

# The Role of Communication in Military Leadership

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**Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to discuss the role of communication in military leadership. First of all, basic terms related to communication, command and military leadership are explained. In the following parts of the paper it is intended to answer the question contained in the title: what is the role of communication in the military leadership? To precise the issue: is the role of communication in military organisations similar to civilian leadership and management or does it significantly differ?

**Keywords:** communication; command; military leadership; social competences; communication skills.

## 1. Introduction

Communication is often considered an interesting subject for social science researchers. Nevertheless, research is relatively seldom carried out in military organisations, which are hierarchical and formalized. In military organisations the information-related processes are considerably more often the subject of analysis. For example, the commanding process of military operations or an intelligence cycle which are very specific and not comparable with any other processes.

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## 2. Command and military leadership

Command (commanding) is the term characteristic of hierarchical organisations, in most cases the military. The review of the subject-related literature and the analysis of the Polish Armed Forces doctrinal documents point out the differences in describing the idea and gist of command and commanding (Kręcikij, 2007, pp. 13–15). For example, the Polish Land Forces operational directive defines commanding as a “process through which a commander imposes his/her will and intentions to his/her subordinates. With support of the staff, a commander plans, organises, coordinates and directs the activities of subordinated forces using standard procedures and all available means of disseminating the information” (Regulamin działań Wojsk Lądowych, 2008, p. 407). On the other hand, the definition proposed by Aponowicz reads that “commanding is an activity of a military unit commander based on overall preparation of subordinated personnel for fight. What is more, a commander fulfils the control over them” (Aponowicz, 1961, p. 72). Subsequent definitions are implemented into the Polish military by NATO directives in which command is usually connected to control. *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions* defines command as “the authority vested in an individual of the armed forces for the direction, coordination, and control of military forces” (AAP-6, 2014, p. 2-C-8) whereas control is described as “the authority exercised by a commander over part of the activities of subordinate organisations, or other organisations not normally under his command, that encompasses the responsibility for implementing orders or directives” (AAP-6, 2014, p. 2-C-13).

To sum up, the definitions of command can be narrowed down to two basic aspects (Kręcikij, 2007, p. 16):

- 1) authority, that is a legitimate right to issue orders but also to bear responsibility for the latter (such authority can vary depending on situation);
- 2) process of facilitating command in which a commander

supported by his/her staff performs the functions connected with planning, organising, directing and coordinating the operations of subordinated forces.

Posobiec (2007, p. 17) ultimately claims that command is a specific form of management and it is justified to consider command in a similar manner.

Military leadership is another term to be explained. Sociologists, psychologists but also experienced managers stress that a subtle but very significant difference exists between a manager and a leader. A manager is simply responsible for coordination of his/her subordinates. He/she manages accuracy, apportionment and effectiveness of assigned tasks. A leader possesses a certain feature or knowledge which by some is characterized as “charisma”. Such charisma is a force making subordinates enthusiastically following a leader in order to achieve common goals (Kuc, 2004, p. 165). The phenomenon of leadership has been for many years and it still remains an attractive and unexplored area for researches. Many of researchers claim that leadership cannot be developed and trained, as it is an inhabited feature of one’s individual character. Contrary, the others try to identify the elements of charisma considered as a combination of: certain amount of self-confidence (overstated self-esteem), increased tendency of domination and high desire to influence others (changing their postures and values) as well as strong belief in own moral righteousness of values and conducted activities (Weber, 1984, p. 206). Maxwell claims that a leader can be easily distinguished from an “ordinary manager” with five following criteria (Maxwell, 1995, p. 19):

- a leader thinks in a long-term perspective going beyond the problems and the horizon outlined in a quarterly report;
- a leader does not limit his/her scope of interest only to the issues of an organisation that he/she controls. He/she wants to be aware how the particular branches of an enterprise or institution affect each other and he/she continuously attempts to expand the field of their influence;
- a leader pays attention to the vision, values and motivation;
- a leader possesses special abilities of balancing different expectations and needs of the particular branches of an organisation;
- a leader does not accept current situation (he/she is an advocate of changes).

The differences between leaders and managers are highlighted by Kuc (2004, p. 170) who observes that “(...) control of others’ work is a domain of a manager whereas inspiring to make work better is a domain of a leader”. As Piotrowski claims, these are the followers who decide whether someone can be considered as a leader. People (subordinates and partners) have a desire of leadership as it reduces their uncertainty in a situation of increasing tempo and makes changes more predictable (Piotrowski, 2004, p. 197).

Embedding the aforementioned observations into the context of a military organisation, the majority of commanders controlling the correctness and effectiveness of tasks accomplished by their subordinated soldiers can be considered as managers. Consequently, the question may be asked which additional knowledge, skills or values should have a commander to be considered as a leader?

