

It Is, So What, Therefore and Who Else Needs to Know! A Paradigm for Operations Centers

Procedures = what to think. Paradigms = how to think. It takes both to be effective and efficient

by COL Harry “Zan” Hornbuckle

The first report is received, announced in the operations center and acknowledged. This first report, while unique, provides all the basics of the developing situation and demands your attention. What happens next should be based on standard-operating or fast-reaction procedures that your command center uses. These procedures and drills should have been taught, reviewed and practiced as you joined the operations team and integrated into the watch.

Unfortunately, the condition described in the report and the ongoing action is not included in your known procedures. Maybe it fits into a combination of two or three, but you find yourself in a situation that is not accounted for in your volumes of procedures. We know from Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0 that “[p]rocedures are standard, detailed steps, often used by staffs, which describe how to perform specific tasks to achieve the desired endstate.”¹ In other words, procedures are the actions taken in the operations center to respond to common situations with specific actions in a concise manner.

Scenarios not covered by procedures transpire across our operations centers almost daily. This trend occurs in the small-organization level all the way up to the corporate-organization level. You ask yourself, “How can we not have a procedure written for this situation?” The answer is simple: because if you had all the procedures required for every single possible event, and even those black-swan events, no one would know where to find it when they needed it. Also, the digital file would crush your network, and the binder would require a two-person lift to open.

Effective operations centers

The procedures in your operations center for the purpose of this article are sound and by design account for common and routine actions. The procedures enable your operations center to be effective.

Keep in mind that, if used effectively, a procedure is basically a tool that teaches people what to think in the context of that situation. A procedure provides instructions, with a sequence of actions to follow, to accomplish a task. This is useful to a point and, in most cases, sufficient for operations centers to be of some benefit to the organization. We all want our operations centers to provide us with significant benefit given the cost in personnel and resources to operate a functional operations center.

I believe that our most effective and efficient operations centers will also develop the ability for and be trained on how to think. Effective and efficient centers will deliver considerable dividends to the organization. The combination of what to think – procedures, with how to think - paradigms will equip the operations center with a range of capabilities and problem-solving attributes. The Merriam-Webster dictionary describes a paradigm as “a philosophical or theoretical framework of any kind.”² The key here is the framework that allows a way to train watch teams how to think in our operations centers.

To accomplish this, we need to consider the paradigm we can use for those uncommon events that force us outside our procedures. I recommend that an operations center considers the paradigm “it is, so what, therefore and who else needs to know.” This is nothing unique, and it is something we have been taught in one form or another. I was taught this early in my career, and it has always been of great value. In my execution, observation and coaching experiences – from the small- to large-level operations centers, this paradigm always assists in navigating complex situations. It is an effective paradigm for operations centers to follow as they think their way through events not covered by established procedures.



Figure 1. A Soldier monitors input in a tactical-operations center during an infantry brigade combat team limited-user test at White Sands Missile Range, NM. An operations center should consider the paradigm “it is, so what, therefore and who else needs to know” when conducting its tasks. (U.S. Army photo)

It is

The report that has entered the operations center contains both facts and (most likely) some assumptions. The facts are the best we have at that time. It is the fact that is relevant at the time the report is sent. The assumptions are those things that are considered possible and may be listed as part of the “why” or impact elements of the report, and again are relevant at the time the report was sent.

The operations center will want to ensure they understand what the facts are and what the assumptions in the report are. As the event progresses from the initial report to a more developed situation, the operations center will review and update the known facts and assumptions. In some cases these will change, and in almost all cases, there will be updates. “It is” should follow a simple format of:

- Who is involved?
- What has happened or is happening?
- When did this happen, or is it ongoing and developing?
- Where is the event located?
- Why did this event occur or what is the impact?
- What is the request or recommendation, if any?

The operations center will want to gather as many details as possible before proceeding to the *so what, therefore* and *who else needs to know* stages. This is where your operations center’s experience and training comes to play. There is not a single way to proceed here. The operations-center leader must understand the decision-makers who will be involved, the possible impact of this event and the organization’s ability to influence the outcome or respond to the event’s conclusion. Encouragement of initial reports is critical to success and is the only way to facilitate the operation center’s responsiveness in unique events. We should not allow our desire for a 100-percent report to delay us in informing decision-makers.

We should foster an environment that encourages everyone to communicate the information available at the time and welcomes the updates that will inevitably adjust our understanding of the situation. This environment of information-sharing should be developed into a culture of collaboration. To do otherwise contributes to the operations center consuming information and producing little in the development of situation awareness leading to understanding. There is a fine balance between the amount of time used to gather more facts and the

requirement to inform decision-makers so they have an opportunity to influence the situation. Paradigms help us navigate this balance.

So what

We have discussed the *it is* stage; now on to the *so what* stage, which is easy to say but hard to accomplish. Here is where you have developed the operations team to think and they are value-added, or you identify a requirement to go back and encourage initiative within the shared understanding of organizational expectations.

The *so what* is basically what we think the impacts will be based on the report or the immediate actions that are prudent to recommend to decision-makers. The *so what* will help the operations center identify a similar situation or combination of situations that allow you to reference your procedures.

A discussion on the operations center's authority will also allow them to take the immediate emergency actions required, if any, to ensure the organization can posture to respond with an adjustment action or begin a new action. Opportunity is momentary, and when you can allow your operations center to act within the authority level you are comfortable delegating, you will find success. Some form of immediate action is almost always required to allow the organization to gain momentum and continue to develop the situation as more reports are provided.

Therefore

We have a good understanding of the facts of the event, have taken initial actions and informed leadership, and are now at the point where we make recommendations to either gather additional missing facts or to conduct an operational adjustment.

For the leader, this can be invaluable, as it provides you with options. Options are critical to decision-making and are where your operations center proves its worth to the organization. Options help save the leader time and again posture the organization to maximize momentum.

If there is not a *therefore*, the operations center is just an information center and has reduced its potential to build synergy for the overall organization.

Who else needs to know?

This action should repeat throughout the paradigm multiple times. It is not required to be done at the end, nor is it expected to be completed only once. *Who else needs to know* should be asked across the operations center multiple times. The operations center should review who else needs to know from receipt of the initial report all the way through the event's conclusion. As I mentioned, a key enabler of this action is an environment that encourages open dialogue about the information available and welcomes the updates that will inevitably adjust our understanding of the situation.

I recommended at the start of this article that we combine procedures and paradigms to develop efficient and effective operations centers. Procedures answer the *what to think* requirement to be efficient. Paradigms enable the *how to think* requirement to be effective. Our operations centers need a combination of standard reaction procedures and thinking paradigms since it is almost impossible to identify and train every scenario they will face.

The paradigm *it is, so what, therefore* and *who else needs to know* is a way to support development of operations centers' ability on how to think. There are, of course, many other paradigms that can be used for this purpose. In fact, development of your own paradigm may prove the most effective. This will ensure the operations center and the decision-makers are communicating on this topic and developing the ability to share information and build understanding in a time of crisis. Operations centers with these skills will prove to be efficient and effective.

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Notes

¹ ADP 6-0, **Mission Command**; Washington, DC: Department of the Army; May 2012.

² Merriam-Webster dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradigm>.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

ADP – Army doctrinal publication