

Leadership Q&A with the British Army



How do you become a leader?

Major Nick: That is a good question. I think it's through practice; I don't believe people are born leaders, I believe your personality might suit it better, but everyone can learn aspects of leadership and it's just how far you want to take it.

I think it's understanding what those traits are (and we've been through them with the Army leadership code, with a few examples of how to put it into practice), then study people who think are good leaders. It could be sportspeople, people from history, even people that you know.

Then the third and most important thing is practice – you've got to get out there and give it a go. It could be within Scouts, it could be on an expedition (I mentioned the Duke of Edinburgh's Award before) but you only become a good leader by trying, trying, trying. Will you ever become a perfect leader? No, you won't. From the age of 13 when I joined the air cadets, I've been involved in leadership for 30 years at different levels and I'm always learning and still becoming a leader and I will until I leave the Army.

Corporal Channon: I agree with that – it's definitely with practice and it's following what the people you look up to do as well.

What was P Company like, Major Nick?

Major Nick: I'll be very careful with my language here! P Company was really hard. So, I did it in 2001 (a while back), and there's plenty of information about P Company online. There's a series called The Paras on the BBC; I was involved in a documentary on ITV called The Paras: Men of War.

The reality is that everyone who is in the Parachute Regiment, regardless of rank, does P Company. It's five days, eight tests. It is hard – and it's designed to be hard. We've tested the same way since world war two. No matter how fit you think you are, you will be pushed to a physical (and more importantly, a mental) limit and it's seeing how you react when you reach that mental limit, that mental breaking point. You need to carry on. You just get on with it. You do not give up; you don't quit.

The hardest event by a mile, I think, is the log race. So, carrying a telegraph pole, eight of you, over a two-mile course. It's only 17 minutes (give or take), but you go from zero to maximum effort near enough straight away and it doesn't get any easier.

Some of you might be into sport, into fitness, which is good. But it's just doing that day after day after day after day – it really grinds your body down and it's just keeping going.

So, P Company is hard. It's got a pass rate of around 50% – but that doesn't mean you can't do it. Because if nobody thought they could do it or attempt it, then we wouldn't have any paratroopers. So, it is hard, it is difficult, but it's achievable. A bit of training and a bit of mental robustness and you'll be fine.

What are live air drops, Corporal Channon?

Corporal Channon: A live air drop is where we resupply areas by air that can't be resupplied by the ground. I think I mentioned I did a live air drop for the British Antarctic Survey – what we airdropped to them was fuel. For them to get the same amount of fuel container delivery systems that we can get, it would take them over a year, whereas we can carry 24 containers (each carrying four fuel drum containers) over one pass of a drop zone. The amount we can drop over one path is a huge amount compared to how long it would take them to get their aircraft to take exactly the same amount.

What would happen if someone didn't listen to the major?

Major Nick: I'm fortunate that I ultimately have got military law to fall back on. So, orders and direction that I give have to be legitimate and legal.

I've got no issue with an honest contest – if people disagree with my orders, I'm happy to be challenged on that, but ultimately, if you're a rank junior than me, you have to obey me and that's part of being in the Army. And I can sanction you, I can put you in jail, I can fine you or whatever, I've got military law to fall back on, but I'd rather lead by consent.

I'd rather you follow my direction because it's the right thing to do, you trust me (and I trust you). So if somebody didn't do what they were told, I would try to motivate them without using military discipline (because I think that's the right way to do it); I want to understand why they're not doing it. I get it all the time with the recruits at Winchester – and a lot of the time it's because they've got a lot of underlying personal issues that they need to get over, and I'd rather help them get through that so they can focus their energy and focus their mind on getting the job done.

You lead by example, you set an example, you talk to them directly, firmly, but with respect. You explain why you need to get things done and normally they do it. But it is a real art and it's taken me years to get it right – and I don't get it right all the time, to be honest.

