

Introduction

Based on the book by Field-Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, this paper assesses the effectiveness of a strategic leader using the quality framework as a template. Submitted to meet one of the written requirements for the Army War College, Course 501, Strategic Leadership.

Strategic Vision and Environment

General Slim's strategic vision was to do the right things right by destroying the Japanese Army as efficiently as possible. Doing things right included conducting a moral and just war. He instituted policies and developed systems and control mechanisms to ensure that he and his forces did the right things right.

General Slim's strategic environment was certainly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. He led a multinational and culturally diverse force that operated in terrain that included mountains, jungles, and shorelines spread over a 700-mile front. The Burma Theatre was considered a lower priority than the European Theatre, which resulted in lower priorities for support and attention. General Slim was honest in identifying and communicating resource constraints and challenged as well as empowered his stakeholders to overcome these constraints through innovation.

General Slim unified his command through his frame of reference, personal example, and focus on establishing and maintaining high morale through a focus on what he considered three critical aspects of morale: Spiritual, Intellectual, and Material. These focus areas helped to unify his command and truly demonstrated his exceptional SL competencies in communication and consensus building.

General Slim's Leadership Framework

General Slim's frame of reference was developed over a long and distinguished career and refined by defeats from the Japanese. This framework demonstrated his mastery (Be, Know, Do) of Strategic Leader Competencies (SLC) that include conceptual, technical, interpersonal and tactical. General Slim's framework also incorporated the [Foundation for Leader's \(FFL\) application framework](#). The FFL's principles include Stakeholders, Systems, Variation, Planned Change, and People. These principles are referenced below to summarize General Slim's framework for leading and managing change within his operating environment.

Stakeholders.

General Slim's direct stakeholders included the Allied Command and representative countries. Internal stakeholders included soldiers and indirect stakeholders include everyone else, e.g. civilians and "war college students" (3rd order effect) that are and will

be impacted by the strategic leaders actions in the short and long term. Stakeholders have needs that are met by products/services. General Slim was responsible for products and services that included food, shelter, medical care, training, equipment, material, intelligence, and competent leadership. The Strategic Leader (SL) creates stakeholder expectations through his actions and results. General Slim truly excelled in identifying, understanding, and meeting the needs of his stakeholders. He set high expectations, negotiated priorities, built consensus and optimized the actions of his stakeholders in working together to achieve the vision.

Systems

Systems include subsystems that within a military organization align with staff functions that include Personal and Administration, Intelligence, Operations and Training, Logistics, and Civil Affairs. General Slim had an effective staff that he tailored to his preferences and style. The majority of outcomes are determined by systems and General Slim worked to ensure that he had effective systems in place to continually meet the needs of his stakeholders. To achieve efficiencies in operations, General Slim developed an operation center that was based on two nerve centers-the War Room and the Information Room, to keep him updated on the status of operations. General Slim believed good efficiency was synonymous with good discipline and discipline was critical to success.

Variation

Variation, the difference between the ideal/desired outcome and actual includes the qualitative and quantitative information needed to assess system performance in meeting stakeholder needs. Knowledge of variation—whether outcomes from systems are common (can be expected/predicted) or special (unexpected), are instrumental in assessing improvements. General Slim used a combination of quantitative and qualitative assessments.

Examples of the quantitative information used included: number of killed and wounded; the number and types of illnesses; and cycle time for treatment. General Slim used charts to track admissions to the Malaria Forward Treatment Units which indicated downward trends resulting in a sickness rate for the 14th Army of one per thousand per day. On qualitative assessments, General Slim believed that discipline is one of the most critical measures of effectiveness that he assessed by observation. For example, he remarked that the best units came out of battle and immediately resumed a more formal discipline appearance.

Diversity is another term that used to describe variation. Understanding variation provides better insight for managing diversity. Every individual is unique as is every group, culture, country, and Army. General Slim understood that a critical success factor in managing diversity is to develop a common vision, understand, appreciate, and respect differences, and provide the feedback that stakeholders need to achieve their full potential.

