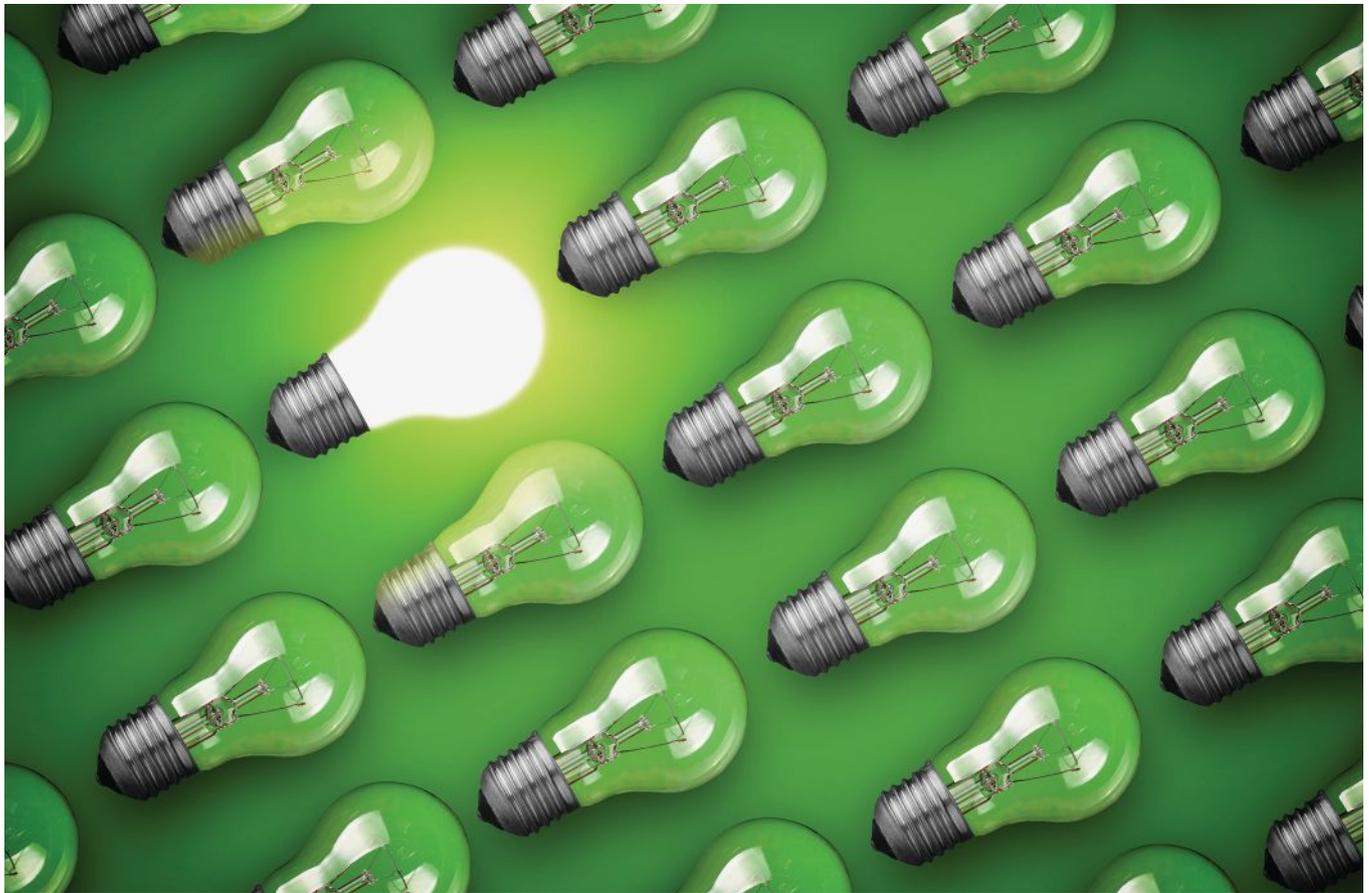


Trust, Risk and Failure

Creating and Sustaining Innovation in Army Culture



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By Col. Gregg Thompson and Col. Charles D. Allen, U.S. Army retired

While the Army is touted as the world's best-trained and best-equipped land force, it must learn and adapt or risk failure in providing national security for an uncertain future. Changing culture and sustaining our competitive advantage will require skilled professionals who know how to promote and protect innovation within the ranks.

