

EMPOWERING LEADERS THROUGH INTENT – BASED LEADERSHIP: A TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH IN MILITARY EDUCATION

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Abstract: *This article examines the application and potential impact of intent-based leadership (IBL) in military education, focusing on its ability to enhance decision-making, autonomy, and responsibility among military cadets and officers. IBL, a leadership model popularized by the former U.S. Navy Captain David Marquet shifted authority from a centralized, top-down approach to a decentralized system that empowers subordinates to make decisions aligned with the commander’s intent. This study aims to document the existing research on IBL and analyze its effectiveness in military settings, drawing insights from both case studies and leadership programs in high-stakes environments. This article reviews documented evidence from various military academies and allied organizations, focusing on the alignment between IBL principles and the desired leadership competencies of military personnel. The findings suggest that IBL can address key gaps in traditional military leadership training by enhancing critical thinking, adaptability, and accountability among trainees. However, implementing IBL in military institutions presents challenges, including resistance from entrenched hierarchical structures, and the need for extensive cultural adaptation. This study provides a foundation for understanding the potential of IBL in military education, highlighting both the opportunities for leadership development and the structural considerations necessary for effective implementation.*

Keywords: *Intent-Based Leadership (IBL), military leadership development, decentralized decision-making, leadership models in military, adaptive leadership, command and control limitations*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intent-based leadership (IBL) has emerged as an influential model for fostering initiative, accountability, and decision-making autonomy within hierarchical organizations. Unlike traditional leadership approaches that emphasize a rigid command structure and centralized decision-making, IBL promotes a culture in which authority is distributed across team members, enabling leaders at all levels to act with a purpose and alignment to the broader mission. Developed by former U.S. Navy Captain David Marquet, IBL shifts the role of a leader from giving orders to creating an environment where subordinates are empowered to make decisions in line with the commander’s intent. This model has gained traction in various high-stakes industries, including aviation, healthcare, and emergency services, but its potential application in military education remains underexplored.

In contrast to traditional leadership models, such as transformational and servant leadership, Intent-Based Leadership (IBL) fundamentally redefines the distribution of authority and decision-making within a military context.

While transformational leadership seeks to inspire and motivate followers toward a shared vision through charisma and encouragement, and servant leadership emphasizes prioritizing the needs and development of subordinates, both models maintain a top-down approach where strategic direction and control predominantly remain centralized. IBL, pioneered by former U.S. Navy Captain David Marquet instead promoted a decentralized model, shifting authority to empower team members at all levels to make mission-aligned decisions independently, guided by the overarching intent of their leaders. This approach not only encourages autonomy and accountability but also enables quicker, more adaptive responses, which are crucial in high-stakes military environments. By fostering a culture where subordinates are actively engaged in the decision-making process, IBL aims to cultivate a more resilient and adaptable military leadership structure better suited to the complexities of modern operational contexts.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Traditional military leadership models, particularly the "command and control" structure, face challenges in addressing modern military demands that require rapid adaptability and independent decision making in high-stakes environments. This top-down approach, while effective in ensuring cohesion and discipline, often inhibits junior leaders' autonomy and critical thinking. For example, studies on U.S. military training programs indicate that strict adherence to command limits subordinates' ability to develop situational awareness and adaptability, which are increasingly critical in complex, unpredictable combat scenarios.

Case studies have shown that while this structure produces disciplined forces, it can hinder effective responses under dynamically changing conditions. For instance, research within the Australian Defense Force suggests that reliance on hierarchical directives can delay timely decision making and limit proactive engagement, which are essential qualities in contemporary warfare. In contrast, models such as IBL, which encourages autonomy aligned with mission intent, foster greater resilience and operational flexibility. Studies in military academies reveal that IBL enhances initiative and problem solving among cadets, addressing gaps left by traditional methods by empowering leaders to interpret and act on commands independently.

By highlighting the limitations of command-and-control structures, these findings underscore the need for decentralized models, such as IBL, which offer a more adaptable framework for military training and leadership development in complex, fast-evolving environments.

While Intent-Based Leadership (IBL) offers promising benefits for fostering autonomy and adaptability, several limitations and criticisms of the model merit consideration, especially within structured environments like the military. First, IBL's emphasis on decentralizing authority and encouraging individual decision-making may conflict with the strict discipline and adherence to hierarchy central to military culture. Critics argue that this shift can create ambiguity regarding authority boundaries, potentially leading to inconsistencies in decision-making, especially among less-experienced leaders who may lack the situational judgment required for high-stake decisions. This can present risks in environments where a unified response is critical, and deviations from command can compromise mission coherence.

