Challenges for the Senior Leader: Potential Landmines in the Senior Leader Decision-Making Landscape

Graphic courtesy of National Defense University

I've never seen a senior American military officer get fired for messing up the big stuff, like losing a nuclear weapon or bilking the government of millions. It's the little stuff that gets under their radar scope because their energies are only focused on the big pieces of their landscape that they forget the details at the fringes…but it's at the fringes where they get into trouble.

Anonymous

Anonymous

Recognize that senior leadership is not "more of the same" – it is a wholly different level of power, influence, authority, and responsibility.

Synopsis of a General Officer's Leadership Discussion with the AWC, 2003

Our society at large is struggling with professional behavior. A presidential sex scandal, greed and avarice in the commercial sector, deceptive practices by powerful bureaucrats and leaders have shaken the foundation of trust between citizens and many of their institutions (Halpern, 2002). Indeed, there is an increase in the study of ethics in the legal, medical, and business professional schools as well as these professions' continuing education requirements (their version of PME) (Calls for Ethical Behavior, 2003; Puff, 2002).

To retain trust individuals within a profession and the profession as a body must behave in a way that corresponds to their claim. Part of that ability to sustain the claim to trust is for professionals to periodically re-assess their environment (also called landscape) and assess how they will maintain high levels of professional behavior as they operate in an increasingly difficult landscape. In the military, the threshold of becoming a senior leader is suggested as an opportune time to assess the new landscape because this landscape and its challenges is significantly different from any previous landscape an officer might have worked within. An officer might have commanded awesome power in the form of a weapon system as a squadron commander. Or, if not in direct command of that combat power, an officer might have had direct responsibility for the support of these systems. But as a senior leader, there is a move away from the direct responsibility of employing systems and a move to the responsibility of influencing and having power over large numbers of <u>people</u> and <u>resources</u> – both requiring the use of consistently

exceptional judgment. The physical (combat risks) may have diminished somewhat for the senior leader, but the VUCA environment will challenge the senior leader both personally and professionally – with little margin for error (Raasch, 2001)

Senior decision-making allows for the use of a powerful tool -- discretion. The strongest ethical base and sense of self-control must underpin this power of discretion. Any lapse in judgment and poor use of discretion can have severe professional consequences, not only for the senior leader, but also for the senior leader's family and service component (or beyond). More importantly, it also weakens the bond of trust between the profession and the public. The press has several examples of senior leaders stepping on professional landmines (Army News Service, 1997; CNN, 1997; Lewallen, 1991). These senior leaders are unquestionably hard working and dedicated carreer military leaders. The forces and rationale that might have contributed to their poor judgment is the point of this paper.

This paper has two objectives. First is explaining the three concepts of 1). a mental map and how it is inherently flawed, 2). an explanation of the impact of narcissism (referred to as "normal narcissism" in this paper) and 3). how self-control is applied and the possible explanation for the energy source to implement self-control. The second objective is to outline the change in professional and personal landscape that is largely the result of having risen to a high level of rank and with it, responsibility. One of the changes in the landscape is the amount of scrutiny an action (or inaction) can receive. The other is that the need to be more aware of how the flaws in a person's mental maps, effect of normal narcissism, and use of self-control may interplay to either successfully navigate the senior officer landscape or succumb to its subtleties and potential problems. The result should be an increased awareness of the context and underpinnings of the senior leader's total environment, both psychologically and sociologically so that action can be pro-active rather than reactive and trust can be maintained rather than lost and then arduously rebuilt (or perhaps never regained).

Mental Maps

A mental map is a term used to explain how the human mind transforms raw input stimulus (see, hear, smell, taste, feel) into meaningful information on which one acts (Buzan, 1991). Through nurture and nature, one develops a pattern of thinking that helps the individual quickly assimilate input from stimuli organize it into recognizable patterns, compare it against what they know, and then make decisions. This works pretty well. It is continuously working to turn input into information for decision-making for survival as well as higher-level decisions. It is the fundamental mechanism supporting basic instinctive reactions (like "instinctively" letting go of an object that is too hot) as well as the mechanism that allows one to work through both routine logic problems (like purchasing decisions) and solve complex problems. The system generally works, but it is not perfect because it is iterative (Buzan, 1991). In other words, it largely bases future decisions on taking input stimuli, and arranging it according to historic patterns. When faced with a totally foreign or new situation, the mental map will do its best to fit

whatever input it gets into the existing mental maps, even if doing so results in arriving at totally irrational conclusions.

Multiple experiments demonstrate that the mental maps everyone possesses are all adequate for routine chores, but usually become tasked when challenged by novel scenarios (Heuer, 1999). The system reacts to these scenarios in the best way it knows how, by forcing the inputs into mental maps that helps maximize the individual's chances of survival. It also forces information into patterns that decrease internal tension. The result is a pattern where the mind is always working to make the individual feel "all right" about an action or decision. People inherently avoid conclusions that make them look or feel "wrong". Intense rationalization sometimes occurs to make the data fit the mental map to ensure this "correct" outcome (Stanovich, 2002). This is due in part to a psychological phenomenon known as normal narcissism.