The core issue may be sustaining innovation in Army organizations, not simply becoming more innovative. Specifically, how should Army leaders address the need for innovation—a notion that inherently conflicts with the larger cultural factors that contribute to the Army's success as a military force?

In the professional dialogue on the future of the Army, few topics are discussed more than the need to foster innovation. In November 2014, then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced the Defense Innovation Initiative to develop capabilities and capacities for the force of the future. Previous secretaries introduced similar efforts. DoD is consistent in its approach, most recently with the introduction of the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUx).

In practice, innovation can be organizational, including the

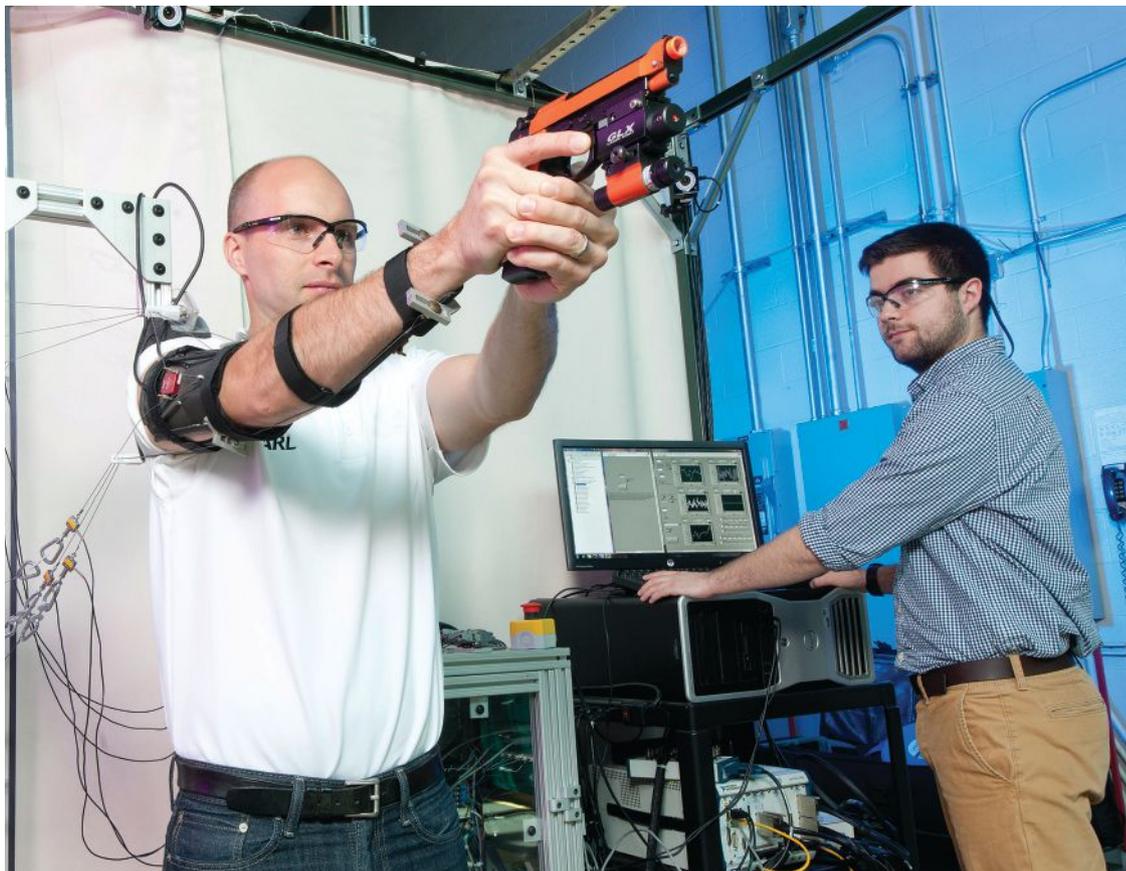
introduction of a new doctrine, process, or agency such as DIUx; and/or institutional, with an intentional effort to change culture. Through innovation, targeted change may result in the creation of adaptable leaders as well as agile teams and organizations that align to meet the demands of a volatile and uncertain operating environment.

