



Bureaucracy & Mission Command: Reform the Army Personnel System to Embrace Mission Command

By Maj. John Q. Bolton and Cpt. Derek Merkler

If I had asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse.

-- Henry Ford

As doctrine, Mission Command codifies principles of decentralized operations. After a decade of decentralized operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, one could assume that the mentality of mission command was already in place. By enshrining these principles in doctrine, however, Gen. Dempsey and the writers of Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, exhibited foresight in recognizing that the institutional Army, though in a seemingly perpetual state of transformation, is inherently slow to adjust. Mission command, however, requires more than a veneer of adjustment and “declaring victory.”¹ The Army should continue examining fundamental aspects of itself to fully inculcate mission command. We cannot proclaim mission command as a fundamental principle of Army operations while simultaneously employing systems anchored in the past. An overriding priority must be reforming the Army personnel system, which inhibits Mission command by emphasizing management over leadership, shuffling personnel problematically, encouraging micromanagement, rigidly formalizing career paths, and failing to consider individuals.

The Army requires a modern talent management system that supports and instills the principles of mission command, specifically enabling the creation of mutual trust, shared understanding, and disciplined initiative. Additionally, Officers need a system that astutely identifies and considers an officer’s unique (not special) skills, attributes, and qualifications as a part of the assignments process. Failing to do so will lead to the precepts of Mission Command, and professionalism in general, being “lost in transmission.”²

The personnel system is ripe for change. Nearly every aspect of the current personnel system was designed in the 1950s and only marginally refined in the 1980s. Not only is it out of date, but antithetical to mission command as envisioned in ADP 6-0 and the Army Operating Concept. Indeed, modern business journals routinely criticize inflexible personnel policies:

The command and control mindset, a mainstay of traditional organizations, doesn’t yield the kind of nimble, responsive results a complex, fast changing world requires. It (the command and control mindset) depends on hierarchy and a chain of command rather than relationship, dialogue, and trust.³

Some writers in various blogs and journals such as *Parameters* have suggested reforms to the personnel system. But these concepts miss the point: the personnel system is the cause, not a symptom, of the Army’s inability to truly adopt mission command. An emphasis on techno-bureaucracy—where efficiency and better processes are paramount—“obscures the larger issue of strategic failure, which efficient management will not ameliorate.”⁴

While working well with simple, well-defined tasks, bureaucracies “fail to acknowledge the value of leadership... They tend to stifle initiative and innovation.”⁵ This is not a criticism of HRC personnel; it is a critique of a system that ignores or undervalues uniqueness, talent, and non-standard competence in favor of a 1950s industrialist mentality. Only by challenging the fundamental assumptions of its personnel system can the Army fully embrace mission command. Failing to change the personnel system reduces mission command to superficiality, style without substance. To ensure successful adoption the Army personnel system must emphasize leadership over management, significantly reduce personnel turnover and adjust the assignments process and career timelines to focus on creating superior combat units, and capture and act on the distinctive skills of officers. It also needs a permanent cadre of human resources professionals to usher in a modern system of personnel management.



Leaders vs. Managers

While Army doctrine espouses leadership, its personnel system is overwhelmingly bureaucratic and, therefore, prefers managers. Neither ADRP 6-0 nor ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership*, describes management; in fact, neither publication even uses the word management, except with the prefixes of risk, knowledge, and supply. ADRP 6-22 mentions it only to describe that leaders limit “overspecification and micromanagement.”⁶

In *Leading Change*, John Kotter uses the following definitions:

Management is a set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly...important aspects include planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem solving...

Leadership... creates organizations in the first place or adapts them to significantly changing circumstances. Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen.

From prescribing career timelines to managing unit assignments and promotions from afar, Army personnel policies implemented through Human Resources Command (HRC) contradict the fundamentals of mission command. This has had the effect of creating what Maj. Jason Warren calls “a centurion mindset.”

[Roman Centurions], combining the command authority of a contemporary company commander with the experience of a sergeant major who directed tactics... [Gen. Creighton] Abrams epitomized the tactically centered centurion paradigm, and it is no small irony the US main battle tank bears his name. In his mold, well-meaning but misguided Army leaders of the post-World War II era, have championed tactical career progression that stunted officer strategic broadening, and ensured the rise of centurions often incapable of performing as true “generalists.”⁸

The personnel system, particularly its centralized boards and prescribed career timelines, fosters careerism. Since boards are only truly concerned with the senior rater comments on evaluation reports, rather than a whole-person concept, a careerist mindset prevails. Simply by their structure and composition, boards will inevitably choose people who had similar career tracks. Though there are exceptions, the centralized boards have become an obstacle to Army cultural change because they elevate congruent personality types. Despite what doctrine says, such a system cannot successfully husband a culture of mission command.

