



Raising the Median

Improving Operational Resilience, Continuity & Efficiency

Contents

Imperative

Introduction: Shifting the Centre of Gravity

Motivation: Sustainable Fighting Power

Resilience: Building the Core of the Organization

Continuity: The Value of Raising the Standard for the Whole Team

Efficiency: Diversity in Problem-Solving

Long-Term Benefits: Investing in Every Team Member

Summary: Leadership for the Long Run

Imperative

In a world where volatility and uncertainty are no longer an exception but a condition, organisations cannot afford to rely on the 'fragile few' to carry the many. The imperative to raise the median, shifting the centre of gravity upward, is not just about productivity; it is about **resilience** and **longevity**.

When the average worker becomes more capable, the organisation becomes more resilient, adaptive, and yes, 'intelligent'. This is not a luxury reserved for high-growth startups or elite institutions; it is the new baseline for any organisation that hopes to thrive in complexity. If the middle does not rise, the organisation simply won't endure.

Unlike the **mean**, which can be skewed or influenced by a few standout performers, the organisational **median** is stubbornly honest. It tells us where the midpoint is, where most people sit and perform. To raise that bar is to change the lived reality of an organisation.

Imagine an organisation with a customer service team of 100. Ten employees might dazzle, ten may need development, but the remaining 80 define the company's rhythm and actual operating capability. When we invest in helping those 80 improve, not just marginally, but meaningfully, we're no longer chasing elite performance. We're transforming the standard.

Introduction: Shifting the Centre of Gravity

Raising the mean, improving the average level of capability, is a worthy goal. But raising the **median** capability is something more profound. It's not about the short-term skewing of success with star talent or exceptional outcomes. It's about **moving the centre of gravity**, lifting what is typical, expected, and routine to a higher plane. It is, in short, about making your organisation pound for pound more capable.

Let's face it, more often than not, performance in an organisation is skewed. There are those few that add considerably more value than the many. Likewise, there are those that prefer to be carried by the organisation and add little to no productive value.

In my view we spend a disproportionate amount of time focusing on these extreme values, or outliers. Typically, when looking from the outside in, we measure the performance of an organisation using its mean performance. Meaning that the outliers, our stars and our shirkers share a really heavy burden of the performance, good or bad.

The reality is that these outliers do not represent what the organisation can consistently, repeatedly, or even normally do, in fact, they infer a degree of fragility onto the organisation. The median is a more realistic representation of the organisation's ability to perform over the long term.

Motivation: Sustainable Fighting Power

The whole motivation for thinking more deeply about improving median performance came from me reflecting on the performance of the British Army's infantry units which served in

Iraq and Afghanistan. Operations in Iraq were called Operation Telic and ran for about 6 years from 2003 – 2009. Each 6-month rotation required at least 3 infantry battalions.

Operations in Afghanistan were called Operation Herrick and ran for at least 12 years from 2002 – 2014. At least 2 infantry battalions were required per 6-month rotation. (Both the number of actual years and the troop numbers are conservative estimates).

During this period, the British Army had just 33 infantry Battalions within its force structure. Such sustained performance in two theatres at once was a real stretch and required a standing population of at least 15 infantry battalions, if you consider that for every battalion in 'theatre' one battalion was spending 6-months recovering and regrouping from their time in theatre and another battalion was preparing and training to take over from the incumbent battalion.

When we add into the mix the fact that the Army had to support other operational deployments, training commitments, ceremonial duties and international security commitments around the world, I would estimate that of the 33 battalions that existed at this time only around 20-23 would have been available in the pool of units waiting to rotate in and out of these two operational theatres.

Outside of the Royal Marine Commandos and the Parachute Regiment, who are generally considered to be more elite and experienced fighting formations, the only commonality between these regular infantry battalions was that they all underwent **basic infantry training** in the same place and to the same standard.

