

Adaptive Leadership: The Way Ahead for Sustainment Leaders

By Colonel James D. Sharpe, Jr., USA (Ret.), and Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Creviston, USA (Ret.)

"We will never predict with any accuracy what the future holds. After more than nine years of conflict the development of adaptive leaders who are comfortable operating in ambiguity and complexity will increasingly be our competitive advantage against future threats to our nation."¹

—General Martin E. Dempsey,
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

"For the past decade, our military has proven itself in what I consider to be the most difficult conditions this Nation has ever faced. Our leaders at every level have displayed unparalleled ingenuity, flexibility, and adaptability."²

—General Raymond T. Odierno,
Army Chief of Staff

Persistent conflict, change, global interdependencies, demographic trends, and exponential technological advancements complicate the strategic environment. General Raymond T. Odierno, Army Chief of Staff, cautions that the forthcoming decade will present our Army with a multitude of security challenges ranging from transnational and regional terrorism—described as hybrid threats—to rising military and economic global powers.

Hybrid threats are innovative, adaptive, globally connected, networked, and embedded in the clutter of local populations. They can possess a wide range of old, adapted, and advanced technologies, including the possibility of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). They operate conventionally and unconventionally; employ adaptive and asymmetric combinations of traditional, irregular, and criminal tactics; and use traditional military capabilities in old and new ways.³

In response to this dangerous and unpredictable operational environment, General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, insists that the Army must embrace a culture of change and that "success in future armed conflicts requires the Army to sustain the expertise we've developed . . . and also develop leaders

who understand and embrace operational adaptability."⁴

History adequately cites examples of American Soldier ingenuity and flexibility before, during, and after war. The success of future unified land operations will be defined by how well Army leaders continue to display the ingenuity and flexibility that served the Army so well throughout the transformation of our force structure and our engagement in two wars during this past decade. But it will be the adaptive leader who successfully minimizes the uncertainties of when, where, and how the Army engages the multitude of security challenges it is certain to encounter in the future. The employment of adaptive, decentralized sustainment capabilities that can rapidly adjust to changing situations requires Army logisticians who can adapt their thinking, their formations, and their functional techniques to the specific situation they face.

This paper will define adaptive leadership, explain its importance to Army logisticians, and outline how senior Army logisticians can better empower subordinates to become adaptive leaders who will succeed in uncertain, complex, and dynamic environments.

Adaptive Leadership

So, what exactly is adaptive leadership? According to management professor and consultant Dr. Charles Albano, a advocate for individual self-growth programs, it is not an passive effort merely to adjust circumstances. Instead, adaptive leadership encourages and builds upon the circular and interactive relationships that exist among the people within an organization. Dr. Albano describes adaptive leaders as those who see organizations as living—not mechanical—systems. Adaptive leaders seek to shape the roles of subordinates by using their ability to tap into human potential to make positive change.⁵

Dr. Gary Yukl and Dr. Ruma Mahsud, professors of management from the University of Albany, state that adaptive leadership involves changing behavior in appropriate ways as the situation changes. Yukl and Mahsud argue that as the pace of change increases, adaptive lead-

¹ General Martin E. Dempsey, "Leader Development," *Army Magazine*, February 2011, pp. 25–28.

² General Raymond T. Odierno, "A Message from The Chief of Staff," *Echoes, The Newsletter for Retired Soldiers, Surviving Spouses and Families*, January–April 2012.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dempsey, pp. 25–28.

⁵ Dr. Charles Albano, "What is Adaptive Leadership," *Self Growth*, 22 April 2007. <<http://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/calbano.html>>.

ers become more critical to its success. Adaptive leaders succeed because they are able to accurately diagnose the situation and vary their behavior and the behavior of their subordinates accordingly.⁶

Albano, Yukl, and Mahsud define adaptive leadership as it applies to the success in commercial organizations. In these organizations, change is a constant created by external variables such as the Internet, diversity, the environment, and the economy.⁷ Organizations that succeed are led by leaders who recognize that change is occurring, or imminent, and who are willing to adapt. They effectively communicate to their subordinate leaders and workforce the purpose for change, the outcomes of change, and the organizational way ahead. In doing so, the adaptive leader builds the understanding, consensus, and collaboration necessary for a workforce to adapt and embrace the organization's roadmap for what businesses define as success—profit.

