CHAPTER 4

Military Professionalism – An Organizational Challenge by Itself

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INTRODUCTION

Terms like "profession," "professional" and "professionalization" are common in daily use, however, they often are ill-defined and multi-interpretable (ambiguous). Within military organizations, the term "professionalism" is also commonly used. Military professionalism has generally been addressed using a historic perspective by describing military professionalism within the context of societies of late-medieval and early-modern Europe and by examining both the theory and practice of war, using literary, archival and artistic evidence. In this chapter, however, we address military professionalism using an organizational/psychological perspective.

Military professionalism broadly refers to the construction of vocational or occupational identities and structures within the armed forces. However, more practically, military professionalism has been approached in different ways over the past years. Some regard commercial aspects such as efficiency and quality as the main issues at stake in a professional attitude whereas others focus upon a professional attitude in interactions with those around (enemy or not); the so-called "chivalry," which refers to certain attributes and military values such as courage, heroism and honour. In this chapter, we reflect upon this dualistic and ambiguous nature of military professionalism within the Royal Netherlands Armed Forces. Our goal is to demonstrate that since there is no agreed upon definition of military professionalism, it is military professionalism itself that causes organizational challenges within the Netherlands defence organization. It is argued that these challenges mainly arise from the lack of a clear and uniform understanding of the relationship between the domain of the leader (i.e., what constitutes the specific domains of both the officer and of the non-commissioned officer) and the complexity and unpredictability of the military context and its organizational and operational settings. In this chapter, attention is first directed to the origin and

* The views expressed in this chapter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Royal Netherlands Armed Forces.
meaning of professionalism by focusing on professions and professionalization. Discussion will then shift to the organizational challenge instigated by the way military professionalism is operationalized within the Royal Netherlands Armed Forces. Finally, this chapter offers a proposal for dealing with this organizational challenge.

**PROFESSION AS THE ORIGIN OF PROFESSIONALISM**

Before we go further into military professionalism, it is necessary to take a look at the background of this concept. We will focus on the term "profession" as its foundation and on two terms that are closely related to professionalism: "professional" and "professionalization".

A profession is widely considered to be an occupation that finds its foundation in socially accepted values and is considered valuable for the continuity of society as a whole. Medical occupations, as they serve society and stand for (amongst others) humaneness, responsibility and altruism, are considered professions. As such, the military can also be considered a profession. After all, the core values of contemporary military organizations are safety, security and peace, all of which are social values necessary for the existence of the human species.

However, being value-driven is not the only characteristic an occupation needs in order to claim status as a profession. A second characteristic is its reflective nature. A profession distinguishes itself from a non-profession by the ability to continually adapt by using new knowledge and insights in order to better meet the needs of clients, employees and society. A third characteristic includes the way in which employees are motivated. When it comes to motivating employees, an employee working in a profession focuses more on inspirational and intrinsic factors (such as the honour to work for a certain organization and the meaningfulness of the activities for society), whereas an employee working in a non-profession is motivated by more extrinsic factors such as salary and benefits.

According to History professor David J.B. Trim, a profession can be characterized by seven qualities: a discrete occupational identity, formal hierarchy, permanence, a formal pay system, a distinctive expertise and means of education therein, efficiency in execution of expertise and finally, a distinctive self-conceptualization. Several of these elements seem to be important in making the distinction between a profession and a non-profession. Some of the most important elements have to do with the individuals shaping the profession: the professionals.

Professionalization is like professionalism, an ambiguous and ill-defined concept. Nowadays, it is used in many ways and is mostly understood to have something to do with making the organization more businesslike. What this exactly means often remains unclear. Terms like "cut-backs", "reorganization", "budget reductions", "efficiency" and "quality" are often associated with the concept of professionalization. In our vision, however, professionalization has much more to do with the organizational efforts to make employees more aware of their own values, motives and convictions of stakeholders. In our opinion, a true professional has the capacity and the will to proactively take these values and the way they influence behaviour into account when performing within the context of the organization. Of course, there is also the aspect of development of the content of the profession itself, such as financial or logistical skills and knowledge. In our vision, however, being fully developed in this sense doesn't necessarily make an employee a professional, at least not within the Dutch Armed Forces.

**MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM - DUALISTIC BY NATURE?**

In this section, we will go into the dualistic nature of military professionalism within the Dutch defence organization. Examples of the ambiguous (and sometimes even double binding) attitude toward professionalism are provided. This will be accomplished by discussing professionalism by referring to two "contrasts": 1) the individual versus the organization, and 2) traditional versus managerial approaches.

**The Organization vs. the Individual**

Within the Dutch Forces, professionalism receives considerable attention on two levels, namely the individual and the organizational level. First, we will briefly address the individual level, since within the Dutch Forces, the
servicemen themselves receive most of the attention when it comes to professionalism. We see this for example, in leadership development programs in which the (future) leaders are trained to act and lead in a professional manner. Within this training, three elements are considered key elements in leadership (development): self-leadership, moral professionalism and ownership.

First, self-leadership is defined as the ability to effectively manage one's own behaviour through awareness of underlying personal values and motives. The premise of self-leadership is that without being aware of the source of one's own behaviour, it becomes arbitrary and as such, may easily lead into unintentional and even undesirable effects.

Secondly, another example of the perceived importance of professionalism is the increasing importance of the so-called moral professionalism within the Dutch military. Courses in ethics for example, are designed to increase moral professionalism, aiming to enhance moral development and moral awareness. The concept of moral professionalism, introduced within the Dutch Armed Forces by Verweij, Professor in leadership and ethics at the Dutch Military Academy, presumes that acting in a morally professional manner not only implies an awareness of the moral dimensions of situations (the values at stake), but also comprises judgement, communication and (behavioural) reaction, in addition to taking full responsibility for the decision and its consequences. The organization uses two management strategies in order to give rise to morally responsible behaviour: a normative strategy by means of behavioural codes or codes of conduct and a stimulating strategy in which military personnel are educated in critical thinking instead of just obeying orders and following rules without reflection upon the moral dimensions of the situation.

Third, ownership refers to the ability of an individual to acknowledge the fact that they are responsible for their thoughts, feelings and personal development. The basic assumption is that all thoughts and feelings originate within an individual. The external world can at most be a trigger, but can never be the origin of cognitive and emotional processes that take place within. This implies that everything a person perceives through his/her senses can be considered feedback about their assumptions about the world and the way he/she relates to it. When an individual acknowledges and internalizes this fact, the received feedback becomes a powerful tool in his/her professional and personal development. For example, when an individual becomes aware of the effects of his/her communication on others through feedback received, and it turns out to have undesirable effects, he/she can choose to change their communication approach to a more effective style. Moreover, if the individual also becomes aware of the underlying internal assumptions and reasons which make him/her communicate in an ineffective way in the first place, this awareness provides the power to change the entire communication pattern into a more effective one.

As it becomes clear, the distinction between “personal” professionalism on the one hand and job content on the other hand is relevant. We mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that the process of professionalization addresses both the individual and organizational levels (the organization as the system in which the individual operates). Even though the balance shows more focus on the individual than the organization, some initiatives also take place at the organizational level. For example, in the field of integrity, an institute has been tasked to address integrity issues within the organization (the so-called Centrale Organisatie Integriteit Defensie, the central organization for integrity issues in the defence organization). This institute focuses not only on controlling the activities of individual employees but also the context in which behaviour is shown and the boundary conditions the organization imposes on its employees.

Even though there are some small initiatives that address the organization as a whole, professionalism is mostly considered to be personal effectiveness resulting from the balance between personal and organizational values. So, what makes a military person a professional depends on the extent to which he/she is able to 1) recognize and appreciate personal and organizational values, and 2) make decisions and act accordingly while taking these values (and possible conflicts between them) into account. In this sense, military professionalism shows great similarity with the concept of moral professionalism. However, the first can be considered to be a general state of mind, specifically associated with leadership, whereas the latter has much more to do with the explicit, preconditioned qualities for moral judgement and behaviour.

