The Benefit of Negative Examples: What We Can Learn About Leadership from the Taliban

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Commentary

Approximately four months ago I was sitting at my desk at the Air Force Academy preparing a course in leadership that I would be teaching during the fall semester. Then, something happened that would have a drastic impact on my professional life as an educator and a military officer. I was informed that I would be deploying to Kabul, Afghanistan, for the next six months to support Operation Enduring Freedom. At first, I was a little taken aback by the opportunity since I had planned a summer of lesson prepping and writing, as I have found this to be the best time for such endeavors. However, after a little reflection, I quickly realized what a great opportunity for me to grow as an educator by giving me a chance to see leadership from different perspectives. While I am a career military officer and have seen many examples of leadership both positive and negative, this particular situation would afford me the opportunity to see leadership from an entirely different vantage point.

As I got to Afghanistan I quickly realized not only were there examples of good leadership, but negative as well. What I am referring to here is the Taliban and how that organization is organized and managed. I started to pay attention to the negative aspects of leadership I saw and realized that right before me were numerous examples of what not to do as a leader and challenges associated with leadership. Specifically, there were behaviors the Taliban leaders were engaging in that were impacting the effectiveness of the entire organization. What I found particularly interesting was the fact that many of these actions were not the little nuances that we often debate in leadership circles, but fairly recognized leadership principles. This was rather compelling since you rarely get to see several of these negative types of behaviors operating at the same time because organizations that routinely exhibit these actions and behaviors are not viable for very long.

Now, I realize there are probably several people reading this that are thinking this is an extreme case. You have an organization (the Taliban) that is run with weapons, uses fear and intimidation as primary modes of operation, and is from an entirely different culture. What could I learn about leadership from them that would be applicable to a traditional leadership classroom? While there are characteristics that are blatantly unique to the Taliban that you will not see in a traditional organization (as mentioned above), I was surprised at how some of the same principles of effective (or in this case ineffective) leadership are so relevant. For example, a Taliban commander must still be able to motivate his followers, provide them basic skill development, provide limits as to acceptable behavior, and arrange for compensation in some manner. The point being, that even when we look at an organization that is contextually different than a traditional organization (e.g., organizations that we are used to dealing with), there are still many lessons to be learned or gleaned from such an observation. With respect to the Taliban, I noticed three major themes regarding negative leader behavior that were particularly interesting and have relevance to leadership educators.

Followers

One of the responsibilities leaders have is to take care of their followers. While as academics, we can debate how much responsibility the leader has in follower development, what the organization should provide in terms of developmental opportunities, and the role of the follower in directing their own future the bottom line is that failure of the leader to consider their followers has negative implications for the organization. This responsibility can take many forms. One of these forms is to make sure those coming into the organization have the necessary qualifications to operate effectively. These qualifications are either already present in the individual because they were taken care of through a proper selection process or must be trained and developed which means proper resourcing for training. In the early part of this decade around 2003, the Taliban had large numbers of individuals joining their ranks. There were very limited controls on who was allowed in. In many cases, these individuals were from other countries that were looking for a way to exert their influence. This opened the door for individuals with criminal tendencies to join the Taliban. If criminals are allowed into an organization, is it really surprising when they then subsequently act like criminals? This is exactly what has happened and can be seen on an almost daily basis in the news media. Therefore, some of the problems facing the Taliban today can be attributed to the types of members they allow into their organization.

