizations — or what Blair and Hunt (1986) call a context-free orientation…. A second way to define military leadership research is to consider the unique characteristics of the military, and focus on studies that attempt to understand the nature of leadership within this context. This approach, what Blair and Hunt (1986) call a context-specific orientation, requires more in-depth knowledge of the military and the issues facing the military. As such it is likely to capture more of the true essence of what constitutes military leadership. (Wong et al., 2003, p. 658).”

The Indian Army, by and large, carries the popular image of being an efficient, reliable, and a functional organization that has delivered whatever it has been asked to in times of need, and the front line operational leaders who actually carry out the work exhibit exceptional leadership qualities that enable the organization to make this happen. So, this research is placed in the military’s operational context, a domain that the author is also most familiar with, having served in the Indian Army’s Parachute Regiment and also in many operational areas during his service. Hence, this paper is written from an observer-cum-practitioner’s perspective, both being embedded in the environment and subsequently as an external observer, that allowed a better understanding of the descriptions and explanations provided by the various participants. While it could have introduced biases in the appreciation of the importance of subtle factors and effects, much though the author has tried, in the spirit of inquiry as a researcher, to take as objective a view as possible.¹

This research sets out to seek answers to a very specific question from the target group: “Based on their previous professional and personal experiences in serving in operational roles in service, how would they describe leaders considered most likely to be able to provide successful long-term leadership in this complex operating environment?” It is expected that answers to this question will open up a fresh understanding of the leadership phenomenon in this complex operating environment, some of which may well be relevant to other similar contexts.

The research adopts the embedded grounded theory research approach to study observed phenomena to discover the underlying causal factors and linkages that can be followed up, employing research techniques to bring rigour to the findings. The leadership characteristics that

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¹ For the last six years, during which a lot of the above work has taken place, the author has been out of uniform, released from service on a medical disability, and, hence, with lesser reasons to be totally inwardly focused.
the paper seeks to identify here, in the chosen environmental scenario, are an outcome of the cumulative experience of a number of serving and retired military personnel of different ranks that the author has interacted with for this purpose, and who have each served in the situations described herein. These were extracted by way of reflective and brainstorming discussions with a large number of knowledgeable service personnel, in both formal and informal settings (about 12 formal group meetings that comprised between 8 to about 36 officers and all ranks, and a large number of one-on-one and small group meetings, and other informal or impromptu meetings across the social spectrum of life in the Services over the years). Incidentally, this part of the empirical research was confined to both commissioned and junior/non-commissioned officers of the middle and junior level leadership hierarchy and their subordinates in order to capture these perspectives at the operational level. Most belonged to what are considered the very elite units of the Indian Army, from its Parachute (Special Forces) Regiment, which has been remarkably successful in various operational commitments over the last 25 years and more.

The learning points, that this research sought to uncover are best described as having gradually crystallized over a period of time, through what can be termed as, “shared apprehensions, experiences and discussions” and “embedded deeply in these individuals and organizations through the process of both experiential and vicarious learning, implementation of continuous improvement, and institutionalization over time,” in the manner of “knowledge management.” This research sought to achieve a deeper understanding of this leadership characterization by asking open-ended questions and encouraging the participants to describe, often by way of examples and their own experiences, what they were trying to express. An indicative list of these questions that were used as conversation starters, in different combinations, as needed, is placed at Appendix 1. While there obviously would be differences in individuals’ prioritization of these critical factors identified, an effort to arrive at a broad consensus was made in the final stages, using modified-Delphi brainstorming sessions comprising about seven select focus-groups, which a varying number of participants (between 4-12) attended. So, successive rounds of investigation helped to identify candidate factors and these were thereafter prioritized and grouped, based on further discussions. Efforts have subsequently continued over the past few years to hone, refine, and critique this framework through discussions with serving and retired military leaders, including by way of making presentations, followed by discussions, at various military leadership seminars and workshops.

A key aspect of note is that an attempt is made to identify and describe the operational leadership characteristics, along with subtle nuances, to present a more complete picture that, to our understanding, goes beyond what the existing terminology is commonly understood to stand for. To briefly take two examples, ‘professional expertise’ and ‘care and concern for the command’. Their description goes much deeper as applied to these leaders as well as to the teams and organizations in the said environmental context. Professional expertise here is related to a dynamic context, in the face of a challenging adversary and difficult contextual factors. There is no time to let down one’s guard and begin to take things for granted – even as you come back successful from the last “op.”, you are preparing afresh for the next one. Similarly, care and concern for one’s command entails a more genuine and deeper desire to make a difference in the long term. This aspect sets this embedded grounded study approach apart in the sense of identifying the relevant factors from a richer and more nuanced perspective.

COMPLEX, DYNAMIC OPERATING ENVIRONMENTS AT THE EDGE

As mentioned earlier, the issue of context has been applying the attention of leadership researchers for a long time. The question boils down to “whether factor structures are sensitive to sample or contextual characteristics” (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; also see Kerlinger, 1986). According to Mulaik and James (as cited in Antonakis et al., 2003), samples must be causally homogenous to ensure that “the relations among their variable attributes are accounted for by the same causal relations” (p. 132). Antonakis et al. (2003) argue that pooling data from raters originating from different contexts may “destabilize the factor structure of a leadership sur-

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2 This can be seen from the annual gallantry awards list of the Indian Army over the last two decades and from the Parachute Regiment’s historical records and publicly available information (e.g. http://www.indianparachuteregiment.kar.nic.in).

3 The author acknowledges the joint nature of this discovery process, in which he was helped by many others, whose work this framework reflects.
vety instrument because of systematic differences in how leadership was demonstrated and/or observed unless the underlying psychometric properties are invariant across different contexts.” Bass et al. (2003) in their discussion of leadership in a “dynamic, complex, turbulent environment,” argue that such leadership could hardly be developed “without taking into consideration the characteristics of the performance context” (p. 216). However, they seemingly hint at the possibility of commonalities across such “dynamic, complex, turbulent environments” with their subsequent observation that, “such dynamic environments today, and into the foreseeable future, are not unique to military contexts,” implying generalizability of the military context to other challenging environments.

Complex, operating systems are a specific focus of both Normal Accident Theory (NAT) and High Reliability Theory (HRT) researchers. Perrow (1984) identified two related dimensions, i.e. interactive complexity and tight coupling, that together determine a system’s susceptibility to accidents, which he argued are inevitable or “normal” in systems that combine both these characteristics. High reliability theorists, on the other hand, are drawn to organizations that are able to maintain a high level of reliability in their operations, primarily by being more “mindful”, with its concomitant processes at the organizational level (Weick et al., 1999). So, while Perrow’s is more an engineering focus, Weick et al. (1999) posit that “reliable outcomes now become the result of stable processes of cognition directed at varying processes of production that uncover and correct unintended consequences.”

