



MITCHELL PHOENIX

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT TRAINING



Gavin Bulloch

Brigadier Gavin Bulloch (British Army, Ret.) served as an infantry officer for 36 years and was involved in counterinsurgency operations in several theaters during his service. He is a graduate of the Army Staff College and the National Defence College. Brigadier Bulloch commanded a battalion on duties in Northern Ireland, served at NATO Headquarters on the Strategic Plans Staff, and finally served in Greece as a Defence attaché before retirement. He recently updated and revised the British Army's doctrine for counterinsurgency.

Brigadier Bulloch works as a consultant for the British Army's Directorate of Development and Doctrine.

An interview including anecdotes, examples and stories around leadership, decisiveness and the personal qualities required of senior officers in the British Army

What was your last position and responsibilities?

I was Defence/Military Attaché to the British Embassy in Athens. I was in that post for 2 1/2 years. My responsibilities centred on defence issues such as government defence policy, all aspects of NATO training and British defence sales. In addition there was a liaison job to do in obtaining views of the Greek Defence Chiefs, plus a great many residual WW2 issues concerning Veterans and so forth

What attracted you to a military career?

I was conscripted at 18 years into a National Service Army and thus had no choice about my career, which came some two years later as a result of this.

“I look for those people who make an immediate impact “

What early career experiences profoundly shaped your approach and attitudes?

As a young man I was attracted to the constantly changing opportunities to do different tasks, the chance to travel and to meet people with different experiences. This was backed up by the opportunities to improve and develop other interests and education.

At what stage in your life did you know you could be good at the disciplines required of leadership?



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Practical, on-the-job experience indicates what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. I began to appreciate that the experience I gained in different situations could develop and assist the confidence everyone needs to be more ambitious and professional in any given task. This started as a young Lieutenant aged 22 to 25.

What personal qualities do you recognise in yourself that have been essential and useful

An appreciation that nothing goes right on the first occasion and that trial and error using background experience will prove most useful

You have demonstrated over the years an ability to shape and mobilise others in a profound way, what are the essential leadership skills needed to progress within the British Army?

As a junior officer you will be expected to display leadership capability, technical skills, fitness and undergo more education. As a senior officer, the same qualities plus an ability to stay calm and use judgment to better effect.

How have they changed in recent times?

Leadership has changed very little over many years, and only in its background. What I mean by that is that raw frontline leadership is always necessary, but aspects of command have become more professional in nature, often supported by technology.

What do you see as being the components of 'raw leadership'?
As I described earlier, physical capability, fitness, some form of charisma and a get-up-and-go mentality. Don't dither.

How do you recognise those among your teams who will be most effective or useful?

I look for those people who make an immediate impact – Judgment about whether others could be effective or not will depend on my perception about a soldier's background, physical ability and in some cases, whether he looks the part. This can only be developed with experience and possibly a few mistakes will ensure that this judgment will quickly improve.

Then explore the potential based on past evidence, look through their CV in detail for clues that they have been able to bring about a change, improvement, make a substantial difference in a posting. I also look for some evidence of 'character'.

My perception of whether the soldier, or officer, has the right attitude to the task proposed. Their background and current abilities will assist me in making that judgment – but finally it is the judgment of whether you trust your reputation on his/her actions – normally 'Yes' if your judgment is well placed.

What qualities do you look for when promoting people, qualities beyond those needed to 'make the grade'?

“Much more attention is paid in the Services to getting on with people and developing those with potential, this adds to good leadership and helps generate mutual respect which I sense is sometimes lacking in business”



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Probably, different from that of a business manager, does the individual have the capacity for more responsibility? (A bit like buying a house, is there potential to turn a dump into a nice place to live!)

What are the qualities that if not present would prevent you from promoting an officer above their current rank. How do these qualities differ as seniority increases?

Lack of potential would be one important area to consider, this needs to be assessed carefully of course. Also lack of leadership character although care has to be taken when selecting technical experts who may lack raw leadership ability but are essential for overall success

“Leadership has changed very little over many years, and only in its background”

How do you feel about having strong characters around you? What, if anything, is different in your approach to those people?

Provided such people can fit in as team players they can be a successful component. It seems to me that strong characters may not have the intellect to function in all circumstances and the more senior they are the more potentially dangerous they may be. I would not handle them any differently than others, always striving to treat everyone with fairness and with care

You have had an extensive career, vast experience and a good share of intellectual horsepower, our readers are often young managers who have much to learn. What advice do you provide for young people keen to advance their skills as rapidly as is possible?

Try to be involved in as much as possible about the setting and context of your work. Ask, “How do others fit into this work”..... “What is the overall purpose of the activity?” This will allow you to ‘see’ people and appreciate the role of others in the business.

In this way you become aware of the context of the overall work in hand and the relevancy. The ability to fit into all types of different social contexts is a must – without losing your personality or principles. Be aware of the value of humour, (particularly against yourself).