One way to address this is to codify acceptable behavior through policies, procedures, and rules. In the case of the Taliban, the one to set these policies is

Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban. These policies help guide what the organization will do and how the organization, and ultimately group members, will act and operate. The Taliban is no different in this respect. In 2006 there was guidance put out to the Taliban in the form of a Code of Conduct that was to serve as the foundation for those in the organization and subsequently it was updated in 2009 and 2010. The code covers topics such as security, prisoners, the organization, training, and prohibited activities (Naval Postgraduate School, 2009). While it is important to have such rules for behavior, one of the issues that must be dealt with is violations of these policies. For example, if you have rogue members in your organization, you can either purge them from the organization or you can try to regulate their behavior. Because due to limited forces purging is not an option for the Taliban, Omar has tried to regulate members by producing longer and more detailed codes of conduct. The challenge is that under these circumstances, you are left dealing with the hand you have. It takes an inordinate amount of energy to invest in these individuals in order to align their behavior with acceptable behaviors in the organization. This results in several distinct consequences. First, if you are trying to do this from a distance (e.g., Pakistan), it becomes exponentially more difficult since you cannot deal directly with these individuals. Second, if they are not held accountable, their negative behavior is reinforced and becomes harder to extinguish in the future. Finally, it also potentially speaks to the long-term viability of the Taliban movement if the members of the organization resist their leader's direction.

So, how could Omar work on the development of the followers in the organization? This is a difficult question and one that would fit nicely into a leadership course. It is obviously a non-traditional situation, but one that would get the students thinking in a creative way about the challenges of leadership. In this case, students would need to incorporate and understanding of the context, existing constraints, leadership style, availability of personnel, follower dynamics, among other things. This is clearly not your traditional case study in leadership, but could certainly gain the students' attention and have them really think about leadership capabilities from a very unique point of view, therefore stretching students and perhaps educators thought processes.

Character

A leader's character plays an important role in defining what the organization stands for, what actions and behaviors are allowed in the organization, and also fills the key role of providing a positive role model for those in the organization. While this may appear obvious to most, the news has been inundated over the past several years of what happens when organizational leaders falter with their character. The results are typically catastrophic to the organization. With respect

to the Taliban, there are several examples that speak to this idea of character. First, there is a complete disregard for those the Taliban wish to rule – the Afghan population. This is evidenced by the brutal methods authorized by Omar regarding the Afghan population when the Taliban see something they do not agree with. For example, if an Afghan citizen is suspected of assisting the government of Afghanistan or working with coalition forces, those actions are punishable by death. A punishment, by the way, that is carried out quickly, efficiently, and with extreme brutality. A more recent example is the Taliban's reactions to local elections. In the past the Taliban have attempted to influence the elections by deliberately targeting anyone who works directly with the election. So, they were focusing on those who were enabling the election to happen. This year, however, there has been a shift to focus on Afghan population. Omar has now directed that it is okay to specifically target through threats, intimidation, bombing, kidnapping, and killing any Afghan civilian that goes out to vote. This means if local Afghan citizens want to vote for a favorite candidate, they are literally taking their lives into their hands by visiting a polling station. This unjustifiable disregard for the value of the Afghan population speaks to the character of the organization.

A second area where character is relevant is the Taliban's wanton disregard for targeting. The weapon of choice for the Taliban has been the improvised explosive device (IED). This is an effective weapon that is relatively straightforward to produce. While the Taliban state their primary goal is to rid Afghanistan of the infidels (i.e., coalition forces), they clearly have no problems generating civilian casualties in an effort to make this happen. They implant thousands of these devices and kill thousands of civilians every year in an attempt to impact the government of Afghanistan and International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) personnel. While people have different opinions about coalition forces being in Afghanistan, there is clearly a difference between targeting enemy forces and targeting innocent civilians. The Taliban has stated that they want to influence the Afghan people. They even borrow the phrase "winning the hearts and minds" that is often used by coalition forces, but it is difficult to win the hearts and minds of the people when you are literally killing them. They may listen out of fear, but this will only bring compliance and not commitment to the cause.

As an educator what a great challenge exists for you to walk through this situation with your students. There are multiple topics to talk about with respect to how character and leadership relate to the importance of the actions of the organization relative to the local community, what is acceptable behavior, legalities of action, ethics, and limits of authority. Classroom exercises could be developed to stretch student perceptions and link coursework to ongoing world events. Having

students take information that they are learning in class and having them use it to wrestle with difficult situations helps them to develop their critical thinking skills and realize the difficulties associated with leadership.