Drs. Benjamin Lichtenstein, Mary Uhl-Bien, Russ Marion, Anson Seers, James Orton, and Craig Schreiber, all complexity leadership theorists, define adaptive leadership as an interactive event in which knowledge, action preferences, and behaviors change, thus provoking change within an organization. In their definition, adaptive leaders do not merely get followers to follow their wishes. Instead, the leaders motivate subordinates to seize new opportunities and adapt and adjust to them in order to tackle the tough issues. As situations change, motivated subordinates leverage their different skills and experiences to lead others to adapt and adjust as required for success.⁸

In reality, there is very little difference between the Army's definition of adaptive leadership and that of the corporate-related examples mentioned above. Field Manual 6–22, *Army Leadership*, defines adaptability as “an individual's ability to recognize changes in the environment, identify the critical elements of the new situation, and trigger changes accordingly to meet new requirements.” Simply stated, an adaptive leader is one who is willing to accept risk in rapidly changing situations, has the ability to adjust based on continuous assessment, and can modify his thinking, formations, and employment techniques to the specific situations he encounters.

In his study “Developing Adaptive Leaders, the Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom,” Leonard Wong tells us “adaptive leaders learn to live with unpredictability. They spend less time fretting about the

inability to establish a routine or control the future and focus more on exploiting opportunities.”⁹

In other words, to mix the right formula that successfully builds adaptive leaders, top Army leaders must be flexible and adaptive. They must be willing to risk their status quo of being in charge. As earlier defined by several academic scholars and Army doctrine, adaptive leaders influence behavior in response to change by effectively communicating to their subordinates the purpose for change, the outcomes of change, and the way ahead in order to build the understanding, consensus, and collaboration necessary for subordinates to adapt, embrace, and help guide the organization's roadmap for success. Being “stuck on stupid,” to use a phrase coined by Lieutenant General Russel L. Honore, is no excuse.¹⁰

Army leaders who micromanage, are inflexible, and will not accept failure are not, by any definition, adaptive leaders. Their management habits narrow the collaborative learning environment boundaries and inhibit their subordinates' abilities to engage, understand, adapt, lead, or even exploit opportunities. In the end, these subordinates may not fully develop the confidence needed to neither make the decisions necessary in rapidly changing operational and tactical environments nor be able to operate independently without clear definitive guidance. Their challenge will be to overcome the temporary toxicity of a bad senior leader while continuing to develop their confidence and competencies through a disciplined self-development regimen until a positive role model or mentor is available.

Why We Need Adaptive Leaders

The 2012 Strategic Defense Review suggests that sustainment challenges will increase exponentially as future land operations transition from prolonged stability operations to smaller scale contingency deployments. To meet these unique challenges, Army sustainers must be able to employ adaptive capabilities that can adjust quickly to changing situations. They will be required to be proficient in scaling forces using power projection and enablers like the Army pre-positioned stocks, and in using conventional sustainment basics in order to exploit windows of opportunity.¹¹

To accomplish this, sustainment leaders must re-

⁶ Gary Yukl and Rubina Mahsud, “Why Flexible and Adaptive Leadership is Essential,” *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 2010, pp. 81–93.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Benyamin Lichtenstein et al., “Complexity Leadership Theory: An Interactive Perspective on Leading in Complex Adaptive Systems,” *Emergence: Complexity and Organization*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2006, pp. 2–12.

⁹ Leonard Wong, “Developing Adaptive Leaders, the Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom,” Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, Pa., July 2003, p. 11.

