



The 20th International Scientific Conference
**“DEFENSE RESOURCES MANAGEMENT
IN THE 21st CENTURY”**
Braşov, October 30th-31st 2025



COMMANDING OFFICERS' ROLE IN MOTIVATING PEOPLE

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Abstract

This essay offers an in-depth exploration of the critical role commanding officers play in fostering motivation among their personnel, both in military and broader organizational settings. Motivation is not merely a supplemental aspect of leadership — it is a cornerstone of effective command, directly influencing mission readiness, unit cohesion, morale, and long-term organizational performance. The essay begins by examining the significance of motivation in high-pressure environments, where mental resilience, trust, and clarity of purpose are essential. It then evaluates the comparative strengths of transformational and transactional leadership styles, noting that effective leaders often incorporate both approaches to achieve a balance between visionary inspiration and structured accountability.

Beyond leadership theory, the essay delves into practical methods of motivation, including the power of recognition and feedback, the necessity of transparent and empathetic communication, and the importance of providing opportunities for growth and development. These elements, when delivered consistently, build trust and psychological safety, allowing individuals to thrive. The paper also emphasizes the commanding officer's role as a role model — someone who leads by example in integrity, courage, and dedication, reinforcing the values they wish to instill in their team. Attention to personnel well-being, both physical and psychological, emerges as a key leadership responsibility, especially in environments that demand sustained performance under stress. The essay concludes by asserting that motivation cannot be commanded; it must be inspired through authentic leadership, emotional intelligence, and a deep investment in people. In doing so, commanding officers not only ensure tactical success but also cultivate an enduring legacy of respect, loyalty, and excellence.

Keywords: *motivation; hierarchy; leadership; effectiveness; collective success.*

Introduction

In every structured and hierarchical institution—whether military, corporate, or civic—leadership is a fundamental determinant of collective success. Within the military, commanding officers play a particularly crucial role not just in strategic decision-making, but in inspiring and energizing the people under their command. The effectiveness of any military unit is not solely dependent on tactics or firepower, but also on the morale, dedication, and motivation of its personnel.

The role of commanding officers has evolved from being merely enforcers of discipline and strategy to becoming motivators, mentors, and emotional anchors. In high-stress, high-stakes environments such as the military, where personnel are constantly exposed to physical danger, emotional strain, and psychological fatigue, the ability of a commanding officer to motivate and uplift their team becomes indispensable. Their leadership can determine whether individuals feel valued, engaged, and committed — or whether they become demoralized and disengaged.

This essay explores how commanding officers motivate those under their command by examining their leadership styles, emotional intelligence, communication skills, recognition practices, and concern for overall well-being. It argues that effective motivation stems not only from authority but from empathy, empowerment, and example-setting — qualities that transform a commander from a superior into a true leader.



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1. Leadership Style and Its Impact on Motivation

The style of leadership adopted by commanding officers greatly influences the motivation of their subordinates. In military and organizational settings, commanding officers employ various leadership styles, each with distinct effects on motivation. Understanding these styles, particularly transformational and transactional leadership, provides valuable insights into how commanding officers can effectively inspire and motivate their personnel. Transformational leaders inspire and empower their subordinates by creating a vision, fostering an environment of trust, and encouraging innovation. They focus on personal development and intrinsic motivation. In contrast, transactional leaders emphasize discipline, order, and a system of rewards and punishments.

In military settings, a balance between the two styles is often necessary. Commanding officers who are too authoritarian may stifle initiative and breed resentment, while those who are too lenient may compromise discipline. Effective leaders adapt their style based on the needs of the unit and the situation, demonstrating flexibility and situational awareness. By doing so, they cultivate respect, loyalty, and motivation among their personnel.

