

Operation COVID-19

Why did Whitehall turn to Military Planners?

Chris Brannigan

Foreword by General Sir Peter Wall



Cover Image: Caption

COVID-19 MOBILE TESTING KITS DELIVERED TO CAREHOMES

The Ministry of Defence is rebalancing the structure of its Covid Support Force (CSF) to ensure our Armed Forces are used in the most effective way possible in the fight against Covid-19 and wider defence of the UK.

Photographed are LBdr Moorhouse and Gunner Wratten-Wood from 12 Regiment Royal Artillery collecting mobile testing equipment from Hartwell Lodge Residential Home in Fareham on 16 May 2020.

Military personnel have been delivering and collecting mobile testing equipment to and from care homes across the UK. It is hoped that the testing will provide an accurate picture of COVID-19 across the UK care home community. Credit: UK Ministry of Defence 2020

Operation COVID-19

Why did Whitehall turn to Military Planners?

Chris Brannigan

Foreword by General Sir Peter Wall



Policy Exchange is the UK's leading think tank. We are an independent, non-partisan educational charity whose mission is to develop and promote new policy ideas that will deliver better public services, a stronger society and a more dynamic economy.

Policy Exchange is committed to an evidence-based approach to policy development and retains copyright and full editorial control over all its written research. We work in partnership with academics and other experts and commission major studies involving thorough empirical research of alternative policy outcomes. We believe that the policy experience of other countries offers important lessons for government in the UK. We also believe that government has much to learn from business and the voluntary sector.

Registered charity no: 1096300.

Trustees

Diana Berry, Alexander Downer, Pamela Dow, Andrew Feldman, Candida Gertler, Patricia Hodgson, Greta Jones, Edward Lee, Charlotte Metcalf, Roger Orf, Andrew Roberts, George Robinson, Robert Rosenkranz, Peter Wall, Nigel Wright.

About the Author

Chris Brannigan is a Senior Fellow at Policy Exchange. Most recently he was at the No10 Policy Unit providing policy advice to the Prime Minister. He was part of the Integrated Defence, Foreign Policy and Development Review Task Force. Prior to that, he was Director of Government Relations to Prime Minister Theresa May.

General Sir Peter Wall is the former head of the British Army; he retired in 2015 and is now a director of Amicus, advising on leadership challenges in business. He has extensive experience of working at the top of government and in the leadership of large and complex organisations. Peter was commissioned into the Royal Engineers in 1974. He has seen operational service in Rhodesia, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq. He was appointed Director of Operations for MoD in 2007 and Chief of the General Staff in 2010. He is a director of the General Dynamics Corporation, President of Combat Stress, the veterans' mental health charity, and a trustee of Policy Exchange.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to a range of commentators with unique experience of both military planning and the operation of Whitehall across all departments at junior and senior level. Their informed contributions have been invaluable. Every commentator expressed the same sentiment. That the cooperative and collaborative lessons identified by the issues of Covid 19 improve our future response by saving lives across society but especially in protecting the operational deliverers in the NHS, the military, and amongst key workers.

© Policy Exchange 2020
Published by
Policy Exchange, 8 - 10 Great George Street, Westminster, London SW1P 3AE

www.policyexchange.org.uk

ISBN: 978-1-913459-27-7

Contents

About the Author	2
Acknowledgements	3
Foreword	5
Summary of Recommendations:	6
Introduction	7
The Intervention of Military Planning	8
Why Military Planning Process?	10
Start at the Beginning – What Do You Want to Happen?	11
Work as a team	11
Potential solutions and outline proposals	13
Speak the same language	13
Work in the same defined geographical space	13
Look at the same picture	14
Think in the same framework	15
Let the ground truth inform the decision-making process	15
Understand the decision	16
Bear joint responsibility	16
Don't hog the time available	16
Honest learning	17
Work with the resources provided by your people	17
Follow the Leader	18
Summary	19

Foreword

By General Sir Peter Wall

To succeed as an organisation the British Army invests considerable resources to train its people in planning under pressure. As commanders at every level know, operational success depends on rigorous and demanding preparations. The Army schools them in tried and tested processes to understand the context, assess the problem, examine options, make hard choices and implement outcomes. It emphasises worst case-scenarios where the risks are high, tempo is essential and the plan has to be deliverable in changing circumstances. This may involve an enemy that is doing its best to prevent the plan working, but the skills are equally applicable and beneficial in more benign but equally critical situations. These skills are part of the Army's psyche, linked to its focus on delivery, because they are critical to success on operations, whether delivering abroad or at this time, here at home.

