

Mission Command

White Paper

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"Mission command is the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders. Successful mission command demands that subordinate leaders at all echelons exercise disciplined initiative and act aggressively and independently to accomplish the mission.

Joint Publication 3-0 "Joint Operations" 11 Aug 2011

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Martin E. Dempsey".

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18

Introduction

- 1. The New Operating Environment and the Future Force**
- 2. Mission Command is Commander Centric**
- 3. Key Attributes for Mission Command**
- 4. Instilling Mission Command**
- 5. The Way Ahead**

Introduction.

Our need to pursue, instill, and foster mission command is critical to our future success in defending the nation in an increasingly complex and uncertain operating environment. This paper offers ideas to inform the development of Joint Force 2020.

The basic principles of mission command—commander’s intent, mission type orders and decentralized execution are not new concepts. They are a part of current joint and service doctrine.¹ But this is not enough; we will ask more of our leaders in the future. Conduct of mission command requires adaptable leaders at every echelon.

1. The Future Security Environment and the Future Force

Joint Force 2020 will operate in a dynamic security environment that is different from today. The pace of change and the speed of operations will continue to accelerate. An increasingly competitive and interconnected world raises the potential for conflicts and crisis to escalate in multiple domains. Concurrently, the expansion and diversification of asymmetric threats will significantly challenge our ability to effectively execute military operations. The relevance of space and cyberspace to national security will grow exponentially in magnitude of importance. Our reliance on technological superiority is a potential vulnerability that our adversaries will seek to exploit, often in covert or indirect ways. We as well as our Allies, confront this new security and operating environment in an era marked by fiscal constraint. This fiscal reality informs our difficult strategic choices and heightens our risks.

Joint Force 2020 must protect US national security interests against threats that routinely span regional boundaries and can rapidly assume global dimensions. The global application of integrated, discriminate military power in all domains calls for us to organize and conduct networked operations, where any force element can support or be supported by any other. US forces operating globally as a network will require unity of effort and prompt execution. Just as today, these attributes must accrue without over-centralization, as decentralized approaches will provide us competitive adaptability and tempo advantages.

Joint Force 2020’s design is shaped by a decade of learned lessons in war. Our fight against a decentralized enemy has driven home the necessity to decentralize our capabilities and distribute our operations. Smaller units enabled to conduct decentralized operations at the tactical level with operational/strategic implications will be increasingly the norm. Synchronization of time and tempo with expanded maneuver space (space and cyberspace) brings added complexity to synergizing and integrating actions and effects in both space and time. The reliance and synergy of disparate elements to achieve operational objectives is the genesis for a deeply interdependent Joint Force 2020; this drives the need to create jointness deeper and sooner in the force. Smaller, lighter forces operating in an environment of increased uncertainty, complexity and competitiveness will require freedom of action to develop the situation and rapidly exploit

¹ Variance in service doctrine (i.e.: “command by negation” or “centralized planning, decentralized execution”) are simply phrasing choices that express the same idea.

opportunities. Decentralization will occur beyond current comfort levels and habits of practice. Resident in the central figure of the commander, the ethos of mission command is a critical enabler of success.

2. Mission Command is Commander Centric

The commander is the central figure in mission command. To the commander comes the mission for the unit; in the commander resides the authority and responsibility to act and to lead so that the mission may be accomplished. In mission command, the commander must blend the art of command and the science of control, as he, supported by the staff, integrates all joint warfighting functions.

In mission command, the commander must understand the problem, envision the end state, and visualize the nature and design of the operation. The commander must also describe time, space, resources and purpose, direct the joint warfighting functions and constantly assess the process. Critically he must understand the intent of the mission given him. In turn, he must clearly translate his intent to his subordinates. The missions given subordinates must be within their capabilities; the commander must understand what his subordinates can do, and trust—but not blindly—they to do it. In its highest state, shared context and understanding is implicit and intuitive between hierarchal and lateral echelons of command, enabling decentralized and distributed formations to perform as if they were centrally coordinated. When achieved, these practices result in decentralized formal decision-making throughout the force, leading implicitly to the opportunity to gain advantageous operational tempo over adversaries.

Tempo is our ability to operate at the speed of the problem. This is more than merely “being fast” – the tactical patience to allow a window of opportunity to open also contributes to tempo. To gain and maintain advantageous tempo, our leaders must be able to see, understand and rapidly exploit opportunities in both time and space, guided by their understanding of intent, their mission, environment and the capability of their force. Decisions are far less likely to be routinely relayed up the chain for institutional contemplation and wisdom. To do so is to surrender the initiative to the enemy. Joint Force 2020, with minimum communications, must act promptly and coherently in step to create the decisive amount of cumulative combat power at the right place and time.

