



The 'Adding Value' Dilemma: An Interview with Lt Gen Richard Nugee

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People are at the heart of a leader's business. This is something every junior leader gets – you need to understand your people, put their needs before your own, motivate and develop them. It is at the centre of leading a team.

If you've worked in a staff headquarters, especially a major organisation like the Army Headquarters or MOD, you will know that leading there is different. The leadership rules-of-thumb that work when you lead a platoon – or a battalion – will not deliver the same success. You need more.

So how do you lead in a major staff headquarters? How do you draw the best from your people, generate ideas and ensure you understand the situation?

These are the questions I asked Lieutenant General Richard Nugee. He is the MOD's three star Chief of Defence People – the senior personnel officer in Defence. He led his regiment on operations in Iraq and also led staff in Afghanistan, as Chief of Staff ARRC in 2006 and Chief of Staff ISAF Joint Command in 2013-14. There was a reason I wanted to ask him the question: he has been working in senior leadership roles in staff headquarters for over a decade – so he knows what works when leading staff, and what does not.

Here is what he said. It is a long answer. It is about 'adding value', listening to subordinates, and admitting you do not know all the answers. But if you work on the staff, it is worth the read.



Leading on the staff

During your career you have led soldiers and officers at the team, organisational and strategic levels, in deployable units and in staff headquarters. You are now responsible for the MOD's military and civilian staff, as well as military veterans. Could you explain your thoughts on leadership when you are in a staff headquarters role like the one you are in now?

Well first, I've never really focused on long lists of leadership characteristics. I have found these quite dull and not much use. Different people have different styles but most importantly different contexts require different types of leadership. A strategic headquarters – like the MOD or Army Headquarters – requires different leadership due to the issues it deals with.

So let us be quite clear, when you are working somewhere like the MOD you do not need the hierarchy to work in the same way as it does in the field army. For example, in a headquarters you don't need the staff work done by a Major to be redrafted by a Lieutenant Colonel, then a Colonel, then a Brigadier and so on, before it gets to the 4* level. That would be incredibly inefficient. Yet it is always a temptation when you are a leader in those jobs because you always feel the need to 'add value'.

Let me use an example. I had an interesting experience when I was a Brigadier working in a headquarters in Germany. It illustrates the tension that I know we all feel in staff leadership roles. I had a fantastic US Army Colonel working for me who wrote very well but in a US style. He wrote a paper for me and we had to submit it to the General by Friday. I was going back for a wedding that weekend and needed to leave on Friday afternoon. So, I told the Colonel to submit it without me seeing it. "I'm sure it will be fine" I said.

"You haven't added value"

As I was driving home the General (and he shall remain nameless) rang me up. I was outside Antwerp on the motorway so I had to pull over to answer the call. He was furious. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked me. I explained I was on the way back to the UK for a wedding. He told me that, in his opinion, I hadn't added any value. I disagreed with him; I'd added value in the drafting but I hadn't read the final copy. He shouted at me so much that I actually offered to turn around and miss the wedding. I offered to come back and present the paper personally. Because I would have done, of course, if he had wanted me to. Well as you might expect, he grumbled at me and said he did not want that.

But after I returned from the long weekend, he got me into his office and asked me precisely how I felt I had 'added value' without personally signing the paper off. It has stuck with me to this day. That's because this is a question we all ask. How do we 'add value' if someone junior to us presents a paper without us having added a little bit more to it?



But if you do that at every level the final paper ends up being so far removed from what was originally written that it ceases to be the initial author's paper. Instead it has become owned by the bureaucratic hierarchy. It stops having the impact the author intended. So in the staff you have to balance a constant tension between trying to 'add value' and yet empowering those beneath you to really make a difference.

The chain of command hierarchy works on operations because the mission flows down the chain of command. On the staff it is never that simple. Hence why you must somehow get over the tension between adding value and not getting in the way.

Let me use an example from right now. I have four outstanding two stars working for me. They do not need me to tell them what to do. Two are military and two are civilian, all of them are HR experts. And they don't need me. When I started as Chief of Defence People I went home most evenings thinking "How on earth am I adding value as a three star?"

Yet when I speak with my two stars, they tell me that they couldn't do their job without me. They tell me they are given the space to get on with their business and when they need me, I am fierce in fighting their corner. But that is quite uncomfortable at first. Sure, I am setting the vision and forming the strategy. But it is different to being a junior leader where you actually do 'stuff'. As a senior leader, sometimes your value is added by creating the space and removing flank interference so that your subordinates can do their jobs.

The value of a junior opinion

You mentioned empowerment. At the moment I worry if empowerment is becoming a buzz-word in the Army. What do you mean by empowerment? And how have you gone about harnessing the ability of your junior officers?

OK, well let me give an example. I ran the last redundancy programme for the Army. I was the person who designed the programme. It was my decision to make it last four years, because my red line was that absolutely no one who was on, or warned for, operations would be made redundant unless they were a volunteer. Being made redundant is horrible and we have to look after our people, even if we are making them redundant.

