

Leadership Development Efficacy and the Peter Principle

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ABSTRACT: Intuitively, Army leaders are thought to be those in uniform. Most can easily picture the faces of famous Army leaders, such as the late President and General Dwight D. Eisenhower or Band of Brothers' Major Dick Winters. However, Army civilians who do not wear a uniform also fill many senior military leadership roles. These civilian leaders typically have fewer leadership development opportunities during their careers than uniformed counterparts due to less structured civilian career pathways. This means Army civilians can be promoted to supervisor or higher roles without formal leadership training, which starkly contrasts with uniform personnel required to attend developmental training before promotions. This potentially leads to superiors making promotion decisions with less focus on managerial potential and more on current technical performance, resulting in promotion beyond their competency. This phenomenon was first theorized by Peter and Hull in 1969 and termed "The Peter Principle." Additionally, the Army struggles to mitigate manifestations of the Peter Principle, termed counterproductive leadership, amongst uniform and civilian personnel. Since Army civilian leaders have limited leadership development opportunities intended to help reduce the Peter Principle dynamic, studies on civilian leadership development and its efficacy are critical to ensure civilians are adequately prepared to lead. The following mixed-methods study is a work in progress and will examine Army civilian leadership development experiences throughout the careers. It will also evaluate a leadership development program offered to the Army Acquisition civilians. The consequences of leadership mismanaging Army personnel, critical equipment, and taxpayer funds are significant and far-reaching, hence the importance of such studies.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Leadership Development, Peter Principle, Counterproductive Leadership

Introduction

In 2019, the Army shifted its talent management philosophy and practices to tackle challenges in several categories, including how it develops its leaders. It published the Army People's Strategy (APS) (U.S. Army 2019) to codify the updates to policy. The strategy impacts approximately 662,000 active-duty and reserve Soldiers and 333,000 civilians (U.S. Army 2022). The strategy is tied to four lines of effort to achieve the vision of cohesive teams for military forces across services: Acquire, Develop, Employ, and Retain Talent. Along with the Army People's Strategy, a Civilian Implementation Plan was published to bridge those lines of effort to support the development of the civilian workforce (U.S. Army 2022). Military personnel's Leadership development regimen is more structured than that of civilians and complements their career timeline (Headquarters Department of the Army 2017). As they progress in rank, military members must attend courses related to leadership and cannot be promoted to the next rank. Civilian personnel have a less structured pathway to prepare them for leadership roles (Civilian Human Resources Agency and Army Civilian Management Activity 2023). However, they can be promoted to supervisors and leaders of both military and civilian personnel with minimal opportunities to prepare. Policy

updates to the vast and diverse civilian population in the realm of leadership development have proven challenging to structure and implement (U.S. Office of Personnel Management 2023).

The importance of effective civilian leadership is derived from the criticality of the roles and the scope of Army missions. For example, a current high-value Army weapons modernization project being developed by the Army Acquisition community is long-range precision fires (LRPF) munitions (Feickert 2023) with an estimated budget in fiscal year 2024 of \$7.2 billion (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, 2022). These munitions are crucial to support the Army in large-scale combat operations (LSCO) against near-peer adversaries like Russia or China. The LRPF portfolio products within the Army could be and have been managed by civilian leaders in the past. Effective leaders influence Army product teams to maintain a workforce that thrives and delivers capabilities on schedule, at cost, and with the required performance standards. The following literature will outline the current state of Army civilian leadership development and related concepts.

Literature

Army Civilian Leadership Development and the Peter Principle

Based on current performance, civilians can be promoted into supervisory or formal leadership roles without taking leadership development courses, and the choice may not be based on managerial potential (Headquarters Department of the Army 2017). According to Benson, Li, and Shue (2019), the best worker is not always the best choice for a supervisor. Organizations prioritizing current job performance over managerial potential, a theoretical concept first published by Peter and Hull (1969) and termed the Peter Principle, do so at high costs to employees within their sphere of responsibility and the organization at large (Benson, Li, and Shu 2019). This is important to note as the U.S. Army grapples with counterproductive leaders within its ranks and the Peter Principle manifests itself. The Peter Principle and the theory of hierarchiology (Peter and Hull 1969) were first introduced by Peter and Hull to explain why certain people are promoted in organizations, and others are ignored (Ghinea, Cantaragiu, and Ghinea 2019). Peter and Hull (1969) argue that “in a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence,” meaning they are promoted for being an outstanding engineer to manage all the other engineers. However, they may not hold the managerial potential to perform such leadership duties (Benson, Li, and Shu 2019). Hierarchiology, the study of hierarchies, relates to how certain employees who are arranged in order of rank or grade within an organization, such as in the priesthood, government offices, or the military, are pulled into leadership positions based on factors other than managerial potential. Peter and Hull (1969) argue that if the superior making the promotion decisions is not at their level of incompetence, their measures for promotion will reflect how the candidate provides valuable outputs to the organization, termed useful work. Superiors at their highest level of incompetence will choose a candidate regarding inputs and adherence to the status quo, e.g., dependable, follows orders, or steady.

