Mission Command
(Building Responsive, Flexible Teams)

by MAJ Jim Plutt Jr.

Mission command empowers subordinate situational decision-making and decentralized execution, but it is not simply subordinates doing what they want within broad intent. Do we want to leave actions at an ambulance-exchange point unscripted and open to interpretation? What about establishment of an observation post, recovery operations or logistics-status reporting?

Mission command requires three foundational elements: standardization, shared understanding and training designed to build expertise. Without this foundation, we may hope to execute through disciplined initiative and mission orders, but instead we will find ourselves overcome by routine problems we could have solved weeks or even months earlier.

If we do have standard operating procedures (SOPs) and common unit language, we may find they suffer from a lack of routine review, update and rehearsal. Our leaders apply their time and energy to solving problems that should be standardized drills or procedures instead of executing on commander's intent, and the first true test of "how we fight" is at the combat-training center (CTC) or even in combat.

Therefore units must train to develop shared understanding and rapidly act during multiple repetitions and sets while maintaining subordinate focus on unique problems. In other words, units are capable of using mission command when they do the routine things routinely.

Solve problems 'out of contact'

At the National Training Center (NTC), we often see that units solve problems by placing leaders at the point of friction. However, when points of friction include our most routine problems, we quickly find more points of friction than leaders to apply to them. Units lack the collective training experience to execute using mission orders, and mission orders themselves are often unhelpful, unproduced or never distributed. When this happens, everything must be solved in the moment. There is little cohesion, and trust rapidly evaporates. We see that units want to execute within commander's intent, but without shared understanding and strong foundations, they cannot act, and so we see them waiting on higher-echelon guidance.

Fortunately, units can avoid many of these problems by simply standardizing and certifying routine actions as SOPs. SOPs are merely deciding in advance how to solve the preponderance of the issues we know we'll encounter. Problems as varied as camouflaging command nodes, conducting radio operations and establishing an observation post all benefit from SOPs, given they are produced, rehearsed and followed.

Figure 1. A Stryker Mobile Gun System fires its main gun during force-on-force training during live-fire conditions at NTC during Rotation 20-05. (*U.S. Army photo*)

Standardize via collaboration

The commander is one of the most experienced Soldiers in the formation, but as Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, reminds us, commanders also "recognize that they do not know everything, and they recognize that they have something to learn from even the most junior subordinate." Commanders who understand this can establish an environment that fosters collaboration and learning.

Discussion in a classroom with a whiteboard is a better opportunity to influence how leaders will execute their many individual and collective tasks than discussion in a period of darkness under direct-fire contact. Sitting down with junior leaders provides an invaluable perspective for the commander to understand the depth of knowledge within the formation. They also learn to appreciate the challenges the formation faces. It gives subordinate leaders the opportunity to share ideas without fear of reproach, and gives more senior leaders the opportunity to understand how subordinate leaders think about common problems. It is an important first step in defining best practices. It is also a venue for resolving conflict; it is better to address divergent ideas about execution in a calm classroom than after line of departure.

From this initial dialogue, units can begin to develop SOPs. Imagine a battalion that collaborates to standardize actions at a logistics-release point (LRP). The unit would identify markings, timelines, security requirements, leader requirements and all other actions required to execute this operation expertly within an SOP. As a next step, the unit could execute an LRP using the SOP, certifying the LRP's execution. After execution, a collaborative team would update the SOP, capturing changes in execution. The unit would now have a functional SOP for LRP operations: shared confidence and shared experience, linking collective competence and shared understanding.

An important part of the process is units routinely revisiting and updating their SOPs. It may be monthly or quarterly, paired with a training progression or focused on a CTC rotation, but it must occur. It allows training to feed back into collaboration in a cyclical manner, maintaining shared understanding throughout the unit. It develops a culture with a living SOP, a way that "we" do it, allowing central ideas to permeate throughout the

organization. It is the lynchpin to operating on limited guidance from higher headquarters. It also provides new leaders a voice for their experience and on-ramps them into the unit more quickly.
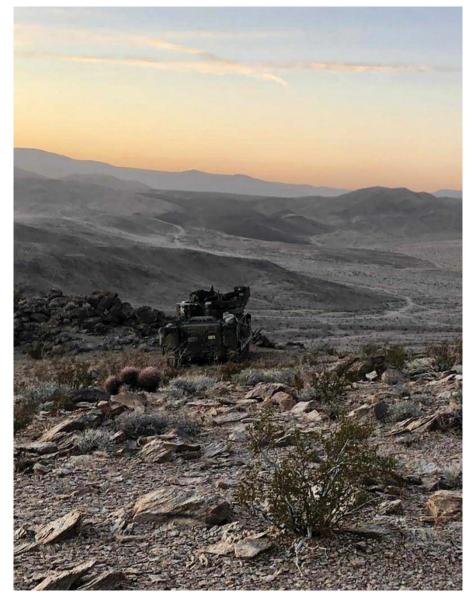