Personnel Turnover

Mission command espouses a mindset among leaders that the best understanding comes from the bottom-up.⁹ This mindset is important, as is the time required to develop it and the requisite trust. Incessant turnover in a unit makes this difficult. Army doctrine considers a unit destroyed if it sustains 30% casualties.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Army routinely exceeds that level of turnover as “a matter of policy.”¹¹ The rate of personnel turnover—the legacy of the draftee Army—creates turbulence. This system largely persists due to a managerial mentality of Army personnel policy that insists instead on treating people like identical spare parts.¹²

In this system, positions held is paramount. Education through osmosis matters more than the particulars of each experience, with time in position as the overriding factor. The system enables the worst aspects of careerism: a by the numbers culture that treats Soldiers as indistinct, incapable of contributing in unique ways.¹³ For officers, passage through the system has become a modern *cursus honorum*, moving rapidly between jobs in order to meet promotion gates.¹⁴ While DA Pamphlet 600-3, the officer career guide, emphasizes the importance of “broadening experiences,” only Key and Developmental (KD) positions have associated durations. This creates a “check the block” or careerist mentality at worst.

At the end of the day, if I ask a PFC ‘Would you go to [Combat, NTC, XYZ] with 1st Lt. Jones again?’ and he



answers 'yes' I find that almost a better assessment of the 1st Lt. than the prefabricated Senior Rater comments.

--Anonymous resigning captain

With such single-mindedness about specific positions, officers do not favor non-traditional or broadening jobs, despite statements of importance in both doctrine, publications, and from senior leaders. Why should they when the system emphasizes KD and other operational jobs? Further damaging is a “cog in the machine” mentality exhibited at HRC; branch managers must get nearly every officer a turn in a limited supply of KD billets, resulting in high personnel turnover. In doing so, HRC meets goals at the expense of operational units. Rapid turnover undermines both personal development and unit competence, instead creating turbulence. Rather than focusing on unit effectiveness and personal development, rigid time marks ensure each officer, regardless of competence, gets the minimum time in KD positions. Ironically, the focus on KD jobs actually degrades officer competence. Rather than give the best opportunities to the most qualified officers—for example, the bottom 10% Captain's Career Course graduates do not command—the system works to get everyone a turn. This results in company commanders and key staff (XO/S3) in place for just twelve or eighteen months respectively.

ADRP 6-0 states that developing trust takes time: “Building trust with unified action partners and key leaders requires significant effort by commanders and staffs to overcome differences in cultures, mandates, and organizational capabilities.”¹⁵ The capriciousness of the personnel system denies commanders and staff this time. Once the personnel bureaucracy takes hold, units end up with “command queues,” a concept anathema to the profession of arms; command is a privilege to be earned, not queued. Command queues reduce the value of staff positions by implying that they are merely holding pens. Limited time in command devalues a crucible experience.

Army personnel policies directly contradict some of the best examples of long-term corporate leadership such as Jack Welch's twenty-year tenure as CEO of General Electric. Short periods in command and key staff positions do not allow officers to develop significant experience, regardless of unit activities. No book highlighting organizational leadership from Jack Welch to George Marshall espouses the time to achieve major change in terms of months; it takes years.

Though twenty years is a stretch for company and battalion commanders, extending commands to three to four years is perfectly reasonable. The current system contradicts Kotter's 8-Step Model taught at the Command & General Staff College. Kotter argues leaders must anchor any change within organizational culture because “cultural change comes last, not first.” At the unit-level, this process of change cannot occur within the confines of 18-month commands. Critical to organizational change is generating short-term wins and locking in long-term success.¹⁶ Requiring longer commands is an easy solution.

Ceaseless turnover destroys a unit's distinguishing “corporate identity.”¹⁷ This is a long-term issue for Army units, but the ARFORGEN cycle, while meeting manning requirements, also reduced leadership continuity by rotating commanders, key staff, and senior NCOs just before deployments. At best, units deployed with new leadership having experienced one training center rotation.¹⁸ At worst, units deployed with leadership that did not participate in any collective training.

