

## Viewpoint

# The Seam between Chaos and Order

By Group Captain Emma Keith

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**Biography:** Group Captain Emma Keith is the Commandant of the Tedder Academy of Leadership with responsibility for setting the direction of leadership and command training across the RAF. The Academy is also the Headquarters for coaching and mentoring. The first female to run RAF Officer training, the College won its first triple outstanding from OFSTED during her tenure. Emma received a national award as an Agent of Change for her inclusive approach. Group Captain Keith has a Master's in Leadership and a level 8 diploma in Strategic Direction. With a passion for helping people to achieve their full potential, Group Captain Keith also has a Diploma in Coaching, is an experienced Mediator and is a qualified practitioner in several self-awareness tools.

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**Abstract:** As a military organisation we are required to tread the line between chaos and order. This viewpoint considers how leadership can be used to navigate this inevitable tension to exploit opportunity, navigate risk and to ensure that the Royal Air Force (RAF) retains a competitive edge now and in the future operating environment. This viewpoint considers how personal accountability is essential and that leaders at all levels must take responsibility for their own environment.

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**Disclaimer:** The views expressed are those of the authors concerned, not necessarily the MOD.

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## Introduction

The world in which the RAF operates is increasingly complex, faced with fresh challenges, enabled by advancing technology and an enemy's willingness and ability to adapt and fight in diverse ways. It is imperative that as a Service we continue to force ourselves to consider what mindset, leadership and command skills will be required to meet these encounters with confidence and ability. As a military organisation, constantly confronting unknown and ever evolving challenges, we are required to tread the line between chaos and order, balancing the freedom, creativity, and necessity of operating in chaos with the discipline and structure required in many elements of our day-to-day work. This seam between chaos and order, where opportunity and risk, and success and failure collide is a fascinating environment to explore. Clinical Psychologist, Jordan Peterson describes chaos as 'the unexplored territory'; he states:

'Chaos is what extends, eternally and without limit, beyond the boundaries of all states, all ideas, and all disciplines... Chaos is where we are when we do not know where we are, and what we are doing when we do not know what we are doing. It is, in short, all those things and situations we neither know nor understand.'<sup>1</sup>

He continues to expand that chaos can generate fantastic freedom but that it can also be a dreadful freedom as chaos is unbounded. Whilst chaos can often be heralded as a mechanism for sparking creativity and opportunity, it must be acknowledged it also carries real risk of carnage and disorder. We need the skills and adaptability to tiptoe this fragile line.

In comparison, order is described by Peterson as the explored territory;

'The hundreds-of-millions-of-years-old hierarchy of place, position, and authority. That is the structure of society...order is tribe, religion, hearth, home, and country... it is the flag of the nation. It is the value of currency. Order is the floor beneath your feet, and your plan for the day.'

He extrapolates by stating that order is where our expectations are met, where things turn out as we assume that they will. We have a plan, we execute it, and we return confident in our abilities and knowledge. As a warning he states, 'order is sometimes tyranny and stultification, as well, when the demand for certainty and uniform and purity becomes too one-sided.'

## The Seam

This tension in the seam between order and chaos is arguably where competitive edge lies. An organisation that can maintain essential structures whilst not allowing itself to become rigid; an organisation that can ebb and flow into chaos without losing control can conceivably garner the advantage in a fluid and changing environment. The requirement for rapid adaptability to a multi-faceted changing scenario has been apparent in the war in Ukraine with a constantly evolving threat requiring a myriad of shifting responses. The Ukrainian's methods