It is quite natural therefore that this large resource of well-trained commanders and staff officers can make a significant contribution in any national crisis that requires a well planned response, thinking to the finish. A response that has to work, despite the friction and setbacks that will naturally occur. A response that deals with an unknowable, undefinable and unpredictable threat in the form of Covid 19 and which requires a fusion of talents drawn from all sectors of our society.

These planning and delivery capabilities have come to the fore in BSE, foot and mouth, strikes, floods and the Olympic security operation in recent years. They have helped to calm the situation, provide assurance, focus resources and engender confidence that a solution will be reached, then get it done with minimum fuss, by focused application of some simple principles.

Christopher Brannigan highlights some key elements of the military approach to planning in this excellent paper. It outlines proposals for future use in the Government response to similar crises; this crisis has proven yet again that the private sector and civil service, with all its talents, can learn much from the Armed Forces about project management, command and control and timely delivery of the desired outcome. It is vital these lessons are learned in the immediate aftermath of the coronavirus crisis to boost the resilience of the UK economy and our civil defences.

As General Eisenhower reminds us, plans are not a silver bullet: *"in preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless but planning is indispensable"*.

In the aftermath of the Covid 19 crisis we would do well to invest in more of this indispensable capability as part of our national resilience.

Summary of Recommendations:

1. Integrate paired military planning staff for resilience and contingency engagement at appropriate levels within Whitehall departments.
2. Introduce common planning analytical methodologies across Whitehall departments for interoperability during emergency situations.
3. Examine a common teaching syllabus for civil and military resilience planning.
4. The application of “Fusion Doctrine” within teams of integrated civil service, military and private sector consultants.
5. Focus delivery of resilience at Local Resilience Forum level to hasten process, exploit local knowledge and create regional responsibility.
6. Introduce an After Action Review team, under the direction of the Cabinet Office, to record and spread lessons as close as possible to the point at which they occur.
7. Examine implementing contiguous areas for departmental boundary divisions.

Introduction

The appearance of Covid 19 as a threat to our way of daily life has led to an astonishing scale and speed of response from government departments and public sector bodies. Planning within a crisis involves complex and undefined problems requiring fast thinking and easy to deliver solutions, the more usual preserve of military planners. Whitehall, equipped with more sophisticated and necessarily subtle methodologies, has drawn from the experience within the Armed Forces cohort of military planners to tackle Covid 19. There is an evident distinction here, in that much of the military's effect has focused on the tactical level of delivery, not the strategic and operational level that Whitehall planners utilise and which works well. The disconnect has been hardest felt between the clear intention and the effective delivery. The framework within which these elements should successfully connect has been starkly exposed and at eight weeks in to lockdown, hard lessons have already been learned. But what of our ability to ensure those lessons remain learned and provide enduring approaches to deliver effectively when the next national resilience challenge arises?

Before examining the planning process, it is worth reflecting on where else the military's role in the Covid crisis has been visible; in building the NHS Nightingale hospitals, repatriating British nationals from abroad and setting up multiple mobile testing stations. Less visible but with comparable impact have been seen in the examples of the 200 personnel from the COVID Support Force assisting ambulance services nationwide; the additional 300 servicemen and women trained to drive oxygen tankers; the platoon of Scots Guards who set up an extra 200 hospital beds on the Isle of Wight.

Novel collaborative approaches have included regular and reserve medical personnel teaming up with ebay to trace and procure available PPE, as well as military engineers responding to 3DCrowd UK appeal for 3D PPE printing. At the top end of capability, RAF aircraft collected 250,000 items of PPE from Turkey and military helicopters have maintained communications to remotely connected locations, such as transporting patients from Shetland to Aberdeen.

Organisations such as DSTL at Porton Down have provided expert hazard assessment and microbiological testing and expanding capabilities such as tackling "disinformation" have been used both in the UK and in support of NATO. As an agile organisation, the establishment of a £1 Million fund to discover an "idea or novel approach" to boost future defence capabilities against another coronavirus outbreak or other similar future threats is reflective of the military's proactive nature.