For example, the 1st Infantry Aviation Brigade transitioned the brigade commander, every battalion commander, 60% of company commanders, twenty of thirty-two first sergeants, and nearly 50% of XO/S3 positions in the six months' prior a nine-month deployment to Afghanistan in 2013.¹⁹ This situation is not uncommon. In fact, it is rare for a team larger than a battalion to spend significant time working together. Regardless of the competence of these leaders, it is unrealistic to assume unit collective proficiency, not to mention camaraderie, can endure massive turnover, yet the Army does so routinely, upending even the best units in order to meet artificial demands.

[People we want] don't want to stay because they get tired of being around stupid people. They get frustrated, they get tired of beating their head against the wall. [They say] 'You guys won't listen to me, I'm outta here.'

--Gen. Robert Neller, USMC
APOJ 3



Micromanagement

Turnover inevitably creates organizational introversion and micromanagement. “Micromanagement is the nemesis of Mission Command, discouraging subordinates from exercising the freedom of action (disciplined initiative) required.”²⁰ Units engage in “firefighting,” an endless cycle of time-consuming, but trivial, actions that produce ineffective results. Without the most dynamic leadership, organizations revert to basic proficiency and minimal goals. In contrast to the commander-centric environment described in ADRP 6-0, turnover empowers staffs—and bureaucracy—at the expense of commanders. Various staff officers, cells, and working groups end up working for each other, rather than focusing on the commander’s intent at each level. The predominance of staffs over commanders is the most pernicious aspect of this trend: “the battalion’s staff ends up working more for the brigade staff than for their own commanders, and battalion commanders [find] themselves subordinate to the brigade staff [as well].”²¹ Mission command requires an environment of mutual trust.²² Without time to create this environment, units focus on compliance instead of performance.

Rapid turnover creates perverse incentives by placing officers in positions just long enough to receive an evaluation, but not garner responsibility for the long-term success of the unit. These careerist incentives corrode trust, the critical element of mission command. It also causes units to confuse action with activity, prioritizing urgency over long-term unit health and developing teams. Leaders lack credibility within organizations as well as ownership of long-term consequences since they move on before their policies truly take effect. A recent War College report noted:

Many Army officers, after repeated exposure to the overwhelming demands and the associated need to put their honor on the line to verify compliance, have become ethically numb. Consequently, an officer’s signature and word have become bureaucratic tools rather than being symbols of integrity and honesty.²³

Many of these findings can be attributed to an Army culture focused on managerial success (readiness, personnel trained, numerous but less than substantive metrics) as opposed to leader results (collective proficiency, professional honesty). The Army personnel system enables this environment in which “[deception] is encouraged and sanctioned by the military institution.”²⁴

I would visit a forward operating base in Afghanistan, and here would be a U.S. Army captain commanding 100 U.S. troops, training 100 Afghan troops, bulldozing roads, building schools, negotiating with the tribal elders, and fighting the Taliban, and having the opportunity to be innovative, entrepreneurial, creative, making decisions. [I would tell the generals], you bring those young people back and put them in a cubicle doing PowerPoints, you’re going to lose them... How do you keep these young people, who are accustomed to living at the pace of the digital age, and put them into these big organizations that move at glacial paces?

–Fmr. Secretary Of Defense Robert Gates

Army Career Tracks, Promotions, and Careerism

Maj. Warren’s article acknowledges the worth in a broadening education: “While simply promoting leaders with advanced degrees to the highest levels will not guarantee success, officers broadly educated can better inform strategic discourse, having had their intellectual abilities expanded to think deeply and widely about complex issues.”²⁵ Warren contends that rigid, centurion-producing career tracks have produced an anti-intellectual officer corps in which “no current four-star generals have doctorate degrees, only one maintains a masters from a top-tier civilian university, and only one serving lieutenant general holds a PhD.”²⁶ Moreover, the Army’s focus on career tracking and tactics, has bred a generation of officers overwhelmingly competent at completing tasks, but not thinking strategically. For years the National Training Center provided tough, realistic training, though the scenario was undoubtedly a “conventional engagement, necessarily bounded in time and space by the astrategic parameters of the training area” where officers demonstrated competence by synchronizing maneuver and firepower.²⁷ NTC’s artificiality simplified the complexities of warfare into a problem-solving scenario, where firepower and tactics was the main means to success.



Coupled with career tracks, the Army's tactical focus created a successively narrow-minded officers. Though recent modest reforms such as sabbaticals, assignment outside of an officer's career field, or increased opportunities for graduate study are a good sign, the personnel system as a whole remains unchanged and wedded to a tactical, linear focus.

