The Unexpected Venn: Creative Action in Leadership

By SGM Leigh Lafosse

Leadership in the U.S. Army exists in many forms: it is a responsibility, a practice, and a trust. In a profession rooted in mission execution through command and control, the idea that creativity is essential to strong leadership may seem counterintuitive. Yet creative action is exactly what our doctrine calls for and absolutely what our formations need to succeed in outpacing adversaries through thought and innovation.

The Army Leadership Requirements Model outlined in **ADP 6-22** demands that leaders think critically and creatively. **ADP 6-0** emphasizes the mission command philosophy, where adaptive leaders are empowered to act in the absence of orders. **The NCO Creed** echoes the initiative of taking action. **ADP 7-0** describes developing leaders who can thrive in complexity- thinking independently and creatively in support of the broader mission. **CSA Gen. Randy George** states: "*you're going to need to think creatively, decide quickly, and act purposefully*."[1]

And yet, a 2024 study published by the Expeditionary Warfare School contends that *"military education, as it's delivered today, is not suited for fostering creative and innovative leaders, instead it may actually drum the creativity out of service members. At the same time, military success depends on creative problem solvers."*[2]

So, my question to you- if it's in Army doctrine, why would Army training and attitudes be developed in a way that teaches those elements out of our skillsets? What might prohibit creative leadership from being embraced across the Army?

In his article *On Military Creativity*, Milan Vego outlines five primary challenges that creative action faces in military environments: authoritarianism, dogmatism, conformity, hierarchy, and bureaucracy.[3] Have you encountered any of those components in your own efforts to create positive change for your teams? I'd be surprised if any senior leader hasn't bumped up against those challenges throughout their career, because "*no matter how much we claim to value innovation, the truth is that many instinctively value control more. As a result, we often fear change and favor familiarity.*"[4]

Our fields also face the unrelenting focus of domain knowledge- the infamous "box"- on military training. Domain knowledge can be defined as convergent thinking, where single best answers exist. And it's true that *"all new learning requires a foundation of prior knowledge. Creativity absent a sturdy foundation of knowledge builds a shaky house."*[5] The military **must** teach to the standards, but I think where we fail is taking that further and applying those convergent thought lessons into our divergent world. We stop short. We restrict and restrain thought before even allowing it to begin- or to be weighed- or to be wrong.

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[1] George, Randy. "Three Qualities of Good Leaders: A Message for New Lieutenants from the Chief of Staff of the Army." *Modern War Institute*, 23 May 2025, mwi.westpoint.edu/three-qualities-of-good-leaders-a-message-for-new-lieutenants-from-the-chief-of-staff-of-the-army/.

[2] Holm, Todd T. **"Teaching Creative Problem-Solving: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures."** Journal of Military Learning, vol. 8, no. 1, April 2024, pp. 3–14. Army University Press.

[3] **Vego, Milan.** "On Military Creativity." *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 70 (3rd Quarter 2013), pp. 83–90. *NDU Press / Department of Defense*, 2013. PDF ed., accessed via NDU Press.

[4] Ashton, Kevin. **How to Fly a Horse: The Secret History of Creation, Invention, and Discovery.** Doubleday, 2015.

[5] Brown, Peter C., Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel. **Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning.** Belknap Press, 2014.

Now, this wouldn't be an article about creative action if you didn't have to engage, so let's look at a few questions:

- Do you think you're creative?
    - If you said yes, what is your creative strength?
    - If you said no, is there a way you would like to be more creative?
- Who is the first creative spirit that comes to mind from your life? Real or fictional!
- Can you think of a creative military leader you've encountered in your career?

When I ask these questions, I have yet to hear someone name a military leader as their 'creative spirit' and I've never once had someone indicate that their creative strength is leadership. That dissonance- between what we say we need in military leaders and how we think about military leadership- forces us to wonder: how do we prepare our minds to be agile, imaginative, and effective because of (and despite) what our profession requires? This is what led me to create "The Unexpected Venn," a seminar based on the idea that **Imagitivitation**, **Play**, and **Unusual Inputs** are three key components to developing Creative Action in Leadership.

Imagitivitation: The First Venn Circle

What better than an imaginary word to summarize the very foundation of creative action in leadership- a combination of the skills imagination, creativity, and innovation.

To imagine. Imagination is the mental muscle that lets us see what is not yet visible. This is how we anticipate, plan, and empathize. For this activity, I have the group start by imagining a **purple penguin**. Now, everyone thinks they have an idea of the creature in everyone's head, but we are only imposing onto the other minds what is already in our own. To highlight that- I ask everyone to add a mystery article of clothing to their imaginary penguin. Now no one else can predict what is being imagined; we can't share in the vision, we don't know what the other penguins are wearing- until someone brings that vision to life.

I don't frequently hear strong leaders described as 'imaginative', but anyone thinking at a strategic level is absolutely leaning heavily into their imaginative skillset. This is what allows us to see solutions beyond what currently exists on the chessboard, and to have the vision needed to effectively navigate any situation or scenario.