"Normal Narcissism" and the Mental Map

Normal narcissism refers to a portion of the mental map people use in how they see themselves and how they compare themselves to other people. Generally, individuals assess themselves as better than other people – consistently. For example, 89% of the respondents in a large survey rated themselves more positively than they rated others (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). In a meta-analysis of industrial / organizational research, 15 of 22 studies showed a significant tendency toward this idea of self-enhancement (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). Most research showed the self-enhancement to be mild, but it was persistently found. The point is that it exists in a non-clinical setting (i.e. is not considered an illness). However, it may present a "landmine" in the senior leader's landscape.

Similar narcissist patterns emerge when examining how people rate themselves on other evaluative devices and standards, like personality tests, intelligence tests, ethical questionnaires, and assessments of their driving skills as compared to others. The adage of Lake Woebegone comes to mind where "…all the children are above average". It is our nature to think positively about ourselves and our mental maps support this naturally occurring desire (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). In the work setting, most employees tend to think they are superior to the average employee in their organization and tend to see themselves more positively than appraisals of themselves from other sources (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Why is this?

The mental map and normal narcissism are related. A mental map is designed to enhance survival. To do this, the mental map tends to make positive self-relevant information more available than negative self-relevant information (Miller & Ross, 1975). This mechanism is self-preserving – this allows us to better manage our self-image and is a support mechanism to the survival instinct. When in athletic competition, the "winning attitude" is a mental map that is enhanced by normal narcissism. Nobody plans to or desires to lose an athletic competition, so inputs are naturally forced onto a "winning" mental map. Coaches do this, players do this, and in the profession of arms, so do military professionals. Nobody likes to lose and winners always keep the positive

mental attitude. This mental map, reinforced by normal narcissism where a person considers him or herself better than the opponent, creates environments where athletes (through both their natural athletic skills and competitive nature as well as their coach's nurturing) discard negative information (joint pain, fatigue, etc.) and focus on the items that will enhance their ability to win (superior skill, morale, etc.). This, in and of itself, is not a bad quality. However, in a less positive scenario, this pattern of self-preservation and the flawed mental map may be used to rationalize a poor act. It may discard all the negative impacts a decision may have on subordinates and only consider the positive outcome for the senior leader. If not aggressively managed, this flawed assessment of reality has the potential for creating poor decisions.

This predisposition to the positive self-relevant information and avoidance of negative information also helps us maintain our self-esteem and self-image (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). This is all a side effect of a person's strong drive for survival and self-maintenance, where people tend to exaggerate moral and interpersonal aspects of their character while simultaneously denying (or rationalizing) less socially accepted behavior (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). This is the psychological aspect of how the mental map may be imperfect when it comes to making judgments. It is naturally predisposed to an answer favorable to the individual because of the "preferred tracks" of normal narcissism that it likes to operate within. In several research efforts, volunteers were presented a novel situation that was contrary to their beliefs and asked to choose between one of two outcomes. The first outcome was rational (and correct, but ran counter to the volunteers' mental map). The second response was irrational and incorrect, but fit the volunteers' mental map. The research revealed that people tended to chose the irrational outcome, even when they were cognizant that it was wrong – they chose it because it "felt right" and fit their perception of what was correct and self-enhancing – it fit their imperfect mental map that was placing this novel information into historic mental patterns to help expedite decision-making. This research has also been referred to as illusions research where the mind forces new information onto established mental patterns. If the new information doesn't fit the established mental map, and the individual does not make a forceful, conscientious effort to overcome this dissonance, then the mind will toss out all information that doesn't fit the pattern to help rationalize the illusion of correctness (Piattelli-Palmarini, 1994). In the conclusion of their research on irrational choices, Piattelli-Palmarini (1994) states: "Between rationality and our cognitive pride, we chose the later".

The central theme to this part of the discussion is when the mind is challenged between what is rational and what is in one's cognitive comfort zone, people chose their comfort zone – even when they know they'll be wrong. Thus it is suggested that the mind is fallible and requires continuous re-evaluation. Even when one is guessing, the mind is in a continuous OODA loop (Boyd, 1987) trying to reduce uncertainty and resolve conflict – and sometimes it resolves conflict by disregarding information that runs contrary to what it would take to resolve the conflict. To compensate for these flaws and make better decisions, it requires a person to actively regulate their normal narcissism tendencies and recognize and manage the imperfect mental map.

As simple examples, the classics of visual illusions are offered (see figures 1, 2, and 3). The mind, when faced with a new vision / picture / etc. will always attempt to force it into an existing framework. Sometimes that is the wrong framework for analysis and decision-making.

Figure 1. The Three Pillars of Non-Reality

The eye sees the blending of the colors as the three columns morph into other shapes, but the mental map continues to solve the dilemma by seeing three columns (Three Columns, 2003).

