

THE CHALLENGES OF CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP

Leadership Lecture at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst

**Think of a formative place in your life.
Somewhere that truly shaped you.
Somewhere that fundamentally changed
the way you viewed yourself and others.
You probably have one in mind.**

For Will Hogg, the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst is that. His alma mater. 20 years ago, aged 23, he was in the midst of the intensity that is Sandhurst. A year long kaleidoscope of physical, mental, emotional endeavour that is designed to prepare young men and women to lead soldiers: in war and in peace.

Last month, after 15 years out of the military environment, the tables were turned. Will was given the privilege of addressing Sandhurst cadets on his views of leadership: views developed in his first professional role as a young officer in the Light Infantry; as a Human Resources Director at Procter & Gamble; and more recently as the founder of Kinetic Consulting.

Sandhurst is a special place and, as Will felt on what was only his second visit since 1994, more than a little imposing. For nearly 300 years it, and its predecessors, is where all officers in the British Army have been trained to take on the responsibilities of leading soldiers in the most extreme situations. The calibre of individual that passes the 48-week Commissioning Course is exceptional. It has to be, given the gravity of the role they are about to step into.

As such, preparing and delivering a concise, meaningful and memorable message was a daunting task for Will. The challenge that he set himself was to pass on one critical point: that they could only fulfil their role of developing a self-confident, effective team with the alchemic quality of winning spirit, by making those individuals 'the hero of the story', *not them*.

This point, as true in the Army as in business, highlights the tremendously difficult balance between relentless drive and deep personal humility; between robust self-confidence and a compelling modesty that channels ambition into a team. A pre-requisite of building trust in others.

With that conclusion in mind, Will based his talk around three main areas:

1 “What I wish I’d learned about leadership at Sandhurst”

A practical tool that, in hindsight, would have ensured that he maximised his leadership potential as a junior officer.

2 “Leadership theory in action”

Bringing that tool to life with 3 simple stories of where he got it wrong and, consequently, learnt those tenets of leadership the hard way.

3 “A transferable leadership lesson”

Where he shared one valuable lesson from business that would be of use to the cadets throughout their careers, whether in or out of the Army.

Summary of key points:

1 “What I wish I’d learned about leadership at Sandhurst”:

In the Army, the leader can often rely on concepts such as commitment and loyalty carrying different weight than in the civilian world.

The corollary, in Will’s view, is that a successful business leader often needs to have far higher influencing and engagement skills than their military peer. In other words, effectiveness in the absence of strict hierarchy demands understanding the HOW of leadership at least as much as the WHAT.

‘**Action-centred leadership**’, for example, is a brilliantly intuitive way of maintaining the essential balance between Task, Team and Individual. Equally, Empowerment Theory (based on the military idea of Mission Command) is at the core of any decent leadership training. Neither of these approaches, however, address the **HOW** of leadership in detail.

HOW do you lead when some very clever people are advocating something else?

HOW do you persuade people to follow you when they would otherwise do something different?

HOW do you influence effectively when you have little or no hierarchical power?

The missing link, for Will, is defined in the 3-E model of leadership, which adds a sense of the impact that you want to have on those that you will lead by addressing the following questions:

ENVISION

Where do you want the team to go?
 What picture of success can you give them?

ENGAGE

How do you create belief, motivation and commitment to their role in the plan?

ENABLE

How do you set people up for success?
 How do you identify & remove barriers to delivery?

2 “Leadership theory in action”:

Will demonstrated these points by sharing 3 deeply impactful stories in which he personally made mistakes as a junior officer. Critically, he mentioned that had he been aware of the 3-E model, he would have acted differently. In the post-talk feedback session it was clear that this essential message was instructive to both Directing Staff and Cadets alike. Seasoned military leaders commented that he had positively altered the way that they viewed leadership and their role.

The key lesson on **Envisioning** was that, as a leader, you have to start with a clear and convincing vision. With that, you have a chance of getting there, however distant and difficult that destination might be. Often overlooked or badly done, it is also about clarifying expectations at the most basic level.

