

## Case study – The Defence School of Personnel Administration

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# The Defence School of Personnel Administration case study

## Background

The Defence School of Personnel Administration (DSPA) is a training, development and education establishment for military personnel. It provides different levels of education including training and continuous professional development for the HR function of the armed forces as well as maths education for some technical trades and development for potential officers. A transformation programme is currently taking place to merge with other elements of the parent organisation (the Defence College of Logistics, Policing and Administration) with the aim of centralising services to deliver a greater range of innovative and efficient training for the three armed forces – British Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Navy – on a single site.

The transformation is happening in the context of wider changes in UK defence, which is being restructured to a ‘contingent’ posture, building a force that is prepared to deal with unknown future commitments or operations, whatever those might be. In this model people are viewed as a ‘centre of gravity’, contributing to the strategic ‘edge’ through their skills and agility to understand and cope with unknown future challenges. Loyalty and flexibility are highly valued (on top of ability), to enable the organisation to build up a reserve of human capital. They invest in people with high potential, developing them to build on that foundation and provide a return on the investment from the value they will add in the future.

As the Commandant of the School, Group Captain Adrian Bettridge, OBE, explains:

*‘We are preparing people to be physically and mentally robust and prepared to do quite difficult things. We are growing their ability to respond to change quickly and robustly.’*

*‘We’re encouraging a more interactive learning style, one where the student is invited to think about what it is that they’re doing. We are inculcating a discipline, where the students are not spoon-fed the whole time, but expected to take personal responsibility for that process. What that means is that we are inculcating into people habits which should serve them well through life and through career and, as the situation changes – as it will – they will have a discipline of thinking about what’s happening and how one might need to do things differently and always continue developing personally.’*

## Balancing competing interests with an eye on the end goal

The transformation programme comprises three strands of improving training delivery: engaging and developing staff to support the new ways of working, as well as updating the infrastructure, including replacing nearly all of the school’s buildings. Such a major change presents the organisation with the challenge of moving towards the future state while keeping the school operational, delivering the usual volumes of training and to the required standard.

The military concept of ‘mission command’ – setting defined high-level objectives while allowing individuals to deliver on those to the best of their ability – is central to the model of delivering the transformation programme.

The transformation plan outlines the ‘end state in 2018’ alongside 15 outputs, and states: *‘Whilst we have described what the outcome of each looks like, how we get there is up to you. Use your talents and initiative to seize opportunities for continuous improvement that take us closer to the innovative, learner-centred training organisation that we wish to become.’*

The leaders aim for the mission, team and individual to ‘meet in the middle’, but there are times when one has to be given more weight:

*‘We talk about the three circles so you’ve got mission, team and individual. What you’re trying to do is keep everything in the intersection of all those three circles. There are times when you would flex your priorities within that model when the mission is the most important thing because it has got to be done. But generally speaking you try and meet the needs of your individuals on the team to get the mission done.’*

In recognition that difficult decisions will have to be made, one of the DSPA areas outlined an ‘ethos’ that sets a framework for guiding the decision-making process. The ethos intends to empower individuals assessing alternative courses of action in their day-to-day roles, but equally

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sets a high-level guideline for what a ‘good’ way of approaching the decision would be in order to achieve the end goal. For example, ‘do not take shortcuts’ requires an informed and considered approach to decision-making, while ‘brook no sense of class’ requires that everyone is treated consistently, regardless of their background.

The ethos also draws on the individual’s responsibility to challenge, as it is seen as the route to pursuing excellent decisions – ones that meet the end goal, but also the standard of how it is achieved. This is why focusing on doing the right thing becomes more important than slavishly following the opinions of others. One leader said:

*‘I think there are lots of different ways of looking at how you manage people in organisations. It’s quite useful to [find] different ways of looking at what is always a complex point. ... However, if you don’t have some clear principles at the heart of how you manage people and how you apply human capital to your organisation, you’re probably not going to be successful in your organisation.’*

### **Managing size and capability of a diverse workforce**

The transformation programme requires a significant change both in terms of the composition of the workforce and its capability. This is associated with the merging of the previously discrete training facilities, but also with the changing nature of training delivery. The tension between managing the future sustainability of the organisation and the impact on people is described by one individual:

*‘At the moment we are aspiring to reach our new future operating model, people-wise. So at some*

*point, jobs will go, jobs will be created. And there has been a lot of work to minimise the impact on individuals of that change, to time the movement of an individual so that at least they have had a decent length of time in the current job, and they have established themselves. But equally to then prepare for the fact that their job will be changed in the future.’*

When managing such a complex process, the organisation inevitably faces questions around fair treatment of staff. This is complicated by the challenge of managing different categories of workforce (civil service, RAF, Navy and Army), who will work side by side as a result of the transformation. However, despite working in similar roles, these individuals are effectively employed by different organisations, with different sets of terms and conditions.

One particular example highlighted in the interviews is the difference in career management for military and civilian staff. In the military, progression is determined by the needs of the organisation, and people are selected for promotion based on their ability, but also provided that there is an opportunity for them to progress somewhere in the organisation. Military staff are regularly moved onto new jobs in different locations, with the support of a career manager. Decisions are made with regard to appointing people to jobs by balancing individuals’ personal circumstances (including family, experience and length of service) with the demands of the organisation. One individual explains:

*‘Expectation management is a huge part of that. You need to have that open dialogue with them, to say, “Well, actually, you are*

*not the number one candidate. If people that are ahead of you on the waiting list don't want it, then yes, of course we will look to assign you there, but there are alternative options available to you. So you might want to think about the alternatives as well, and what suits you best."*

*'Sometimes there are no alternatives, and they have to accept that where they are going to is all that is available to them. But you have to try and sort of take them down that journey, and help them understand, and manage their expectations. That is a large part of what we do; it's called career management. So just make sure that they understand that process, and how they get there.'*

For civil servants, progression is less structured. They are expected to take control of their own training and development to progress to the next grade, and are no longer supported by on-site HR officers as a result of the transformation programme. The shift to central services has encouraged more online learning and self-service for personal development. Providing equal development opportunities for the diverse groups of employees is a key challenge for the organisation.

Equal opportunity is the ultimate principle in the way the school's staff and the students are treated – while recognising individual differences. This is why, although the formal structures do not always allow treating individuals in exactly the same way, day-to-day decisions seek to ensure fair participation, which may require providing additional support for some. One leader explains:

*'Taking it back to the principles of it, there is no such thing as equality – because we are all, every single*

*one of us, biologically unique. If you try and set conditions that result in absolutely equal outcomes for everybody, you're going to find that very difficult to achieve because everybody is unique. It doesn't really matter what system you come up with, you're never going to achieve equality for everybody because it isn't possible. What you absolutely should strive to do is to ensure that everybody has an equal opportunity and that means access to the right sort of help and assistance to make the most of themselves.*

*'The way we look at it in the military is that this isn't about giving handouts to people; it is to enable people to make the most of their own talents, to achieve the best outcome for themselves so that they can be fulfilled by the fact that they made the most of their natural talent, accepting that different people are talented in different ways. Everyone needs to feel they've made the most of themselves. That's what we're trying to do.'*

### **Key points**

The critical challenge at DSPA is working in an organisation that prioritises different principles for the diverse groups of staff. This is being tackled through:

- putting people at the heart of the transformation programme (its centre of gravity)
- giving individuals autonomy to achieve the end goal in their own way within the parameters of 'mission command'
- maintaining integrity of behaviours on the way to achieving the end goal
- providing equal opportunities, recognising individual circumstances.

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