

Social and political acumen: a vital but neglected professional skill set

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We had run up against a wall in dealing with a particular agency in Defence. We initially got bogged down with the thought that ‘they are wrong’, and it was frustrating that our ‘logical arguments’ didn’t work. This especially often happens when dealing with gatekeepers: those who control access to key decision-makers elsewhere in the organisation. But we persisted. Not getting our argument across would be very costly; and we also needed to maintain the long-term relationship. We moved from an approach that was based on verbal arguments to demonstrations of how these would work, using examples and dealing with questions. All the time, we were reassuring them of our experience in this area, and gently guiding them through the arguments while biting our tongues. Eventually—inch by inch—we turned their thinking around towards our views and goals.

An O7 officer interviewed for this study

As the case above illustrates, work in the Australian Defence bureaucracy is subtly but significantly different to the structured and focused activities that comprise the majority of appointments in the first half of the average professional’s career. Issues are often complex, with long-term implications across a range of political, professional, economic and societal factors. They involve multiple stakeholders, many of whom have distinct agendas, perspectives and priorities. All this equates to a career environment that often seems a world away from the well-ordered routines and relationships of the ship, the regiment or the squadron.

Those who perform well in such an environment tend to be skilled in a competency set known as social and political acumen (SPA). SPA comprises the skills needed for situations involving multiple stakeholders with diverse and sometimes competing interests, in order to find about and make sense of the environment,



and to achieve sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes.¹ Its importance is indicated by its inclusion and primacy in the appraisal form used for senior military officers (AC740: Executive and Senior Executive Officer Appraisal and Development Report for Military Officers), where it is one of four core professional competencies listed for the annual evaluation of O6 and O7.²

However, there are crucial impediments to sound professional understanding and practice of SPA. AC740 is surprisingly vague about the nature of SPA and its component behaviours (beyond the terms ‘political’, ‘diplomatic’, ‘networker’ and ‘liaising’), and the competency set receives little explicit coverage in either formal professional military education or mentoring.³

The study reported herein is an important first step in finding out more about SPA and its practice, in an exploration of the skills involved, the main weaknesses and vulnerabilities in its performance, and options for lifting individual and collective performance.⁴

The study

The study focused on those in the mid-senior career stage. Invitations were emailed to all 212 uniformed O6 and O7 officers working in the Canberra Defence bureaucracy. Responses were received from 67 officers, 33 of whom were interviewed (these were essentially those who responded first). Sample details are shown in Table 1.⁵

Interviews explored the extent to which O6 and O7 were aware of and practised SPA, and the benefits and challenges involved in doing so. The questionnaire (a modification of the instrument used in recent ground-breaking research of public servants in several Commonwealth

countries) was sent to interviewees in advance.⁶ About one in three prepared responses prior to the interview. Almost all interviews were conducted by telephone, with transcripts sent to interviewees within 48 hours for checking.⁷

Findings

The report presents findings in terms of four broad aspects of SPA:

- ‘What’: the concept and practice of SPA as perceived by those at the middle-senior career levels;
- ‘Why’: the reasons why officers at the O6 and O7 level need to be skilled in SPA;
- ‘How’: details of SPA practice; and
- ‘So-what’: the implications of the findings of this study for improving understanding and professional practice.

The ‘what’

The large majority of interviewees regarded SPA as a core key skill set, typically describing SPA in terms such as ‘vital’, ‘critical’, ‘fundamental’, ‘very important’ or ‘core to what I do’. Their comments included:⁸

SPA applies to virtually everything that I do—I can’t think of an activity where it does not. Perhaps the extent of its use varies but its importance does not. Whereas work at earlier career levels is essentially focused inwards and downwards, that is not the case here.

