

# Trust and military leadership

by Johan Bergh

## Resumé

Denne populærvitenskapelige artikkelen handler om tillit i en militær kontekst. Tillit er kjernen i alle relasjoner, også i militær forstand. Tillit i den militære profesjonen handler om i det mest ekstreme å legge ditt liv i hendene på dine medsoldater. Det er for øvrig utbredt enighet om at tillit er en særdeles viktig faktor når det gjelder samhandling mellom ulike interessenter i en organisasjon. Forskningen på tillit i militær forstand er svært beskjeden. Dette er et stort paradoks fordi tillit er mye omtalt som særdeles viktig i en mengde militær litteratur. Det er heller ikke noen fullstendig definisjon på hva tillit er – eller hvordan tillit skal forstås i en militærspesifikk kontekst. Artikkelen bygger på en lett omarbeidet keynote speech som ble holdt på den militærpsykologiske konferansen WARMCAMP i Jaipur, India 5. november 2016. Den utforsker tillit i samhandling og hva det eventuelt kan bety i en militær realitet. Den utforsker også noen perspektiver på hvordan det Norske Forsvaret forstår militært lederskap. En foreløpig forklaring til en tillitsbasert militær samhandlingsmodell omtales også. Fullstendig modell er planlagt publisert i 2017 i boken *Samhandling under risiko* (foreløpig tittel) av Professor G E Torgersen (red.)

ACCORDING TO THE esteemed researcher and Nobel Laureate, the late Elinor Ostrom, trust is as old as humanity itself and is deeply embedded in our genetic material. In order to survive, you just had to trust someone with skills other than your own. For our purpose, it is widely agreed that trust within military forces is essential for the successful accomplishment of any mission. Recent research suggests, not surprisingly, that there is still an ongoing debate on how to understand and define trust. According to the Swedish researcher Maria Fors Brandebo, Ph. D., there is still no complete definition of trust in a military sense.

The core of all military business is to plan and conduct military operations. One of the most important tasks is to plan for the unforeseen, in the utmost consequence of war. The nature of warfare is characterized by uncertainty and coincidences, which is a whole number of unforeseen factors. The unforeseen is in no way a closed concept, but

a relatively open one. In the military context it is about forestalling in the best possible way the unforeseen through intelligence, planning, structured training and learning. Interaction is necessary to accomplish this.

The core of interaction is tightly connected to leadership. In a military sense we can say that it is about gaining experience and learning during the process. For the military, interaction is among many things about leading the planning of military operations in the most effective way. This is dependent on many factors, such as leadership and the ability to interact (or cooperate). In all of this the most important factor is trust.

It is widely agreed that trust is a very important factor when it comes to interaction between different stakeholders in an organization. The well-known researchers Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner (2003) point out that trust works as one of the main preconditions for effective interaction. Trust can be seen as the will to subdue to vulner-

ability when it comes to actions taken by any member of a group or team. It may be the leader, a subordinate or a co-worker. All this based on a feeling of safety in the face of the other member of the team.

Mutual trust and interaction will therefore be very important factors when it comes to executing military missions in an effective way. Interaction and trust will also contribute effectively towards planning the development of common mental models. This may also better the ability to meet with the unforeseen. The latter is my assertion.

In a military context it can be claimed that efficient military leaders forge alliances and build teams. They break down walls, floors and ceilings and distribute leadership throughout the organization. Effective leadership is not about controlling from the top. It is all about liberating the inherent force in all people. Therefore, good and effective leadership is a collective process, inextricably tied to interaction. Military leadership is, of course, about the leaders' characteristics and behaviour, and about the interaction between the leader and the subordinate. In addition we have all kinds of external factors, such as organizational structure, situation, context and coincidences, just to mention some.

This, in turn, implies that leaders in their interaction with their subordinates must in a targeted way structure, organize, influence and not least legitimize. So here we can get a notion of trust in interaction being a considerable function when it comes to effective mission accomplishment. Trust is therefore a considerable contributing factor for effective interaction.