I can tell you quite truthfully that some very important people within the Army's upper echelons were quite concerned about the ability of many of the less well known and less well tested units to be able to delivered sustained performance at a high enough level.

Testament to the quality of the common basic training was that the British Army managed to sustain the same level of **operational effect** in these two theatres regardless of which infantry battalion had been deployed. The median level of performance achieved through a very rigorous and thorough level of basic training was the only thing that allowed the Heads of the British Army to maintain their commitment to these operations over such a prolonged period.

Indeed, on many occasions, things were so tight with manpower that many non-infantry units deploying to these theatres also found themselves working in an infantry role. In one notable case C Company of the Queen's Dragoon Guards a light Armoured unit, who were attached to a Commando Battalion were presented with the famed Royal Marines Commando Dagger at the end of their tour of duty by the Head of the Royal Marine's Brigade in recognition of their level of performance alongside their Royal Marine counterparts. This is an almost **unheard-of event**.

Under a new 'One Defence' initiative, as the dwindling numbers of the British Army looks forward to an uncertain future, the Army has decided that it will double down on its strategy of increasing the median value. In a 2024 Guardian article General Roly Walker the Chief of the General Staff stated.

“a bold ambition” for the army “to double our fighting power in three years and triple by the end of the decade”; not with extra resources but by using technology and techniques. developed on the battlefields of Ukraine, such as drones and artificial intelligence. [1]

Fighting Power or operational effect, is how we measure our performance in the military. Instead of sales or items produced / cost. Fighting power is the unit in the data set when we try to measure median performance.

Under pressure from shrinking budgets and decreased manpower and faced with a fast-evolving series of international threats, the Head of the British Army intends to shift the median value of the army’s operational performance. Having leveraged the quality of its basic training as much as it can, the Army is now turning to the development and smart deployment of technology to shift the centre of gravity.

Resilience: Building the Core of the Organization

Resilience, once considered a soft virtue, now stands as a strategic imperative. It is not merely the capacity to rebound from disruption but the architecture that enables an organisation to continue learning and adapting in the face of sustained volatility. In a world where uncertainty is not episodic but ambient, building resilience into the collective body of the organisation, rather than concentrating it in a few heroic individuals, has become essential.

The resilient organisation shifts its centre of gravity by ensuring that each and every team member has access to the tools and training they require. From a leadership perspective, this means equipping every team with the strategic intent, autonomy, and technology to respond with coherence rather than chaos.

As a young Royal Engineer in the British Army, I had the quite natural expectation that in time of war or conflict I would be expected to form part of a team capable of delivering a range of battlefield engineering services. This was the essence of my role. It may include water supply, bridge building, explosive demolition, building anti-armour and anti-personnel defences to name but a few.

As you can see from the list above the Army expected me to be a **General Specialist** If you also consider that two of my engineer units also had specialist armoured or amphibious roles then you can in another whole range of engineering support tasks. Another layer of complexity is added when I was asked to train as a Combat Signaller, Obviously, we mustn’t forget that everyone of us could be expected to work in an infantry role at any time as well as perform battlefield First Aid and Nuclear Biological and Chemical (NBC) detection and protection.

What the army had either intentionally or unintentionally achieved was to build a **fractal organisation**. At the lowest fractal level was the individual soldier like me who despite not being expert at any of the individual tasks or sub-disciplines had the stored knowledge and **potential** to have an effect in any of a dozen specific areas.

The next fractal level up was the small team whose very existence allowed the organisation to have a type of shared competence. You see, within each team there is always certain to be

someone more expert in each of the different sub-disciplines than the others. This person, agent, or leader filled in the competence gaps, and coordinated the efforts of the rest.

As we increase each nested fractal level the inconsistencies, lack of ability or knowledge in specific areas begin to lose any relevance to achieving even the most complex and difficult tasks. Organisations like the British Army, structured and allowed to develop in this fractal manner have developed a truly **adaptive architecture**.

