

Chapter 2

Mission Command

Introduction

Among the many ‘enhancements’ included in Enhanced MAGTF Operations (EMO) are continuing improvements to our leader development process that incorporate emerging ideas to adapt to current or anticipated operational demands. MCDP-1 *Warfighting*, widely recognized as the foundation of the Marine Corps’ philosophy of maneuver warfare is steeped in the ethos of mission command and provides a solid doctrinal base for integrating this leadership methodology into all aspects of our training, garrison and combat activities.

Purpose

Mission Command builds on the foundational wisdom of MCDP-1 *Warfighting* and MCDP-6 *Command and Control* to provide insight and guidance to institutional and operational leaders on combat leadership development and application. While the Marine Corps can take justifiable pride in the application of mission orders and the decentralization of command in current operations, it is widely recognized that there remains significant room for improvement in the application of our command philosophy in both garrison and combat. Mission Command is designed to provide a more explicit narrative of the virtues and value of command by influence, with the expectation that it will inform Marines of the continuous duty to establish a leadership climate of trust, mutual understanding and professional respect that enhances combat effectiveness. Based on leader character, Mission Command offers no checklist for success, but instead challenges our Corps to cultivate a bias for action in subordinate leaders and accentuate the senior leadership virtues of trust, moral courage and restraint. A Marine Corps that boldly incorporates the tenets of Mission Command into our institutional ethos will be better able to adapt and achieve advantage in complex and uncertain operational environments.

Defining Mission Command

MCDP-1 *Warfighting* describes the Marine Corps philosophy of command. Key ideas include: decentralized decision making to accelerate tempo and gain initiative, mission tactics, a human approach centered on exploiting “human traits such as boldness, initiative, personality, strength of will and imagination,” implicit communications through mutual understanding, shared philosophy and experience, commanders forward—especially at the point of decision, shared danger and privation, professional trust, familiar relationships and the ability to thrive in an environment of chaos, uncertainty and friction. The term Mission Command is meant to encompass this broad description, but ultimately we will be pressed for a definition that succinctly captures the essential purpose of mission command, even if in being concise it omits a more holistic description.

Incorporating new ideas from the emerging field of operational design, the evolving Army definition of Mission Command reflects the emphasis the Army Capstone Concept places on decentralized operations and adaptability. “The art and science of integrating the warfighting functions and synchronizing forces to understand, visualize, design, describe, lead, assess, and adapt decentralized operations to accomplish the mission within the broad purpose of higher commanders’ intent. Mission Command includes empowering the lowest possible echelon with the combined arms capabilities, competency, and authority to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative.”

Attempting to more closely integrate Mission Command philosophy into service ethos, stress the predatory nature of entrepreneurship in combat and identify the importance of cohesion, the evolving Marine Corps definition of Mission Command is crafted in accord with maneuverist thought.

Mission Command is the leadership philosophy that compliments and supports the maneuver warfare philosophy of the Marine Corps. Rooted in service culture and fundamental to our warrior spirit, Mission Command is a cultivated leadership ethos that empowers decentralized leaders with decision authority and guides the character development of Marines in garrison and combat. Mission Command promotes an entrepreneurial

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mindset and enables the strong relationships of trust and mutual understanding necessary for decentralized decision making and the tempo of operations required to seize the initiative, degrade enemy cohesion and strengthen our own cohesive relationships in the crucible of combat.

These definitions all illuminate the evolving idea of Mission Command and contribute to a growing joint understanding of how command philosophy influences decision makers to achieve advantage and accomplish mission objectives.

Describing Mission Command

Mission Command is a command and control philosophy based on the principle of “command by influence.” In *Command in War* Martin Van Creveld identifies three principle genres of command philosophies: Command by Direction, Command by Plan and Command by Influence. Of the three, Command by Influence is the most complex, but also the most counter-intuitive. Most military forces incorporate some elements of command by influence into their command and control philosophy, but to what degree does Mission Command influence the organizational ethos and resulting capability of the force.

The primary characteristic of command by influence is ***decentralization of command with empowered subordinates exercising initiative in accord with the superior commander’s intent.*** We will augment this core characteristic with other aspects of decentralized combat decision making. It is important to note that Mission Command evolved in tandem with maneuverist philosophy. Maneuver warfare seeks not only to capture militarily significant objectives and destroy the enemy force and material, but to simultaneously “*shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.*” The maneuverist strives to *take the initiative in both the physical and cognitive domains* and asserts the critical importance of tempo and surprise to gain the initiative and compromise enemy cohesion.