Figure 2. A Bradley Fighting Vehicle observes a named area of interest (NAI) at NTC during Rotation 20-04. *(U.S. Army photo)*

Training and trust

ADP 6-0 states that "tactically and technically competent commanders, subordinates and teams are the basis of effective mission command." We describe doctrine as "common language," but doctrine is a guide or framework, lacking specific unit language to "speak" mission command. Building SOPs and certifying them during training builds another kind of common language within a unit and generates trust. The power in this common language allows the commander to know when he or she orders an LRP in execution that everyone knows exactly how to do it.

Shared understanding of unit SOPs, paired with demonstrated competence in routine drills and procedures, builds trust at echelon and allows disciplined initiative. Subordinates are trusted because they have been certified to

execute; they know "what" to do and "how" to do it. This is built-in doctrine within the principles of "train as you fight."

Mission orders

An untrained unit will find it cannot execute on mission orders. Without the common language or standardization described, commanders can only ensure their intent is met and reduce risk to mission by being more prescriptive and exerting higher control. For commanders, this costs time and energy. For subordinates, this may appear as micromanagement and delays decision-making. For the unit, this loses opportunities.

With standardization and demonstrated competence, mission command is possible through the use of mission orders. Good mission orders provide everything a subordinate must know and nothing else. Good mission orders do not contain the "whats" and "hows" collaboratively built during SOP development, much less superfluous products with useless excess information. They do provide enough information and products to synchronize and give subordinates the key information they need.

The mission-orders process itself should be SOP. The subordinate leaders who will execute commander's intent should be part of its development, providing input to unit products and required touchpoints. In the best mission-orders processes, subordinates should receive what they expect and when they expect it, and nothing more.

Figure 3. A Soldier puts an RQ-11 Raven unmanned aerial system into operation to observe an NAI at NTC during Rotation 20-05. (*U.S. Army photo*)

Conclusion

When successful, mission command frees leaders from solving routine problems at the point of friction. It relies on routine, enabling momentum. It allows units to operate on shared confidence and shared experience, relying on collaboration and expertise built through training long before the line of departure. Mission command is less nuanced and abstract than one might think, and it certainly requires more structure than is initially apparent. It is a culture within a unit that must be stewarded routinely.

With a sufficiently strong foundation, we do not have to tell subordinates how to do things. We can tell them what to do, empowering them to use their full ingenuity. This is mission command.

MAJ Jim Plutt Jr. is the cavalry squadron S-3 trainer/(Cobra) NTC Operations Group, Fort Irwin, CA. His previous assignments include S-3, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM),

WA; S-3, 2nd Infantry Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, 2-2 Infantry, JBLM; small-group leader, Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC), Fort Benning, GA; commander, Bravo Troop, 3rd Squadron, 38th Cavalry Regiment, 201stBattlefield Surveillance Brigade (BfSB), JBLM; and S-3 Plans, 3-38 Cav, 201st BfSB. MAJ Plutt's military schools include the Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course, MCCC, Australian Command and Staff College – Joints, Basic Airborne School, U.S. Army Ranger School, Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leader's Course, Joint Firepower Course and U.S. Army Jumpmaster Course. He has a bachelor's of business administration degree in finance from Kent State University and a master's degree in military and defense studies from the Australian National University.

Notes

[1] ADP 6-0, **Mission Command (Command and Control of Army Forces)**, Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, 2019.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ADP – Army doctrine publication
BfSB – battlefield surveillance brigade
CTC – combat-training center
JBLM – Joint Base Lewis-McChord
LRP – logistics-release point
MCCC – Maneuver Captain's Career Course
NAI – named area of interest
NTC – National Training Center
SOP – standard operating procedures

Figure 4. Soldiers dismount ahead of their M1127 Stryker Reconnaissance Vehicles to conduct reconnaissance of an obstacle during a zone reconnaissance. (*U.S. Army photo*)