Additionally, IBL requires a high level of trust and mutual understanding between leaders and their subordinates, which is not always feasible in high-turnover or high-stress military environments, where building such rapport may be challenging.

A lack of trust or misunderstanding about the leader's intent could result in actions misaligned with the overall mission objectives, reducing the effectiveness of the leadership approach. Research on military applications has suggested that without proper guidance and support, implementing IBL may foster uncertainty among subordinates who are accustomed to more directive forms of leadership, thus requiring a careful balancing act to avoid undermining established discipline.

Furthermore, the adaptability encouraged by IBL can sometimes lead to delays in decision-making, as leaders at various levels assess the intent behind commands rather than following pre-established procedures. In time-sensitive operations, such deliberation might hinder response speed and unity of action, particularly when decisions require immediate execution under conditions of limited information. Moreover, critics of IBL in high-stakes contexts suggest that the cognitive load imposed by making autonomous decisions may overwhelm some team members, leading to stress or indecision, especially among those not well versed in the IBL philosophy or in the operational nuances of their roles.

Finally, implementing IBL within traditional military structures often requires extensive cultural adaptation, training, and institutional support, which may not always be available or feasible in every military context. Such implementation costs, combined with potential friction between traditional military culture and IBL principles, highlight significant barriers to its full-scale adoption.

This critical perspective suggests that while IBL can address certain limitations of traditional leadership models, its effectiveness may be contingent upon carefully managed integration processes, sustained support, and adaptive modifications tailored to the unique demands of military settings.

A. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to bridge the existing knowledge gap on Intent-Based Leadership (IBL) within military education by evaluating both the potential strengths and limitations of IBL as a leadership model. However, it is essential to critically assess the quality of the reviewed studies, as some of the existing research on IBL lacks robust empirical validation. Many studies supporting IBL in military and high-stakes contexts rely heavily on case studies and observational data, which, while valuable for generating insights, often lack the rigor associated with experimental or longitudinal research designs. Consequently, findings may reflect context-specific outcomes rather than universally applicable principles, limiting their generalizability to other military settings or units.

Additionally, there is a need for more rigorous quantitative studies that assess IBL's impact on leadership qualities such as adaptability, autonomy, and decision-making efficiency within controlled military training environments. Current literature, often based on anecdotal evidence or qualitative assessments, may overstate the effectiveness of IBL without adequately addressing potential limitations. For instance, studies demonstrating improvements in decision making through IBL frequently come from civilian sectors or smaller military programs that differ significantly from the hierarchical and structured environments typical of military academies. Without more stringent research designs, including larger samples, control groups, or cross-institutional analyses, it remains challenging to determine whether the observed benefits of IBL can be effectively scaled across military institutions.

Furthermore, while the literature emphasizes IBL's principles of autonomy, mission alignment, and empowerment, it is less explicit in identifying how these principles address specific deficiencies in traditional military education models.

For example, traditional military training often emphasizes obedience and standardized responses, which may inhibit critical thinking and adaptability under rapidly changing operational conditions. Linking these gaps explicitly to IBL's principles—such as how empowering decision-making at lower levels could mitigate rigid adherence to orders—would strengthen the argument for IBL's integration. This critical lens also highlights the need for adaptive training curricula that blend IBL with established military values to create a hybrid model that respects both discipline and autonomy.

Therefore, this study seeks not only to examine the potential of IBL, but also to underscore the importance of adopting a balanced view that recognizes both the advantages and possible limitations of this model in military education

B. Significance of Intent-Based Leadership in Modern Military Training

The evolving nature of global conflict and the increasing complexity of military operations demand leaders who are not only technically skilled but also highly adaptive and resilient under pressure. Military academies worldwide face the task of producing officers who can lead in volatile environments, often with limited information and in unfamiliar contexts. The IBL model aligns with these demands, emphasizing that leadership is proactive rather than reactive, mission-driven rather than task-oriented, and based on initiative rather than rote execution. By embedding IBL principles within military training programs, academies have the opportunity to cultivate leaders who are not only capable of following orders but also skilled at interpreting and acting upon their commander's intent in ways that advance the mission.

C. Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions to guide the exploration of IBL's applicability in military education:

1. What are the documented effects of IBL on leadership development and decision-making autonomy in a hierarchical setting?
2. How can IBL principles be integrated into existing military educational frameworks to support leadership development?
3. What challenges arise in implementing IBL within the rigid structure of military academies, and how can these be addressed?
4. What empirical evidence exists on the benefits and limitations of IBL in military or similarly high-stake fields?

