



# Enhancing the Leadership Communication Skills of Norwegian Military Officers

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## Abstract

Background: For military officers it is important to accomplish the mission and to take care of their personnel. The key to knowing how to challenge and support each individual in one's unit lies in leadership communication and in getting to know each one. Purpose of Study: To discuss the use of guidance as a tool for improving leadership communication skills in officers. Sources of Evidence: The Norwegian Armed Forces needs leaders who can act in their role and position. The challenge is to collect and share information, to create a common situational awareness, and hence to achieve an interaction with others that provides the desired efficiency in accordance with the Norwegian Armed Forces Joint Operational Doctrine. Main argument: The officer needs knowledge and skills in building good relations with others in their own unit. The Norwegian Military Academy teaches guidance as a communication tool in leadership development. This is facilitated through a five-day course in guidance. The interpersonal relationships create a sense of esprit de corps, that is, feelings of loyalty, enthusiasm, devotion to a group, and mutual trust. Guidance helps the officers to learn about themselves and others, their own reaction patterns and those of others, and gives them an understanding of relationships. Conclusion: Dialogue provides an opportunity to reflect on the professional and personal challenges and thoughts. The focus is on facilitating that the individuals being guided increase their will to reflect on their own thought patterns and emotions.

**Keywords:** Guidance; Leadership communication skills; Military leaders; Leadership development; Teaching

## Introduction

Leadership is often considered to equal planning and action, or more precisely, to be the ability to make a plan and put it into effect - to point out the direction and then set the wheels in motion. However, leaders are entirely dependent on their subordinates in order to achieve their goals. To succeed in achieving goals and other important tasks, it is important for leaders to have good communication skills.

Leadership is defined as the process of producing direction, alignment, and commitment in collectives, and leadership development as expanding a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes [1]. In leadership training and development, communication will therefore be a critical component. The leader must learn to make himself understood with the fewest possible sources of misunderstanding and the best possible basis for establishing trust. Equally important is that the leaders learn to collect important information from the people they interact with and co-workers.

Effective communication is no doubt important in any daily leadership. For a military officer, however, it is not only important. It can be crucial. It can be the decisive factor for the life of the officer himself, his personnel, and their ability to succeed in operations of great importance.

The Norwegian Armed Forces have established mission command as its leadership philosophy [2]. Mission command promotes decentralized management before centralized command. The idea is that every soldier and officer must understand the leader's intention for the assigned mission, and based on this determine how they can act to achieve the intended goal within their leader's instructions and the rules of engagement. This change of leadership model increases independence at the cost of the leader's control. The question we asked ourselves was therefore how we can teach the cadets and officers at the Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) to communicate in such a way that they meet these demands and needs.

## The Emergence of a New Leadership Philosophy in the Norwegian Armed Forces

Until 1986, a distinct restrictive control leadership philosophy was the norm in the Norwegian Armed Forces [3]. This philosophy was based on the principle that higher ranked officers at any time had command and the sole authority to make decisions. The soldiers and subordinate officers were supposed to follow orders.

This led to a very bad accident in Vassdalen in Norway in March 1986 where 16 Norwegian conscripts were killed in an avalanche. This incident contributed to recognition of a need to change the leadership culture in the organization, so that it could both secure the mission and the personnel. The leadership philosophy had to be modernized significantly. From the beginning of the 21st century, the Norwegian Armed Forces introduced intention-based leadership as a new philosophy [4]. Intention-based leadership implies that every officer

and soldier has to understand the mission of the task as well as the chief's intention, and should make their own decisions on how to solve it based on this knowledge.

This leadership philosophy has in recent years been replaced by a new leadership concept referred to as mission command [5,6]. The mission is still the focus, and implicit in this is still the commander's intention with the mission. The need to communicate effectively and accurately has simply become clearer. The main point in the new leadership philosophy that should be emphasized in this context is the officer's ability to communicate well, have a good overall overview, and not to mention a good flair for asking pertinent questions that will provide the desired information. It is important to note that mission command is really not a new concept. It can be traced back to the end of the 19th century, with the Prussian concept of *Auftragstaktik* invented by the Prussian general Von Moltke the elder [7].

The Norwegian Armed Forces Joint Operational Doctrine (NAFJOD) [5] through the cognitive domain in its domain model emphasizes the importance of individual perceptions and influence of ideas, values and determination, while the focus in the social domain revolves around the interaction and includes the communication between individuals and units. Unity and *esprit de corps* develops through the social domain and is a prerequisite for good and efficient cooperation. *Esprit de corps* here refers to the unit members' feelings of loyalty, enthusiasm, and the devotion they have for the group they belong to.

