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COMMAND PHILOSOPHY: IS IT TRANSPORTABLE AND UNIVERSAL?

BY

Lieutenant Colonel William E. Ward
United States Army

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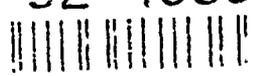
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COMMAND PHILOSOPHY: IS IT TRANSPORTABLE AND UNIVERSAL?

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

Lieutenant Colonel William E. Ward, IN

Dr. James W. Williams
Project Adviser

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America has entrusted the care of the best of its young men and women to the U.S. Army. The Army continues to respond to this challenge by placing qualified officers in command. The effectiveness of these leaders is enhanced when they enter positions of command with well-developed command philosophies. Officers begin developing command philosophies immediately during their initial assignment. They form ideas on command using a variety of sources including peers, subordinates, institutional schooling, and superiors. When the philosophy of command is well-developed and articulated, it is a valuable aid in creating effective and productive organizations. This study examines the development of a command philosophy; elements used to construct a command philosophy; and the universality of a command philosophy. Entering command with a well-developed and credible command philosophy is the first step in ensuring the success and combat-preparedness of the unit.

COMMAND PHILOSOPHY: IS IT TRANSPORTABLE AND UNIVERSAL?

INTRODUCTION

As professional officers of all ranks speculate about serving the Army, being a commander is most often dwelt upon. The process begins early in a career and continues until the officer leaves active duty. Throughout a career and through a myriad of assignments in all corners of the world, an officer is reflecting on his or her* role as a commander. What should that role be? How is it conveyed-- orally or in writing? Who should be the audience? How does he ensure that the role is understood? How detailed should it be? What should be directed versus what is left to the discretion of your subordinates? These questions, along with a host of others, are not easy to answer. The commander or leader (synonymous terms for the purpose of this paper) is concerned with his unit moving in a specific direction. His job is to establish the framework that allows the unit to attain the desired goals and objectives.

During the career of an officer, he is able to observe many leaders. From them he observes things that make both positive as well as negative impacts. Using these observations as a point of departure, he formulates leadership ideas of his own. These ideas are supported

*He/his is not gender specific throughout this paper.

through an elaborate officer education system. As the officer serves in various assignments in different locations around the world, the environment serves to solidify or nullify these same ideas.

From the platoon to the field army, each leader has his idea of how to lead the organization. How then is this idea or philosophy developed? What are the components of the philosophy and is the philosophy of command universal with respect to its world wide geographic application? These are three essential questions that this paper will examine. The first step is to provide a framework for discussing command philosophies. This is accomplished by defining the concept. After defining command philosophies, the command philosophy development process is described. The components of a command philosophy are then discussed followed by a discussion of the universality of command philosophies and whether a command philosophy can be carried from assignment to assignment.

COMMAND PHILOSOPHY DEFINED

It is widely recognized that commanders will enter leadership positions with a philosophy of command. Field Manual 22-103, Leadership and Command at Senior Levels, includes a host of concepts and concerns that could be a

part of any command philosophy, but lacks a coherent definition of command philosophy.¹ According to Field Manual 22-103, "senior professionals blend the best of command, control, leadership, and management into a personal strategy for organizational success."² This personal strategy is best described as one's philosophy of command.

COMMAND PHILOSOPHY DEFINED

Recent military studies have attempted to define command philosophy. In 1990 Lieutenant Colonel Vernon Hatley defined command philosophy as "a set of general principles governing a commander's conduct and thought which can be transmitted orally or in writing, formally or informally, to groups or through key subordinates."³ Earlier, Colonel Larry J. Smith defined command philosophy as a set of pronounced guidelines or policies used by the leader to describe "how" a unit will link organizational performance to mission accomplishment and long-range vision.⁴

A more traditional approach to defining command philosophy would encompass notions of leadership coupled with a dictionary definition of philosophy. One such definition useful for this paper is that philosophy is a particular system of principles underlying conduct and thought.⁵ Leadership is viewed as the process of

influencing others to accomplish the mission by providing purpose, direction, and motivation.⁶ These definitions are consistent and not controversial. They are widely understood and command philosophies, whether stated orally or written, fall within the constructs they offer. An additional statement in the U.S. Army War College's 1991-1992 reference text on command management indicates what the command philosophy statement should do. Namely, that the philosophy should indicate those aspects of organizational activity most important to the commander. Additionally, the philosophy gives insight into the leader's leadership style so others in the command can synchronize their action with the commander. The reference text states the "focus of the command philosophy should be broad enough to provide reference points for ethical, personal leadership style, and managerial style preference issues."⁷ These concepts generally describe what a command philosophy is and they provide a useful backdrop for developing a command philosophy for any level of command.

