Relationships and Empathy : What Is Changing in Military Leadership ?

A View from Italy

By Eraldo Olivetta

In the last few decades, Western Armed Forces have been affected by significant transformations in both their organization and the military subculture itself. Since the end of the Cold War, factors such as perceptions of threat, mission types, theatres of operations, technologies, cultural change in the parent society (not least the rise of multiculturalism), to cite but a few,[1] have evolved at a rapid pace and considerably altered the military equation. One of the questions that arise in light of these transformations is whether they have produced corresponding changes in military leadership and command styles.

The issue is no small matter : if the service academies are to train effective leaders for the future, are their models of reference adapted to the needs of those in command in today's and tomorrow's theatres of operations ? And if not, along what lines should their training concepts and standards be revised ?

The best way to answer these questions is to test the changed leadership style hypothesis directly with officers by studying their command experiences in various recent theatres of operations. That is what this research proposes to do with reference to the Italian case.

Theoretical Background

Janowitz (1959) long ago stressed the importance of the "quality of leadership" for the effectiveness of military units. Even earlier, Stouffer (1949) had designated junior officers as key figures for group cohesion (and thus for operational performance), already addressing the overlapping of formal and informal roles, and the need to distinguish between two different environments : the front, understood as the operating theatre marked by greater risk and therefore stress, and the rear, i.e. non-combat situations characterized by lower levels of stress.

Downplaying shared beliefs or ideological commitments in combat motivation, Shils and Janowitz (1948) emphasized the importance of primary ties among members of small military groups and pointed to the situation and satisfaction of soldiers' basic needs as key factors to positive group relations and cohesion (Nuciari, 1990). Chief among the actors in charge of generating positive primary bonds are officers and NCOs, whose role consists in regulating and supervising their subordinates' behaviour by means of detailed rules while maintaining good relationships with them. However, their role requirements

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[1] For other such factors, see Olivetta, 2012.

were then limited to focusing on aspects such as paternal behaviour (as illustrated by WWII German officers' use of "children" [Kinder] when addressing Wehrmacht soldiers), a combination of tough discipline and kindness through small displays of affection.

Nora Stewart (1990) later emphasized that the role of small unit leaders is to use vertical cohesion to funnel horizontal bonds in the direction of the organization's objectives. According to Stewart, this should be done by showing concern for their men, by setting a good example themselves, by earning the trust and respect of their subordinates, and by sharing the hardships of training and danger of combat with them.

However, while the function of leadership in ensuring operational effectiveness at small unit level is accepted and confirmed, military sociologists have also repeatedly stressed the peculiarity of the military profession, i.e. the unique traits which in many ways make military leadership different from that prevailing in civilian organizations. In a 1998 study which listed the characteristics of "true" leadership, Ulmer stated that the very nature of the military profession – marked by sacredness of mission, to be performed regardless of risk to life and limb, strong normative culture, authority, functional value of a warrior ethos based on team spirit in the face of danger, etc. – in fact limits the exportability to military organizations of those features most commonly found in civilian leadership roles.

Comparing the characteristics of leadership training in both military and civilian settings, Ulmer drew attention to certain aspects, and for the purposes of this study, it is useful to mention three of them :

- unlike civilian organizations, the military tends to attach greater importance to reference values and, in particular, to loyalty, respect, integrity, courage, honour, and self-sacrifice.
- the measurement techniques used to assess organizational climate are far more advanced in civilian organizations than in the military.
- civilian decision-making processes tend to rely on multiple sources of information, including those provided by subordinates, whereas that is less often the case in military organizations because it is feared that this could weaken authority.

So that no mention was made of the "use of feedback" until in 1991 Bartone and Kirkland presented it as one of the key variables in their four-phase development model.