Key Leadership Insight:

Resilience, or the ability to sustain an operational effect in the British Army is composed of three elements. Firstly, there is the fractal architecture I have just mentioned, secondly because sound leadership behaviours are developed and expected at all levels each subgroup has within it the perfect pairing of technical competence and good leadership.

Sometimes this may mean different people playing the role of technical expert and leader, but such arrangements are readily accepted by most soldiers because they maintain the strong **Followership philosophy** of jointly owning the problem and realising that no individual has achieved anything until the entire task is complete.

The final pillar of achieving a sustained operational effect is in the way British soldiers approach a task. Yes, it is true that they receive orders and are expected to carry them out within certain parameters, however they are also always expected to **think** and **evaluate** the problem or situation for themselves.

You see it is not **what** is given in a set of orders that is important it is **how** they are delivered. A typical order from above asks the subordinate to achieve an **effect**. In engineering terms, the objective might be to: deny, breach, destroy, construct etc. However, whoever receives the task at whatever level always follows the same planning matrix and most important to this article are the first 2 questions of this 7 Questions Planning Matrix.

Q1: What is the situation and how does it affect me?
Q2: What have I been told to do and why?

British Army soldiers are allowed to make their own first-hand appreciation of the situation with all of the detail and nuance that comes with being closer to the action than anyone else. Most importantly they then get to compare what effect they have been asked to achieve and why, with the reality of the situation. Once this **fundamental piece of thought** has been concluded, the soldiers are allowed to complete what they have been asked to achieve however they best see fit.

Continuity: The Value of Raising the Standard for the Whole Team

In the complex machinery of modern organisations, high performance often becomes a spotlight phenomenon, illuminating only the brightest corners of the enterprise. Yet the true hallmark of a well-led organisation is not the brilliance of the few, but the reliable excellence of the many. When organisations or teams focus on increasing the organisational median, elevating the average output of all contributors, they invest not only in performance but in predictability and **continuity at scale**.

Essential to realising these predictability and continuity at scale gains, is an early investment in leadership development for all. It is these many median nascent leaders who are the **agents of systematizing success**. It is their daily micro-leadership habits that are pivotal in ensuring that tools, feedback, and data-driven habits are distributed equitably and that this continuity of sustained performance and development leads to the building of a sturdier, more agile operation.

Continuity can mean several things. It can mean business carrying on as usual when Person X is away on holiday. It can mean Person Y seamlessly moving up and integrating themselves into their old managers position as the older manager leaves for planned retirement. It can also be useful for more extreme events when one or two specialists in the organisation suddenly decide to leave.

Having developed the median level of everybody in the organisation means that a lot of people know a little about everything. This means that the organisation as a whole can **buffer** any disruptions for a period of time until a replacement for a specialist is found or until someone within the organisation has the desire, motivation and ability to take on this more specialised role.

Key Leadership Insight:

Effective leaders build systems that empower **everyone** to operate at a higher level, not just the high achievers. But more importantly, having an organisation that has leadership as its focus from the very earliest stages of the career ladder means that you effectively have an organisation capable of maintaining continuity. This is because you have created a collective group, an organism-like entity that accept new tasks and projects as a joint effort to be resolved by the organisation as a whole.

Efficiency: Diversity in Problem Solving

There is a romantic myth that innovation springs from the lone genius, working in isolation. Reality, however, is far more collaborative and diverse. Raising the organisational median means pulling insights from corners of the team or organisation that are often overlooked: the introverted analyst, the frontline operator, the newcomer who asks the question no one else thinks to voice. Diversity in thinking across race, gender, role, discipline, and experience doesn't just create fairness; it fortifies resilience and accelerates problem-solving.

However, there is a catch if we really want to switch the centre of gravity for each individual member of the team or organisation then we need to develop and reinforce robust **communication channels of relevance**. Relevance really is the operational word here. If we simply forwarded every good idea, diverse input, or new approach to everyone in the organisation, people would soon become overloaded with potentially useless information.

