

Mission Command: Do We Have the Stomach For What Is Really Required?

By COL Tom Guthrie

Do we really have the stomach for implementing mission command, or is this concept a passing fancy, the Army's current bright shiny object? If we intend to truly embrace mission command, then we should do it to the fullest, and that will require commitment to changing a culture from one of control and process to one of decentralization and trust. We cannot afford to preach one thing and do another.

FM3-0 *Operations* defines *mission command* as "the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of full spectrum operations. It is commander-led and blends the art of command and the science of control to integrate the warfighting functions to accomplish the mission."

Army leadership is mission-command leadership and vice versa. Good leaders tailor their leadership approach according to the mission; the operational environment; and the experience, training, proficiency, and skill of their staff and their subordinate leaders and units. Based on these and other factors, commanders decide if more control or decentralization is required. This is not new and has not changed with mission command, but it does imply that a certain amount of decentralization is required for mission command to be successful, and this is where the Army might resist completely embracing mission command, for true decentralization would require leaders to accept the fact that they will be consciously abdicating the responsibility of the outcome to subordinates. If we cannot embrace that sort of true decentralization then mission command in execution will be viewed as hypocritical.

The phrase "centralized planning and decentralized execution" has been

around for decades, but in application it typically means that the centralized planning headquarters establishes three back briefs and seven in-process reviews before the decentralized executors are approved. Mission command philosophies, however, go much deeper than that.

Words like *agility*, *initiative*, *intent*, *empowerment*, *mission orders* and *adaptability* all point to the condition of decentralization under a most important umbrella: trust. Without trust, mission command—as a routine practice and warfighting function, in garrison and in combat—has little hope. With trust, all of the desired effects within mission command's definition are possible.



Trust must be earned, both by leaders and subordinates. It is developed over time through personal and professional interactions and dialogue over all issues from the simple ones to those of the most difficult nature. You do not earn trust simply by being "the boss."

Most every leader I have known likes the notion of being provided an environment in which he or she is given the mission, the intent and the appropriate resources, and is then trusted to accomplish the mission. I am not so confident, however, that the "receiving" leaders are as willing to pass that environment downward. If leaders only want mission command to exist above their level, then we will be limiting its intended and desired effect.

A Hypothetical Division

At the request of a brigade combat team commander, the division commander agrees that the quarterly training brief process in its current form is actually irrelevant since all resourcing

windows associated with the upcoming third quarter training had to be submitted in the first quarter. The division commander adjusts the process and moves to semi-annual briefs and directs that the April through September period be briefed in November so that his decisions and priorities for resources can actually be implemented.

A battalion commander issues his vision and intent for the next year's training. Desired outcomes and objectives are understood, and the company commanders develop their plans to reach them. Each is different: Company B decides, for many reasons, that it will conduct physical fitness training (PT) at 1500 daily from October through December instead of 0630 like the rest of the battalion. Company C decides that in order to practice decentralization and build trust, the company will hold no company- or platoon-level formations for the next six months. Company A removes the company bulletin board because someone found a digital application that can post training schedules and policies virtually through everyone's cell phone.

The battalion staff discovers a flexible training management system that works well for the commander as well as the companies, and a battalion commander decision makes weekly training meetings obsolete. The battalion has only one training meeting a quarter now.

In the Institutional Army

In the previous example, a mission command climate exists in such a unit, but are we ready to embrace this cultural shift? Or will we insist that Company B do PT at 0630 like everyone else? Will we demand that Company C post written policies and the training schedules back on the bulletin board? Could we possibly allow a battalion to *not* have a weekly training meeting? It is my understanding that the intent of our most senior leaders toward the institutional Army is to train and educate

our leaders to be agile, adaptive, critical and creative thinkers who will succeed in any 21st-century environment. I doubt that the traditional, standardized, doctrine-based and sometimes unimaginative institutions of an earlier time can achieve that intent. To prepare the sort of leaders we need, our institutions must possess similar attributes.

In an effort to achieve that intent, subordinate commanders have already issued more specific guidance.

- Replace instructors with facilitators to engage learners to think and understand the relevance and context of what they learn.

- Tailor learning to the individual based on a pre-test or other assessment.

- Replace instructor-led slide presentations with virtual and constructive simulations, gaming, or other technology-delivered instruction.

This allows innovation to take place within some left and right limits (that can and should be challenged) that account for accreditation, resource and other considerations.

Despite our best efforts to publish

coherent, thorough guidance rapidly, those charged with carrying it out—the leaders running our learning institutions—inevitably encounter gaps where strategy, concepts and intent don't line up with rules, regulations and policies. When leaders operating under mission command encounter a gap, they might be expected—trusted—to apply judgment and exercise initiative—attack through the gap, so to speak. Unfortunately, in our institutional Army, our leaders too often choose another course. Instead of seizing an opportunity, they dig in; fill the gap with mines and wire; hold their positions; and wait for instructions.

Who can blame them? For generations we have been conditioning our institutional commanders and leaders to respond to mandates, go by the book, and stick to the checklist. How many times have we invoked phrases like “here’s what right looks like,” “that’s not in the lesson plan” and so on? When we’re trying to replicate the complexity of the operational envi-

ronment in the classroom, why would we insist that a lesson plan survive unaltered after contact with our students, a new tactic, technique or procedure, or late-breaking current events?

Leaders who embrace mission command would acknowledge the fact that not every instructor will teach or train every class the same way, that *not* doing so would be perfectly acceptable. In fact, they would expect and demand it to be that way. A sergeant first class instructor who tweaks his program of instruction to best reach his particular group of students should be commended for his initiative, not admonished.

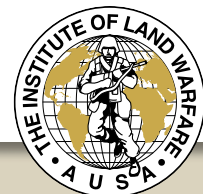
Mission command succeeds in a free-energy-dominated environment that values, promotes and demands innovation, creativity and initiative. Will the Army default to its fixed-energy natural state imbued with rules, regulations and policies? When “bad” things happen under mission command, will we feel the need to control the outcomes better by increasing the

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approval level on a particular issue?

We may think that our smart cards and smartphones and smart cars are making a smarter planet. The truth is that the most agile, adaptive, intelligent system on the battlefield or anywhere else in our Army is a human being. We will spend billions of dollars researching how to improve the network, but it will mean little if we don't focus our energies on command

climates and environments that develop the human foundation—trust, initiative, dialogue and freedom of action within intent—that will allow mission command to thrive throughout our Army and our institutions to become as agile as our operating forces.

Even in these times of diminishing dollars, spending billions will be easy compared to changing the cli-

mate and the culture. *That will take stomach.* □

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