COMMAND PHILOSOPHY DEVELOPMENT

The process of developing a command philosophy, while complex, is most likely very natural to aspiring leaders. It is a process that is practiced to some degree

throughout the course of a military career. As officers read and serve in various assignments they are exposed to many influential people. From the outset, these assignments allow future leaders to watch and listen to superiors and peers. In doing so, an officer is able to contemplate various aspects of command. Given typical rotation patterns, new opportunities to observe different leadership styles are available every eighteen to twenty-four months.

As these observations are combined with the personal experiences of the officer, basic tenets emerge and are either altered or reinforced with additional experience and more observations. The importance of the personal-experience element of command philosophy development cannot be overstated. In many respects these experiences are paramount in formulating basic ideas of leadership. Earlier in this paper the role of the superior as a factor in developing a command philosophy was highlighted. Equally important in the development process are the collective experiences "cataloged" from dealing with subordinates. Insights gleaned from subordinates' reactions to a leadership style are extremely important. These insights provide a sensing or gauge of the effectiveness of a particular leadership style. Understanding these

reactions is essential in developing an effective philosophy of command that is supported by a particular leadership style.

The entire arena of leadership style is significant because of its relevance in legitimizing a command philosophy. The link is a simple one. A leadership style and accompanying philosophy of command should be and must be congruent. The link has to be natural to be credible. Congratulatory conversations between newly selected commanders and their former bosses, especially, are laced with comments like "do what comes natural," "keep doing what it was that got you there," "be yourself," "do not try to be like the guy you are replacing," etc.⁶ These comments are most often made to the battalion command selectee, but are equally applicable for all levels of command. In essence, to be effective and, thus successful, the commander must bring his or her own personality into the situation. Any "phoniness" in the commander will soon be discovered by the subordinates. Once this happens the entire command relationship is jeopardized, and the effectiveness of the commander will suffer.

If the commander loses credibility, then the command philosophy will not be effective. It will not be a meaningful tool in providing direction and purpose to the unit. The authors of Taking Command provide a detailed

discussion of these aspects of command. They indicate that:

...adoption of a particular leadership style is based to a large extent on how effective the style might be in motivating the followers... The motivation is enhanced when the leader is successful in establishing effective communications with them.⁹

Just as motivation is intensified when leaders effectively communicate with subordinates, so too is the effectiveness of the command philosophy enhanced when credible communications links exist.

All of this is to highlight the significance of two critical factors in command-philosophy development. Namely, the development process builds upon the sum of the experience one accumulates during years of service and upon being yourself. In his comments on leadership, now deceased General of the Armies, Omar Bradley stressed the importance of experience in providing judgmental advantages to the leader.¹⁰ On being yourself, former Chief of Staff of the Army, General (Retired) Edward C. Meyer, said, in Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence, that "you cannot fool a soldier anytime! The leader who tries chooses a hazardous path."¹¹ The framework for command-philosophy development resides firmly in these two tenets. They form the very sound basis in developing a plan for guiding and directing (commanding and leading) a military organization.

COMPONENTS OF COMMAND PHILOSOPHY

In his book The Challenge of Command, Roger Nye states while command is very personal and commanders must find their own styles and techniques, nevertheless several items are widely accepted as appropriate ingredients for inclusion in a command philosophy.¹² The literature is replete with items that help to focus the actions and activities of subordinates once personalized by the leader in his command philosophy. While the studies and surveys that detail these elements were conducted in a variety of locations at different times, there is a high degree of commonality in the results.

A 1989 Army War College class was surveyed on command philosophy content. Three-fourths of the respondents agreed that the philosophy should address goals and objectives, ethics, values, standards, a vision for the future, purpose and mission, teamwork and team development, and the concept of powerdown.¹³

A survey of the command philosophies of twenty commanders at Fort Benning, Georgia, conducted in 1988 cited the same elements stated above in additions to some others. These were priorities, the system of rewards and punishment, commander's role, vision, leadership style, chain of command, the nature of the challenge, and command climate as essential elements of a command philosophy.

