



# From Authority to Support : Contemporary Developments in Command in the French Gendarmerie

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# CREOGN Research Note

French Gendarmerie Officers Academy Research Centre

## **FROM AUTHORITY TO SUPPORT : CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN COMMAND IN THE FRENCH GENDARMERIE**

***By Nicolas ALFANO, Doctor of management science***

In today's French gendarmerie, commanding positions are put to the test of new conditions of exercise, both on the technological and relational levels. The removal of barriers and the immediacy in communication go hand in hand with the rise of a new condition of the gendarme that transforms the contours of the hierarchical relationship. In this new context, chiefs are encouraged to downplay some of their traditional prerogatives in favour of a more concerted approach to decision-making. This research<sup>1</sup>, conducted between 2014 and 2018, has focused on understanding the issues at stake in such a context and on analysing this (r)evolution of command in the gendarmerie<sup>2</sup>. It is divided into three parts: an interpretative framework of a leader's various roles (I); a global analysis of the changes in the condition of the gendarme (II); and finally, the identification of a shifting process in modern command (III).

### **I) The commanding position in the divisional gendarmerie: a role-based approach**

The analysis of command that is suggested here is a role and activity-based approach. It essentially rests on observation work carried out in the divisional gendarmerie, in order to break down the daily workload of the chiefs. The activities associated with the commanding position were thus translated into a repertoire of 10 roles. These roles are like relational tools which - when used in accordance with the situation - allow access to resources and privileges otherwise inaccessible. This repertoire is divided into three categories: symbolisation roles, monitoring roles and mediation roles.

The first roles (symbolisation) are based on the leader's visibility, both inside and outside his or her organisation. They generally involve representational activities and are centered on the use of the gendarmerie's symbols and cultural codes. The second roles (monitoring) are those that allow the chief to control the formal processes and internal movements of the organisation. They are often associated with administrative work and equipment-related arbitrations, but also with decision-making and strategy implementation. Finally, the last ones (mediation) bring together the various relational activities of proximity that unfold in privileged and trust-based exchanges rather than in public representations or formal events. As they are barely visible and often not very constraining - and although they have a strong strategic interest - they generally require the leader to take the initiative to use them.

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1 This note is a synthesis of a doctoral thesis : ALFANO, Nicolas. *De l'autorité au soutien : rôles et usages des rôles dans le commandement en Gendarmerie Départementale (From authority to support : roles and uses of roles in command in the divisional Gendarmerie)*. Doctoral thesis, Institut de management public et de gouvernance territoriale (Institute of Public Management and Territorial Governance) of Aix-Marseille, supervised by Robert FOUCHET, defended on 7 December 2018. Available at : [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331354642\\_ALFANO\\_Nicolas\\_-\\_De\\_l'autorite\\_au\\_soutien\\_-\\_These\\_de\\_Doctorat\\_2018](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331354642_ALFANO_Nicolas_-_De_l'autorite_au_soutien_-_These_de_Doctorat_2018)

2 This applies mainly to the divisional gendarmerie, where all the work was done. However, some of the conclusions drawn here can be transposed to other workplaces.

<b><u>Category</u></b>	<b><u>Role</u></b>	<b><u>Description</u></b>	<b><u>Examples of activities</u></b>
Symbolisation	Official	Represents the institution and the chain of command in formal moments. Is the pillar of the internal ceremonial procedures, participates in public events, and ensures good relations with partner institutions.	Ceremonies, official events, public relations.
	Manager	Defines the framework of the mission and produces the signs that guide the collective action. Sets objectives, disseminates assessments and talking points, delivers speeches, formulates the strategy.	Production of talking points, speeches, valorisation, reprimands.
	Leader	Ensures operational command and leads the staff into action. Serves as a role model and an example.	Involvement in the action, supervision of an intervention team.
Monitoring	Validator	Validates the administrative acts of the unit. Gives legitimacy to the interactions and the topics covered.	Handling of signature books, signatures, meetings, responses to requests.
	Dispatcher	Distributes resources of all types in the area of responsibility. These resources may be permanent or temporary. Decides on the initial allocation and the prioritisation of replacements.	Assignment decisions, organization of supply and replacement of equipment.
	Manager	Organizes the day-to-day operations of the unit. Divides the workload related to the operation strategy.	Division of workload and rest periods.
	Censor	Ensures that orders are carried out, goals achieved and actions compliant. Assesses the quality of the command. Carries out professional assessments and sanctions professional misconducts.	Computer control, inspections, command investigations, assessments, rewards, disciplinary measures.
Mediation	Protector	Supports staff and absorbs various pressures. Listens to staff and makes them feel safe.	Visits, recognition, responses to complaints and requests.
	Solver	Solves subordinates' problems and organisational dysfunctions. Finds solutions to internal crises and mediates or arbitrates disputes.	Coordination, crisis management, animation of prevention networks, dialogue.
	Representative	Represents the interests and expectations of the staff and the organisation. Speaks out on sensitive issues.	Mediation, negotiations, request forwarding.

***The Leader's Role Repertoire and associated activities.***

## **II) A new employment relationship oriented towards fair treatment**

Within the gendarmerie, the military status traditionally implies a real asymmetry between the chief and his subordinates, notably through the subordination of all to the service requirements. This situation is considered to be a normal consequence of the job, in that it stems directly from the double responsibility of the collective: that of ensuring permanent control of the territory and maintaining a permanent capacity for deployment and action. In this "traditional" configuration, asymmetry results from the fact that the management of the unit's forces is essentially left to the discretion of the chief, which gives the latter a number of advantages and possibilities of action. The gendarme himself, as a subordinate, is then strongly dependent in his daily life on the degree of fairness and accuracy with which his immediate superior makes the arbitrations necessary to maintain operational capacity.