SPA is about understanding how certain courses of action will be seen by government and other stakeholders, who to get onside, which ducks to get in a row, what do they care about, who do they trust most (and related to that last point, how I can line those people up to support my needs), which networks to tap and manage given a particular

| | O6 | O7 | Total | | Men | Women |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|--|------------|--------------|
| Navy | 6 | 5 | 11 | | 8 | 3 |
| Army | 6 | 4 | 10 | | 8 | 2 |
| Air Force | 7 | 5 | 12 | | 10 | 2 |
| Total | 19 | 14 | 33 | | 26 | 7 |

Table 1: SPA study sample

need and context, and which networks need refreshment, given that every January we find that the turnover from last year's network has been about 50%.

Interviewees showed a ready acceptance of the need to go beyond collaboration into compromise, trade-off, and acceptance of significant modification (at least temporarily) to their own goals in the interests of the larger good. This larger good is often expressed in terms of organisational outcomes (that is, advancing the broader agenda) or of maintaining an important relationship. These often go well beyond simple compromise into quasi-creative solutions that improve on and are more generally acceptable than original proposals. Hence, comments included:

Getting the right result is more important than being right.... [and] The aim is to find win-win solutions consistent with other issues on one's agenda.

Importantly, interviewees also saw the clear logic in coupling the 'social' with the 'political' in terms of discerning what is going on, what is important, who has a stake, and the points of potential agreement and leverage; and making sense of bigger picture issues and how local agendas fit or could better fit with these.

However, being savvy does not equate to being skilled, and most were quick to concede their SPA limitations and those of their colleagues:

I'm probably not as skilled at networking and liaising as I need to be; either that or I don't give sufficient attention to them.

A lot of what we do is very simple, but commonsense is not always applied. People get stuck in the process, rather than trying to understand the issues.

The 'why'

SPA is important for mid-to-senior officers for at least four main reasons. Firstly, many policy initiatives and projects at this level are complex, and most of those at this level understand that such initiatives have to fit the ADF as a whole rather than just the contemporary needs of a single Service:

Understanding the nature of the playing field helps you understand where your current

thinking fits with that of others, and how it might be possible to reshape your thinking so that it aligns with rather than is contrary to that of others.

Secondly, while we might like to think of ourselves as logical beings, the reality is that our perceptions of and reactions to our world are subject to a variety of psychological influences. For example, we tend to give attention to evidence from sources we have learned to trust or to whom we give credence for other reasons. Within the military, this tendency is reinforced by the value placed on qualities that are often difficult to describe and analyse (such as status, experience, reputation, etc).⁹

A third reason why SPA is important at this level is because of subtle but significant shifts in the nature of leadership. In contrast to the more direct engagement of earlier career roles, middle-level and senior leadership depends much more on indirect control and influence, and on being a facilitator of the work of others, as opposed to 'leading from the front':

Pre O6, you are doing things; you are doing 'the right work'. At higher levels, however, your main function is to help a range of others to do their work. In order to be able to do this, you need to understand the nature of their work and the context in which it is done. SPA is fundamental to this understanding.

The final reason why officers at this level need SPA skill is that the basis for authority in the bureaucracy is significantly different to that which applies in ship and units. Implicit authority in the ADF tends to be characterised by a 'knower code', that is, 'Do as I say because of who I am', with authority legitimised by rank, experience, status and function. In contrast, the APS is characterised by a 'knowledge code', that is, 'do as I say because I know'.¹⁰ Implicit authority in the Defence bureaucracy is a shifting amalgam of the two, with many military professionals generally not even realising this, let alone adjusting to it.

You need to understand what motivates different people and therefore how you shape and package an issue according to its target. It is applicable even in dealing with one's own staff.

One of the most challenging aspects is to find the right words to show the other party that I

am indeed trying to see things from their perspective, and am trying to look at both sides.

In short, the ability to get something accepted by a number of stakeholders depends very much on understanding their perspectives and on forging an emotional connection between them. Although it might sound manipulative—and, in many areas of commercial practice, it clearly is—much depends on the spirit and purpose by which the connection is being made. This is where integrity and authenticity, underpinned by professional ethics, are important:

It depends in part on building useful networks, but that is just the start. You then need social skills (active listening, self-awareness, body language, and the like). Very importantly, it depends also on the kind of person you present as. If you don't present as authentic, it is not surprising if you are not completely trusted.