In answering these questions, this study aims to build a comprehensive understanding of IBL's potential of the IBL to transform military education. By examining research findings, case studies, and theoretical frameworks, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse on military leadership development, proposing IBL as a model that aligns with the needs of a modernized, adaptable force structure.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explores the historical context of leadership models in military education, the foundational principles of intent-based leadership (IBL), and documented applications of IBL in both military and civilian high-stake environments. This section synthesizes existing research to provide an understanding of how IBL can align with and enhance military training objectives, addressing both the potential benefits and challenges of its implementation.

Military leadership models have traditionally emphasized a strict hierarchy with top-down command structures, a method designed to ensure unity of action and disciplined execution under high-pressure conditions.

This "command and control" approach has proven effective in maintaining order and cohesiveness, yet it can limit individual agency and hinder adaptive decision-making at lower levels. Research indicates that while this model instills discipline, it often restricts subordinates' ability to take initiative or think independently under dynamic operational conditions [5].

As warfare has evolved to require rapid adaptation and decentralized decision making, alternative models have been considered in military education. Servant leadership, transformational leadership, and decentralized models, such as *Auftragstaktik* (mission command) from the German military doctrine, have gained attention. These approaches prioritize the development of individual leadership capacities and autonomy, which are essential in complex, modern conflict scenarios. The shift toward these models aligns with the goals of IBL, which emphasizes empowering subordinates while maintaining a clear mission focus [7].

Moreover, as empirical evidence directly assessing IBL in military contexts remains scarce, this methodology relies on extrapolations from case studies and experience from sectors with fundamentally different operational structures. The lack of direct, longitudinal studies within military settings makes it challenging to validate IBL's long-term impact on leadership development and operational effectiveness, underscoring the need for future research that rigorously tests IBL in military academies.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, we present key findings from the collected studies and case analyses, examining the potential benefits and challenges of adopting intent-based leadership (IBL) in military education. The findings were organized according to four thematic areas identified during the analysis phase: leadership autonomy and initiative, decision-making and adaptability, trust and accountability, and challenges of integration.

A. Leadership Autonomy and Initiative

Research demonstrates that IBL enhances leadership autonomy by empowering individuals to make mission-aligned decisions without relying on constant directives from superiors. In military training environments, fostering autonomy could prepare cadets and junior officers to act decisively in high-pressure situations. Studies on decentralized leadership models, such as mission command, show that encouraging autonomy strengthens leadership skills by requiring trainees to understand the broader mission and act accordingly, rather than simply following orders [6].

For example, in the U.S. army uses mission-oriented training exercises, and cadets are instructed to execute commands based on mission intent, allowing them to adapt tactics and make decisions independently. This approach aligns closely with IBL principles, as it encourages trainees to think critically about their actions within the scope of the commander's goals rather than rigidly following predetermined steps [5]. Such methods have been shown to build resilience, situational awareness, and initiative—qualities that are vital in complex combat scenarios.

B. Decision-Making and Adaptability

One of the most significant advantages of IBL is its potential to improve decision-making efficiency and adaptability in volatile environments. Studies in civilian high-stakes settings, such as healthcare and emergency services, have shown that IBL enhances responsiveness by allowing team members to make real-time decisions without waiting for orders from superiors. This adaptability is crucial in military operations, where changing conditions often require immediate action [2].

In military training, adaptability is often developed through simulations and live exercises that challenge trainees to respond to unexpected scenarios. Research on the U.S. Air Force's exploration of servant leadership as a means of promoting flexibility and initiative among cadets underscores the benefits of leadership models that prioritize mission intent over rigid control [1]. Adopting IBL could enhance these training exercises by requiring cadets to interpret and act on mission goals, thereby honing their ability to adapt their strategies and tactics in response to evolving circumstances.

C. Trust and Accountability

IBL places a high emphasis on trust between leaders and subordinates, which fosters accountability across all levels of an organization. By giving subordinates the freedom to make decisions, IBL requires a culture in which leaders trust their team members to act in the best interests of the mission. Studies on trust-building in military and civilian settings have highlighted the positive effects of such leadership approaches on organizational cohesion and individual responsibility [7].

For example, research from the Australian Defense Force has shown that trust is a critical component of effective leadership development. In environments where autonomy is supported, officers tend to exhibit greater accountability and are more engaged in their roles, as they feel responsible for both their actions and the outcomes of the mission [7]. This aligns with IBL's objective of cultivating responsible, mission-focused leaders who are prepared to take initiative when required.