The Intervention of Military Planning

Military planning, as a process and within a culture, delivers immediate effect in high stakes crisis. Whilst Whitehall regularly plans at the strategic and operational levels, (and is therefore more analogous with Operational Art) it is the combat estimate, colloquially referred to as the “Seven Questions”, that has been more readily employed as a planning technique. That is, how those tactical events (the establishment of the NHS Nightingale Hospitals, or the delivery of a PPE flight from Turkey) are conceived and orchestrated within a campaign framework, where risks are traded and effects are synchronised.

The proofing effect within military planning is that it is drawn from hard experience and a necessity to deliver results. A culture of trust, affinity and identifiable credibility connect everyone from commander-in-chief to corporal, bound by common language, common procedures and clarity of direction. This underlying philosophy applies equally in peacetime as in wartime; it is an inexpensive, agile and robust approach ruthlessly focused on delivering.

Its necessary introduction in confronting the challenges of Covid 19 result from the exposure of two major fault lines arising from the testing of other government planning processes. The first is the demarcation gap between direction from a ministry and the agency who deliver it. This characteristic is not unknown amongst the Whitehall cognoscenti but it has never been exposed quite so vividly until the problems presented by Covid 19 demanded swift and comprehensive action to prevent disaster.

The separation between “policy writer” and “operational deliverer” is an artificial divide; it has not been a coherent relationship inside government for some time. In practice, departments and ministries are powerless to deliver when agencies hold the responsibility to do so. The relationships between the Department of Health and the Ministry of Justice with, respectively, NHS England and Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service demonstrate the weakness of the connection in everyday matters and is exacerbated by the current situation. The challenge of Covid 19 has meant that the separations between Whitehall departments and their relative agency has failed at the crucial moment. For example, the operational delivery of mobile testing has fallen to military teams to organise, coordinate and provide, stepping into the vulnerability revealed by Public Health England.

The second fault line has been the exposure of the relationship between

management consultants and Whitehall departments. For longer, slower and more structural change, the intellectual input and depth of experience provided by consultancies can be invaluable in creating strategic change. Their top end expertise and structured analysis is world class. But too often, they provide a managerial and confidence crutch to civil servants in the absence of core thinking within a Ministry and the recitation of ersatz military terminology by less senior consultants is a poor substitute for original thinking every time the situation changes. The illusion of delivery is revealed when it comes to results, and the more compressed the timeframe, the more evident the illusion. There is less time, and less tolerance of inefficiently using time, within military planning processes. Military planners have the benefit of common linkage, whether through shared language, mutual understanding of capabilities, coherence in time and space for delivery, and plain old-fashioned accountability for the idea, the plan and the delivery. Underpinning all of that is the trust that springs from credibility and reliability. When the plan is actually being delivered, someone responsible for the concept will still be part of the team.

There has been a compounding effect exposed by the standard mechanism of response to Covid 19 across Whitehall which has resulted in generating greater numbers of “cleverer people” as they have been described – whether intellectually able civil servants or best in class management consultants – with the commensurate result of greater numbers of abstract and theoretical solutions but crucially without simultaneously creating the strong connectivity to the operational implementers.

Why Military Planning Process?

The military planning process has been designed individually and collectively by generations of practitioners, of all ranks and specialisations, to work in difficult situations of confusion, danger and stress. Decisiveness is essential and, where time and resources are lacking it works because immediacy is evident; it's thought through from end to end, founded in practical experience— senior commanders were once junior commanders and innately understand the effect of their plan – as well as being stress tested; it's delivered by people working within a framework of mutual trust and duty; it relies on independently undertaken and supporting actions, delivered to a common schedule ; and most importantly, it's focused on the achievement of intent.

Military planners follow a common framework upon which thoughts can be developed and solutions provided so that, at every rank, understanding, contribution and extraction of essential information is enabled. The costly mismatches in Covid 19 planning might have been avoided if understanding the task, identifying the objective; defining the problem (and creating points where it is reassessed); clearly and swiftly communicating the plan; efficiently resourcing it; and managing the risks as they appear had all been the remit of a single team within an organisation.

Fig 1: Planning simplified - How to liberate Normandy



Start at the Beginning – What Do You Want to Happen?

Military planning starts with Mission Analysis – what we actually want to do. This requires informed perspectives from experienced staff, to provide original but simple ideas and options for decision by commanders, of what is needed. This need not take long but does require common understanding, common language and common ambition.

