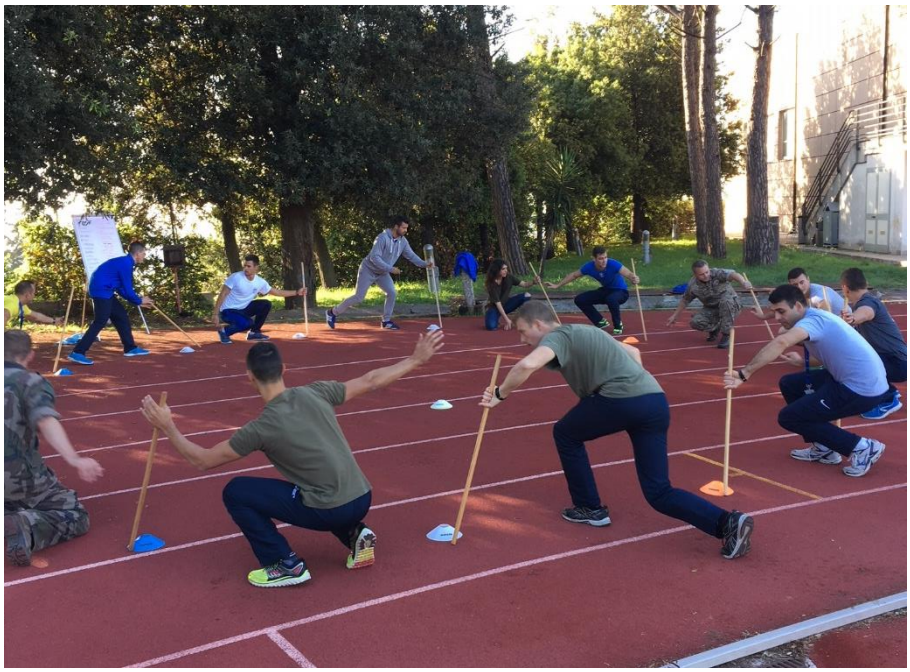
Leadership and Agility in Complex Environments
By Flight Lieutenant Alaister Nurse RAF

Introduction

On the 8th October 2017, 4 members of the Officer and Aircrew Training Unit packed our chino shorts and headed to Italy to attend a course with the tantalising name Leadership and Agility in Complex Environments. The course had been designed by the Italian Air Force (IAF) Academy in Naples, but of note, they used instructors from across the air force including their Staff College in Florence. The students taking part came from, Spain, Romania, Austria, France, Greece, the UK and academics from Naples University.

What is perhaps of interest to the RAF Cranwell Courier reader, is that from the glimpse we had of the Italian Leadership programme, there were many similar topics which are also taught on Initial Officer Training and moreover taught across many of the European Military Air Colleges. For example the French Academy also teaches John Adair's Action Centred Leadership, the central pillar of leadership theory at RAF Initial Officer Training. Occasionally there were subtle differences in the IAF Course theory, but these variants helped us to see things from a different perspective, furthering our own understanding. This article will focus on EI, Complexity and Organisational Culture.



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(The course was a mixture of practical group dynamic exercises (as shown in above picture), lectures, presentations and theoretical work, including an essay submission.)

The first day provided an opportunity for the participants to get to know each other through the medium of group dynamics exercises. Group dynamic exercises are used in an organisation to try and foster team work and enhance interpersonal skills, like communication. After each exercise the IAF Instructors asked the students to review their performance. At the start of the review each participant was asked to

summarise their emotions during the activity. There were some clear benefits to acknowledging and capturing emotions and feelings first as it often led to a more analytical review of the activity, i.e. enabling the group to explore the cause of these heightened emotions without their emotions clouding (or preventing objective) feedback.

The review process then continued with the IAF Staff asking the students to describe the activity in the format of a movie. The resultant story-board of events provided a chronology of key influential moments that were the catalyst for discussion and allowed the instructors to facilitate deeper analysis of why they happened, why the task was / wasn't achieved and how the team / individuals interacted with one another.

EI

The Leadership and Agility in Complex Environments Course had Emotional Intelligence (EI) at the heart of the syllabus. EI helps to understand what happens inside a leader's mind when they are presented with a complex scenario. Understanding the inner workings of our brains, gives us an opportunity to consider our reactions, and perhaps adapt our behaviour to the situation (helping a leader to be more agile). Also, it is important for the leader to consider his team's emotional responses to situations: How does a leader motivate their subordinates when there is no clear path to success?

The IAF focussed on how to control our emotions, especially in complex situations where a holistic view is vital. They presented a concept that identifies different parts of our brain with different behaviours. The theory says a stimulus will travel in a set path through the Reptile, Mammalian and Primate areas of the brain.

A stimulus is initially processed near the brain stem, which was labelled the reptilian area. This area's response will consider survival (we discuss this in our own theory as 'Fight, Flight or Freeze'). Then the stimulus will proceed a little deeper into the brain to the limbic system, where the 'mammalian brain' resides. Here the stimulus will cause an emotional response. Eventually, after many thousandths of a second, the signal will arrive at the' primate brain' within the neo-cortex; this is where the higher thinking and objective logic takes place.