In Italy, however, the 1999 Army Commanders' Handbook prescribed that, depending on variables such as the situation, degree of preparedness and motivation of subordinates, leadership styles should be either of a directive or participatory type, or even – referring to Likert's (1961) model – should rely on sheer delegation of initiative, but did not go so far as to fully and explicitly stress the aspects of feedback and empathy. Pullano (1996), in citing the qualities of leadership, included those concerning the person of the leader him/herself and their position with regard to the environment, as well as their relationship with others (charisma, fairness, authority, and availability). It was not until 1998 that Bagni for the first time made explicit reference to the concept of feedback, when he stated that commanders have to "*pay attention to their subordinates and their feedback*".

In summary, the examination of the studies carried out on the issue shows that the view of leadership as key to enhancing cohesion and operational effectiveness is widely shared and confirmed. So is contention that the military profession is unlike other professions in peculiar ways, and thus that leadership requirements in military settings are qualitatively different from those prevalent elsewhere. However, social science production also noted an evolution of this concept, beginning in relatively recent times with a call for use of the concept of feedback – "empathy" had to wait a little longer. As we have seen, leaders should in fact care about their men, worry about them, adopt paternal behaviour that combines rigour and benevolence, while respecting the formal aspects of their role, especially in non-combat situations.

From a sociological point of view, the officer who is called upon to command a unit (platoon, company, etc.) comes to occupy a particular status or a specific place in the system of relationships considered as a structure (Parsons, 1951) that characterizes the whole organization. The leader plays a role, defined by Parsons (*ibid*.) as expected behaviour in relation to the other actors, because he or she occupies that particular status (Gross *et al*., 1958). On the one hand, this role can be seen as a set of attitudes, values, ways of thinking and action that the membership organization assigns to the social position of a leader ; on the other, it can be understood as a complex whole of the types of social behaviour considered most appropriate for a leader by the social actors (subordinates, peers, superiors, neighbours, etc.) who enter into a relationship with him or her, due to that particular status. In other words, the role of leader is defined by the organization, which in turn defines what it means to be a leader and how the individual in that position should behave as such. But the leadership role is also defined by the expectations of other individuals who come into contact with the leader. In both respects, to the extent that the leader role is delineated by what he or she *should be* or *should do* in that particular position, these expectations are normative.

In addition to duty, there is definitely a subjective dimension – the leader role as perceived by the leaders themselves –, likely to be influenced by training and the notion it instils of what the "correct" leadership model is, i.e. by institutional factors, as well as by their actual experiences in different operating environments.

As with any role, that of leader also tends to vary over time : while some basic aspects of military leadership models appear to be fairly constant, others are apt to change. Some of the changes that have taken place in recent decades in the armed forces as they have been moving from the Institutional to the Occupational model (Moskos, 1977) are of special importance for the purposes of this article. In most Western countries, the move from draft-based mass armies to all-volunteer forces has resulted in an increased incidence of the occupational model.

In this context, it is reasonable to assume that, while fully aware of the military profession's uniqueness (Segal & Kramer, 1977), the individuals who have made this particular career choice tend to conceive of the roles of leader and subordinate somewhat differently than in the past, thereby creating expectations which slowly but steadily lead to

change in that regard. If we also consider that the military sub-culture tends to be influenced by the parent culture and that the changes taking place in society at large also tend to result in changes of the military institution (Olivetta, 2012), it is safe to assume that the expectations weighing on leaders are liable to change. Therefore, the changes occurring in the society to which they belong, the resulting transformation of the military institution, and the related changes in the sub-military culture, especially the transition from the institutional model to the occupational one, may have brought about a change in the way leaders conceive of their role and their subordinates'.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis underpinning this article is thus that, taking into account the peculiarities of the military profession and the resulting differences between military and civilian leadership, those who have command roles within the military organization tend to refer to leadership styles that increasingly stress the importance of relationships, consideration, and getting feedback from their subordinates, as well as of empathy, thereby increasingly approaching the styles that prevail in civilian organizations. Such a tendency seems stronger today than in the past. If this hypothesis were verified, then it would mean that there is a gap between what future commanders in Italy are taught and what the current theatres of operations and asymmetric conflicts actually require. In fact, considering the changes that have taken place and are ongoing, the training of Italian officers still seems to be very much focused on the more formal aspects of the role – on hierarchy and formally assigned authority – without giving due emphasis to empathy between the leaders and their subordinates.