Whilst I'm sure many people will shout at me for the redundancy programme, I am actually pretty proud of how it ran. It is the only redundancy programme the Army has run where it hasn't been taken to court. So I think we got it broadly right and broadly fair. And that was important to me.

How did I do it? Every Wednesday I had a brainstorming session with my Colonels to discuss the programme. One of my newest Majors, fresh out of staff college, always attended. I invited Hugh because he was much closer to the 'real' Army than everyone else there. Before we started, I told him "You are here because I need you to tell me when I am talking utter rubbish. And I'll make you a promise. No matter whether or not I disagree with you, I will always listen to you."





His role was important because it was critical in getting a feel for what the rest of the Army was thinking. Of course we ran studies, surveys and tests across sections of the Army. We had data. But on a day-to-day basis, I needed to be able to discuss ideas with someone who was nearer to the real Army than me.

The best I could do was ask my most junior officer to give me input. Of course, and I should have known this, he was tapping into his network from Staff College and asking all his mates their views.

The sessions were all pretty fruity. But what we were doing was so important that I absolutely needed to have junior people giving me input. What Hugh said in those meetings genuinely affected the redundancy programme for the better. His views allowed me to temper the programme. At my level, leadership is about being open to listening to junior people. They may not be as experienced, but that doesn't mean they don't have a view, or that the view is not valid – perhaps even more valid than your own!



An arrogant Major

At what point in your career did you learn that lesson?

I can tell you exactly when. It was in my first job after Staff College. I had spent my whole career to that point in operational roles. When the job list came out I was furious because I had been put into this ghastly G1 personnel job. I had been promised I would be SO2 G3 Ops in a deployable division. I'd gone from being an operational soldier to being some horrible desk-wallah. I was so angry I went to my Divisional Colonel and said "Sir, who the hell shafted me?" and then walked away. He grabbed me and said "Richard, you should be pleased, it's a really good job." Well, in the end it turned out to be one of the best jobs I've had.

At the time, General Guthrie was the CGS. About three months into the job Guthrie openly and publicly criticised one of the policies I was responsible for. It was a direct criticism of the policy I'd written. And having CGS directly criticise your policy isn't great! So I wrote a short note to CGS explaining why the policy existed, what it did, and the logic behind it.

CGS didn't respond. Then, two or three months later, he very publicly criticised it again. He said it was a rubbish policy and it should be changed. So I rang up his outer office – my God, I was an arrogant young Major – and said "I'm fed up with CGS criticising my policies". And his Military Assistant said "Well, I'm sure CGS would be very interested to know why. Why don't you come up and talk to him?"

"This is my problem with your policy"

With some trepidation I duly went up to see CGS. He sat me down and talked with me, who had only been an Major for six months. "Well Richard," he said "this is my problem with your policy" and he explained, in the most calm manner, why he didn't like it. He even had his leg draped over the arm of his chair – I remember it so vividly. "But Richard, this is why the policy isn't working. I can see what it is, I understand it and the logic, but it isn't working. It might have worked 20 years ago. But it isn't working today. And if it doesn't work it doesn't matter about the logic – it needs to be changed so that it does work".

From that conversation came Career Structure 2000. From that conversation came the end of Regular Commissions being given out at Sandhurst. From that conversation came the formation of the career fields as we know them today. It all came from the head of the Army sitting down with a junior Major and taking the time to explain that "actually, I get your policy, but it's not working and here's why".

So as a young major I learnt the lesson that youngsters need to be listened to. They may not have as much experience as you but they have something to say and they should be listened to and given time.



Find the space to listen

How do you manage to do this today, as a three star?

It gets more difficult as you get more senior. My first Military Assistant thought it was their duty to stop people seeing me. They thought I was far too busy and important to be interrupted or questioned about things. I had an Adjutant who did the same when I was a CO. When I found out in both cases I was furious. I live by the rule that if someone has gathered up the courage to see a three star or the CO, if it is important enough for them to need to see the boss, what right have I got to turn around and say “you are not important enough to see me”.

And to have someone else interposing and saying “No, you are nothing like important enough to see the boss” – which is what is inferred even if it isn’t what is said – I think is terrible. I got rid of the MA and the Adjutant. The new person knew to say “of course the General will see you, it just might take time for him to get you in the diary.” As a result, my diary is constantly full! But I want to see people who feel they have something important enough to say.

By definition, every single one of them are junior to me. By definition, they are also more expert in their particular field than me. I’ve got to find the space to see them and I’ve got to listen to them. If I don’t, I’ll make stupid decisions. Then the whole system falls down. You cannot have Generals making stupid decisions because they do not find the time to listen to their junior experts.

Frankly, if a senior officer thinks he is the font of all knowledge – of course we all like to think we are – but if he seriously thinks he is, then he will go wrong pretty fast. You actually see senior officers do this. They think their idea is the only good idea out there. It is soul destroying for everyone beneath them. They know it is a stupid idea but they have to do it because the boss says so. That is why I want give my junior officers the opportunity to speak to me.