A good analogy for this topic is a road rage incident. When suddenly a car pulls out in front of you (and you nearly have an accident) without thinking you are already apply the brakes, swerving and adrenaline is released ready for you to respond as required to survive. This unconscious behaviour is the Reptile response. Next you are just conscious of pressing the horn with one hand whilst the other hand is… communicating. You likely feel anger, this emotional reaction is the mammalian response. Soon you realise that the other driver is more shocked than you. Your logic kicks in from your neocortex, the primate brain. With this realisation you may go across and make sure that the other driver is all right. Slowly emotions and your survival instinct retreat.

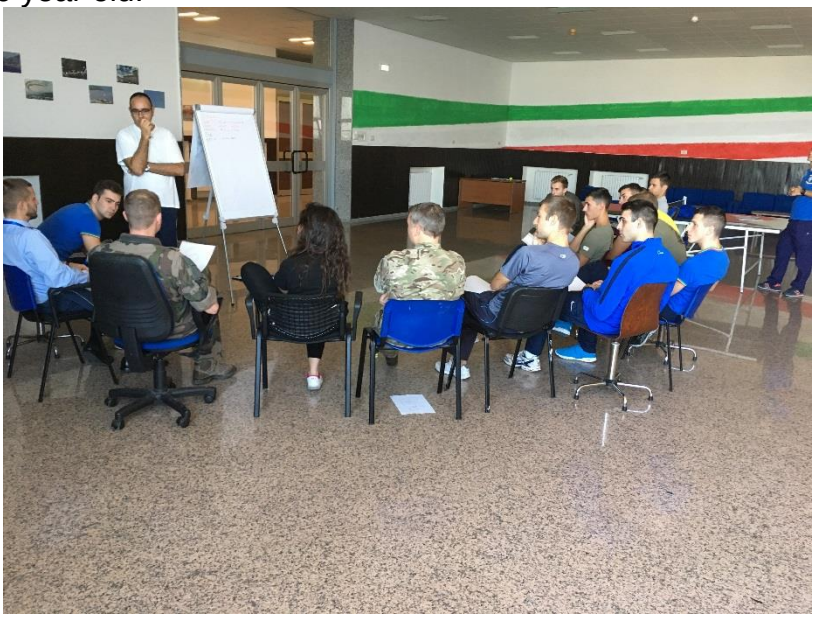
Understanding how we respond to events outside of our comfort zone may allow a leader to more tailor their response to a situation. To move our behaviour out of the reptile and mammal parts of the brain and try and respond with logic.

Complex Problems

Next the Italian staff moved on to discussing complexity. At the RAF College we talk about tame, critical and wicked problems. The IAF initiated this lecture with the question: What is the difference between a complex problem and complicated problem?

A complex problem was described as a situation where all the factors are connected in some way. If you try and fix one strand you will move, damage or put strain on another. Like a plate of spaghetti, if you pull one strand, others move with it. There is no clean solution to a complex problem and you will need a holistic view to lead in a complex environment (what will be the 2nd order impact of your actions).

Whereas a complicated problem is predictable, you can often take it apart to solve. In the operational environment we are more often than not dealing with complex problems. Firstly an enemy is hard to predict as they will always try to out flank our own forces. Secondly we often operate within a coalition, so we have to deal with the complexity amongst the friendly forces. For example, how do we get agreement on the mission, the intent and the execution of a particular operation? A group of brains is a complex system and a complex system is always evolving. Bringing up children can be thought of as a complex problem. How you bring up your child is always evolving; how you reprimand a 2 year old is different to how you reprimand a 6 year old.



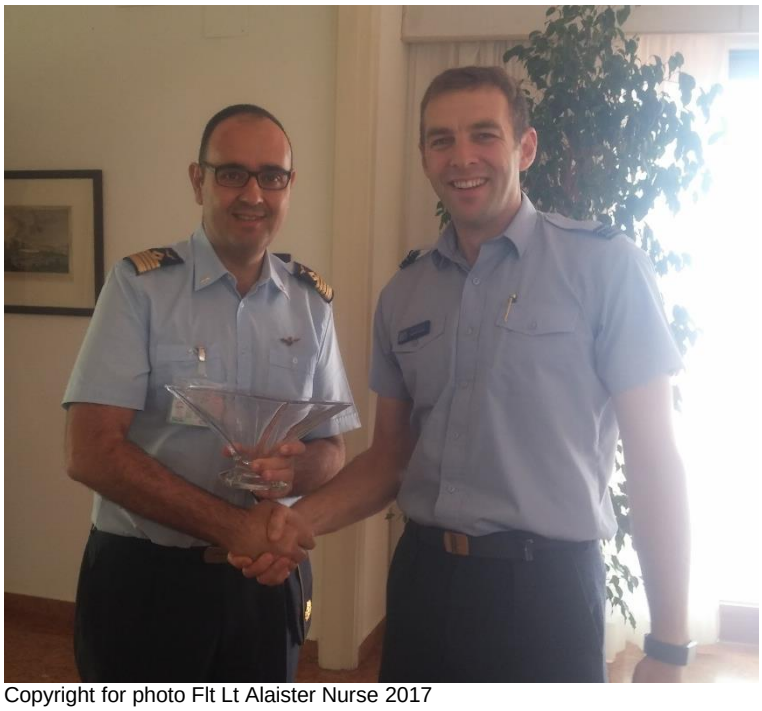
(Classroom activities)