Methodology

In order to test this working hypothesis, interviews were conducted as part of an ERGOMAS research project[2] in 2014 with 43 Italian officers with combat experience as platoon leaders, company or battalion commanders, or again as mentors, in recent asymmetric operations. The interviews were semi-structured and used the in-depth interview method (Banaka, 1981) in order to grasp the essence of the interviewee's thinking and experience. It was thought that a qualitative approach could help overcome the reservations of the interviewed officers and encourage them to give details about their experiences even when they were of particular gravity, e.g. when loss of life or personal factors such as family problems were involved.

Research Variables

The list of studied variables included field experiences and the characteristics of the units the respondents commanded. The former focused on operational experiences, i.e. combat situations, baptism by fire, etc., while the latter threw the spotlight on unit morale

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[2] Entitled "Officers and Commanders in Asymmetric Warfare Operations", the project was initiated and conducted by the ERGOMAS Working Group (WG) on the Military Profession. The interviews were performed by the WG's Italian members.

and the factors that influence it. The officers were notably asked how they had managed situations stemming from the troop's poor morale, and the factors that had given rise to them. Analysis of the respondents' answers about their experiences on missions abroad gave an indication of what idea of effective leadership in such operational theatres their collective imagination harboured.

The research results showed clear recognition by the interviewees of the links between moral cohesion and the unit's effective operational performance, as well as of the commander's role in maintaining high morale.

In order to validate the study's working hypothesis, it can be useful to focus in particular on three of the factors that can affect the morale of deployed troops in situations of asymmetric conflict[3]:

> 1. the particular context of operational theatres ;
> 2. baptism by fire, loss of life :
> 3. the respondents' family situation.

Results

On missions involving situations of asymmetric conflict, however effectively the logistics may be organized, difficult situations will inevitably arise if due to unforeseen circumstances some basic needs (for example : use of showers, living conditions in tents, etc.) fail to be met.

> Nobody was asking to have caviar. However, at times the basic conditions were lacking. If I have been out in the cold all day long, when I return I'd like to be able to take a shower. If the showers do not work for three days, people begin to get fed up. Or if it rains three days in a row, and for three days, you practically need a boat to get around [platoon leader, aged 30].

According to the respondents, the particular context in which the mission is performed and its related stress seem to amplify the impact of such uncomfortable situations as can be expected during a military operation. The difficulty then resides not so much in the temporary lack of comfort as in the fact that under stressful conditions such as those accompanying the missions, the capacity to endure may diminish, and problems that in other contexts would not look particularly serious, may negatively affect the unit's morale, especially when they have been accumulating.

> The fact is that everything there is amplified. All it takes is a trifle. Unpredictable situations that come to be created can lead to some small misunderstandings in an environment with few people but a forced cohabitation nonetheless, thus exploding into dramas that, in the end, are resolved with a glass of water [platoon leader, aged 30].

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[3] The factors mentioned were : mission length ; stressful situation during a high-intensity operation ; the routine of periods of a lack of activity; the environmental conditions of the operating theaters and satisfying basic needs; the separation of one or more members of the unit; baptism by fire; the loss of life; and the situation of their family at home.

However, according to some interviewees, the boredom born of the lack of operational activity during long routine periods can prove almost as detrimental to a unit's morale as the stress created by high risk in combat operations. With respect to this factor, the study's respondents feel that the commander's task is to boost the soldiers' morale by keeping them constantly busy, motivate and stimulate them by giving them objectives to be achieved, gratify them when they deserve it, but also to reduce to their true proportions the problems magnified by the specific context, and ease tensions within the group.

