

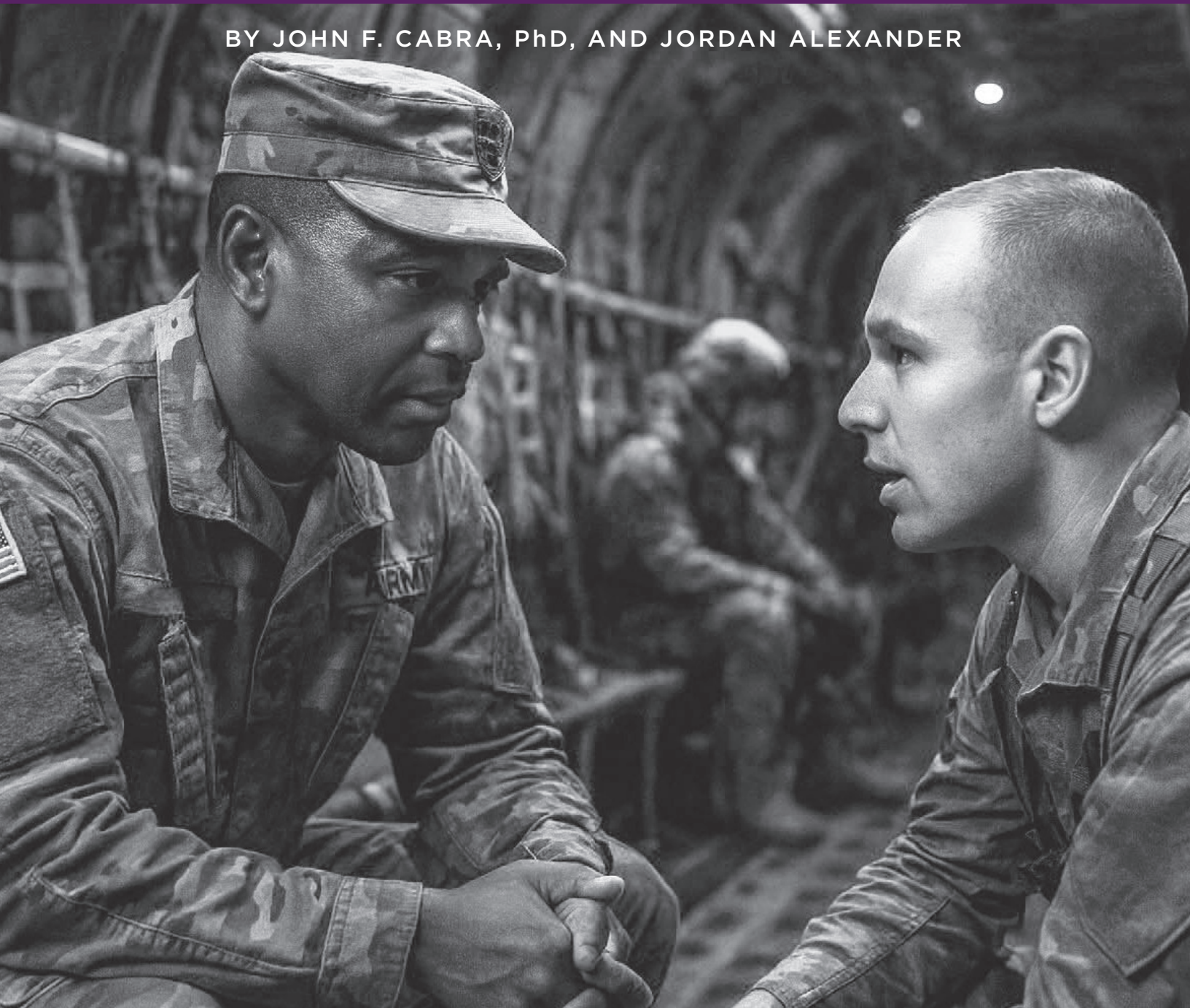
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**JSOU
PRESS**

THE EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT LEADER: APPLYING THE R.E.A.D. TECHNIQUE IN MILITARY LEADERSHIP

BY JOHN F. CABRA, PhD, AND JORDAN ALEXANDER



On the cover:

A leader taking a deliberate moment to connect with a service member in an otherwise chaotic or high-stakes environment. Source: Image generated by JSOU Press using original photo by Sgt. 1st Class Tanisha Karn and Microsoft Copilot, April 21, 2026.

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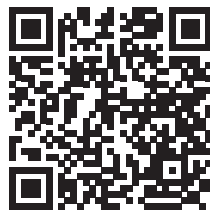
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Introduction

A priest's assistant and his wife owned a mongoose that had become like family to them. One day, the wife left her infant son alone with the mongoose while she went to fetch water. During her absence, a king cobra slithered into their home. The loyal mongoose fought fiercely with the cobra, ultimately killing it to protect the child. When the mother returned, she was horrified to see blood on the mongoose's mouth. Assuming it was her son's blood, she panicked and grabbed a heavy box, striking the mongoose dead. Only then did she rush inside to discover her son sleeping peacefully, with the dead cobra lying beside his bed. In her fear, she had killed the very creature that had saved her child's life.¹

This fable illustrates a fundamental leadership truth: misreading emotional states leads to catastrophic decisions.² However, the mother's error was neurological, and belief driven. Her brain's prefrontal cortex processed the blood and generated an immediate prediction: "My child is dead." This belief, formed in milliseconds by her amygdala's threat detection system, triggered fear-based somatic markers* including accelerated heart rate, tunnel vision, and overwhelming panic. Her emotional system (System 1) drove immediate action before her deliberate, analytical system (System 2) could evaluate alternatives.[†]

Military leaders make similar errors when they form beliefs like "this soldier is lazy" or "this team lacks motivation" without recognizing that the real emotional drivers might be overwhelmed or despair. These belief-driven misdiagnoses can undermine the very people trying to accomplish the mission.

