



by Paul W. Smith

Admittedly, I am probably late regarding my admiration of this particular subject, but thanks to the glory of my DVR I have been reintroduced to the show *Elementary*, a [modern take](#) on the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Joan Watson. Watching the show, I couldn't help but glean some leadership principles from the world's most famous detective and began wondering about the real source of Holmes' "genius."

In the last few weeks, I found myself [diving into](#) Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, in preparation for the Commanders Assessment Program. With that fresh in my mind, I started seeing things around me with a new perspective. Interactions became opportunities to grow in the Army competencies (Leads, Develops, and Achieves) and even watching a TV show about a fictional detective developed into a demonstration for the attributes (Presence, Intellect, and Character) from the Army Leadership Requirements Model.

Watching *Elementary*, one can immediately recognize Sherlock's presence. He makes an impact when walking into a room or, more likely on the show, a crime scene. The actor playing Holmes gives him a stiff demeanor that carries all the way through to his movements. It not only serves as a character trait but clearly sets him apart from everyone else. When Holmes enters, people notice.

He also takes fitness seriously, both for his well-being and for his profession. Sherlock boxes, practices Muay Thai, and is often shown exercising. This directly aligns with how the Army defines *Presence*. It is also one area where Sherlock's veneer of perfection has some cracks, which I will address a little later.

Looking at the [competencies](#) listed in ADP 6-22, it is hard to deny that Sherlock achieves his goals. Week in and week out, he excels at catching criminals, wrapping up cases for the NYPD with flair, and consistently doing it within the hour run time for each episode. His ability to look at a crime scene, immediately assess the situation, and draw conclusions is nearly unmatched. Simply stated, Sherlock uses his innate skills and gifts to mobilize the NYPD to arrest suspect after suspect. The faith they have in his ability to get results is nearly infallible, backed up time and again by closed case after closed case.

Perhaps the most obvious attribute that comes to mind when thinking of Sherlock Holmes is *Intellect*. His expertise in a variety of topics, coupled with the ability to creatively link facts from personal experience, reading, and history help make him an excellent detective. Sherlock is a critical thinker, with several scenes per episode normally devoted to a mind map of each crime linking suspects, clues, and more until the criminal is eventually in custody. The ability to identify his shortfalls and actively work to improve them shows a degree of mental agility. When we first meet Sherlock in *Elementary* he lacks tact, but improves over time by learning from Watson and his partners within the NYPD.

While looking at these attributes and competencies help to demonstrate Sherlock is a leader in his field, one thing begins to jump out as a key to his success that is completely overlooked both in the show and far too often in real life as well. In each episode of *Elementary*, Sherlock works through multiple suspects before arriving at the real culprit. When I say that, it's not simply that there are multiple suspects but that Sherlock levies accusations at two to three suspects per show, each time convinced that they are indeed the perpetrator.

When faced with those failures, the Precinct's Captain and his fellow NYPD detectives could simply write off Sherlock and devote their time and resources to solving crimes through other means. Instead, they continue to believe in him and remain impressed with his initiative and creativity.

I think there is a lesson to be learned there.

Despite all Sherlock's strengths when looking at his competencies and attributes, his true genius lies in his ability to fail, learn from those mistakes, and continue to be trusted.

As leaders we tend to be quick to attribute success to innate genius or nearly unattainable skill, but we fail to notice, or are just simply unaware of, the trial and error it took to get there. *Elementary* shows us those failures as Holmes, Watson, and the NYPD work through their suspect lists to eventually catch the culprit, all the while still maintaining that Sherlock is the world's greatest detective.

What would happen if the opposite was true? If after one failure Sherlock and Dr. Watson were no longer allowed to serve the public, what impact would that have? The true winner in that scenario would be the criminals of New York. Similarly, when looking at our formations, how willing are we to allow those under us to fail? Do we grant that same opportunity for growth?

Leaders create environments that enable success, and part of that must be providing room for failure. Dave Hollis said, "You never lose when you fail; you only learn from experience" and in a business where lives are at stake [failure and learning](#) must happen early and often to minimize the impact at scale. If we do not tolerate failure, we stunt growth and limit learning.

As leaders we need to balance our reliance on attributes and competencies with the ability to tolerate failure in the pursuit of the growth of our subordinates. I would argue that we rarely see intellect, presence, and the ability to achieve in those that have not overcome failure. Invest time in the development of your people, expect mistakes along the way, and keep trusting in those you serve with because maybe, just maybe, the Army's next "genius" is there in your formation.

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