The 'how'

SPA activities comprise six main complementary dimensions, grouped in three categories:¹¹

Foundational:

- **Use personal skills.** Be self-aware in regard to one's own motives and behaviours; be open-minded and curious; exercise self-control.
- **Use interpersonal skills.** Interact constructively with others; get support or buy-in from people over whom one has no direct authority.

Functional:

- **Build relationships and networks.** Build robust relationships and networks across intra- and inter-organisational boundaries to support sense-making and influencing.
- **Read people and situations.** Analyse and discern the dynamics that can occur when stakeholders and agendas come together; gain and use knowledge of institutions, processes and social systems to understand what is happening or what might happen.

Strategic:

- **Build alignment and alliances.** Build alignment from different interests, goals and motives by forging differences in outlook or emphasis into collaborative alliances and actions.

- **Think and act strategically.** Think and act strategically in relation to power dynamics and organisational attributes that can be managed to improve effectiveness and efficiency purpose, and consider these in the context of longer-term issues and second- and third-order effects.

Table 2 gives examples of the behaviours associated with each of these dimensions.¹²

The 'so-what'

The final section discusses how SPA practice can be improved. It proposes a number of actions, ranging across the developmental, the structural, and the symbolic.

Developmental

Developmental activities that directly shape SPA could include:

- Giving SPA greater emphasis in major professional military education activities, particularly the important year-long courses at the Australian Defence College;
- Encouraging mentoring by raising awareness, providing refresher training, emphasising the benefits for mentors as well as mentees, etc;
- Developing the skill progressively in a series of short on-site courses; and
- Running common-interest groups or 'learning circles', facilitated by a moderator, in which small groups of officers meet regularly to discuss and exchange ideas on SPA and other leadership practices.

The advantage of including SPA in the longer professional military education programs is that would allow experienced officers to exchange ideas with peers, and give them time to examine and learn about the practice of SPA within the broader professional and strategic context:

I didn't really need SPA in the early stages of my career, but the higher you go, the greater the ambiguity of the environment and issues, and thus the greater the need. You get better, and you learn from reflecting on your social interactions and political judgements. I once was given some great advice: 'Every day you will go home and reflect on what you said, how

| Category | Dimension | Example behaviours |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Foundational | Use personal skills | Be proactive while aware of own values, motives and behaviours. Be humble about what one does not know, open to the views of others, and curious about others' views. |
| | Use interpersonal skills | Establish rapport and make people feel valued, by active listening, inclusive language, verbal reinforcement, sharing credit, frequent contact, etc. Use 'tough' skills when necessary: negotiate; stand up to pressures from others; handle conflict to achieve constructive outcomes, etc. |
| Functional | Build relationships and networks | Develop and cultivate multiple and overlapping networks to support intelligence gathering, indirect influencing, alliance building, etc. Understand others' perspective and help them to understand yours; get support and buy-in from those over whom you have no direct authority. |
| | Read people and situations | Use professional and tacit knowledge of institutions and social systems to understand what is or what might happen. Analyse or intuit likely standpoints of various interest groups in advance. |
| Strategic | Build alignment and alliances | Seek out, develop and cultivate alliances and partnerships, and bring difficult issues into the open. Develop agreed frames of reference or mental models to help forge differences into collaborative action. |
| | Think and act strategically | Understand and manage core organisational power dynamics and how these might shape, or can be managed so as to shape, long-term capacity and direction. Scan the broad environment – internal, external, political, societal, organisational – to analyse or intuit the 'so-what?' and possible second- and third-order effects of key factors and situations. |

Table 2: SPA skills framework

it went over, and what it meant in terms of your leadership effect'. For 'leadership', read 'SPA'.

The advantage of the mentoring option is its long term, progressive facility, in an environment in which the mentoree would feel safe to be candid and to ask the 'dumb questions'. The advantage of the short-course option is that it enables the officer to put this learning into practice while the material is still fresh in the mind.