How do you get respect straight away when you're one of the youngest and you have no track record?

Major Louise: That's a very good question. Sometimes, when you're a young officer and you've come straight in from finishing your year at Sandhurst, you've got much older, much more experienced Sergeants and Staff Sergeants and even Corporals who know what they're doing.

Major Nick: Even in Scouts, you're all volunteers there so you haven't got military law to fall back on. You earn respect – you never demand respect, you earn respect through your actions, through the example you set, and through the way you talk to people and motivate people.

Age shouldn't be a barrier, but I know it can be quite intimidating. [You have] to listen, listen to what other people are advising you to do. You still make the decision, but there's people out there who have loads of experience who are trying to be good followers who give you sound advice. But ultimately, it is your decision because you're the leader, but they also want you to do well.

That's what I like about the parachute regiment: we're all one team and we want to get the job done. It is hard when you're young to try to get respect, but you earn that respect by setting an example. Definitely listen to others, but ultimately, it's down to you as well. So that should hopefully build that foundation for you going forward.

Captain Luke: I think personally, from my experience, you just have to remember that leadership is something you can do. It's a behaviour, it's not some mystical thing. So if you start following the leadership behaviours, and act like a leader, you might not have the respect straight away when you show up, but you will get it through your actions and through your behaviours. It's important to remember that behaving like a leader will cause people to treat you like a leader – but if you don't behave like one, they're not going to treat you like one.

What is a good way to raise morale and motivate somebody to do something when they don't want to, for example, when they're tired, cold, or bored?

Corporate Channon: So, with the junior soldiers, for example, they had exercises a few weeks ago and it was very cold, it was wet, and it was muddy and their motivation to get them through that is passing that exercise. They need to pass that to be able to carry on and move on to the next stage of their training. Also, the progression of the next stage or their next part of their tests that they need to do. That also helps push them, keeping them motivated and seeing the end goal – finishing the exercise off, finishing that final attack, something like that.

Captain Luke: I think focusing on the end stage rather than the situation you're in is always good. I talked about striving for team goals, and I think it's important in challenging situations to remember

the goal you're going for rather than the situation that you're currently in.

If you have a team goal in mind and motivated people, you'll be amazed what people will go through to get to that team goal. So I think focussing on the end state is the way I would address that.

Major Nick, how do you motivate the trainees under your care?

Major Nick: It's similar to what's been mentioned – I think the only thing of value I could add on this point is trying to take off self-induced pressure from individuals or members of your team. I get it: when it's cold, wet, and miserable, your soul leaves you, you want to give up and quit – and that's a completely natural action but definitely focus on the end state.

The reason why you might not be motivated is that you've tipped over your pressure limit and that pressure limit's probably been reached because you've put too much self-induced pressure on yourself. There's two types of pressure: system-induced pressured and self-induced pressure.

The system, for example, is you're going to go on a 10 mile march carrying 30 kilos in 10 hours, over rough terrain. That is outside, system-induced pressure and that is hard enough. You're going to reach a physical and mental limit there.

What you don't need on top of that is you, internally, going 'I'm not good enough, I'm not fit enough, I'm never going to be able to do this, I'm going to let everyone down' – and all of a sudden, those self-induced increments mean you reach your limit and you just want to quit. So, take those away, control your self-doubt and then understand how you can get through the system-induced pressure and you'll achieve your goal. Take your mind off the present, take that self-doubt away, and focus on the end state.

Have you got any experiences of times when you've really valued good followers?

Corporal Channon: Yesterday, I had my junior soldiers (who are followers to me) and the progression of seeing them progress through and coming from a civilian into a soldier, the transition. Showing how they didn't know how to march, to how they conducted themselves on the pass out parade – being a follower and doing everything that I told them to do (and instructed them to do) was very good. And it just shows that they can then pass out and be very good soldiers.