1.1 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is characterized by the ability to inspire and elevate followers by creating a shared vision and fostering an environment of trust and collaboration. Commanding officers who adopt this style focus on several key components that enhance motivation:

Transformational leaders inspire a *shared vision* by articulating a compelling purpose that resonates with personnel, helping them connect their individual roles to broader organizational goals. This intrinsic motivation fosters pride in their contributions and drives engagement [1, 6]. They emphasize *individualized support*, understanding each team member's unique needs and aspirations, which fosters a sense of belonging and value, ultimately enhancing performance [1, 7]. *Building trust* and respect is fundamental; when leaders demonstrate integrity and genuine concern, they create a secure environment that motivates collaboration [1, 43]. Additionally, transformational leaders *encourage innovation and creativity* by promoting a culture where ideas can flourish, empowering team members to think outside the box [1, 53]. Finally, by *fostering personal development* through training and career advancement opportunities, leaders show their investment in their personnel's futures, significantly boosting motivation and commitment to the team's success [1, 153].

Rear Admiral Chester Nimitz's leadership following the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941 stands as a prime example of transformational leadership in a military context. Confronted with a demoralized and disorganized Pacific Fleet, Nimitz implemented a series of strategic initiatives aimed at restoring morale, building strong relationships, empowering his subordinates, and articulating a clear vision for eventual victory. He quickly reassured his staff, expressing confidence in their abilities to recover and prevail. By actively touring facilities and engaging with personnel, he fostered trust and demonstrated empathy, crucial for rebuilding team cohesion. Nimitz also encouraged initiative by decentralizing decision-making, which allowed his officers to take ownership of their roles. His calm demeanor and unwavering resolve inspired confidence among the fleet, leading to a rapid improvement in morale. This revitalization facilitated the swift repair of damaged ships and the integration of new vessels, ultimately transforming the Pacific Fleet into a formidable fighting force. The successful execution of pivotal strategies in key battles, such as the Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway, underscored the effectiveness of his leadership. Nimitz's ability to create a culture of innovation and adaptability was critical in overcoming the challenges posed by a technologically advanced enemy across vast oceanic distances. His leadership



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not only revitalized a defeated fleet but also highlighted the essential qualities of character, vision, and empathy that define effective military leadership [2].

1.2 Transactional Leadership

In contrast, transactional leadership relies on a system of rewards and punishments to motivate personnel. This style is characterized by the following key elements: *Clear expectations and structured guidance* are central to transactional leadership, where commanding officers set defined performance goals and clear standards that help personnel understand their specific roles and responsibilities. This approach enhances motivation by fostering accountability—team members are more likely to stay on track when they know exactly what is expected of them and how their performance will be measured. In parallel, *performance-based rewards* are used as external motivators, offering tangible incentives such as promotions, commendations, or other recognitions to reinforce desired behaviors and outcomes. While this can be effective in driving short-term performance and ensuring task completion, it may also lead to surface-level engagement. When motivation is tied primarily to rewards rather than internal satisfaction or alignment with mission goals, individuals may lack a deeper commitment to the organization’s values or long-term objectives. Thus, while transactional leadership can be highly efficient in structured environments like the military, it should be balanced with intrinsic motivators to cultivate sustained dedication and meaningful contribution [1, 103].

A good example of the transactional leadership is the case of “Desert Storm”, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, as Commander of Coalition Forces during the Gulf War in 1991, faced the challenge of uniting a diverse multinational force to counter Iraqi aggression, necessitating a leadership style that ensured discipline, clarity, and effective coordination. He adopted a transactional leadership approach by providing clear, explicit orders so every unit understood its role and responsibilities, recognizing and rewarding achievements to motivate troops, and enforcing strict accountability with immediate corrective actions for deviations or underperformance. As a result, coalition forces operated efficiently and cohesively despite their diverse backgrounds, achieving a rapid and decisive victory over Iraqi forces, with the emphasis on discipline and clear directives contributing to minimal friendly casualties. This case demonstrates that transactional leadership, with its focus on clear expectations, rewards, and accountability, is highly effective in military operations requiring strict discipline and coordination, though it may be less suitable in situations that demand adaptability and innovation [3].

