



By: MAJ Ryan C. Boileau, Sr

Over my 25-plus year military career, I have benefitted from mentors who shared their knowledge with me. A common trait in all great leaders is being a conduit of knowledge - disseminating and sharing what they know to those who could benefit from their knowledge. This is palpable in any organization: observe the way information flows and you can tell if a leader serves as a conduit of information or as a reservoir, requiring subordinates to pull information from them.

Reservoir leaders typically are not aware of their own shortcoming. Reservoirs believe they are effective because subordinates constantly seek them out for information, input, or opinions. This creates a perception of positive leadership; the leader issues initial guidance, the operator returns for feedback, and all appears to be well. However, if the reservoir is removed, no additional information will be forthcoming and all momentum stops. This is the fallacy: subordinates working for a reservoir cannot operate independently. Subordinate elements cannot function in the leader's absence.

By contrast, a conduit *shares* all available information with action elements, enabling

continuity of effective operations even when the source is removed. Through effective dissemination, subordinate and adjacent elements can determine the best courses of action without circling back for detailed guidance. The choice to operate as a conduit rather than a reservoir of information can be difficult, because it removes the outward perception of positive feedback.

The Army *ADRP 6-22* defines leadership as the “process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.” Providing purpose, direction, and motivation is learned and exercised over time to become second nature. Accomplishing the mission and improving the organization are attained only when a leader places selfless service above self-promotion. A reservoir is unlikely to achieve this, because this type of leader, once removed, creates chaos as people move to cover shortfalls in the information flow. Improving an organization requires a paradigm shift in one’s thinking to consider a higher element’s strategic position and then apply systems and processes that support, reinforce, or enable that vision to come to fruition.

For Commanders, a doctrinal method to improve information dissemination is to clearly delineate *intent*. Through effective communication of Commander’s Intent, subordinate elements are aware of the desired end and can improvise courses of action that support the end state even when information is incomplete. A well-established intent imparts freedom of maneuver to everyone in the execution process, allowing for spontaneous decisions that maintain momentum. Intent is not just Commanders’ business: leaders at all level should communicate intent to subordinates for any action, enabling them to make good decisions in the absence of orders.

Presence is both tangible and abstract. Quality leaders project a presence that exists even when they are physically gone. The impact of presence is a quality of good leadership. Good leaders impart a presence that pervades their organization regardless of its size, scope, or mission, and sets conditions to complete the mission. Over time, the presence of a leader is absorbed and mirrored by subordinates and mentees. A leader’s ability to project presence can be understood by observing what an organization does in his/her absence. If discipline lapses, safety standards drop, or accountability is lost, then the leader is not projecting presence effectively. On the other hand, if there is no perceptible drop in performance or output, chances are that a leader’s presence remains even when they are physically absent.

Trust goes hand-in-hand with presence. Breaking any link in the chain of trust introduces unnecessary complexity to the process of leadership and is difficult or impossible to repair. A leader establishes trust by giving intent and end state, but leaving the details to the

executor. Trust is earned with closed-loop feedback processes; at the end of a discussion or mission, give information back to the next higher leader to show that a message is understood, or has been accomplished to standard. Conduits close this loop instinctively, while reservoirs do it only with the intent of self-gain; if there is no benefit in providing feedback, it is not given.

Finally, a leader who is a conduit of information must create and support a learning organization. To do this, the leader must be approachable. Subordinates must be free to make good-faith mistakes and recover from them. Openness allows a leader to keep an accurate pulse and recognize changes. Being approachable includes receiving bad news without overreacting. Open, candid discussion and acceptance of feedback creates a synergy of its own and contributes immeasurably to unit improvement.

Quality leadership is *learnable*. Transforming from a reservoir to a conduit creates effective knowledge management and eliminates barriers to mission accomplishment. Removing this obstacle from the complicated process of leadership and applying the qualities outlined here can contribute to that transition. By our nature, most leaders begin as reservoirs; the best leaders make a conscious decision to change. Accept this challenge: **become a conduit of information and improve your organization!**

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