

Feedback about the European Common Module “Leadership and Agility in Complex Environments 2015”, Italian Air Force Academy



By Luca Emanuele Facchini, Emanuele Raffaele (Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna):

We took part in LACE 2015 as civilians, coming from University, in order to enrich our insight about the meaning of Leadership in the military world and in order to let us understand the basic principles to analyse a very complex topic like Leadership in VUCAR environments is.

According to us, all the stated goals have been achieved optimally, above all thanks to the “Learning-by-Doing” method, which allowed us to internalize nearly all the concepts discussed. Starting from the fundamentals of “Complexity and Chaos Theory” until the “Anthropological interpretation of Leadership through relationships”, every topic discussed during the course has been firstly experienced through the activities, then basically understood during the feedback groups time with the external observers, and finally completely explained during the lessons.

Moreover, in our opinion, the outdoor activities, the competence-oriented trainings and document writing time in heterogeneous groups, have been the main strengths of this course because they have encouraged the cross-pollination between the international participants, who were extremely delighted to have the opportunity to meet foreign military cadets and civilians, to have the possibility to share ideas and experiences together with them, in order to improve in the future their own institutions.

Finally, this course has let us to broaden our knowledge and skills in order to act properly in case of real complex situations and these results will be effective in our behaviour even after many years due to the opportunity to have learnt by doing, by experiencing them in practical activities, and has even given us a very positive impression about what military life and values are, thanks to the strong human relationships built with the other participants during this week.

By Sara Gaglione:

"Leadership and Agility in complex environments" is a course that tends to transmit and internalize knowledge and basic skills that are the foundation of leadership, through modern teaching methods and conceptual practices. The educational objectives and methods aim to develop tools to support leadership in different contexts, not necessarily confined to the military. This is, therefore, a course created to develop the leadership skills and knowledge of young officers and civilians, but it was much more than that.

Through theoretical and practical lessons, each participant was able to understand the basic functions of a leader and what leadership means, in total respect of others. We were provided the foundation needed to understand the most important aspects of the subject, that we would then develop through study, research and definitely the practice.

What all of us has been transmitted is the importance of learning-by-doing: famous is the phrase of Confucius I see and I forgot, I hear and I remember, I do and I understand. In fact it was during the outdoor and indoor activities that we really learned what it means to lead a team, plan and work together to achieve the same result. Equally useful were the lectures on leadership and complexity, transformational leadership, the strategic leadership and ethics: in class we have been actively participating, getting involved in every discussion, open to the exchange views and always respectful of other's ideas.

Nothing was left to chance about the organization of the course, and every detail has been studied, starting from the first night, when we had to organize three different teams, to the document writing, provided for the last day of activities. For example, the choice of doing the sealing race during the first day was not random: the different teams were composed of members who did not know each other. It has been interesting to observe the dynamics of newborns-groups,

furthermore this first activity has allowed us to know better each other and has allowed each group to choose their informal leader, which often does not coincide with the formal. It was possible, then, to observe the growth of the team and assess the importance of trust in the group during the last outdoor activity of the week, when blindfolded we had to cross a football field and touch a ball: it was possible to achieve the goal only by working together and trusting each other. In fact, thanks to the moments of rest and recreation, we could deepen our relationship and we have increased our confidence, day by day. In this way, we truly understood the necessary abilities and qualities of a leader, but we have also learned to work in teams, skill increasingly required by companies.

Besides the professional aspect, this course has given us the opportunity to grow on a personal level: for a civilian are rare the occasions of sharing and living together like this, then it was for us also an opportunity for exchange of opinions, merger between civilian and military world. Also interact with people from different countries has enriched us and opened our minds, made us understand what it means to respect different cultures and allowed us to learn through observation of other's behaviour.

Finally, it is therefore right and necessary to thank the Italian Air Force Academy, which gave also to civilians the opportunity to participate and hosted us in the best possible way.

In conclusion this was not just a course, but a life experience, which has given more than what was expected, providing us the tools necessary to improve over time and become confident leaders and better people.

By Mario Grieco (University of Naples “Federico II”):

The European Common module that took place in the Italian Air Force Academy during the days 5-9 October 2015 could be summarized as follows:

- Challenges: first of all the aim of the module was to foster team working skills and clarify what being leaders means, trying to go beyond the limit between civilians and cadets. First of all the participants were divided from the very first moments in 3 teams composed of both cadets and civilians coming from different countries with different backgrounds in order to promote the so- called “cross pollination”. The sailing race, the “Heck-Meck” activity showed that in each group tried to behave as a team and leaders came out spontaneously. The interesting part of the activities was that most of them took place before giving any explanation or lecture about leadership and the leader behavior. This was what allowed everybody to learn much more from the mistakes made, as after the activities, little clips were shown and everybody could understand which the best behavior for each situation was.