To create. Imagination alone isn't enough. Creativity is required to **make** something with those mental sparks. At this point in the seminar, everyone is directed to actually draw their penguin, wearing whatever article of clothing they originally imagined. Breaking the blank page- bringing their vision to life.

Why would creativity be a useful strength for a leader? For me, it's all about communication; being able to effectively describe and share ideas while taking something across the finish line from imagined to reality. If you are unable to effectively communicate what your penguin is wearing, how can you expect your team to understand its fashion choices? Many a good idea tanks because the leader cannot communicate the value that they see so clearly within their own imagination.

To innovate. And innovation? That's creativity refined, practiced, and iterated upon. Do you think everyone was able to successfully draw their penguin, exactly as they imagined it? I certainly wasn't! We won't always personally have the skills needed for the innovation stage, which makes it an ideal opportunity for a leader to encourage collaboration, establish buy-in, engage with SMEs. It highlights why it's so vital to build a team around you who can bridge your knowledge and skill gaps. Innovation

requires a leader to be open to the idea of someone else bringing value to amplify the vision, the mission, and the goal. As leaders we must actively move those conceptions from imagination into creation and then innovate with purpose.

When you think about the Army definition of leadership, what one word would you distill to capture the core meaning? *Leadership is the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.* For me- that one word is ACTION**.** Influence is action. Provide- action. Motivate- action. Accomplish- action. Improve- action. **Creative leadership IS action.** In the words of General Dempsey: *"Think about what you're not thinking about. Develop a bias for action."*[6]

Leadership is not passive, even in stillness, or across vast expanses of tactical patience. It's also not reactive, even with short fuse decisions. Effective leadership is creative action through controlled, considered motion. Just like physical training, growing as a creative leader can be uncomfortable, but growth **is** possible. In the same way you're not going to suddenly go from deadlifting 150lbs to 350lbs on the AFT, you have to train your mind through conscious and directed effort. But growth is never linear, and there are some definite hurdles that can inhibit our action- especially intrinsic inhibitors.

Action Inhibitors: Risk and Fear

Imagine if I challenged you to *"make a mistake today."*[7] You might recoil, because we're not conditioned to glorify our failures. But we **should** celebrate risk. Not recklessness- resilience in the face of weighed risk acceptance. Creative leaders must confront the basic fears that inhibit human action, most of which collapse into a single core fear: the fear of failure. But as authors across disciplines have noted:

"If you make things long enough, you will fail"[8]
"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that don't work"[9]
"Success is going from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm"[10]

The fear of failure- whether it's the loss of face, credibility, livelihood or life itself, remains one of the most significant barriers to creative leadership. Creative action is based on untested ideas. Things that haven't been proven effective and could fail, threatening our zero-fail environments. Mission command philosophy clearly states that risk acceptance isn't just tolerated, it's an essential component of effective leadership. Doctrine alone does not make it easy to be the one who assumes that risk, but as General Randy George states: "*we have to take the right risk in the right places.*"[11]

An additional factor inhibiting creative action- one unique to the Noncommissioned Officer Corps- stems from our role as advisors to the Commissioned Officer Corps. When we are not the leaders responsible for making the final decision and assuming its inherent risks, the task of conveying the value and potential

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[6] Dempsey, Martin, and Ori Brafman. **Radical Inclusion: What the Post–9/11 World Should Have Taught Us About Leadership. Missionday, 2018.**

[7] Lewis, Sarah. **The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery**. Simon & Schuster, 2014.

[8] Questlove. **Creative Quest**. Ecco, 2018.

[9] Belsky, Scott. **Making Ideas Happen: Overcoming the Obstacles Between Vision and Reality.** Portfolio, 2010.

[10] Azzarello, Patty. **Rise: 3 Practical Steps for Advancing Your Career, Standing Out as a Leader, and Liking Your Life.** Ten Speed Press, 2012.

[11] Evans, Ryan. "The Army's Upcoming Transformation, with Secretary Driscoll and Gen. George." *War on the Rocks*, 6 May 2025, War on the Rocks, www.warontherocks.com/2025/05/the-armys-upcoming-transformation-with-secretary-driscoll-and-gen-george/.

rewards of those risks becomes more nuanced and complex. In these moments, the Enlisted NCO serves as the trusted advocate for creative action. As SMA Michael Weimer observes, "*leading through command teams allows NCOs at every echelon to be critical thinking problem solvers who inspire trust*."[12] These are precisely the situations in which verbal courage is essential, ensuring that all decision makers are equipped with a broad range of innovative perspectives to maximize the probability of future mission success.

So, how do we train creative leaders to confront that fear of failure in the face of nuanced layers of risk acceptance?

Shift your definition of failure. Ask yourself: "*What did I fail at today*?"[13] Pay attention to your gut reaction. Then try to respond how educator Benjamin Zander teaches his music students to respond to their mistakes: *"How fascinating!"*[14] This shifts the impact towards an opportunity mindset: A chance to develop.

