

CHANGING MINDS IN THE ARMY: WHY IT IS SO DIFFICULT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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With the end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. Army now finds itself in a time of extraordinary fiscal and national security uncertainty. In such an environment, it seems naïve, or at least overly optimistic, to assume that all, or even most, of a strategic leader's current assumptions will be just as relevant several years into the future. It follows then, that senior leaders may need to be willing to change their minds on important issues instead of clinging to increasingly obsolete ideas and positions. For this monograph, changing one's mind implies a reversal of a previous judgment or position on an issue.

This monograph is not advocating capricious, wishy-washy organizational decisionmaking. Instead, these pages merely highlight the need for Army senior leaders to periodically question their deep-seated beliefs on critical issues and base their decisions on the most current information, rather than relying solely on what they have long believed to be true. There are numerous obstacles to achieving this recommendation. This monograph will discuss some of these obstacles, including frames of reference formation, traits, career imprints, the hardwiring of the brain, confirmation bias, and organizational culture. The monograph concludes by providing recommendations in Army leader development to address this challenge.

To understand why changing one's mind is difficult, especially for Army strategic leaders, we

must first consider frames of reference. Frames of reference are the complex knowledge structures we develop through personal and professional experiences that influence—and often limit—the way we approach issues. Changing one's mind requires a reevaluation of one's frames of reference when confronted with new information. Unfortunately, shattering or unlearning our frames of reference is an action that is easy to espouse, yet incredibly difficult to execute.

A sophisticated understanding of frames of reference development requires attention to years of research on the importance of inborn traits. One of these traits is the personality factor of openness. Openness is the recurrent need to enlarge and examine experience. Leaders high in openness search for relevant and conflicting perspectives. They are generally more receptive to change. Army officers low in openness will be more reluctant to change their minds.

A second partially inherited attribute related to this topic is cognitive ability. Army officers have above average intelligence. Unfortunately, research demonstrates that the more intelligent a person is, the better he or she is at rationalizing already held beliefs. In other words, being smart does not make one more likely to change his or her mind.

Career imprints—the significant professional impressions left on individuals by an organization—also influence frames of reference. Because

individuals are more susceptible to career imprints when they are young, imprints experienced at the company-grade level can be expected to be deeper and longer lasting. Leaders must be cognizant of these imprints and their influence as they approach complex situations at the strategic level.

Confidence in one's frames of reference is not a bad thing. Accumulated expertise, or intuition, allows senior leaders to make solid, rapid decisions in most contexts. However, intuition—although invaluable at the tactical and operational levels—loses its power at the strategic level, where patterns and consistency are not as common. Senior decisionmakers must appreciate the limitations of applying intuition since it will often lead to closed-mindedness and a tendency to dismiss dissonant information too quickly.

Recent research on the neuroscience underlying judgment and decisionmaking provides another reason why changing one's mind is so difficult. Repeated activities and responses harden the wiring of the brain. Therefore, senior officers sometimes have to overcome decades of viewing an issue from one angle to approach it in a novel way in order to make better decisions. This is very difficult to do. Biology does not support it.

At the individual level, there is one more relevant piece to discuss. Individuals pay particular attention to information that supports their beliefs and either ignore or discount the value of evidence that contradicts their beliefs. Changing our minds is hard because we spend our lives looking for confirming information and rationalizing why disconfirming data must be incorrect.

Organizational level factors can also contribute to the hindrance of corrective action for the faulty thinking processes of senior leaders. One of the main factors that may contribute to a senior leader seeing a flawed perception of reality is an organizational culture that discourages subordinate dissent or disagreement. Senior leaders will have a difficult time changing their minds if they never receive knowledge that is contrary to their own views.

Creating an Army that facilitates senior leaders changing their minds will take a series of deliberate, long-term actions. At the individual officer level, the Army must continue its emphasis on self-awareness. The Army must also increase its emphasis on continuous assessment and experimentation as another avenue to improve the ability for senior leaders to acquire accurate, and even disconfirming, information. Next, Army officers need to be broadened. The best broadening experiences immerse an aspiring leader in an environment where the comfortable hierarchy of the Army is removed, frames of reference are questioned, and assumptions are tested. Finally, the journey to developing Army strategic leaders who can change their minds when confronted with new situations begins long before officers reach the senior ranks. The most effective way for people to develop their ability to change their minds is by interacting with different people and entertaining diverse ideas. An officer's career should grow gradually, with increasing amounts of intentional exposure to people and ideas outside his or her entrenched frames of reference.

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