Leadership

The wisdom and ethos of Mission Command should define our leadership and inspire our Corps in all endeavors. As leaders, we must understand that the quality of our leadership is rooted in character not method. The moral qualities necessary for establishing the relationships that sustain a climate conducive to mission command place great demands on the courage and character of leaders. Personal fortitude is the foundation underpinning the relationships that promote unit cohesion and combat effectiveness. Mission Command is more than a leadership philosophy; it is about relationships founded in fortitude and nurtured in trust that enable Marines to thrive where others would flounder. Through mission command we can prevail over men bounded by lesser mutual expectation and weaker service ethos. Fundamentally, mission command is dependent upon leaders with the spirit to risk and the moral courage to trust. Mission Command thrives where mutual understanding and trust outweigh the sum of all fears.

Mission Command is founded on the human qualities of trust and mutual understanding that inspire individual and small unit initiative. Professional expectation and dutiful initiative energize subordinates and allow them to take action to accomplish assigned missions (tasks) in accord with commander's intent (purpose). As a method of operational level command and control, Mission Command is dependent on the individual character and reciprocal relationships developed between leaders. The salient features and benefits of the Mission Command philosophy are:

- Enhanced speed of decision or agility of action based on decentralized decision makers closer to the tactical edge where direct observation and cultivated situational awareness enhance military judgment.
- An entrepreneurial spirit focused on developing and exploiting tactical and operational opportunity.
- Greater opportunity to gain and maintain the initiative through greater speed and fidelity of action produced by more numerous decision makers generating and exploiting fleeting opportunity.

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- The opportunity to gain advantage by degrading enemy cohesion through numerous rapid and unexpected actions.
- Preserving the cohesion of friendly forces through relationships strengthened by trust, professional respect and mutual understanding.
- The enhanced situational awareness of empowered small unit decision makers enabling greater fidelity in planning and dexterity in execution.
- Decentralization that enables more numerous points of engagement over a wider battlespace to control terrain and to influence and protect populations.

Like any effective command and control philosophy, Mission Command must be in accord with the nature of war and human nature, reflect our warfighting philosophy, contribute to resolving current or future operational problems and leverage to advantage unique qualities of the people it serves.

Mission Command leverages the unique nature of the American people. Americans are entrepreneurs. Our culture values and rewards calculated risk takers who expend great initiative to develop and exploit opportunity. Could an emphasis on decentralization, empowerment of subordinates and exploitation of opportunity generate a disproportionate increase in combat power? Historic contrast between mission command guided forces and more centralized C2 structures indicates we have much untapped potential within our grasp.

Entrepreneurial spirit is supported by a Mission Command philosophy that is focused on developing and exploiting tactical and operational opportunity. The role of vision, personal will, dynamic creativity, initiative, intuition, risk acceptance and pragmatism as enabling leadership competencies are essential as we move forward.

Mission Command accounts for the nature of war by acknowledging uncertainty as a fundamental characteristic. To resolve this inherent

uncertainty we distribute empowered decision makers to the point of action in order to discern the situation, gain better awareness, and act. Decentralized organizations are inherently more resilient and capable of timely adaptation than those with more hierarchical and centralized decision processes. Decision makers close to the tactical edge will be able to more rapidly develop or exploit opportunity and if given appropriate authority, can take timely and effective action. Dexterity and fidelity of action are also enhanced by decentralization, so commanders are more likely to not only do the right thing, but to do things right. The unclear nature of the future operational environment disallows for any degree of certainty in preparing for future conflict—but investment in developing a culture and command climate of mission command will better enable appropriate adaptation to any operational challenge.

Mission Command accounts for human nature by acknowledging *human will as the deciding factor in battle* and identifying ‘cohesion’ as the critical vulnerability to our success. Human will and cohesion are common to all collective human endeavors conducted amid the risk, danger, violence and uncertainty of war. Our object is to “shatter enemy cohesion” through surprise, speed and violence, and strengthen and insulate our own cohesion from enemy action by emphasizing the trust and mutual understanding between commanders that doubly bond unity of command. Our understanding of C2 is fundamentally about intent and relationships, vice hierarchical control and technological means. Consequently, commanders who lose communications and are physically isolated are expected to continue to act with confidence in accordance with commander’s intent. For this reason we assert that *Mission Command is the sword and shield of cohesion*.