Leader Distance

The final theme has to with the concept of distance or physical separation from the organization. Leaders face several challenges when they are geographically separated from their organization. This is especially compounded when they are lacking in the first two themes discussed above (followers and character). In most traditional organizations the leader is resident in the organization. A basic purpose for this is to allow the leader to be responsive to and informed of what is going on daily within the organization. The issue of leader distance is exactly what the Taliban has to deal with every day. It is not that the country of Afghanistan is geographically large; however, it is that due to ongoing events. The leadership of the Taliban is limited in its movement and location (i.e., Pakistan). This creates several challenges. First, Mullah Omar is limited to operating out of Pakistan. He is being denied entry due to ISAF forces into the country in which his organization operates creates many hurdles to dealing with his organization. The result is he cannot directly deal with issues that occur with organizational members. For example, when he has a rogue member he cannot deal with the problem. He has to handle it by proxy. This typically means working though another organizational member and trusting the member will follow through. However, based on the character discussion above, trust may be a problem. If not dealt with, however, the inconsistency between the Taliban's rules and a member's individual actions can create doubt in the leader's ability to manage the organization. It can also create a problem space for Omar where organizational members may feel like they can do what they want since it will not be punished.

This distance issue is important for another reason. While Omar is relegated to operating out of Pakistan, he cannot also not directly see what is going on in his organization. This means he must take his personnel at their word when they relay information to him. Therefore, the information he receives about his organization (reporting) has to be good and accurate or he will make decisions based on faulty information. Since he is not able to have "eyes on" he does not know with certainty how different commanders in the field are behaving. As a result, issues such as drug use and corruption have become rampant in parts of the organization. As an example, if a regional commander has a good thing going with respect to earning extra income through intimidation tactics and taxes, why would he pass on that information? This can create schisms in the organization that can result in competing interests. In a perfect world organizational members buy into the organization's vision and are compensated for this support through their

paychecks and other benefits. This results in workers that are committed to the organization and feel that they are getting something fair out of the organization compared to what they are giving up supporting the organization. This does not seem to be the case with the Taliban. While they may support the vision of the organization, they often want to increase their power and income above and beyond what they earn solely through the Taliban.

The final issue has to do with his asking followers to do something they are not willing to do. Typically, a leader has either done or is willing to do what is asked of followers. As a military example, you cannot be a general without first being a lieutenant and working your way up through the ranks. When it is time to fight, the general is there in country with the troops. With respect to the Taliban, this is not the case. Since Omar is at a distance and away from the danger, he has relatively little to personally worry about. However, he is expecting of the people in his organization to go into harm's way on a daily basis. Some of these members are even required to conduct acts such as suicide bombings. In order to make this happen, he often has to resort to internal intimidation and threats to people within his organization who will be carrying out these actions.

For this theme there are multiple points of entry for discussion in the classroom. This addresses the limitations that often surround leadership. As we know, the context in which leadership is enacted sets the parameters in which the leader can operate. This opens up numerous opportunities to discuss the leeway a leader has based on situational constraints. Exercises such as role plays and case studies would be great venues to introduce and guide discussion for this theme.

Conclusion

As you can see, many of the leadership challenges traditional leaders face are present even in an organization like the Taliban. I started this deployment thinking there was probably not much I was going to be able to take away from this experience that would aid me in my endeavors as an educator. However, I was quite wrong. You never know when the challenges or opportunities that lie before you will shed a fresh perspective on your work. The lesson is to take advantage of these opportunities because you never know how they will develop you as an educator. While many educators may be feeling the pull toward "edutainment" where they feel the pressure to try to entertain students to keep them interested in the material, exploiting current events is a great way to keep them involved in class. So, look for your next opportunity.

References

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