**Tradition vs. Business**

As mentioned, military professionalism can be addressed by means of two perspectives. The first perspective, the more traditional, is called chivalry. Chivalry occurred in the 12th century as a legitimate, socially respected code for warriors to perfect their craft. This perspective is still recognizable today, mainly within manoeuvre-units (e.g., the Infantry), through their esprit de corps and by honouring traditional values like courage, honour, brotherhood, hardiness and heroism. In this perspective, these traditional military values are the determinants of the degree of military professionalism.
Netherlands

The second perspective is a more modern and managerial view in which organizational values such as efficiency, cost-consciousness, control and integrity are indicators. The organization implements this perspective through the education and training of its employees, but also by implementing a certain working-strategy. What the leaders often hear (and sigh about), is that there is too little time to actually “lead” and invest in the relationship with their team-members as a result of the increasing amount of management tasks.

Another example is related to financial cut-backs. In times of economic (and political) crisis, organizations need to operate with fewer financial resources. This is also the case for the Dutch defence organization. Interestingly, however, cut-backs seem to focus on short-term financial issues whereas the long-term military ambitions are not adjusted downwards. As a consequence, the army is forced to do more with less. On the one hand, the troops are expected to operate in the “champions league,” meaning they can be deployed anywhere in the world in any type of conflict, whereas on the other hand the number of operational units and servicemen is economized. Another issue related to financial cut-backs deals with the availability of resources. Since the organization needs to economize, less spare parts are purchased. Troops, however, are still deployed and/or are training for deployment.

An interesting parallel seems to run between the dichotomy mentioned above with the distinction between military deployment abroad and non-operational functioning in barracks and offices. Chivalric values seem to be especially important on the battlefield, whereas managerial values (and qualities) seem more applicable in a peace context where managing daily administrative processes is the core business of the mother-organization. Another important (and in some ways ambiguous) concept within this perspective is the sense of responsibility and ownership. First, from a chivalric perspective, when deployed, servicemen often carry great responsibility, for deployed equipment, the mission itself, and ultimately the lives of team-members. “Mission Command” is carried out in full extent by decentralization of power and decision-making-authority. This is often felt as liberating since, in this case, great responsibility comes with relatively great influence. During a mission, servicemen are given significantly more room to make their own decisions and are usually given authority over a much larger command area. In addition, the effects of decisions made during a mission are usually felt to have a more profound effect and meaning in comparison with the less substantial effects of non-operational functioning. Secondly, from a managerial perspective, responsibility has much to do with being held accountable. Several systems and processes (such as Rules of Engagement), originally meant as guidelines in order to give the individual margin of manoeuvre and appeal to an individual’s sense of responsibility, are actually often used and organized in a directly opposite manner, namely as control mechanisms that appeal to feelings of accountability in order to avoid being held responsible and face possible punishment.

One could say that organizations using control mechanisms this strictly, are incapable of learning, since “intelligent failure” and taking risks are necessary ingredients for a learning organization. We consider this to be a negative consequence of the professionalization-strategy the Dutch defence organization uses. This exact kind of administrative avoidance of responsibility can ultimately lead to what is known as administrative evil.

Administrative evil is “regrettably a recurring aspect of public policy and administration in the modern era.” It refers to a bureaucratic mechanism that results in people engaging in acts of evil without being aware that they are in fact doing anything wrong. After all, ordinary people may act in accordance with what is considered normal and appropriate from their organizational and role perspective, whereas an outsider observer would call their activities wrong and morally irresponsible. In worst cases, under conditions of what is referred to as “moral inversion” – in which something evil has convincingly been redefined as good – all individuals may easily engage in acts of administrative evil when at the same time believing that what they are doing is not only correct, but even the right thing to do. The term “administrative evil” arose in 20th century as an attempt to explain what role bureaucracy played in the Holocaust. Of course, this article isn’t about genocide as a result of bureaucratic accountability. A more common example of administrative evil within the Dutch Armed Forces concerns the manner of dealing with issuing (new) military identification cards needed to access barracks and offices. These cards are necessary for identification purposes both in the Netherlands as well as during deployment. The procedure that needs to be followed in order to achieve such a card (which expires, meaning every employee must repeat the procedure every few years) is so non-transparent, complex and fragmented that it literally takes months to successfully complete. This results in frustration among employees who take part in this procedure: for those trying to obtain such an identification card and for those who are releasing the cards since they are often considered to be non-supportive as they stick to the rules and procedures without taking into account the circumstances which in many cases do not comply with the oversimplistic model situations the rules and procedures were based upon. By introducing the concept of administrative evil we show that accountability...
is not synonymous with military professionalism. The way accountability is pursued in the Dutch defence organization, however, counteracts even the military professionalism that is aimed for, since accountability, as such, is opposite of the vital elements of professionalism mentioned before: self-leadership, ownership and moral professionalism.