Empirical testing related to the Peter Principle has shown it remains a factor in the suboptimal performance of managerial personnel. Benson, Li, and Shue (2019) studied the microdata of transactions and organizational hierarchy for a panel of 38,843 sales workers, 1,553 of whom were promoted to managerial positions, which spanned 131 firms. The results are consistent with the Peter Principle. When measuring prepromotion data, the doubling of a manager’s prepromotion sales has an inverse relationship to team sales, where under the new leader, total team sales decline by almost one-third. Although it may seem counterintuitive that good sales workers make bad bosses, great sales workers are motivated by a desire for personal achievement. Success is less about the team and more about their individual results. The study further revealed that firms favor high performers by promoting them ahead of peers who show more significant leadership potential due to misaligned sales performance incentives. The

results suggest that firms justify the costs of promotion mistakes due to the increased revenue realized from the increased sales incentive (Benson, Li, and Shue 2019).

In another study related to the Peter Principle, results suggest that the cost of promoting personnel who manifest counterproductive traits in the workplace can be higher than estimated at the time of promotion (Ghinea, Cantaragiu, and Ghinea 2019). The personalities and psychological profiles of employees who push and pull themselves to levels of incompetence (Peter and Hull 1969) exude characteristics such as the need for achievement, Machiavellianism, and the Dunning Kruger effect, increasing their likelihood of accepting positions where they are unqualified (Ghinea, Cantaragiu, and Ghinea 2019). Further, they suggest that further study is warranted to observe the organizational effects of individuals who obsessively climb the ladder and manifest subclinical psychopathic traits.

Results from a study by Volmer, Koch, and Göritz (2016) suggest that leaders who score high in Machiavellianism and psychopathy have an inverse relationship to employee career success and well-being. Further, higher scores in those personality traits, termed the Malicious Two (Rauthmann and Kolar 2013), relate to lower career success and well-being. Low employee salaries were related to higher levels of leader Machiavellianism, and higher leader psychopathy was related to lower subordinates' job satisfaction. Emotional exhaustion of employees was positively related to Machiavellianism, where the higher the emotional exhaustion reported by the employee, the higher the levels of leader Machiavellianism (Volmer, Koch, and Göritz 2016). Sutton (2007) pointed to numerous studies of counterproductive bosses and the damage they cause employees. Research on abusive supervision that examined 712 employees in a midwestern city suggests that employees whose bosses display ineffective and counterproductive traits drove people out of organizations, depleted remaining employees of effectiveness, and increased employee burnout (Sutton 2007). These personalities can manipulate superiors into assessing them as competent for promotion can be promoted without feedback from those whom they have damaged the most along the way.

Although Army promotions are not based on peer or employee feedback, the Army Talent Management Taskforce did implement a program to combat counterproductive and ineffective leaders from assuming certain roles. The Battalion Commander Assessment Program (BCAP) and Acquisition Leader Assessment Program (ALAP) study and assess the fitness of its executive-level leaders to take command roles (Spain 2020). These are investments aimed at being bias-free, systematic processes that include four days of physical, cognitive, non-cognitive, and psychological testing that produces Commanders who are more cognitive skills, capable communicators, and less likely to display counterproductive leader behaviors (Williams 2022), highlighting the potential for positive change.