The Recognize, Evaluate, Acknowledge, and Direct (R.E.A.D.) Technique provides leaders a way to interrupt this neural cascade: to recognize somatic markers before forming beliefs, to evaluate emotional states with prefrontal precision, to acknowledge what's actually happening, and to direct responses that reshape both the emotional state and the underlying belief system driving future decisions.

The Gap in Military Leadership Doctrine

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 1805.01C, Enlisted Professional Military Education Policy, explicitly identifies empathy as a core competency within the Enlisted Desired Leader Attributes, which states that leaders must possess emotional competence that exhibits strong self-awareness paired with the capability to connect meaningfully, show empathy, and comprehend the perspectives of people across cultures.³ Similarly, CJCSI 1800.01G, Officer Professional Military

* Somatic markers are physiological signals (heart rate changes, muscle tension, gut feelings) that accompany emotions and guide decision-making. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio proposed that these bodily responses, processed in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, mark options as advantageous or disadvantageous based on past emotional experiences.

† Psychologist Daniel Kahneman's dual process theory proposes that human cognition operates through two distinct systems. System 1 thinking is fast, automatic, and intuitive, operating effortlessly outside conscious awareness. System 2 thinking is slow, deliberate, and analytical, requiring conscious effort.

Education Policy, emphasizes emotional intelligence as essential for strategic leadership.⁴ Yet neither provide a systematic framework for how leaders develop or apply these capabilities in practice.

This gap has consequences. Trust depends on leaders' ability to recognize and respond to subordinates' emotional states. Leaders observe performance declines and retention problems without understanding the underlying emotional dynamics. Like the mother in the fable, they respond to symptoms rather than causes. The R.E.A.D. Technique operationalizes emotional intelligence, which translates abstract concepts into concrete actions leaders can execute in high-stakes conversations.

The Empirical Foundation

Research demonstrates that emotional intelligence—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others—directly correlates with leadership effectiveness.⁵ Table 1 summarizes key empirical findings demonstrating this relationship across multiple military contexts.

These findings translate into measurable operational outcomes. When the U.S. Air Force implemented emotional intelligence screening in recruitment, it reduced financial losses by 92 percent, saving approximately \$2.76 million annually.⁶ In deployed environments, emotional intelligence significantly predicted job performance and improved resilience outcomes.⁷

The R.E.A.D. Technique emerged from U.S. Special Operations Command's executive leadership workshop, where

participants immediately recognized emotional intelligence training as a mission-essential capability, not “soft skill” development.

The R.E.A.D. Technique: A Tactical Approach

The R.E.A.D. Technique provides military leaders with a structured process for applying emotional intelligence in real-time during high-stakes conversations. The technique synthesizes a repeatable process that company commanders, platoon leaders, and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) can execute immediately in counseling sessions, crisis interventions, and developmental conversations. See Figure 1.

The technique follows four sequential steps. First, **recognize** the verbal, vocal, and physical cues that signal an emotional state. This involves detecting somatic markers, the physiological manifestations of emotion generated by the brain's ventromedial prefrontal cortex and limbic system. Next, **evaluate** by identifying the core emotion and specific feeling using an emotional taxonomy. Move from broad category (fear, anger, sadness, joy) to specific feeling (overwhelmed, resentful, defeated, motivated) and identify the underlying belief driving the emotion. Third, **acknowledge** what has been identified through faithful translation by stating, “It sounds like you're feeling [emotion] because [trigger].” This activates the subordinate's prefrontal cortex while reducing amygdala activation, literally changing brain state from “hijacked” to “capable of deliberate choice.” Finally, **direct** the conversation by

providing an emotion-appropriate response and moving toward action. This step rebuilds the subordinate’s belief system by creating new emotional experiences that generate adaptive somatic markers.

Step One: Recognize the Cues

Military leaders should develop observational discipline for human behavior

equivalent to tactical situations. Recognition involves detecting somatic markers—physiological manifestations of emotion, including changes in posture, vocal tone, speech patterns, and facial expressions.⁸

Three Categories of Observable Cues

Verbal cues: Repetitive phrases (“I just can’t...”) signal preoccupation. Absolute