Resilient Military Cultures

Accordingly, discussions about organizations are fundamentally conversations about culture. Defense critics inside and outside of the profession debate whether the Army can become more innovative. It follows that Army efforts to become more innovative must begin with deliberate introspection of its culture. However, actions to enact desired change are often inhibited by existing practices and structures that are the essence of very resilient military cultures across DoD.

One can easily envision an out-brief session of an Army conference. Briefers present their PowerPoint presentations in a prescribed format, with a specific number of slides and a time limit to discuss creative approaches to strategic issues. Of course, the large Army conference room is arranged with senior

Dan Baechle, left, a mechanical engineer at the U.S. Army Research Laboratory, tests a prototype of a device he designed to reduce arm tremors for marksmanship training.



U.S. Army/Doug LaFon

leaders at the front table and subordinates arrayed behind them, organized in rows by rank and position.

This common picture is an example of the Army's strong hierarchical culture and demonstrates a dimension of organizational culture that social psychologist Geert Hofstede calls power distance. Hofstede identified cultures with high power distance as centralized, authoritative and hierarchical, with large supervisory staffs.

Members of high power distance cultures typically expect power and authority to be concentrated at the top of the hierarchy and distributed unequally among members. High power distance combined with the presence of cultural in-groups, another of Hofstede's organizational dimensions, influence how organizations develop, operate and ultimately innovate.

In-group collectivism reflects the degree of cohesiveness within an organization. Thus, the presence of in- and out-groups

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in high power distance cultures reinforces cultural norms contrary to those typically exhibited in highly innovative organizations. How often do Army leaders conclude their statements followed by "Hoo-ah," to which the collective response is a hearty, "HOO-AH!"? This happens reflexively and without challenge to the perceived consensus.

As organizational members seek to become part of in-groups, they often embrace established norms and accept unquestioningly the framing, problem definition and solutions to organizational challenges expressed by senior members of the hierarchy. All members understand it is important to "stay on message" and be team players. It's not surprising that traditional Army culture is often described as incongruous with the characteristics of innovative organizations.

In the institutional setting, highly cohesive cultures can inhibit the exercise of creative thinking principles. In a learning organization, subordinates should expect to appropriately challenge the assumptions, judgments and guidance of their senior leaders. For senior military leaders, managing the tension between these two cultural aspects can be more art than science. Army leaders can have the greatest influence in changing culture by shaping the climate at their specific location and level.

Trust and Openness, Risk-Taking

Swedish researcher Goran Ekvall's dimensions of climates for innovation in organizations provide a useful framework for military leaders. Two of these dimensions in particular—trust and openness, and risk-taking—illustrate items of leverage for the Army.

The trust and openness dimension in an innovative climate

challenges the norms of a traditional military culture and its high power distance hierarchy. Members of organizations fostering innovation often thrive on a leader-member relationship that values open, critical dialogue. The climate is less dependent on compliance and centralized authority. It relies more on the expectation that every member of the team can and should challenge the ideas and directives of the organization. Every point of view is valued; members expect to be heard.

How amenable is Army culture to its members openly discussing institutional and organizational goals, and leader-determined ideas and outcomes? Do its members trust organizational leaders to value their contribution to the process? Imagine the organizational tensions if every member of a hierarchical bureaucracy expected their collective ideas to be considered equally. Local climates operate within the context of the more pervasive organizational culture. Thus, the dimension of trust

and openness is an important component of the innovation climate within a creative organization.

The challenge for Army leaders is fostering this type of leader-member relationship within the parameters of its high power distance cultural norms. The problem is exacerbated by Army doctrine that is wholly commander-centric, with the untested assumption that commanders have knowledge and experience superior to that of all members within their commands.