D. Challenges and Limitations of IBL in Military Education

Although IBL offers numerous potential benefits, its implementation in military education faces considerable challenges. Military institutions are typically built around hierarchical structures that emphasize discipline, uniformity, and adherence to a chain of command. Introducing a decentralized leadership model, such as the IBL, can overcome resistance due to cultural and structural factors inherent to military institutions. The emphasis on hierarchy and control may conflict with IBL's principles of autonomy and distributed decision-making, making it difficult for leaders and trainees to shift from traditional models [4].

Additional research indicates that successful implementation of IBL would require significant adjustments in military training and education curricula. This includes rethinking the role of instructors, shifting evaluation criteria from task execution to decision-making quality, and providing institutional support for experimentation with decentralized leadership models. Furthermore, some studies suggest that not all trainees are equally prepared for the demands of autonomous decision-making, and additional support may be required to transition them from a follower mindset to one that is initiative-driven [5].

E. Comparative Case Studies

In reviewing military and civilian case studies, we found consistent support for the idea that decentralized models such as IBL enhance leadership qualities by empowering individuals to think critically and act independently. For instance, case studies of medical education programs utilizing IBL have demonstrated improvements in situational awareness and trainee engagement. These outcomes suggest that military academies could achieve similar results if they incorporate IBL principles into their curricula [2].

In summary, the findings indicate that while IBL offers a valuable framework for military education, its successful implementation requires a nuanced approach. The model's emphasis on autonomy and mission-aligned decision making aligns well with the evolving needs of modern military operations.

However, adapting IBL to military institutions will require overcoming cultural resistance, modifying training approaches, and ensuring that trainees are equipped to handle increased responsibility and initiatives.

The insights from this analysis will inform subsequent discussions on the feasibility of adopting IBL in military education and the strategies necessary to address potential challenges.

5. EVALUATION OF FINDINGS

The findings highlight both the potential advantages and challenges of implementing intent-based leadership (IBL) in military education. In this section, we discuss how IBL can enhance leadership qualities in military personnel by fostering autonomy, decision-making skills, and accountability, while also addressing the structural and cultural barriers that may complicate its integration.

A. Benefits of IBL in Military Training

The documented benefits of IBL closely align with the goals of modern military education. By empowering individuals to interpret and act on the commander's intent, the IBL encourages initiative and promotes mission-focused decision making. This approach cultivates several qualities that are essential to military leaders.

Enhanced Autonomy and Initiative: Traditional military training often focuses on adherence to protocols. Although discipline is critical, it can sometimes limit the development of independent judgments. IBL encourages trainees to take ownership of their roles and make mission-aligned decisions, which research shows can build resilience and adaptability, particularly under pressure. In an operational setting, leaders trained under IBL would likely exhibit stronger decision-making abilities in complex or rapidly changing environments [6].

Improved Decision-Making Speed and Adaptability: IBL's decentralized approach allows for faster responses to emergent situations, as leaders on the ground have the authority to make decisions based on their understanding of the mission's goals. This adaptability is essential in military contexts where conditions can change unpredictably. Civilian case studies, such as those in healthcare and emergency services, provide evidence that decentralized leadership models like IBL can improve situational awareness and responsiveness, outcomes that are critical for military operations [2].

Building Trust and Accountability: By empowering subordinates to make mission-critical decisions, IBL fosters a culture of trust and accountability. Leaders in IBL environments learn to trust their teams, which in turn builds stronger cohesion and dedication to the mission. Studies show that such trust-based environments lead to higher levels of accountability as team members invest more in the success of their decisions. This is particularly relevant in military training, where developing trust within a hierarchical framework is essential [7].

B. Challenges to Implementation in Military Academies

Despite its potential, IBL faces structural and cultural barriers in military settings, where traditional hierarchies and command structures are deeply ingrained. Transitioning to a model that emphasizes decentralized decision making may require significant adjustments at both institutional and cultural levels.

Cultural Resistance to Decentralization: Military institutions often prioritize order, discipline, and a clear chain of command. These principles can conflict with IBL's decentralized approach, which emphasizes individual autonomy.

Shifting from a directive-based model to one that encourages initiative and independent decision-making may encounter resistance from both instructors and trainees accustomed to a more structured environment [4].