Table 1. Emotional Intelligence Research in Military Contexts

Research	Essence of Findings	Key Findings
Nice, 2025	A quantitative predictive correlational study of 112 primary U.S. Army Commissioned Officers using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale and Leader 360 assessment.	Self-assessed emotional intelligence sub-factor scales combined can predict Army Leadership Requirements Model core competencies in primary commissioned officers.
Krishnakumar et al., 2019	Examined 152 active-duty U.S. military personnel using a work-related emotional intelligence measure, the North Dakota Emotional Abilities Test, to test if work-related emotional intelligence predicts job performance in a high-stress, team-oriented career.	Work-related emotional intelligence was a significant predictor of military job performance, including task performance, discipline, and organizational citizenship behaviors, even after accounting for personality and cognitive ability.
Roseberry, 2018	Examined senior U.S. Marine Corps leaders’ perceived importance of emotional intelligence characteristics using Goleman’s four-component model during organizational change.	High emotional intelligence senior leaders are perceived as effective change leaders.
Crosby, 2017	A quantitative study of 132 U.S. military leaders using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale examining combat vs. humanitarian mission experience.	Veterans with combined combat and humanitarian missions showed significantly higher emotional intelligence scores.
O’Boyle et al., 2011	A meta-analysis of 43 studies examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and job performance across diverse organizational contexts.	All three emotional intelligence streams (ability-based, self-report, mixed) showed significant correlations with job performance.
Bar-On, Handley, and Fund, 2006	Examined the relationship between emotional-social intelligence and occupational performance, including U.S. Air Force and Israeli Defense Forces studies.	U.S. Air Force/Israeli Defense Forces studies showed significant relationships.
Handley, 1997	U.S. Air Force recruitment study examining 1,171 U.S. Air Force recruiters using the Reuven Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory comparing high performers (100%+ quota) vs. low performers (<80% quota).	Successful recruiters scored significantly higher in Assertiveness, Empathy, Happiness, and Emotional Self-Awareness; 3-fold increase in predicting successful recruiters; saved \$2.76 million annually.

Source: Sean Nice, “Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Readiness in U.S. Army Officers” (working paper, Social Sciences and Humanities Open, 2025), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5201163; Sukumarakurup Krishnakumar et al., “Affective and Effective: Military Job Performance as a Function of Work-Related Emotional Intelligence,” *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 27, no. 2 (2019): 203-215. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332274524>; Wayne Roseberry, “Military Leaders’ Perceived Importance of Emotional Intelligence Characteristics When Leading Organizational Change” (EdD diss., University of Massachusetts Global, 2018), https://digitalcommons.umassglobal.edu/edd_dissertations/189/; Randall S. Crosby, “Effect of Emotional Experiences on Emotional Intelligence Among U.S. Military Leaders” (PhD diss., Walden University, 2017), <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/2965/>; Ernest H. O’Boyle et al., “The Relation Between Emotional Intelligence and Job Performance: A Meta-Analysis.” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 32, no. 5 (2011): 788-818. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.714>; Reuven Bar-On et al., “The Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Performance,” in *Linking Emotional Intelligence and Performance at Work*, eds. Vanessa Urch Druskat, Gerald Mount, and Fabio Sala (Psychology Press, 2006), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203763896-2/>; Richard Handley, “AFRS Rates Emotional Intelligence,” *Air Force Recruiter News* 28 (April 1997): 797-812; and U.S. General Accounting Office, “Enhanced Recruiter Selection and Training Could Improve the Recruiting Process” in *Military Recruiting: The Department of Defense Could Improve Its Recruiter Selection and Incentive Systems* (GAO/NSAID-98-58), Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1998.

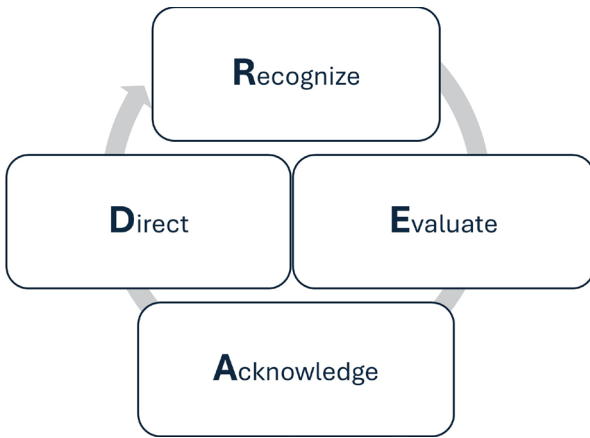


Figure 1. The R.E.A.D. technique process.
Source: Author.

language (“always,” “never”) indicates emotional intensity that distorts perception. Self-deprecating statements (“I’m not good enough”) suggest shame or despair. Deflection through subject changes or inappropriate humor signals discomfort. Vague generalizations (“Everything’s okay”) mask emotional reality.⁹

Vocal cues: Changes in pitch signal emotion. A rising pitch indicates anxiety or fear, while lowering pitch suggests sadness. Speech rate reveals intensity: Rapid speech accompanies agitation, while slow, halting speech signals overwhelming emotion. Volume shifts betray feelings: Being loud indicates anger or defensiveness, while being quiet reveals shame or resignation. Tone inconsistency reveals emotional masking.¹⁰

Physical cues: Posture tells stories: Slumped posture suggests defeat or sadness; being rigid and tense indicates anger or fear; and being closed-off signals defensiveness. Eye contact patterns reveal emotion: Avoidance indicates shame; intense contact signals anger; and darting eyes suggest anxiety. Hand movements communicate: Fidgeting reveals nervousness;

clenched fists indicate suppressed anger; and unusual stillness suggests emotional shutdown.¹¹

The Belief Connection

Somatic markers reveal underlying beliefs. A service member’s clenched fists and rising vocal pitch signal a belief about fairness violation: “I’m being treated unjustly.” An averted gaze and self-deprecating language reveal a belief about capability: “I’m not good enough.” These beliefs, encoded through repeated emotional experiences and stored in neural networks connecting the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex, drive behavior and constrain decision-making options.¹²

By failing to recognize these cues, there is a missed opportunity to identify the beliefs shaping a subordinate’s choices. Recognition provides the diagnostic intelligence about both the emotional state and the belief system behind it.