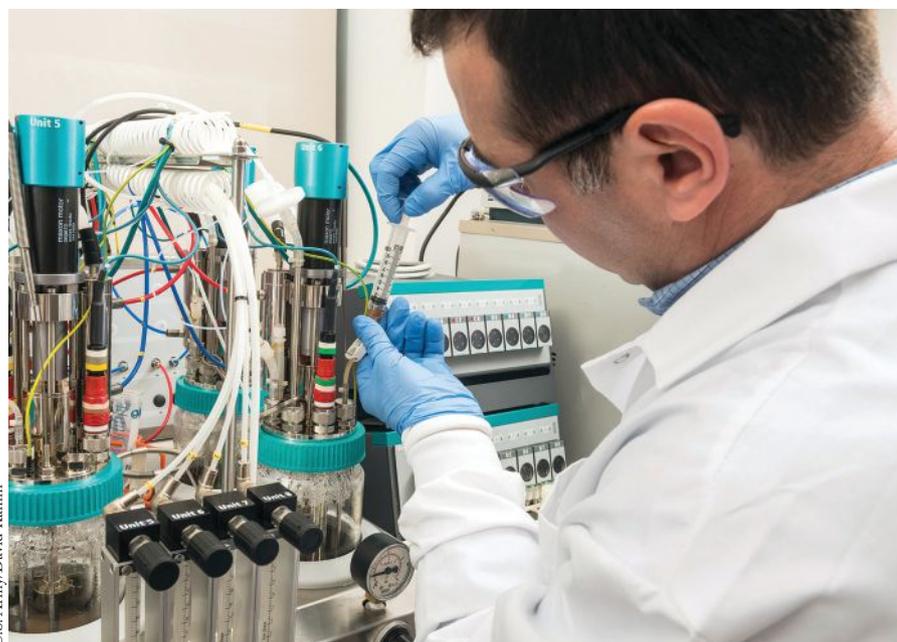
Similarly, the risk-taking dimension of a climate for innovation describes organizations that are increasingly tolerant of and comfortable with failure. In fact, failure is an expected and valued outcome of innovation. The purposeful testing of ideas and prototypes to failure is fundamental to learning and innovative organizations—to make what decision theorist Paul J.H. Shoemaker calls “brilliant mistakes.”

Candidly, the nature of the Army’s underlying culture most likely will not fundamentally change but rather, continue to rely on high power distance and cohesiveness to accomplish its missions. The Army as an institution is too big and too anchored in the cultural dimensions that have brought it success. It is natural for an institution to seek stability and maintain success in its core competencies, so it will resist large-scale pressures to change the fundamental way that it gets things done.