Mental agility and superior speed in competitive cycles of decision-making are therefore attributes desired in the commanders of each echelon of the Joint Force 2020. Air Force officer and military strategist John Boyd famously captured the idea that decision-making occurs in recurring cycles of observe-orient-decide-act—the “OODA loop.”² The key to victory in Colonel Boyd’s thinking was the ability to create situations wherein one can make appropriate decisions more quickly than one’s opponent. The practice of mission command in the Joint Force 2020 is in this spirit.

Mission command is not a mechanical process that the commander follows blindly. Instead, it is a continual cognitive effort to understand, to adapt, and to direct effectively the achievement of

² For a doctrinal discussion of the OODA loop, see MCDP 6 “Command and Control” Oct 1996, pgs 63-65.

intent. Balancing the art of command with the science of control, the commander positions himself as needed to best accomplish the mission. Mission command challenges commanders to cultivate a bias for action in their subordinates, develop mutual trust and understanding, and exercise moral nerve and restraint. Applicable across the range of military operations it is executed by adaptive leaders and organizations capable of exercising initiative enabled by shared experiences, doctrine, education, and training.

3. Key Attributes for Mission Command

Several key attributes enable the practical application of mission command. These are understanding, intent, and trust. We will discuss each briefly in turn.

Understanding equips decision-makers at all levels with the insight and foresight required to make effective decisions, to manage the associated risks, and to consider second and subsequent order effects. This is the “inner eye” – the cognitive ability “at a glance” to see and understand a situation and thereby enable independent decision and correct action.³ What changes for Joint Force 2020 is the increasing need for the commander to frequently frame and reframe⁴ an environment of ill-structured problems to gain the context of operations by continuously challenging assumptions both before and during execution.

Importantly, in Joint Force 2020, leaders at every level must contribute to the common operating assessment of context, “co-creating it” as operations progress and situations change. Created knowledge at the point of action is critical to operational and tactical agility. Understanding in mission command must flow from both bottom-up and top-down. Shared context is a critical enabler of the next of the attributes relevant to mission command, that of intent.

Joint Doctrine defines “commander’s intent” in part as “a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state.”⁵ It then links intent explicitly to mission command. In mission command, *intent* fuses understanding, assigned mission, and direction to subordinates.

Joint Force 2020 will, by necessity, act by the guiding star of intent. Mission-type orders will be the norm. Commanders will be required to understand intent to the level of effect; that is, strategic to tactical and across domains. They will be required to clearly translate their intent (and that of higher) to their subordinates and trust them to perform with responsible initiative in complex, fast-changing, chaotic circumstances.

³ Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*. Howard & Paret edition/translation. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). “When all is said and done, it really is the commander’s *coup d’œil*, his ability to see things simply, to identify the whole business of war completely with himself, that is the essence of good generalship. Only if the mind works in this comprehensive fashion can it achieve the freedom it needs to dominate events and not be dominated by them.”

⁴ Recent efforts regarding “Design” are aimed at providing the commander, supported by his staff, the cognitive tools to perform this vital task.

⁵ JP 3-0 “Joint Operations” 11 Aug 2011. See Chapter II “the Art of Joint Command”, pg II-2 and II-8.

Just as understanding informs commander's intent, *trust* informs the execution of that intent. Mission command for Joint Force 2020 requires trust at every echelon of the force. Building trust with subordinates and partners may be the most important action a commander will perform. Given our projected need for superior speed in competitive cycles of decision-making, it is clear that in Joint Force 2020, operations will move at the speed of trust.⁶

Coupled with shared understanding and intent, trust is the moral sinew that binds the distributed Joint Force 2020 together, enabling the many to act as one in the cross-domain application of the appropriate amount of cumulative combat power at the right place and time. Unless these attributes are made central to the basic character of the force, Joint Force 2020 will struggle to reach optimal performance levels. The task of imbuing mission command into training and leader development is an immediate challenge. The journey to 2020 is already underway.

4. Instilling Mission Command.

Mission command must be institutionalized and operationalized into all aspects of the joint force—our doctrine, our education, our training, and our manpower and personnel processes. It must pervade the force and drive leader development, organizational design and inform material acquisitions. Service cultures are important in these efforts; the Joint Force derives strength from our distinct service cultures.

Joint and service doctrine, education and training are keys to achieving the habit of mission command; our doctrine must describe it, our schools must teach it, and we must train individually and collectively to it. The key attributes described in the previous section are the center of gravity in instilling mission command; if we do not successfully instill these traits in our people we will never instill them in our organization and practice.