Units represented by the survey included combat, combat support, combat service support and training units.¹⁴

Another 1988 survey conducted at Fort Polk, Louisiana, yielded similar findings. The majority of the commanders included goals and objectives, values, priorities, the commander's role, communicating, rewards and punishments, leadership style, vision, standards, decentralization, teamwork, ethics, and unit purpose as discussion points in their command philosophies.¹⁵

Earlier writings on the subject of command philosophy components emphasized the same ingredients that tended to appear in the later surveys. Perhaps the most widely read piece on key ingredients of a command philosophy is Colonel Michael Plummer's article, "Winning in Command." All battalion and brigade command selectees are exposed to Plummer's article during the Leavenworth pre-command course. According to Plummer, the command philosophy should state:

- 1) the commander's values starting with the four Cs (courage, candor, commitment, competence)
- 2) how the commander plans to exercise command
- 3) the objectives that are important to the commander
- 4) how and what the commander will evaluate
- 5) how and what will be rewarded and punished

Plummer suggests these ingredients be coupled with a well-thought-through vision and a system for measuring progress toward that vision.¹⁶

The importance of the ingredients was also highlighted in the 1985 Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus book, Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge. Of particular note is what Bennis and Nanus have to say about vision, even though they were addressing the civilian sector.

To choose a direction, a leader must first have developed a mental image of a possible and desirable future state of the organization. This image, which we call a "vision," may be as vague as a dream or as precise as a goal or mission statement. The critical point is that a vision articulates a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization, a condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists.¹⁷

Another contribution to the discussion of components of command philosophy was also written to address the civilian sector. It serves to highlight the universality of the ingredients. Perry Smith (not retired Major General Perry Smith), in his 1988 book Taking Charge, stresses the need for a philosophy letter that points out organizational goals and priorities, decentralization and empowerment, vision, the need for personal and institutional integrity,

measuring performance standards, and communication systems. Leaders should use this tool to help create effective and productive organizations.¹⁸

These various sources provide ample components for inclusion in a statement of command philosophy. In summary the philosophy could/should address these items:

- goals
- objectives
- values
- priorities
- ethics
- mission
- rewards
- performance
- policies
- integrity
- honesty
- powerdown
- communication
- evaluation
- teamwork
- vision
- purpose
- standards
- punishment
- leadership style
- unit climate
- discipline
- chain of command
- cohesion

Although not as abundantly observed in the literature, a few additional topics are appropriate components of a command philosophy. These are:

- training
- conduct
- physical fitness
- maintenance and logistics
- caring
- quality of life
- professional/personal development
- expectations
- balance

These list the items that, if included in a command philosophy, will provide insight into a leader. They will convey what a leader considers important to his subordinates. As a result, the organization will have a

vision, along with clearly stated goals, objectives, and priorities.

UNIVERSALITY OF COMMAND PHILOSOPHY

Several external factors shape the philosophy of command that any commander develops, regardless of his personal style and other things mentioned above. The leader must consider who the audience of the command philosophy will be and includes or omits some elements accordingly. The command level further determines what might or might not be included in the philosophy. Another potential factor is the geographic environment of the command. The literature contains no discussion of geography or geographic location as a factor in developing a command philosophy. This could be seen then as a statement that geography is irrelevant in formulating a command philosophy. With the case of the deployable forces of today's Army, a unit might find itself in a location far different from its home station.

It can be agreed that the purpose of a command philosophy is, in part, to establish goals, policies and priorities, and to identify values which are important to the individual leader. Further, commands exist in all corners of the earth with all the attendant environmental conditions. With these two points in mind, what special

consideration might apply to a particular component of the command philosophy? In a harsh arctic climate, for example, the commander will surely advocate goals and policies, and set priorities that are aimed at safeguarding members of the command from cold weather injuries. Likewise, a commander who commands in a hot temperate region will formulate a philosophy of command that places emphasis on those things that will promote the protection of the soldiers from hot weather injuries.

Do these conditions consequently indicate that the command philosophy is no longer valid, if the geographic environment changes? Further, does it also mean that a philosophy that evolved over years requires major changes with the restationing of the leader? The answer to both of these questions is no.