To do this, leaders must first be able to detect and understand the signs of any discomfort or distress that may be created among subordinates, whether it be tension due to stress, boredom caused by routine, disappointment at the unit's inability to meet a primary need, difficulties in relationships with a partner, or any other factor. In other words, they have to pay attention to the behaviour of those under their command, know how to manage conflict among them by finding a way to talk about it, understand their different perspectives, and thus be able to solve their differences.

Another factor that, in the descriptions given by respondents, can have a significant effect on soldiers' morale (and can be useful in verifying this study's working hypothesis) is the unit members' encounter with their first combat situations (baptism of fire), first intensive high-risk events (IED strikes, etc.) and, above all, injury or death of a comrade.

> Of course the first time you get shot at you feel pretty shocked. Then, after the second time, it becomes routine, and you go by the rules [platoon leader, aged 33].

The death of a 'buddy' is described by the respondents as the event that can have the most serious impact on the unit's morale. The same is true, albeit to a lesser extent, of events that may cause people to be injured.

> Morale was affected when there was news of the death of a colleague, including from the coalition's other armies. As I noted a decline in morale, I tried to keep people engaged. So the cohesion of the group helped [platoon leader, aged 38].

> Upon returning from the mission in which there had been exchanges of fire, it was very important to talk among ourselves, and make comparisons within the platoon: that helped the individual paratroopers a lot [platoon leader, aged 41].

Some interviewees expressed reservations about bringing psychologists into the field when these serious events are experienced. The latter, they point out, actually tend to be considered 'out-group', seeing as they had not started out with the unit at the beginning of the mission. On the contrary, it seems that a much more important role, and one which can partly substitute for that of the psychologist, is played by the chaplain, to all effects regarded an in-group member.

According to respondents, in these cases commanders should, first of all, rationally analyze the event with unit members, studying the details and circumstances, the actions of everyone, behaviour that needs to be corrected or improved, and best-practice moves under such circumstances. The platoon leaders interviewed often mentioned the need to "*speak of what happened*", underlining the almost 'cathartic' aspect of such practice. Faced with the

most serious events, he/she should then promote *esprit de corp*s so as to mobilize the primary group's support. In short, squad and platoon leaders need to be close to those under them, and to recognize the signs of a lowering of morale in the unit so as to intervene promptly.

A third factor that can especially influence soldiers' morale, as mentioned by the commanders in the interviewed sample, resides in family matters. The family, the primary group *par excellence,* can enter into competition with the primary group of buddies in the field. This has become a problem due to the rise of private communication tools such as mobile phone systems, Skype, WhatsApp, etc., which allow soldiers deployed far from home to speak with spouses, partners, children or relatives on a daily basis. Now, the family and the military are two *greedy institutions*[4] often interfering with each other as they are apt to place competing demands on the soldiers' attention.

According to respondents, the family can affect a soldier's morale in two different ways:

- positively, it can provide the soldier deployed on a military mission away from home with emotional presence and moral support;

- negatively, it can bring to his or her attention problems at home that he or she is unable to handle from a distance.

> While one would expect that families never fail to support those who are on a mission, in some cases in which one was having problems, it would end up with the family blaming the spouse in the field for not being present to deal with them [battalion commander, aged 45].

In the experiences gathered as part of this research, the most serious difficulties encountered related to the health of a child or spouse, death in the family, or marital breakdown leading to separation. In all these cases, one primary group (family) seems to prevail over the other (squad or section), thereby undermining the soldiers' morale to the extent of forcing the commander to arrange for them to be repatriated. The experiences reported below confirm this:

> If you get a call from home and they say: "your father is sick", then that man is lost. He's lost in the sense that he is not thinking of anything else, just about going home. If they get a call from home about important things, they just turn off. So, since they are turned off, it is no longer useful to keep them there. In principle, if you can, you send them home [platoon leader, aged 30].

> Not being able to take action on the problems of their own family drives them crazy ! It makes it really hard for them. The cases that I have had were almost all irrecoverable : we had to send them home [battalion commander, aged 45].