Effective military leadership combines transformational and transactional approaches to optimize both motivation and operational effectiveness. Transformational leadership, exemplified by Admiral Nimitz, builds long-term commitment through inspirational vision, trust-building, and empowerment - essential for morale restoration and innovative thinking. Transactional leadership, as demonstrated by General Schwarzkopf, delivers immediate results through clear expectations, performance-based rewards, and structured accountability systems. The most successful commanders integrate these complementary styles: using transformational techniques to create shared purpose and intrinsic motivation, while applying transactional methods to ensure disciplined execution. This dual approach develops adaptable, high-performing teams that can meet complex challenges, with skilled leaders employing emotional intelligence and communication prowess to balance inspirational messaging with precise operational directives, thereby sustaining both engagement and performance standards.



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2. Communication and Emotional Intelligence

Effective communication is fundamental to successful leadership and teamwork, especially in high-stakes environments. A leader's emotional intelligence significantly impacts communication effectiveness, enabling them to recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions while being sensitive to the emotions of others. This skill allows commanding officers to gauge the emotional states of their troops, respond appropriately, and create a supportive atmosphere. Empathy and understanding are not signs of weakness; they are vital traits for leaders who wish to build trust and rapport. Commanding officers must convey objectives, expectations, and feedback in an authoritative yet empathetic manner, as ambiguity and inconsistency can lead to confusion, frustration, and decreased morale. Moreover, effective communication includes active listening, which makes subordinates feel heard and valued, ultimately enhancing their engagement.

2.1 Understanding Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is built on five essential components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. *Self-awareness* enables individuals to recognize and understand their own emotions, helping them assess how these emotions affect their actions and interactions. This insight promotes honest and reflective communication. *Self-regulation* is the capacity to control emotional impulses, allowing leaders to remain composed and responsive under pressure, which contributes to clearer, more balanced decision-making. *Motivation*, especially when intrinsic, fuels a leader's drive to achieve goals with enthusiasm and persistence, creating a ripple effect of motivation across the team. *Empathy*, or the ability to perceive and understand others' emotions, deepens interpersonal connections and strengthens trust, which is critical for collaboration and morale. It also enables leaders to respond thoughtfully and appropriately to the emotional needs of others. Lastly, strong *social skills* are key to managing relationships effectively—leaders use them to influence others, resolve conflicts, foster teamwork, and communicate persuasively. These five pillars of emotional intelligence collectively enhance a leader's ability to inspire, connect with, and guide others in a meaningful and impactful way [5].

To see how these components come to life in practice, let's explore a real-world case study that illustrates the transformative impact of emotional intelligence on leadership and organizational performance - The U.S. Air Force faced recruitment challenges in the late 1990s and sought to improve the effectiveness of its recruiters. To address this, the Air Force implemented the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i) to assess recruiters' EI competencies, focusing on areas such as Assertiveness, Empathy, Happiness, and Emotional Self-Awareness. Recruiters who scored higher in these EI domains were found to be significantly more successful in their roles. By incorporating EI assessments into the recruiter selection process, the Air Force nearly tripled its ability to predict recruiter success and achieved annual savings of about \$3 million. This success led the Government Accountability Office to recommend that all military branches consider EI-based selection procedures. Beyond recruitment, the Air Force continued to emphasize EI in leadership development, such as through the Air University's Leadership Development Course at Maxwell Air Force Base, which focuses on empathy and interpersonal communication to address toxic leadership and foster a more inclusive culture. The key takeaway is that integrating emotional intelligence into recruitment and leadership development not only improves organizational effectiveness and cost efficiency but also supports diversity and a positive organizational culture [6].