Major Nick: It's really when I'm having a tough time – emotionally, being away can be quite emotionally draining, you've got that pressure of always trying to make the right decision, people's lives could depend on it, and again, always that doubt that creeps in.

And certainly in Afghanistan, I really appreciated some really good, sound support from the team and senior people who I was working with and in those little words of encouragement or saying 'yeah boss, you're fine, that's fine', it just lifts you.

I get a lot of personal satisfaction from seeing them doing well – it's camaraderie, I did feel it to a degree in the Air Cadets because you get that bond as a shared group. The hardship that you're doing through drives you together and it can form some really, really strong, really positive networks and teamwork. I think it is important because as a leader you will face some challenges, and when you're facing those challenges, it helps immeasurably when you've got even that tiniest bit of support from the rest of your team.

What is the toughest thing about being a leader?

Major Nick: I think it's the responsibility. An important thing about being a leader is taking responsibility for your actions and your decisions, and if they go wrong (or are going wrong) understanding when the need is to change that decision.

You're always thinking, that's quite hard and quite tough, but ultimately: things go wrong, it's down to you. And that's a big burden. But that's the privilege of being a leader as well, that when things go right, you will get the recognition and so will your team (because you can't do it on your own). So I think it's the burden of responsibility which I think, personally, is the biggest challenge.

Right now, my responsibility is getting 600 of my recruits out into the Army. I'm dealing with

all their issues and all their strengths and all their weaknesses. I want them to do well and to get them out. That's a 365 day a year job. But I love it – when they pass out, it's great.

Captain Luke: I'm going to have to agree, I think responsibility, and accepting responsibility – particularly when you've made mistakes. I've made a few, and just being able to admit that you've made a mistake and being responsible for it is probably the hardest thing you'll have to do. But conversely, as Major Nick said, when things go right, I would agree entirely with what he said.

Corporal Channon: I agree as well, it's the pressure. Mine's not on as big a scale – but mine is the pressure of making sure I do everything right in front of the junior soldiers, so that they're looking up to me, and conducting the correct drills, and aspiring to be like myself and the other section commanders when they pass out.

What's been the most valuable leadership learning opportunity you've experienced? What's taught you the most about leadership?

Captain Luke: I think in the Army, we're quite fortunate that we get to do a lot of training prior to going on the operations we do. We have a bit of a phrase: 'train hard, work easy'. I think the most valuable thing I've had in my leadership experience is going through those training exercises and those practices where we were allowed to make mistakes in a safe environment. I learned so much from that, and so much from my team, that I would have to put that down to proper training in that environment.

And that might be unique to the military, but I think there are things that we can take from that and apply to other organisations like Scouts. And I think it really comes down to that preparation: be prepared for what you're doing. I think that's one of the lessons I'll always take away from that – that preparation can really prevent poor performance.

Major Louise: Your leadership journey as Explorers (and even before then as Scouts) has already begun, and it's how you progress from here. Leadership is definitely a learning game and a developing game and you will develop as leaders throughout your life – I don't think you ever stop learning.

How do you choose a leader and how do you tell other leaders to calm down a bit and not be too shouty?

Major Louise: I'm not a particularly shouty person, but I've been in the Army as a leader for 23 years. So my leadership style is very different from others' leadership styles but it doesn't mean that it's wrong. You don't necessarily choose a leader: I think you've got to develop your own style. It's about being yourself. If you feel comfortable and you start this learning journey from now and take it forwards. There are times to be shouty, but there are other times where you don't need to raise your voice and you've got to get people to listen to you. So there is a time and a place.

Is being dyslexic an issue in the Army? Does it stop you joining the Army?

Major Nick: The answer is no, one hundred percent. Don't think if you've got dyslexia or dyscalculia, or dyspraxia that that's a bar to joining the Army at all. Just cos you've got dyslexia, doesn't mean you're stupid, it just means that your brain's wired up a little bit differently. It doesn't mean you can't do really well in the Army. I, for example, have got a learning support officer in my unit who helps people with dyslexia. It can often be undiagnosed and people can feel a bit awkward and embarrassed about it, but there's nothing wrong with it. If you'd like to join the military, dyslexia is not a barrier to doing that: you can still join.