On **Engagement** (the 2nd E), Will introduced this section with a quotation from Sydney Jary (a WW2 hero): “The fact is that infantry soldiers see the ‘macho’ officer as a threat to their very lives; who will get them killed in, at the best, an ill-conceived operation or, at the worst, in an exhibitionist display of personal valour. Many of the qualities that give soldiers confidence in their leader are often considered to be feminine ones.”

Will’s message was that Engaging is about genuine care, even ‘love’: about authenticity and building mutual trust. As such, it is based on listening before telling; ‘them’ before ‘you’; and empathy before ego.

Having explained Envisioning and Engaging, Will then covered **Enabling**: specifically, Enabling Execution. This, he proposed, is about 4 activities: first, allocating the resources required to get the job done; second, apportioning responsibility and delegating authority down to the lowest possible leadership levels; third, encouraging initiative and disciplined risk-taking in the team; and, last, making fast, effective decisions based on a clear framework of principles.

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If that is the “science” of Enabling then the “art”, Will pointed out, is infinitely more difficult. Maintaining the balance between being irresponsibly cavalier on one hand and micro-managing on the other requires constant adjustment and fine-tuning every single day.

Having highlighted where he got it wrong, Will then ensured the cadets understood best practice by

sharing a story about the significant challenge that he had faced in the business environment (at P&G). Specifically, he focused on how his boss turned a business around by putting the three E's into action.



The context was a Regional team that had lost 40% of sales in 4 years, that was hampered by low self-confidence and even lower morale. To the last point, Will also highlighted that business leaders have an additional challenge vs. their military peers: the presence of headhunters who target top talent with offers of more money, better perks and a more appealing environment.

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As well as defining 'a new north' for the organisation, the boss had to make this vision tangible by defining 3 clear 'Building Blocks': an essential step to focus the team on reinforcing success and on withdrawing resources from where they couldn't yet win. Critically, this approach was rooted in brutal acknowledgement of the facts and driven by a manager who put his own reputation on the line in support of the turnaround.

After **Envisioning**, **Engaging** the organisation meant setting up meetings with the headquarter staff in every country. Meetings in which 3 objectives were delivered: creating clarity on the current business situation; developing common understanding of the new Objective and Strategies; and ensuring that each team and individual understood their unique role in delivering the strategy.

Will explained that although the wider team had been excellently Envisioned and Engaged, the

leader of the organisation devoted even more time to **Enabling Execution**. Fortunately, the CEO understood that there is no quicker way to demotivate than to stop after the first two E's and declare victory. This happens frequently in a business context, where Enabling is often seen as something that more junior people do, to support the big chief's strategy. The most junior officers in the Army, conversely, understand from the start that Strategy and Execution are one indivisible whole.

So, what was the result? From a business perspective, the team won. Driven by relentless application of the 3-Es, the business doubled in 5 years (after 4 years of decline). Today, the business is unrecognisable – both in sheer size and in credibility in the outside world. An amazing legacy, and for Will, the lesson was crystal clear: If you Envision, Engage and Enable properly, you are leading and you will win.

3 “A transferable leadership lesson”:

An area in which Will suggested that the military could learn from Business was the area of Talent Management and, specifically, the necessity to differentiate sufficiently between top and mediocre performers. This is critical in a context where most leadership experts, including some of history's greatest generals, live by the maxim that “the right people are your most important weapon”.

To make this relevant for junior officers, Will closed by urging them to: spend time on appraisals; give clear and honest feedback; allocate training with care; and fight for the best people to get the best roles. Put differently, he advised they demonstrate that the team (and not the leader) are 'the hero'. He closed by stating that in the few cases where he did this properly, he still hears about it nearly 20 years later and that it is the part of his military career in which he is most proud.

Will's leadership address was a great success. He received accolades at the time from across the spectrum of Sandhurst personnel: from the target audience of the Officer Cadets and through all levels of the Directing Staff. He has been warmly invited back by the Commandant, Major General Stuart Skeates CBE, to share these messages with future intakes of cadets at this formative part of their leadership lives.