Civilian companies have started championing "Festival of Errors," "FailCon," and "Queasy Eagle Awards" all reframing failure as a form of learning; encouraging transparency and recognizing the value of failure as a step towards innovation. These aren't celebrations of incompetence. They're scaffolds for growth. In my own practice, I've committed to developing 1,000 ideas for the Army before I retire. Not all of them will land. But if one fails, another will be ready. These mindset shifts- from perfection to momentum- reframe failure from something **fatal** to something **fundamental**.

Reconnect with Play: The Second Venn Circle

It might be surprising, but one of the most vital tools for overcoming that fear is… **play**. Behavioral research shows that animals play not just for enjoyment, but to prepare for complexity. Play is nature's way of rehearsing for the unexpected. For humans, it fosters trust, resilience, and problem-solving. It's also where we are permitted to explore and test ideas without the consequences of real-world failure.

There are at least 8 different types of play personalities, to include kinesthetes, directors, explorers, collectors, jokers, competitors, artists, and storytellers.[15] It is of immense value for leaders to recognize in which personalities their own play strengths reside. Think of a time you felt like the truest form of yourself: what activity occupied your focus? Odds are high that it in some way connects directly to this personality. Play attaches us to our "element"[16] through "flow states"[17]- those moments of complete engagement where skills and passions align. What is your personal antithesis to screen time or scrolling social media? What would you do with a day where you could shed all responsibilities and just "play"? From a resilience perspective, engaging in and understanding our play arenas helps us recognize our natural coping mechanisms under stress, building greater self-awareness and adaptability as leaders.

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[12] Weimer, Michael. "Weimer Calls for 'Brilliance at the Basics.'" *Association of the United States Army*, 10 Aug. 2023, www.ausa.org/news/weimer-calls-brilliance-basics.

[13] **Lewis, Sarah Elizabeth.** *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery.* Simon & Schuster, March 2015.

[14] Stone Zander, Rosamund, and Benjamin Zander. **The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life**. Harvard Business School Press, 2000.

[15] Brown, Stuart, and Christopher Vaughan. **Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul.** Avery, 2009.

[16] Robinson, Ken. **The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything**. Viking Adult, 2009.

[17] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. **Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience**. Harper & Row, 1990.

In terms of Esprit de Corps, play also releases bonding chemicals in the brain, reinforcing human connection, deepening trust, and strengthening friendships. PT is a familiar example of cooperative physical play, promoting cohesion through shared physical effort. But not everyone identifies as a kinesthete, so one person's flow state might be another person's stress trigger. Recognizing these differences helps leaders notice the unique strengths in their teams and better tailor motivation strategies. Play is not a frivolous distraction; it is a trust-building tool that deepens confidence both in ourselves and in each other.

Feed Your Inputs: The Third Venn Circle

Finally, if creative action is the output, then unusual inputs are the fuel.

We each build our leadership philosophy based on what we've studied and experienced, and the more variety we draw from, the greater our capacity for effective creative action as leaders. One description I've always appreciated ties into the concept of the adjacent possible.[18] Think of your experiences like rooms in a house. Over time, you've built a unique internal space, where each room holds a different area of knowledge or experience. You access these mental rooms when you need something from that part of your memory or perspective. But here's the key: the rooms are connected, and some can't be entered, or even imagined, without first moving through others. The more varied your experiences, the stranger and more unexpected your rooms become, and the more creative your responses and solutions can be.

That's why leaders must seek out high-quality input. If you don't always want the mundane or obvious responses, you have to give your brain new rooms to walk through. Try establishing "idea nutrition" for yourself; seeking out deliberate, engaging activities that expand your perspective, keeping in mind- the more the inputs challenge your comfort the more lasting the impact on your adjacent possibles. These nutritional inputs don't require hours of time- even just five minutes of something new can rewire the brain toward valuable breakthroughs. *The Accidental Creative*[19] is an excellent resource for attainable ideas on how to jump start your creative momentum, as are *The Artist's Way*[20] or *Creative Quest*[21].

Ultimately, the responsibility for strengthening your capacity for creative leadership rests squarely on your shoulders. Opportunities for growth are limitless, yet all progress converges on a single imperative: ACTION. You must DO. So, I challenge you: Lean into a little discomfort today. Seek out a moment to play. Take one concrete action that moves an idea from imagination into reality. The culture of how we train and champion creative leadership will only change if we make it change- starting with you. Lead from the front and be the one to pave the way for possibility.

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[18] Johnson, Steven. Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation. Riverhead Books, 2010.

[19] Henry, Todd. **The Accidental Creative: How to Be Brilliant at a Moment's Notice.** Portfolio, 2011.

[20] Cameron, Julia. **The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity**. Tarcher Perigee, 1992.

[21] Questlove. **Creative Quest**. Ecco, 2018.