The learning circles option shares these advantages and more. As was shown earlier, O6/O7 officers collectively possesses a sophisticated understanding of SPA, so they would learn much from each other, while simultaneously establishing and expanding their networks. And this option would also be the cheapest and easiest to enact. Underlying all these is the principle of 'practice, practice, practice': as one officer remarked, 'intuition is a function of experience'.



Structural

Structural activities for SPA are those that indirectly shape the skill set by providing task aids, professional guidance and prompts, and incentives for certain ways of behaving. These could include:

- Using a SPA checklist and SPA behaviour scales from the component activities in the SPA skills framework for both personal guidance and for self- and supervisor assessment;
- Making SPA more prominent in professional leadership models and incorporating SPA-related elements into these models; and
- Giving SPA greater emphasis in annual performance reviews for O5 and in major professional military education activities such as those at the Australian Defence College.

The first structural activity option—developing and using a SPA checklist, etc—would be straightforward and would have significant practical benefit. Individuals and mentor-mentoree pairs could use the information gathered thereby to identify strengths, weaknesses and corrective action.

Symbolic

Symbolic activities for SPA include giving greater weight to SPA expertise in career decision-making and by increasing official recognition of SPA performance (such as in honours and awards lists). Symbolic activities would raise the profile of the skill set and of those who are seen as expert practitioners, and give further incentives for those at all levels to focus on its practice.

Several officers expressed the view that career decisions are unfairly skewed towards those who thrust themselves forward and continue 'leading from the front' in a traditional manner:

Most are not as good as they think they are; many are not good listeners; and they are not comfortable with counter views. And many are too inclined to 'busyness', and thus have inadequate time to reflect on how and why things are going as they are and to plan how to do something about changing this.

Those who are more inclined to 'lead from the shadows' tend to be overlooked, ironically because of their very success in doing so. And

another irony, as one interviewee pointed out is that:

While extroverts are more likely to be noticed, introverts have an advantage. X was a particular example. He used to say very little in a meeting but he was able to sum up brilliantly at the end.

SPA can also be enhanced symbolically when senior officers demonstrate appropriate behaviour:

Senior officers must play their part in setting the tone and establishing the right environment. We recently saw a period in which the three personnel O7s collaborated: this established an appropriate tone at the top, and this flowed through to their more junior colleagues.

Encouragingly, most O6/O7 officers see their senior colleagues as good SPA role models, with many citing 3- and 4-stars as excellent examples of SPA:

Most of those I deal with are well skilled. They are aware of different ways to get something done, and are prepared to actually do that something. In essence, they are well versed in greasing the wheels without being conniving; and they know different ways that work and are better at identifying and articulating these.

Just as importantly, they had well-established reputations for integrity/character. This allows them to set a positive leadership example of authenticity and to be respected. This in turn gives the credibility to call it as they see it; and this adds further to the reputation and lustre.

However, others see it as:

... patchy; with many coming up through a comparatively narrow career path, and finding themselves in their first joint job as a Brigadier. As a consequence, they struggle.

Conclusions

SPA emerges as an intriguing 'sleeping' dimension of military professional leadership. Encouragingly, most O6 and O7 seem to have at least a good working understanding of what is involved but very few (especially the O6) appreciate the full dimensions of the skill set, particularly in terms of low-key and behind-the-scenes indirect influence that often is done so subtly that it is scarcely noticed.

However, almost all see themselves as having at least some significant deficiencies in their ability to practice SPA. They pointed to the deficiencies in ADF leadership doctrine, in terms of its coverage of such an important but subtle skill set; to its inadequate coverage in Service leadership thinking and models and in professional military education programs; and to the related lack of mentoring and other somewhat indirect aspects of development and education.

Incidentally, very few interviewees spoke of using SPA for the purpose of personal gain, with a number expressing their aversion for doing so. However, SPA can be useful for seeking out appropriate mentoring opportunities.