If we rely instead on a curated network of leaders spanning the depth and width of the organisation to efficiently distribute the relevant information to those that need it, when appropriate, then we would achieve '**just in time**' diversity. Those requiring the stimulus from new ideas would receive the information in a format they could make sense of, whilst being supported by the guiding hand of their leader.

Key Leadership Insight:

Innovation is not an elite function, it flourishes when the average contributor is empowered to iterate and improve. More importantly, it leverages diversity ensuring that all relevant opinions, perspectives and ideas actually get the opportunity to contribute to the collective effort. In this way we could view leaders as information or **idea brokers**. Their role being to connect up ideas with problems.

Long-Term Benefits: Investing in Every Team Member

It is easy to lavish attention on the high-potential employees, the top 10% that every talent strategy seems calibrated to attract and retain. But true sustainability comes when an organisation takes the long view, when it invests in the potential of all its members, not just the preordained stars.

Raising the median value means rejecting the logic of exclusivity and embracing the compounding power of inclusive development. It's the mundane rhythms of mentorship, feedback, and growth planning applied consistently, not the flash of one-time initiatives, that generate lasting impact.

Gallup research reveals that.

"Employees who strongly agree that their employer invests in their development are 3.6 times more likely to be engaged in their work. And engagement, in turn, is the soil from which innovation, loyalty, and collaboration spring." [2]

Key Leadership Insight: When everyone grows, the organisation compounds value over time. Leaders who truly want to future-proof their organisations must stop chasing unicorns and start cultivating fields. Leaders need to **embrace mundanity** and realise that they are farmers and not construction engineers.

The task of your organisation in raising the median over the long term is in providing the right environment to elicit the greatness inherent in nearly all of its members. Just as a young seedling's cells multiply exponentially as it grows, our leaders need to embrace mundanity and create the fertile conditions for this exponential growth over time.

Summary: Leadership for the Long Run

To raise the organisational median is to pursue leadership that **raises the floor**, not just the ceiling. It's a commitment to equity in growth, resilience in systems, and excellence by design.

Raising the median is the new imperative. In today's volatile and complex environment, organizations can no longer afford to rely on a few elite performers to carry the rest. I argue that sustainable performance stems from improving the **median**, not just the average or the extremes.

Motivation from Military Success. Using the British Army's experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, this article has tried to highlight how operational excellence was maintained

not by elite units, but through the consistent capability instilled by rigorous, standardized training across the board. This strategy ensured that even lesser-known infantry battalions could perform at a high level.

With limited resources and manpower, the army's ability to deliver consistent results was due to the strength of its median, not its mean. This military analogy reinforces how powerful it is to equip **everyone** with a strong foundation, creating a dependable and scalable force capable of long-term success.

Resilience through Distributed Leadership. Resilience is reframed not as a trait of the few, but as an embedded capability in the many. Drawing on military examples, this article has discussed how fractal leadership, where each level of the organization is both technically competent and capable of leadership, builds adaptability and autonomy.

This distributed model ensures that performance isn't dependent on proximity to formal power or a handful of experts. Instead, every team and individual can respond thoughtfully and effectively, which allows the organization to maintain continuity even in the face of uncertainty or disruption.

Long-term value comes from Inclusive Development. Finally, I have tried to argue against the short-sighted strategy of only nurturing the top 10%. True long-term value comes from developing the potential in everyone. This inclusivity not only boosts engagement, loyalty, and innovation, but also leads to compounding growth, like a seedling growing through small, consistent changes.

Leaders are urged to act like gardeners rather than engineers, cultivating environments where growth happens organically across the board. By raising the median, organizations don't just survive, they evolve, adapt, and thrive over time.

Ask yourself: What am I doing today that raises the median across my team, and isn't just aimed at squeezing more out of the few stars?

Bibliography

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- [2] Dick Smythe, "State of the Global Workplace: 2023 Gallup Report," Gallup Website.