2.2 The Role of Communication in Leadership

Effective communication encompasses not only the transmission of information but also the ability to listen actively and foster a two-way dialogue. Leaders must be adept at articulating their



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thoughts clearly while also being receptive to feedback and concerns from their team members. Clear communication helps eliminate misunderstandings and sets accurate expectations, leaders who communicate with clarity and transparency build trust and credibility within their teams, fostering an environment where personnel feel valued and heard. Active listening enhances this dynamic by ensuring leaders not only hear but engage with and understand their team members, demonstrating empathy and respect that boost morale and strengthen relationships. Additionally, constructive feedback, delivered in a supportive and encouraging manner, plays a crucial role in helping individuals grow, build confidence, and improve performance. Conflict resolution is another vital aspect of leadership communication — since disputes are inevitable in any group, leaders with emotional intelligence must address them sensitively and tactfully, using effective communication to mediate disagreements and promote a collaborative, cohesive team environment.

2.3 The Interplay of Communication and Emotional Intelligence

Communication and emotional intelligence are reciprocally linked, with high emotional intelligence boosting communication skills and effective communication nurturing emotional intelligence. Empathetic and authentic leaders build trust, fostering open communication and psychological safety, while also enhancing team collaboration by recognizing emotional dynamics, addressing issues effectively, motivating others, and facilitating cooperation, leading to improved problem-solving, innovation, job satisfaction, and informed decision-making. To leverage these benefits, leaders can employ strategies such as regular self-reflection, empathy training, feedback mechanisms, and mindfulness practices, which promote self-awareness and interpersonal effectiveness, enabling composed and respectful interactions, especially during challenging conversations. Ultimately, integrating emotional intelligence into communication practices is crucial for effective leadership, driving individual, team, and organizational success, and underscoring the importance of honing these skills for navigating the complexities of human interaction in any environment.

3. Leading by Example

One of the most powerful tools in a commanding officer’s arsenal is personal example, as soldiers are far more likely to follow leaders who consistently embody the values and standards they espouse, such as integrity, courage, discipline, and commitment. When officers share in the hardships of their troops, participate in drills, and remain visible and involved, they reinforce their credibility and strengthen unit cohesion, while leaders who distance themselves or exploit their rank for privilege quickly lose respect and motivation from subordinates.

Leading by example also means handling failure and adversity with honesty—officers who admit mistakes, take responsibility, and learn from setbacks model resilience and foster a growth mindset within the unit. This principle extends beyond the military; in every corner of society, true leadership stands out not by command but by conduct. “Leading by example” is more than a phrase — it is a principle rooted in action, where leaders model the behaviors, values, and standards they expect from others, inspiring trust, loyalty, and excellence. Inconsistency, such as emphasizing punctuality but arriving late, breeds cynicism, while leaders who are punctual, attentive, and reliable become mirrors for their teams’ behavior. By “getting their hands dirty,” staying late, or being open to feedback, leaders demonstrate humility and teamwork, motivating employees to go the extra mile. Trust, the foundation of any strong team, is built through consistency between words and actions, and leaders who show accountability and empathy foster psychological safety and high performance. In today’s digital age, where remote collaboration and rapid change are the norm, leading by example is even more critical, requiring resilience, clear communication, and emotional intelligence.



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Though challenging, as it demands self-awareness and adaptability, leading by example is the foundation of authentic leadership, transcending industry and role, and through action—not instruction—leaders inspire, gain credibility, and build thriving teams.

Captain Florent Groberg’s actions in Afghanistan in 2012 exemplify “Leading by Example” in military leadership, showcasing how courage and self-sacrifice can save lives and inspire others. As a U.S. Army officer commanding a personal security detachment, Groberg was responsible for protecting senior U.S. and Afghan officials. On August 8, 2012, while leading a patrol in Kunar Province, he noticed a suspicious individual approaching the formation. Reacting instantly, Groberg moved toward the threat, physically confronting and pushing the individual away from the group. As he and another soldier tackled the suspect, the man detonated a suicide vest, causing a massive explosion. Groberg’s decisive and selfless actions absorbed much of the blast, saving many lives, though four Americans were lost. Despite suffering severe injuries, including significant damage to his left leg, Groberg’s primary concern remained the safety of his team. His willingness to act without hesitation, placing himself in harm’s way, set a powerful example for his unit and reinforced the importance of vigilance, courage, and putting others first. For his valor, Groberg was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Barack Obama in 2015, becoming one of the few living recipients of this highest military decoration for actions in the War on Terror. The outcome of Groberg’s leadership was not only the immediate preservation of lives but also a lasting impact on the morale and cohesion of his unit, who witnessed firsthand the profound effect of a leader willing to share the risks of combat. The key takeaway from Captain Groberg’s example is that true leadership is demonstrated through action—by confronting danger, prioritizing the welfare of others, and embodying courage and duty, leaders can inspire extraordinary loyalty and performance [7].