The Norwegian Armed Forces Chief of Defense's Basic view of leadership in the Norwegian Armed Forces [2] aims to raise the awareness of all employees in the Norwegian Armed Forces regarding the military principles and values that underlie the governance of the military organization. The purpose is to help create a common understanding and thus a common language and thinking of what can be characterized as good leadership in the military. Among the principles and values that are highlighted are respect, responsibility, and courage. These values are identified as the core values of the Norwegian Armed Forces. Furthermore, emphasis is put upon professional expertise, ethical judgment, collectivity and solidarity, social responsibility and joint liability, the organization's ability to learn in order to enhance action, commitment, flexibility and situational awareness. It is emphasized that good leadership is based on mutual respect and trust between leaders and subordinates [2] and that leadership is about relationships. The officer thus has a need for knowledge and skills in how to build relationships within his or her own unit and for themselves to be included as constructive members of the profession community.

### The Role of Communication as a Leadership Skill

Communication comes from the Latin term "comunicare" meaning to do something jointly [8,9]. This has been our starting point; creating a shared understanding of what to do, and how to think about what should be done. Officers manage their personnel in various situations ranging from a trivial daily life in an office or an educational context to full war in their own country or abroad. The individuals being led will have different competencies. The officers need to contribute to their subordinates' development of a positive, realistic self-confidence and to their commitment to the tasks in question. Finally, the officers must help the subordinates to develop their ability to effectively and independently make choices and solve problems while balancing between following orders and judging the order's validity in the specific

local circumstances. The leader needs to activate the potential in each individual and create the necessary willingness to participate and make use of each individual's competence.

Guidance provides many of the tools needed to achieve this distinct leader communication. Exercising guidance fulfills many of the requirements for successful leader communication, and contributes to creating a common understanding and joint situational awareness. In addition, exercising guidance may improve the efficiency of learning processes, both personally and professionally.

The Norwegian Military Academy (NMA) has educated military officers since 1750 [10]. An important part of the ongoing education is to ensure that the officers have what it takes to face challenging and demanding situations while leading others [11]. Officer training at the NMA is multifaceted and diverse. The wide span of topics ranges from etiquette to leadership of high-intensity operations. The NMA's training is organized as a process of formation where the cadet learns about the profession and the art of being a military leader as well as interpersonal interaction. The education aims to ensure that the cadets acquire the ability to translate their experience, knowledge and wisdom into constructive decisions and actions within the framework of the military profession and according to the social mandate issued to the Norwegian Armed Forces. The educational process focuses on being, knowing and acting with theoretical knowledge acquisition, practical exercises, reflection and guidance. As the education model rests on formation into a profession, this also implies that the NMA must decide what kind of socialization process it wants to promote.

The formation socialization process is according to Lauvås and Handal "that one is or becomes aware of the ongoing socialization process and is enabled to consider what is happening to oneself" (page 56, our translation) [12]. This gives the cadets tools to understand and consider whether this is indeed a profession they wish to enter and practice. Guidance is a counterforce to an unconscious adaptive socialization process, and a means to assist the learner in his or her development towards becoming a professional practitioner. Guidance is a vocabulary the cadets will also be encountering from their own supervisors. Being able to master the techniques for themselves provides greater insight into the formation process. Practicing this form of communication on exercises and in other appropriate venues in the communities of practice will also provide a rich foundation for self-training before cadets shall commence their further service in a unit.

A feeling of mastery or self-efficacy is important in order to increase the likelihood that cadets will adopt what they are experiencing. Wenger's theory of communities of practice underpins this perspective through the emphasis he places on the common opinion formation that takes place in a community of practice [13,14].

### The Pedagogical Intention of the Guidance Course

The pedagogical intention of the course is to provide an educational short program that enables the officers to learn how to empower their subordinates and especially how to communicate to build solid relationships, ideal as basis for implementation of the mission command model. To be able to trust another person's competence and judgment, especially in challenging missions, the officers need to know each other and communicate well. The leaders must understand how their subordinates think, feel and then consequently act. They need to make the communication effective, clear and safe. The leader needs to activate the potential in each individual and create the necessary

willingness to participate and make use of each individual's competence. This leads to the purpose of this study, which is to discuss the use of guidance as a tool for enhancing leadership communication skills in Norwegian military officers.