An interesting reference can be derived from historical sources. The ancient thinker Sun Zi in his seminal work entitled *Art of War* wrote: “The leaders have three fundamental characteristics. First is the trust, second – loyalty and the third – boldness. What loyalty? Loyalty to a persisting authority. What trust? In the prize. Which boldness? In eliminating of the evil” (Sun Zi, 2008, p. 176). As it can be seen, the Chinese master assumed that the command over an army could not be given to an individual who: was not loyal to his sovereign, did not believe in victory and did have neither virtue nor authority in his subordinates’ eyes. It is not difficult to deduce, that those qualities reflect the contemporary existing attributes of a leader.

Discussing historical examples Posobiec (2007) describes the features of military leaders in the following way:

(...) usually, the chieftain was chosen from the leaders of families, clans or tribe, who possessed the values that distinguished him from amongst the rest of warriors. In most cases the individual was daring, physically fit, strong and decided to prove his value as a soldier. He also stepped forward thanks to his determination, ability to assess the situation and perseverance as well as ruthlessness. These were the qualities which predestined one to fulfil the commander’s role. The authority and command was concentrated in his hands over those who were committed to him as subordinates for the time of war. Mastery in using arms, bravery and other personal qualities were necessary because, from command point of view, commanding was the ability of leading (soldiers) in

combat. Often he provoked a fight giving a command to attack in which he actively fought with enemy in the first echelon but had no major influence on directing the course of battle (Posobiec, 2007, p. 17).

Therefore, besides the virtue of perseverance, the ability to make decisions and intellectual skills some other features necessary in battle such as physical proficiency and even ruthlessness are included into the catalogue of capabilities which military leaders should have.

According to the aforementioned statement made by Piotrowski (2004), it seems that emotions play a significant role in the process of selecting a military leader. What is more, it is more prominent than in the case of a leader in a company/corporation. In business environment, unsuccessful mergers, investments or projects may occur which a not effective manager can be blamed for. Similarly, successful and right decisions and business projects can be also noted. Nevertheless, as a general principle, completely different arguments are being used as justification of failure or success in the company. It may be so, because the leadership in organisations does not enjoy sufficient respect and maybe because it is yet difficult to assess the emotional commitment of workers into a given project.

In the military a situation is significantly different. The variety of historical sources, describing bloody battles in which hundreds of soldiers lost their health and lives as a consequence of following their leaders, are an irrefutable, unquestionable proof. Simplifying, one has to be on the highest possible level of motivation and emotional commitment to a certain military operation to sacrifice own life and well-being. Not every military operation, however, takes place in the combat environment and not every operation requires extreme sacrifices. Nevertheless, in most of the cases, military operations are being conducted in less comfortable conditions than any business venture. It occurs in a less safe, more stressing and unpredictable environment.

Concluding, it is claimed that command and management can be considered as very similar constructs, which is not so obvious when comparing leadership in military and business organisations.

### **3. Communication**

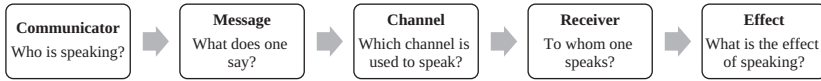
The word communication is of Latin origin, it comes from the verb *communicatio* meaning *making something common, cooperate, be in*

*relationship with somebody*. Throughout centuries the noun rooted from this word particularly determined a sort of community or commune. As a matter of fact, the development of roads and postal service in the 16<sup>th</sup> century added new connotations such as: movements of people and items within space with use of means of transport as well as transmitting the information over a distance with the use of appropriate technical means (at the time it was a telegraph, today telephone or new media such as the Internet) (Filipiak, 2004, p. 13).

Despite the fact that the scientific literature acknowledges origins and overall meaning of the word *communication*, there is still a difficulty in discovering common, coherent and precise definition of the term. The researchers, depending on a scientific discipline, speak about the linguistic perspective of communication which is focused on semiotics and the meaning of a communicate (message). Additionally, they speak about the quantitative perspective of communication evaluating it by the relations and method of steering (human-machine, machine-human). The sociological aspect of communication will be applied herein as most often occurring in the management theory and providing the foundations for considerations associated with a military organisation and widely perceived security issues.

In this context, communication is “a process of generating, transforming and transferring information between entities, groups and social organisations. The aim of communication is continuous and dynamic forging, modification or change of knowledge, stances or behaviours into the direction corresponding with the values or interests of the mutually affecting subjects” (Antoszewski and Herbut, 1995, p. 34). As regards social disciplines, the Lasswell linear model (Figure 1) of a persuasive act seems to be the most popular model of communication. The construction of the model considers the existence of a communicator (as a source of information) and a receiver of a communicate or code as well as the means of transmission. According to Lasswell, when analysing the process of communication five fundamental questions are to be answered (Dobek-Ostrowska, 1998, pp. 33–34):

- Who is speaking?
- What does one say?
- Which channel is used to speak?
- To whom one speaks?
- What is the effect?