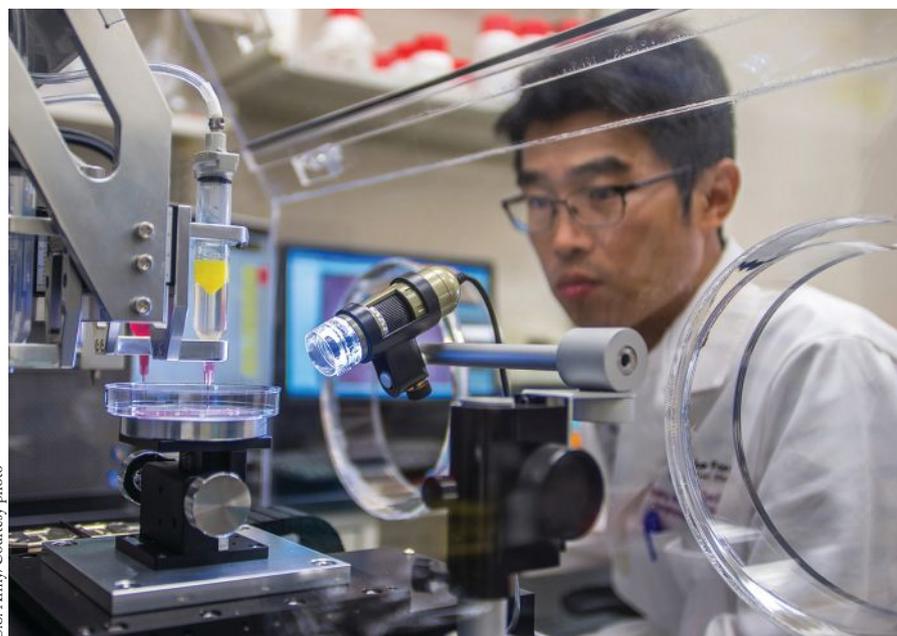
Local Climates of Innovation

Perhaps one solution begins with an understanding of what the Army as an institution requires. Rather than attempting to make the entire Army and its basic culture more innovative, leaders should seek to create local climates of innovation within the existing culture.

By doing so, two approaches align to support the larger organizational goals. First, leaders throughout the Army must believe in the potential of their organization’s ideas or new ways of doing things and therefore, be advocates for change. The Army aspires to be a learning organization and is openly seeking ideas and solutions through a number of initiatives and programs. Leaders who understand the value of innovative climates and are willing to underwrite the organizational risks inherently assume the responsibility to communicate the results to the larger



U.S. Army/David Kamm



U.S. Army/Courtesy photo

Top: An Army chemical engineer investigates biofermentation in gut bacteria; left: A research fellow works on a project to print experimental muscle tissue for reconstructive surgery.



The Integrated Soldier Power and Data System, demonstrated here by an Army engineer, harvests energy to charge a battery that powers soldiers' wearable electronic equipment.

culture. Successful change requires advocates within the culture; most often, these champions must be leaders who fostered its outcome in the first place.

Second, a key recognition is that the Army can innovate within its existing culture. To do so requires leaders who understand and practice openness, build effective leader-member trust relationships, and accept risk-taking that will frequently result in failure for the sake of organizational learning and improvement. Learning and adaptation are the essence of Army leadership—officially defined as “the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.”

Thus, leaders throughout the force can create climates of innovation and pockets of innovation. The most impactful leaders may be the colonels and GS-15 civilian leaders. When organization and institution members see that new patterns of behavior are supported by local leaders and used to solve organizational problems, these patterns become part of the local subculture and have the possibility to change the existing organizational culture.

These “oil spots” of innovation will spread and connect with others. By aligning creative climates to the larger organization’s

purpose and objectives, the Army’s culture will adjust to outcomes that provide value to those stakeholders whom the organization serves.

Military leaders naturally seek to understand the operational or strategic environment and their organization’s role within it, and anticipate how the organization must adapt to changes in the environment. Innovation begins with Army leaders who seek opportunities to build teams and deliberately create an organizational climate that supports innovative culture norms—within existing organizations and subcultures.

Underwrite Risk, Empower Teams

Innovation within the organization is sustained by a climate where the leader is willing to underwrite risk and empower teams to challenge the norms, processes and assumptions of the status quo.

This coexistence of innovative climates within the Army’s traditional culture requires leaders who understand the dynamics of both climate and culture, and who seek to exploit the value of each. This is the desired outcome of defense initiatives established by senior defense leaders over time—to establish pockets of innovative climates that work toward solutions unencumbered by the norms of the larger culture.

This concept is not new; examples abound in the Army’s long history. From then-Lt. Col. George C. Marshall Jr.’s Benning Revolution in the late 1920s to

the Rhino hedge-cutting device in Normandy, France, during World War II and the helicopter in the Korean and Vietnam wars, soldiers and units will organize quickly around ideas that improve the way that things get done.

Consider the onset of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. The rapid adaptation and synthesis of joint and interagency intelligence sources and processes, and development of improved sensors for threat detection and targeting, significantly changed how Army units employ lethal force today. People instinctively seek innovative ways to solve problems and will naturally adopt what works, provided organizational culture does not stifle or dismiss its unproven potential.

The Army can adopt this approach. Through the Army Warfighting Challenges, the Campaign of Learning and other initiatives to develop new solutions, the framework exists to identify needs and advocate the results. When done well, Army organizations can explore, find and produce the valued outcomes the force requires to sustain strategic advantage in the future operating environment.



This article reflects the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Army War College, Department of the Army or DoD.