

Military values in ITSM

Translating discipline, leadership, and determination into service excellence

A whitepaper

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on behalf of itSMF UK's Armed
Forces Community of Practice





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Foreword

As Head of Service Management at Pearson Education and a member of the IT Service Management Forum (itSMF UK) board, I have had the privilege of operating within the structured world of IT service management and the dynamic environment of the British military. My journey began as a combat engineer and military parachutist in the Regular Army, a world apart from traditional IT. However, the values and disciplines ingrained during my military service have proven to be invaluable assets throughout my IT career. Having recently surpassed a personal milestone of spending more time in IT service management than in the regular forces, I've found myself reflecting on the significant overlap between these supposedly different fields.

The past year, with the support of many within both the IT Service Management (ITSM) and military communities, I have delved into the intersection of military values and IT service management. This exploration has been a key theme for the itSMF UK's Armed Forces Community of Practice, an initiative I have had the honour of chairing since its inception in January 2023. This white paper is a culmination of our collective insights, offering an insight into how military principles can be effectively applied within IT service management.

The Armed Forces Community of Practice was born out of ITSMF UK's commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, signed in June 2022. Our mission is clear: to bridge the gap between the Armed Forces community and IT service management, helping service leavers transition into our profession and demonstrating the unique value they bring to the industry.

We have strived to create a supportive environment where learning, collaboration, and innovation flourish, enabling the military community to thrive within the IT service management field.

This white paper does more than present findings; it serves as an affirmation of the untapped opportunities that military skills offer in the realm of IT service management. The insights presented today aim to provide new angles and strategies for ITSM, underscoring the impact that a diverse team and organisation can have on the field we are deeply committed to. While it may not be the most statistically heavy or fact-driven document you've encountered, it is designed to prompt reflection on your implementation of practices and operational methods.

I wholeheartedly endorse this white paper, as it not only encapsulates the wisdom of the military community but also serves as a guide for anyone seeking to understand the profound impact that military experience can have on IT service management. Whether you are a service leaver considering a career in IT, an IT professional seeking to learn from military principles, or a business leader looking to tap into this rich talent pool, this paper provides invaluable insights and practical guidance.

In conclusion, I invite you to explore the pages ahead with an open mind and a curious spirit. The lessons contained within are not just theoretical—they are lived experiences. It is my hope that this white paper will inspire you to see the unique value that military experience can bring to the IT service management profession and encourage you to apply these principles in your own work.

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1 Introduction

In the field of IT service management, professionals constantly seek new ways to enhance leadership, foster resilience, and manage complex challenges. While the IT industry is often seen as a domain driven by technology and innovation, there is a growing recognition that the core values that define effective leadership and operational excellence are not unique to IT. In fact, many of these values have been deeply embedded in the military for centuries.

This white paper explores the integration of military values into IT service management, offering fresh perspectives on leadership, communication, and problem-solving. Drawing on the experiences of those who have served in the Armed Forces, we aim to highlight how these principles can enhance our approach to managing IT services, leading teams, and tackling the unpredictable challenges of our industry. The Armed Forces Community of Practice within itSMF UK was established with the mission of bridging the gap between military and civilian careers in IT service management. This initiative is rooted in the belief that military experience brings unique insights and strengths that can drive innovation and excellence in IT. Our focus is on harnessing these insights to create a more robust and adaptive approach to IT service management.

In the following sections, we will delve into the six key military values and examine their relevance to our field. These values, ranging from the importance of clear communication to the ability to maintain clarity and focus, offer practical guidance for IT professionals looking to enhance their leadership and operational effectiveness.

The insights presented in this white paper are not just theoretical concepts; they are grounded in the real-world experiences of military professionals who have transitioned into IT service management. By exploring these values, we hope to provide you with new strategies and approaches that can be applied in your own work, helping you to navigate the complexities of IT service management with greater confidence and success.

As you engage with this content, we encourage you to think critically about how these principles can be adapted to your specific context, and how they might help you and your team to achieve your goals more effectively. The journey from the barracks to the boardroom is one that offers valuable lessons for all of us, regardless of our professional background. Let's spark curiosity, generate conversation and hopefully take something away.



2 Transactional versus transformational leadership

Emphasising the importance of both direct, authoritative leadership in critical situations and the nurturing of team skills and relationships for long-term success.