Practical Application

In the next emotionally charged conversation, spend two minutes observing before speaking. Ask: “What somatic markers am I detecting?” and “What belief might be generating these markers?” Watch for clusters of cues across all three categories rather than single indicators.

Step Two: Evaluate the Specific Emotions

Once a leader recognizes emotional cues, the next challenge is interpreting what these cues mean at three levels: the core emotion, the feeling family, and the specific feeling. This evaluation process engages the brain’s deliberate processing system (System 2) to override automatic assumptions (System 1).

Without this step, leaders operate like the mother in the fable, seeing blood and immediately believing “threat” without evaluating what the blood actually means.

Emotional evaluation works through three levels of increasing specificity: core emotion (fear, anger, sadness, joy), feeling family (anxiety, frustration, grief), and specific feeling (overwhelmed, agitated, heartbroken). Table A.1 depicts a deeper breakdown of the emotional-feeling taxonomy developed by USSOCOM’s executive leadership workshop and can be viewed in the appendix.

Four Core Emotions in Military Leadership

Fear is the body’s response to a threat, real or perceived, which arises from deployment uncertainty, career decisions, performance evaluations, and threats to safety.¹³ Anger mobilizes energy to confront obstacles or injustice, which signal blocked goals or violated fairness around workload distribution, promotion decisions, or disrespect.¹⁴ Sadness signals loss and encourages withdrawal for reflection that follows family separation, death of comrades, failure to achieve goals, or loss of belonging.¹⁵ Joy reinforces connection and achievement.¹⁶

Why Neural Exactness Matters

In military operations, there’s no time for trial-and-error leadership. Emotional exactness enables leaders to diagnose and address the actual problem the first time and maintain unit effectiveness when seconds count. Different emotions are like different warning lights on a car’s dashboard. Each one highlights a specific problem. Fear means the brain’s security alarm goes off and signals “I need to feel safe.” Anger means the

brain’s fairness detector activates and signals “Something isn’t right or fair.” Sadness means the brain’s loss system engages and signals “I need support to deal with this loss.” When a leader can accurately identify which emotion someone is experiencing, they know exactly what that person needs. It’s like knowing whether a car needs gas, oil, or air in the tires instead of just guessing.

Fear-based emotions primarily engage the amygdala and anterior cingulate cortex (threat detection circuits). Anger-based emotions activate the lateral orbitofrontal cortex (fairness violation circuits). Sadness-based emotions engage the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and subgenual cingulate (loss-processing circuits). When leaders can

In military operations, there’s no time for trial-and-error leadership. Emotional exactness enables leaders to diagnose and address the actual problem the first time and maintain unit effectiveness when seconds count.

accurately identify which emotion is present, they can address the specific need driving it—whether that’s safety, justice, or support—rather than applying a generic response that may miss the mark entirely.

The Belief Diagnostic

Every emotion signals an underlying belief. Fear-based emotions reveal beliefs about threat or capability: “I can’t handle

this.” Anger-based emotions reveal beliefs about fairness or respect: “I’m being treated unjustly.” Sadness-based emotions reveal beliefs about loss or worth: “I’ve failed.” Joy-based emotions reveal beliefs about success and connection: “I’m valued.”¹⁷ A slumped, self-critical soldier signals sadness rooted in the belief “I’m failing everyone.” Unless that belief is addressed, performance won’t improve.

The Four Diagnostic Questions

To systematically uncover the belief driving an emotional response, leaders must work through four sequential questions (see Fig. 2):

1. What is the core emotion (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, joy)?
2. What is the feeling family (e.g., anxiety, resentment, despair)?
3. What is the specific feeling (e.g., overwhelmed, agitated, defeated)?
4. What belief might be driving this emotion?

Example: A service member reports late to formation twice, then appears in their supervisor’s office with slumped posture, minimal eye contact, and says in a flat voice, “I know I’m screwing up.” Core emotion? Sadness. Feeling family? Despair. Specific feeling? Discouraged. Underlying belief? “I’m failing/I’m not good enough.”

This four-level diagnosis tells leaders exactly how to respond by targeting the belief system that’s compromising judgment and decision-making capacity.