Training Adaptations and Curriculum Changes: Implementing IBL in military academies would likely require modifications to training curricula, focusing on developing critical thinking and decision-making skills alongside traditional military competencies. Case-based teaching methods, which encourage scenario-based problem-solving, align well with IBL's objectives. However, integrating such methods into the existing military education framework may necessitate changes in instructor training and curriculum design [3].

Assessment and Evaluation of Leadership Skills: Evaluating the effectiveness of IBL may require a shift from traditional performance metrics, which often emphasize task completion and adherence to orders, to metrics that assess decision-making quality, adaptability, and mission alignment. Implementing such evaluation methods requires clear frameworks to assess initiative and accountability in a way that reflects the values of IBL.

C. Comparative Lessons from Other High-Stakes Fields

Insights from high-stake environments outside the military provide valuable perspectives on how IBL can be adapted within hierarchical structures. For instance, the successful application of IBL principles in graduate medical education and emergency response contexts suggests that decentralized decision making is feasible within structured organizations. These fields, like the military, require a balance between individual autonomy and adherence to overarching goals, demonstrating that IBL can be effectively tailored to structured environments without undermining discipline or unity of purpose [2].

Additionally, studies on servant leadership in the Air Force indicate that trust and empowerment-based models can thrive within military settings. These models foster a culture in which individuals feel valued and accountable, and outcomes that align with IBL's principles. Such examples provide a roadmap for adapting IBL to fit within the military's cultural and structural frameworks while preserving the model's core values of autonomy and initiative [1].

D. Implications for Military Education Reform

The potential benefits of IBL in developing adaptive, accountable leaders suggest that military education systems could benefit from incorporating elements of this model. To do so successfully, military academies might consider the following strategies:

- **Gradual Implementation**, introducing IBL incrementally allows trainees and instructors to adapt to this new approach without overwhelming the traditional structures. Starting with scenario-based training exercises that emphasize mission intent may be a practical initial step.
- **Instructor Training**, equipping instructors with the skills to facilitate IBL-aligned exercises is essential. This could involve training instructors to guide rather than direct them, helping them foster critical thinking and autonomy among cadets.
- **Evaluation Reforms**, adjusting assessment methods to value initiative and mission-aligned decision making over strict adherence to orders can help reinforce the principles of IBL, ensuring that trainees are rewarded for exercising autonomy within the scope of their training.

E. Future Research Directions

Further research is needed to explore IBL's long-term impact of IBL on leadership development in the military context.

Empirical studies that assess trainee performance, leadership effectiveness, and team cohesion under IBL-aligned programs can provide valuable insights into the model's applicability. Additionally, pilot programs within military academies could offer concrete evidence on IBL's potential to enhance traditional training approaches.

The findings of this study indicate that IBL has significant potential to enrich military education by fostering autonomy, adaptability, and accountability among trainees. However, successful implementation requires a nuanced approach that respects the cultural and structural specificities of the military institutions. By gradually integrating IBL principles through scenario-based training, instructor education, and evaluation reforms, military academies can cultivate leaders who are both disciplined and capable of making independent, mission-focused decisions. These leaders will be better prepared to navigate the complexities of modern warfare, where adaptability and initiatives are essential for success.

Through this examination, we see that IBL aligns well with the evolving demands of military operations, suggesting a promising pathway for military education reform that balances traditional values with innovative, empowering leadership approaches.

5. CONCLUSION

The application of intent-based leadership (IBL) in military education offers a transformative potential for developing adaptive, accountable, and autonomous leaders who can respond to the complexities of modern warfare. As warfare increasingly requires flexible and rapid decision-making, the traditional, hierarchical "command and control" model of military leadership is evolving. IBL aligns with this evolution by promoting a decentralized approach to leadership that empowers individuals to act with initiative and purpose, even within structured military environments.

The findings of this study suggest that IBL could bridge critical gaps in military leadership training by enhancing decision-making, fostering autonomy, and building accountability. These qualities are essential in high-stake settings, where leaders must be prepared to make rapid, mission-aligned decisions. Evidence from studies in other high-stakes fields, such as healthcare and emergency response, supports the adaptability of IBL principles in hierarchical organizations, providing a promising framework for the military's structured environment.

However, implementing IBL in military academies is challenging, particularly in terms of cultural resistance and structural adaptation. The hierarchical nature of military institutions, along with deeply ingrained traditions of discipline and command, may complicate the shift towards a more decentralized leadership model. To address these challenges, military academies could consider a gradual approach to integrating IBL, beginning with scenario-based training exercises, instructor development, and adjustments in evaluation metrics to reward initiative and mission focused decision-making.

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