Management within the military is deeply embedded in its structure, with roles and responsibilities clearly defined by rank. Every individual, regardless of their position, is tasked with some level of management, whether it involves logistics, personnel, or other critical resources. This management is essential for ensuring that operations are conducted efficiently and that resources are utilised effectively. However, while management is focused on the practicalities of organisation and resource allocation, leadership is a distinct and vital component that transcends the hierarchical nature of military management. (Bass, 1985)

Leadership in the military context is often misunderstood as being solely authoritarian, characterised by a top-down approach where orders are given and expected to be followed without question. The recognised example of this is that of a drill sergeant on a parade square. This misconception overlooks the nuanced and varied leadership styles employed within the military, where different situations require different approaches. The military, in fact, recognises and promotes the necessity of adapting leadership styles to the context, balancing the need for transactional and transformational leadership to achieve both immediate and long-term objectives. This approach is well-aligned with Daniel Goleman's leadership styles, which emphasise the importance of flexibility and situational awareness in leadership.

Daniel Goleman's leadership framework identifies six distinct styles: Coercive, Authoritative, Affiliative, Democratic, Pacesetting, and Coaching, each rooted in emotional intelligence. Transactional leadership aligns with the Coercive and Pacesetting styles, which focus on directive, results-oriented approaches effective in crisis situations or when quick, decisive action is needed. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, resonates with the Authoritative, Affiliative, Democratic, and Coaching styles. These styles inspire through vision, foster strong team relationships, encourage participation, and focus on personal development, key elements for driving long-term growth and team cohesion. Goleman emphasises that effective leaders must be flexible, adapting their style to the demands of the situation. (Goleman, 2000)





Transactional leadership

Transactional leadership in the military is most evident in situations where compliance and adherence to orders are critical, particularly in high-stakes environments such as combat. On the battlefield, the effectiveness of a mission hinges on the ability of a leader to issue clear, direct commands that are immediately followed by subordinates. This feeds well into an upcoming value of clear, unambiguous communication. In such scenarios, there is little room for discussion or deviation from orders, as the consequences of inaction or error can be fatal. This style of leadership is characterised by a clear chain of command, where responsibilities are well-defined, and rewards or consequences are directly tied to performance and compliance. (Bass, 1985)

For example, during a battlefield operation, a section commander might issue precise instructions on how a unit should advance under fire. The expectation is that these orders will be executed without hesitation, as any delay could jeopardise the mission and endanger lives. This is the essence of transactional leadership: the leader establishes clear expectations, and the followers are expected to meet those expectations, with success measured by the achievement of specific objectives. Mission Command may still be called upon in this scenario and we will discuss that as another value later, but clear parameters are given, and orders must be followed.

In the realm of ITSM, transactional leadership is equally crucial, particularly during major incident management. When a critical system fails, the priority must be to restore service as quickly as possible. In such situations, a leader must adopt a more directive approach, assigning tasks, setting clear expectations, and ensuring that team members are focused on resolving the issue at hand. The urgency of the situation necessitates a leadership style that is more authoritative, where quick decisions are made, and actions are taken with little room for debate.

For instance, during a major incident where a key service is down, the incident manager might issue direct instructions to various teams to troubleshoot different parts of the system. There is a clear expectation that these instructions will be followed promptly to restore service. However, this transactional approach is not about being abrasive or overly forceful; rather, it is about creating a controlled environment where the team can focus on the immediate task of incident resolution.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership in the military is most apparent in training and developmental contexts, where the focus is on nurturing and developing individuals to reach their full potential. This leadership style is less about issuing commands and more about inspiring and motivating soldiers to improve their skills, take ownership of their roles, and embrace the core values of the military. The military's emphasis on the slogan "fail, learn, win" exemplifies this approach, where the objective is to create an environment where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities rather than failures. (Capita)

During fitness sessions, for example, physical training instructors may encourage soldiers to push beyond their perceived limits, guiding them through challenging tasks and providing constructive feedback. The goal is not just to complete a task but to foster growth, resilience, and adaptability in each soldier. The instructor's role is to transform these individuals, helping them to build confidence and develop the skills necessary to succeed in future missions. This approach not only improves individual performance but also strengthens the overall effectiveness and cohesion of the unit.

In ITSM, transformational leadership can play a significant role in the post-incident review process, where the focus shifts from immediate issue resolution to learning and improvement. After a major incident has been resolved, a transformational leader will guide the team through a reflective process to identify what went well, what could have been done better, and how similar incidents can be prevented in the future. This approach is not just about assigning blame or praise but about establishing a culture of continuous improvement and learning.