Simply writing down what one's superior wants and checking that this has been clearly understood and expressed in terms understood by all avoids confusion. Without reducing this to its simplistic minimum, it includes designing a structured argument to re-imagine the issue, challenging standing assumptions, directives and priorities; it gets leaders to engage fully in trying (often iteratively) to define their information requirements; and it uses contrarian perspectives and wargaming to test concepts before they are handed to the 'factor/deduction/task' planners. This can then be set resources so that options can be worked out, and can evolve as the situation changes (less time, fewer people, more media pressure, fresh opportunities, etc). Regular reviewing will be necessary both of the situation and of whether the plan as a whole remains valid.

Work as a team

Whitehall has relied heavily upon the structure of military planning teams during the Covid 19 crisis. Departmental staff, evidently capable, have experienced difficulties in coalescing into cohesive teams in order to focus on the urgency of the task. In some cases this has stemmed from leaders' demands for extra staff, with the intent of increasing the capacity, both intellectually and providing extra horse power but inevitably reducing the capability through increased friction in decision making and repetition of effort. In other cases, from the difficulty of combining talent from different ministries into teams who have not previously worked together or had dedicated time for rehearsals of plans. There are dozens of applicable analogies as to how to make teams more effective. Sport usually provides the best ones; they usually feature examples such as Sir Alex Ferguson's ability to make 11 individuals become greater than the sum of their parts as a central theme.

Other weaknesses have been exposed in the misaligned bolting of management consultants' approach and recommendations onto more prosaic Whitehall practice and procedure. A widely commented issue has centred on the lack of continuity in the consultants' presence throughout a project. In the delivery of a project, the tendency to cut and paste one size fits all solutions brought in from other, not always comparable, commercial or military management situations is an aggravating factor, frequently observed by officials. Senior and experienced management consultants provide similar talent to the pool available at the senior levels in Whitehall. The differentiating and sometimes divisive factor in bringing consultancy and officials together seems to be that consultants have better technology available, more current management speak, relatively better junior staff, and more time for decision making. Little wonder that

unintentional division can appear within a team.

This doesn't have to be the case. If Whitehall applied its own Fusion Doctrine, it would generate multi-skill teams (the 'Whole Force by Design' in crisis) bringing together experts from different fields. Many will testify to the quality of work where consultants have embedded with the Military or the Civil Service as one team. What appears more typical (and difficult to verify within the scope of the brief note) is where Whitehall departments have called in the military - and consultants - in a largely transactional way, to do a task or fill a gap. In the short term, this can work, yet the changes to structures and processes that could have been made as the scale of the challenge became apparent have not occurred. Organisations are stretching pre-existing models beyond their natural elasticity.

By contrast, military planners of varying seniority, embedded within departments and seemingly armed with only notebook and pencil have in many cases been more effective, just as fast and a great deal less expensive. delivering what they say they can do within the timeframe identified. There is no magic at work here; it has simply illustrated the effect that the military usually produce in pursuit of a foreign policy objective abroad, and given it a domestic airing.

Another problem has been the surprising lack between the public service and the consultants of common concepts and language and thus what constitutes success or failure. Amongst the competing consultancies, greater sparkle and linguistic dash added to more prosaic terms, is thought to justify the day rate and is necessary to prove the commercial engagement. This seems glib, but is often repeated as a comment by officials. Yet once this happens, the lack of challenge by officials towards consultants breeds a collective irresponsibility within the team to the monitoring of charging and assumptions of contract renewal provide no impetus to disrupt sclerotic thinking.

The common approach generated by collaborative teams during Covid 19 suggests that more use could be made of the military planning teams already in existence and already funded by the taxpayer. Greater commonality of approach between the two separate parts of the same public sector, in combination with the appropriate talent from the commercial sector should start to shape the most effective combinations of talent available to solve problems at national scale.

Potential solutions and outline proposals

Speak the same language

Bringing together experts from across Whitehall to tackle Covid 19 has clearly been productive. What appears less effective has been the requirement to calibrate every meeting, to conduct excessive numbers of meetings, and the absence of common terminology. This has hampered planning. For example, it can appear that one department's staff interpret 'medium term' as three to five days, whilst another's imagine it as three to five years. A common set of pre agreed reference terms would remove the misunderstanding when collaborative working is necessary.

At every level within a military structure, commanders have a common understanding of the meaning of technical language. This demands training and practice. But the use of common operating language saves time and prevents confusion; Generals and Lance Corporals can understand each other. This may also be true in smaller organisations with simple outputs, but its practical application across the demands of a large and complex civil service poses challenges.