Clearly, in trying to figure out what will work successfully in the context of complex operations that this study focuses on, it is important to understand both the influence of the context on what must go in for more successful operations therein and what these successful leaders do to achieve continuing success in these complex environments. To note, in this context, the technical dimensions of complexity and tight coupling are replaced by the ground conditions, the dynamic play of adversary strategy and tactics, and the changing equation with the adversary at the time and place of coming together. There is, therefore, the need to first take a look at what characterizes these complex, dynamic environments that are of interest to us today, in order to further our understanding of transformational grassroots military leadership characteristics that are found to be successful in this context.

“High-Intensity, High-Risk Operational Combat” Environment: Defining Characteristics

The “high-intensity, high-risk operational combat” environment at the edge is very demanding of the foot-soldiers and the leaders who operate therein. This is what makes it a special case, at the extreme, even as compared to the challenges of military life with its incumbent tenures of regular “field service.” The characteristics that make such an environment uniquely challenging and different from the routine, as applied here, are listed here-under. The author has picked these up based on his own contact experience in the environment, where, assuredly, this understanding would have coalesced over a period of time via constant interactions with the operational environment, through experience, learning, and discussion across a wide operational forum, including both formal and informal institutional learning mechanisms. This listing should largely capture the critical aspects of concern to operational level leaders in these environments and help in understanding their work context better, for what follows.

a) Uncertainty about one’s own reactions and performance under crises, in the face of heightened stress and lack of information, covering, namely:

i) Successful discharge of command related responsibility, having read the shifting ground situation correctly, despite incomplete information/intelligence

ii) Physical restrictions on command and control, in the midst of the operating environment

iii) Fatigue, separation, and other psychological pressures over extended periods of deployment

iv) Uncertainty regarding movement and actions of sub-units once they have been launched or are caught up in the operating dynamics.

b) Uncertainty with regard to the adversary tactics, their presence on the (soon-to-be) combat zone and, particularly, the “moment and direction of strike”

c) Environmental uncertainty, coming from the following factors:

i) Degree of unfamiliarity with the terrain/environment vis-à-vis relative familiarity of one’s adversary’s with that terrain/environment

ii) Reduced capabilities in extreme weather and visibility conditions
iii) Vulnerability of logistics and administrative back-up in the operating dynamics

iv) Gaps in coordination across boundaries with the neighbouring units/sub-units.

d) Need for increased awareness and motivation on an ongoing basis to maintain vigil in the absence of any untoward incidents (since long spells of quiet in these risk-laden operational environments tend to lull one into a false sense of complacency), without specific institutional brief.

The research literature on interactively complex operating environments is rich and indicative of the implications on operational reliability. However, micro-level mechanisms of the complex environments need to be specifically understood in respective contexts (Weick et al., 1999). The above description helps to set the stage for further analysis of essential leader characteristics for successful and reliable operations in this context.

ATTRIBUTES OF LEADERS OPERATING SUCCESSFULLY ON THE “EDGE”

The research process to seek answers to the stated research question led to the identification of certain essential leader characteristics that are discussed in greater detail in the following sections. While the word “essential” has been used here, it does not mean that these are to be found in either uniformly high measure in all such leaders or even all of these in each such individual leader. There would obviously be variations in the extent to which different successful leaders in this environment would carry and display these leader characteristics, also varying dynamically with time and their own learning and evolution process. But, what is observed is that these combined characteristics are an essential component of such leadership—an ideal, so to say—even as they may be present in differing measures, or even be compensated for between each other in these leaders. Some leaders may well themselves be aware of their own relative weakness in an area or more, but be able to compensate for it with other suitable techniques. So, from this research, leaders operating successfully on the edge, in high-intensity, high-risk extended duration combat situations, are found likely to display the following attributes in noticeable measure. This list is comprehensive to the extent that a framework can hope to capture the leadership process, which inherently is by far complex and all encompassing in its character. Below are the significant observations with regard to each of these characteristics that emerged in the process of this study, followed by a discussion about what it implies.

Strive for Professional Excellence and Competence in Team-building

Observations

Military leaders operating successfully in a challenging environment are, first and foremost, thoroughly professional, striving always for excellence in any task they set out to do. Competence does not come easily. It requires a lot of effort, getting one’s hands dirty, and learning, which these young officers and soldiers most willingly do. They know that the road to being successful in a dangerous environment calls for perseverance, alertness to what is going on around them, asking questions, and finding answers to them; what Weick (2001) suggests as ‘mindfulness,’ ‘sensemaking’ and ‘experimentation.’ This knowledge is not just theoretical; instead it is closely intermeshed with the ground realities, and is driven by a desire to keep a step ahead of the adversary – for any laxity means failure and swift death. This learning, however, needs to be shared with and practically implemented in their command. Successful leaders strive to translate the learning extracted from a variety of sources into concrete actionable instructions and plans in their organizations and teams. So, team-building is the next logical concern of these leaders. Over time, as these leaders prove themselves to their followers, they, in turn, begin to respect their leaders’ intellectual cognitive and perception skills, repose full confidence in them, and are ready to follow their bidding even in face of danger, which means, bullets, in operational environments. Certain aspects of interest in this process are as under.

Relentless innovation. Leaders at all levels look around constantly to detect signals of environmental change and try to smell out what their adversaries may be up to, so that they can proactively innovate to meet, better outflank the next looming crisis, and stay on top of the situation. This is more than a luxury; it is a matter of survival. Team leaders thrive on action; they are wary of periods of quiet, when there is no information flowing in, because it means that they are actually out of sync with the goings-on. It is important for them to constantly plan and innovate to stay a step ahead of their invisible adversary. For this, they find it useful to get their complete sub-units to
put their heads together; so, they constantly encourage their team members to think and come up with novel suggestions as well as critique each others’ thinking. In any post-hoc analysis of an incident, they listen to as many team members as possible, from among those who took part in the operation, in order to put the pieces of the incident together. Though there are likely to be inconsistent interpretations, frank discussion, honest critique, and joint analysis are the best ways to cull out and take in the learning from any past mistakes and omissions. This is, however, not to be misused for making scapegoats or mutual recriminations. The team that thinks and works together to learn from past mistakes, comes out on the top.

**Drive for professionalism.** Successful leaders display an overpowering drive for professional excellence. They nurture a dream and aspire to be the best, even as they want their organization to succeed. This vision is compelling and enduring enough to keep their followers and organizations/teams excited about their work. Professional excellence is to be achieved and maintained as a de jure standard to achieving the vision for the organization. One cannot expect to remain a part of their group for long, if one does not commit oneself to these exacting ground rules. Leaders lacking in this drive for professional operational excellence are rarely to be encountered amongst these teams; while some leaders may not be intellectually the best (in a general cognitive sense), they, however, more than make up for it through operational practice and refinement, honed by a keen sense for ground-level action. While humble enough to seek to learn, they are men-on-the-go, when there is a call to action.

**Competence building.** These leaders’ actions are driven by long- and medium-term strategy, as against short-term benefits and goals. As a result, these leaders go out of the way to inculcate in their followers a thirst and enthusiasm to seek professional knowledge and to apply and refine it relentlessly. They seek to leverage their own professional excellence by encouraging and developing professionally competent sub-units and teams capable of operating independently of themselves. In getting the various components of the organization to operate together towards a common vision, the leaders take upon themselves the responsibility of coordination both within and without, so that the efforts of these components are seamlessly integrated. This obviously calls for a practice-oriented approach to knowledge and professionalism, beyond just theoretical concepts.