4. Recognition and Empowerment

Motivation thrives in environments where achievements are recognized and individuals feel empowered. Commanding officers play a critical role in ensuring that soldiers receive acknowledgment for their efforts, whether through formal commendations or informal praise. In the demanding realm of military leadership, a commanding officer wields many tools — discipline, strategy, and authority among them. Yet, two of the most underappreciated but profoundly transformative tools in a commanding officer’s arsenal are recognition and empowerment.

Recognition boosts morale, reinforces desired behaviors, and builds a sense of pride and belonging. It is essential, however, that recognition is perceived as fair and merit-based to avoid fostering resentment. Recognition is more than ceremony or medals — it is the daily acknowledgment of effort, commitment, and growth. When a commanding officer publicly recognizes a soldier’s initiative or resilience, it sends a powerful message: **You are seen, and your contribution matters.** This simple act fosters motivation, loyalty, and trust, essential traits for cohesion under pressure. Recognition sustains morale, especially in environments where risks are high and routine can be grueling.

Empowerment involves entrusting subordinates with responsibilities, encouraging initiative, and supporting decision-making at all levels. When soldiers feel that their contributions matter and that they have a degree of control over their work, their motivation increases significantly. Commanding officers who mentor and develop their personnel not only enhance current performance but also build future leaders. It transforms the traditional command hierarchy into a dynamic network of trusted decision-makers. A commanding officer who empowers subordinates encourages them to take ownership, exercise judgment, and innovate in real-time. It creates adaptive leaders at every level — an invaluable asset in today’s complex operational landscapes [8].



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Together, recognition and empowerment forge a command climate where soldiers are not just followers, but active participants in mission success. This blend of respect and responsibility cultivates a stronger, smarter force — one that is prepared not only to follow orders but to lead when needed.

5. Supporting Well-being and Morale

In the heart of every successful military unit lies more than discipline and tactics — it lies the unseen force of morale and well-being. For a commanding officer, supporting these elements is a strategic act of leadership. It is a quiet power that sustains performance, loyalty, and endurance through adversity. Commanding officers must be attuned to the physical, mental, and emotional needs of their troops. This includes ensuring access to medical care, managing workloads, and promoting rest and recovery.

Mental health, in particular, requires proactive attention. Stigma surrounding psychological issues can prevent soldiers from seeking help. Officers who openly support mental health initiatives and create a culture of openness contribute to overall morale and resilience. When the unit is on a prolonged deployment. The operational tempo is high, conditions are tough, and home feels distant. Here, the commanding officer’s ability to support emotional resilience becomes vital. By checking in personally, listening with intent, and fostering camaraderie, the commanding officer does more than lead — he or she sustains.

Well-being initiatives — such as rotating duties, facilitating communication with families, or offering psychological support — signal care and foresight. They remind service members they are not just assets, but valued individuals. Morale, in turn, is lifted not only by victories in the field but by a command climate that recognizes humanity amidst hardship. The well-being of personnel is a fundamental component of sustained motivation. A commanding officer who supports morale and well-being builds more than a team — they build trust, and trust is the bedrock of military success. When soldiers feel seen, heard, and supported, they don’t just follow — they give their best [9].