Transitioning from psychological to the sociological realm where our personality interacts with the environment, mental maps and normal narcissism also come into play. In a social environment, humans tend to take cues from their environment, monitor these demands, and respond in the best possible way to gain acceptance from that environment and maintain self-preservation (Snyder, 1974). If this sounds similar to narcissism, it is. It is the sociological application of normal narcissm and should be considered a *normal* component of human personality as it interacts with the environment rather than a clinical syndrome, although at the extreme, narcissism is a clinical condition (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). As for life goals, normal narcissism tends to motivate people to have long-term aspirations related to being successful and getting ahead in life rather than being communal and submissive. Again, this is not a condemnation of narcissism. It is a description of how normal narcissism may motivate behavior and how people motivated by normal narcissism may interact with the environmental – and to suggest that most people do not have clinical narcissist tendencies but most people display certain levels of narcissist behavior in their daily routines – it's just a part of one's personality. The narcissist tendency helps inflate a person's views of himself or herself regardless of whether they are evaluating their task performance, personality traits, expected academic performance, behavioral acts, intelligence, or physical attractiveness. These inflated self-

tendencies are not necessarily how people record their views of themselves on reports (such as a Myers-Briggs or the EADP), but how they see and report to themselves (i.e. how one might "look at themselves in the mirror in the morning") – there is a difference between what a person might tell others about themselves and what a person might tell themselves about themselves.

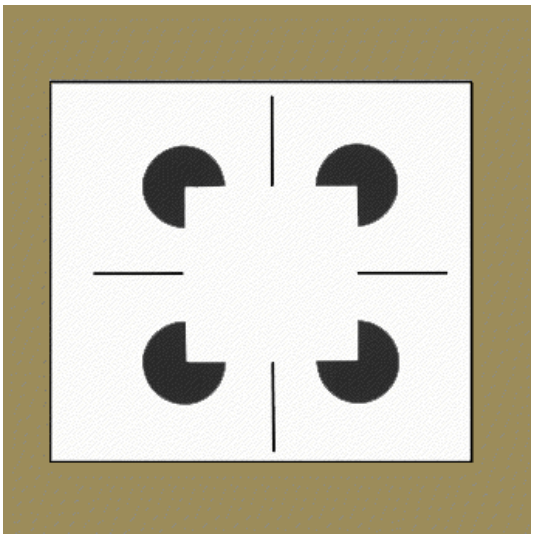

Figure 2. The "Visible" Invisible Square
The eye does not see a square in the above sketch, however the mental map perceives a square and so "fills in the blanks" to make the sketch fit historical references in the brain (Fischler and Firschein, 1987).

Under normal circumstances and lower stress, normal narcissism is a reasonable task to manage. What is interesting to note is that when this character element is threatened by the environment through actions like strong criticism or significantly stressful situations, the individual tends to react by perceiving themselves more positively than is justified, denigrating others, engaging in arrogant social behaviors, assigning self-serving attributions for their behavior and reacting with hostility towards others, especially when they are wrong (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). It is suggested that this may be a manifestation of normal narcissism under stress without the benefit of self-control. The concept of self-control and its relationship to normal narcissism will be introduced later in this paper.

"Normal Narcissism" is Reinforced by a Society Advocating Self-Esteem

Another issue that adds to the effect of normal narcissism is the American society's pre-occupation with self-esteem. For at least the past 30 years, American society has advocated the concept of positive self-esteem. The belief is that high self-

esteem leads to positive outcomes and that accurate self-appraisals might contribute to depression (Taylor & Brown, 1988). This positive view "promotes psychological adjustment" as well as "higher motivation, greater persistence, more effective performance and ultimately greater success" (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p 199). In other words, thinking positively about an outcome makes the outcome more likely to happen (in basketball lingo – "Be the Ball"). This concept adopts many of the features of normal narcissism and the individual's desire for self-preservation. Again, normal levels of self-esteem are most likely healthy, but taken to the extreme and in combination with elevated levels of normal narcissism, can prove counter-productive to the intended outcome of positive, well –adjusted citizens of a society.

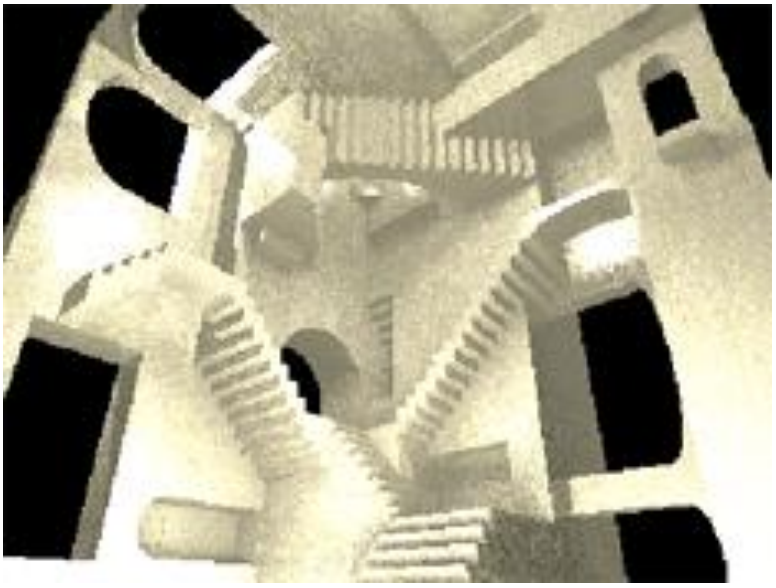

Figure 3. "The Brain Won't Let Me See The Big Picture"
The eye can only take in bits and pieces of this sketch, because the mental map cannot accept the entire sketch, it doesn't fit any of its current paradigms. So it forces the eye to look only at small bits and pieces that do make sense to the mental map (Rible, 2003).