**Encourage professional feedback and suggestions.** Leaders who are successful in dealing with complexity and meeting these extreme challenges seek active participation of their followers in problem identification, analysis, and search for viable solutions. Once their followers feel empowered with sharp professional acumen and develop the capability to address the challenges they are faced with, like the leaders themselves, the group/team performance in the specific organizational context improves that many fold. Continuous, on-going, task-oriented interactions are the key here. In fact, the mode of operational tasking in these units is by way of “briefing”, where concepts are explained and discussed and questions taken, even at the last moment before preparing for an operation.

**Discussion**

This research describes the shared meanings of professional excellence for these leaders and successful organizations in close detail. The complex inter-linkages are explored along with their underlying causal explanations. Gaughan (2001) also feels the need for behaviours described in a leadership competency framework to be more explicit to be of use, against the US models, which “only reflect a part of the complexity of the leadership required for leading” under a set of circumstances (p. 90). Leaders operating in these environments have a clear and compelling operational vision for their organizations, which they effectively communicate to their followers. They strive to prepare themselves and their followers to meet the challenges of the situation by increasing their understanding and grasp of the problem domain and its inherent complexities. They try to proactively anticipate environmental dynamics and possible crises before they occur. While they themselves scan the horizon and remain ‘mindful’, they also empower their followers to be able to take the initiative whenever the situation so demands. They seek to create an environment of professional excellence embedded in a two-way interactive organizational learning culture. Over and over again, it was found that operational excellence was the objective that all such leaders set for themselves and their command. In informal talk across the spectrum, it was evident that professional calibre and operational expertise scored higher and earned one greater respect than mere smart career moves, which would at best earn a cynical nod!
‘Grounded’ Visionary

Observations

Almost all these leaders have a clear vision of what they wish to achieve, and this is ‘grounded’ in their operational reality. Most young infantry officers in an operational insurgency environment are driven by a desire to excel in the field, as a stepping-stone towards greater professional prestige and acceptance from their superiors, peers, and subordinates. Motivation also comes from the high professional levels that are prevalent in their units – they feel they “must live up to the standards of their ‘paltan,’”4 – akin to their home and close family. But these leaders are also adept at translating this vision into practical, achievable objectives, which can be set out for their followers with the resources at their disposal. They like to constantly interact and communicate with their followers about their intentions, seeking their participation in both setting and modifying these goals, dynamically. They ensure that their subordinates are well equipped, both professionally and resource-wise, to deliver results against objectives that have been set for them. In addition, though these leaders have high moral, ethical and professional standards, they are nevertheless practical enough to realize their own limitations – and so, are able to balance the need to bring about change with judicious incremental steps for the time being, against ideal case scenarios that could actually take much longer to achieve.

Another aspect that merits attention here is the communication of the leaders’ perceptions of the shared vision. This characteristic has figured above and in other leadership research as well (Bass, 1985; Gaughan, 2001; Kotter, 1990). What appears to distinguish it in the present context is the “force of communication behind this shared vision,” that makes it so very compelling. Not only must they merely communicate this vision and their objectives, they also need to “live it themselves” as an integral part of their professional lives, besides also helping their target audience discover it as well. Leaders operating in these environments over extended periods and confronted with the necessity for continuing innovation and change, to stay at the top, need to constantly motivate their followers, so as to draw them out into active participation. This is, in fact, a two-way process, wherein they also listen in to others in a participative format towards discovering and refining an appropriate vision and goals for their community (Gaughan, 2001). Some well-known examples of leadership in this mould from the field of social change, where these qualities are indeed pivotal, have been Mahatma Gandhi, Jaya Prakash Narayan, and Anna Hazare5 (Bangari & Prasad, 2012; Sunday Times, 2011), in the more recent context,6 who are already part of the folklore today. They all embodied an extreme passion in discovering, formulating, and communicating their vision and promise to the larger target audience, as an analogy. While these societal leaders obviously had societal-wide aims, operational leaders in the field have more operational objectives; however, the essential processes and the intensity of involvement appear to be quite the same.

Discussion

Successful leaders set out practical, though challenging, objectives, for themselves and their command, continually working towards their vision. They set out a clear plan of action and retain flexibility to modify it according to the dynamic influences of the environment. They plan for “small wins” on the way towards their larger goals (Perkins, 2000). Importantly, these leaders display practical wisdom (Sternberg, 2005), as against theoretical knowledge and idealistic objectives alone. For operational level leaders, the requirement to be practical, right now, as it were, is critical and cannot be put off, most often. Leaders in these environments must achieve continuing success to come on the top of their adversaries. Hence, they set achievable aims and improvise creatively with available resources to achieve them. The importance of how these leaders formulate and communicate their vision to their followers has been discussed above. The demands of the emerging turbulent environment are adequately met by this process because of the greater need for “sensemaking” in an organizational context (Weick, 1979; 1996) and a more transparent and participative process involving the stakeholders (Seeger et al., 2003).

4 A “regimental” unit, such as, an infantry battalion or an armoured regiment, which lives and operates together in battle/operations.

5 Inclusion of Anna Hazare’s name along with these others is meant to just take into account his long track record of sacrifice and work in the society for others, without any consideration of power and wealth.

6 These have been notable leaders who have earned the respect of the average Indian, by dint of their lofty vision for the common dispossessed citizens and their own personal sacrifices in the struggle towards making that vision a reality.
Lead by Personal Example

Observations

One behavioural characteristic common across all these leaders is “leading by example,” to set stringent standards of performance and conduct. They are thus able to set the bar higher and higher each time for their followers, who, in turn, are inspired by their example. It is important for leaders to maintain stiff professional standards, or else there is a natural tendency amongst individuals and organizations to slacken over time, and unless these standards are embedded into the culture of the organization itself—“the way we do things here”—it may only be a temporary phenomenon, if not followed up in earnestness.

One reason for this extraordinary tendency to ‘lead by example’ could be that they are all volunteers and are accepted in their units after a strict probation period. They learn very young that they need to prove themselves and not take their place for granted. This, coupled with the prevailing ethos that they need to be up ahead, right at the front, could be the driver for this characteristic. This spirit is, in fact, contagious and enthuses their team members who they lead.

This also highlights the fact that a conscientious leader will never send her subordinates into a risky situation where she would not herself lead willingly. This facet of leadership spills over into their personal interactions with their followers, where genuineness and integrity come through as a norm.

Discussion

That leaders “lead by personal example” is widely known and accepted universally as a norm; and, from what we see, it is likely to remain this way till such time crises and uncertainty erupt to disrupt sensemaking and cause disorientation amongst people, reinforcing the need for a leader’s stabilizing influence (Sashkin, 2004). What was most noticeable here was the holistic manner in which this applies to all facets of their ‘being’ as leaders. In fact, for most leaders here, this was non-negotiable, in the sense, they would not even need to think about it as they went about their tasks—“what they expected from others, they themselves lived and did.” As Kotter (1990/2001) famously wrote: “No one yet has figured out how to manage people effectively into battle; they must be led.” This is one of the norms amongst these leaders, even as they try and develop leadership in their own subordinates alongside (as will be seen below).