Work in the same defined geographical space

Military organisations operate within boundaries. It doesn't matter what the boundaries are describing, everyone involved is contained, even if only for a specific task, within a common operating frame. Military planners can ensure that participants know where their efforts should be concentrated and at each level of responsibility, it becomes evident that there are neither gaps nor overlaps between different sectors. Responding to Covid 19, it became clear that, for example, areas of responsibility between e.g. the DWP and HMRC did not correspond to those of NHS Trusts, creating uncertainty for accountable responsibility and leaving uncertainty in the minds of operational deliverers.

The ready-made solutions of Local Resilience Forums, centred on the local government authority and where participation in resilience and emergency response is rehearsed prior to major emergency events occurring have proven to be the most effective means of delivery. This is most effective when Whitehall has delegated responsibility and authority for decision making down to the local level. Regional military brigades, for example, under the direction of the Ministry of Defence

have been very effective loci in delivering government intent. The level of tactical planning and delivery that goes on at local and regional level, is not what the processes within Whitehall concentrate on; the perspectives are invariably mismatched. Yet it is the level where delivery has been most effective. For Whitehall and Covid 19 scenarios, it would be more appropriate to have focussed the role of ministries and departments on fusing and understanding the multiple, fragmentary and often contradictory streams of information coming up various stove-piped channels. The distinction made previously in this research note between Operational Art and tactical level decision making is exemplified by this practical division of responsibilities.

Coincidentally, the benefit of co-locating planning teams, even within the constraints of social distancing, has improved communication, enabled direct feedback and fostered development of trust between personnel faster than separated work space, ever lengthening email chains and the deadening hand of the cc button to make plans come into effect faster. The military term for planning team location is a planning cell; it may be no coincidence that the term conjures up a confined space with imposed restrictions on liberty, and with release conditional upon redemption.

Look at the same picture

Common situational awareness is fundamental. More than individuals believing they know what is going on, this requires regular and commonly formatted briefings. The military usually schedule briefings twice daily within a 24-hour operating cycle. It ensures continuity, communicates nuance within a situation, provides clarification, and minimises confusion. It is conducted by the senior commander present, who is given the opportunity through the briefing process to enquire of his commanders and his team, assess the operational situation and give direction in response to predicted sequencing, looming calamity or fleeting chance.

Leaders can include the use of charts, photographs, maps or schematics. A simple graphic can be memorable in a way script is not. But beware of the trap, common in the Pentagon, of policy making by PowerPoint; such techniques are useful as a means of illustrating or communicating policies which have been settled on by more conventional bureaucratic means. It sets the bigger picture, literally, of visually representing what is happening around your task and enables actors to understand the wider context of their actions and how it affects the bigger picture. Lastly, it exercises a subtle psychological imperative to deliver by not letting down the teams on each flanking side.

During the Covid 19 responses, for example, not producing a 'Recognised Picture' early on in the crisis, centred on a single metric for assessed deaths in hospitals, care homes and the community, suggests an unwillingness to adapt far enough from non-crisis routines. Physically separated departments, as well as remote working decision makers, were not looking at the common situation in the same way, adding to the operational friction. Not changing structures and processes when

they were failing to provide strategic leaders with the ground-truth and foresight that are essential should not be either discretionary or optional choices.

Understanding the same scenario enables time to be made available for commanders to think through more difficult decisions. Less time needs to be spent undoing errors, checking actions and ultimately undermining trust. Leaders at all levels possess only so much capacity, which in some cases can be exceptional yet all leaders need to create space for analysis. Utilising simple techniques provides that precious spare capacity for critical thinking.

Think in the same framework

Whilst military planners do not all think alike, they do operate within a common framework of reference. It has already been previously referred to but it was surprising reveal in the initial approach to tackling Covid 19. A commonly structured framework, such as the Army's routinely applied "Seven Questions"¹ technique, enables integration and development of thought. When it is understood by its practitioner, it doesn't constrain thinking; it provides a structure to handrail thinking under stress and it furnishes ideas in a logical sequence. Participants know where to add specialist advice (for battlefield planners for example, the quantity of artillery available to support a manoeuvre) and where to extract relevant information (how much time do I have to bring that artillery within range?). The absence of a commonly agreed thinking framework across Whitehall was a factor in delaying the government's response time to Covid 19 and lost weeks of effect. Even when the task hasn't been fully defined, or the problem wholly apparent, the thinking process and anticipatory moves can still be readied. Anyone, from any part of the organisation, needs to be able to join in the process of analysis to ensure that it is generally accepted and to create a common purpose.

