

TCS and Military Training and Organisation

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 4 September, 2003 - 07:21

Posted by **David Deutsch** on the TCS List on Sun, 13 Oct., 1996.

[A poster] wondered whether TCS can be a fully general theory of education, given its apparent incompatibility with the needs of military education and organisation:

This may be an appropriate opportunity to mention the single area where I find TCS educational theory to be implausible: military organisation. I am not yet able to imagine a military force in which the fighters learn and organise along TCS lines and have the whole achieve the effectiveness required to pose a credible military threat.

Historically this difficulty is represented by the overall success of regimented armies over tribal armies. Regimentation, such as gave the Romans their important military edge, was accomplished through institutionalised coercion.

And in a later post:

If TCS is adequate as a general theory of education – which it does seem to claim – then it must apply to the learning required for military organization just as it would to any other learning. But TCS relationships appear to be irreconcilable with the basic form relied on for military organisation. This is the tension I'd like to help resolve.

In the long run I hope that individual autonomy becomes pervasive and consistent in our society, even in solutions to military problems. But these must be real solutions, not just applications of individualism which result in a critical loss of military readiness. Until a military organisation which relies on unlimited personal discretion can be better, in military reality, than organisations which rely on coercion, it would seem we must rely on coercion for adequate solutions.

In this last sentence, I think, there is implicitly the answer to [the poster's] question. We must surely distinguish the organisational and political problems involved in reforming institutions to make them more consensual, from any *inherent* problems with consent – ways in which the very fact of being non-coercive might make military organisation or education less effective. I would readily agree that there are many problems of the first kind. It may well be unrealistic to expect the military to lead the rest of society in changing to non-coercive relationships and organisation. But as for inherent problems, I strongly dispute that there are any.

I was surprised to see [this poster], who has so often championed the idea of spontaneous order, drawing the wrong conclusion from “historically ... the overall success of regimented armies over tribal armies”, and that this “was accomplished through institutionalised coercion”. Organisation wins over chaos – that is unsurprising. This does not imply that tyranny wins over freedom! Historically many things have been accomplished through institutionalised coercion that

are nevertheless far better done through free cooperation. The pyramids were built by slave labour. But people would have been wrong to conclude from this that there is an inherent problem in envisaging a volunteer-only skyscraper-building system.

However, it *is* true that to get from their building system to ours they would have had to undertake a great deal of institutional reform, which would require creativity. (For instance, as a bare minimum they would presumably have had to institute a free market in labour and commodities, and some sort of banking system too.) Similarly the way we defend ourselves militarily cannot be reformed by fiat, overnight. Better solutions have to evolve, and this requires creative thought and (preferably) the *intention* to make things less coercive, which is of course absent at the moment. Such creativity will only be applied in earnest when the theoretical understanding becomes prevalent that there is something – including increased military effectiveness – to be gained from reducing coercion.

So what are the alleged inherent conflicts between non-coercion and military effectiveness?

[The poster] mentions individuality. Soldiers, to be effective, have to subordinate themselves to the overall plan.

The most obvious difference between a family situation and a military situation is how much default from assistance can occur before a person is effectively outside the group.

I think he means that, for instance, a child can refuse to fetch the towel from the swimming pool when asked to, without in any way risking destroying the family, but a soldier who refuses to fetch the shells to reload the gun when asked to has committed a massive betrayal and would have to be expelled from the group at the very least.

But as I have mentioned before, the degree of conformity expected from members of an orchestra is even greater than that. A single moment of inattention (let alone crass disobedience) to the precise instructions of the conductor can spoil the whole performance for everyone. Moreover, traditional music teaching has always been highly coercive. Yet that is not an inherent feature of music. There are, and have always been, people who devote themselves passionately and voluntarily to the appropriate forms of discipline. And in many orchestras there is a strong atmosphere of joint responsibility, of finding common preferences, rather than blind obedience to one person's interpretation.

Notice that even today, in elite military units, such as the SAS, there is a similar atmosphere, and a studied *deviation* from the standard traditions. To a great extent they do strive for common preferences. It is taken for granted that everyone's opinion is valuable, that the commander's opinion can be criticised and may be false. Ranks are not used (except for the commander, who is known as the “boss”). Everyone is on first name terms. Everyone feels both jointly responsible and personally committed to the success of each mission. The creativity released by this more consensual form of organisation (I'm not saying they are fully non-coercive!) is directly responsible for the increased military effectiveness of such units.

Another supposed problem is the lack of time to arrive at common preferences in emergencies.

Indeed I anticipate that reviewing the decisions of different members would be an important difficulty in a non-coercive military – if such a thing has any viability.

Certainly it would be an important *preoccupation* of such an army. Finding common preferences would be the engine of such an army's organisation, just as maintaining deference, obedience and chains of command are in today's military. But why would it be a problem? They would not do much of this decision-reviewing *on the battlefield*, any more than an orchestra interrupts its performance to reach agreement on disputed issues of interpretation. But the quality of the performance, indeed the very precision and enthusiasm of their devotion to a common goal, is a direct consequence of their having reached common preferences during their preparations.