Empower Subordinates

Observations

Leading at the knife’s edge, so to say, of necessity requires combined efforts of the whole team to succeed. Successful military leaders operating in elite units realize that the good old ways of yore, when officers/leaders commanded and the others simply obeyed, without any questions, are simply not warranted in today’s environment. In fact, there is a realization amongst these leaders that directive style of leadership is possibly not justifiable anymore in today’s context, with levels of literacy and awareness rising, and increased expectations of “rank and file” in the emerging context. Today’s leaders are equally dependent upon their subordinates to come up with their unbiased suggestions and perspectives, as much as they expect them to take on-the-spot decisions, while operating on their own, often times out of communication, when confronted with contingencies not catered for. “I have been speaking to my ‘men’ that they must understand my mind and be able to anticipate what my reaction would be under an emerging set of circumstances, so that we are not found wanting when it comes to the crunch,” explained one Lt. Col., as he spoke about his philosophy of training soldiers under his command. Further elaborating, he added (along these lines), “From what I have learnt through my experience, so far, a combat patrol and team needs to think like one — to come out on the top of the situation. This requires a very high level of communication, understanding and working in a closely coordinated manner. Can it be done? Well, there are many challenges and we cannot even depend on the radio sets to keep us in touch then! But, we have got to find a way there. That’s our job!” This requires talking things out with one’s command, getting them to take the initiative, to plan, to be able to operate independently, and, then, given opportunities for a lot of practice to fine-tune this approach.

In parachute and special-forces’ operations, each soldier is trained to replace one’s commander, at least one-up, since nobody knows who would or would not land and arrive safely after the para- or heli-descent. As a result, paratroopers, by and large, are known to deliver, adversities and unexpected contingencies notwithstanding (which are, in fact, considered routine). In addition, emerg-
ing media technologies today enable reporting of actions of a soldier leading a platoon on mission, almost simultaneously across the world; hence, so much greater is the felt need for each soldier to be able to answer questions relating to his conduct that may be directed at him. “So, that’s what they need to be prepared for.”

Discussion

This is an interesting observation, coming up in the context of an organization that is commonly perceived as rigid, hierarchical, and bureaucratic. However, the shift towards a network form of inter-dependence in these elite Parachute (Special Forces) units, that is both loose and tight, as per demands of the situation, is evident more than ever before as these leaders seek to empower their followers and teams. In fact, somewhat like good NGOs whose success is really measured in terms of whether or not the NGO “work(s) itself out of the job” (Edwards, 2002, p. 286), these successful leaders in complex, dynamic, and turbulent environments aggressively work to make their teams and subordinates more independent, and to be able to operate even in their own absence. So, while, as leaders, they would remain close to their teams and operational commands to step in when needed, yet they would let them exercise their appropriate judgment when they should. This is achievable through ‘institutionalization of their values in the organizational culture’ and ‘empowerment of their followers’, as often repeated in our interactions.

Sincerity of Purpose

Observations

This factor has already emerged from previous research in leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Boyatzis & McKee, 2005), and is likely to gain even greater importance in the emerging turbulent environment. Leaders setting out to implement radical change or establish standards of professional excellence must exhibit sincerity of purpose to their followers; else they are not likely to go far. By this, they add force to their vision and convictions. Any traces of insincerity that show up are detrimental to the overall cause in the longer run, as truth ultimately emerges. Increasingly, how one measures up as a human being is becoming more important for leaders today, especially as noted in these Parachute (Special Forces) units. Goffee and Jones (2005) express the same sentiments when they talk of managing (actually, leading) authentically. In our observations, these volunteer leaders came through with a high level of sincerity of purpose and motivation. It was almost as if this was their calling, with their unit environment, in most cases, helping to maintain this momentum in the right direction. Minus this sincerity, these leaders would find it difficult to motivate their led to superhuman tasks.

Impeccable Moral Integrity

Observations

Leaders with moral integrity and high values are widely regarded. It has also got its own place in these operational leaders. There is an apparent confusion, however, in the minds of some in view of the seemingly successful leaders around us who do not appear to hold very strong credentials as regards their moral integrity, or at the very least, with regard to their underlying intent and motivations in instances. In the frank discussions with a number of officers and soldiers, widely regarded as honest and upright, it clearly emerged that while they seemed to accept the fact that somebody who is ethical and upright may not always do as well in one’s career, as against somebody more flexible with regard to issues of ethics and integrity, other things being equal, the subordinates, however, were generally aware of the ‘what’s what’ (truth
and lies), and consequently the greater respect and idealization that arose for the leader with moral integrity and higher values. Some in the lower ranks may not always be able to discern ethically deviant behaviour in their superiors routinely, but that was more out of (generally a temporary) lack of access to information, than anything else. Subordinates, some way down in the hierarchy, would overlook unethical commissions by their superiors because of their inability to do much about it (in the currently prevailing environment in the Services), but they do not seem to really intrinsically condone any such lapses. This leads us to make a very pertinent and subtle point about the importance of ethics and morality in operational level leadership. While these may not be very essential to achieving outwardly success in career progression terms, yet these character qualities are highly desirable in these operational level leaders, and their importance is only likely to increase with greater empowerment of the subordinates, easier availability of information, and in conditions of ‘high stress and uncertainty’, where inter-dependence is of a much higher order. Of course, these leaders do not operate in a vacuum. The organizational environment in their units is conducive of the right and appropriate professional conduct. This is something that good units take pride in standing for.

One point, which often troubled us in our discussions, was how the junior officers looked upon their own role in these circumstances, where they were both, leaders (to their respective teams/companies, troops/platoons and squads) and the led (under the unit commanding officer or the company commanders). Did the ‘appraisal phobia’ get to them too, as it does many others? Specifically, did they take professional and ethical short-cuts to further career advancement or short-term gains? And, what if these leaders were themselves to make a mistake and fall short of the high ethical standards of conduct sometime? Actually, answers to these queries were rather forthcoming from our participants. These elite units and their officers did not fight shy of facing up to these uncomfortable but very much live issues—since similar incidents had occurred in the past when they had to face up to these circumstances. “No officer who serves in our unit gets anything less than the top ratings; they simply have to be good; else they wouldn’t be here in the first place,” replied a young Major. The commanding officers are similarly very particular in ensuring that only the best of the lot serve in these units: “An officer is expected to lead by example, tact and integrity — there can be no compromise in that.” As for any lapse of moral and ethical nature, there was no hesitation whatsoever in committing that, “such officers have no place in our unit”; in other words, they simply had to pack their bags and leave.