The definition of counterproductive leadership is newer than the definition of Army leadership and was first penned in 2019 as being “the demonstration of leader behavior that violates one or more of the Army’s core leader competencies or Army Values, preventing climate conducive to mission accomplishment” (Headquarters Department of the Army 2019, 8-7). Examples include abusive behaviors such as degrading others, bullying, self-serving behaviors such as displaying arrogance or exaggerating accomplishments, and erratic behaviors such as poor self-control and losing their temper (Headquarters Department of the Army 2019). Literature on counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) is compared to the Army doctrine on counterproductive leadership (Na-Nan and Arunyaphum 2021). It is behavior deemed destructive and goes against peers' and an organization's potential and overall performance. A study of 1,100 employees conducted by the National Health Service in Great Britain found that over 38% of employees reported workplace bullying within the last year (Pfeffer 2015).

A civilian promoted to a supervisory position based on performance but has hidden counterproductive traits could be termed a Dark Triad leader. Studies and literature on this construct are a growing area of study and interest. The Dark Triad is a common higher-order

construct consisting of three sub-dimensions: narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Paulhus and Williams 2002). Narcissists are defined by a sense of grandiosity, a high need for admiration from others, and ego reinforcement (Volmer, Koch, and Göritz 2016). Psychopaths are characterized by deficient self-control, impaired emotional regulation, and high levels of impulsivity. Finally, people high in Machiavellianism can be highly exploitative and emotionally cold when interacting with others (Volmer, Koch, and Göritz 2016). Narcissism and psychopathy in the Dark Triad are subclinical, meaning they are a “delineated subclinical version of the DSM-defined personality disorder” (Paulhus and Williams 2002, 557). One does not need a psychological diagnosis of narcissism or psychopathy to be identified with those traits. The construct of Machiavellianism, the manipulative personality, was derived from Richard Christie’s selection of statements from Machiavelli’s original books (Paulhus and Williams 2002).

A study comparing 560 undergraduate business and psychology students revealed higher than historical averages of narcissism in the group, and levels were significantly higher in the business school students (Pfeffer 2015). Chatterjee and Hambrick (2007) studied the narcissism of 111 chief executive officers (CEOs) in the computer hardware and software industries from 1992–2004. The results show that narcissism in CEOs is positively related to strategic dynamism or significant risk-taking and grandiosity, which resulted in extreme and fluctuating organizational performance. The results also suggest that narcissistic CEOs favor bold actions to attract attention, resulting in significant wins or big losses, but that, with the computer hardware and software industries, their firms’ performance is generally no better or worse than firms with non-narcissistic CEOs (Chatterjee and Hambrick 2007).

Counterproductive leadership traits and Army leadership principles contrast (Headquarters Department of the Army 2019), so relevant leadership development programs are a means to amplify desired leadership traits and mitigate those seen as counterproductive (Center for Army Leadership 2017). Cann and Cangemi (1971) argued this notion when they posited that, in the short term, the Peter Principle can be overcome when individual employees have a leadership competence plateau through formal development and training. A 2022 study by Kapustin, Neumann, and Ludwig explored the impacts of a leadership program implemented by the Chicago Police Department in 2016 in response to the large uptick in gun violence. The study argued that police leadership tenure is related to lower numbers of violent crimes in cities as well as fewer incidents of police use of force. The developmental program was aimed at increasing the leadership effectiveness of police managers. The results suggest that the program reduced shootings and violent felonies by 32% in the first month and 21% after three months without measurable changes in arrests, stops, or police use of force. These results indicate that leadership development can enable leaders to become more effective and overcome competency gaps. The leadership development framework leading up to assessments such as ALAP is different for Army civilians when compared to their military counterparts (Headquarters Department of the Army 2017).

Leadership Development and Frameworks

Army policy categorizes workforce training and development into three complementary domains: Institutional, Operational, and Self-development (Headquarters Department of the Army 2017). The institutional training domain includes Army schools and educational centers of excellence that provide initial training, functional training, and professional military education for Soldiers, military leaders, and Army Civilians. Officers, NCOs, and civilians attend separate educational institutions or programs focusing on their specific professional requirements within the institutional domain. Institutional training, including leadership development coursework, is systematically tied to promotions for military members. In contrast, it is not for civilians unless chosen for a leadership position or program requiring formal leadership training certification. This means an Army Civilian

is not required to attend any formal leadership training to be a supervisor or senior leader throughout their career. If, at such time, they are allowed to apply for a leadership position and then receive it, they will take a host of required leadership courses just before assuming the new role to meet policy requirements (Headquarters Department of the Army 201).