Enhancement of SPA skill for mid-to-senior officers is likely to result in significant improvements in personal and organisational efficiency and effectiveness. And for an individual, focusing on SPA might well turn out to one of the best things that individuals could do for their careers in both the short and the longer term.¹³

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References

- 1 Adapted from Jean Hartley, John Alford, Owen Hughes and Sophie Yates, *Leading with political astuteness: a study of public managers in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom*, ANZSOG and CM: Melbourne, 2013, p. 3. Important ideas were also gleaned from the conceptual development of the 'boundaryless career' and the distinctions between 'know-how' and 'know-whom, know-why and know-so what': see R.J. Defillippi and M.B. Arthur, 'The boundaryless career: a competency-based perspective', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Issue 15, 1994, pp. 307-24.
- 2 The Service ranks at O6 and O7 are, respectively, CAPT/ COL/GPCAPT and CDRE/BRIG/ACDRE.
- 3 Similarly, while Defence SES officers are expected to perform against the SES capability framework, including 'political nous', the capability framework gives little detail of what the latter entails.
- 4 Ethics approval was granted by DPR-LREP 014/15 AB3861781 of 17 March 2015.
- 5 The sample may possibly be biased, with those who volunteered perhaps largely comprising those who are already comfortable with and engaged in SPA. However, this is unlikely to be a significant limitation, given that the invitation to participate was answered by nearly one in three from a group of very busy people (which would be regarded in scholarly circles as a good result). A sample of 33 is comparatively large for an analysis based on in-depth interviewing and detailed analysis of responses.
- 6 The questionnaire is available by request from the author: nicholas.jans@gmail.com
- 7 The study has a significant potential limitation in that it is possible that those who volunteered largely comprised those who are already comfortable with and engaged in SPA. However, this limitation may not be significant. The invitation to participate was answered by nearly one in three from a group of very busy people (and would be regarded in scholarly circles as being a good result). Moreover, a sample of 33 is comparatively large for an analysis based on in-depth interviewing and detailed analysis of responses.
- 8 Quotes from interviews are presented in this and following sections. A host of relevant information could have been included but was omitted because of space limitations. For further details, see Nicholas Jans, *Supporting, influencing, leading: getting things done through social and political acumen*, Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies: Canberra, 2015.
- 9 N.A. Jans, 'New values, old basics: how leadership shapes support for inclusion', *Australian Defence College* [website], September 2014, available at <http://www.defence.gov.au/ADC/Publications/Commanders/2014/New_values_old_basics_how_leadership-shapes_support_for_inclusion.pdf> accessed 11 July 2017.
- 10 Elizabeth Thomson, *Battling with words: a study of language, diversity and social inclusion in the Australian Department of Defence*, Department of Defence: Canberra, 2014, p. xii. I have paraphrased Thomson's concept of the ADF code slightly. Her concept is 'Do as I say because I am who I am'.
- 11 Five of these closely match those identified in recent research on Commonwealth senior public servants: see Hartley, *Leading with political astuteness*; and Gerald R. Ferris, Darren C. Treadway, Robert W. Kolodinsky, Wayne A. Hochwarter, Charles J. Kacmar, Ceasar Douglas and Dwight D. Frink, 'Development and validation of the political skill inventory', *Journal of Management*, Issue 31, 2005, pp. 126-52. The additional dimension was 'build relationships and networks', which emerges as the pivotal and most frequently mentioned activity set.
- 12 For a broader discussion, see Jans, 'Supporting, influencing, leading'.
- 13 For examples of how 3- and 4-star officers depend on social and political acumen, see Nicholas Jans, Stephen Mugford, Jamie Cullens and Judy Frazer-Jans, 'The Chiefs: a study of strategic leadership', *Australian Defence College* [website], 2013, pp. 20 and 57, available at <<http://www.defence.gov.au/adc/publications/chiefs/thechiefs.pdf>> accessed 27 June 2017.