have swiftly evolved in response to Russian tactics to target their Critical National Infrastructure. The Ukrainians have shifted from having limited Air Defence ability pre-war in the form of Russian Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) to intercepting most missiles via multiple means. Their defence has been reinforced by Man Portable Air Defence Systems (MANPADS) and a limited number of gifted Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs), but they have also used technology and the strength of national feeling to their advantage by creating an app that allows the public to report incoming missiles, where the missiles are and what direction they are heading in. They have harnessed power and information in new and novel ways. Thrown into chaos, they have, out of necessity, reacted at pace to the evolving conditions. There is much to admire as they have truly embraced rapid innovation, moving capabilities from concept to combat in weeks vice years. They have not achieved this alone; the support of allies has been imperative, highlighting the power and influence of international relationships. The Ukrainian's have become comfortable with failing fast but failing forward, taking the lessons, experimenting, and improving at a speed of relevance as their existence depends on it. A catastrophic event which decimated any sense of order has necessitated a transformational and heroic response. It is imperative that we ask ourselves what would our response be? How would we cope thrown from order into chaos with high intensity warfighting against a near-peer adversary? We must challenge ourselves to improve our reaction times and move concept to capability at a faster rate. For example, are we being ambitious enough with projects such as Agile Combat Employment (ACE)? Is this really new doctrine or old doctrine re-branded? How do we create the atmospherics of a burning platform prior to it becoming a reality to ignite necessary action and prevent organisational stagnation? We have long held a philosophy of train hard, fight easy but we must acknowledge that the training need has adjusted and must keep pace with the context or else we will be forced to fight hard.

The Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was sworn into office on 20 May 2019. His election caused headlines due to his previous career in TV and specifically as a comedian. He founded 'The League of Laughter' non-government organisation, produced ten feature length movies, won more than 30 awards at the National Television awards in Ukraine and is a prize-winner of numerous international film festivals and media forums. His is not the usual career back story for a leading politician. As the COVID crisis took hold in 2020 he could be forgiven for assuming this would be the major challenge of his Presidency. Following the outbreak of hostilities in Donbas he transitioned overnight to a war time leader with the sovereignty of his country under substantial threat. I opine that his unconventional background has been a major advantage for President Zelenskyy at a time where warfare is influenced by social media and online communication just as it is by traditional military battles. The President's ability to exert influence and impact the battle space via media content has been outstanding. His use of tone, rhetoric, and cadence in his addresses have all born the hallmarks of a seasoned actor who knows how to connect to his audience. Little is accidental, streaming footage from central Kyiv is an intentional message of defiance to the enemy and solidarity with his soldiers, his continual wearing of combat clothes portrays the vision of a war time leader who is prepared to fight, these decisions have been incisive and powerful. His actions make it clear that whilst

he may be utilising acting skills to his advantage, he is not faking his part. By remaining in the country, and amid the fighting, despite the significant risk to his, and his families lives, he has demonstrated the willingness to make sacrifices to hold his ground and to fight for what he believed in. Leadership in the RAF is defined as, 'the projection of character, principles and behaviours that inspire people to succeed.'<sup>2</sup> He has used technology to incredible effect to aid the projection of his character, maximised his natural ability to connect with an audience and built this on a foundation of someone who has principles and will live by them via their behaviours. He presents as confident in the chaos. It is clear to see that his leadership has been pivotal to the national response. What lessons can we as a Service take from the leadership that we are witnessing?

As we operate in a constantly evolving world, arguably in a period of chronic chaos – war, pandemics, climate crisis, energy and food insecurity and financial instability, what skills do we need our leaders to demonstrate and how do we inculcate this? We must take context into account. What type of leader is required in war time versus peace? Is peace clear cut? Whilst not at war I describe our current context as a period of chronic chaos. Do these contrasting environments demand distinct characteristics? Can a leader thrive in both chaos and order or is it the right leader at the right time? The RAF has an illustrious history, shaped by leadership at all levels, but how can we use leadership in the future to continue to enhance and maximise our position in navigating this tight rope between chaos and order? Leadership has a critical role in ensuring that the organisation continues to accumulate the cultural ability to flex and shift as the context dictates. The RAF will continue to require world-class leadership skills at every level to meet the current and future operating context.