For example, after resolving a major incident, the incident manager might facilitate a post-incident review call where team members are encouraged to share their experiences and insights. The leader's role is to create a safe environment where constructive feedback can be shared, and lessons can be learned. This transformational approach helps to build a more resilient and capable team, ready to handle future challenges with greater skill and confidence.

In both the military and ITSM, effective leadership requires a balance between transactional and transformational approaches. While transactional leadership is essential in situations where immediate compliance and decisive action are required, transformational leadership is key to building long-term growth, development, and team cohesion. The best leaders are those who can adapt their style to the situation at hand, blending the strengths of both approaches to achieve both immediate objectives and long-term success.

In the military, this balance ensures that missions are executed efficiently while also developing soldiers who are resilient, adaptable, and capable of operating effectively in diverse environments. In ITSM, it ensures that incidents are managed promptly while also building a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. Understanding when to employ transactional versus transformational leadership is critical to success in both domains.



3 Mission Command

Providing clear objectives while allowing flexibility in execution to encourage initiative and adaptability.

"Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity" General George Patton

Mission Command is a foundational doctrine within military leadership, emphasising the importance of providing clear objectives while allowing subordinates the flexibility to determine how best to achieve them. This leadership approach is deeply rooted in the military's need to maintain operational effectiveness in rapidly changing environments. Mission Command is described as the "clear expression of intent by commanders and the freedom of subordinates to act to achieve that intent". It is a form of decentralised decision-making that promotes initiative and adaptability, enabling leaders to dictate the tempo of operations while remaining responsive to superior direction. (Defence, Nov 22)

Mission Command is built on mutual trust between commanders and their subordinates. Trust is essential, as it allows commanders to delegate decision-making authority based on the context and the capabilities of their team. This philosophy encourages subordinates to exercise judgment and initiative within the framework of their commander's intent, creating an environment where innovation and adaptability are valued.

The principles of Mission Command closely align with the balance between transactional and transformational leadership discussed earlier. Just as transactional leadership is necessary for providing clear directives and ensuring compliance in critical situations, Mission Command emphasises the importance of clear objectives and decisive leadership. However, the flexibility granted to subordinates under Mission Command resonates strongly with transformational leadership, where the focus shifts to empowering individuals to take initiative, innovate, and adapt to changing circumstances.

This approach not only ensures that immediate goals are met but also fosters an environment where team members are encouraged to grow and develop their capabilities, much like the transformational leadership style that prioritises long-term success and team cohesion. By integrating the strengths of both leadership styles, Mission Command enables military leaders to achieve both the precision needed in high-stakes operations and the adaptability required for sustained operational effectiveness.

In a military setting, Mission Command is exemplified by how orders are communicated and executed in the field. For instance, a battalion commander might issue a directive to secure a strategic location, such as a bridge or a hill, without dictating the exact method by which this should be accomplished. The subordinate leaders (such as platoon commanders) are given the autonomy to assess the situation on the ground and choose the tactics they believe will best achieve the objective. This might involve deciding on the route to approach the target, how to deploy their troops, or how to respond to unexpected enemy actions.

This approach leverages the on-the-ground expertise of the leaders directly involved in the action. It allows them to adapt their plans in real-time, responding to unforeseen challenges while keeping the overarching mission objective in focus. This flexibility is crucial in combat situations, where rigid adherence to a pre-set plan could lead to failure.

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on ensuring that individual and team objectives align with the overarching mission and goals of the organisation. This approach mirrors the principles of Mission Command, where the commander's intent provides a clear strategic direction, and subordinates are entrusted with the flexibility to determine the best way to achieve their specific objectives. In a corporate environment, this means that while the organisation sets broad, strategic goals, the methods by which these goals are pursued will vary depending on the role, function, and context within different areas of the business.



The adoption of Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) has become a popular method for achieving this alignment. OKRs emphasise setting ambitious, measurable goals that are aligned with the organisation's mission, allowing teams and individuals the freedom to innovate and determine the best ways to achieve these outcomes (Doerr, 2024). This approach fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, ensuring that all efforts are directed towards the overall mission of the organisation while allowing flexibility in execution.

In ITSM, the principles of Mission Command can be applied to empower teams managing critical IT functions, such as the Configuration Management Database (CMDB) or monitoring systems. An IT leader might define clear objectives for the team, such as ensuring the accuracy and completeness of the CMDB or achieving a specific uptime target for key services. However, rather than micromanaging how these objectives are met, the leader grants the team the autonomy to decide on the processes and tools that best suit their needs.