In fact, let me change that – people don’t just need the opportunity, they need to know they have the opportunity as well. I don’t want them to think I’m not interested just because I’m a three star. The difference between an SO2 and a three star is massive, psychologically. If they can’t approach me then the chain of command is not helping me get things done, it is getting in the way.

Mission Command or empowerment?

Is this the difference between leadership in the field army versus leadership in the institutional headquarters? The former is about directing people to get on with tasks, the latter is about freeing up your SMEs to do their job and drawing up expertise from the bottom?





I'm not sure it is quite as simple as that. However, a good example is the idea of mission command on the staff. I hear a lot of people say we should use mission command on the staff. I think this is a misunderstanding of mission command; it is not quite right. In this context, mission command is being used as a code for 'empower people'.

Here's my personal view. Mission command is specific to missions. It is specific to operations and operational units. When using mission command on operations you receive orders from above, then you direct people, telling them what to do but not how to do it. In contrast, on the staff in senior headquarters you receive problems from every direction and then ask your team for ideas.

It is not a question of 'we have this compound we need to capture, get on with it', as it was for me on Op TELIC during a battlegroup attack. At the senior level, there are not well bounded problems with a solution that you need to enact. There is no clear task, so there is no clear mission.

'Get rid of this insurgent strong point': I turned to my staff and they came up with a plan. I gave them planning direction, they worked the problem, I liked the plan, I said 'make it so' and our sub-units did. That was mission command – how each battery, company, squadron worked was down to the subordinate commander, not up to me. They had the parameters and they executed the battlegroup headquarters' plan.

On the staff and in the policy world, the problems aren't bounded. You are not just telling your subordinates or staff what to do. In my world I am more often looking to them for ideas. I look to my team to find solutions for wicked problems.



Problems without boundaries

An example. What do we do about the problem of veteran suicides? There is no 'go do it' order I can give. This is not a simple problem and there is no simple solution. Most importantly, there isn't a monopoly of good ideas from senior officers. It is such a big question that you can't say 'go do it'. So mission command, in that sense, isn't appropriate. The question is 'how do we solve one of the most intractable problem we have at the moment?' We don't know how to solve it and we do not own all the levers to improve the problem. There are a myriad of ideas within the MOD, let alone the huge number from outside. So the concept of mission command, in the policy world, doesn't work.

Unless mission command is just a code for 'just empower your subordinates'. But I don't think it is. Some of the best ideas for dealing with the veteran suicide issue are coming from some of my brightest, most junior staff. I have not given them a mission to 'go do it'. I have not given them boundaries within which to act – because the problem isn't suited to that sort of approach.

So, where does a senior leader add value in this case? I do not do it often enough, but I try and walk around my staff and talk to them. I try explaining the problem to them and saying 'what do we do about it?' I don't give them a mission – I explain my problems and try and pull the best ideas from the team.

Ask questions; admit you don't know

So you subscribe to the idea of 'leadership by walking around'?

There is something to that. I was told once at a leadership event that the more senior you get the more you need to ask questions rather than give answers. I've tried to live by that. In fact, there are two things I have tried to live by as a senior leader.

The first is to ask questions. Not leading questions, but inquisitive questions. How do we deal with this? How could we make this work? This gives people the freedom, the permission, to talk to a senior leader and provide their wisdom.

The second is to say 'I don't know'. I always try to ensure that every day I say 'I don't know' in answer to a question. I picked up the idea from reading David Marquet. Saying 'I don't know' allows other people to tell you that they know or to give you ideas. Out of that comes so much more imagination than one person alone could ever produce. It doesn't matter what rank the idea comes from. Only if it is any good. So I always look for opportunities to tell people that I don't have the answers.

You don't want to do it all the time! If you do people will think "Who the hell is this guy? How has he ended up in charge?". But even after the 30 years I've been in the Army, if I thought I knew everything about any issue – complex issues, like veteran suicide – then I'd be kidding myself. And then I'd cease to add any value to my people and my organisation.



If you think you know it all, you really aren't adding value. You really have stopped empowering people. It is a balance and it is difficult. I inevitably get it wrong. I am sure there are times when someone has turned around after I have left the room and said "God, this guy thinks he knows it all". But, of course, I don't.

Add value

As a junior leader, sometimes you can know enough to solve problems. You will always fare better if you get help from your team, but it is possible to get by on your own.

But as you become more senior, the problems get so complex that it is impossible for you to know enough to solve them. So you have to set the vision, define the problem and enable your team to solve it.

As a senior leader you have understand that you add value by admitting you do not know enough; by listening ideas from the bottom of your organisation; by empowering your subordinates to act; and by removing the distractions and flank interference that stop them from getting on with their job.

And probably not by recrafting their submission.



Lt Gen Richard Nugee is the MOD's Chief of Defence People. A Royal Artillery officer, he commanded 40th Regiment Royal Artillery in Iraq in 2003 and was Chief of Staff of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps during its deployment to Afghanistan in 2006. In 2013 he served as Chief of Staff, Combined Force Command Afghanistan.



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