We can therefore ascertain that trust in military leaders is not only essential for effective mission accomplishment. Trust is also essential when it comes to mental and physical wellness. To quote Maria Fors Brandebo: "Trust in leaders has been highlighted as a

core variable and a prominent mechanism for subordinates' well-being, job satisfaction and motivation, amongst other things"

## The evolution of modern Norwegian military leadership

We shall now go back in time and have a look into how the Norwegian Armed Forces have changed their view on military leadership, as well as trust. The significant changes that our society has undergone in the past 20 to 30 years have also affected how the Norwegian Armed Forces are deployed in practice. The roles of leaders have evolved from merely organizing the defence of their own country to participating in international missions where the risk of political controversy and public discontent is much higher.

The Norwegian Armed Forces have embraced the leadership philosophy *Mission Command*. It has not always been that way. The changes for The Norwegian Armed Forces began with the Vassdalen Avalanche disaster in 1986. Tragically, 16 young soldiers were killed during an exercise.

So why did this happen, you might ask? There are a number of answers to that question. One of the answers was obeying orders whatever happens. Almost every man in this unit knew that the area they were about to enter was dangerous. Also, one of the younger officers even tried to get some superior officers on the radio to warn them about the possibilities of an avalanche in that area. When nothing was heard, they still proceeded into the area. They followed orders and were obedient, even if they knew the danger. And the rest is now history.

This incident demanded action from the top. After the disaster there was a clear shift in the way leadership and trust was communicated throughout the military and a couple of new books on leadership were written. The

Vassdalen disaster prompted a wide-ranging debate. In the immediate aftermath a new set of rules was put in place, existing regulations were tightened, and expertise on avalanches and landslides was provided.

This was followed by a debate in which one of the main issues was the problem of centralized control and adaptation to local conditions. Was such a rigid organizational structure in the military chain of command, which compelled officers in the field to refer back to senior levels for permission to delay or cancel a mission they considered hazardous to life and limb, really necessary? Or should not the person on the spot, with the best opportunity to appraise the situation, be allowed to order his or her troops out of the area? Should there not be more room for initiative and adaptive action at the local level?

The debate eventually resulted in a reform of the Norwegian military leadership, which addressed the organizational structure of the military, its organizational culture, procedures and leadership ideals. The solution to the above-mentioned challenges was the leadership philosophy known as mission command. In 1995, a new manoeuvre-based concept was instituted through the doctrine on the development and deployment of Norwegian Armed Forces in peacetime, crisis and war. In 2000, the Armed Forces Joint Operational Doctrine described mission command as the Armed Forces' new leadership philosophy.

In 2012, we developed a normative document called The Chief of Defence's policy on Leadership in the Armed Forces. In this document the concept of trust becomes very clear. Also, we state that trust is built through honesty, openness, loyalty and competence (or skills if you wish).

For what is our military reality today? All leaders in the Norwegian Armed Forces

are expected to exercise good leadership in peacetime and in times of conflict, crises and war. The policy highlights what distinguishes us from civil society and the special qualifications required of our military leaders.

Having said that, the policy is not only relevant to military operations. It focuses on values and principles of crucial importance in perilous situations, but they are also important for missions in peacetime. This is how we see it: The Chief of Defence's policy on Leadership in the Armed Forces includes both mutual trust and respect, a shared sense of commitment, responsibility, initiative and solidarity. Units informed about these values will be effective, with high levels of job satisfaction and personnel who feel a sense of meaning in their everyday work.

The leadership philosophy is designed to work efficiently in peacetime as much as in times of crisis, conflict and war, as an approach to managing both personnel and resources. To facilitate leaders' ability to handle uncertainty and make sensible decisions, we formulated a decentralized leadership philosophy, which was easier said than done. The purpose of this is to let the person with the best understanding of the situation act independently, though within the limits of his or her superior's intent. As can be seen, trust is of the essence here.

Trust means being able to rely on someone else, even when it comes at a price. When members of a team trust each other, they spend less time worrying about how they are going to behave – and it makes it easier to ask each other for help. Trust is essential for effective decentralization, for dealing with the unforeseen, for making the most of skills and expertise, targeted initiatives and drive.

Mutual trust among team members and especially between superiors and subordinates is in that respect a cornerstone of what we

mean about mission command. There needs to be trust at several levels. Senior staff must be able to feel confident that their subordinates are willing and able to accomplish the task. Subordinates must be confident that their superior will appreciate independence, initiative and innovation.