> [When deployed], I think all your emotions are a little amplified and the distance from home makes you perceive the problems as bigger than they are. But because you're someone on a mission, it doesn't mean you should not be

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[4] Segal & Blair, 1976 ; Bowen & Orthner, 1989 ; Moelker & Kloet, 2003 ; Farina, 2004 ; Sertorio & Nuciari, 2009 ; Nuciari & Sertorio, 2009.

> concerned about family problems, and you need to be reassured about those who are at home. This is what makes it possible to endure things in the field : so it is not just a feeling [company commander, aged 34].

With regard to this particular factor of influence on unit and individual morale, some respondents with a higher leadership role and with significant experience at home have complained about a substantial weakness of the Italian military with regard to family support, especially in light of other countries' practice. The need to solve this issue was stressed, if only for the serenity and therefore the morale of deployed spouses.

According to the interviewees, in the cases when a problem arises with families of their own soldiers, commanders should be able to recognize it early on. They should talk to those concerned, showing them that they know how to listen and understand, and then be able to intervene by taking appropriate action to help them. Again, the sampled officers stressed such actions as "talking", "listening", "getting to know" and "understanding" their subordinates.

> It is our role to know our men and, when you see someone who is a little off, to approach them and talk... You can't know them unless you talk with them [company commander, aged 32].

These actions may ultimately be summed up in the expression "*caring for their people*". This focus, in turn, calls for and coincides with the concept of *empathy*.

From the analysis of answers given by the commanders interviewed about these three morale factors, what also emerged was the role of commander in managing them and, consequently, key aspects of the leadership model that prevailed among them. Here, attention should be paid to at least three of these aspects.

First of all, it should be noted that respondents consistently referred to situations of particular stress, such as precisely are to be found in asymmetric conflicts. It is in that context that the need arises for the commander, on the one hand, to cope with suddenly and quickly changeable situations, and on the other, to pay attention to relations with subordinates, allowing room for informal rather than formal behaviour. Respondents point out however that, once they returned from the mission, at home the leadership model tended to change back to the prevalence of aspects largely related to hierarchical status, discipline, and formal relationships within the group.

> Upon returning, there were no major problems of readjustment. If anything, there was the need to resume a bit of the formal discipline that had slackened while on the mission [platoon leader, aged 31].

A second aspect that emerged from the interviews is the role of the primary group with regard to cohesion and operational effectiveness. In recounting their experiences, respondents stressed the importance of the leaders closest to the rank and file :

> In any case, the squad leaders also do a lot for the unit's morale. I have had fairly experienced staff members and some were even a bit older. They kept everything in line and so everything went well [platoon leader, aged 41].

Squad leaders have a small number of privates under their control, they belong to the primary group, and as such are considered by subordinates as 'in-group':

> Surely the squad leader, in charge of 8 people, could enforce the rules more comprehensively [than anyone else]. Then since you are living in dormitories and in daily contact with your people, maybe you know how to say "look, yesterday he had a fight with his wife on the phone", and so I did not have him go out on patrol. I replaced him with somebody in his right mind [platoon leader, aged 30].

This results in a better understanding of people, and thus a greater ability to recognize the signs of a decline in morale at both individual and unit levels. In turn, this increased capacity is linked by respondents to experience gained on previous missions: the greater the latter, the more effective the ability to recognize the indicators of stress and declining morale seems to be. Such recognition would therefore put them in a position to intervene promptly with action that is considered appropriate, and perhaps already experienced on previous missions.

The small unit leader is ideally placed, and probably without peers, when it comes to getting to know, listening, talking to, and providing support for its members, i.e. empathizing with them. All of this goes to confirm – if further proof were needed – the role of the primary group in promoting cohesion.

The third, and certainly the most important aspect for the purposes of this study resides in how leaders should manage the factors mentioned above in order to improve morale and unit cohesion. At the end of a brief review of the factors that can affect morale, the respondents always insisted on the central need to know the individual members of their unit.