For example, instead of centralising control over the CMDB, an IT leader might delegate responsibility to individual delivery teams, allowing them to manage and update their own segments of the database. The leader provides the overall vision and necessary resources but does not impose a strict process for every action. This autonomy encourages teams to innovate and optimise their approaches based on their unique understanding of the systems they manage.

Similarly, when setting up monitoring systems, the IT leader might establish the goal of achieving comprehensive coverage and timely alerting but leave the specifics, such as the choice of monitoring tools and alert thresholds, to the discretion of the individual teams. This delegation of responsibility empowers the teams to tailor their monitoring setups to the specific requirements of their applications, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of issue detection and response.

In both military operations and ITSM, the application of Mission Command principles allows for greater adaptability and responsiveness. By providing clear objectives and empowering individuals to determine how to achieve them, leaders can harness the full potential of their teams, driving success in complex and rapidly changing environments. This balance between direction and flexibility is essential for achieving both immediate tactical goals and long-term strategic success.



4 Clear, unambiguous communication

Ensuring messages are understood as intended, without room for misinterpretation.

Effective communication is a cornerstone of military operations, where the clarity of messages can determine the success or failure of a mission. In the military, there are strict protocols and procedures designed to eliminate ambiguity and ensure that every message is understood exactly as intended. This necessity arises from the high-stakes nature of military operations, where miscommunication can lead to catastrophic outcomes.

One of the key tools in achieving clear communication at the basic level is the use of the phonetic alphabet. By assigning specific words to letters (e.g. Alpha for A, Bravo for B), the phonetic alphabet reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings, particularly in noisy or stressful environments where radio communication might be less than ideal. This method ensures that important information, such as coordinates, call signs or even passwords, are conveyed accurately, preventing errors that could jeopardise a mission.

Another critical component is voice procedure, the standardised method for transmitting messages over the radio. Voice procedure includes practices such as using "over" to signal the end of a transmission or "Roger" to indicate that a message has been received and understood. These standardised phrases and protocols minimise the chances of misinterpretation, ensuring that every soldier knows exactly what is being communicated and how to respond.

Even in the delivery of orders which I referenced in the previous value, the military employs a set structure to communicate this to their subordinates. Mission Command very much remains in place but with this methodical approach all essential information is covered and understood, leaving little room for error. The format is repetitive regardless of the level at which the information is being delivered. Each element is communicated clearly and in a specific order, ensuring that all personnel have a comprehensive understanding of the mission and their role within it.

A historical example that underscores the importance of communication (and the potential consequences of its manipulation) is Operation Fortitude during World War II. This Allied deception operation involved the creation of fake units, misleading radio traffic, and false information intended to deceive the Axis powers about the location of the D-Day invasion. The success of this operation relied heavily on precise and deliberate communication strategies. (Levine, 2012). While I'm not recommending you deceive your users about system performance—after all, they are allies, not the enemy—this example illustrates the power of clear and strategic communication in achieving desired outcomes.

In ITSM, the need for clear, unambiguous communication is equally vital, particularly during major incidents. When a critical system fails, swift and effective communication is essential to manage the situation and mitigate impact. One effective practice is the use of templated communications for major incidents. These templates ensure that all necessary information is conveyed succinctly and consistently, including the nature of the issue, the impact on users, the actions being taken, and the expected resolution time. By standardising these messages, organisations can reduce confusion and keep stakeholders informed with the key information they need.

Additionally, having a centralised knowledge-sharing platform, such as a SharePoint site, can further enhance communication within ITSM. By consolidating all relevant information, procedures, and updates in a single, accessible location, teams can ensure that everyone has access to the most current and accurate information.

This centralisation helps prevent the miscommunication that can occur when different teams or individuals have access to conflicting or outdated information. The goal is to ensure that all communication is clear, consistent, and leaves no room for misinterpretation, much like the rigorous communication standards in the military.



It is also important to highlight that communication is not merely one-way. Effective communication involves both sending and receiving information. In ITSM, the ability to interpret technical details and relay them in a manner understandable to business users is invaluable. Similarly, in the military, the use of deduction while receiving information is crucial for operational effectiveness and effective Mission Command.