**Figure 1.** The Lasswell model of the persuasive act

Source: Dobek-Ostrowska, 1998, pp. 33–34.

Communication in organisations is directly associated with basic management functions (planning, organising, motivating and controlling). Therefore, it is important to underline the effect of communication known as the feedback, last but equally important link of the process of communication within an organisation. It comprises three core elements: interpretation of a message by the subordinated personnel, supervisors' assurance that the message was well comprehended and taking actions aimed at realisation of the message. Therefore, feedback is considered as the prerequisite for effective communication (Sobkowiak, 1998, p. 11).

Communication in all organisations fulfils the two principal functions (Filipiak, 2004, pp. 144–145):

- informational-organisational, based on disseminating messages to organisation members irrespectively if they are top-to-bottom messages (directives, orders, etc.) or bottom-to-top messages (workers' suggestions, assessments, reservations, etc.);
- motivating-inspirational, concentrated on mobilising organisation members to achieve common goals.

According to Filipiak (2004, p. 18), majority of researchers share an agreement that communicating is a:

- 1) symbolic process (symbolic nature of characters conveys a message);
- 2) social process (ruled by exchange of symbols between social entities);
- 3) mutual relationship (such "mutuality" can be either symmetric or asymmetric);
- 4) process taking place at a certain level:
  - intrapersonal (so called internal thinking),
  - interpersonal (with participation of other person or a small group),
  - group level,
  - institutional level,

- intercultural level,
  - mass level;
- 5) continuous and sustained process engaging multiple habitual communication manners which are both verbal and non-verbal, conscious and subconscious, intentional and non-intentional (meaning that communication must not be stopped as even silence can be considered as a form of message);
  - 6) transactional process of negotiating the meanings of messages by the participants of communication.

#### **4. The role of communication in the military leadership**

As mentioned before, from the management perspective, the communication in every organisation facilitates two principal functions: informational-organisational and motivating-inspirational. In the majority of civilian organisations the first function is fulfilled by the formal informational process comprising the communication of directives, programmes, orders and decisions by the supervisors. Additionally, the bottom-to-top communication initiated by workers takes place by transmitting recommendations, reports and summaries, assessments, remarks and complains. Simplifying the issue it can be claimed that the informational and organisational function of communication can be portrayed as a complex system of documentation flow and formal dissemination of necessary messages (Filipiak, 2004, pp. 144–145).

As a matter of fact, the other function of communication is usually facilitated with less structured activities which are within the competences of human resources branches, public affairs offices as well as press offices. Contemporary human resources (HR) branches apply the variety of tools to motivate employees. For instance, they manage benefit systems, trainings and professional development opportunities for every single member of a company. Similarly, besides creating a positive image of the firm in its external environment and in the media, public affairs offices are often responsible for intra-organisational communication. They perform the functions of internal communication by: issuing brochures (bulletins), managing organisational intranet websites, integrating teams and fostering the feelings of employee identification with an organisation and employee satisfaction from the projects they participate in (Filipiak, 2004, pp. 144–145).



The review of literature indicates that in the case of military organisations the informational and organisational function of communication is decisively dominant if not the only that matters. In military organisations, distinction should be made between staff (support) functions and command functions. Staff structures are to a greater extent comparable to civilian organisations. The command structures are more specific. The studies concerning the process of command describe in detail complex informational processes observed during military activities and the structures of the so-called informational bonds, quality of which is of paramount importance for timely and effective decision making processes:

(...) the informational and decisive structures decide which is a manner and quality of the information flow within military organisations. Such structures are to be understood as the qualitative and organisationally determined, constant order of space-timely relations connected with the exchange of variety of information, especially orders, directives and decisions as well as reports, memorandums, information about adversary side and its combat capabilities as well technical and tactical parameters of enemy's means of combat. (...) The informational system (...) functions at many levels and it is based on available communication and information systems. (...) It is strictly associated with the command system, organisational structure, structure of decision making centres, apportionment of workload and hierarchical and functional relations (Wolejszo, 2007, p. 214).

On the contrary, there is a lack of evidence that the motivating-inspirational function is performed. Certainly, it is possible that motivating the soldiers to execute their tasks is skipped by the commander with his/her full awareness and, till certain extent, it is replaced by the efficient system of documents and orders flow, uninterrupted system of the informational relations as well efficient mechanisms of internal communication, e.g. activities of HR or Public Relations offices. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that the aforementioned teams are able to inspire dozens of soldiers to participate in particular projects or developments with equal commitment and engagement. First of all, because neither the Public Affairs Offices nor Public Relations Offices are authorized to have an access to detailed information about the planned activities. The specialists – in many cases highly qualified

professionals, dealing with communication and human relationships in military organisations – are completely subordinated to the operational cells and such state is strictly regulated. It is particularly important during the conduct of information operations (INFOOPS). Military PR cells do not have a full awareness on certain activities, to be ordered to disseminate specific information about them. That means, they can participate in the process of deceiving an enemy but without noticing such participation (MC 0457/1, 2008). This is a common and characteristic and therefore distinguishing hierarchical organisations from civilian organisations.