Step Three: Acknowledge Through Faithful Translation‡

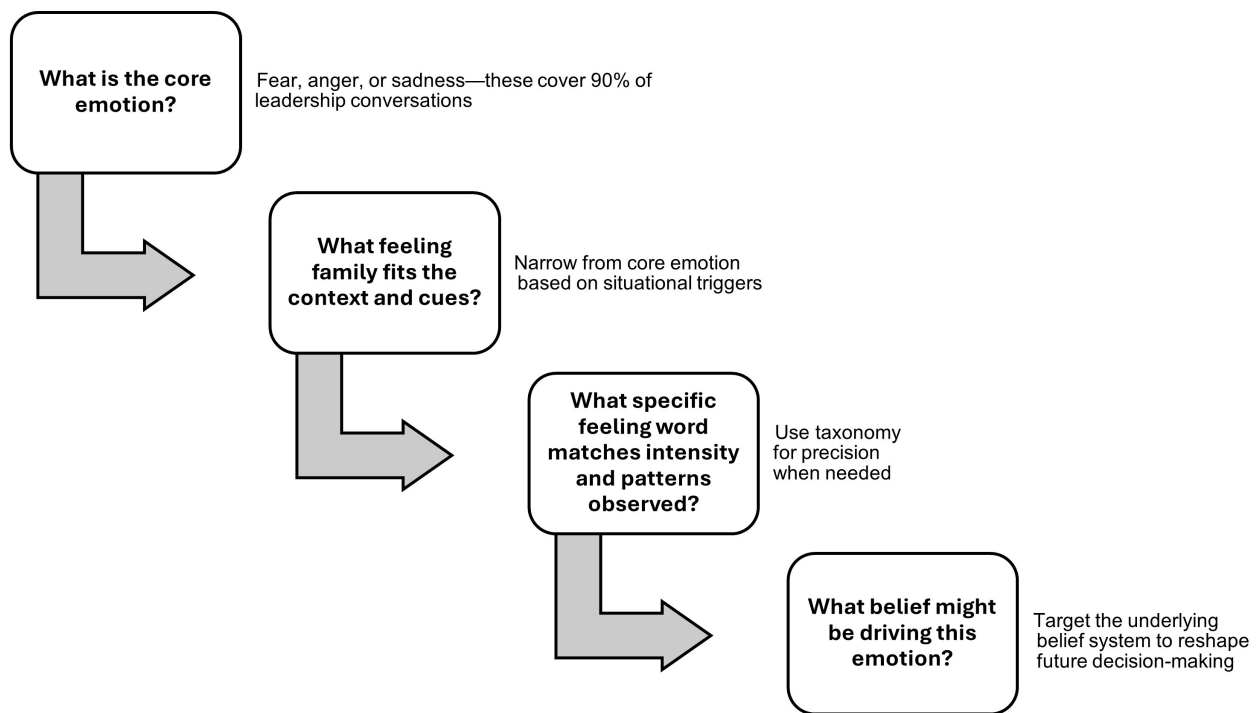
By accurately naming someone’s emotional state and the belief driving it, three neurological changes are triggered that directly improve decision-making capacity.

Prefrontal cortex activation: Research demonstrates that accurately labeling emotions activates prefrontal regulatory regions while reducing amygdala activation.¹⁸ Saying, “It sounds like you’re feeling overwhelmed because you’re juggling work and family,” helps the person’s brain shift from limbic system dominance (emotional flooding that impairs reasoning) to prefrontal cortex engagement.

Belief reframing: Saying, “It sounds like you’re feeling torn between two responsibilities and like you can’t do either one well right now,” externalizes and reframes a maladaptive belief. The internal belief “I’m a failure” shifts to “I’m facing an impossible situation.” This matters because beliefs function as the brain’s prediction models.¹⁹ When someone believes “I’m a failure,” their brain cannot generate adaptive solutions. The reframe creates a competing belief that opens new possibilities.

Creating new somatic markers: When a service member experiences genuine understanding, his brain encodes this interaction as a new somatic marker: “Being honest about struggle leads to support, not punishment.” This emotional memory makes him more likely to seek help early rather than suffer silently until crisis.

‡ The Faithful Translator is an empathy tool developed by Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and was taught at a USSOCOM executive leadership workshop. It evolved into the R.E.A.D. Technique as a way to make the Faithful Translator tool more accessible.



■ **Figure 2.** Diagnostic flowchart. Source: Author.

The Acknowledgment Formula

The most effective way to deliver this acknowledgment is through a structured translation technique. The Faithful Translator formula provides a simple, repeatable framework that ensures an acknowledgment hits all three neurological targets: “It sounds like you’re feeling [specific feeling] because [belief/trigger]. Is that right?”²⁰

This formula has four essential components: (1) tentative framing (“It sounds like...”), inviting correction; (2) a specific emotion word demonstrating genuine effort to understand; (3) a causal connection to show an understanding of the context; and (4) a belief identification which creates opportunity to challenge it in step four.

Avoiding Autobiographical Responses

Stephen Covey identified four “autobiographical responses” (see Table

A.2) that prevent understanding: evaluating, probing, advising, and interpreting.²¹ When a service member says, “I’m struggling with this deployment,” the autobiographical response is “I know exactly how you feel. When I deployed...” This shifts the focus to the leader’s experience rather than understanding the service member’s situation. Instead, use the formula above.

Why Tentative Framing Matters

Tentative framing is tactical precision, not weakness. By saying, “It sounds like you’re feeling overwhelmed,” the person is given permission to correct you: “No, I’m not overwhelmed; I’m pissed off because nobody asked for my input.” That correction provides accurate intelligence. Table A.3 shows three possible responses to a scenario from worst to best and can be viewed in the appendix.