DEALING WITH MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM - THE ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGE

Being a professional military organization means that the Dutch Forces need to overcome the organizational challenge professionalism causes. In this section we go into the dimensions that are, in our opinion, prerequisites to overcoming this organizational challenge. First, we describe what is needed for an organization to be considered a learning organization. Next, we discuss the bureaucratic management strategy. Finally, we discuss the organization in relation to the individual employee.

Organizational Learning

The military organization needs to continually adapt to changing situations due to the fact that the world changes continuously and the operational context is different for each mission. Our contention is that the organization is currently not a learning organization and therefore, it is not capable of adequately adapting to changing circumstances. The following illustrates this point:

Since 1648 (Peace of Münster, after 80 years of war with Spain) the Dutch forces were deployed in situations in which the territorial integrity or the political sovereignty of the state were under attack. After the fall of the Berlin wall, the end of the Cold War, the military realized a broad scale of tasks of which most (due to the absence of a direct enemy) are of a humanitarian and peacekeeping nature. Since the last two decades, warfare has changed greatly. Nowadays there is talk of asymmetric warfare, meaning there is no definite enemy but insurgents using guerrilla tactics. So, warfare is no longer large-scale. This implies a fundamental change in the nature of the military profession, however the military ethos does not seem to follow these changes.18

It is strongly suggested that the Dutch organization invest in stimulating a learning culture. Several elements have been described that, to a large extent, determine whether the learning ability of an organization is used to its fullest potential to establish areas where matters could be improved.19 Max Visser, an organizational scientist, categorized these elements in the following four dimensions:

1. the extent to which responsibilities are decentralized; the more responsibilities that are placed with lower levels in the organization, the greater the risk of mistakes being made at this level;

2. the extent to which, within an organizational culture, failures are tolerated; the more open and tolerant an organizational culture is, the more failures are laid out on the table, discussed and fixed;

3. the extent to which lessons learned are anchored within the organization; the more an organization internally records and shares these lessons learned, the greater the organizational learning potential; and

4. the way an organization generally treats its members; the better members are selected, trained/educated and deployed, the more responsibility they can bear.20

When these four dimensions are applied to the Royal Netherlands Armed Forces, it becomes clear that the organization can improve. The first dimension (a decentralization of responsibility) is present in the organization, but could be further enhanced. Of course, this is the foundation of the strategy of Mission Command. In order to be effective, however, a culture of trust needs to exist between the hierarchical levels. The second dimension centres around the openness of the organizational culture regarding the reporting of mistakes and problems. The organizational culture of the Dutch military can be improved on through effective feedback, trust, and initiative. Feedback and trust are necessary in order to ensure that all leaders can and will take the initiative. The third dimension is about the transfer of training-on-the-job, otherwise known as lessons learned. This encompasses supplementing the formal training program with up-to-date insights from the field on the organizational, unit and personal levels, and in this way, allow these insights to be put into practice. The defence organization has established an institution (Defence Institute for Lessons Learned) that aims at analyzing deployment experiences. Collecting these lessons, however, does not guarantee they are actually learned. The process followed in this matter can be questioned in its effectiveness. Further, only deployment experiences are addressed. Clearly, the organization also needs to learn from non-operational situations. Finally, according to Visser's fourth dimension, better training, higher education and selection for more specific tasks can enhance the ability of individuals to deal with the complex situations they encounter in the military context. Currently, military personnel are not selected for specific functions or tasks, and as such, they do not necessarily work in their field of expertise. It is therefore
suggested that by selecting servicemen for specific functions it could help the organization professionalize.

**A Bureaucratic Challenge**

The second dimension to confront the threat to military professionalism is bureaucracy. First, we should ask ourselves, "Is bureaucracy a threat to professionalism?" In the managerial perspective, military professionalism broadly refers to the degree to which accountability is achieved by using bureaucratic principles. Bureaucracy is a way to control systems, activities, and structures within an organization. As such, it is not necessarily a bad thing. However, the organizational context of military organizations becomes more and more complex, therefore flexibility and adaptability are needed. At the same time, the one thing that bureaucratic organizations have a hard time dealing with is being flexible.