Another dimension of integrity is ‘being truthful and just’ to the standards expected. Forwarding citations for awards for exhibition of gallantry under operational circumstances should be a straight-forward matter. However, as is known in the environment, it is, unfortunately, not so straight-forward. These leaders too are confronted with these dilemmas some time or the other. Morally upright leaders hesitate and refuse to do the wrong. “You cannot live with the ignominy of an award that’s not earned!” said one officer, echoing the sentiments of many others like him. “That’s right. You live by your jawans, and they know.” A Commanding Officer revealed being subtly encouraged to resort to cooking up falsehoods in an operational area. He refused, stating, “What face can you show to your troops, if you succumb to such temptations!”

Discussion

Relevance of the moral dimension towards effective leadership has been debated both by academicians and practitioners in many ways. However, the necessity of this important adjunct has come to be accepted gradually. Followers are increasingly vigilant and expect the highest standards of conduct from their leaders. These operational leaders would, in fact, lose quite a significant amount of their authority to lead their followers into difficult missions, if they were to come across as morally weak or shaky.

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) say, “Many leaders walk a fine line of moral probity.” They label these leaders, who may be manipulative, as “pseudo”:

“They may have the public image of a saint but privately are deceptive devils. They may appear to their followers to behave as a transformational leader but the appearance is deceptive for inwardly they remain more interested in themselves than their followers. They knowingly focus their followers on fantasies instead of attainable visions. They engage in shams and pretense. And these masquerades are at the expense of their followers. They are pseudotransformational.”
A leader’s moral authority greatly enables development of leader-follower trust in these circumstances as set out in this research. Ethical and moral values help leaders and organizations to overcome adversity during “crises,” particularly, when public accountability comes to the fore. Increasingly, the rise in frequency of organizational crises is making it near incumbent upon organizations to adopt greater transparency with regard to their values to continue to maintain organizational legitimacy (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 231-233), and, in this, their leaders play a critical part.

Genuine Care and Concern for their Command

Observations

These leaders also exercised a genuine concern about the well-being of their command, including, of their families and other societal obligations. This, specially, appears to be very relevant to the Indian context, where family and societal obligations are key factors that need to be considered by leaders. Past studies of successful leaders in other Indian contexts have found significant evidence of similar characteristics, e.g. the ‘nurturant’ role of leaders in their interactions with their followers (Sinha, 1980; 1984). Likewise, these leaders would always find time for a sympathetic word, even if they could not do much in face of an untoward occurrence or an unavoidable necessity. There is generally an easy camaraderie, which prevails between these leaders and their command. In elite military units, i.e. the specialized forces, though the outwardly strapping of discipline is not much evident, yet there is no laxity in conduct of professional activities and other related interactions. There is certainly greater amount of faith and trust reposed in each other, than observed in most other fighting units — possibly, “close interaction and dependence on each other in past operational assignments,” as one company commander put it, has helped forge these bonds.

An important differentiation needs to be highlighted here — this characteristic is intrinsically in contrast to the traditionally popular ‘contingent reward’ based leadership. Followers do not look upon these relationships as an exchange-based or contractual arrangement with their leader. In top-of-the-line units, one after another, we found that both the leaders and the followers had this implicit understanding about each other, that this was ‘the done thing’ — their relationships going much beyond what ‘contingent reward’ possibly could have covered on an exchange basis. Followers had developed self-efficacy to visualize and plan for their personal needs, and the organizational environment mostly provided the necessary enabling conditions for these to be met. But obviously, these small inter-personal gestures often left a deep impact — many of these leaders would recollect how some of their followers had much later reminded them of some small acts of kindness of theirs, which (sometimes) they could barely recollect, but which had meant a lot to those followers over the years.

Discussion

These leaders exhibited transformational leadership characteristics in the holistic manner in which they looked after their followers’ needs. They went beyond mere transactional “give-and-take” relationships to a deeper sense of responsibility from within. This, in turn, created strong bonds of camaraderie and loyalty between these leaders and followers under the most trying of circumstances. In her study of the leadership behaviours required of healthcare management and staff, Gaughan (2001) speaks of similar themes, ‘valuing and supporting staff’ and ‘genuine concern for others’ (the latter from a study by Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2001), as being the most important themes emerging from the respective studies. This is contrasted by Gaughan (2001, p. 83) against Bass’s (1998) model where individualized consideration is identified as the fourth factor, besides it being “much more descriptive of the type of behaviour expected from effective leaders.” The above discussion seeks to place in the right perspective this aspect of human care that most of these leaders demonstrated towards their followers, a phenomenon that finds few parallels in many other organizational contexts.

Compassionate Approach towards All in General

Observations

These successful leaders also displayed high standards of conscientious citizenship and belongingness to their communities with the attendant social responsibility. They displayed an awareness of the larger issues in the community and society, and maintained steadfast loyalty to these, in their opinion, ‘venerable institutions’ (i.e. the community/society). Many leaders from the fighting arms traditionally exhort their followers by calling upon them to remain faithful to their ‘naam, namak, aur nishan’ (loyalty to the past sacrifices of the ‘paltan’ or unit; to the
‘salt of this earth/country’; and the ‘standard’ or the regimental flag), come what may. In doing this, they arouse their followers towards loyalty to a higher cause by giving them more contextual and concrete symbols and objects of veneration to hold on to, especially, in times of adversity. This, in turn, implied that their personal behaviour must also reflect this respect and concern in their day-to-day interactions, as well. While widely acknowledged transformational leaders, like Gandhi and Mother Teresa, clearly exhibited this concern more universally, all aspiring leaders operating in the increasingly complex environments today also feel the need to be more responsive to their immediate environmental stakeholders, in order to genuinely maintain the moral and spiritual basis of their leadership. There was one difference, though, that we noted in the extent to which this was visible in these leaders — younger leaders tended to cover or underplay this facet somewhat, which became more evident and gained an upper hand, as they matured through the years. We saw this as a natural phenomenon wherein the younger leaders initially tried to play this down, or may not simply have been aware of its importance, in order to live up to their machismo image, and it took some years before this became a more natural part of their whole personality that they did not feel uncomfortable talking about. Successful senior operational leaders did realize its importance and generally emphasized it through their words, deeds and actions.

Discussion

These successful leaders operating under threatening conditions try to instil a higher sense of purpose in their followers (also from the nature of their jobs) by giving form to more contextual and concrete symbols and objects of their veneration, as described above. They also reinforce this by their day-to-day conduct and their own respect towards the higher organizational (beginning with their own “regimental” ethos) community and societal institutions. They are also responsive towards environmental stakeholders in the larger context, especially, in these contemporary times, as these issues are becoming more critical in a universal sense. By consciously moulding themselves in the frame of what they expect from their followers, these leaders are able to pass on some of their own ethics and values to their followers. At the holistic level, this ties in well with their other defining characteristics, i.e. ‘grounded’ vision, sincerity of effort, and moral integrity, that have been discussed earlier.