## Leadership in the Norwegian military reality

In Norway, this is how we understand our military reality: the mission of the Norwegian Armed Forces is to defend and preserve Norway's security, interests and values. Following the Cold War, the nature of military operations has changed dramatically. The fundamentals of good leadership as we interpret them are enshrined in the document Basic Values of the Norwegian Armed Forces and embodied in the core principles of Respect, Responsibility and Integrity, all founded on human dignity and popular legitimacy.

The Norwegian society expects their military leaders to have professional know-how and a well-functioning ethical compass. In this respect, something of crucial importance, but also extremely difficult, is asked of our leaders, namely the ability to initiate the right action at the right time in the right situation. By the right action we do not mean that there is only one way of doing things, for example a blueprint showing how a mission should be conducted. Rather, the right action is about coping in difficult circumstances both tactically, morally and emotionally; right in this sense means, for example, not erroneous, immoral or cowardly.

Assessing what the appropriate action at the appropriate time actually comprises is difficult in terms of ethics and knowledge, especially so when the mission is undertaken in difficult, unpredictable circumstances. Military operations can be observed by the

whole world today given the ubiquity of the media and the increasing use and misuse of social media.

The ethical dilemma of the military is that we are to protect things of value in our society as well as the dignity and value of human life. But at the same time we risk losing our own lives and those of others as well. An officer must be prepared to put his life on the line for the sake of the nation and political objectives, to take the lives of others and order missions that may well endanger the lives of subordinates and others. All this entails mutual trust.

Although the public accepts the use of military force, there is little tolerance or acceptance of misuse in an open democracy like Norway's. This applies not only to soldiers in combat, but to all military personnel. The organization's legitimacy relies on popular support; an ability to make tough ethical decisions is something everyone in the Norwegian Armed forces needs to have. Human and social values are to be protected, but we are also charged with responsibly managing a large workforce, materiel and financial resources. Leaders, who abuse these values, be it in military operations or conduct in peacetime, undermine the public support that we need to have. The social contract is broken; the public loses some of its trust and the military loses its legitimacy. So trust in military leadership is important to us, and there is no doubt about that.

Being a leader places particular demands on the individual. The situations in which leadership is exercised vary greatly in complexity and intensity. At its utmost extreme, military leadership is about coping with great uncertainty in complex situations and withstanding these conditions better than the adversary. Good military leadership also entails adaptability and flexibility. It is about doing the unpleasant and putting up with it.

It is about overcoming powerlessness and not falling apart emotionally.

If subordinates are to perform tasks in accordance with the leader's intentions, everyone needs to have the same idea of the objective. The leader must therefore encourage every member of the unit to work together. It is about helping team members grasp the purpose of the mission, to work towards and align common resources in order to achieve the same goal. It also requires that each member tries and sees larger parts of the whole, and that they target their efforts where they have the best effect. Clear communication is an essential part of leading others. It is about knowing oneself and each member of the group so as to deploy available resources as usefully as possible.

When people are put under pressure, they may forfeit their ideals in favour of their true self. This "unmasking effect" reveals or evokes a typical response in the individual and requires a leader who is genuine. By 'genuine' we mean that the leader has integrity and shows consistency between theory and practice. Most commonly this is called authentic leadership. As can be seen, trust is the core element. Integrity implies that one is totally on the level in relation to oneself and one's subordinates, i.e. that one is true to oneself and one's own principles and is aware of one's strengths and weaknesses in a self-assured, credible way without needing to put on an act.

Encompassed here, moreover, is a solid core; it finds expression in a consistent, reliable and effective *modus operandi* as a leader. Other attributes are flexibility and humility in relation to other people's needs and opinions, traits which in turn imply adaptability and openness to learning and cordiality. Being a good role model implies self-awareness and a deep understanding of oneself and the surrounding world. By meeting others in a frank, open and straight-

forward manner, the leader shows respect and inspires confidence and trust. Treating people's ideas and opinions, culture, experience and background with humility is also to show a form of respect and may be important in facilitating interaction.

A positive view of the world based on a belief that people have both the ability and desire to progress and flourish is another attribute. This latter aspect is, incidentally, very consistent with the transformational leadership theory. Finally, good leaders are socially motivated, that is, they stand for social equality, serve the common good and emphasize the development and empowerment of others.

