

# AN EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE FOR INNOVATION AT THE U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE

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and Steven Zeisler*

In a rapidly changing world, perhaps the only thing separating those organizations that can maintain long-term success from their rivals is the quality of their leadership. Top managers and executives must be more than highly competent in the skills demanded by the domains in which they operate; they must be better able to anticipate the global shifts all around them and enable their organizations to innovate faster and with greater impact than their competition. Accordingly, wise executives across public and private domains understand that to maximize an organization's performance they must maximize the potential of their leaders. They must find ways to keep their top leaders better equipped than rival organizations. That is why in many high-performing organizations, leaders tell us that there is a deliberate effort to identify and develop high-potential enterprise leaders in formal and experiential executive development processes. Corporate leaders intuitively know that a company's higher market performance is directly connected to their global leadership program. Although difficult to quantify, this is why leadership development has long been an essential tool for businesses and other institutions that have long histories of success.

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## **The Business Case for Army Leader Development and Education**

This focus has been rigorously applied and studiously maintained for over a century at the U.S. Army War College where, since 1901, it has contributed to the education of world-class senior leaders with the expert knowledge and competencies to address the strategic issues of U.S. national security. Its student body is composed of highly successful officers (lieutenant colonels and colonels) from across the military services and senior government civilians who, based on demonstrated performance and future potential, have been board selected for this 10-month educational program. As with important promotions in rank and assignments to key senior positions, each year the Army convenes a special board of senior officers to evaluate and select high-potential students (this year the top 9 percent of the officer cohort) to attend senior-level college programs like the Army War College.

A culture of leader development pervades the Army, whether in operational or institutional settings, such that each individual has an obligation to lead or share in leadership as circumstances dictate. But the focus of this article is on the *climate* that supports one pillar of leader development, education, for our high-potential students at the U.S. Army War College.

Insights from the work at this institution have relevance and power when considering civilian leader development programs, especially those that focus on the development of executives and enterprise leaders.

Thus, we define a specific climate—for innovation—and present analysis that compares the War College with other learning institutions using a well-established instrument and a substantial research base. Our analysis supports the assertion that the educational setting of the U.S. Army War College (USAWC) provides the climate for innovation to enable the development of its graduates as contributors to innovation within the U.S. military.

Executive development in any sector will benefit by incorporating a focus on climate. As with our national institutions of higher learning and in corporate leadership institutes, U.S. professional military education (PME) has been under scrutiny and, in some cases, assault. Critics have come from within and outside of the profession of arms on the appropriateness and effectiveness of the education of senior officers, especially with the challenges of the 21st century. Facing challenges of fiscal realities and demands for measures of performance on the bottom line, the persistent question that drives all professionals in training and development is, “What is the return on investment (ROI) for leader development?” Three aspects have been touted as most important to address: the rigor of the PME curriculum, the quality of the faculty, and the development of students who undergo this educational intervention. These three aspects interact within the totality of the standard educational process with the expectation that the graduates will emerge as more informed and competent strategic thinkers. An important and missing element is the climate in which education is conducted.

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For the U.S. Army, leader development is supported by three pillars: training, experience, and education. The Army develops its leaders through standardized programs of operational assignments that provide on-the-job experiences and periodic stints for training and education in institutional settings (like PME) and sets an expectation of self-development for individuals. This approach has parallels in corporate leadership development efforts in the past decade or more that follow a 70-20-10 model (70 percent experience, 20 percent feedback and coaching, and 10 percent formal education and training) conceived at the Center for Creative Leadership.

From its mission statement, "The U.S. Army War College educates and develops leaders for service at the strategic level while advancing knowledge in the global application of Land power." Its institutional charter is to "provide high quality Professional Military Education at the strategic level that further develops accomplished officers and civilians, both graduates and faculty, who depart our institution armed with the right balance of theory, history, practice, and communication skills to clearly articulate options for solutions to complex strategic problems and immediately be of value to any organization."

The imperative in the business world—and in the military—is to develop leaders capable of bringing strategic and creative thinking to the challenges and opportunities they face, of nurturing creativity in others, enabling innovation throughout their organizations, and guiding others to deal effectively in times of turbulence and constant change.