Self-sacrificing and Self-effacing Personal Qualities

Observations

Humility is a quality that has been found to be associated with leaders who seek to motivate their followers by appealing to their deeper instincts. This has generally been taken as an inherent attribute in great leaders through the ages, as recounted in most epics and tales passed down in various communities. Leadership research was somewhat slow at capturing this aspect, and, though it may not have mattered much in the earlier days of industrial environment and work processes related leadership research, its importance has, however, been on the rise over the recent years. Greenleaf (1970) coined the term ‘servant leadership’ to describe those who choose to serve first and then lead as a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions. Gaughan (2001) found evidence of ‘self-awareness and humility’ as a separate leadership theme in her study. Though similar to an extent, this characteristic that was noted in the successful leaders in this study appears to build on the past traditions of Indian culture, where self-sacrifice and humility reflect an elevated individual’s inner-self and are generally associated with great leaders in its traditions. These leaders feel the need to be careful so as not to let exaggerated personal charisma or image-projection come in the way of the larger goals of their institution, though there would be some exceptions to this, necessarily. In the same manner, some extent of self-sacrifice for the sake of the larger cause and for the sake of their command responsibility was also evident in many cases.

To buttress this further, in the regimental folklore, there exist many tales of simple, honest, and hard-working men doing their best under various adversities and yet unmindful of seeking credit for that. Time and again, some such leaders have volunteered to go and serve in tough assignments, even after they had done their fair share. One such tale is that of Maj. Sudhir Kumar7, in whose memory the then Army Chief, General VP Malik, himself penned down a tribute (Malik, 2001), as the young leader requested, after completing the tenure with him as his Security Aide, to go back to serve with his battalion in an operational sector during the Kargil crisis – shortly there-

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7 A quiet, unassuming officer, Maj. Sudhir Kumar had already been awarded for gallantry on a number of occasions by this time—with a Sena Medal and a bar to it. He was awarded the nation’s highest peacetime gallantry award, the Ashok Chakra for this specific operation.
Discussion

This characteristic of successful leaders in our context has its roots in the Indian cultural traditions, as discussed. There is also a holistic perspective to this, as we noted in this study. Many of these operational leaders felt that personality and self-aggrandizement driven agendas must not be allowed to detract from emerging leadership dynamics, which was becoming a more community- and social-oriented process, leading to empowerment of individuals and establishment of a value system to help overcome the increasing complexities in the operating environment. Cultural and societal factors appear to play a part here in the wider expectations and perceived affiliation of such qualities with transformational leadership, and thus appear to give this a specific contextual character that may not be evident in other cultural and societal contexts, where individualism may be the more dominant norm.

MODELLING SUCCESSFUL TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

The paper now attempts to put together the above insights into a logical framework, so as to try to deduce the learnings and possible generalizability of these research findings. This will also allow comparisons with other contemporary leadership frameworks, by situating these research findings into a more familiar context.

Fresh Qualitative Insights

Currently dominant typology in leadership research is “transactional-transformational” (Pearce et al., 2003). Full range leadership theory (FRLT) has been described as a paradigm shift “to understand how leaders influence followers to transcend self-interest for the greater good of their units and organizations in order to achieve optimal levels of performance” (Bass, 1985). Bass (1985) referred to this type of leadership as transformational leadership. In its current form, FRLT represents nine single-order factors comprised of five transformational leadership factors, three transactional leadership factors, and one non-transactional laissez-faire leadership (Antonakis, et al. 2003). However, this over-dependence on established theoretical propositions and frameworks tends to restrict and straitjacket leadership research. For example, Yukl (1989, p. 212) calls it an “unwarranted simplification of a complex phenomenon.” There is a criticism of this approach to leadership research, and Pearce et al. (2003) wonder “if scholars have coalesced too narrowly on this two factor theory of leadership.” Most leadership research, in this sense, is restricted by either of the dominant paradigms and extremely focused on a narrow positivist approach to identifying relationships between a set of independent variables and the dependent variable. There is a need to break out of this fixation and carry out more meaningful research to identify causal variables, behaviours, and the role of context in throwing up effective and desirable leadership competencies. One option out of this dilemma is to look for alternative meaningful approaches for specific domains where different and, in cases, exceptional, circumstances bring a different set of leadership characteristics and capabilities to the fore. Studies of military operational level leadership in ‘high-intensity, high-risk operational combat environments’ over extended time duration is one such approach, as discussed above. This research was started with an open slate, as it was found that while currently popular leadership frames did help to situate what we were faced with, yet they did not appear to present a complete picture or even meaning of what really went on in there.

The study’s findings help us to identify richer nuances associated with traditional leadership characteristics, also their changing nature and meaning, as applied to an operational environment. As discussed above (and reinforced further in the following discussion), certain factors come to the fore and certain others acquire a new, deeper meaning in this context, while combining with each other in newer ways. This richer insight helps us to appreciate the changing nature of leadership, which also throws open new ideas for our consideration — to better prepare the leaders of tomorrow, in various domains.

Specific Focus of Research

This research sets out to seek answers to a very specific question: “Based on the target group’s previous professional and personal experiences in serving in operational roles in service, how would they describe leaders considered most likely to be able to provide successful long-term leadership in this complex operating environment?”

Of course, answers to this question emerged more in the form of an ongoing dialogue that was often revisited with
the participants, colleagues, and subordinates who contributed to this study. In this sense, the clarity in the research was not lost sight of by bringing too many issues together or being overtly ambitious in the process. The intent is to provide a starting model or framework by this in-depth qualitative research based on ‘grounded theory’-cum-modified Delphi approach; and, then going on to refine and validate it by applying suitable quantitative techniques. Based on the author’s interactions with study participants, his observations through the period of this study and from focus-group based learning initiatives, an indicative survey instrument is proposed (see Table 1), along the dimensions of the characteristics discussed above, to help take this research further towards broader generalization. It is hoped that this step helps with the further development of a more meaningful and relevant leader framework for these forces at the operational level, which can then be applied, with suitable contextual redesign, to its varying operational requirements.

**Highlighting Inter-linkages across Research Approaches/ Factors**

The above discussion of transformational grassroots military leadership in a “dynamic, complex and turbulent environment” (Bass et al., 2003, p. 216) leads us to propose a rich theoretical model, which treats each of these leadership characteristic or factor holistically, implying a range of leadership behaviour. Each of the identified characteristic includes items/behaviours across more than just one traditional second-order factor found currently in use in most leadership research instruments. In effect, the findings incorporate a large variety of converging and overlapping behaviours at multiple levels, seeking to engage the followers continuously towards professional excellence, greater empowerment, and self-leadership. For example, a ‘professionally competent’ leader in complex environmental context must be able to translate this capability into practical outcomes through a group/team; so, one would need to provide ‘intellectual stimulation’ to the group/team to challenge them to be competent, creative, and innovative; would also need to provide ‘inspirational motivation’ to the group/team for encouragement and giving meaning to the work of the followers; possibly, also ‘manage-by-exception (active)’ so as to guide followers to stay on the right track by correcting their mistakes in a timely manner; and above all, strive continuously to build an ‘organizational culture’ which encourages professional excellence and facilitates achievement of the vision/goals for the group/team.