A major problem is the prescriptive nature of DA Pamphlet 600-3.²⁸ To be sure, officers need general guidance in their career in order to develop goals and manage expectations. Nevertheless, the restrictive career tracks contrast directly with the varied, non-linear experiences of officers like Marshall, Eisenhower, Stilwell and Powell.

The system focuses on placing officers in KD positions, but then keeps them there for such a short time as to nearly mitigate the benefits of the experience. With such a focus on specific positions, it is unrealistic for HRC to steer offers toward non-traditional or broadening jobs. Branch managers try to get everyone into just a few KD jobs, exacerbating personnel turnover. In doing so—focusing on process, rather than people— HRC meets goals at the expense of operational units.

Finally, centralized promotions are reactive in nature. HRC corrects errors in year-group populations though wildly fluctuating promotion rates. Allowing officers to simply change year groups is not an option. Boards were introduced to eliminate favoritism, but they have the pernicious effect of driving performance toward a lowest common denominator. Rampant exaggeration of performance evaluations, rather than honest assessments, are a clear indicator that the system has flaws. This methodology promotes poor performers to under-strength ranks and fails to promote officers with high potential to over-strength ranks, all based on the year the officer entered service.

Skills, Abilities, and Goals of the Individual

Currently, HRC cannot achieve personalized assignments and development of officers for two reasons. First, talent, in the form of skills, knowledge, behaviors, is not captured, except for a narrow band of skill identifiers. The system is limited to educational and training history and perfunctory military skills. An individual's one-page record brief does not capture unique skills outside of training and language. Second, neither educational skills nor experience are necessarily aligned with Army needs. HRC does not align an officer's degree to his or her branch; the Army only cares about the paper, not the content. Consider an officer with a family background in Asia with an international relations degree. He or she is a perfect candidate for assignment to Europe; however, HRC will not make that connection.

When 2nd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division deployed multiple teams to Africa over two years, soldiers developed some of the cross-cultural skills that the Army requires. However, no "records besides anything that captured on an evaluation was recorded [by HRC] from the [Africa] personnel...We tried to consolidate the historical record of the deployments... but even just one year after the deployment only a few of the key leaders were still in the brigade."²⁹ Modification of HRC systems could have captured the experiences of each soldier. For example, in addition to the skill identifiers, a more personal skills and goals section could supplement the ORB. In other words, a CV or resume like document to supplant the ERB/ORB. Likewise, career managers spending more than two years at HRC could leverage these unique attributes and experiences.

Bureaucracy Fights Back

A 2015 *Military Review* op-ed by Lt. Col. Frost, a former HRC assignments officer, demonstrates HRC's managerial viewpoint. The author believes that many officers are "ignorant" of the personnel system and "display a level of arrogance that suggests they believe their talents warrant special treatment."³⁰ She explains officers' "ignorance" of constraints imposed on HRC, but that is exactly the point. No matter how well HRC manages officers, they still operate within the confines of a mid-20th system designed more for factory production than producing adaptive leaders who can "win in a complex world."³¹



Modern talent management does not consist of seeking out only those that are ‘special’ or members of the top 5%; it consists of identifying personal and professional values, skills, and attributes. Frost is correct when she states, “Qualities the Officer Corps desires are moral courage, emotional intelligence, and innate devotion to duty.” she made this statement to defend current policies as somehow different from those of corporate executives.³² However, if emotional intelligence is so critical, then why does HRC fail to identify, qualify, or quantify it? Moreover, why are these supposedly desired values not explicitly codified in official publications like DA Pamphlet 600-3?³³

Devotion to duty does not equal acceptance of a misaligned system; one’s membership in the profession does not necessitate accepting folly inherent in personnel policies. If anything, true professionals acknowledge problems while striving to align the system with professional values.

Structure of HRC

These problems are not creations of the people working at HRC. They are hardworking and understanding; they do their best to manage each officer year-group. However, HRC personnel operate within the confines of a myopic, outdated bureaucracy. They are also, for the most part, not human resources professionals. Assignment officers typically fill a billet at HRC for two to three years; they receive no specialized human resources training but are simply senior members of the population they manage. This creates distant, temporary relationships.