### **Defining guidance as a concept and how it can be used**

As for the concept of leadership, one encounters in the literature many different ways to explain the concept of guidance [15]. The theme is to some extent culturally determined and Norway has developed its own guidance traditions. The supervisor asks questions and proceeds to aid the supervised person in finding their own answers and solutions [12][16-18]. Tveiten [18] shows that the term guidance also has been defined as qualification, a form of teaching, assistance in learning struggles, an education process, and as help to facilitate learning and development or change. The terms "enabling process" and "empowering process" have also been used.

Guidance can also be described as a learning process that takes place with professional support, where the individual's own resources are the most important instrument. The term professional support puts some limits on the context in which the supervision takes place. These limits can be professional and of a formal nature, e.g. in educational settings, where the organization has clear aims and values [19]. A slightly different starting point is when guidance is described as a relational interaction method that requires reciprocity, respect and trust between the parties. Tveiten [18] defines guidance as a pedagogical and relational process with the objectives of discovery, learning, growth and development within the learner. Guidance is first and foremost dialogue, where questions, reflection and curiosity are key elements.

Within the Norwegian tradition, when describing guidance, learning and development are common denominators with the learner in focus. The learner can both be in an educational and a formative process, as well as in an occupational or personal process. As a preliminary summary, we can say that guidance is dialogue-based communication between two or more parties, with the intention of encouraging reflection, commitment and possibly action by the person who receives guidance.

Especially for professions and professional education, an aim is to develop professional skills, and assist the learner in developing their professional identity. "The main purpose of the guidance is to develop or continue developing professional competence. Professional competence means the competence belonging solely to a profession. A conscious relation to what this entails may affect the identity of the professional members. Occupational identity is developed through practice. Awareness and experience of identity in relation to the profession's aims, methods, responsibility and professional basis are essential for professional identity. Guidance may facilitate the development of a professional identity" [18]. Here, professional competence is knowingness, which is the same as knowledge, understanding, contextual insight and values that deal with rational skills, interaction skills and manual skills [20].

Guidance that takes place in an education or in a vocational context, aims to help the guided person to develop his or her professional identity. Lauvås and Handal [12] refer to this as the internal perspective, where supervision helps to qualify the supervised person into the professional community through guidance that introduces the profession's key competences. The institutional setting provides an internal perspective on necessary qualification into the profession and

understanding and commitment to the tasks. This guidance perspective facilitates the opportunity to focus on various internal conditions and socialization processes that new members are undergoing in order to be accepted into the professional community. This is important in an organization like the Norwegian Armed Forces, which is in continuous development and transformation.

Guidance can also contribute to giving the members an external perspective on the organization, seeing it all from the "outside" by scrutinizing one's own thinking and judgment. Practicing a kind of critically oriented guidance could probably strengthen the practitioner's ability to think critically and ethically about the task and the execution of it.

### **How can guidance be learned?**

The discussion about what learning is and how it happens, has largely revolved around whether learning is an individual cognitively constructive phenomenon, whether it is related to emotions or rather to social contexts. Is learning an individual or social process? Does learning occur between people or in people? In this context, we have chosen to use Jarvis' [21] explanation of what learning is and then we have built an arena for learning based on these assumptions.

According to Jarvis, "human learning is a combination of processes throughout the life cycle, whereas the complete person – body (genetically, physically and biologically) and psyche (the mind) (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, feelings, beliefs and senses)-experiences social situations, where the content is transformed cognitively, emotionally or practically (or through a combination of these) and integrated into the individual person's biography, which results in an ever-changing (or more experienced) person" [21].

Learning theories have normally treated three different dimensions, the cognitive, the emotional, and the socio-cultural dimensions, either separately or in some cases as combinations of dimensions [22], and educators have struggled to create optimal conditions for learning. Is dissemination, individual problem-solving, group work or practical exercises the best way of transmitting knowledge from the more competent facilitator to the learner? From a research-based perspective, it has been common to look at the different learning theories as opposites too each other rather than as complementary. According to Jarvis [21] definition, one must take the complete person into account to facilitate learning. Not least, one must understand the individual's experienced role in the social context, and how the individual looks upon him- or herself, and the ability to influence and create conditions for participation and development.

Seeing humans as complete persons requires that one might consider learning as consisting of cognitive, motor and emotional aspects [23]. There are two ongoing learning processes taking place simultaneously and integrated with each other in order for learning to take place and to result in the individual's change of capacities. These processes may be referred to as internal and external. The external process is a continuous interaction that takes place between the individual and the environment, whereas the internal process is the inner process taking place within the individual. This internal process connects new knowledge with existing knowledge or replaces previous knowledge and is the result of learning.