Institutionalizing Mission Command

Institutional changes that promote Mission Command include:

- Adopting and formalizing the traits of Trust, Moral Courage and Restraint that inspire, enable and reinforce a bias for action in subordinates.

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- Establishing a training environment that allows for ‘white space’ in the schedule for subordinates to develop unit cohesion and compels them to exercise judgment and creativity in training.
- Leadership development that challenges and embraces failure to evaluate character, fortitude and resiliency of personality in conditions of adversity.

Operationalizing Mission Command

Operational commanders can effectively integrate Mission Command into operational art, planning and execution by:

- Cultivating a leadership climate that empowers subordinate leaders and lowers the decision-authority threshold.
- Developing cohesive and reciprocal relationships of trust and mutual understanding among subordinates.
- Promoting a service culture that values calculated risk as the means to generate opportunity.
- Incorporating design methodology to promote understanding and visualization of the problem and purpose.
- Creating a command climate that values the shared assessment of subordinate, adjacent and senior commanders to enhance understanding and promote adaptation.
- Promulgating timely vision, intent and guidance.
- Enabling subordinate commanders exercise wide latitude in accomplishing mission objectives within senior commander’s purpose and intent.
- Integration of warfighting functions and synchronization (coordination) of forces to empower the lowest practical echelon

with combined arms capabilities.

- Encouraging an entrepreneurial mindset focused on gaining advantage and degrading enemy cohesion.

Achieving Operational Advantage

By decentralizing tactical decision authority the operational commander gains many advantages, among them are:

- ***Gaining the Initiative.*** Many decision makers making more timely and dexterous decisions closer to the point of action generates more opportunities for exploitation. The rapidity of decisions that Mission Command and decentralization enables can overwhelm a centralized adversary's ability to react. Not only does decentralization enable speed of decision, but it also enhances decision detail and enables greater agility in action. When speed is of lesser importance, as may be the case in counter-insurgency (COIN) operations, trading speed for enhanced precision can also produce advantage. Rarely can a superbly trained and more experience senior make more timely and apt decisions from remote locations than many adequate subordinates who have refined situational awareness at the point of action. The *primacy of proximity* guides mission command.
- ***Generating Feedback Loops.*** By decentralizing command decisions the operational commander unleashes tactical commanders to pressure the enemy or influence the situation at more points of tactical action in accord with his intent. The distributed units also serve as 'observers' who gain situational awareness and report on commander's critical information requirements (CCIR) and other actionable information. After the mission-directed action is taken by a subordinate, he reports back to the senior not only the action taken, but on any unforeseen, unintended or 'emergent' results. Attentive subordinates constantly providing detailed situational awareness (SA) across the operational area, provide the operational commander the opportunity to more quickly discern enemy patterns, better

understand the nature of the problem and provide more effective planning and operational guidance at each step of the design and planning process. This understanding of command relationships places great emphasis on the '*reciprocal relationship*' that bonds commanders rather than hierarchical chains that might shackle them. It recognizes the need for the senior to be attentive to the information, ideas and insights coming from the tactical edge.

- ***Decision Advantage.*** Mission Command is not predicated on more brilliant commanders or troops and does not presume an intellectual or innate cognitive superiority over adversaries. Superiority is *achieved* by exploiting subordinate initiative to control tempo, dictate terms of engagement and realize *incremental advantage* across a wide array of activities and functions that *cumulatively* lead to a deteriorating enemy situation and cause loss of coherence and cohesion that can lead to disproportionate result. The MAGTF commander and his staff establish the **context and command philosophy** that enables information flow, pattern recognition, speed of decision, and effectiveness of action in a decentralized environment. By their every action, question and requirement they convey the expectation and intent that encourages the creativeness required to exploit opportunity and thrive in complex operations. Decision advantage is achieved by establishing conditions that enable cohesive relationships that are resilient in conditions of adversity, austerity, danger and the inherent uncertainty and chaos of combat.