## For Education AND Innovation, Focus on Climate

Typically, leadership development efforts focus on three areas: WHO—the high potentials on whom the development efforts are targeted; WHAT—the curriculum with content for training and education; and HOW—the processes including classroom, experiences, and on-the-job development efforts. In addition to these three, at the USAWC we've added a fourth area of focus: the prevailing atmosphere

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or climate in which students experience PME. In addition, our work at both the USAWC and Zeisler Associates strongly supports the premise that a primary focus on culture has low return on investment. Culture is the organization-wide, historically based, and deeply held philosophy, values, and beliefs that bind an organization together and is, therefore, most resistant to change. Scholar Edgar Schein stated that culture can outlast products, services, and all the other physical attributes of an organization as well as the founders and its current leadership. Although leaders may be transient, culture endures. Quality guru W. Edwards Deming confirmed the intransigence of culture when he remarked that culture change can take a generation or longer. Former IBM CEO Lou Gerstner conveys in *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance* the time and monumental effort it took to effect a new culture in a well-established and at-risk corporation.

## Theory and Research on Climate for Innovation

In contrast to culture, climate is what people in a specific part of an organization experience: the patterns of behavior and the perceptions that characterize day-to-day life in the organization. Climate plays a key role in determining the outlook or likelihood of creativity, innovation, and change occurring in a particular situation. Because climate can vary throughout an organization, it is localized and much more susceptible to the influence of and change by local leaders.

Particularly at an institution like the USAWC, it is important for us to focus away from culture, over which local leaders have little control and influence, and turn

<b>Challenge and Involvement:</b>
The level of engagement members of an enterprise have to contribute to its goals, operations and success.
<b>Freedom:</b>
The independence people have in carrying out their work, roles and responsibilities.
<b>Trust &amp; Openness:</b>
The emotional safety in relationships and whether people show respect for and are open and frank with each other.
<b>Idea Time:</b>
The amount of time individuals devote to creating new and elaborating on existing ideas.
<b>Playfulness &amp; Humor:</b>
The amount of spontaneity, ease and light-hearted humor displayed in the workplace.
<b>Conflict (the only negatively-rated dimension):</b>
The presence of personal and interpersonal tension in the workplace.
<b>Debate:</b>
The amount of positive exchanges among those persons with different perspectives, ideas, experiences and knowledge.
<b>Idea Support:</b>
The degree to which new ideas are solicited and the positive ways they are treated.
<b>Risk-taking:</b>
The level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguous outcomes, and the willingness to try the unproven and new.

Source: CPSB, Inc.

TABLE 1. CLIMATE FOR INNOVATION DIMENSIONS

our attention instead to the climate for innovation. We recognize that USAWC is embedded in the larger Army and U.S. defense enterprise, which have their own institutional cultures. Climate, not culture, is the real leverage point for leaders within organizations. It is climate that presents the true opportunity for leaders to shape intentionally the day-to-day atmosphere that enables individual and organizational performance.

In order for leaders to develop and hone their skills at leading innovation in their organizations, the day-to-day setting at the USAWC must be one that nurtures their development of these skills and establishes a benchmark for them for what such a climate is like, as experienced by those within it.

Research into climate for innovation, especially that of Dr. Goran Ekvall at the University of Lund, Sweden, clearly demonstrates that organizations that can innovate consistently and successfully have significant differences in a climate for innovation than those companies with a poorer track record of innovation. His research identified nine dimensions of

a climate for innovation (Table 1) and an instrument for measuring them. We can assess the results of these dimensions against the results of organizations previously identified as "innovative" (industry leaders as determined against a range of innovation metrics) and "stagnated" (industry laggards assessed against the same metrics). We can also compare data from other learning institutions, including universities and corporate leadership development groups, that focus on executive development.