The five-day guidance course was built on the andragogical principles of Knowles, Holton and Swanson [24] stated as follows: 1. The learners need to know why, what and how. 2. The self-concept of the learner is autonomous and self-directing. 3. Prior experience of the

learner is a resource and mental model. 4. Readiness to learn means that the learning must be life related and the tasks developmental. 5. Orientation to learning should be problem centered and contextual. 6. The motivation to learn occurs when learning gives intrinsic value and personal pay-off. Based on these principles, the guidance course was developed to appear as practice-related, contextually useful, rich in perspectives, and creating a common vocabulary of guidance and leadership. The learning process is designed to be increasingly complex and self-directed and aims to develop a common professional community among the participants. The groups at the NMA may vary from 10-35 people so the contextual perspective is dynamic, and at the same time also relatively vulnerable as regards giving each participant a good learning situation.

### Theoretical background and contents of the guidance course at the NMA

The course content and working method emphasizes that the learning must be perceived as valuable and useful. Participants will experience a high degree of influence and own activity and the content should be experienced as contextual and developing.

The learning processes should stimulate the development of a shared professional community, built on the balance between the learner's own learning experiences and feedback that helps increase guidance skills. The learning conditions aim at the same time to safeguards the individual's self-esteem; it is focused on stimulating participants' interest and desire to learn, and concentrated on creating a reflective action competence. The learning takes place in groups of professionals so that they develop certain common mental models, a common vocabulary, and methodology knowledge in communication.

Since many of our participants do not choose whether or not they want to participate, we are also working to create learning situations that the participants experience as personally useful, something they can use in their lives both at work and personally.

With the above in mind, the training was based on Illeris' theory model [23], in which he discusses how to understand learning and what learning processes consist of. The content and work of the guidance course have been developed in light of the two processes of acquisition and interaction, and selected from these three complementary dimensions: cognitive theories; psychological theories emphasizing motivation and the importance of emotions; and ultimately the socio-cultural contexts that are meaningful within an organizational framework. The model created for the guidance course was conceptualized based upon several theories framed within the three dimensions [25] and illustrates the course's theoretical learning profile. The model is shown in Figure 1.

Illeris [23] model has been the prototype for the development of a corresponding model to illustrate the foundation of the theories used in the guidance course. Some of the theorists who originally were mentioned by Illeris are not a part of the guidance course and hence not mentioned in our version of the model and the italicized names are added based on an evaluation of the course's form and content. Altogether, this is meant to illustrate the complex, contextually adapted foundation and content of the training conducted during the course, which will help the NMA cadets practice their communication skills. In the execution of the program, the different theoretical aspects melt together through experience and discovery based on the officers existing knowledge and understanding of the topic. This takes place in a safe educational environment. The officers work in small groups

practicing their enhanced skills through both cognitive and emotional approaches and experience the effects of guidance as a leadership tool.

The left side of the model incorporates theoretical aspects from agency theory, while the right side of the model incorporates theoretical aspects from socialization theory. The top of the model positions different theories from the field of developmental psychology and makes a differentiation based upon cognition and content, on the left side, and driving force and motivation on the right. Different researchers are placed inside the model according to which research tradition they belong to. Each of the mentioned theorists contributes to one of the course's didactical choices or the theoretical basis. The star in the middle constitutes a middle point to help define whether the different theorists' positions are mostly associated with agency, interactionist, or socialization theories. Illeris [23] points out that the positioning is made on his own understanding and perception and the same has been done here. The theorists have been placed as accurately as possible based on our perception.

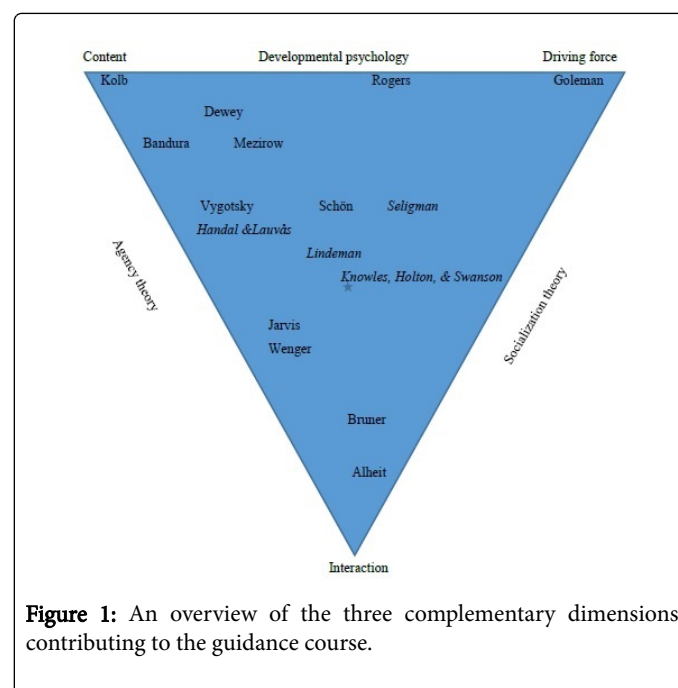


Figure 1: An overview of the three complementary dimensions contributing to the guidance course.