A common military planning method is the three-column format (3CF), which includes identifying factors (what is observed), deductions (the implications of these observations), and outputs (the actions to be taken). This method, embedded in military training, can be directly applied when working through complex challenges in ITSM. The 3CF is a powerful tool, enabling thought and action to flow naturally from a factor, leaving you with a list of actions that can be later incorporated into your plan. Overall, the goal is to fully understand the situation to enable planning. It starts by taking a step back to gather information, assess potential risks and decide upon key actions. By doing this, you can make more informed decisions and avoid basing your plan solely on instinct or experience. It's a crucial step that sets the foundation for a solid and effective plan. (Edwards, 2023)

An example of the 3CF is given below:

Factor (What have you identified?)	Deduction (So what?)	Output (What are you going to do about it?)
A Bill introducing changes to data protection and privacy laws may be passed during my project's lifecycle.	Such a Bill would directly affect my project's scope, budget and timeline.	Action 1: Review the Bill to understand how it will affect my project. Action 2: Assess the impact on the schedule, budget and scope. Identify areas which require change. Action 3: Communicate scope of change to stakeholders, seeking a decision on proposed changes. Action 4: Re-baseline the project. Action 5: Establish a process to monitor compliance with the new legislation throughout my project.

Three Column Format Table



5 Working through the fog of war

The ability to maintain clarity and focus on objectives amidst chaotic situations.

The term "fog of war" was first described as *"the state of ignorance in which commanders frequently find themselves as regards the real strength and position, not only of their foes, but also of their friends."* (Hale, 1896)

This concept highlights the inherent uncertainty and confusion that leaders often face in the midst of complex and rapidly changing situations. In such environments, the ability to maintain clarity and focus on objectives becomes crucial.

In the context of service management, this fog can manifest in various forms. Consider the multitude of roles within ITSM, the different frameworks that guide practices, the diverse organisational structures, and the vast array of industries that depend on ITSM. The sheer complexity of these factors can create a chaotic landscape where it's easy to lose sight of key objectives. The question then arises: how can leaders navigate this complexity and maintain focus?

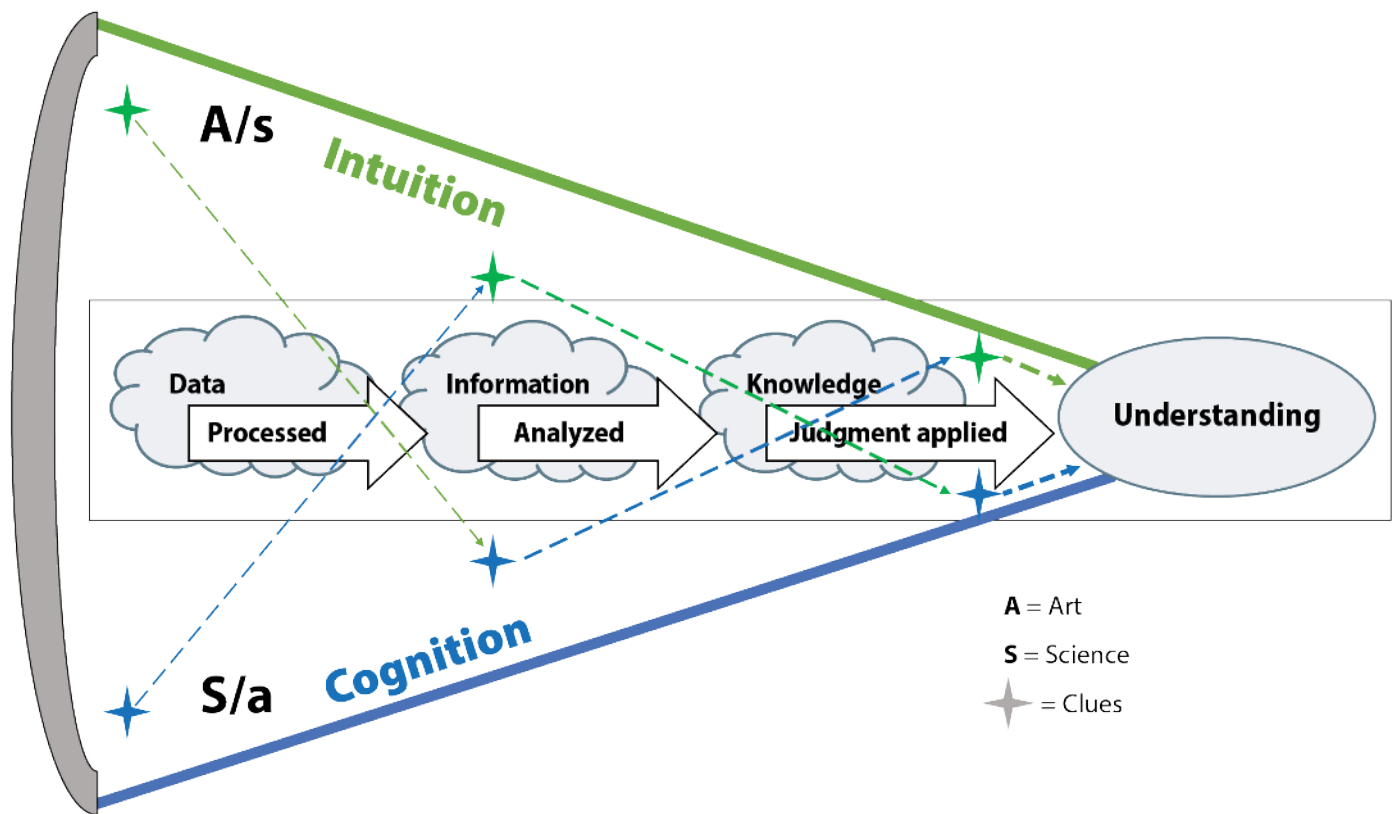
One approach is through visualisation, a technique used by military leaders to gather clues from their environment and predict what will happen next. Visualisation is more than just seeing; it involves interpreting and applying meaning to the information observed. Military leaders often use a cognitive model that helps them achieve understanding through an iterative process of determining meaning from environmental clues until a decision can be made.