- Complex environment: It's important to notice that all of a sudden thirty people speaking different languages and not everybody coming from the air force, were put together in order to cooperate to reach some targets. The first challenge was this one. Moreover, the activities were outdoor based. In the sailing race for example, most of the participants were supposed to learn movements and rules, as they had never sailed before. The result was that everybody made an effort in order to reach the goal, that's to say to win the game. Complexity came out also in the kitchen challenge, where people had to cooperate also with the other teams to prepare a dinner for 40 people. The Heck-Meck too was structured in order to raise complexity and chaos, as it was no so easy to organize and schedule 15 people's work. Nevertheless, after having shown behaviors and mistakes, in the last outdoor activity, the blind path, everybody tried to put into practice what had learnt from the clips and the lectures. The result was that the teams were able to choose a leader and follow

his instructions, speak only when necessary, reach the goal in an optimized way and succeed in the activity.

- Leadership as science. What made the course effective was the sequence of the activities. The theory about leadership was taught only after having done some exercises and outdoor challenges. This allowed everybody to have a scientific approach to the subject. In particular, the complexity theory lecture enlarged the horizons and gave the opportunity to see things from a larger point of view. The results was that people who were not “natural” leaders had the chance to try to get in the game and put into practice the different ways in which a leader could come out in a team working environment.

Thus, as a civilian, I have to say that this experience made me understand a bit more about leadership. Most of the activities made are the same that take place into a hiring process in big companies, and that is why I found it useful. It would be interesting to change the proportions of cadets/civilians in order to see how they would behave. Moreover, the activities could be made even more complex: for example could be added multiple-target activities or survival challenges. Many suggestions were given to improve the course, as for instance inviting civilian leaders like CEOs, to give more standpoints to cadets that are used to see leadership in a strict way due to the military hierarchy. Nevertheless, inviting people from other countries and inviting civilians proves that the Italian Air Force is making a step forward in educating its cadets.

By SgtCdt Łukasz Chodak and MCplCdtMagdalena Sekita (Polish Air Force Academy):

Leadership Agility in Complex Environment is one of the existing European modules introduced by Italian Air Force Academy. The main goal of these exercises is to learn cadets and young officers about human resources management ,especially military one. Moreover they are given a opportunity to enhance self-confidence by working in international group, focused on common tasks. Finally participants have a great opportunity to find themselves as a leaders and enhance analytical thinking and problem-solving skills. The method proposed by Italian Air Force Academy which is learning by doing, seem to fit perfectly to group of young, aspiring people.

The module consists of three phases. Firstly each of invited nations is asked to write an essay on given topic. There are no restrictions associated with an approach to the problem. In that part, an authors can express themselves and give the best they can to get the highest score in peer grading activity which is actually second part of the exercise. In given forms, each team has to grade an essays of other nations. The final part is residential phase in Italian Air Force Academy facilities. During five days of intense course an international group of people have to build up bond, trust and cooperation which is the most important to handle planned tasks.

The very first thing after arrival of the guests is to put them in complex environment right from the start. According to the rule that simplest ideas are often the best, participants are being accommodated in six bed rooms and have to share it with others. This kind of action actually enables them to create some kind of informal

relations which will be essential during the challenging week. Moreover this process helps literally to open the mind for other cultures, thoughts and common issue. During the module cadets had to follow the rules like: respect culture and views of others and understand different point of view, seek consensus all time nevertheless try to note dissenting opinions, state personal ideas. These rules actually are introduced for one thing – to open the mind of each individual.

The first day was some kind of challenge for everyone. It emerged that after our lectures we went to the boats. The collaboration in groups was a challenge for us , because of the fact that we knew each other only for few hours. After the briefing we were given the rules of the game and time to prepare team strategy. Despite a short time of our acquaintanceship we choose the leaders for each group. The leaders were not a volunteers, but they were chosen by other participations of each team. During the game every group was forced to change strategy. Each team had a few boats so communications between them was

difficult. Finally we decided to choose a leader for each boat. Despite there were winners and losers, this day we have learnt that we must be flexible with our strategy in order to achieve success. We think, that the game strengthened our trust to other contributor. Even tough, we were representing different cultures, we were a great team. Following days also brought many new experiences and knowledge about leadership.

Game Heck-Meck”, introduced by German officers showed important role of leader. At the beginning of that competition was total chaos emerged because of different approaches to the problem. Some people were talking, while others stepped back without putting any ideas. During this game we have chosen leader, who was trying to put all ideas together. The leader also shared out the tasks between us. This competition showed the great importance of leader . Next task was to prepare the dinner which actually showed how important is cooperation between team members. Before we got to prepare dishes we divided tasks between us relative to our experience or level of difficulty. We cooperated with other teams which was very enjoyable. We had a lot of fun and did not treat this as the competition. Common meal was the result of our cooperation. During the meal we had great chance to get knew each other a little bit more.

Another objective we were given was to find a tennis ball. Whole difficulty was that our eyes were covered and additionally all of us had to hold one rope. Our strategy was flexible, we kept our minds open for new ideas. This competition was all about trust to the leader who was leading us blindfolded.