On the one hand, the military organization uses bureaucracy to create a predictable and manageable working environment. However, this bureaucracy leads to the illusion of working in a predictable and controlled environment instead of making it actually controllable. To deal with this, the organization increases the level of control. This creates a bureaucratic monster with a lack of understanding that over-bureaucratization is not a translation of professionalization and will not necessarily make the organization more effective. Noticing that bureaucratization is not a complete answer, the organization reaches for the organizational culture and the traditional military values (such as tradition, trust and chivalry) in order to inspire and motivate its personnel to complete their missions. Subsequently, a vexing problem arises in this dual nature of military professions. Professions are by nature reflective institutions, as they continually need to adapt by using new knowledge and experiences in order to meet the needs of the situation. It is argued that in this light, the challenge for any military organization is to make sure that the bureaucratic nature does not outweigh and compromise its professional nature. This is a point of view which, not surprisingly, is strongly held by the authors of this chapter. As we see it, the pitfall for the Dutch military lies in the fact that in general one believes there is a need to choose between bureaucracy and traditional military values. We believe a choice does not necessarily have to be made. In some situations, military values are relevant, say for example, when a sacrifice is asked for or when honour and pride are needed in battle. Yet, in other non-operational situations, a commercial perspective is needed in order to improve quality and efficiency. We believe, following Snider, former Professor of Political Science at West Point, that it is not a matter of choosing only one perspective when professionalizing the organization. Instead, it is through differentiating and finding the balance between these two perspectives that enable professionalism.

**An Organizational Challenge**

The final dimension concerns opportunities for the organization to manage military professionalism. In our opinion, the biggest challenge with which the organization needs to cope lies within the fact that professionalization is not only relevant at the individual level, the organization as a system needs to be subject to the process of professionalization. Where the organization falls short is in its ability to communicate transparently about the goal and subject of professionalization. Clear definitions in this matter are simply lacking. We believe that a first step towards professionalism is to recognize what the organization truly considers to be important values, or in other words, it needs to define, transparently, what it stands for and identify the shared values. This means that the organization must not only formulate values which stem naturally from its core business identified in close consultation with the members of the organization, but also put effort into pursuing a culture in which these values are actually put into practice. If, for example, tradition, uniformity and loyalty turn out to be truly important values (which seems to be the case in certain units within the Dutch Armed Forces), the organization should accept this fact and behave and communicate those values accordingly, instead of enforcing behaviour that contradicts these values, for example by promoting on the surface values like progress, uniqueness, and critical thinking. In our opinion, an organization should actively strive for congruence between values, culture and daily practice. One can easily see the parallel with the earlier mentioned concept of individual self-leadership, resulting in congruence between motives, beliefs and behaviour. At an organizational level this congruence is, in our perception, exactly what makes an organization a professional organization.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we described military professionalism within the Royal Netherlands Armed Forces. The aim of the chapter was to argue that it is professionalism itself, as it is currently put into practice, that poses a threat for true professionalism within the Dutch Forces. As stated in this chapter, professionalism is an ambiguous and ill-defined concept. This is also the case within the Royal Netherlands Armed Forces; there is no clear-cut concept of what professionalism comes down to and what the subject of the process of professionalization should be. Professionalism is thus an organizational challenge in itself. In order to overcome this challenge we believe the organization needs to put effort into three dimensions: 1) creating an organizational
culture in which learning is the key characteristic, 2) using bureaucracy in an effective manner in order to control systems and activities without losing the competence of flexibility and adaptability, and 3) finding the balance between focusing upon individual professionalism and organizational professionalism.

We want to conclude this chapter by arguing that military professionalism indeed poses an organizational challenge for the Royal Netherlands Armed Forces. However, we believe that this challenge can be managed by devoting effort to integrating values, culture and behaviour, into a congruent system. In other words: by dedicating oneself to organizational and individual self-leadership, the Royal Netherlands Armed Forces can further improve and sustain professionalism.

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
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