Every acknowledgment must include permission to correct. Close with “Does that fit what you’re experiencing?” or “Am I reading that right?”

Step Four: Direct Toward Resolution

After accurately identifying and acknowledging both the emotion and underlying belief, the conversation can be guided toward resolution. Direction is actively rebuilding the subordinate’s belief system by creating new emotional experiences that generate adaptive somatic markers. Table A.4 provides guidance on directing conversations based on each core emotion and can be viewed in the appendix.

Beliefs shift not by logic but through emotionally corrective experiences (e.g., when “I’m failing everyone” becomes “asking for help brings support”).

After acknowledging the emotion, transition to forward movement with action-oriented questions: “What would help right now?” “What’s one step you could take today?” “What do you need from me to move forward?”

Complete R.E.A.D. Example: Service Member Struggling with Deployment

Scenario: Staff Sergeant Pacheco has been withdrawn for two weeks, arriving late to formation twice. He appears in your office.

Recognize: Pacheco enters with slumped posture and minimal eye contact. He sits rigidly, hands clasped. When you ask how he’s doing, he responds in a flat monotone: “I’m fine, sir. I know I’ve been off lately.” You observe slumped posture, rigid sitting, minimal eye contact (physical);

flat monotone, slow speech (vocal); self-deprecating, apologizing (verbal).

Evaluate: Core emotion? Sadness (low energy, withdrawn, self-criticism). Feeling family? Despair (flat affect, resignation). Specific feeling? Overwhelmed (still functioning). Context? You recall Pacheco mentioning his mother’s declining health three weeks ago.

Acknowledge: “Staff Sergeant Pacheco, I’ve noticed changes over the past two weeks. It sounds like you’re feeling overwhelmed, maybe because you’re managing responsibilities here while worrying about your family situation. Am I reading that right?” He looks up, makes direct eye contact, and his posture softens.

Pacheco: “Yes, sir. My mom’s health is getting worse. I’m trying to focus on my job, but I keep thinking about home. I feel like I’m failing everyone.”

You: “It sounds like you’re feeling torn between two responsibilities and like you can’t do either one well right now. Is that closer?”

Pacheco: “Exactly, sir.”

Direct: “I appreciate you being honest. This is a hard situation. But three weeks ago, you were the most reliable NCO in this platoon. That capability didn’t disappear. The problem isn’t you; it’s that you’re trying to carry this alone. Here’s what we’re going to do. First, I’m connecting you with the chaplain today before 1600. He understands family crisis resources, emergency leave, Red Cross support. Can you commit to meeting with him today?”

Pacheco: “Yes, sir.”

You: “Second, I’m adjusting your duty schedule. I’m pulling you off the training exercise Thursday and Friday, so you have time to coordinate with your sister. Third, I need you to communicate with me going forward. When you’re struggling, tell me before it becomes a crisis. Can you commit to that?”

Pacheco: “Yes, sir. I should have said something earlier.”

You: “Leadership means knowing when to ask for help. Here’s the immediate plan: Meet with the chaplain by 1600. Call your sister tonight. Come see me tomorrow at 0900. Between now and then, just focus on getting through the next 24 hours. Can you do that?”

Pacheco: “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

You: “Showing up here today while dealing with all this? That took strength. We’re going to get through this together.”

What Changed Neurologically

This conversation rebuilt Pacheco’s neural architecture in three ways:

Prefrontal activation: Accurate acknowledgment shifted control from amygdala-driven flooding to prefrontal problem-solving.

Belief reframing: His core belief changed from “I’m failing everyone” to “I’m facing a hard situation that requires help.”

New somatic marker encoding: The interaction became a positive emotional memory: honesty led to support, not punishment.

Months later, his brain retrieves that emotional memory and asks, “Who can help?” instead of “Should I hide this?” shifting from isolation to connection.

That difference separates leaders who burn out subordinates from those who build resilient teams.

Key Principles

Regardless of which core emotion is being addressed, effective direction requires:

1. Matching the response to the emotional need. Fear needs certainty and capability-building. Anger needs to be heard and see justice. Sadness needs connection and hope. Joy needs recognition and growth. Don’t apply a one-size-fits-all approach.

2. Providing specific, actionable next steps. Vague guidance like “hang in there” or “it’ll get better” provides no traction. Identify concrete actions the person can take in the next 24 hours.

3. Setting clear timelines. “Meet with the chaplain today by 1600” is better than “you should talk to someone.” Specific timelines create accountability and reduce overwhelm.

4. Activating appropriate resources. Don’t try to be the person’s only source of support. Connect them with chaplains, behavioral health professionals, family support, peers, or other resources appropriate to the situation.

5. Following up. Schedule a specific time to check back in. This demonstrates that the leader’s support isn’t just performative; they’re invested in the service member’s success.

6. Maintaining authenticity. The conversation frameworks in Table 5 are not scripts. Leaders should adapt the language to their personality and leadership style. Authenticity matters more than perfect phrasing.

7. Balancing empathy with accountability. Understanding someone's emotional state doesn't eliminate standards. Leaders can simultaneously acknowledge that someone is struggling and hold them accountable for performance. "I understand you're dealing with a lot, and I want to help. But your team still needs you to show up ready to lead."