It is further suggested that there may be a dark side to the psychological benefits of only encouraging high self-esteem or self-enhancement (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). It has the potential to be mal-adaptive and may promote self-enhancing behavior. If normal narcissism operates in this context and is not properly controlled, it may become a potential contributor to mal-adaptive behavior. If taken to the extreme, self-enhancers may become absorbed in their self-importance and this trait may cause friction within an organization because "getting ahead" (promotion of self) becomes more important than "getting along" (promotion of the team). What tends to keep all this in check is a person's external and internal controls on their behavior. The external controls may be represented by rules, regulations, policies, peer pressure, direct supervision, and

consequence management. The internal control is primarily represented by the concept of self-control.

Steve Jobs – founder of Apple computers

Steve's self-promoting, self-aggrandizing style was conducive to launching breakthrough technology that had the potential to revolutionize an entire industry. His belief in his genius helped overcome the industry's initial skepticism about the concept of the personal computer. However, once the industry was up and running, his style became a serious threat to the organization – he was seen as manipulative, rude, and condescending – and eventually lost his job (Robins & Paulhus, 2001). What might work as a Captain might not work as a senior officer? Unchecked narcissism might work in some professions (Pablo Picasso (artist), Armand Hammer (industrialist), Naomi Campbell (supermodel) or Mohammad Ali ("I am the greatest"), but perhaps not in the military profession where teamwork is better translated into success than individualism

"Normal Narcissm" and Leadership

So far, normal narcissism has been discussed in psychological and sociological terms. This is good for descriptive and exploratory explanations of the concept. To be more useful, a practical leadership application of normal narcissism is provided. Psychologists posit that leadership may actually be only an illusion of control – the idea of leading a group based on one's inherent skills and charisma is really not as important as the willingness of the subordinates to actually be led or at least not resist being led (Elmer & Cook, 2001). According to this position, leadership is romanticized and put way out of proportion to its real impact on people. This research points to the performance of organizations being consistent across several leadership turnovers, some periods of time being led by "competent" personalities and others being led by incompetent people (Elmer & Cook, 2001).

However, significant other research does support the notion that it does matter who is in control, and that this person's makeup can affect their leadership quality. Research supports the construct the personal qualities that guide a person to "do the right thing" does count in leadership (Bennis, 2001; Elmer and Cook, 2001). This moral imperative to do the right thing rests on two distinctive qualities. First is the ability to

detect the morally correct action and second is the capacity to act in accordance with this judgment and overcome whatever inducements exist to do otherwise (Fogleman, 2001).

The Abuse of Power

In the early 1970s, an experiment at Stanford University simulated the conditions of a prison to examine the social relationships and power between the "guards" and the "inmates". Volunteer college students were randomly assigned these positions, and knew of the method of assignment – knowing that the "guard" was not more intelligent or superior in any basic quality than the student who played the "inmate". The two-week experiment was terminated after 6 days because the guards were overwhelmed by the "excess" of their power over the inmates and proceeded to abuse that power – even in the controlled setting of the lab experiment. Observing this setting, one can surmise that the assignment of power must be carefully exercised to ensure only "mature" leaders get such power – another observation is that regardless of who you give the power to (since these college students were assigned randomly, one can assume a normal distribution of maturity) power corrupts regardless of who you may give it to. This second observation is not to mean that leaders are naturally corrupt, but the thought that they are potentially corrupted by the opportunity and temptations of the high position that includes significant power (Box, 1983). This illustration leads us to the practical application of the theory of unchecked narcissm.

"Doing the right thing" is not a problem in the junior officer years – guidelines were distinct and the situation fairly certain with ample amounts of clear and visible direct supervision and oversight (Durkeim, 1961). As senior leaders, the ability to ascertain the morally correct position is more difficult due to VUCA and the ability to chose correctly is confounded by the lack of immediate and visible oversight and the existence of counter-pressures and temptations to do otherwise (Emler & Cook, 2001). This new landscape provides new situations that may amplify the effect of a flawed mental map and the naturally occurring narcissist tendency that resides in most people. The VUCA environment blurs the lines for several reasons. First, the field of operations is wider. As

a Captain, the field of operations was probably confined to the arena of an air base and one's specific area of military expertise. As a senior leader, the field of operations is often outside the immediate area of military expertise and cuts across large segments of the military environment as well as crossing the boundaries of civil-military relations. Second, the expectations are different. As a Captain, compliance, obedience, and conformity were hallmarks to successful teams and career advancement. The senior officer is expected to be a bold risk-taker and accept the consequences of all that this perspective entails. Third, as a Captain, the standards were relatively clear. Regulations and those senior in rank detailed the accepted standards. They also enforced those standards. As a senior officer, there may still be regulations, but few officers senior in rank to either explain those standards or provide daily enforcement in the form of close supervision. Finally, the pressure to perform is greater. As a Captain, there were many more in the "herd", each Captain was important, but each Captain was also one of many Captains in the field. As a senior leader, there are very few and they are usually known by name and reputation. In this setting, the daily performance is very visible and subject to instant criticism and oversight (i.e. actions after the fact or act) verses supervision (i.e. actions prior to the fact or act). This "after the fact" visibility may come in the form of scrutiny by the press, Congress, or other segments of society. A positive self-outlook may be vital in order to succeed in this environment.