The opposite kind of leadership is personally motivated, where personal dominance and an authoritarian style are deployed in the service of the leader's own particular interests and to exploit others. We often call this destructive or toxic leadership. This is not a topic for now.

Effective leadership is thus an effect of three relationships: 1) between leader and subordinate; 2) between personnel and their duties (objects, events); and 3) between the leader's appraisal of and relationship to him or herself. The latter requires systems, such as the 360-degree leadership assessment, which optimizes feedback on the leader's style of leadership and highlights systematic leadership development.

Selecting leaders on the basis of endorsed procedures and research-based tools, such as tests, followed by leadership development programmes, which take into account the distinctive challenges facing leaders in the military, are important measures to ensure that leaders in the Armed Forces always have the requisite personal qualifications.

## Mission Command

What can be said about mission command? Here we have an interesting topic. I do not

think I will be much mistaken if I suggest that most of my readers are familiar with this leadership philosophy. The military in many countries military have adopted mission command and with various degrees of success. This applies to us too. What we can see as of now, mission command translated into Norwegian terms works pretty well. The very essence in mission command is trust, as well as freedom of action. This is not to be taken lightly. Mission command promotes initiative, creativity, a sense of task ownership, responsibility and thus a collective sense of commitment.

We can, therefore, at this point probably agree on the fact that trust seems to be of the essence. The most paradoxical thing of it all is that many military organizations operate under a strong controlling regime. From the 1980's, and from Australia, came New Public Management (NPM), which still prevails although in a slightly different form.

So, on the one hand you have a leadership philosophy that emphasizes and promotes trust. On the other hand, you have a regime that is primarily based on distrust, first and foremost against all public servants and decisions made in the public sector. A great dilemma which places especially high demands on military leaders on all levels.

At the operational level, where you conduct joint, or even joint-combined operations, trust has several dimensions. At this point, I would like to introduce a preliminary theoretical model that I have been working on for some time. It must, however, be considered that it is preliminary.

## **A preliminary discussion on trust-based military interaction**

This discussion is based on relational didactics which is developed in a teaching perspective. For my purpose, this approach is nevertheless

valid. The full discussion including a trust-based model is scheduled to be published in 2017 in the forthcoming book: *Interaction under risk* (preliminary title) by Prof. G E Torgersen (Ed.). The main point is to clarify interaction and various relationships that we have to consider when we analyse, plan and conduct military operations.

More precisely, this means that when we reflect on, analyse and act in relation to one element, we must at the same time consider all the others, as choices or decisions related to one element will have consequences for the others. This attempt is to simplify a very complex reality. It is to be regarded as follows: every military operation, at least at the operational level, is influenced by several framing factors such as current political priorities, overall strategy, laws, conventions and available resources, just to mention a few.

All these factors have implications for the CO to successfully achieve the purpose, or desired end-state, for the operation. In addition to this, there are several other important elements to be taken into consideration when conducting these kinds of operations:

The CO is directly responsible for the outcome of the operation, and is as such at the heart of it. The CO's leadership style influences all the other elements. Trust is therefore a very important factor. There is always a level above the CO, which may be the department of defence or a military-strategic level. The superior level may interact directly and influence with all the other elements. Or most commonly, directly with the CO.

In the modern Norwegian society, military forces are politically governed. That means that military commanders do not have total freedom of action. The superior level is therefore a vital element in planning and executing military operations. However, over the past few years I believe that many



COs have experienced that the superior level more and more often interacts directly with one or more of the other elements. Of course, new information technology has a lot to do with this. Still, I am curious what this does to trust altogether.

The purpose or the desired outcome for the operation is the CO's main concern and number one priority. As regards the purpose you may ask: 'why this element'? Is not the purpose considered to be a result? I would claim both yes and no. I choose to have the purpose as a separate element because planning for military operations demands both integration and interaction. In a military sense this means that we first of all must find out what the military force is supposed to achieve before we launch the operation. This demands interaction. This interaction is a dynamic process where the formulation of the purpose is constantly subject to change. These dynamics will in turn influence all other elements in this discussion.