Organisational Cultures

The IAF staff linked complex systems to the concept of change within organisational cultures. Within an organisational culture employees think, feel and act unconsciously, as captured by Edgar Schein. Schein identified 3 levels within organisational culture and if a leader wants to change and develop the culture then

these levels need to be understood. Schein called these 3 levels ‘artefacts’, ‘espoused values’ and ‘basic underlying assumptions’. The artefacts being the visual organisational structure; the espoused values being the conscious beliefs and ideologies; and finally the basic assumptions are the unconscious values - thoughts and feelings. A leader can’t force their subordinates to change their basic assumptions. So when employees start acting subconsciously within the new culture a leader knows they have succeeded in delivering change.

Leaders earn their pay as they try to bring about change within an organisation. Teams typically don’t like change and it is vital for a leader to understand the principles of organisational culture prior to amending systems, procedures and processes. After all, an organisation’s culture is an asset and therefore should be handled with due respect.



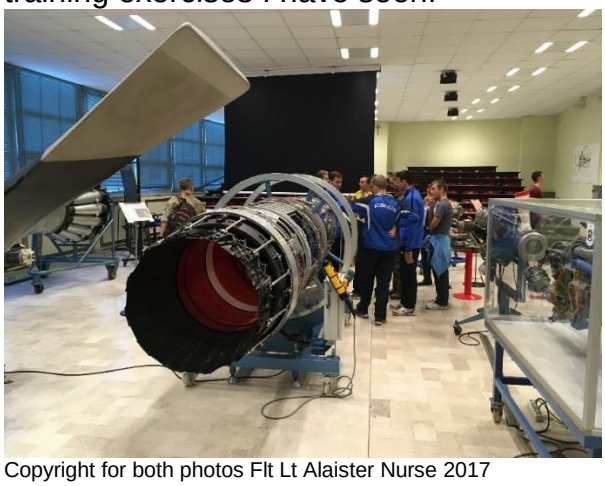
(Delivering a gift to the Dean of the Italian Air Force Academy)

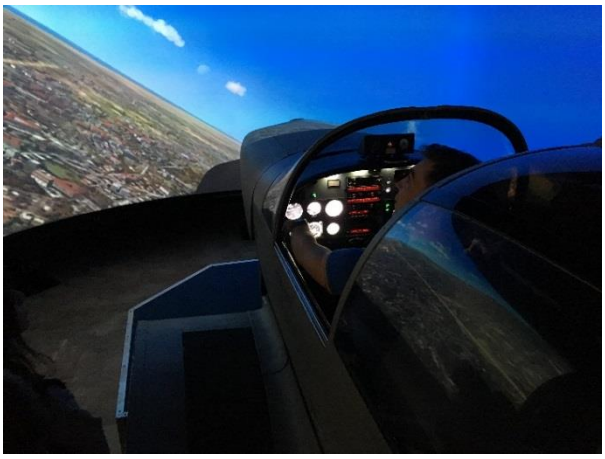
Drawing the concepts together

Towards the end of the week the students got an opportunity to apply the leadership theory to an exercise in the Bay of Naples. The task was a sailing challenge with the beautiful backdrop of the Italian coast line. 4 Teams had to evaluate the environment, consider the evolving tactics of the opposition, leading teams in difference crafts within different areas of the bay in order win the challenge. It was an appropriate complex task.

Completing a leadership exercise on the open water was a brilliant idea. The cadets did not particularly like the deep water or the reliance on the wind for movement. It was not in their comfort zone and therefore put them in to stretch (‘Stretch’ is where the brain is in a heightened state but not yet in panic). Delivering this leadership exercise as a competition gave an enemy forces dynamic, which added an amount of change and forced the leaders to amend tactics. Motivating and ensuring every individual was involved, particularly in the smaller boats was initially overlooked by

the teams. A lot of leadership theory was cemented from one of the best leadership training exercises I have seen.





(The photos above: Interspersed with the main syllabus we were afforded opportunities to see aspects of the impressive IAF Academy.)

Final thoughts

It was a privilege to observer this mixed group of future leaders from across Europe's Air Forces. After the course itself, one of the greatest outputs from the week was the bond and comradery we developed with our European peers. Even in the backdrop of Brexit and the uncertainty that brings, our relationship with our continental partners continues to be strong. We have so much in common and I hope that despite the 'complexity' of political events, we will continue to work and train closely together.

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