

Operational Leadership

What makes a good operational leader? A combination of professional skills, and personal traits and characteristics are foundation for good operational leadership.

Some of those include: high intellect, decisiveness, moral courage, mental agility, creativeness, persistence, flexibility, ability to motivate subordinates, loyalty, determination, strong will and more.

Effective operational commanders commonly have skills, knowledge and insights acquired from their responsibilities in combat -- combined with a sound understanding of the technical aspects of warfighting.

Operational leaders need to be skilled communicators – possessing the ability to clearly and concisely articulate plans and orders. General Collin Powell observed that, “Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate and doubt to offer a solution everybody can understand.”

Boldness and decisiveness are essential. – which includes having the confidence to take a calculated risk when others are less willing to do so.

Effective operational leadership requires presence of mind, which includes being able to act decisively and independently in situations where contact with superiors is impractical or impossible. Resolute action is the first requirement in war. Operational commanders who only wait for explicit orders can't exploit sudden opportunities in combat.

Analytical and problem-solving skills are essential. This includes the ability to assess available data, combine it with personal and other commanders' knowledge and experience and then make a sound, practical decision. This also includes the ability to discern what's important and relevant in a given situation and discard what isn't.

Admiral Chester Nimitz, Command-in-Chief of the US Pacific Theater during World War II kept a card on his desk, to remind himself of the questions every operational commander should ask:

Is the proposed operation likely to succeed? What might be the consequences of failure? Is it in the realm of practicability in terms of material and supplies?

A good operational leader cultivates a broad, working knowledge of factors that can shape any given theater, such as foreign policy, diplomacy, geopolitics, the international economy, ethnicity and more. To be successful, the future operational commander must think broadly and beyond the domain of physical combat.

Operational commanders should fully comprehend both the military and nonmilitary aspects of the situation. They must be able to calculate and balance the factors of space, time and force -- several weeks or months in advance -- and then properly sequence and synchronize the use of both military and nonmilitary sources of power in accomplishing assigned strategic or operational objectives.

Finally, effective operational leaders need be skilled at handling both tangible and intangible demands of the job; such intangibles as -- the politics, personalities, conflicts among personnel, clashes of service cultures -- all inherent to leading. For example, consider the challenges faced by Admiral Nimitz. First, he was leading as one-half of a divided command, which adds additional dynamics to the demands of leading: political maneuvering, turf-guarding and plays for power, authority and resources. Next, he had to hold his own and build consensus among some legendary personalities and egos: A bombastic Army general with a larger-than-life personae, as well as an admiral who unabashedly lived-up to his nickname: bull.

Nimitz met the challenges without compromise -- but with grace -- a combination invaluable to sound operational leadership.

National-Strategic Leadership is the highest military leadership of a state, coalition, or alliance.

The President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense are responsible for leadership at this level, being the only two people with the authority to commit American armed forces into combat.

Civilian service secretaries, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the chiefs of Military Services, have administrative and advisory leadership roles at this level.

Military-Strategic Leadership is the highest operational level of command. Commanders at this level are responsible for the full range of military actions by the forces under national, alliance, or coalition command. The Unified Combatant Commanders exercise this level of leadership. Six of these are geographic commands

They provide Theater-Strategic leadership in their respective geographic commands, during a time of conflict. Theater Strategic Leadership is only exercised in the case of war or conflict.

Leaders at this level, must have the qualities needed to plan, prepare and execute sev

Admiral Nimitz and General MacArthur were Theater Strategic leaders in the Pacific Theater during World War II.

Theater Strategic commanders like Nimitz and MacArthur, rely heavily on *Operational Commanders* who can effectively apply the principles of operational art to plan and conduct operations. Admiral Halsey, Commander of the 3rd Fleet and Vice Admiral Kinkaid, Commander of the 7th Fleet were Operational Commanders at Leyte Gulf.

The final level of military leadership is tactical. These are the commanders who plan and fight the battles and engagements.

Nimitz MacArthur relied on the leadership skills, judgment -- and courage of naval tactical commanders. These included: Admiral Halsey in battleship *New Jersey*, Rear Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf on the *Louisville*, Rear Admiral Thomas Sprague in the escort carrier *Sangamon*, Rear Admiral Felix B. Stump, "Taffy Two" in the *Natoma Bay*, Rear Admiral Clifton Sprague in the *Fanshaw Bay* and Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher in the carrier *Lexington*

However, it's important to remember that command frequently requires commanders to lead at multiple levels.

This was the case at Leyte, where some commanders had both operational and tactical responsibilities.

Operational thinking is the very foundation of the commander's operational vision, specifically the ability to think far ahead of current events, accurately anticipate the enemy's actions and reactions, and then take timely and proper counteractions.

Operational thinking is not an inborn quality. It is acquired by a combination of direct and indirect influences. Professional education and training in peacetime are two of the most critical factors for obtaining an operational perspective. The most important indirect source for acquiring operational thinking is the consistent study of military and naval history.

In summary, what makes a good operational leader?

A combination of professional skills, and personal traits and characteristics are foundation for good operational leadership.

Some of those include: high intellect, decisiveness, moral courage, mental agility, creativeness, persistence, flexibility, ability to motivate subordinates, loyalty, determination, strong will and more.

They must think operationally, which provides the foundation for operational vision.