The subordinate-to-leader relationship has also changed. As a Captain, the difference in experience and age between the leader and the led was small. As a senior leader, the leader may be a generation removed from the led. This sets up different expectations from the subordinate. The subordinate sees the senior leader less of a near-peer and more of a "parent" role model. The subordinate wants to see the senior leader succeed, for that is where his or her future success also lies. Subordinates succeed when their leader succeeds. For the senior leader, this means that his or her thoughts and suggestions become the subordinate's "marching orders", sometimes their unintended marching orders due to their zeal to please the boss. The subordinate, because of the desire to "please the boss" may translate what the senior leader is musing about into a direct order. The subordinate also sees the senior leader working hard and desires to see them treated like a star – and the senior leader may begin to believe they may be worthy of exceptional treatment and begin to lose touch with the landscape and their true responsibilities as a senior leader.

All this serves to bolster and feed the normal narcissism tendencies in the senior leader and may set the groundwork for potential problems. It is suggested that a senior leader, in believing this paradigm that he or she deserves to be treated differently than convention due to rank, may result in the senior leader getting used to this concept and perhaps believing that notion of "deserving this good deal." This digression from the straight and narrow (inflated TDY voucher, perk from a contractor, deviation from the regulation) may be incorrectly rationalized more as a reward for a previous (legitimate) sacrifice rather than for what it is, deviation from accepted behavior. The consistency and frequency of these opportunities to digress from the straight and narrow path increase in frequency and intensity in positions of senior leadership. But why do some otherwise hard-working and dedicated senior leaders fall prey to their flawed mental maps and / or

normal narcissism? The condition that was seemingly under control earlier in the career path has now turned into a potentially detrimental force.

Relative behavior

The boundaries of acceptable behavior in the general public have also changed, and this confounds the issue of acceptable behavior in the military. Think of the first time you heard of drug abuse occurring and your (probable) strong reaction to it (you evaluated it as bad behavior that should be punished… now that same transgression is considered a daily routine – not even worth noting. The friction is that many of the current "accepted" behaviors in the pubic are still strictly forbidden in the profession of arms. When confronted with the decision to act morally, the immoral act that used to be abhorred by the majority of the publics is now "ho-hum" and the relative distance is narrowed between acceptable and unacceptable behavior in their eyes, but they still will hold the profession of arms to a higher standard, which makes the moral judgments of a member of the profession of arms the more difficult (Jeter, 1998).

Doing The Right Thing – The Issue Of Senior Leadership And Self-Control

So far, the discussion has set the landscape of a senior leader's flawed mental map and normal narcissism and how they potentially interact with the environment. The following discusses the self-control mechanism in theory and application. Senior leadership provides opportunities to exercise discretion and the use of great power without much direct supervision. Without this significant external control mechanism, the internal control mechanism must compensate. This internal mechanism is referred to in this article as self-control. The issue of self-control becomes the tool to maintain the healthy management of both a flawed mental map and normal narcissism.

It is important to see that a flawed mental map and narcissism are natural – and in the past these were partially controlled with external factors such as regulations, instructions, checklists, supervision, etc. and supplemented with an individual's application of self-control. But the changing landscape allows for greater use of discretion and judgment by the senior leader, while simultaneously the formerly prominent external controls begin to fade into the backdrop. This movement to the backdrop is confounded by the cloudy moral standards held by the general public (see sidebar on relative behavior).

It is also important to consider that just because an officer has arrived at the threshold of senior leadership opportunities does not mean the officer also has arrived with all the requisite awareness and skills to successfully cope in this environment. It is suggested that one must actively self-appraise and listen to the appraisal of others to prepare for the challenges of this new landscape.

Three Mechanisms of Self-Control

It is fairly well documented that most of the major personal and social problems affecting people are due to the failure of self-control (Baumeister, 2001). Drug abuse, alcoholism, computer fraud, indebtedness, gambling are simple examples. Few people manage themselves as well as they should or would like (Baumeister, 2001). Why people lack self-control is the subject of considerable research. Some scholars suggest that self-control is a resource that is finite and deteriorates with time, use, and or other environmental factors. Some believe it is unrecoverable and incapable of rejuvenation, while others have the opposite perspective (Baumeister, 2001). Baumeister proposes that these finite views of self-control may be modeled three ways. Self-control can be explained and described as a strength, a schema, or a skill.

The first technique for looking at self-control is its application through a tool called willpower. This is a strength concept. Willpower relies on an inner strength to resist and control one's responses to the environment and avoid poor decisions. The strength model describes willpower as a finite, non-renewable energy resource and is reduced in its ability and durability each time it is utilized by the individual. In this model, self-control must be exercised smartly and sparingly, for once expended, the resource is not capable of being rejuvenated. This concept of self-control may be visualized as a type of non-rechargeable battery, where willpower is the level of electricity stored in the battery is used to exercise self-control.