Each of the theories is used to contribute to the didactical choices made for the course regarding both content and design. Kolb's experiential learning theory makes sense in the way that we let the officers begin by finding their own practice theory and go on to reflect what their experience means to them. Then they get to know new terms and a new vocabulary, and get the chance to practice once more and hopefully a little better [26]. Roger's theory of person-centered guidance contributes to the content about meeting the guidee's needs and beliefs [27]. Guidee here refers to the person being guided. Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence and empathy is used both to focus the lecturers' attitudes towards the participants and to the content when teaching empathy and also nonverbal communication [28]. Dewey's contribution is associated with the facilitation of the learning context. The participants practice the new skills they are about to learn. Dewey's theory has also made an impact about the need for learning in a society [29].

Bandura's social cognitive theory has inspired us to let the participants learn both by trying for themselves and also by observing



each other and receiving feedback from the group and more competent instructors [30,31]. Mezirow [32] talks about transformational learning which takes place from time to time because of the experiences the participants get during the course, and because of the need for restructuring earlier knowledge. Vygotsky has been a source for designing the feedback process with a view to helping the learner just enough to master the process for him- or herself the next time, and to show how to accomplish the exercise. His theory about conception has also been important in the design since every practice session ends with a summary of the terms that have been used and how they contribute to streamlining the conversation [33]. Schön [34] has been the inspiration for the reflective practitioner because that is what the officer needs to be. Seligman's [35] contribution to the course lies in his theory of positive thinking and learned optimism, and is used to enhance the officer's awareness of being focused on resources and possibilities instead of problems. Handal and Lauvås [36,12] are two of the foremost contributors to cognitive guidance theories in Norway and in the course, we especially emphasize their thoughts about practice theory. Lindeman [37], and Knowles, Holton and Swanson [24] have laid the foundation for the principles and the sole learning process. Jarvis' thoughts on learning have been important because he states that humans learn with both body and mind through social experiences [38,21]. Since this course is part of the leader development process in the officers' education at the NMA, Wenger's theory about communities of practice has been inspiring in the way that we have emphasized stimulating the officers' common vocabulary and thoughts about good leadership in the officer profession [14]. Bruner's [39] theory has been used when designing the gradually more complex learning processes. And at last but not least, Alheit's [40] contribution to the course lies in his thoughts about the adult's biography and his/her need for self-regulated learning and independence.

The program of the guidance course consists of a total of nine exercises of one-on-one guidance and two exercises with group guidance. The basic guidance communication skills they learn are theory of practice, active listening, verbal and non-verbal, framing and in some ways reframing problems, personality and preferences, empathy, and using structure and progression to make the dialogue effective.

### The learning goals of the guidance course

The following learning goals are essential in the guidance course and are presented to the officers at the beginning of the course. The officers are required to: 1. Actively take a position on the attitudes that are presented as important for managers and supervisors. 2. Display basic guidance skills such as listening and problem framing. 3. Show awareness of the supervised person, ask reflective questions, and assess situations so that the level of good guidance and supervision is increased during the course. 4. Develop interaction skills, gain insight into their own preferences and the influence of circumstances, working on their own attitudes and becoming aware of their own practice theory. 5. Develop their ability to be personal and empathic and develop confidence in working with emotionally charged situations. 6. Develop a basic knowledge of group counseling and a basic knowledge of group dynamics and procedural regulation as an intervention method [25].

### Conclusion

The starting point of this paper was that the important task for military officers is to accomplish their missions and to take care of

their personnel. It was then established that in order for a leader to be successful, he or she needs to know how to challenge and support each individual member of their unit. A key feature of this lies in leadership communication and in getting to know each individual. By practicing guidance, the officers' communication skills become better. The theoretical background and the contents of the guidance course at the NMA thus aim to facilitate enhanced communication skills in the officers. Guidance is a valuable and useful tool in order to enhance the officers' leadership communication skills in alignment with the mission command philosophy used in the Norwegian Armed Forces.

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