When to Escalate Beyond R.E.A.D.

Not every emotional issue is within a leader's capacity to resolve. Escalate to a behavioral health professional, chaplain, or commander when the following are observed:

- Suicidal ideation or self-harm behavior (immediate escalation; do not leave person alone)
- Statements suggesting harm to others (immediate escalation to chain of command)
- Severe depression lasting more than two weeks with inability to function
- Substance abuse affecting duty performance
- Trauma symptoms beyond normal stress response

When escalating, frame it as expanding support: "This is beyond what I can help with alone, so I'm connecting you with someone who specializes in this. I'm not handing you off; I'm staying involved." Continue checking in and demonstrating care while ensuring the person receives professional support.

Metrics for Success

Assessing development requires attention to specific indicators. Positive signs include subordinates who increasingly seek out counseling beyond mandatory sessions, conflict resolution with fewer formal interventions, reduced escalations to higher headquarters, and faster transition from emotional acknowledgment to productive action. Warning signs include service members who avoid counseling, persistent compliance without genuine buy-in, recurring morale problems despite repeated counseling, and frequent surprises about subordinate emotional states that should have been detected earlier.

Track conversation outcomes systematically. When emotional crises resolve, a leader's diagnostic accuracy is likely strong. "When issues persist despite intervention, a leader must revisit their recognition and evaluation steps. Honest self-assessment combined with peer feedback accelerates emotional intelligence development."

The R.E.A.D. Technique is not a rigid checklist but a flexible framework. With practice, leaders internalize the process: recognizing cues becomes automatic, evaluation becomes intuitive, acknowledgment becomes natural, and direction becomes instinctive. Like any tactical skill, emotional intelligence improves through repetition and reflection.

Conclusion: Reading the Human Terrain

Leaders are trained exhaustively to read terrain and enemy intentions, but little is invested in training them to read the emotional terrain of their own soldiers. However, mission accomplishment depends on humans experiencing fear, anger, sadness, and hope.

The R.E.A.D. Technique operationalizes emotional intelligence: recognize, evaluate, acknowledge, and direct. When a leader identifies a service member as defeated rather than lazy, resentful rather than insubordinate, overwhelmed rather than incompetent, they prevent the mongoose tragedy that destroys those trying to protect the mission as a result of misreading a service member's state.

Joint doctrine, as exemplified in CJCSI 1805.01C and CJCSI 1800.01G, is built on

the leadership philosophy of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission. This is achieved through its core emphasis on mission command, which develops leaders who operate on intent, foster trust, and empower their teams. Purpose, direction, and motivation all flow through emotional channels. Leaders who cannot read those channels can enforce through authority, but cannot inspire, develop, or transform. They lead bodies, not human beings.

Research confirms that emotional intelligence predicts leadership success. The R.E.A.D. Technique fills the doctrinal gap by turning empathy into action. The question isn't whether it's essential, it's whether leaders will master it. Service members deserve those who do. 📌

Appendix

Table A.1. Emotional-Feeling Taxonomy for Military Leaders

Core Emotion	Feeling Family	Specific Feelings	Observable Cues
FEAR – <i>Automatic response to threat; prepares body for survival</i>	Anxiety – Unease about uncertainty	Nervous, Apprehensive, Worried, Overwhelmed	Rapid speech, fidgeting, avoidance, “what if” statements, elevated breathing
	Dread – Fearful anticipation of harm	Uneasy, Alarmed, Terrified	Pale complexion, shallow breathing, frozen posture, wide eyes
	Insecurity – Lack of confidence or safety	Vulnerable, Exposed, Inadequate	Self-deprecating language, minimal eye contact, defensive posture, seeking reassurance
ANGER – <i>Mobilizes energy to confront obstacles or injustice</i>	Frustration – Irritation at blocked goals	Irritated, Agitated, Exasperated	Tense jaw, clipped speech, restless movement, sighing, impatience
	Resentment – Lasting anger at unfairness	Bitter, Indignant, Jealous	Sarcasm, bringing up past grievances, comparison to others, cynicism
	Hostility – Active opposition or aggression	Defiant, Aggressive, Outraged	Loud volume, challenging posture, direct confrontation, blame language
SADNESS – <i>Signals loss; encourages withdrawal and reflection</i>	Grief – Sorrow over loss	Heartbroken, Mourning, Devastated	Low energy, tears, withdrawn, slow speech, difficulty concentrating
	Loneliness – Pain of disconnection	Isolated, Neglected, Abandoned	Mentions being alone, lack of belonging, quiet desperation, seeking connection
	Despair – Loss of hope	Hopeless, Defeated, Discouraged	Flat affect, “I give up” statements, resignation, no future orientation
JOY – <i>Reinforces connection, achievement, bonding</i>	Excitement – Energized anticipation	Eager, Enthusiastic, Motivated	Animated gestures, quick speech, forward-leaning posture, smiling
	Contentment – Calm satisfaction	Peaceful, Satisfied, Relieved	Relaxed posture, steady breathing, genuine smile, open body language
	Gratitude – Appreciation and warmth	Thankful, Appreciative, Valued	Eye contact, specific acknowledgment, warm tone, expressions of thanks

Note: This table was developed by authors for U.S. Special Operations Command’s Executive Leadership Workshop. This taxonomy is not exhaustive. Leaders should develop emotional vocabulary through practice.