Second is explaining the application of self-control as a schema (a plan or logic mechanism). The schema approach is a more recent explanation of self-control and follows an information-processing approach (Baumeister, 2001). Schema relies on an internal set of processes that relies on accumulated knowledge, comparing that knowledge with the current situation, and constructing a scheme to deal with the new situation in the most rational manner. This explanation posits that self-control actually gets stronger as one matures because the information base gets deeper and gains validity through repeated cycles of comparison and action. This is similar to the iterative process in the mental maps explanation, except it assumes that the quality of the decision always gets better as experience is gained. It does not completely address other research that proposes that the iterative process of the mind is inherently flawed as the mind constantly tries to put new data in established (and possibly flawed) mental maps (Baumeister, 2001).

The third major way to explain the application of self-control is through skill. The skill approach is explained as a method where an individual learns to control him or

herself using an applied skills process. Subsequent requirements to use self-control uses the same skill set over and over and repeated use does not affect the quality of the decisions. The quality of each decision remains constant over time, even with frequent or rapid use. The skills explanation, unlike the schema, proposes that the skill level remains relatively constant and does not improve with each encounter requiring the use of self-control (Baumeister, 2001).

These three ideas on how to apply self-control mechanisms end up predicting different results, either poorer, better, or unchanged results for the same input. In testing these three models of how mechanisms might apply self-control, researchers investigated the conflicting outcomes from these three models by having participants engage in two consecutive but seemingly unrelated acts of self-control (Baumeister, 2001). The results of the study favors the outcome predicted by the first model proposed above, the willpower theory. The experiments suggest that willpower, used frequently, decreases with subsequent uses. Additional support for this conclusion was provided by a several subsequent studies by other researchers (Baumeister, 2001). But the finite quality of willpower as described above (the battery illustration) was rejected in the research by another finding (Baumeister, 2001).

The researchers in these studies found that self-control in the form of willpower, although finite in its capability to sustain self-control in the short run, actually behaves similarly to a muscle in the long run. When used often in a short amount of time, self-control tires and loses strength and resiliency. In some studies, self-control diminished quite rapidly, sometimes in as short as 5 minutes of exposure to the adverse situation (Baumeister, 2001). Also, researchers point out that unrelated items requiring self-control drew on the same source of finite willpower. But they also discovered that similar to a muscle, when allowed to rest, willpower recovered (Baumeister, 2001). Thus the suggestion is made that self-control, as explained through the willpower model, is finite in its strength in the short –run but recoverable for sustained use in the long-run.

This model may help explain why, in field observations, most lack of self-control incidents occur late in the day verses the morning (breaking a diet, addictive relapses, even impulsive crimes) (Baumeister, 2001). It is suggested by the end of the day the energy resources left in the willpower stores are depleted and the ability to effectively exercise self-control is potentially compromised. The researchers went further to determine what events helped rejuvenate the stores of self-control through willpower. They observed that not only rest, but also physical exercise helped improve the stores of willpower (Baumeister, 2001). Physical exercise has been shown as an especially effective stress reliever as it releases endorphins into the system and allows more efficient and effective mental processes to occur.

With rest and exercise recognized as mechanisms that could restore self-control, researchers went on to see what the lack of rest and exercise did to self-control. Observations from this research first suggests that simple stress draws on and weakens the stores of willpower considerably. It is not a prerequisite for an event to be extraordinary in order for it to weaken the self-control mechanism. The same finite,

short-run resource that is used for self-control in grave situations is also weakened by everyday stress (Baumeister, 2001). Further, observations were made that suggest that either a lack of rest or a lack of physical exercise contributed to reduced levels of self-control. In some situations, the normal stresses of everyday life were requiring so much of the available stores of willpower that little was available to address more serious issues requiring decisive use of this self-control mechanism (Baumeister, 2001). This seems rather like pedestrian information; self-control is a concept powered by this energy source called willpower and willpower, a finite short-run energy resource, can be restored through rest and / or exercise. However, there is more to this model and it is pertinent to the senior leader.

In a parallel research effort to see if the source for willpower was also the same source of mental energy used for other decisive actions, researchers asked participates to first complete a decision-making chore and then subjected them to a situation requiring self-control. The experiment had two groups, one group had to complete a complex, senior level, decision-making chore and the other had a less arduous task. Individuals in both groups were then subject to a subsequent task requiring the use of self-control. The individuals in the group with the complex, senior level decision-making task had less self-control on the second task than those in the other group (Baumeisater, 2001). This conclusion is also supported by other research (Baumeister, 2001). Thus, it is suggested that the "short-run" finite energy source used to execute self-control through willpower is also the same energy source used to make difficult decisions. It is suggested that as a senior leader, the "duty day" will provide more opportunities to draw on this finite energy source to make these good decisions than were presented to a decision-maker when they were a Captain.

Some people, when realizing the daily challenges of senior leadership, and realizing that there is only "so much effort to go around", counter this daily (and rapid) drain on the energy source with a conservation mechanism. Essentially the individual is pacing the use of this energy knowing the daily routine is long and challenging (Baumeister, 2001). Thus, it is suggested that the quality of self-control decisions may be affected long before the point of "exhaustion" is reached because the stores of willpower are being consciously conserved. This is similar to an athlete realizing that the contest is long and arduous. The athlete, seeing this situation, begins to reduce the level of overall effort in an attempt to complete the contest (Baumeister, 2001). It is suggested that a senior leader, facing the VUCA environment on a daily basis, may unconsciously "conserve" to ensure achieving some unknown (and sometimes moving) end game. This may have the unintended effect of reducing the overall quality of all decisions being made by the senior leader.