Similarly, a number of these characteristics, such as, professional competence; leading by personal example; impeccable moral integrity; and genuine care and concern for their followers, are intuitively aimed at leaders’ efforts at building an ‘organizational culture’ which guides the group/team towards their vision. In fact, Sashkin (2004) too notes that three of the eight leadership approaches reviewed (in a study of transformational leadership) “include a concern for the context of leadership; that is, the organizational environment or culture within which leaders exercise leadership and which is, itself, a prime focus of leaders’ actions” (p. 193, emphasis in original).

An indicative overlap of items/behaviours of the leadership characteristics identified in this empirical research against appropriate second-order equivalent factors identified in previous leadership research is also shown in Table 2 (columns 2 to 5 show the item groupings under different leadership approaches or research categories that overlap with these characteristics in column 1).

**What does this Leadership Framework Indicate?**

As stated earlier, this framework does not aspire to be the silver bullet for all types of leadership requirements in different contexts. Researchers have, of late, begun to accept the limitations with respect to a sweeping applicability of their proposed frameworks. Pearce et al. (2003) believe that defining a leadership typology is like ‘shooting at a moving target’, and decry research efforts attempting to come up with a ‘holy grail of one-best-theory of leadership’ (p.297). Even intuitively, it appears logical that the same leadership solutions are not likely to be either effective or even desired by followers, i.e. raters, whose responses are often sought in much of the leadership survey research forming the backbone of most studies. This research proposes a model of leadership, which seeks to combine the traditional and the emerging views of leadership logically, in an insightful manner, grounded in in-depth analyses, to provide better understanding of leadership as perceived by followers and leaders alike in the environment to which it relates. Antonakis et al. (2004a) and Van Seters and Field (1990) also argue for the need to integrate overlapping and complementary conceptualizations of leadership into hybrid or even hybrid-integrative perspectives. Pearce et al. (2003), both deductively and inductively, find support for their results extending the transformational-transactional model of...
leadership, supporting the existence of four leadership types: directive leadership, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and empowering leadership. In addition, they find close similarities of their model with other leadership typologies of Quinn (1988), Quinn et al. (1990), and Yukl (1998).

The proposed leadership model typifies leadership characteristics that are found to be more effective in practice, as well as are closely identifiable with by the followers, in the complex, dynamic, turbulent environment, characterized by a continuum of crises, which could be confronting many organizations today, depending on one’s perspective (Weick, 1996). It could, in this sense, be taken to be an idealized prescriptive leadership cocktail for the contexts described above.

The author has subsequently (that is, much after delineation of this framework) come across the work of MIT Leadership Center’s researchers, whose leader framework has some interesting parallels with this work (Ancona, 2005; Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, & Senge, 2007). By re-arranging the above characteristics in some naturally overlapping combinations, one can see how these two frameworks, both, converge on some aspects and diverge on certain others (see Table 3). This divergence stems from the peculiar contexts that these two frameworks relate to, to begin with. This also appears to be some validation of the nuanced leadership model that this research proposes here.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH: MEASUREMENT AND TESTING OF THE MODEL

In as much as this research is grounded in a very specific context, there is certainly a case to, at least, test its validity in other comparative contexts. While the context here is that of crisis and turbulent environments, and set in an organization that stands for an entirely different ethos of functioning, it is proposed that there are essential learnings that can be taken to other domains, by suitable application of the nuanced descriptions provided above. Leaders and organizations can draw what applies to them and also where they can actually do better! For example, leaders in small innovative start-ups have many more levers to apply at their disposal. Larger and more stable organizations have the resources to shape their environments and bring instability, and apply more resources as needed, giving that much more empowerment to their organizational members.

Further work also needs to be done to refine the proposed itemized survey instrument (see Table 1) to measure the leadership characteristics identified from this research. Quantitative follow-up studies will help bring up issues that may need to be investigated and incorporated into the emerging framework. Similarly, comparisons with analogous leadership frameworks (see Tables 2 and 3) can help to situate this study’s findings in the larger context. One will also need to identify the cultural factors and their influences that may have had a significant bearing on the results from this study. To that extent, one needs to proceed with generalization of these findings with due caution.

One more promising direction of future investigation is the study of emerging leader frameworks in the context of wider social and cultural change. At a macro-level, this framework possibly marks a subtle shift to a more equal leader-follower and professional relationship, as described above, in contrast to earlier studies that highlighted, specifically, the ‘nurturant-task’ leadership style (Sinha, 1980; Ansari, 1986). Whether this phenomenon applies only to peculiar professional and critical contexts, as against the wider traditional manufacturing sector, however, needs to be investigated.