This kind of thinking, sometimes referred to as "intellectual bracketing," involves transforming data into information, analysing that information to create knowledge, and applying judgement to achieve understanding. (Lt. Col. Richard A. McConnell, Ptaschek, & Mong, Jan - Feb 2021)

Intellectual bracketing blends both art and science: cognition leans more on science, while intuition relies more on art. In ITSM, this approach can be adapted to process complex data, make sense of diverse information sources, and ultimately maintain clarity of purpose. While the "fog" in ITSM might differ depending on the industry or role, the process remains the same - leaders must work through the chaos to keep their objectives in focus. What often gets lost in the complexity is the goal or objective that the leader is visualising. The chaos is the fog, and it will always be present to some degree. Military values teach us to maintain clarity and work steadily towards our objectives, utilising both intuition and cognition to navigate the uncertainties.

It's important to note that it's not just intuition and cognition that help manage the fog of war. The fog of war in the modern landscape has increasingly reduced as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technologies advance, providing more accurate and timely information to decision-makers, as well as building a better environment for teams to operate within. A parallel can be drawn in ITSM, where the "fog" can be reduced through a deep understanding of processes, continuous improvement, knowledge management, strong team dynamics, effective leadership, and clear communication. These elements collectively enable focus and clarity to flourish in the face of complexity.

Just as in military operations, where commanders use tools, technologies and teams to gain a clearer picture of the objective, ITSM professionals can build upon the same foundations. The ability to process and interpret vast amounts of information in real-time allows ITSM leaders to make informed decisions, keeping their teams aligned with organisational objectives. Combining effective visualisation with deduction methods shared in the clear, unambiguous communication value will allow IT leaders to succeed in these objectives, despite the inherent chaos of complex IT environments.



(McConnell), 2014)



6 Humility and curiosity

Encouraging a culture where questions are welcomed, and there's an openness to learning.

Humility and curiosity are essential values within any organisation, building an environment where questions are welcomed, and learning is continuous. In both the military and ITSM, these are encouraged and crucial to success.

There are approximately 2.4 million veterans in Great Britain, 40% aged between 16 and 64. By 2028, the percentage of working-age veterans is expected to rise to 44%. (Office for National Statistics, 2023)

Each year, thousands of individuals transition out of the armed forces, with 15,730 personnel leaving in 2023 alone. Voluntary outflow, where individuals choose to leave the service, accounted for 61% of these departures. This steady flow of service members transitioning to civilian life is driven by curiosity about new opportunities and a recognition of the need to learn new skills and adapt to different environments. (Kirk-Wade, 2024)

These veterans bring with them a profound sense of humility, rooted in the understanding that while they may have excelled in the military, there is always more to learn in their new roles. This humility is paired with a determination to succeed and a willingness to ask questions and seek guidance, knowing that this is the key to their ongoing development. The military's rigorous training programs, which include apprenticeships, trade-specific education, and leadership courses, instil a lifelong learning mindset. Military personnel are conditioned to see every experience as an opportunity to learn and grow, a mindset they carry with them into civilian life.