Currently, civilians can attend institutional courses within the Civilian Education System (CES) to support leadership development, including the foundations course, introductory course, and manager development course (Headquarters Department of the Army 201). Civilian professional development programs were developed within the branches and functional areas at the lower-echelon organizational levels (U.S. Army, 2022). Of the civilian leaders who have attended a CES course at some point in their career, 56% rate Army Civilian schools as effective in developing leadership responsibilities. Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) results suggest that between nine and 19% of courses are rated ineffective at improving leadership capabilities (Center for Army Leadership 2017).

In April 2023, the Holistic Employee Development Framework (HEDF) was released by the United States Army Civilian Human Resources Agency (CHRA) and the Army Civilian Career Management Activity (ACCMA) as a training guide in the development of Army Civilian Supervisors (United States Army CHRA & ACCMA 2023). Domain experts in the military and outside consultants developed the framework and its contents. HEDF supports attaining initial supervisor certification and then recertifying every three years. It argues that successful supervisors set the conditions in their organizational environments to enable the development of cohesive teams. HEDF proposes a paradigm shift from calling leadership competencies “soft skills” to moving away from the notion that everything required of a leader is a leadership competency (United States Army CHRA and ACCMA 2023).

The competencies and requirements for supervisors fall into categories such as cognitive processes, social awareness, self-awareness, effective communication, and development of others and self (United States Army CHRA and ACCMA 2023). The theoretical basis of the HEDF is that great supervisors are, first and foremost, caring, decent, and effective human beings. This framework was developed to answer the study question: What makes a good, effective human being? Even as HEDF focuses on supervisor certification, it argues that self-development must occur throughout one’s career, starting from the beginning and not directly prior to or when a civilian attains a supervisory leadership position. HEDF includes a competency dictionary that guides the supervisor certification program; it is currently synchronized with the other federal competency frameworks to refine further the attributes, interdependencies, and definitions (United States Army CHRA and ACCMA 2023).

The IDEAL program is a leadership development program developed by The Army Acquisition School (TAAS) for select General Schedule (GS) 12-13 civilian workforce members. It is conducted over three months, with a one-week monthly session, as seen in Figure 1 (IDEAL Program Framework and Syllabus). TAAS, like all other U.S. government agencies, works in resource-constrained environments (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer 2022). IDEAL sessions are limited based on resources available per year, including funding, instructors, and facility space. As such, curriculum developers and program managers are challenged to perform studies or program evaluations to make evidence-based decisions on the curriculum.

Inspiring & Developing Excellence in Acquisition Leaders (IDEAL) Course

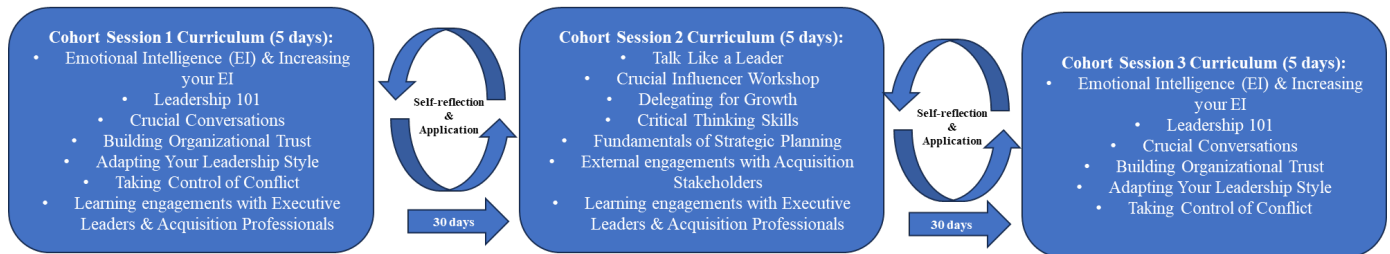


Figure 1. IDEAL Program Framework and Syllabus

Methodology

This mixed-methods study is a work in progress and will include Department of the Army Civilians enrolled in two programs: Senior Service College Fellowship (SCCF) (levels GS 14-15) and IDEAL (levels GS-12 and GS-13). Data was collected from an initial focus group attending the SCCF in September 2024 ($n = 5$). The recording and transcript are not available due to consent and confidentiality requirements. After coding the data, themes related to structure challenges within the Army civilian leadership development framework and manifestations of the Peter Principle were observed. Further focus groups will be conducted utilizing the same grounded theory approach to retrieve more data. The study will be conducted in an iterative process of data collection, data analysis, and coding. Iterativity is an integral part of building new knowledge in qualitative research and allows researchers to rethink existing assumptions in practice and the literature (Bhattacharyya and Berdahl 2023). The experiential data related to Army leadership development framework would help identify phenomena and themes to gain a broader understanding of civilian leadership development.