6. Other Case Studies and Examples

Historical and contemporary examples unequivocally demonstrate the profound and far-reaching influence that commanding officers wield over the motivation and ultimate effectiveness of military personnel. A quintessential illustration of this is General Dwight D. Eisenhower's leadership during World War II. His command was characterized by a distinct fusion of strategic foresight and astute emotional intelligence. Eisenhower's impactful presence on the front lines, his personal engagement with his troops, and his inclusive leadership approach were instrumental in unifying a diverse coalition of forces under a singular, overarching mission. His motivational impact transcended mere issuance of orders; he actively fostered a deep-seated belief in the cause and instilled unwavering confidence in eventual victory. Indeed, military effectiveness, defined as the ability to produce favorable military outcomes, is profoundly shaped by such high-quality leadership, and militaries often make demotion and promotion decisions based on this understanding [10].

In the asymmetric environments of Iraq and Afghanistan, the traditional hierarchical structure of command was often less effective than adaptive, decentralized leadership. Junior officers and NCOs frequently operated autonomously, relying on their training, judgment, and interpersonal skills to navigate complex social and combat situations. They were not only tactical leaders but also diplomats, mentors, and mediators—especially when engaging with local populations and coalition partners. These leaders earned trust through consistent actions, respect for cultural norms, and moral clarity. Their ability to lead small units under fire, manage civil-military interactions, and respond



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humanely to the needs of civilians set a new standard for modern military leadership. Importantly, their actions often prevented minor incidents from escalating into strategic setbacks. Ultimately, the extraordinary leadership shown by junior ranks during these conflicts underscores the enduring truth: leadership is not confined to rank but proven in action. [11].

When Alan Mulally took over as CEO of Ford in 2006, he inherited a company on the brink of collapse — losing \$17 billion annually with deeply demoralized employees and fractured operations. His leadership approach centered on creating the unifying "One Ford" vision, which aligned all global divisions under shared objectives, much like a commanding officer rallying troops around a critical mission. Mulally instituted military-style weekly "Business Plan Review" meetings that mandated radical transparency, where executives had to report progress using standardized color-coded metrics (green/yellow/red), fostering accountability akin to a battlefield debrief. He reinforced positive behaviors through personalized recognition like handwritten "You're awesome!" notes—a civilian parallel to military commendations — while modeling steadfast optimism during the 2008 financial crisis by refusing bankruptcy (unlike competitors GM and Chrysler), demonstrating the same resolve Admiral Nimitz showed after Pearl Harbor. This combination of strategic clarity, visible leadership, and psychological resilience drove remarkable results: Ford returned to profitability within three years without government bailouts, employee engagement surged by 48%, and by 2013, Ford became the world's most profitable automaker. Mulally's success underscores how civilian leaders can apply military-grade leadership—merging unshakable vision with daily engagement — to turn around even the direst organizational crises [12].

Conclusion

In the modern military environment, the importance of motivation cannot be overstated, and commanding officers play a central role in cultivating and sustaining it. This role extends beyond enforcing orders to encompass mentorship, communication, leading by example, and advocating for the well-being of personnel. Leadership style significantly shapes motivation, and a balanced approach between transformational and transactional methods enables commanding officers to inspire long-term commitment while maintaining discipline. Transformational leadership—centered on empathy, vision, and personal growth—drives intrinsic motivation, while transactional leadership ensures order and immediate compliance. Equally essential is emotional intelligence and effective communication; leaders who actively listen, empathize, and communicate clearly foster trust, cohesion, and psychological safety within their units. Moreover, leading by example, especially in challenging conditions, reinforces credibility and cultivates unity. Recognition and empowerment are powerful motivators — when soldiers feel valued and are entrusted with responsibility, their pride and engagement rise, nurturing future leaders. Attention to well-being is not optional but a core leadership duty, addressing physical, mental, and emotional needs to preserve morale and operational effectiveness. Historical and contemporary examples confirm that effective leadership, rooted in compassion and competence, directly drives performance. Ultimately, motivation is not enforced but inspired, and officers who understand this truth will achieve mission success while leaving a meaningful legacy in those they lead.

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