CONCLUSION

Leadership, a complex process spanning multiple traits, behaviours, and goal requirements, cannot be explained or measured adequately by simple factor constructs. This in-depth grounded research attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of successful leadership in dynamic, complex, and challenging environments. It discovers newer meanings associated with successful transformational military leadership at the operational levels, which are most likely to be able to answer the needs of the complex emerging environments that may be increasingly witnessed in the future. The proposed nine-factor leadership framework defining transformational grassroots military leadership in the emerging ‘dynamic, complex, and turbulent environments’ attempts to provide holistic prescriptive guidelines for leadership test and development. As this research brings out, both leadership and followership are in the process of being fundamentally redefined, egged on by the curious mix of technological progress and social change, emerging environmental turbulence, and increasing individual self-awareness.
Table 1: Proposed Transformational (Operational-Level) Leadership Characteristics Measurement Instrument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transformational Grassroots Military Leadership Characteristics</th>
<th>Descriptive Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strives for professional excellence and competence in team-building</td>
<td>He/she is thoroughly competent professionally and takes pain to keep abreast always. He/she makes it his/her priority to ensure that we remain abreast professionally as well, goading us on to continual self-improvement. He/she trusts us and allows us to exercise initiative and attempt to solve difficult problems on our own. He/she is at hand to guide us through the mistakes we make, and to help us improve our performance towards perfection and excellence. Encourages others to develop innovative ideas and challenge the status quo within the organization, with a more practical perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Grounded’ visionary</td>
<td>He/she articulates a vision of future opportunities for the organization. He/she practically communicates how the vision can be achieved by working together and what it will mean for us. His beliefs and enthusiasm for the vision are the spark that ignites inspiration in the organization. We feel happy to be part of the effort towards achieving the vision, as our very own. All members of the organization work towards common goals and vision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leads by personal example</td>
<td>Our leader sets a personal example for us all. I am confident that he/she will not ask us to do something which he/she is sceptical about our achieving, with our current skill set and resources. He/she will take personal risk without hesitation if there is something that has got to be done by us or in an emergency. I feel confident that he/she is always close at hand in case things were to go wrong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowers subordinates</td>
<td>He/she makes me feel more confident about myself and enables me to use my full potential. He/she has made a decisive change within me for better. I feel confident to handle adversity on my own. He/she trusts me to take decisions/initiatives on important issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincerity of purpose</td>
<td>He/she is genuinely sincere about what he/she talks or communicates to us. I trust his/her leadership and accordingly set my own levels to match his/her sincerity in my assigned job. In case of any crisis, I am confident he/she will share an honest picture of the evolving situation at the earliest possible opportunity. I am confident that he/she will look after my interests, in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impeccable moral integrity</td>
<td>He/she takes decisions based on moral and ethical principles. He/she makes me aware of strongly held ethics, moral values, and ideals which are shared in common for the larger community. He/she will stand steadfast with his/her ethics and values in face of any adversity. He/she is ready to accept mistakes and will willingly listen to subordinates and colleagues for their criticisms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuine care and concern for one’s command/ followers</td>
<td>I feel confident that he/she will take care of our concerns and requirements. His/her concern for our welfare is genuine and not on a quid-pro-quo basis. He/she is responsible for creating/maintaining an organisational environment/culture where we are all like members of an extended family. He/she has genuine interest in me and helps to develop my strengths. I feel confident to speak to him/her about my problems and seek his/her advice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate approach towards all in general</td>
<td>He/she is always concerned about our larger responsibility to the organisation and other stakeholders. He/she does not deviate from being honest and helpful to others, even if it hurts his/her personal interests in the short term. He/she coaches us to show respect and concern for the organisational stakeholders. He/she can be called a good citizen of the organization/community to which we belong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sacrificing and self-effacing personal qualities</td>
<td>He/she always gives due recognition to his/her subordinates and colleagues. He/she gives us the credit and rewards the team/group for our team/group’s achievements. He/she likes to keep a low profile during our successes and takes the blame even for our individual mistakes. He/she does not care so much for his/her individual rewards as for organizational/team success and achievements.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2: Essential Leadership Characteristics for the Emerging Environmental Complexities and Turbulence: Meanings and Approximate Equivalents across Different Leadership Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transformational Grassroots Military Leadership Characteristics</th>
<th>Leadership Traits</th>
<th>Transformational Leadership</th>
<th>Transactional Leadership</th>
<th>Organizational/Institutional Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strive for professional excellence and competence in team building</td>
<td>Professional acumen; Analytical intelligence; Practical intelligence</td>
<td>Intellectual stimulation; Inspirational motivation</td>
<td>Management-by-exception active</td>
<td>Organizational culture; Organizational standards of excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Grounded' visionary (also communicating perceptions of the shared vision)</td>
<td>Vision (cognitive capability); Leadership communication</td>
<td>Inspirational motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading by personal example</td>
<td>Leading by example; Charisma; Willingness to risk and sacrifice</td>
<td>Idealized influence (behaviour); Inspirational motivation</td>
<td>Contingent reward leadership; Management-by-exception active</td>
<td>Organizational structure, procedures, and culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower the subordinates</td>
<td>Empowerment orientation; Care and concern for followers</td>
<td>Individualized consideration</td>
<td>Contingent reward leadership</td>
<td>Organizational culture — self management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincerity of purpose</td>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Inspirational motivation</td>
<td>Ethics and morality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impeccable moral integrity</td>
<td>Willingness to risk and sacrifice</td>
<td>Idealized influence (behaviour)</td>
<td>Ethics and morality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genuine care and concern for the command/followers</td>
<td>Caring nature</td>
<td>Individualized consideration</td>
<td>Contingent reward leadership</td>
<td>Organizational culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate approach towards all in general</td>
<td>Caring nature and fairness/equity</td>
<td>Idealized influence (behaviour); Individualized consideration</td>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational culture — accountability and transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sacrificing and self-effacing personal qualities</td>
<td>Self-sacrificing nature; Humility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational norms &amp; standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: Comparison between Transformational Grassroots Military Leadership from “High-Intensity, High-Risk Operational Environments” and MIT Leadership Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transformational Grassroots Military Leadership Characteristics</th>
<th>Parallel Interpretive Description</th>
<th>MIT Leadership Center’s Distributed Leadership Framework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strive for professional excellence and competence in team building</td>
<td>Call it: Capability enhancement and learning</td>
<td>Sense-making; Visioning; Inventing; Changing signature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relentless innovation/application in the field</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hallmark “professionalism” in whatever they do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Competence building with long-term perspective</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage open professional feedback and suggestions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build (competent) teams</td>
<td>Call it: Distributed leadership and Empowerment</td>
<td>Relating; Sense-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acutely aware of the need</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Train teams to operate like extension of their own selves</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increasingly let teams take over</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self:</td>
<td>Call it: Visioning and leading by example</td>
<td>Visioning; Changing signature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Practical visionaries (also communicating perceptions of a shared vision)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lead by personal example</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sincerity of purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Impeccable moral integrity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards others:</td>
<td>Call it: Humanistic and societal dimension</td>
<td>Relating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Empower subordinates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Genuine care and concern for the command/followers</td>
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<td>• Compassionate approach towards all in general</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Self-sacrificing and self-effacing personal qualities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 1: Indicative List of Questions used as Conversation Starters during Interviews and Meetings

**Inspirational Leaders**

Who were the leaders that you looked up to during your operational military service?

What was it about these leaders that drew you towards them?

What was it about them that you tried to emulate in your own self?

In your judgment, what were their strengths; what were their weaknesses? Why?

Were these leaders successful in all respects? What were the challenges they faced? Why? What would you have done in their positions?

What was their relationship with their junior officers and their “jawans” (soldiers in one’s command)? How would you describe the strengths of the understanding they had with them?

**Yourself as a Leader**

What kind of a leader did you try to be? How would you describe your own leadership style?

What do you think helped you to be successful? What would you, in retrospect now, think were areas that you could have done better? How?

What were your relations with your superiors? Your colleagues? Your subordinates?

What factors would you think were most influential in helping you succeed as a leader in operational environment? What factors did not help? What were the areas that you think you could have done better, if differently?

What was your philosophy of grooming your subordinates for leadership positions? How did you go about this?

What was your relationship with your “jawans” (soldiers in one’s command)? How would you describe the kind of understanding you think worked best in your case?

**Others as Leaders**

From your own experience in grooming of younger leaders, what would you think were the important factors and characteristics that possibly led to theirs being successful? What would be these top few factors as per your judgment and why?

What kind of leaders do you think would be best suited for your unit’s operational roles today? How would you describe what these leaders stand for?

In general, what kind of leadership is needed in today’s and the future operational environments?

**REFERENCES**


Acknowledgement. The author offers this work as a humble tribute to the innumerable Parachute (Special Forces) Regiment soldiers and leaders amidst them, at all levels, who have toiled selflessly to uphold the security of their nation’s citizens. The work attempts to throw light on the true essence of their endeavours, with the hope that this will provide impetus to further research of their professional context.

Ravindra Singh Bangari is a retired Lt. Col. of the Parachute Regiment, with 23 years’ service across various active operational sectors, and was awarded the Army Chief’s Commendation for proficiency in a Counter Insurgency environment. An adventure enthusiast, a skydiver, and a motorized paraglider pilot, he was discharged from service consequent to injuries in an adventure expedition. He is a PGDM and Fellow of IIM Bangalore, where he is currently Adjunct Faculty; also heads operations of a start-up academic KPO outfit. His research interests are in the areas of leadership, decision making, creativity, and learning and development.

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