Quantitative data related to the IDEAL program was gathered by the Army Director of Acquisition Career Management (DACM) in November 2022 for the fiscal year 2023 (FY23) IDEAL cohort. Data was collected before the students began the IDEAL program at Time 1 and then reassessed at Time 2 to analyze if the treatment effectively increased leadership competencies. Time 2 data collection occurred approximately six months after graduating from IDEAL. The measure derived at Time 1 when combining each learner's priority score (Knowles 1977), which reflects their level of motivation, and their perceived competency level is defined as Growth Potential (GP). GP is a novel measure derived when combining the learner's perceived skill level in each leadership competency with their developmental priority, or motivation, to develop within that competency; the measure is scaled from 0-1. Further, GP is derived by plotting the priority and competency level scores on an X-Y axis and applying a novel use of the Pythagorean Theorem. Conceptually, GP relates to the distance from the highest competency score of 1, meaning at the expert level, and where the individual scores themselves within both priority and current competency level (see Figure 2). A learner scoring at a lower skill level means they are at a steeper portion of their learning (compared to the other competencies), where rapid improvement is most easily achieved. Simultaneously, they have placed higher relative priority on the competency, so the individual will be the most focused and motivated to work for improvement in that competency. Therefore, the highest GP occurs when the learner has a low relative competency skill level and prioritizes the given competency.

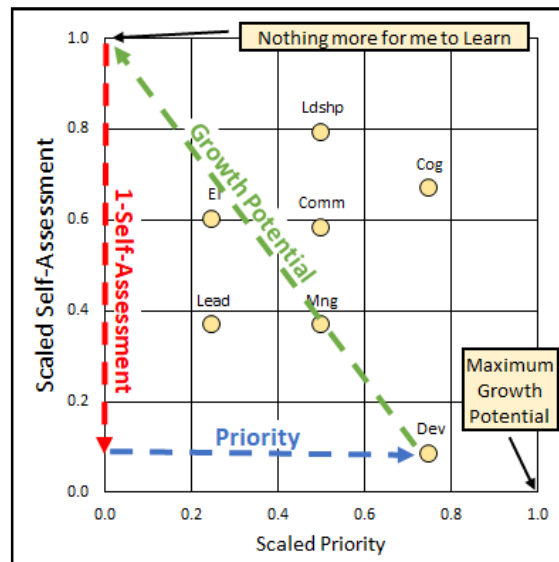


Figure 2. Method of measuring Growth Potential (GP)

Data related to the IDEAL program is constrained by the number of individuals chosen for the IDEAL program and ranges between 25-40 cases per cohort.

Conclusion

The leadership development of Army civilians is a challenge within the vast and diverse Headquarters Department of the Army. Effective leadership development programs help mitigate effects that arise from constructs such as the Peter Principle (Benson, Li, and Shue 2019). It is essential to study the perceptions of Army Civilians throughout their leadership development pathways to gather insights into the distinctions and complexities of those experiences. This generates more shared understanding across stakeholders. Similarly, a related study on the effectiveness of a current leadership development program like IDEAL is an opportunity to analyze if the program's framework and curriculum are effective in improving leadership competency levels. Studies on leadership development provide Army decision-makers with the data to make evidence-based decisions on curriculum, resourcing, investment, and divestment decisions. Strategic Army leaders have already codified the importance of leadership development in policy, so work in this area is not only limited but needed. Notably, study data may provide evidence to taxpayers that the funding budgeted for these efforts is being applied thoughtfully and effectively (Center for Army Leadership 2017). Lastly, studies that relate to effective leadership development models are critical and can potentially mitigate the risks associated with the Peter Principle (Ghinea, Cantaragiu, and Ghinea 2019) as well as its manifestation of counterproductive leadership. As stated earlier, effective leaders are the ones who generate healthy organizational cultures and enable the successful delivery of capabilities that are on schedule, at cost, and with the required performance standards for Soldiers.

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