¹⁰ Lieutenant General Russel L. Honore, Hurricane Rita press conference statement made to a reporter's question, 20 September 2005.

¹¹ Secretary of the Army John M. McHugh and General Raymond T. Odierno, “2012 Army Strategic Planning Guidance,” Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 19 April 2012, p. 4.

main aware of environmental conditions, have access to a flow of accurate information, be trained in critical skill sets, and be personally engaged to influence the actions of subordinates as they also adapt, plan, and conduct operations. Failure of senior sustainment commanders to adapt sustainment units and capabilities or develop adaptive junior leaders carries a potential death sentence for those for whom the sustainment was intended.¹²

Increasingly complex environments require Army leaders who—

- Are confident, versatile, adaptive, and innovative.
- Understand the context of the military situation and are able to act within that understanding.
- Assess and adapt actions to the environment.
- Consolidate tactical and operational opportunities into strategic aims.
- Transition effectively and rapidly from one operation to another.¹³

Successful Army leaders recognize that they must adapt their thinking, formations, and employment tech-

niques to the specific situations they encounter. General Dempsey suggests “it is always the leaders on point who are able to take what we give them, adapt to the environment in which they are placed and accomplish the mission.”¹⁴

Sustainment in this complex environment requires an adaptive and versatile sustainment framework capable of maintaining the Army land forces’ freedom of action. Major General James L. Hodge, former commander of the Combined Arms Support Command, stated that the sustainment community must do three things to keep up with the constantly changing environment of the future:

- Continue to assess the performances of sustainment units engaged in the current fight and review their lessons’ learned.
- Engage the operational force and supported units in order to stay focused on their needs.
- Participate in the active assessment of the dynamics of our changing world and security environment to best predict doctrine, training and force structure requirements.¹⁵

Soldiers of the Army Reserve’s 311th Expeditionary Sustainment Command look for simulated improvised explosive devices and other threats along a convoy route during training on 2 November 2012. The Soldiers were training for an upcoming deployment to Afghanistan. (Photo by SFC Gail Braymen)



¹² Paul Yingling, “Irregular Warfare and Adaptive Leadership,” *Small Wars Journal*, 2009, <<http://www.smallwarsjournal.com>>

¹³ Field Manual 6–22, Army Leadership, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, October 2006, p. 10-8.

¹⁴ Donna Miles, “Army Chief Discusses Future of Training,” 1 June 2011, <<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=64141>>

¹⁵ Major General James L. Hodge, “Versatile Trainer: Sustaining the Force While Adapting Doctrine, Training, and Leader Development,” *Military Training Technology Review Q&A*, February 2011, <<http://www.military-training-technology.com/mt2-home/299-mt2-2011-volume-16-issue-1-february/3873-qaa-major-general-james-l-hodge.html>>

To sustain the fight effectively at all times, the Army sustainment community requires innovative subordinate leaders who recognize challenges as they occur, quickly analyze and adjust to those challenges, and operate within the senior commanders' intent. As General Dempsey clearly stated, "There are no crystal balls that can predict the demands of future armed conflict. Our ability to learn and adapt rapidly is an institutional imperative."¹⁶

Training Adaptive Sustainment Leaders

The Army recognizes that it must adapt the way in which it develops leaders in order to stay ahead of the evolving and changing uncertainties and challenges of the operational environment.¹⁷ Perceptive Army leaders train subordinates to adapt to fluid, changing conditions and successfully cope with the ambiguities of complex environments.

Through consistent training and leading by example, adaptive leaders can develop situational and cultural awareness competencies in subordinates, which will improve their abilities to understand the purpose of operations and extend their full capabilities of support. These competencies will help them to not only succeed in the current fight but also prepare for the next one.¹⁸

To accomplish this task, senior Army sustainers must better empower subordinates to become adaptive leaders through leader development programs that focus on critical thinking and unstructured problem solving.