Mission command is fundamentally a learned behavior to be imprinted into the DNA of the profession of arms. The education of our officer corps—joint and service—must begin at the start of service to instill the cognitive capability to understand, to receive and express intent, to take decisive initiative within intent, and to trust. We must place students into situations of uncertainty and complexity where creativity, adaptability, critical thinking and independent, rapid decision-making are essential elements. The moral courage or nerve to make decisions in these types of situations is to be actively rewarded.

Education in the key attributes of mission command must be progressively more challenging as officers progress in rank and experience. Education must develop the “inner eye” mentioned previously. Officers must be taught how to receive and give mission-type orders, and critically, how to clearly express intent. Trust too is learned behavior to be developed during education; this goes to the need to balance the art of command with the science of control. As responsible exercise of mission command does not entail blind trust, education must give officers the ability

⁶ Dr Stephen Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006). Dr Covey has expressed the idea that trust is “the hidden variable” in the formula for organizational success. His phrase “the speed of trust” captures the idea that trust affects two outcomes in any organization: speed and cost. High trust engenders high speed and low cost (“the trust dividend”); the converse has the opposite outcome (“the trust tax.”)

to recognize the capability for mission command in subordinates and the skills to know when and how to adjust their level of supervision.

As education develops individual leaders, so does training prepare units for operational duty. Training for mission command is about building teams, both within the unit by the commander and externally to the unit by the commander with supported, supporting, and higher echelons of command. These teams must have implicit communication between them, guided and enabled by common understanding of intent, and accelerated by deep trust.

Like education, the truism “to train as you will fight” remains applicable to training. Training must replicate the distributed, chaotic, and uncertain nature of the expected operational environment. It must force commanders, supported by their staffs, to receive and clearly express intent. Training scenarios must require the commander to extend trust as they employ their force and constantly assess. Training for mission command requires it to be commander centric in ways that it is not often now; this will require an investment in those who can focus on the commander’s development.

Training should place commanders in situations where fleeting opportunities present themselves, and those that see and act appropriately to those opportunities should be rewarded. Training must force commanders to become skilled at rapid decision-making. Training is the optimum venue for a commander to learn how practically to delegate authority and accountability to subordinate and supporting commanders; this serves to build trust, teamwork, ease implicit and intuitive communications, and is vital for the development of the commanders of those echelons. Subordinate echelons must be allowed to own their own “white space” and thereby develop unit cohesion and exercise judgment and creativity in training.

Training is also the preferred venue to expose the commander to the things that get in the way of mission command. The first of these is the volume and the availability of information. Modern C2 systems transport and deliver information in quantities that can easily overwhelm the commander. Technology cannot replace the human ability to create and make intuitive judgment. Training should help the commander learn how to avoid information overload and “paralysis by analysis.” Likewise, training should rehearse the commander in making rapid decisions without perfect or complete information. Training for mission command focuses the commander on gaining a comfort with uncertainty and chaos, and guided by intent, having the moral courage to decide quickly and act decisively.

Our training should also teach commanders what not to do. In a network-enabled force, the commander can easily penetrate to the lowest level of the command and take over the fight. This is dangerous for a number of reasons. No C2 technology has ever successfully eliminated the fog of war, but it can create the illusion of perfect clarity from a distance. This can lead to micromanagement, a debilitating inhibitor of trust in the lower echelons of the force. Training must reinforce in commanders that they demonstrate trust by exercising restraint in their close supervision of subordinates.

5. The Way Ahead.

The Services and the Joint Force share the responsibility in ensuring that mission command is a common attribute of our Profession of Arms. Our collective efforts must institutionalize mission command by adopting and formalizing the character traits that enable a bias for action and responsible initiative at all levels of the force. Our leader development efforts must create the climate for greater trust, and challenge leaders to the point of failure as a way to evaluate character, fortitude, and resiliency of personality in conditions of adversity. Critically, we must collectively promote a culture that values calculated risk as the means to generate opportunity.

Operational commanders have a vital role in effectively integrating mission command into operational art, planning, and execution. The operational commander as the practitioner of mission command is a powerful example. Beginning with a leadership climate that empowers subordinate leaders and lowers the decision-making threshold, commanders must fashion cohesive and reciprocal relationships of trust and mutual understanding among subordinates. They must ensure that continuous assessment flows from the forward edge of operations, before being distributed vertically and horizontally. Critically, commanders must set the example in regards to clear and timely vision, intent and guidance, enabling subordinates wide latitude in accomplishing mission objectives within the intent of seniors. How commanders shape behavior through reaction to failure is critical; mistakes of subordinates that nonetheless demonstrate responsible initiative guided by intent should be seen as building blocks in the development of mission command.

We will not embrace mission command from a simple combination of policy, doctrine, education, and training. These guide and shape, but they do not create belief and capability. *Understand my intent:* I challenge every leader in the Joint Force to be a living example of mission command. *You have my trust.*