A command philosophy, among other things, compiles and distills many years of experiences, study and reading. The philosophy is developed through a continuous process of refinement resulting from observation and reflection. This process occurs in conjunction with an officer's collective experiences gained while serving in a variety of locations.

The theoretical components suggested for a command philosophy are universal concepts, as an examination of specific command philosophies and the literature on command philosophies and leadership reveals. Included here are

honesty, values, teamwork, standards, discipline, candor, sincerity, competence, commitment, ethics, and vision. All of these components suit virtually all settings. They are appropriate for public as well as private organizations. These components are, in fact, principles applicable to all walks of life and valid in all situations or scenarios. They are universal indeed.

Given the universality of the ingredients of a command philosophy and the developmental process through which a leader arrives at a position on these ingredients or concepts, it follows that a philosophy of command would possess a universal flavor. Specifically, the values, ideals, priorities, and leadership style, among other components, of commanders will remain constant. They will be consistent and reflect habitual character traits and principles developed over time and applied over the course of a career. If, then, the command philosophy is limited to these universal concepts, it is transportable as leaders move from organization to organization. The same basic philosophy of command, modified only as experiences and learning dictates, is applicable to units regardless of the geographic setting. Other geographically peculiar ideas would be appropriate for policy letters or memoranda. These policy letters and memoranda provide guidelines for actions that are unique to the command, but remain consistent with

the command philosophy. The specific requirements found in the policy letters support the broad philosophical tenets of the command philosophy. Although this paper deals with command philosophy issues from a troop oriented perspective, the universality of the components makes them apply equally to staffs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A well-developed command philosophy that supports a vision is essential to the success of a commander. It provides a constant and visible guidepost that gives purpose and direction to a unit. It allows an organization to focus on the things that are important to the commander from day to day. Energy is therefore expended on making those things happen. This leads to productivity, effectiveness and efficiency instead of trial and error operations as subordinates attempt to determine the commander's purpose and intent.

The development of this philosophy is an iterative process that begins early in the career of an officer. It is a product of the collective experiences and influences of a leader which are flavored by interpretations of leadership theory.

The philosophy, itself, is comprised of a set of concepts or components. Included among these are ethics,

evaluation criteria, a system of rewards and punishment, values, quality of life, caring, values, communications flow, standards of conduct, performance standards, thoughts on honesty and integrity, discipline and professional development. A leader's thoughts about these topics transcend geographical locations and are applicable at all organizational and unit levels. Therefore once developed, the refined product can typically go with the leader as he moves from unit to unit in either a command or staff position. They remain relevant at each of these levels.

Commanders at all levels are encouraged to have a command philosophy. In most instances it is written; however it may only be stated orally. Written command philosophies would seem to have the advantage of clarity and consistency. To enhance its readability, brevity is also desirable in the command philosophy. The most important point is that the philosophy be specific, focused, constant and a true reflection of the commander's beliefs. Once articulated these principles and thoughts become an extension of the commander. It is a reflection of his personality and leadership style and is an instrument for "knowing what the boss stands for and what he or she wants."

All leaders begin formulating a command philosophy at the very beginning of their career. Basic principles are formulated early and undergo modification mainly through an

iterative, incremental, and educational function.

Therefore, junior leaders should be formally exposed to the command philosophy development process initially during the schooling process and each stage thereafter. Since it is transportable, this will help ensure commanders enter successive levels of command with greater certainty of possessing a well-developed, meaningful, and credible command philosophy.

The command climate of an organization is created by the commander. The well-developed command philosophy is an essential tool in creating a healthy, positive command climate leading to a combat-ready unit.

ENDNOTES

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7. Army Command and Management, p. 5-7.
8. I received similar advice from three of my former commanders prior to assuming battalion command.
9. Colonel Samuel H. Mays and Lieutenant Colonel William N. Thomas, eds., Taking Command, The Art and Science of Military Leadership, Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, PA, 1967, p. 169.
10. Lloyd J. Matthews and Dale E. Brown, eds., The Challenge of Military Leadership, Pergamon-Brassey's, Washington, 1989, p.9.
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14. U.S. Army Infantry School and Center, "Command Philosophies of Ft. Benning," Leadership Training to Command, Fort Benning, GA, 1988, pp. 1-72.

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