A series of studies were conducted to determine if this position has merit. When faced with self-control tasks requiring more energy than the participant knew they had, participants "conserved" their self-control mechanisms in order to attempt to complete the course of the experiment. Their self-regulation on subsequent tasks in the series presented during the experiment was weaker than initial self-control outcomes (Baumeister, 2001). This did not reflect a diminishing level of motivation to complete the

self-control tasks successfully, but a diminishing in the level of positive effort due to conservation. The participants meant to do well, but could not generate the level of self-control on subsequent tasks to equal the level of self-control demonstrated on the initial task. Other research supports this observation (Baumeister, 2001). Thus some poor outcomes may be the result of becoming passive due to the technique of conservation. The result may not be a poor decision, but also not taking appropriate avoidance action. However, the net outcome of either choice may be the same, a poor choice because of the lack of active self-control.

At this point, an emerging senior leader may consider throwing in the towel and avoiding the challenges offered. The objective of this article is not to discourage, but rather to encourage the use of this knowledge and research into mental maps, narcissism, and self-control so that a pro-active and anticipatory mechanisms can be adopted in order to avoid the unfortunate consequences of poor personal decisions and avoid the unpleasant need for after the fact "damage control" and "spin." As an interim summary prior to heading off into illustrations and proposed solutions, the following is suggested:

1. Mental maps are inherently flawed and that new information is constantly being mapped onto existing templates. Sometimes, in order to make the data "fit" the mental map ignores negative information. The mind does this in the name of self-preservation and tension reduction.
2. Narcissism is normal and natural. However, narcissism tends to elevate one's positive self-evaluation and perceptions and suppress one's negative self-evaluation and perceptions.
3. Self-control is a strength exercised through willpower.
4. Willpower draws on a finite, short-run energy source that may be rejuvenated.
5. The energy source can be rejuvenated with rest and / or physical exercise.
6. This energy source is also used by other decision-making mechanisms.
    a. Daily stresses in living depletes the resource
    b. Complex decision making processes also draw on this energy source
7. Long periods of activity tend to make an individual conserve this resource and not apply it fully to the situation. This may lead to an overall decrease in decision quality and self-control execution.

The Landscape of the Senior Officer

The senior officer environment is understandably complex. VUCA is the order of the day and attempting to solve dilemmas is the task at hand. Senior leaders will focus on making frequent significant decisions that will affect large numbers of people and hundreds of millions of dollars in resources. The senior officer "duty day" landscape consists of:

1. high demands for outstanding performance,
2. low tolerance for errors,
3. perceived harshness of "outside" critics (media, civilian critics, special interest groups),

4. decisions that may affect large groups of people in moderate ways (policy changes, program changes, etc.), and
5. decisions that may affect small numbers of people, or individual people, in significant ways (quality of force actions, adverse adjudication, punishment, administrative discharges, etc.) (Soat, 2003).

At the end of the "duty day", the senior leader takes on a myriad of social and unit morale engagements to support both the mission and the local community. After virtually all the resources are depleted, the senior leader retreats to the home to find not a haven of rest, but rather the potential challenges of:

1. teenage and / or college kids and their attendant problems, demands, and financial woes,
2. elderly / sick parents and the high level of care that may be required,
3. peers going through difficult times (sickness, divorce, retirement, civilian career change, layoffs), and
4. spousal issues (health, life goals, attendant crisis associated with the spouse's family aging)

The "home-front" demands do decrease in frequency of occurrence as compared to the early days in a military career, but although decreased in frequency, the occurrences increase in their intensity, because the infrequent events are usually high in their emotional, psychological, and / or financial impact (parent's death, child leaving home, etc.) (Soat, 2003). At times, the home may become as stressful as the workplace, and rather than a place of rejuvenation and recharge, a place where additional demands exist for the use of finite resources of energy.

A summary of disciplinary actions against senior officers in one of the DOD military braches offers the following data. From 1993 to the present, over 80 senior officers were dealt Article 15 punishment. In addition, 19 senior officers were dealt court martial convictions. The majority were cases of improper conduct (sex), falsifying documents (money), or taking advantage of their rank and / or position (harassment or dereliction of duties)(Schools, 2003).

A Senior Leader Landscape Scenario

Thus far, this article put together the element of mental maps, normal narcissm, and self-control. It has also quickly described the senior officer landscape and its challenges. Next is a combination of these elements into some scenarios to illustrate how these elements may interplay to create a situation where a senior leader may make a poor judgment. The following scenarios are based on actual events, but the names are fictional.