Corporal Channon, who do you look up to for inspiration or mentorship?

Corporal Channon: I use my Platoon Sergeant and Platoon Commander who I work with quite regularly. They give me a lot of mentorship. Also other members that I work alongside in my

company. You get assigned a mentor and a mentor comes and sits in your lessons and observes you. That also helps with peer-to-peer feedback and helps me progress along with my teaching side of things and where I need to improve.

Major Nick, you said about a nervous 16 year old who didn't want to make mistakes or look foolish. How did you overcome those fears?

Major Nick: I did it by making mistakes and looking foolish! That's it really – it's just having the nerve to go and try it out, and you're never going to get it right all of the time.

So, certainly in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and I can imagine with Scouts, you'll always have a lot of supervision. So, if you're going to make some sort of catastrophic error, someone will be there to step in. And the same counts if you're on exercise, it's fine, it's safe to fail, it's OK to fail, and someone will always step in and bring you back if you're going to make a mistake.

So, it's really by doing that that I probably looked a bit foolish for about five minutes – yeah fine, but I understood why I made the wrong decision (probably a lot of self-induced pressure) and next time I made a better one and so on.

Unfortunately, the only way to get over it is don't be overruled by it and if you do end up looking a bit stupid, or a bit foolish, then so what? You can learn from every mistake you make. It's better to try than not at all, otherwise you're never going to develop as a leader.

How do you know if you are a good leader?

Major Nick: I think it's asking the people you work with. You can sit down and go 'oh I'm fantastic, I'm great, there's nothing wrong with me' and even when you do some self-reflection, you might miss something, because how you perceive yourself is going to be fundamentally different to maybe anyone else.

So there's a thing you can do called peer review – so I ask friends of mine with similar experience or rank, and say 'can we sit down for 10 minutes and you tell me where you think I'm going wrong, or where I'm doing well?'

That can be quite brutal, because people can come up with some quite scathing answers, so I think it's always better to do it not in a group because that can embarrass people. But I'm a big fan of peer review – we call it 360 feedback as well.

So, ask your team anonymously 'what do you think of my leadership style? What do you think I'm doing right? What do you think I'm doing wrong? How could I get better?' as long as you accept it might be a little bit uncomfortable to see, to experience, that's the only way you're going to pick up on that. Ask other people.

What tips would you give to someone who lacks confidence to enable them to have the courage to start their leadership journey?

Captain Luke: I think the biggest tip we talked about, having that fear of [not] being confident, is to just give it a shot and accept you might not get it right first time and that's OK.

I think the biggest thing you need to do is just be yourself and recognise that everybody's style of leadership is going to be different. So what you view as confidence might not be what someone else needs and might not be what your team needs to achieve the goal. So if you be yourself and just get out there and try it, you'll be OK.

Corporal Channon: The first step would be to take that step and putting yourself forward to actually start thinking in that command task or in that certain situation, putting yourself forward and then that starts your little process.

Major Luke: Just do it!

What has been your best motivating leadership memory in the Army?

Captain Luke: I think seeing members of my team promote has been the most motivating thing for me. When I see the members of my team doing well, achieving their goals and getting success in what they want – that's the most motivating thing I could hope for. And that's been the biggest reward for me, and provides me with motivation going forwards: helping out my team and making sure they succeed.

Major Nick: When you're in a training environment, like all three of us are, it's seeing the positive effect you have on young people. If I've made a five percent positive difference to their life, I get a lot of personal satisfaction from that. And it's seeing them go onto fantastic careers and carrying on that tradition of leadership and professionalism in the Army; and hopefully I've contributed in a very small way to that. So it's just reinforcing that success going forward.