But what about the necessity for charging mindlessly into the enemy's machine gun fire, without question, when ordered to? Well, it may be received opinion that war – or at least success in war – is characterised by such mindlessness, but I am sure this is a myth. I am reminded of General Patton's speech to his soldiers: “You're not here to die for your country. You're here to make the other poor dumb bastard die for *his* country.” Success in war, like success in all other human endeavours of any value, is primarily a matter of creativity. Everything else flows from that.

Of course there are *moments* in war that call for heroism and risk, and even sacrifice. The same is true of many other human activities where no one would dream of suggesting military style organisation. Many medical researchers, for instance, have tried out a new drug or treatment on themselves, because it is deemed too dangerous to try even on volunteers. Many explorers have sacrificed their lives in the cause of science, or to save each other in situations very similar to those that call for sacrifice on the battlefield. No one ordered them to do it, and they did not have to be trained to mindless obedience. On the contrary, it was the very fact that the common purpose was also their own personal purpose – made so by institutions of consent, which enabled them to create common preferences – that made such behaviour natural. Even everyday activities can call for moments of sacrifice. Which of you parents would not jump in front of your child, ready to take the bullet, if a gunman suddenly appeared when you are in a bank?

So in summary, there is every reason to believe that there is room for great improvement in military education and organisation, that would make them consensual as well as increasing military effectiveness. This cannot be done by fiat, but there is no inherent limit on how well it can be done by creativity. If we had any seriously threatening enemies I would say that such reforms were a matter of urgency. As it is, I'd say they can wait on the back burner.

to post comments

Comments

Seriously Threatening Enemies

Submitted by DavidSJ on 4 September, 2003 - 07:58

Now that we have seriously threatening enemies, what do you think?

David Schneider-Joseph (<http://www.davidsj.com/>)

to post comments

Re: Seriously Threatening Enemies

Submitted by David Deutsch on 4 September, 2003 - 15:37

David Schneider-Joseph wrote:

Now that we have seriously threatening enemies, what do you think?

Fortunately the nature of the threat, though extremely serious, is not currently such as to require a large increase in the number of people in the military. Therefore current recruits come from a small and highly self-selected fraction of the population who either enjoy or at least consider it worthwhile to tolerate, the traditional methods of military education. Nevertheless, to the extent that there is a danger that we may at some point require significantly larger armies and/or significantly more creative armies, the problem is more urgent than it was. I have no direct

knowledge of whether it is being addressed, but I do see some signs that I choose to interpret optimistically, such as: the proportionately larger role of special forces; the proportionately larger role of high-technology weapons requiring highly skilled and knowledgeable operators; the diversity of tactics being used; and the comparatively low casualty rates (both on our side and among enemy civilians and even enemy combatants).

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You underestimate how consensual it is

Submitted by a TCS reader (not verified) on 21 September, 2004 - 08:21

Sir, if I understand you correctly, you underestimate how consensual British military training/ops are. Ask any of the lads, they'll tell you--the ones that haven't left. Obeying senior officers is not like kids obeying parents or prisoners obeying prison wardens, it's what you do because that's what's necessary to get the best result. It's not like you obey the orders but really you want to go off and smoke a fag--ok, we can joke like that, but when the chips are down, the obedience of military personnel is what they choose every time there's an order given. If they didn't want to work in this system they wouldn't have chosen the military option. We believe we have a good system here. We all believe in it, that's why we serve, that's why we obey our senior officers, and that's why it works. To say it's not consensual you're looking at it too superficially. You see the commands, the orders barked, the hierarchy, and you assume the lads don't want it, but what you have to understand is, they DO WANT IT LIKE THIS. You have to look beyond appearances and see what lies beneath.

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I think the key to answering

Submitted by mammal_mama on 20 March, 2007 - 18:09

I think the key to answering this question is in David Deutsch's statement: "There are, and have always been, people who devote themselves passionately and voluntarily to the appropriate forms of discipline."

I think there probably is room for more input from each individual during times of planning and construction of various strategies. But in the heat of battle, I think each unit needs to function as ONE individual, not a bunch of autonomous cells each doing his own thing.

In the heat of battle, the commander needs to function as a brain: each individual needs to be a cell that quickly responds and does its part. As the previous poster said, "it's what you do because that's what's necessary to get the best result."

I recently saw a documentary on the U.S. Marines, and learned that there's a point early in training when each recruit can decide whether this is what he or she really wants.

When the discipline is voluntary -- it's not coercion.

Susan

[to post comments](#)

Interesting comment i tend

Submitted by Dana (not verified) on 21 June, 2007 - 18:10

Interesting comment i tend to agree with you but what if the commander has a bad judgment? Here is the main problem. Here where the issues begin and here is where all falls apart. ">drug treatment center

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