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CHANGING JOB REQUIREMENTS IN RELATION TO REQUIRED ABILITIES OR PERSONALITY TRAITS DURING A MILITARY CAREER

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Introduction

I started my military training at the Royal Military Academy in 1966. I have held several officer positions over the years (including those of company commander of an armoured infantry battalion). Over all these years I have needed knowledge, experience and skills to perform these jobs properly. In recent years I have been responsible for the psychological selection policy in the Royal Netherlands Army. In that position I was able to assist in the reassessment of the requirements. This was required because conscription in the Netherlands was suspended a few years ago and in addition the focus has shifted from large-scale, high intensity conflicts to smaller operations in which personnel are required to perform new tasks and different conduct is expected from officers.

Content of the Paper

My paper reviews a Dutch exploratory survey by Wassenberg, which entailed interviews with some twenty former military personnel who have held positions as senior managers. The requirements set of senior management were catalogued on the basis of the study. I shall then proceed to deal with the differences in positions held by officers at the middle and lowest level. The requirements for officers at the various levels can be formulated on the basis of this comparison and the resultant differences. In view of the limited time available today, we can discuss them only summarily. My paper will round off with some concluding remarks.

Some Observations in Advance

Before proceeding to explore the Wassenberg study, I should like to make some observations in advance. During my work as officer, I became extremely interested in the phenomenon of

leadership and management. There is a great deal of literature, albeit of variable quality, on this subject. The majority is fairly theoretical in nature, in the sense of it lacking empirical foundation. Descriptions and analysis of what actually happens are therefore rare. Sometimes texts served to set the norm, indicating what a good officer does. But many of these theories differed from my own experience of what I saw happening about me. This aroused my curiosity.

Before to continue, we must first define the three different levels of management in further detail:

- the lowest level is platoon and company commander;
- the middle level is battalion and brigade commander;
- the highest level (senior management) is army corps commander and in the Netherlands, Commander in Chief of the Royal Netherlands Army/Air Force/Navy and Chief of Defence Staff.

Exploratory Study of Top-Level Management

The exploratory Wassenberg study was designed to further define the behaviour of senior managers, to "verify" a number of ideas and to gain some fresh insights. We opted for an approach which involved interviews with some twenty former military personnel who had acted as senior managers. There were two reasons for this. First of all, Wassenberg wanted to "spoil" the field of the definitive study as little as possible. He wanted to avoid those whom he had approached during the survey actually participating in the final study. That has, it must be said, a number of irritating effects. Secondly, the former managers have more time and are easier to approach. Finally – and what is more important still – they have some measure

of distance. Apart from the former senior managers, three who were still in active service were approached to give some idea of the current situation and also as a sort of "check".

The interviews were open in nature, the interviewees were free to answer the questions posed in the way they chose. First of all, they were asked to describe the highest post they had held. This was mainly to find out in more detail what activities were involved. The interviewer then proceeded to ask more about the whys and wherefores to form as solid a picture as possible. The differences were then raised with the positions held at middle and lowest executive level of the organisation. Finally, the interviewer asked about the qualifications/qualities specifically required for the most senior level and the way in which they had been acquired.

Results

The results of the interview can be classified in three categories, which Wassenberg specifies as follows:

- a) Conceptualisation
- b) Planning and giving direction
- c) Leadership

a) Conceptualisation

Conceptualisation is future-oriented. We are talking here about the *raison d'être* of the organisation and its contribution to safeguarding the world around us. The future is uncertain as a result of a wide variety of unpredictable developments. The time frame was generally some 5 to 10 years. To overcome this uncertainty, senior managers actively collect information on the future developments in the vicinity of the organisation. Some picture is then formed of how the world fits together and will fit together, and what are the most important causes and what the consequences are. In view of the lack of certainty, alternatives are developed regarding the most probable developments. Contacts are established and maintained with an entire network of relevant bodies and institutions to collect information. The literature is also eagerly studied, not just books

and journals connected with the organisation, but covering a wide range of subjects. The higher the position in the organisation, the more these activities were quoted.

In this manner, some picture of the surrounding world is established and subjected to ongoing adjustment. They then identify the threats lying in store for the organisation. These are interpreted as challenges demanding a satisfactory response. This results in thinking of alternative directions for solutions and boundaries within which the ultimate approach must remain. Finding them requires imagination and originality. In general, people confine themselves to a few alternatives to avoid failing to see the wood for the trees. It is then a matter of developing the most probable outcome. The question of which one is selected depends upon the question of whether this tallies in terms of possibilities within the organisation or within its environment. This requires sound knowledge and understanding of what is happening in the organisation and may happen, and the flexibility called for by the necessary changes.