It's not necessarily an 'I've achieved this and that'. To me, these days, I take it or leave it. It's just seeing other people do well and the fact that you've personally helped them in their journey.

Corporal Channon: In a netball situation, when I'm umpiring, seeing the actual players get to play because I'm one of the people helping them with that game, also gives me a good motivation to keep umpiring and keep supporting netball.

When you were in the Army, was it like the TV programme Bad Lads Army, and what tasks would you do at the Army Foundation College?

Major Louise: I can guarantee you, being in the Army is absolutely not like being in the TV show Bad Lad's Army. That was based on the 1950s, when there was conscription and young men, aged 18, were conscripted into the Army and that was the training they went through.

Corporal Channon: The first six weeks is focusing on the basic soldiering skills such as going out on first exercise and conducting weapon handling drills. Then it moves on into the second phase where we start to do other stuff such as more adventurous training. We do the educational side, so you get your English and Maths – if you've not got them – or you progress onto something else, like a higher level or NVQ. And then we continue to build the soldiering skills throughout.

Have you flown in an AC130?

Corporal Channon: Yes, an AC130J is the one I continuously work on.

Major Nick: I jump out of them for a living, so yes.

How do you deal with peer pressure when leading?

Major Nick: I ignore it, and I think the more senior you are in an organisation, the easier it is to ignore. But I think, Corporal Channon – don't want to speak for you – but I think your level might get a bit of negative peer influence on occasion. And certainly, when you're in Scouts or a youth organisation, you're there as volunteers, with not really a defined rank structure – so everyone's sort of trying to maybe be the top dog and assert themselves. I just try to ignore it. Again, peer pressure converts itself into another form of self-induced pressure, that puts doubts in your mind and ability, and you reach that stress level where you just want to quit. So, I know it's easy for me to say, and it's really hard to do, but I think the best thing is to try and ignore it. It's not adding value – just ignore it in a polite way.

What is it like to go to different countries with other Army members?

Captain Luke: It's really rewarding. It's a lot of fun – it's a great opportunity to meet other people from different cultures and it's entirely what you make of it. You find that leadership that you use in certain situations doesn't work well when working with other cultures, and it doesn't work well when working with other militaries, and you have to learn, and adapt, and change it. But those fundamental

behaviours we talked about – they remain. Massively rewarding. I've enjoyed every minute of it.

Major Nick: I've worked with loads: US, Kenyan Army, Afghan, Iraq, the French, and Croatians last year – language is normally the biggest issue. My surname is 'French': try and be attached to a French Army unit with a surname of 'French' and everyone thinks you can talk in French and you don't – it's a real pain. But it's really interesting just to see how people do different things differently, and you can learn a lot from them, and it's really awesome – it's a real eye opener.

And if you get the opportunity – I don't know if you have international Scout level meetings – definitely get on them, because you can learn a lot from people in different countries. And it's really rewarding and will make you a better person.

Have you enjoyed being in the Army?

Major Louise: I'll start by saying, absolutely. It's a bit like being in Scouts as an adult. It's great fun. The opportunities are great, and I've very much enjoyed it.

Major Nick: I love it. If I didn't like it, I'd leave. Simple as that. It's not just a job, it's a vocation. So it's a way of life. You could probably compare it to other aspects of the military, or being in the ambulance service, or the police, or even being a teacher. It's not just a job, it's a way of life. And if you don't enjoy it, there's no point in you doing it – go and find something else. 19 years down the line and I still really enjoy it. There's still loads of variety and interesting things to do. I'm really looking forward to the rest of my career.

Captain Luke: Absolutely – if I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't do it. I've loved it. I've found it really rewarding. I've been given some great opportunities. I've been really lucky and I've enjoyed every minute of it.

Corporal Channon: I agree. I've been to some amazing places and seen some amazing things (such as they have) and have had some amazing opportunities, and I haven't been in that long. I'm looking forward to the new opportunities that will arise in the future.