On this specific point, the contemporary transformations of command cannot be understood outside of the recent changes in the employment relationship within the gendarmerie. Following, in particular, the strikes of 1989 and 2001, the French gendarmerie has in fact launched over the last fifteen years a series of voluntary reforms intended to transform the relationship between the personnel and their work and its constraints. The military status has gradually changed from a principle of total submission to the service requirements to a more egalitarian logic, based on new individual rights. It was thus enriched by three new fundamental rights for personnel - the right to speak out, the right to well-being and the right to free time - which reoriented daily management and decision-making methods. From the institution's perspective, these new fundamental rights are respectively represented by three major directions for change - developing a militarised rationale of labour relations, recruiting psychological and social support professionals on permanent long-term positions, and finally, revising the rules governing the organisation of working time.

Through these changes, the modern condition of the gendarme has been partially freed from the service requirements, as it allows the military to demand the application of individual rights that can sometimes contradict - directly or indirectly - the need for flexibility traditionally imposed by the logic of capacity. In a broader context where barriers are being removed and information can bypass the official channels via new technological tools or new intermediaries, the value of the leader is then evaluated and assessed as much on his operational results as on his ability to satisfy his subordinates. The monitoring roles, which until then benefited from the possibilities offered by the logic of capacity and the military culture, have thus seen their prerogatives reduced by a number of rules and new management modes. On the other hand, the mediation roles have gained prominence and now offer a number of advantages by placing the leader at the center of new dialogue and information sharing logics.

This change in the possibilities offered by the leader's role repertoire necessarily modifies the way in which command manifests in daily interactions. Sometimes experienced as a hindrance, sometimes as an opportunity, it shows a shift in the playing rules of the hierarchical relationship and calls for a number of adjustments. It therefore reveals differences in career paths, leadership styles, and the resources actually available to make this transition a success. However, it is still possible for people in command positions to adapt their stance in such a way as to embrace the transformations of the institution and take full advantage of them. Adopting this new stance - called the "supportive stance" – can then be seen as a solution, and turns a number of constraints into opportunities to assert a new form of authority, better adapted to contemporary issues. However, it faces a number of challenges that should not be overlooked.

## **III) The transition from authority to support: a challenge for command**

In general, the transition to a logic of support implies an enrichment of the practices and possibilities related to the mediation roles, which is supposed to compensate for an impoverishment of the monitoring roles. When they appropriate this transition, the leaders observed take control of a new system of relations that serves their territorial strategy. The freeing of speech, psychosocial concerns and the transformations of working time are presented as a set of opportunities, in that they allow new resources and new possibilities of action. For example, freeing speech within the institution allows managers to rebuild professional relations on a new basis, more focused on dialogue, staff buy-in to decisions and the involvement of local expertise.

In many ways, the change in the playing rules seems to be an opportunity to reinforce and legitimise the exercise of a commanding style based on proximity, thus reviving in some respects the military ideal of the charismatic and benevolent leader. Such a development would then solve the problem of the two distances that characterise the divisional gendarmerie: the first, subjective, which stems from the hierarchical deference of the military world; the second, more objective, linked to the units and resources being scattered all over the territory. However, if you look closely, seizing this opportunity for closer work relationships depends on a subtle balance between the chief maintaining his independence - or even his exclusivity - in decision-making and being attentive to the needs of the field. In other words, the leader must be careful to preserve his essential prerogatives while adopting an open attitude to new relational models.

The difficulties that may arise from this situation are due to many factors, such as the leader's isolation from his own hierarchy, the absence or intermittence of advisory resources, etc. From this point of view, it seems that the current situation does not create the same opportunities at different levels and locations, favoring in particular the highest command positions. This inequality within the territorial network, when combined with situations of relational blockages, can therefore generate conditions that may create a feeling of insecurity or even downgrading in the exercise of command. This process of revamping professional relations, far from being a given, should therefore include a logic of staff support so as not to generate counter-productive tensions at the local level.

## **Conclusion**

Because of its particular situation, the French gendarmerie today is suggesting an interesting revamping of the traditional command doctrine. This new expertise, which should not be confused with a kind of "military management", offers opportunities in that it combines military culture and concerted decision-making practices informed by practical problems. This transition, which is not based solely on the establishment of new operating standards, assumes that each command position finds, at its own level, a number of balanced solutions. Beyond the issue of style or psychology, which is too often put forward to account for the difficulties of command, it is therefore on the real possibilities of adaptation that future developments must focus. In this respect, the situation of the most operational and/or most disadvantaged levels will have to come under close scrutiny, so that the tensions at the origin of former labour discontent do not eventually shift to the command levels which are closest to the field.

ALFANO, Nicolas. *From authority to support : roles and uses of roles in command in the Divisional Gendarmerie*. doctoral thesis, Public management and territorial governance institute of Aix-Marseille, under the supervision of Robert FOUCHET, defended on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2018. The full text is accessible to public without restriction.

*Translated by SLT Quentin ROUSSEL and the French Gendarmerie Officers Academy Language Department*

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