It is imperative to recognise that an individual does not need to have an official position of authority to influence the behaviour of others, and to lead. In a military hierarchical organisation with seniority on display, it can be extremely easy to look upwards for leadership and thus to abdicate your own personal accountability for the environment around you. This is not to say that we should not have high expectations of our seniors, of course we should. It is vital that an individual in a position of authority recognises the impact that they can have, and their role in setting the command climate within their area of responsibility. I propose that as a person with positional authority, the shadow they cast is enhanced. If the Boss is in a difficult mood, it can have a disproportionate impact on members of the team. It should be noted that this influence can also be used to positive effect, casting sunlight with positive behaviours. The relevant point though is that just because we have a Boss it does not relinquish us of our own accountability to lead.

The RAF requires a culture that maximises the full intellectual and physical capacity of every person; quite simply success cannot be achieved by the leadership of one person at the top or by a senior team. It is not easy to remain engaged, particularly against fiscal constraints and infrastructure challenges, however, it is all too simple to blame the context and to let our

own standards slide. *AP7001* advocates the importance of *Leading Yourself*. We must gain full self-awareness of our own strengths and weaknesses. No one person can cover all angles, we all need to understand the key strengths we bring to a team and where we need others to mitigate our weaknesses. Observing and acknowledging other strengths is also an opportunity for our own self-development and increased self-knowledge. Self-awareness, however, is not the holy grail of leadership that many uphold it to be as on its own it is contestably pointless. Consider the Boss who states, 'I know I can be a bit aggressive but that is just who I am.' The individual has great self-awareness, but this is not having any discernible difference on those experiencing their behaviour! The second essential part to leading yourself is self-management, changing behaviour because of the new-found awareness. Only when we have both elements in harmony, we can really claim to be Leading Ourselves.

How often do we truly reflect on our own responsibility and accountability in a situation as opposed to discussing the answerability of those around us? An important part of the *Lead Yourself* narrative is that the standard you walk past is the standard that you accept. This is a familiar phrase in training, but in real life, it is easy to ignore bad behaviour, accept a poor piece of work or simply to fail to report an infrastructure issue. These seemingly trivial details impact our pride, sense of purpose and the professionalism of the environment around us. There is a clear correlation between the lowering of standards and deficient performance on operations, ownership of our environment and personal conduct matter. Instilling these habits and standards whilst in the calm of order will mean they are habitual when required to provide stability in chaos.

Whilst it is a fully accepted academic term, I dislike the phrase 'followers,' it is not active enough as a label. If used, I believe the term requires a word in front of it, such as 'engaged follower' or a 'responsible follower.' I lean to the view of David Marquet, author of *Turn the Ship Around: A True Story of turning Followers into Leaders*. Marquet talks about the positive impact and intellectual capacity generated by turning his followers into leaders when he transitioned the USS (US ship) Santa Fe from the worst to the highest performing submarine in the fleet.<sup>3</sup> I propose that whilst followership skills are essential, we do not wish our people to be a 'follower' we wish them to be an engaged and active leader who utilises followership skills at appropriate times and pertinent to the current operating context. This may sound like a subtle difference, but it is an important distinction. In high performing teams you do not have a leader and a team of followers, you require leadership at all levels.

As Stephen Covey Snr points out, spending time and energy on factors which are outside of our control can lead to feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. Many people can get trapped in this space using all their energy on things they cannot change. He refers to this as our circle of concern; too much time focussing in this area can lead to a downward cycle of motivation and energy. This behaviour could be particularly harmful amid chaos where many elements will be outside of personal control and operating in ambiguity is vital. It can also, unfortunately, lead to people blaming and shaming others thus creating a toxic environment.

Instead, Covey recommends that we become mindful of our circle of influence. He proposes that if we focus our attention on our circle of influence then the circle will naturally expand allowing us to extend our area of impact.<sup>4</sup> If we operate in this space where we can enact change and influence, then our motivation and energy naturally increase and we, and our team, start to move into a positive flow and to provide discretionary effort; another key factor in high performing teams. We can start to influence and control the elements close to us and to bring elements of order to chaos.