## How Does the Army War College Compare?

In Table 2, we compare aggregated data from the USAWC consisting of 241 respondents over several years (since 1999) with 741 respondents from four advanced learning institutions as well as innovative and stagnated organizations. Although the USAWC respondents are students enrolled in the elective courses "Creative Thinking" and "Creative Leadership," cohorts from over a decade report fairly consistent perceptions

	Innovative Organizations	USAWC	Learning Institutions	Stagnated Organizations
<b>Challenge/Involvement</b>	238	237	228	163
<b>Freedom</b>	210	195	176	153
<b>Trust &amp; Openness</b>	178	207	190	128
<b>Idea Time</b>	148	190	148	97
<b>Playfulness &amp; Humor</b>	230	200	182	140
<b>Conflict*</b>	78	67	76	140
<b>Debate</b>	183	213	197	108
<b>Idea Support</b>	158	241	200	105
<b>Risk-taking</b>	195	183	166	53

Range: 0 - 300 Statistically significant difference = 25 pts.

\* n.b. Conflict is the only negatively-rated Dimension

**TABLE 2. CLIMATE FOR INNOVATION DIMENSIONS COMPARED**

of the climate across the years. It is clear that along these salient dimensions USAWC students experience a climate for innovation that is comparable with innovative organizations across varied domains and is arguably at least as supportive as other learning institutions in the research database. This may be surprising and counterintuitive, given the prevailing stereotype of military bureaucracy and rigidity.

Although this may not be reflective of the Army and other defense organizations writ large, during the 10-month resident experience at USAWC, its students are deeply engaged in exploring, understanding, and addressing the security issues faced by our nation. Perhaps for the first time in a long while, they have the opportunity to reflect and think strategically about such issues. In the seminar experience, students find that their thoughts are welcomed as contributions to professional discourse. And the climate is psychologically safe where they can try out new ideas and experiment in a setting that promotes learning.

The numerical data are supplemented by written comments from the students that provide additional feedback about the kinds of behaviors, approaches, and mechanisms that support or get in the way of the climate for innovation. Often, insightful students offer creative ideas on how to improve the educational

experience. It is important to note that the quantitative and qualitative data about the climate for innovation are a *description* of the organization rather than a prescription of what to do or a pronouncement of the innovative health of the organization. Leaders must examine the data in light of the purpose, mission, and goals of an organization to determine which dimensions should be addressed and what actions to take. A higher—or lower—number for any dimension on its own does not provide a conclusion. The assessment must be examined within the context of the organization. For example, a higher risk-taking score at a nuclear power plant may not be a target to strive for, but in a start-up company's research and development (R&D) labs, it might.

These comparisons help our USAWC faculty to improve awareness and understanding of our ability to develop and maintain a supportive climate. It also provides participants—our students—with the first-hand experience of what such a climate is like. This may not have been the case in their prior military assignments so it is important to demonstrate the potential that exists for them as senior leaders. In this way, when our graduates return to their field and staff assignments, they are better equipped to put in place mechanisms, behaviors, and tools to