What are the special challenges that are presented when turning an unsuccessful unit/operation into a success? What standard steps are followed and what will excellent leaders apply over and above standard practice?

The first step is to identify the problems. The roots of this are often poor management or poor training just as they may be in business.

In developing improvements, how would you go about this and whom would you engage first?

This will depend on an assessment of the problems and a judgment about the priorities needed. The removal of one man may change things markedly; the change of systems and procedures may also change things markedly.

Finally set high standards going forward. It is possible to inspire others by maintaining high standards, important in one’s personal behaviour, professional knowledge. It is also important to know your men, beyond just a superficial level.



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What would be an example of this last idea?

I once arranged for a spoof telegram to be sent to an assistant I had from the RAF, it was on their 75th anniversary. It was not a deceit as he rumbled it straight away, just an acknowledgment that I was aware that it was an important day for him, and a bit of fun. How did he rumble it? I used the term 'Aeroplane', a term no one in the RAF would ever use – they would use Aircraft!

What is your attitude to making tough decisions? How do you approach this and how do you view the potential 'fallout afterwards?

Don't rush decisions, obtain the rationale and act decisively. You must follow through on actions.

Dealing with ill discipline or lapses in behaviour is hard, as you may know, and can de-motivate for a period, but it is correct to address this early on and without compromise. High standards are maintained through this, in part, and it cannot be left alone.

On operations, the toughest decisions are to know where to be at the right time.

How do you see the need for consensus and the conflict that exists between keeping all involved happy and making decisions that are right for the circumstances and objectives? Also, what is your view on the issue of gaining permission first; versus seeking forgiveness afterwards?

On consensus, you must seek views in advance but decide yourself. Act as though you take the rap if things go wrong, this provides useful internal checks for the individual officer in charge. Also happiness is not an objective in dealing with soldiers – train hard, fight hard and soldiers will be happy.

Having to gain permission is not always helpful; you should act within the framework of the overall instructions/mission. If you need further input then use the mission command process, sometimes there is no time to seek permission.

How do soldiers react when they see that significant change is the only agenda?

Provided the 'Boss' is happy – and places confidence in any new agenda – then soldiers will go along with changes because trust between them all is explicit.

The language of business strategy is taken directly from military language, Vision, mission, strategy, tactics and so forth. Could we explore the interface between the Politicians and the Military leaders and define where responsibilities start and end?

I agree Military language is useful but often it is too flowery, (Vision is a good example) and often difficult to understand. I believe it is the same in business – sometimes it creates the wrong perspectives, as individuals understand the language differently.

General politicians are very tricky to deal with; they are a different breed of people to military personnel and have a completely different agenda. Ministers are important and need careful

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briefing in order that they come up with good decisions. These days, Ministers are far less aware of how Defence works and they lack strategic understanding.

How has that aspect changed over past years, and whom would you cite as someone who did possess strategic understanding?

Since WW2 strategic understanding has become a rare feature of Government ministries etc. A few Ambassadors have strategic insights – normally those who are in the UN, NATO, or Embassies such as Berlin, Moscow, Paris, Cairo and Beijing. Some servicemen have this attribute but are not often in positions of authority to exercise it. Quite often a business leader will have strategic insight, and could bring this to bear quite easily.

Once the military leaders have taken on their part of the venture how is strategy formulated and who will be involved?

The longer term planning has to be done. This is usually left to servicemen to follow through and to make suitable adjustments as time passes

How dynamic is the decision-making thereafter and what influences those dynamics?

Things can't be changed overnight unless it is a 9/11 situation or Barbarossa

On occasion, events take the lead – 9/11 'Barbarossa' and Pearl harbour are examples. These effect all in one-way, or another – and have to be thought about in case they appear tomorrow. There is not much that can be prepared for, but an appreciation that things have changed irrevocably is essential – and subsequent actions and priorities will have fresh consequences.

How much autonomy is expected in the heat of operations and what training is provided?

The whole military concept of 'mission command' implies autonomy and can suffer from micro-management. Training for mission command is implicit throughout an army career, officers expect to act with decisiveness and autonomy. They are trained to get on with the job once given. Too many checks are not welcome or really necessary.

What differences do you perceive between service life and general business life?

Much more attention is paid in the Services to getting on with people and developing those with potential, this adds to good leadership and helps generate mutual respect which I sense is sometimes lacking in business. Trust is greatly encouraged which is vital for servicemen. Service leaders are more ready to be flexible and try something new.

Brigadier Gavin Bulloch is considered one of the foremost modern experts in the field of counterinsurgency and is widely quoted by current authors, both military and civilian. His work includes books and papers on a multitude of military subjects, one reference work can be found on this link.

[Military Doctrine and Counterinsurgency: A British Perspective](#)