Let the ground truth inform the decision-making process

Military plans depend upon realistic assessment of the current situation and its likely evolution, drawing on the opinion and expertise of the people in the process closest to the action. Creating a thread of information generates trust throughout the chain, and ensures that the idea is relevant. It also provides answers to the repeated question "has anything changed in the situation?" Surprisingly, this appears less true in the Covid 19 case where there have been repeated disconnects between policy formulator (J5 in military terminology) and the operational deliverers (J3). Between these two functions is the J35, a very small but discrete function to ensure that information flows between J3 and J5; and that intelligent questions are asked of both. In the case of Covid 19, a comparable civilian function would increase efficiency and remove confusion

1. Combat estimate. The combat estimate, also known as the '7 questions', presents the analysis, plan creation and decision-making in a sequence of 7 questions. This is intended to make it easy to focus on rapid understanding of the problem and decision-making as part of accelerated procedure. It is used at formation level for similarly urgent situations. It can be adapted for more complicated, deliberate actions. It assumes that the operating environment and general situation are already well understood. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/605298/Army_Field_Manual__AFM__A5_Master_AD_P_Interactive_Gov_Web.pdf

Understand the decision

How directions and orders are transmitted to every participant and stakeholder is important. That is why military planners provide direction in a standardised format. It ensures that everyone involved understands the solution without delay or begins creating alternative and misunderstood local solutions. Everyone involved has thought through the problem and understands the solution in the same terms. This has the additional benefit of generating a sense of a team effort and makes possible the rapid cascade and correct direction of orders when time is tight and the situation creates pressure.

Bear joint responsibility

The Ministerial Implementation Groups set up within the Cabinet Office are widely acclaimed as very effective. The replication of that effectiveness has not been evidenced in other departments, but bespoke solutions have delivered results without having to blindly imitate unsuitable structures. In the MoD, it has been more effective to delegate decision making authority down to regions and use existing resilience structures such as LRFs rather than centralise, but the effect has been the same. Delivery happened in line with direction. Yet without the replication of mini-ministerial implementation groups in other ministries, weeks were wasted before organisations started to take the threat seriously. Some of this was generated by a lack of analytical clarity resulting in uncertainty around decisions but the unintended effect of this phoney war on Covid 19 was worse. It resulted in prevailing organisational cultures mistakenly pursuing higher or existing priorities that bore no effect upon meeting the challenges of the pandemic. In effect, it directed resources, both physical and intellectual, towards the wrong target. Military planners concentrate on cascading the “Higher Commanders Intent” down the delivery chain as a clearly stated requirement prominently placed within a directive. This provides the operational implementers with the framework guidance to consider how every action they undertake bears in mind the stated requirement set two levels of responsibility above their own and can therefore quickly amend priorities to match. Clearly stated intent removes confusion and maintains priorities.

Don't hog the time available

The refined approach taken by sophisticated decision makers toward achieving an expert and informed brief can consume time that would otherwise be useful to subordinates and collaborators. Striving towards 100% perfection within a solution is ordinarily unobtainable and usually overtaken by events as a situation changes. The military process utilises a commonly held, almost sacrosanct application, of one third/two thirds rule whereby every decision-maker understands that of the total time available before an event has to happen, that only one third of that time can be given over to analysis, planning and dissemination of orders. Taking more than that removes freedom from subordinates, creates unnecessary

pressure on junior staff and so creates resentment at being “left short” of time to do the necessary good job expected. Sticking to the rule fosters trust, demonstrates credibility, and is efficient. It also makes people get on with it, and that removal of prevarication should not be underestimated in value.

Honest learning

Encourage learning without blaming. Highlighting failure without giving commensurate support and a comprehensive and factual debrief creates fear amongst staff. It is the sort of fear that results in timidity for future decision making and imposes fear constraints for the vocal expression of potentially problem-solving thoughts within people’s minds. The military, with some success, uses blame free After Action Review, a risk-free learning environment to instil both good practice and harsh lessons. In the scenario of dealing with the pandemic, the lessons captured by the After Action Review involved in tackling the 2001 Foot and Mouth crisis and the preparedness lessons deduced from stress testing resilience contingency plans would all have been good start points for framing the response to Covid 19.