A crucial element that supports humility and curiosity in both military and ITSM contexts is psychological safety. Psychological safety refers to an environment where individuals feel secure enough to express their thoughts, ask questions, and take risks without fear of negative consequences (Edmunson, 1999). This concept is fundamental in developing a culture where learning and growth are prioritised.

In the military, psychological safety is cultivated through a culture of mutual respect and trust. Commanders are trained to listen to their subordinates, value their input, and create an environment where feedback is not only accepted but encouraged. This openness is essential in high-stakes situations where lives are on the line and every piece of information could be critical. Humility in leadership plays a significant role here; military leaders must acknowledge that they do not have all the answers and that insights from others, regardless of rank, can be invaluable.

In ITSM, psychological safety is equally important. IT environments are often complex and dynamic, with a constant need for innovation and problem-solving. Encouraging team members to ask questions, propose ideas, and admit when they don't know something creates a culture of continuous improvement.

This is particularly relevant in ITIL V4's High Velocity IT framework (PeopleCert, 2019), which emphasises the importance of trust and the ongoing commitment to learning. The behaviour pattern of "trust and be trusted" highlights the need for respecting each other's professional skills, trusting in their decision-making, and providing feedback that is both honest and considerate. The underpinning behaviour of "commit to continual learning" resonates strongly with military values. Just as military personnel undergo continuous training and education, ITSM practitioners are encouraged to constantly expand their knowledge base, challenge existing hypotheses, and engage in data-driven experiments to drive improvements.

In both the military and ITSM, humility and curiosity are not just personal attributes; they are critical components of effective leadership and team dynamics. Leaders who demonstrate humility are more likely to encourage open communication, foster psychological safety, and create an environment where learning is continuous. Curiosity, on the other hand, drives innovation and improvement, as individuals are motivated to explore new ideas, challenge the status quo, and seek out new knowledge.



The military excels at creating these environments through non-work-specific activities like adventurous training, social events, and sports. Adventurous training challenges individuals to step outside their comfort zones, building trust and resilience that translate into better teamwork and communication. Social events and sports break down formal barriers, promoting camaraderie and mutual respect, which are crucial for a culture where learning and open dialogue are encouraged.

These activities strengthen interpersonal relationships, creating an environment where humility and curiosity can thrive. In ITSM, similar practices, such as team-building exercises and informal gatherings, can enhance collaboration and create a culture of continuous learning, essential for the complexities of service management.

The British Army, as one of the UK's largest apprenticeship employment providers, exemplifies this approach. With 4,000 personnel starting apprenticeships each year, the Army ensures that its personnel are constantly learning, whether through trade-specific training or leadership development programs. (British Army, 2024) This culture of learning is deeply embedded in the military, and it is carried forward by veterans as they transition into civilian roles, including ITSM.

In the ITSM context, establishing a culture of humility and curiosity can lead to significant improvements in service delivery and team performance. When team members feel safe to express their ideas and admit their limitations, they are more likely to collaborate effectively, innovate, and find solutions to complex problems. This, in turn, enhances the overall efficiency and effectiveness of IT services, leading to better outcomes for the organisation.



7 Appetite to risk

Knowing the importance of risk, what to accept, and learning from past mistakes.

Risk management is a crucial aspect of both military operations and ITSM, where the balance between risk and reward often determines the success or failure of a mission or project. In the military, the stakes are incredibly high, and the tolerance for risk must be carefully calibrated to achieve operational effectiveness. This represents the most extreme example of risk versus reward, where the outcomes of decisions can be a matter of life and death.

In the military, every activity must be accompanied by a thorough risk assessment, embedded within an established risk management framework. This could range from having a family's day in the barracks, to completing a range package where units will ensure they are competent at shooting. Managers at all operational levels are responsible for conducting risk assessments, which vary in complexity and detail depending on the nature of the task. These assessments are not just static; military personnel trained to continuously evaluate and adjust their risk assessments as situations evolve. This flexibility is crucial in a rapidly changing environment, where the ability to respond to new threats or opportunities can be the difference between success and failure.