The last exercise was paper writing. Each team had specific topic to work on. Once again every team pointed a leader, a writer and a speaker. This task allowed us to express our own opinion in specific subject. Our different nationality brought many interesting ideas. It was great experience.

Leadership Agility in Complex Environment module met our expectations. Practical use of knowledge is essential in learning process. The possibility of working in multinational group was quite an experience for us. The idea of working with civilians was a great success. As a soldiers we have to cooperate with them all of the time.

During the exercises We realized that it could be very hard to find common ground with civilians because of differences in our approaches. It was great lesson of leadership because civilians don not have to obey the orders, they have to be inspired by leader to complete the task. Finally We have noticed that their knowledge and skills could we very useful and how important is CIMIC issue. Summarizing, the time which we have spent in Italian Air Force Academy was a great opportunity to develop ourselves. After this module our way of thinking evolved, we were given a knowledge which definitely will be useful in our duty.

By Lavinia Pascu (Romania):

There is almost no area of life and social practice that is not interested in the vast and extremely actual issue of leadership. Military organizations, business centers, universities, banks, etc. make major efforts to improve their management and to maintain the continuous improvement of leadership, which is undoubtedly a vital aspect of the functioning of all organizational systems. Its correct approach is necessary. In my opinion, the idea of “Leadership and Agility in Complex Environments” Module was welcomed by both students and universities.

I had the honor and the opportunity to be part of this wonderful team. During those days, I had contact with our colleagues of other academies from countries like Holland, Poland, Greece, France, UK and of course, the host country, Italy. The meeting of this year was improved by Italian civilian students studying Aerospace Engineering. Their participation was welcomed both by the civilian and the military parts because, due to the complex environment, containing different structures, different personalities, all of us will work together.

Every morning there were lectures, open discussions, we shared ideas related to leadership, management, complex and complicated environments, team building, with a theoretical basis for correct understanding of concepts by young future officers. Also, we talked about leadership styles and the role of the leader in today society.

Of course, the theoretical part is basic, but leadership cannot be learned only by memorizing new information. It is necessary to practice it through various exercises, which are meant to enrich life experience and to develop the skills of a good leader.

This module had the advantage of implementing the concepts, not just dealing with them theoretically. In this way, the information received by us has settled more easily and for a long time in our minds. Outdoor activities included mutual knowledge of students, sharing ideas and cultures of different countries. Bringing together in one place the various nationalities of students with different backgrounds, thinking, sex, skills, was meant to put the participants into difficulty, because they were brought sometimes into delicate and unpredicted situations, in which they had to find common solutions, reach an agreement, despite their different points of view.

During this period, we participated in a game with Italian boats in the port of Naples. Divided into three teams, we had to know each other's strengths and weaknesses in order to use them in the fight against competing teams. Also, team strengthening was

possible through joint work in the kitchen to prepare a dish chosen by each group. Under the guidance of the leader, each participant had different tasks for completing his part in the cooking process. Also an interesting exercise was Heck Meck, organized by the German officers. The game has

challenged participants' patience and their team spirit. They were surprised by the difficulty of the game, which seemed at first a simple puzzle. But after this experience, we learned how to handle a situation under time pressure and how to use our intellect and logic.

Strengthening the team was possible through an ultimate game, Blind Team, in which each group had to organize itself for succeeding in a new mission organized on a new ground for some of us and relatively known for the others (Italian students). We had the opportunity to apply what we had learned in choosing the right leader and following his instructions. Another very useful task was writing a document entitled "Leadership Development: Ideas, Approaches and Projects". Each group organized itself and all the members contributed with their ideas. Although we worked in teams, at the end we had to present the document together; this idea was interesting and also useful for team building, because we had to work together with the other groups at the Power Point Presentation and to share with them our speeches and our ideas. We realized we were colleagues, not competitors and we had to cooperate for the requirements to be accomplished at the highest level.

At the end of this week my self-confidence and knowledge increased. I learned many useful things, which I am sure will help me in the future. Now I realized that the experience is a learning tool and the most effective way to learn is collective action. Teambuilding is very important. You must value your people and communicate with them at any moment. The team is a complex character who can find the solution to problems more easily. Through it, the problem can be examined from many points of view.

Now I know what complexity is and how to handle it. Nowadays, we must develop a specific culture; we need high sophisticated cognitive capabilities to face complex issues and cultural tools to manage the group dynamics. And for this to happen, you must continuously build yourself through self-education and group interaction. The complexity depends on who has to deal with it. It depends on his way to approach it. Like beauty, complexity is in the eye of the beholder. We must observe the world through complexity lenses. First, we have to try to model the problem and then to simplify it without trivializing it, of course, considering the little signs that can give us important clues. We should not be afraid of problems and risks; we must look for the opportunity in every problem. Even if the world is complex, we can only accept it and learn how to "think complex"

"The best way to predict your future is to invent it." General Fernando Giancotti