Senior sustainment commanders will soon have available to them the Army Training Concept (ATC) 2020, the Army's vision to maintain operationally adaptive, ready units and Soldiers in a period of reduced resourcing, persistent conflict, and a complex, uncertain operational environment. When fully implemented, ATC 2020 will allow senior sustainment commanders to create unscripted, free play, multi-role player exercises that replicate the complexity and uncertainty of the modern battlefield.¹⁹ The after-action review and retrain processes will help subordinate leaders to better understand the operational environment within which they may have to operate, identify how to act independently within it, and confidently adapt to operational changes as they occur to provide the right sustainment, at the right time, and at the right place.²⁰

As already noted, the Strategic Defense Review suggests that the Army will likely find itself engaged in smaller scale contingency deployments—quick in and quick out. Operations in Southwest Asia have proved that the Army is highly skilled at providing ready and relevant capabilities

in support of deliberate Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) cyclic deployments. As noted by Rapid Expeditionary Deployment Initiative Implementation Execution Order 250–12, the Army may not be as equally prepared to respond to no-notice, rapid deployments because deployment skills have been allowed to atrophy.²¹

Future operations will challenge Army logisticians to prepare modular sustainment force packages scaled to be rapidly deployed, reinforced by strategic resources, while simultaneously providing the deployment expertise and platforms to project combat capabilities as required. A way to ensure sustainment leaders can rapidly adapt and succeed in future, fast-paced contingencies is to design realistic training that develops them to be tactically and technically competent and confident in force projection development and execution.

Past experiences at the Joint Warfighting Center suggest that units often "wished-away" the requirements to power project from U.S. platforms. Too often, joint task force staff training thoroughly vetted course of action development, skipped critical deployment and reception, staging, onward movement, and integration activities, and then continued with planning and execution at D-Day, ignoring the demands and consequences of building sufficient combat power in a simulated theater of operations.

Balancing live and virtual training can help the Army logistician better understand that effective sustainment during decisive action operations starts with deliberate time-phased force deployment data considerations. Those considerations ensure the right sustainment enablers are deployed and in place to facilitate reception, staging, and onward movement and future integration operations. Failure to do so delays the deployment-to-employment transition, reducing the capabilities of sustainers to keep pace with the warfighters' intent.

The Army's Rapid Expeditionary Deployment Initiative recognizes that the players, processes, and infrastructure requirements to support power projection operations must be carefully coordinated from beginning to end. Logisticians and warfighters must understand TRANSCOM's role in power projection and partner with TRANSCOM to ensure success.

The return to realistic and challenging force projection training exercises, such as no-notice emergency deployment readiness exercises, combined with evolving virtual training venues such as the Army Training Concept and decisive action simulation, ensures Army

¹⁶ General Martin E. Dempsey, "A Campaign of Learning to Achieve Institutional Adaptation," *Army Magazine*, November 2010, pp. 34–35.

¹⁷ "A Leader Development Strategy for a 21st Century Army," Department of the Army, 25 November 2009, p. 2.

¹⁸ Dempsey, "A Campaign of Learning."

¹⁹ Brigadier Generals Richard C. Longo and Paul E. Funk II, "Developing Adaptable Soldiers, Leaders and Units to Meet the Challenge of Persistent Conflict," *Army Magazine*, March 2011, pp. 45–50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ All Army Activities (ALARACT) Message 194/2012, Rapid Expeditionary Deployment Initiative (REDI) Implementation Executive Order 250–12, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 25 July 12.

logisticians will be comfortable adapting to, and keeping up with, the real-world pace of force flow changes.

When today's adaptive leaders are faced with a problem, the combination of realistic training and developed competencies will foster innovative ideas to solve such complex problems.