Work with the resources provided by your people

The military does not take a transactional approach towards its personnel. It works with the people it has available and where pre-identified vulnerability or capability gap is evident it takes steps to repair it. Mentoring and training of new participants, by either bespoke or general training methods, ensures a commonality of language, procedure and analysis that we have described previously in this note. Appropriate inclusion in decision-making at every level is a commonly applied process. Of particular note is how specialists’ advice is always incorporated within the generalist approach.

Team structures are built around purpose and task; they are not constructed around preferment or patronage.

The composition of talented teams is a competitive business within Whitehall, and although it maintains transparency of process, shades of preferment and patronage are commonly perceived. The effects of this can be observed in any organisation but it is amplified during crisis. Magic circles disempower people; if you have people who are “in” contrasted with people who are “out”, narrowly composed or selectively chosen teams create the effect of removing the capacity of whomever perceives themselves to be out. Most military personnel have worked with people they don’t like, for longer than they would like, in conditions they object to. It doesn’t stop them working with each other. This robustness inherent in this approach binds employees together in their focus on the task and contributes towards delivery.

Military teams are built within the system on behalf of the leader; and are not generally self-selecting. There is no internal, discrete HR process; the military does not “buy in” a rank at any level. Working with what you

have got is how everyone, regardless of their place in the hierarchy, gets on with their business. As one of the pillars upon which trust is built, it enables the processes and philosophy of trust to adhere.

Follow the Leader

Command and control are different functions. Some of the attention on Whitehall's response to Covid 19 has focused on the effective functioning of the latter. Control is about management and systems and process; command is about the personal input of the leader. Both are needed, especially when uncertainty and personal stress have impacted upon team members. The controller drives the machine, via the mechanisms and processes that this research note covers, in support of the commander's objective. The commander ensures the task is achieved. From an early professional age, military commanders at all ranks are versed in being at the place where they can most influence the outcome of the event. It may be one of the distinguishing variables that has led to the military gaining micro advantage in determining the successful outcomes that have been seen during this pandemic.

Summary

Military commanders and decision makers understand that plans have to be made to work, within a time frame and to an agreed outcome. Everyone within the structure of planning and delivery understands that their responsibility, authority and accountability are evidently embodied in their respective role. This culture of trust and credibility is not always evident in some Whitehall bastions. This may not matter much in normal times, but can create frictions and diversions in a time of crisis. The development of such a culture can only be introduced with comprehensive engagement by everyone involved and with exemplary leadership. The necessary response demanded by planners and delivery agencies across Whitehall departments if Covid 19 mutates into Covid 20 and potentially Covid 21, it is a change that will require action and is beyond the scope of this short research note.

The planning capabilities within the Armed Forces are not necessarily better than Whitehall staff at planning and delivery. But they are more practised and every penny spent by the taxpayer on allowing the Armed Forces to practice provides government with the enviable advantage of planners who comprehensively understand the wicked and complex problems presented to them. Working from their analysis, the same teams of people know how and when to take action to put their solutions into effective form. Shared language, situational awareness, framework analysis and solving the problem within available resources are common and imitable techniques, but the cultural underpinning that enables this to happen requires more than imitation.

The demanding nature of central government applies pressure every day for output and the onerous workloads of ministries and departments means the luxury of time available for preparation, rehearsal and training for contingencies is unaffordable. Conversely, the military prepares for war every day whenever it's not at war. Such an environment allows its personnel, its organisations and its agencies to assess effect, adapt and make risk-free mistakes, recording good and bad practice for the whole entity to study and draw upon in times of stress and time pressure. "More sweat, less blood" is an enduring military maxim.

The reflexive response to a government crisis by officials of "more staff, more resources, more consultancy" isn't the only method out of the situation, but nor is the resort of plugging the short term gap with uniformed personnel. Military operations, where significant events unfold at exhausting pace, entangled with multiple situational variables, create reaction speeds for managing landscape crises, provide a seemingly

endless source of people, ideas and techniques to reinforce the Whitehall ministry, but they are only a short-term fix and might unintentionally create superficial imitative change. Without a structured and strategic integration, the military planning philosophy and culture of trust which underpins its effectiveness would merely replace the consultancy support for the underlying problem. For the change to be effective, if we continue to face comparative threats, it will require fundamental evaluation of process and leadership within the organisation of central government beyond the indicators we have outlined here.



£10.00
ISBN: 978-1-913459-27-7

Policy Exchange
8 - 10 Great George Street
Westminster
London SW1P 3AE

www.policyexchange.org.uk