Characteristics of Mission Command

- ***War Compels Adaptive Learning.*** The inherent uncertainty of war, combined with our adversary's reaction to our initiative and simultaneous actions to disguise his capabilities and intentions, make war risky, unpredictable and highly susceptible to chance. While calculated risk can mitigate chance, even the most skilled decision maker operating under the time competitive pressures of combat will make mistakes. Therefore there is a need to develop and select leaders who know how to learn, are used to making mistakes and are capable of generating new opportunities amid

setbacks. (Grant at Shiloh vs. Hooker at Chancellorsville) Because mistakes are inevitable amid the high risk and uncertainty of combat, commanders must be capable of discerning the patterns that led to mistakes and avoid them in the future. To the degree practical, shared experience—especially lessons hard earned—should be promulgated laterally as quickly as possible so that the learning curve of the entire organization is elevated by the creativity or misfortune of individual units.

- ***Continuous Training.*** Operational commanders should expect that deployed units will be trained and ready. However, it is the commander's responsibility to generate the opportunities necessary for task organized units to become a cohesive expeditionary force. Training and discussions about tactics invite senior leaders to develop professional expectation and a sense of personal commitment by subordinates entrusted with exercising their operational vision. History buffs will identify Admiral Lord Nelson's dinners with his fleet captains aboard his flagship while at sea as important contributors to the "Nelson Touch." Different, but similar efforts to develop personal relationships of trust and professional respect are essential to success in combat operations. Professional development should educate leaders on the need for continuous professional engagement and shared educational experiences among commanders and subordinates at every level, even during the conduct of combat operations.

Senior Leadership Traits

Mission Command asserts new senior leadership traits of *TRUST*, *MORAL COURAGE* and *RESTRAINT* to compliment the classic leadership traits and principles. These senior leadership traits are designed to promote those qualities of character in senior leaders that enable initiative, innovation and a bias for action to thrive among subordinates. The trust and mutual understanding developed in training allows dutiful subordinates to know what is expected of them and how their actions integrate into the wider purpose of the commander's vision. Once confident that subordinates know how to innovate an appropriate action based on commonly discussed principles, *commanders must display the moral courage and exercise the restraint that unleashes the*

innovative potential of subordinates conditioned by a creative spirit, to strive for advantage and wrest the initiative from a determined foe, or take effective action in chaotic and complex situations.

Moral courage conveys the moral strength, emotional resiliency and predatory calculation that steels resolve and tempers impatience. It is the ability to absorb great pressure and to master emotion with composed judgment. Moral courage is a quality of character that enables other leadership traits to thrive amid danger and violence under the weight of command. It steadies leader confidence and distinguishes those self-assured enough to invite criticism, listen to subordinates, learn from all, while avoiding arrogance.

Just as Mission Command must permeate our culture in both garrison and combat, so too the moral qualities of mission command must be exercised and exemplified in both peace and war. In garrison and training leader's moral courage combines with *restraint* to unleash subordinates to train to failure, make mistakes and develop their decision making skills. Moral courage embraces risk, vice merely tolerating it.

Risk as Military Virtue

Risk is a military virtue. "He who dares not risk cannot win" and "victory belongs to the bold" capture the spirit of moral courage that must animate the character of joint leaders. Calculated risk is not reckless, it is the recognition that in war nothing is assured and that friction and chance can radically influence events; yet advantage can be gained through relentless efforts to generate, recognize and exploit opportunity in a timely manner. Risk calculation and acceptance is a complex problem that confronts commanders in both the intellectual and moral dimensions. Risk cannot be eliminated, nor in pursuit of the utopian battlespace should we seek to do so. Risk is a component of resolve, and inherent to the entrepreneurial spirit promoted by *Mission Command embraces calculated risk to generate opportunity*.

Conclusion

Mission Command is not a panacea. Nor is the formal adoption of a “policy” of Mission Command sufficient to make a quick difference in operational capability. The leadership habits of Mission Command can not be “trained” into a force, but must be more subtly “imbued” by the words and example of confident leaders—cultivated over time. The long history of human conflict is punctuated with exceptionally capable forces sustained beyond mortal limits by leaders and warriors welded in purpose by Mission Command. Anticipating the demand for future operational effectiveness compels resolute effort toward a deepened Corps ethos of Mission Command today.