Table A.2. Autobiographical Responses That Block Understanding

Response Type	Description	Example
Advising	Giving counsel, advice, and solutions based on your experience	“Here’s what you should do…” or “When that happened to me, I…”
Probing	Asking questions from your own frame of reference or agenda	“Why didn’t you just…” or “Have you tried…”
Interpreting	Explaining another’s motives based on your experiences	“You’re probably feeling this way because…”
Evaluating	Judging, and either agreeing or disagreeing superficially	“That’s not a big deal” or “You’re right to feel that way”

Source: Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (Free Press, 2004).

Table A.3. Progression from Poor to Effective Acknowledgment

Scenario	Autobiographical Response (Worst)	Generic Acknowledgment (Better)	Faithful Translation (Best)
Soldier: “This deployment is really hard.”	“I know how you feel. When I deployed in 2015…”	“You seem stressed about the deployment.”	“It sounds like you’re feeling overwhelmed because you’re worried about your family managing without you.”
Soldier: “Nobody listens to my input.”	“That happened to me too. Here’s what I did…”	“You seem frustrated.”	“It sounds like you’re feeling disrespected because your expertise isn’t being valued in decision-making.”
Soldier: “I can’t do anything right.”	“Don’t say that. You’re doing fine.”	“You’re being too hard on yourself.”	“It sounds like you’re feeling defeated because recent setbacks are making you doubt your competence.”

Source: Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (Free Press, 2004).

Table A.4. Directing Conversations by Core Emotion

Core Emotion	Common Maladaptive Beliefs	What It Signals	Leader's Role	Key Actions	Example Opening
Fear	Beliefs about threat or incapability: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I can't handle this." • "Something bad will happen." • "I'm not prepared / not good enough." • "If I fail, I'm finished." 	Threat or uncertainty; feels unable to cope	Restore confidence and reduce uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide certainty about what happens next (reduces amygdala threat signals) • Activate past successes to reframe capability beliefs • Create incremental steps that demonstrate capability through small wins • Reduce ambiguity through specific timelines and clear expectations 	<p>"I hear you're worried about [situation]. But here's what I see: [evidence of past capability]. That worry you're feeling isn't because you're incapable. It's because you care about doing well. Let's break this down into manageable steps..."</p> <p>Neural effect: Counters the belief "I can't handle this" with evidence-based reframing while reducing uncertainty (amygdala calming) and activating problem solving circuits (prefrontal engagement).</p>
Anger	Beliefs about fairness or respect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm being treated unjustly." • "My contributions don't matter." • "The system is rigged." • "Leadership doesn't care about me." 	Goals blocked; fairness violated	Enable them to be heard and see justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow brief venting (2–3 minutes) • Listen without defending (validates their emotional experience, prevents escalation) • Acknowledge valid grievances explicitly • Explain what you can and cannot change (provides agency within constraints) • Identify specific corrective action (demonstrates that their voice produces results) 	<p>"I hear you, and you're right about [specific valid point]. I can't change what happened, but here's what I can do: [specific corrective action]. I'm committed to [ongoing accountability measure]. What else would help make this right?"</p> <p>Neural effect: Counters the belief "I don't matter" with demonstrated responsiveness while activating the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex through problem solving.</p>
Sadness	Beliefs about loss or self-worth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I've failed." • "I don't belong here." • "Nothing I do makes a difference." • "I'm not good enough." 	Loss or disconnection	Provide connection and restore hope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaffirm capability and belonging • Externalize the problem (shift from "I'm broken" to "I'm facing a hard situation") • Activate connection ("We're going to get through this together") • Provide hope through concrete next steps (counter learned helplessness) • Resist immediate fixing; sit with emotion briefly • Reconnect to past success and capability • Provide temporal perspective • Activate support networks 	<p>"[Acknowledge their strength in showing up]. The problem isn't you. It's that you're trying to carry [impossible situation] alone, and nobody can do that effectively.</p> <p>We're going to get through this together. Here's what we're doing: [specific actions]. Between now and then, just focus on [manageable timeframe]."</p> <p>Neural effect: Counters "I'm failing" with "I'm strong enough to ask for help" while providing temporal boundaries that prevent overwhelm.</p>
Joy	Beliefs about success and belonging: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm capable." • "I belong here." • "My work matters." • "I can grow." 	Achievement or connection	Recognize and leverage momentum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge the specific achievement • Connect to broader impact • Use success as springboard for growth • Anchor the success (make the achievement memorable) • Connect to identity ("This is who you are at your best") • Direct toward growth (what's the next challenge?) • Celebrate connection (recognize team contribution) 	<p>"Outstanding work on [achievement]. What I want you to remember is [specific capability demonstrated]. That's the kind of [trait] this unit needs. The team noticed. What's next? How do we build on this?"</p> <p>Neural effect: Encodes success memories, generates positive somatic markers, and creates growth-oriented beliefs that predict future success.</p>

■ Source: Author

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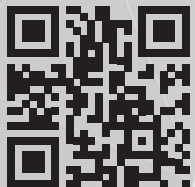
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