Our own military doctrine supports the view of leadership at all levels. Mission command is the basis of our command philosophy and the need to delegate decisions down to the appropriate level is well versed. Doctrine clearly explains that this is to ensure timely decision making thus capitalising on opportunities, and mitigating risks, within a situation. Care must be taken in the re-writing of doctrine; I posit that often the change required is an investment of our time to ensure that we are enacting the good doctrine that we already have versus re-writing.

It would be easy to rest on the laurels of the RAF's past successes as a Service and to advocate that the key tenets of leadership never change. We must be honest that we have also had failures and a rapidly evolving context demands us to question what leadership could look like in the future, for example, what does leadership and command look like in the space and cyber operating environments? It is true that there are core leadership principles that hold true, such as the requirement to communicate, but the way we enact the principles has evolved with the advent of advanced technology and virtual and dispersed workforces. Is communication also now enough? In *AP7001*, the Tedder Academy changed the word 'Communication' to 'Connection'. You can put a great deal of effort into communication but if it has not landed with the intended audience then it has been a waste of time and effort. Consider the earlier reflections of Zelenskyy's leadership and the critical element of a connection with the intended audience and a strengthening of a shared purpose. Leadership is the critical enabler to optimise the RAF's capability across multiple domains, to ensure that through connection we gain discretionary effort from our people to allow us to retain a competitive edge. We require teams that generate diversity of thought, that as a collective can operate in the seam between chaos and order carving and directing the way for success.

Finally, we must consider what behaviours are required to lead a multi-generational work force. Generations are grouped as follows:

- Baby Boomers – born 1946-1964
- Generation X – born 1965-1980
- Millennials – born 1981-1996
- Generation Z – born 1996-2010
- Generation A – born 2010-2024

The oldest members of Generation Z will now be in their mid 20's operating on the front line and in training roles throughout the organisation. In five years, we will have individuals from Generation Alpha joining the organisation. We still have members of Baby Boomers in the organisation for the next few years. There is much discussion about how we must ensure the organisation pivots to be attractive to the younger generations to entice and recruit talent, this is clearly vital particularly against the national landscape with a shortage of skills in areas such as engineering. This is in my view overly simplistic as we must also retain the amazing talent we already have from across the generations, it requires a multi-faceted approach. The younger generations must absolutely be listened to as they positively shape and influence the work environment, but I propose that they must also listen. The older generations can be referenced as outdated in the media but to me this is a dangerous approach. The older generations have experience and accumulated knowledge some learnt via hard lessons. It would be dangerous and naïve to dismiss these perspectives, as ever, in a truly inclusive organisation all people must contribute and only via honest and sometimes challenging debate can the real crux of an issue be identified, and the nuances of a situation be unpicked. If we are to operate decisively in the seam between chaos and order, we must organisationally consider what must alter but of equal importance what must be embedded and retained.

As the RAF's Training Requirements Standard Authority (TRSA) for Leadership and Command the Tedder Academy leads the direction and development of world class, through-career, air-minded Leadership and Command education and training, as such, the Academy sets the strategic direction for leadership in the RAF. The Academy is also the Headquarters for coaching and mentoring. Via input to formal training and informal initiatives such as, conferences, webinars and podcasts the Tedder Academy aims to start important conversations and to make individuals and teams reflect on how they can improve their individual and collective performance. High performing teams do not make excuses, they are not naïve, and they do not shy away from the realities of complexity, they aspire to overcome the issues rather than using them as an excuse.

The Tedder Academy's challenge to every person in Defence is to evoke a sense of pride and ownership in your organisation. The RAF will not succeed due to one brilliant person, it will succeed if we rise together as one team ensuring quality and professionalism and a bedrock of strong leadership is at its heart. Whatever rank, grade, or profession, you have an important part to play in ensuring that the United Kingdom's interests are defended at home and abroad. As a member of the RAF Whole Force, you are the RAF. Be the change that you want to see.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jordan B.Peterson, *12 Rules for Life* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2018), 35-36.

<sup>2</sup> AP7001 brochure edition 1 June 2020, Tedder Academy of Leadership.

<sup>3</sup> L.David Marquet, *Turn the Ship Around!: A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders* (London: Penguin, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2013), 88-89.



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