The CO always has a staff to help him (or her), among other things in order to get a grip of the overall picture and to think ahead. The CO's staff is generally filled with expertise in several fields such as intelligence, psychological operations, air, land and naval warfare, to mention some. The interaction between the CO and the staff is very much intertwined – to a certain extent. The CO cannot execute the mission without a professional staff. The reality of the environment is just too complex. It is claimed, however, that the staff can work effectively regardless of who the CO is at any particular moment. Interaction and trust is still essential.

The staff always works on behalf of the CO and facilitates for those who are to fight the battle – the subordinate commanders and units. They are also the CO's and the staffs' advisors in tactical matters. You may often also find a lot of knowledge about joint opera-

tions at the tactical level. It is of the utmost importance that the CO trusts his staff and their expertise, and that the staff trusts the CO to give them the necessary direction and a clear commander's intent. Mission command is essential, as is the height of the ceiling in this process. It has, among other things, to do with effective communication.

Finally, about civilian expertise: this is another vital element, as this kind of expertise contributes to a better understanding of the area of operations. This element can provide the planners detailed knowledge of topography, infrastructure and the civilian population. All this may contribute to a higher degree of mutual interaction and possibly trust. My point being that the successful outcome of any military operation is based on effective communication, interaction and trust within and between all the elements I have discussed. The essence of it all is at the heart of it, namely trust.

## Situational awareness and mental models

I like to point out this when it comes to the planning and leadership process: in interacting in this complex reality there is much effort put into ensuring, or trying to establish, a common situational awareness. This is not an easy task to perform. I would claim it is nearly impossible. Why? Because we all perceive and understand differently. The concept of situational awareness is used for describing a person, group or organization's wider appreciation and understanding of a given situation. To obtain a realistic understanding of a situation, leaders must be able to draw on and galvanize all the resources of the team. Teams also need to have good mental models of the system and context in which they are involved. Mental models are unconscious, deeply entrenched

assumptions, generalizations, and ideas that affect how we perceive our surroundings and how we act.

Mental models are constructed automatically in our encounters with the world around us and on the basis of experience. They are constituted from the day we are born, and comprise our individual and common perceptions of reality. When, or if, these perceptions become a collective experience, they help the group itself acquire a common idea of reality and synchronize observations and action. It can be a challenge for teams, especially under pressure, to coordinate the actions of numerous individuals. At the same time, it is a critical factor in adapting to frequent changes in the wider world. The formation of shared mental models is one way of coordinating joint efforts.

Shared mental models enable members of the team to anticipate each other's needs and actions and adapt behaviour to suit the situation, often without specific steps being taken to synchronize action as such. Teams with well developed, shared mental models will not need to communicate as much verbally because they will have a good idea of the tasks ahead, equipment, circumstances, responsibilities as well as each other's preferences. And they will also have an idea of what they and other teams are going to do.

Tacit coordination and communication are necessary for a team to handle a heavy workload and act with speed in an unclear dynamic environment. By communicating frankly and openly, we can try out our thoughts, test our interpretations and discuss different options. The better this form of communication is tried and assessed, when there is time, the sooner it can be put to use, often wordlessly and intuitively, when time is a key factor. This is a difficult thing.

According to constructivist theory, language creates meaning. I propose that if we

talk more about trust, maybe the concept of trust will be easier to understand or at least be a more common expression among us. I mean, how often do you talk about trust in your organization? Maybe this can contribute to a better practice in both planning and leadership processes.

## Conclusion

This article highlights some important elements when it comes to military interaction and trust. Trust is of the essence in military relations – make no mistake. Trust is important on every level, not only in smaller teams on squad level but also for strategic leaders.

The preliminary trust-based discussion shows a few interdependent relations, the need for effective interaction, cooperation and most important of all – trust. Trust is important both within each element and between the elements. These are elements we need to address when it comes to planning and executing military operations.

My final point is that trust is still a relatively open concept and is very much a subject for research and debate, which is not surprising. In a military sense trust has not been very much researched and this is a great paradox. Trust is often highlighted as extremely important, but if trust is that important, why is it still so vague and so difficult?

The obvious answer is that of more research. We need to know more. Especially about trust in a wider military context where our reality is characterized by vulnerability, risk, uncertainty and unpredictability.

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