b) Planning and giving direction

Activities in this field are more concrete than those in the field of conceptualisation. They embroider upon what has been developed and explored at the conceptual phase. Sometimes, this implies operationalising them, sometimes the tasks are clearly given. The objective is to allow duties to be discharged at the lower level and to give them direction. This involves such matters such as job allocation, managing and controlling mutual dependency relationships between units, depending upon the requirements of the task, drawing up priorities for the allocation of resources to the units, co-ordination and control of activities over time. There is a heavy emphasis on planning and feedback. The net result of all this are procedures, instructions, guidelines and limits within which one must remain and criteria for assessing the result and/or the way in which it is achieved. The information required is gathered with a high level of focus on carrying out one's responsibilities. The thinking is based on facts and is concentrated on weighing up benefits and drawbacks. It is highly analytical, abstract and logical in nature.

c) Leadership

Leadership is concerned with immediate dealings with employees. The aim is to induce and encourage them to fulfil their responsibilities as effectively as possible. Major elements are designating concrete duties, checking and motivation. Competence in professional skills and interpersonal skills play a predominant role. At the senior level, leadership is not confined to immediate subordinates, but also extends to the entire organisation. The employee at the lowest level must be convinced that the boss at the highest level knows what is going on and will do all he can to ensure that he can perform well. This remote leadership is disputed in the literature, but almost all those interviewed quoted it as an essential point. There is strong support for this from studies in the Israeli armed forces.

Comparison of Levels

The most striking difference with the middle level lies in the breadth of the field of vision, the time perspective and the degree of concreteness. The most senior managers have a view of the surrounding world and the entire organisation. At the middle level that view is generally confined to one's own unit and "adjacent" units. The future timescale is also limited to a maximum of a few years. Contacts with the world in which the organisation operates are also less frequent and within the organisation they are mainly focused on what is required to perform the job. The activities cover operationalising what has been handed down "from above", planning and implementing it. Senior managers do the same, but at the middle level the range is much smaller and the tasks more concrete. Dealing with direct subordinates is more directive than at the senior level. The contrast with management positions at the lowest executive level is even greater. The emphasis there is on applying professional and personal skills. The time frame varies from the here and now to a few months. Contacts are mainly confined to the immediate unit.

At the lowest level, the managerial task is very much the dominating feature. In addition, the provision of information to one's own unit and improvising make up a significant proportion of the duties. All these activities call upon personal, communicative and professional skills as well as a talent for improvisation. In view of the limited

time available, I cannot go any further into the qualities required.

At the middle level, it is a question of such activities as allocating resources and acting as monitor and liaison, spokesman and figurehead. This makes heavy demands upon cognitive and analytical skills. Within this complex of activities, providing leadership, providing information and 'trouble shooting' are still a feature. However, in a different way from the lower level, it is more a question of creating conditions under which things can be carried out. In view of the enormous volume of information and lack of time, important matters have to be quickly distinguished from secondary matters. Finally, middle managers require more social and communicative skills.

We can conclude from the Wassenberg study that virtually all respondents are of the opinion that operating at the senior level demands special qualities. This very much calls upon intellectual capacity, which includes logical, analytical and abstract thinking. In addition, integrative skills are indispensable. The latter entails the capacity to form an overall picture of the setting, organisation and oneself as well as developments within them, looking to the future. The knowledge acquired, understanding and experience, logical abstraction and analytical qualities, feelings, personal values and norms are moulded into a whole, such that the parts are coordinated and are accepted for their full value. Almost all the respondents, each in their own way, refer to the importance of this integrative capacity.

The question is: how was it acquired? Naturally, there must be some "genetic baggage". Over and above this, experience is gained by operating at various places and under different circumstances. All the interviewees considered this a necessary prerequisite, though certainly not sufficient on its own. Training, study and education are also indispensable. But that still is not enough. Some of the most senior top-level managers emphasised a wide interest going far beyond the limits of what is specific to one's own company. Modern philosophy is one of the examples listed here. Last but certainly by no means least, some mental maturity is deemed necessary. Some respondents associated this with a particular phase in life, which roughly comes at the age after 40-45.

What does this mean for the selection of officers?

Basically, selection must be focused primarily on knowledge of one's subject, interpersonal and communicative skills, as well as the capacity for improvisation. In so far as these cannot be directly investigated, one must confine oneself to identifying a capacity receptive to being trained in them. For senior positions in the organisation, one must be particularly alert to the presence of analytical ability. Such aspects as imagination, creativity and what is termed integrative capacity, must be the deciding factor with candidates at the highest level. The selection must also take account of the candidate's phase in life. There is little point in investigating someone's qualities when his phase of development suggests he is not yet ready. As, however, this development does not proceed in the same way for all people, there is the possibility that some will be later than others in reaching it and even overtake the others at some future date. There are, however, people who never acquire integrative capacities, however excellent their analytical qualities. Continuous monitoring of candidates around the age of 40 will therefore be necessary. There is little point in early selection. The only thing that can give an indication at a younger age is a very wide interest and participation in society.