Who or what does motivate soldiers? The most probable hypothesis is that the motivating-inspirational function is fulfilled personally by a military commander. However, there are situations that a formal commander is just a coordinator of work (“manager”) and commanding functions including motivating-inspirational functions are realized by an informal leader, naturally selected from a group. It is worth asking: in what manner does he/she perform such a function? The answer can be easily given when the aims of communication and leadership are compared. The aim of communication is “(...) continuous and dynamic shaping, modification or change of knowledge, stances and behaviours towards the directions being in conjunction with the values and interests of the subjects being in mutual relations” (Filipiak, 2004, p. 18). As a matter of fact, the aim of leadership is: “the ability to influence others, their will to change attitude and values” (Aponowicz, 1968, p. 72). Consequently, the aims of leadership are nearly identical as the objectives of communication. Therefore, communication should be considered as an indispensable element of leadership. Only thanks to appropriately applied communication tools obedience, trust, respect and loyal cooperation of the “own men” can be obtained. Certainly, this is not an easy task.

Discussing the development of the young Polish Navy officers to command, Felski (2006) notices:

the specialists claim that we communicate with others not only by voice but with our entire body – the mimic, stance, gestures, etc. The exercises conducted with the courses of the oldest cadets prove that these elements are among the most difficult challenges for them. The content of an order or a speech could have been prepared, memorized by heart but how could the shaking voice, shivering hands of knees been brought

to order? What to do with the hands? How to bring a severe mimic on the face during “directing” the group of subordinates... These are the problems which cannot be handled by theoretical studies (Felski, 2006).

The aforementioned examples of future Navy commanders illustrate challenges in the area of communication faced by military leaders.

Communication is a very wide spectrum of behavioural deeds, skills, means and tools of self-expression, own values, thoughts, decisions and attempts. Some people possess incorporated communicative abilities: they are more social, have better communication with others, more precisely transmit their stances. Others are to learn communication life-long, attending less or more useful trainings.

It is worth to mention that efficient communication never occurs as single-sided only. That means effective communication takes place when, as mentioned before, a feedback happens, when a receiving person comprehends a communicate and an addresser is convinced that those processes took place indeed. In other words, appropriate communication is, in nearly all types of cases, a dialogue or a conversation. What is more, it is not only verbal, conscious and intentional but also non-verbal, subconscious and unintentional (Filipiak, 2004, p. 19).

The behaviourists claim that the rational verbal communication is only 7 percent of an entire message – a receiver reads and interprets also a way of addresser’s speaking (approximately 38 percent) as well as the body language (as much as 55 percent) (Mehrabian and Ferris, 1967, p. 252). The way of speaking (that is a sound of speaker’s voice, its volume, intra-sentence intonation, intonation of certain words in a phrase, pause, paralanguage) as well as non-verbal communication (mimic, communication by touch, maintaining of a personal distance, gestures, pose, overlook) are dominating here. It means, that if the content of pronounced words is not coherent with the speaking manner and the body language then a receiving person trusts more in non-verbal message than the content of words (Filipiak, 2004, pp. 51–53).

As regards military organisations – it is of paramount importance how the commander communicates as it enhances or weakens the strength of relations between him/her and soldiers. If he/she is a proficient “communicator”, conscious of power of the body language and manner of transmitting the contents, his/her chances of becoming a real leader significantly increase.

There is a quite popular opinion, that one may be a leader, however not necessarily forever. If so, the aim of educational and didactic activities of military academies is to create the situation when a graduate is able to create such emotional relationships with his/her subordinates which make him/her an unquestioned leader when such a need comes. During the peacetime such bonds are to be built to encourage soldiers to follow their leaders, to enable them to present analogical behaviours also during combat. Achieving such an end state is possible only under the condition of systematic work with a team and under the condition of possessing the structured knowledge and professional skills. Moreover, the abilities from the field of leadership are also necessary (Felski, 2006).

## 5. Conclusions

Concluding, communication plays a crucial role in the military leadership. A military commander cannot become a leader without effective communication and without understanding of interpersonal relationships, consciousness of non-verbal messages and emotional relationships. Comparing the role of communication in a military organisation to its role in civilian leadership and management, it is to be claimed that they are similar, however not identical. As a matter of fact, motivation to participate in a business project (even if associated with a risk) cannot be compared with motivation to participate in the military operation in which one's life or health can be lost. Consequently, communication in military leadership should enjoy greater significance and be appropriately developed in the process of educating young commanders.

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