The action that the respondents ranked first was "talking" with their people:

> Talking with people is essential. Maybe at a gathering, and therefore, a moment that is formal. Or if you see that something is wrong with someone, you take them aside, and you go and get a beer with them, and talk about it [platoon leader, aged 30].

> Lower-level commanders also have the task of being close to the personnel and cheering them up. It is also our role to know our people, to approach them when you see that someone is a bit off, and to talk with your people [platoon leader, aged 30].

Not far behind was the second necessity they mentioned: paying attention. It is not enough to "hear" what your people tell you; you must know how to "listen". It is only by listening to their men that commander are able to understand and support them at the first sign of weakening. This support seems to be of particular importance in all three cases discussed above, but it seems particularly essential if the individual has personal or family problems. Specific training with psychologists that focuses on precisely this function would be useful during the commanders' training just before deployment.

As already alluded to when dealing with family problems, "listening", "talking" and "understanding" could be summed up in the phrase "*caring for your people*". This requires a capacity for empathy. Good leaders must be able to "*step into the shoes*" of their subordinates so as to understand their behaviour and emotions better, and develop appropriate intervention strategies if necessary.

> You have to understand who your people are, what their expectations and needs are, and then be able to give them the right answer [company commander, aged 32].
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> Being a leader means taking on the personal problems of your men [company commander, aged 34].
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> A good leader is also someone who solves any problem and puts you in a position to serve in a certain way [platoon leader, aged 30].
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> The commander is the person that everyone looks to when there is a problem. In certain situations, you really feel that people's eyes are looking right through you while they are waiting for an answer [platoon leader, aged 30].

If there's one valuable insight about leadership in these operational environments that has emerged from the experiences of the respondents, it is this : leaders should be empathetic. Now, empathy is the first among the skills of the third dimension ("social awareness") in Daniel Goleman's model of transformational leadership. According to Goleman (2002), the leader should be able to tune in to a wide range of emotional signals, capturing the unspoken but perceptible emotions of the individuals or groups in his or her unit. By listening carefully, he can manage to grasp their perspective.

If the three aspects mentioned above are useful for testing the study's assumption, it is equally useful to focus on one final point before discussing its findings: the respondents' considerations concerning the professional content of the operations to which they were a party. All the commanders expressed particular satisfaction with their participation in the last mission in which they were involved.

> I learned things during the mission that I probably would not have learned in two or three years of training at the academy [company commander, aged 32].

The value of the training gained in the field abroad is explicitly recognized also with regard to leadership styles :

> It is an exceptional personal and professional experience that all leaders of people should have. It greatly enhances the primary group's potential [company commander, aged 37].
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> I would not say that leading a platoon in Afghanistan is the only real test but in any case, there are few other occasions for this kind of experience. When you are leading people in critical situations where everything that happens is under the responsibility of the leader… he tells you what to do, he takes responsibility for everything. Perhaps that's the true experience of being in command [platoon leader, 29].

Reiterating the educational value of overseas mission experience for all concerned, including themselves, the interviewed officers also confirmed that in Italy unit commanders

are mainly trained either while on missions through direct experience, or through sharing the experience of those who have already participated in previous missions. This, however, draws attention to the gap that exists between the leadership styles relied on during deployments and those that prevail in garrison life:

> When the young officers arrive from the training centres, they find soldiers who are much better prepared than they are and with experience that the officers have not had yet. Therefore, their leadership must be exercised in a different way than in the past : in a way that is more collaborative, taking into account their subordinates' different personal skills [battalion commander, aged 51].

Discussion

This research on Italian Army officers who in recent years have held leadership roles in environments of asymmetric conflict seems to fully confirm the initial hypothesis. It additionally bears out the role of commanders and primary bonds in enhancing cohesion and operational effectiveness, in keeping with Shils and Janowitz's (1948) and Stewart's (1988) lines of argument. Further, the experience of the officers concerned corroborated the overlapping of formal and informal roles – one of the traits, rarely found elsewhere to that extent, that make the military unique – as well as the need to distinguish between combat and non-combat environments, marked by different levels of stress.