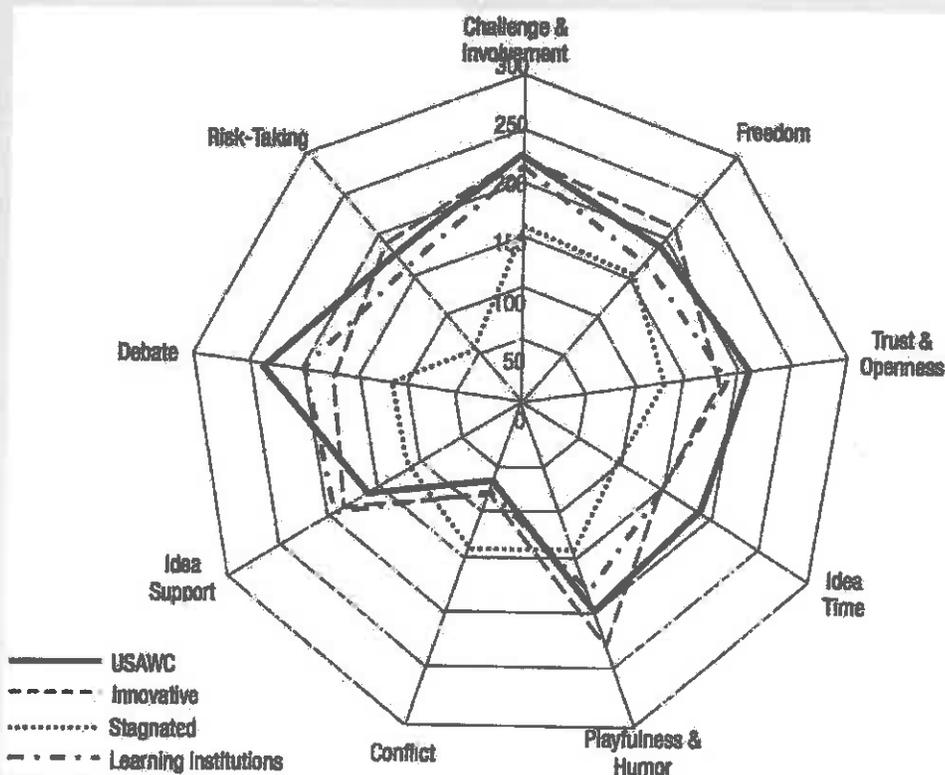


FIGURE 1.

develop and maintain the appropriate climate in their organizations.

## Applications Beyond the Army War College

We offer that our work and findings at the Army War College indicate very strongly that a focus on the climate for innovation in corporate leadership development settings will have a similar significant return on investment. Indeed, where we have applied a focus on such a climate in the corporate world, remarkable things happen. We have experienced the power of a focus on climate beyond the USAWC.

- A 50-year-old research and development site of a Global Fortune 100 company had languished for nearly a decade to the extent that executive leadership was considering shutting it down if it could not turn performance around. Various efforts over the recent past had yielded little improvement until we were engaged and brought the focus on
- the climate for innovation. Within 3 months of analyzing the climate and identifying key initiatives that would improve it, executive leadership noted meaningful improvements in the quality and number of new product and process developments emanating from the site. Within 6 months, significant capital investments were made in the site based on recent, highly visible R&D successes, and within 18 months the center had radically transformed itself into a hotbed of innovation, leading all of the corporation's other R&D sites in commercialization of new products and revenues generated by those innovations. All this was accomplished with virtually the same staff as before.
- Senior leadership at a high-performing affiliate of an international industry leader used the climate for innovation to identify where their organization could build on its climate strengths and to locate early warning signs of decline. A climate for innovation survey and analysis were conducted across all functions site-wide. Our findings helped

leadership leverage their existing strengths of challenge and involvement by increasing and adding to its employee engagement strategies. In addition, we identified low levels of idea time and playfulness and humor as areas of concern. Tactics to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of meetings were enacted but even more significant gains resulted from a shift in focus from time management to energy management and wellness. The affiliate has maintained or increased their business performance and innovation success year after year by focusing on what needs to be done to continuously improve key dimensions of a climate for innovation throughout each of their organization's functional groups.

- A support function for corporate innovation efforts avoided being outsourced because a sharp focus on their climate for innovation helped them identify ways to bring more value to the company than would have occurred through outsourcing. Our climate analysis helped them target key activities and behaviors to provide the outstanding support levels their internal clients required. The survey identified needs in risk-taking and idea support and subsequent work with members of the organization identified specific actions and activities that would enhance the value they delivered to internal clients. They built upon their strengths in challenge and involvement and, by implementing suggestions from its members, physically transformed workspace in ways that added to playfulness, trust, and openness.

Senior corporate leaders now have leading indicators for innovation success—the dimensions of a climate for innovation—that drive lagging innovation indicators including shorter cycle times in going from idea to

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## *Organizations must find leverage points for innovation.*

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implementation, end-user or customer enthusiasm for the innovation, and its commercial success. And, because the dimensions can be measured and compared with other organizations, the usually hidden aspects of an organization are made clearly visible.

### **Conclusion**

Without a focus on a climate for innovation, the best tools, approaches, and behaviors to unleash innovation in corporate settings taught in any aspect of the 70-20-10 model are less likely to take hold. They are less likely to withstand the impacts of cultural inertia (resistance to movement) and the human bias against change. Without the proper climate, the efforts of leaders will be severely diminished. Adding a clear focus on the climate for innovation with the best WHOs, WHATs, and HOWs of professional development will help ensure outcomes aligned with expectations and a higher ROI.

In today's rapidly changing business, geopolitical, and economic environments, organizations everywhere must find leverage points for innovation they can push on with speed. Culture is not that lever; climate is.



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