Knowledge

General Slim continually assessed the status of enemy and friendly forces to determine strengths and weaknesses and he quickly instituted improvements. At the strategic level, General Slim recognized the importance of the negative results that can occur, when there is no clear objective or aim for a campaign. His vision along with verbal and written communications on his intent, corrected this deficiency.

Based on lessons learned from earlier defeats, General Slim issued guidance that communicated his intent for training where he communicated his expectations of higher standards for individual soldiers and units and the importance of seizing the initiative in keeping the Japanese confused.

Planned Change

Planned change includes maintaining the current system, making incremental improvements or creating new or redesigned systems. General Slim implemented all three types of changes and achieved extraordinary results through innovative use of available resources. He instituted many transformational changes and then maintained the new changes. Examples include close air support, air re-supply through the development of "parajutes," and dramatic change in tactics to increase mobility. General Slim also reduced the amount of supplies that a division required from 400 tons to 120 without loss of efficiency. These changes helped to maintain initiative against the Japanese and disrupt their plans. Examples of maintaining routine processes included General Slim maintaining his personal habit of getting up at six thirty and being in bed by 1000 hours and working in an hour of leisure to read, think and reflect. For the troops, General Slim reinforced the need to maintain strict discipline in battle and bivouac.

People

General Slim excelled in the interpersonal competencies of communication and consensus building. He maintained high morale by articulating and communicating a focus on the Intellectual, Spiritual, and Material aspects of morale. This focus helped to align and synchronize the actions of the stakeholders in working together to achieve the vision. His genius was the ability to keep things simple and in communicating the right message to the right people. His strategic culture and command climate was one of respect and appreciation for diversity.

Assessing Strategic Environment

Any strategic level environment, including the one that confronts leaders responsible for the current army transformation, can be defined as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. The strategic level includes a scope that will always include a diversity of people, cultures, and subcultures, differing values, mores, norms, ethics, different degrees of technology, and threats that range from symmetrical to asymmetrical. In

some respects, army transformation is a more daunting challenge than General Slim's defeat of the Japanese. The scope of the change and diversity of stakeholders is greater and there are more vested interests in protecting the status quo. Army transformation also requires a significant culture change that is needed to be dominant across the full spectrum of envisioned future operations.

General Slim was an exceptional leader that demonstrated mastery of the SLCs and FFL principles and would be successful today. He had many strengths and overcame any weaknesses through continual assessment that identified opportunities for improvement. His leadership approach in the Burma Theatre paralleled the eight stages that the Army identifies as necessary for successful change. Specifically, General Slim:

- Demonstrated a sense of urgency by articulating the importance of defeating the Japanese to secure liberty and defeat evil.
- Formed guiding coalitions by communicating his vision and obtained consensus through his personal competence, compassion, fairness, and integrity.
- Developed a vision and strategy, which incorporated lessons learned from defeats. He instituted and maintained new methods such as air re-supply and close air support.
- Communicated the vision every chance he got and tailored his message to the audience.
- Empowered subordinates who rose to the challenge in overcoming logistical shortcomings.
- Planned for short-term successes by developing effective training programs. Improved patrolling techniques against the Japanese which gave soldiers confidence that they could defeat the Japanese soldier in the jungle.
- Consolidated and built on the wins from short-term successes achieved by small unit patrols and expanded to include larger unit actions. Squads, platoons, and companies were considered the core units in the jungle.
- Preserved the change culturally by reinforcing the vision, maintaining the focus on the Spiritual, Intellectual, Material aspects of morale and communicating successes.

A conscious awareness and understanding variation is the "what's missing" in strategic leader competencies. This knowledge can be developed through integration of the SLCs with application of the FFL principles. This integration would provide a more common language for supporting continual improvement towards meeting the goals of army transformation to be more responsive, deployable, agile, versatile, lethal, survivable, and sustainable.