Analysis also showed the relevance of a leader figure that is flexible, capable of adapting to different situations, and more particularly "caring" for and "worrying" about the individuals in the unit, with whom he or she has established "good relations". This is hardly new, since early writings on the subject (by classic authors of World War II vintage, following a line of argument initiated in the mid-19th century by Ardant du Picq) had all cited such traits among the characteristics of effective military leadership. What is more novel is the study's finding that at least in the stressful situations typical of combat in asymmetric conflicts, consideration for, empathy with and attention paid to feedback from the rank and file are of the essence. The interviewed commanders, on the strength of their field experiences, strongly emphasized the importance of such practice. By so doing, they would seem to refer to a concept of leadership that in fact seems closer to that found in civilian professions than it was in the past – as it happens, one that diverges from the current Italian military' official leadership doctrine.

In the past, the leadership model of reference in military institutions seemed to be paternalistic at most, and mostly failed to give empathy a central role. If doctrine is indicative of actual practice, this is still the case in today's Italy. However, commanders who have been directly involved in overseas missions appear to have evolved leadership styles that are more relationship-oriented. The leaders' role as defined by the expectations of their subordinates no longer resembles the somewhat rigid leadership style prescribed by the Italian armed forces. Those operational leaders and commanders are thus way ahead of the organization to which they belong in that respect: their model of reference is that of a type of leadership that is more attentive to signals from their soldiers of any discomfort or malaise that might negatively affect operational performance.

Empathy means more than just "*taking care of my men*". Its relevance hinges on *how* care is being delivered. And once again, the indications repeatedly emphasized by the respondents are clear : by listening, talking, and understanding. The platoon leader who gleans signs of trouble or distress in this or that private or corporal, invites him to have a beer back at the base, and shares his burden of family problems is integrating formal aspects of the leader role with informal ones.

Thus, the hypothesis that military leadership is coming to resemble that of civilian organizations seems to be borne out, at least for these aspects, and only in situations of great stress such as combat, mainly at the hands of the squad and platoon leaders directly involved, that is to say, those considered part of the primary group.

The study amply shows that in a stressful war situation, a good leader must be able to channel the emotions of the group towards the achievement of the unit's objectives. In other words, he/she must have emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2002). The more difficult the task to be accomplished, the greater the empathy and support from the leaders must be.

Interestingly, while their spontaneous practice is redolent of Goleman's model of transformational leadership, none of the study's respondents had studied or knew of Goleman's work.[5] Nonetheless, in the stressful situations of asymmetric combat missions, all of them have in fact demonstrated the value and relevance of most skills forming the basis of the four dimensions of transformational leadership.

Conclusions

Even though the interviewed officers were unfamiliar with Goleman, by applying the skills that underlie the four dimensions of transformational leadership they showed that they possessed emotional intelligence, and thereby managed to provide leadership that proved effective in the operational contexts considered. For the population under study, it was the result of on-the-job field training, often facilitated by the experience that seasoned senior NCOs in their unit cared to share with them.[6] So the near-absence of any formal training along those lines in their initial officer education process was compensated for. Importantly for the future, combined with experience gained in the field, the inclusion of empathetic leadership in basic training and official doctrine holds the promise of even better leaders at platoon level as well as more effective leadership and unit performance on overseas missions in which the Italian Army will be called upon to participate.

Such changes are not optional : they are required by the change that has affected not only the operational contexts in which leadership has to be exercised, but above all also the soldiers to be commanded. Since the latter's expectations have evolved, the very role of the leader must also change if optimal levels of effectiveness are to be ensured.

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[5] In fact, only officers who graduated from the Italian Army's School of Application and Institute of Military Studies in the last four years have studied Goleman as part of a special module on leadership during the Sociology of Organization course in the second year of a specialized degree in Strategic Sciences. At the time of the research, none of the interviewees had participated in this form of training.

[6] These are mainly *marescialli* (sergeant-majors) with extensive experience from numerous missions abroad.

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