Illustration #1

This first illustration involves a senior officer (Colonel A) on a new and challenging assignment. There are high levels of responsibility, but unlike Colonel A's earlier days, low levels of physical threat (i.e. little chance of risk in combat). Colonel A is given significant latitude and only gets intermittent supervision, but the Congressional oversight is stressful. He also has two college kids and aging parents (and aging in-laws). Colonel A's program management skills are exceptional, but there are significant challenges to the program he's currently in charge of because service-related priorities are changing in light of transformation. The external audits are also nit-picking. The duty day is long and there is little opportunity for escape to either a decent meal or physical exercise. A long-time friend of Colonel A (they deployed together to some rough places when they were younger) calls Colonel A late one night at the office (the friend has since retired and is now a contractor). Conversation turns to an offer to meet for a late meal and drinks. Disappointed with the long day of fruitless negotiation of the program's positive attributes to the Air Force mission to seemingly disinterested outsiders, he takes the friend up on the offer. The dinner conversation ends up with the friend offering the colonel a superb retirement job opportunity. The friend claims Colonel A has earned the position and the colonel, after having reviewed the past few years, tends to agree. Colonel A feels that he has "paid his dues". The friend, after paying for dinner, casually asks for some information from Colonel A'S program. The colonel sees this as harmless, routine data. It ends up giving the friend's firm (and Colonel A'S potential future employer) and leg up on the bidding process. What happened?

Colonel A is a diligent and conscientious leader. He didn't lose a nuclear weapon or embezzle millions of program dollars, yet he made a poor choice in divulging this information to a friend. Potential issues involved in this decision may involve a flawed mental map, narcissism, and the withering of willpower. First, the flawed mental map may have seen the friend as just that, as friend and not a contractor. People change roles and responsibilities during life, but the mental map may tend to leave the person in the role that they were best liked and remembered. Second, narcissism may play a role in the "paid your dues" perception of the job offer. It tended to exaggerate the accomplishments and put in the background the continued requirement to follow the military – contractor relationship rules exactly as prescribed. To add to this, there is no immediate supervision; Colonel A has significant autonomy in much of his work. Finally, the energy source that Colonel A has successfully drawn on for so many years to make the "good call" in these situations is worn out by the difficult demands of the current job and home life, with minimal opportunities to "recharge" and regain the right perspective.

Illustration #2

Colonel B has been in her current assignment for two years. An incredibly rewarding job, it however involves significant travel and time away from home. She misses her family and lost family opportunities. Her boss praises her work and self-less sacrifice of her time. On one of her last TDY's she did not get re-imbursement for a travel fee. It amounted to $90.00 in fuel fees charged to a personal credit card but used to fuel a government vehicle. The paperwork "hassle" of getting this straightened out was not worth her effort, she would rather be with her family than dealing with this

bureaucratic frustration. A subsequent TDY ended up being a long and tough where things did not go well at the meeting. It was topped off by a weather delay resulting in her missing her daughter's senior prom. When filing the voucher for this trip, she has the opportunity to "pad" her voucher with non-existent fees, and does so for $90.00. This is the exact amount she feels she is owed by the government from her previous TDY.

Colonel B doesn't think she has cheated the government out of any money, just settling the overdue balance. Potential issues involved in this decision may again involve a flawed mental map, narcissism, and the withering of willpower. First, the flawed mental map may have seen the $90.00 "pad" as something owed to her by the government. She is accepting the positive information, that she is owed the money, and possibly rejecting the negative information, that she is falsifying a travel voucher. Second, narcissism may have rationalized her action as just "settling this money issue with the government with minimum hassle" rather than going through the arduous task of completing special paperwork to explain the unusual fuel charge from the first TDY (although she would expect a Captain in her unit with the same problem to "do the right thing" and complete the paperwork "hassle"). Finally, the willpower stores may well be depleted as she endured the emotional drain of missing a special family event and the prospect of losing even more family time as she dealt with a multi-step effort to fix the first voucher or the simpler step of just "padding" the second voucher for what she was owed.

Summary and a Recommendation

This article has presented a possible explanation to what might contribute to poor decisions by senior leaders. Through examining the research it is suggested that mental maps are inherently flawed and that new information is constantly being mapped onto existing templates. Sometimes, in order to make the data "fit", the mental map ignores negative information. The mind does this in the name of self-preservation and tension reduction. Next, narcissism should be considered normal and natural. However, narcissism tends to elevate one's positive self-evaluation and perceptions and suppress one's negative self-evaluation and perceptions. Finally, self-control is a strength exercised through willpower, but willpower draws on a finite, short-run energy source. However, this source is capable of rejuvenation. Some methods that may rejuvenate this energy source are rest and / or physical exercise. This energy source is also used by other decision-making mechanisms, both those used to deal with the daily stresses in life as well as those mechanisms that address complex decision making processes. Finally, long periods of activity tend to make an individual conserve this resource and not apply it fully to the situation. This may lead to an overall decrease in decision quality and self-control execution.

This summary may be viewed two ways. It may be seen as a prescription for failure or as a set of warning signs that requires the senior leader to actively manage the situation. By active management, this means that the senior leader must recognize these conditions exist and understand how these conditions are amplified by the challenges present in the senior officer landscape. To avoid the potential pitfalls of a poor decision, a senior leader must constantly evaluate the situation and aggressively manage the

conditions of a flawed mental map and normal narcissism. Also, the "normal" lifestyle of the senior leader is counterproductive to restoring the common energy source used for handling daily stress, making complex decisions, as well as exercising willpower. Senior leaders must make conscious efforts to afford themselves (and their organizations) sufficient time for rest and exercise. The combination of awareness of the situation, aggressive management of the conditions, and proper planning for rest, exercise and other options to help rejuvenate the critical common energy source should help the senior leader be more effective. It may also help the senior leader help his or her peers to avoid the poor judgment pitfalls within the senior officer landscape.

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