Adaptive Sustainment Leaders: The Way Ahead

The way ahead for Army sustainers is to learn to adapt.²² A leader's adaptive capacity is defined by his ability to quickly identify change opportunities, respond intelligently to them with limited data and analysis, and then evaluate the results of the response after the action is completed. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, characterized by complexity, unpredictability, and uncertainty, have provided the Army with a force of adaptive leaders who have led units in combat, who are skilled in negotiations, and who are comfortable with challenge.

Ten years of combat operations has also substantiated the Army's abilities to project and sustain large formations overseas for prolonged periods albeit at a tremendous cost. The Army is comfortable with the cyclic rotation of available and ready forces in and out of the U.S. Central Command area of operations, more so since the withdrawal of forces and retrograde of equipment from Iraq.

Our nation's dependence on neighboring nations for political, security, and transportation cooperation and assistance keeps sustainment requirements in Afghanistan complex and uncertain. Senior Army logisticians are comfortable with this arrangement and so are their subordinates, who have gained sustainment "know-how" through their experiences in this operational environment. However, comfort does not lead us to adaptability; challenging uncertainty does.

Sustainers must heed Paul Yingling's caution that "officers conditioned to conformity in peacetime cannot be expected to behave boldly and flexibly in combat."²³ General Hodge directed the sustainment community to not only study lessons learned from current operations but also exploit training opportunities with warfighters in all environments, all conditions, and all scenarios to best prepare for the uncertainties and sustainment challenges that future operations will bring.²⁴

The shifting nature of the operational environment demands that we match tactical agility with institutional agility and that we develop leaders who can create an environment of collaboration and trust to promote adaptation and innovation.²⁵ It is critical to build upon the

sustainment know-how learned from the current fight. However, fiscal realities suggest that training opportunities may be limited.

Senior sustainment commanders are tasked to replicate the challenges of complexity at schools, training centers, and home station. In General Dempsey's words, leaders need to make the scrimmage as hard as the game.²⁶ Sustainment commanders must seek creative, realistic, and challenging training opportunities afforded by combined live and virtual training venues to reinforce subordinates' functional expertise and confidence. With such training, Soldiers will be able to operate successfully regardless the threat, environment, conditions, and the availability of information. Failure to do so would be to ignore Confucius's caution "to lead untrained people to war is to throw them away."²⁷

Colonel James D. Sharpe, Jr., USA (Ret.), is an assistant professor for sustainment and force management for Intermediate Level Education at the Army Command and Staff College at Fort Gordon, Georgia. He is a graduate of the Army War College and earned a B.A. degree from Augusta College and an M.A. degree from Troy State University. While in the Army, he served in a variety of command and staff positions to include brigade command and assignments at three combatant commands.

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas E. Creviston, USA (Ret.), is an assistant professor for sustainment and force management at the Army Command and Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He is a graduate of the Command and General Staff College and holds a B.S. degree from South West Texas State University and an M.S.A. degree from Central Michigan University. He is currently working on his Ed.D. in instructional leadership through Northcentral University. His Army assignments included a variety of command and staff positions primarily at the division and brigade level.

Editor's Note: In cooperation with the Army Logistics University, Army Sustainment has implemented the practice of a double blind peer review for all articles appearing in its "Spectrum" section. The magazine's goal is to ensure that only well-researched, balanced, and thought-provoking articles are published. Peer review is an objective process at the heart of good scholarly publishing and is carried out by most reputable academic journals. As part of this process, our authors and reviewers both play vital roles in maintaining the high standards of Army Sustainment.

²² Major Harold H. Whiffen, "Becoming an Adaptive Leader," *Military Review*, November–December 2007, pp. 108–114.

²³ Yingling, p. 6.

²⁴ Hodge, *Military Training Technology Q&A*.

²⁵ "A Leader Development Strategy for a 21st Century Army," Department of the Army, 25 November 2009, p. 5.

²⁶ Miles, <<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=64141>>

²⁷ Confucius, Wikiquote.org, <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Rome:_Total_War>