The defence sector mandates that risk management is conducted in accordance with Joint Service Publication (JSP) 892, which outlines the requirements for effective risk management within defence organisations. According to JSP 892, defence organisations must demonstrate that risk management is integrated into their Safety Management Systems (SMS). A robust risk management framework should include risk identification, assessment, mitigation, reporting, monitoring, and governance. This framework is typically overseen by senior leadership, ensuring that risk management practices align with the defence safety vision of eliminating fatalities, enhancing capability, and minimising injury.

A key concept in military risk management is ALARP (As Low As Reasonably Practicable). ALARP is a principle that balances risk against the resources required to mitigate it, ensuring that risk is reduced to the lowest level that is reasonably achievable, considering the costs, time, and effort involved. This concept is crucial in the military, where some level of risk is often unavoidable, but must be carefully managed to ensure mission success without unnecessary exposure to danger. (Ministry of Defence, 2023)

In ITSM, the principles of ALARP can be effectively applied to manage risks associated with IT projects, services, and operations. IT environments are complex and dynamic, with numerous variables that can introduce risk. By adopting an ALARP approach, ITSM professionals can ensure that risks are identified, assessed, and mitigated in a way that is proportionate to the potential impact on the organisation.

For example, when implementing a new IT service or deploying a critical update, the risk of service disruption must be carefully weighed against the benefits of the change. Using ALARP as a guiding principle, ITSM teams can determine the level of risk that is acceptable given the potential consequences and the resources available for mitigation. This might involve conducting comprehensive risk assessments, implementing safe systems of work, ensuring staff competencies, and establishing clear escalation processes for managing foreseeable risks.

The military's approach to risk management, particularly the use of ALARP, highlights the importance of a structured, yet flexible, approach to risk. It emphasises that while it is impossible to eliminate all risks, they can be managed effectively by applying a rigorous framework that considers both the likelihood and severity of potential risks, as well as the resources required to mitigate them. This approach is not only relevant but essential in ITSM, where the balance of risk and reward must be carefully managed to ensure the smooth and successful delivery of IT services.

In ITSM, learning from past mistakes is equally critical. Post-incident reviews and problem management processes serve as opportunities to assess what went wrong, why it happened, and how similar issues can be prevented in the future. This learning process is closely aligned with the military's practice of after-action



reviews, where operations are dissected to understand the effectiveness of decisions made under pressure. By incorporating these lessons into future risk assessments, both military and ITSM teams can continuously improve their ability to manage risk, ensuring that they are better prepared for future challenges.



8 Summary

The principles derived from the military offer valuable insights into enhancing leadership, communication, risk management, and overall effectiveness within ITSM. As we've explored throughout this paper, these military values - transactional versus transformational leadership, Mission Command, clear communication, working through the fog of war, humility and curiosity, and appetite for risk - are not just theoretical concepts but practical tools that can be directly applied to the complexities of ITSM.

Transactional and transformational leadership highlight two complementary styles of leadership critical to ITSM. Transactional leadership focuses on structure, rewards, and performance management, ensuring that teams meet their objectives. In contrast, transformational leadership inspires and motivates teams to exceed expectations, creating innovation and long-term growth. Together, these leadership styles create a balanced environment where operational excellence and strategic vision coexist.

Mission Command teaches us the importance of empowering teams with the autonomy to act while ensuring alignment with the broader organisational goals. This decentralised approach fosters a more agile and responsive IT environment, where teams are trusted to innovate and solve problems efficiently.

Clear, unambiguous communication is essential in both the military and ITSM contexts, particularly in high-pressure situations like major incidents. Establishing standardised communication protocols and ensuring that all stakeholders are on the same page can prevent misunderstandings and facilitate faster response and resolution.

Working through the fog of war reminds us of the importance of maintaining clarity and focus amidst complexity and uncertainty. In ITSM, this means developing the capability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and making informed decisions even when complete information is not available.

Humility and curiosity are key to creating a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Encouraging open dialogue, promoting psychological safety, and promoting non-work-related activities that build trust and camaraderie can lead to more innovative and effective IT teams.

Appetite for risk emphasises the necessity of understanding and managing risks appropriately. By adopting the ALARP (As Low as Reasonably Practicable) approach from military risk management, ITSM professionals can make balanced decisions that protect the organisation while still allowing for necessary innovation and progress.

By integrating these military values into ITSM practices, organisations can enhance their operational effectiveness, build stronger teams, and create a culture that not only meets the demands of today's digital landscape but also adapts to the challenges of tomorrow.

This alignment between military values and ITSM practices offers a robust framework for achieving excellence in service delivery and organisational performance.



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