HRC personnel have little to no knowledge of each individual’s wants, needs, desires, nor their particular skills, aptitudes, or interests outside of the narrow confines of the Army-specific ORB/ERB. As it currently exists, HRC cannot meet the cognitive, physical, and social goals of the Army’s Human Dimension Concept.³⁴ HRC’s practices directly contradict the business practices of many Fortune 500 companies, who nearly all have professional Human Resource Departments designed to “get and keep enough of the right people” and put them in the best opportunities to take advantage of their unique, not special, skills, attributes, and abilities.³⁵

Recommendations

For the Army to fully embed the concepts of mission command into its culture at all echelons and support mission command going forward, it must decentralize the assignments process, strive to minimize turnover, place the right officers in the right positions, and create permanent career manager positions at HRC. One of the key concepts in Jim Collins’ *Good to Great* is “First Who, Then What.” Collins’ found that building the effective teams— “getting the right people on the bus”— was actually more important than figuring out where the organization should go. With the right people, problems of motivation subside. They will also be able to succeed despite changes to a unit’s mission. Collins’ final point in this section is that with the wrong people in an organization, it will fail regardless of the circumstances.³⁶

With the concept of “First Who, Then What” in mind, the assignments process should be adjusted to more closely replicate the hiring process used outside government. The end state for this change is that unit commanders have the opportunity to choose their subordinates and individual officers have the opportunity to apply for specific jobs. Other tenets of this change include tying rank to position and limiting turnover to officers’ desire to change positions and/or rise in rank.

Introducing modern human resources management principles into personnel management could leverage unique skills and increase unit readiness. For example, an infantry Lieutenant (Lt. Jones) desires to command an infantry company. Using some sort of Army job listing application or his relationship with his HRC career manager, Lt. Jones identifies open positions at preferred locations and applies for the positions. The respective battalion commanders would review the Lt. Jones’ file, conduct interviews, and offer or not offer a position based on that process. As an example, say a battalion commander at Fort Drum selects Lt. Jones to command Alpha Company. Lt. Jones would take command of Alpha Company and immediately rise in rank to Captain based on the increased responsibility and expectations of the position. Cpt. Jones, along with the other selected commanders and staff in



the battalion, would remain in position for the foreseeable future, fostering a climate of mission command and providing those officers the opportunity and time to build the battalion into a trained, effective, and deployable unit. We must also note that a similar system already exists in many Army National Guard units.

By tying an officer's rank to the position held, the Army could both eliminate its obsession with time in grade and its up or out mentality. With rank associated with position, the need for year groups, key development time, promotion boards, and command queues goes away. The free market of career opportunities driven by individual officer desires and the needs of individual units and their commanders would ensure that positions are optimally filled with officers who are motivated and hold the requisite skillset, a claim that the current officer management system cannot make. Furthermore, by not forcing officers to rise in rank or leave, the Army will gain tremendous experience at the junior officer level, retaining the currently forsaken group of officers who are tremendous performers at the company or battalion staff levels but lack potential for higher positions. The current up or out system does not allow for any flexibility. In fact, the concept of a market-based system of assignments is anathema to the current personnel system.

Second, HRC needs a permanent staff to develop effective relationships with the operational force. Long-term career managers, similar to how many large firms such as Toyota maintain continuity with executives and shepherd them through a career. Permanent staffs also help form a bulwark against "flavor of the day" initiatives in a way that temporary assignment officers cannot. Professional personnel cadres could recognize those attributes, more effectively matching personnel with opportunities. Long-term relationships with your assignment officer would also greatly enhance the value of HRC unit visits, since they would facilitate face-to-face contact.

Conclusion

Mission command is the right solution for an Army seeking to "win in a complex world." That said, do we really have the stomach for what is required? Adopting mission command requires fundamentally changing the Army's institutional culture and personnel policies. Mission command concepts such as maximizing initiative, devolving authority, and establishing trust already exist within tactical units, but the machinations of the Army personnel system hinder its full implementation. Adjusting Army culture and organizational policies to suit mission command requires a seismic shift.

Ironically, the shift toward mission command may be much easier than it may seem, because the personnel system is the bedrock of Army Culture. Getting policies right will implicitly encourage mission command in units. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan provides the contextual evidence that mission command can succeed. The "cultural software" and experience is already in place.³⁷ The Army must reinforce this culture to create the next generation of leaders able to employ mission command. The Army must begin by correcting some of the perverse incentives embedded in its managerial, outdated personnel system.

Mission command will inevitably fail if the Army personnel system does not change accordingly.³⁸ Implementing mission command is not so much a revolutionary change in tactics or equipment, it is a matter of getting the culture right. To do so requires getting the basics of personnel system right, to include incentives, rewards, and punishments while reducing the malignant effects of constant personnel turnover. Once these factors are in place, mission command will occur organically.

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