



A battalion commander receives a situation report from his company commanders prior to proceeding to a battalion objective 24 October 2019 at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana. (Photo courtesy of the JRTC Public Affairs Office)

Bridging the Three-Generational Gap Using Doctrine

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In June 2018, *Military Review* published an online exclusive article by Matthew Archambault titled “The Three-Generation Dilemma” that outlined the challenges U.S. Army brigades and battalions face with ensuring shared understanding across the three

generations (company grade officers, field grade officers, and battalion and brigade commanders) that operate within its ranks.¹ The author argued that the lack of shared understanding is due to varying levels of experience between the generations and a lack of mentorship

and training of young staff officers. When observed at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), lack of shared understanding results in plans that lack sufficient or synchronized details and ultimately end with mission failure. The “Three-Generation Dilemma” is as true now as it was when the author published the original article and, arguably, since the creation of the Army. So the question becomes how we bridge the gap between the three generations.

Current Environment

Biannually, the commander of Operations Group at the JRTC publishes trends and observations gathered by all the task force observers, coaches, trainers (OC/T) over multiple rotations. The commander of Operations Group publishes this information to enable trend reversal throughout the Army. As depicted in figure 1 (page 3), the May 2020 report showed that the number one brigade combat team shortcoming was the “struggle to synchronize Detailed Planning, in a 21st Century Decisive Action, contested environment.”²

There are multiple contributing factors as to why brigade and battalion staffs struggle to synchronize their plans.³ In general, OC/T observations reveal the following:

- Brigade and battalion staffs lack proficiency and confidence in the military decision-making process (MDMP) and the rapid decision-making synchronization process, especially course of action (COA) analysis.
- COAs are not complete or detailed enough, and they fail to address all warfighting functions and integrate all enablers.
- Singular, commander-directed COAs are not developed into complete COAs.
- Execution products are not functional or complete to enable control and decision-making.
- Operational graphics are not complete, nor are they disseminated in both analog and digital versions.
- Staffs fail to plan for operations in a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) environment and do not integrate CBRN into COA development and analysis.
- Staffs do not determine decision points for changes to mission-oriented protective posture, and they do not plan and rehearse CBRN detection and appropriate response to the threat.

- Staffs fail to develop plans to prevent, detect, report, and react to attacks in the cyber domain and within the electromagnetic spectrum to mitigate and/or defeat enemy cyberspace electromagnetic activities while carrying out their own effective operations.

In addition to these contributing factors, commanders at both brigade and battalion levels sometimes deviate from the MDMP when placed in a time-constrained environment such as the JRTC. Their intention is to solve the problem of “fleeting time” by modifying their process to solve complicated problems.

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Brigade Combat Teams in the Decisive Action Training Environment at JRTC ...

- **Struggle to synchronize Detailed Planning, in a 21st Century Decisive Action, contested environment.**
- Do not have efficient, agile, or survivable command and control systems (command posts), capable of executing the CP functions.
- Fail to define and maintain the Common Operational Picture (COP) and to maintain this COP in both analog and digital form.
- Fail to employ and synchronize the full effects of BCT combat power due to ineffective time management.
- Do not employ reconnaissance and security forces with appropriate and clear task and purpose, based on doctrine, to enable friendly forces and limit enemy options.
- Do not effectively plan, coordinate, and employ joint fires and attack aviation with the mass or responsiveness required to achieve desired effects.
- Fail to develop and rehearse a detailed plan for large scale casualty evacuation (CASEVAC).
- Struggle to synchronize sustainment with maneuver to accurately forecast, plan, and distribute commodities through multi-echelon nodes from the DSA to point of need.

(Figure by Task Force Brigade Command and Staff/1 May 2020)

Figure 1. Top Eight Common Brigade Combat Team Shortcomings

ed COA to gain efficiency. While this is an approved method within the MDMP, staffs fail to fully develop the commander's direction into a detailed plan. More concerning is that in some cases, commanders opt for a nondoctrinal planning process. However, their staffs are only trained in the MDMP. Further, staff members, specifically at the battalion level, are junior officers still learning how their warfighting function fits into the overall process. As observed over multiple rotations, when brigade or battalion commanders deviate from the steps within the MDMP or modify the process, staff members struggle to provide the necessary detail to ensure a course of action is complete.

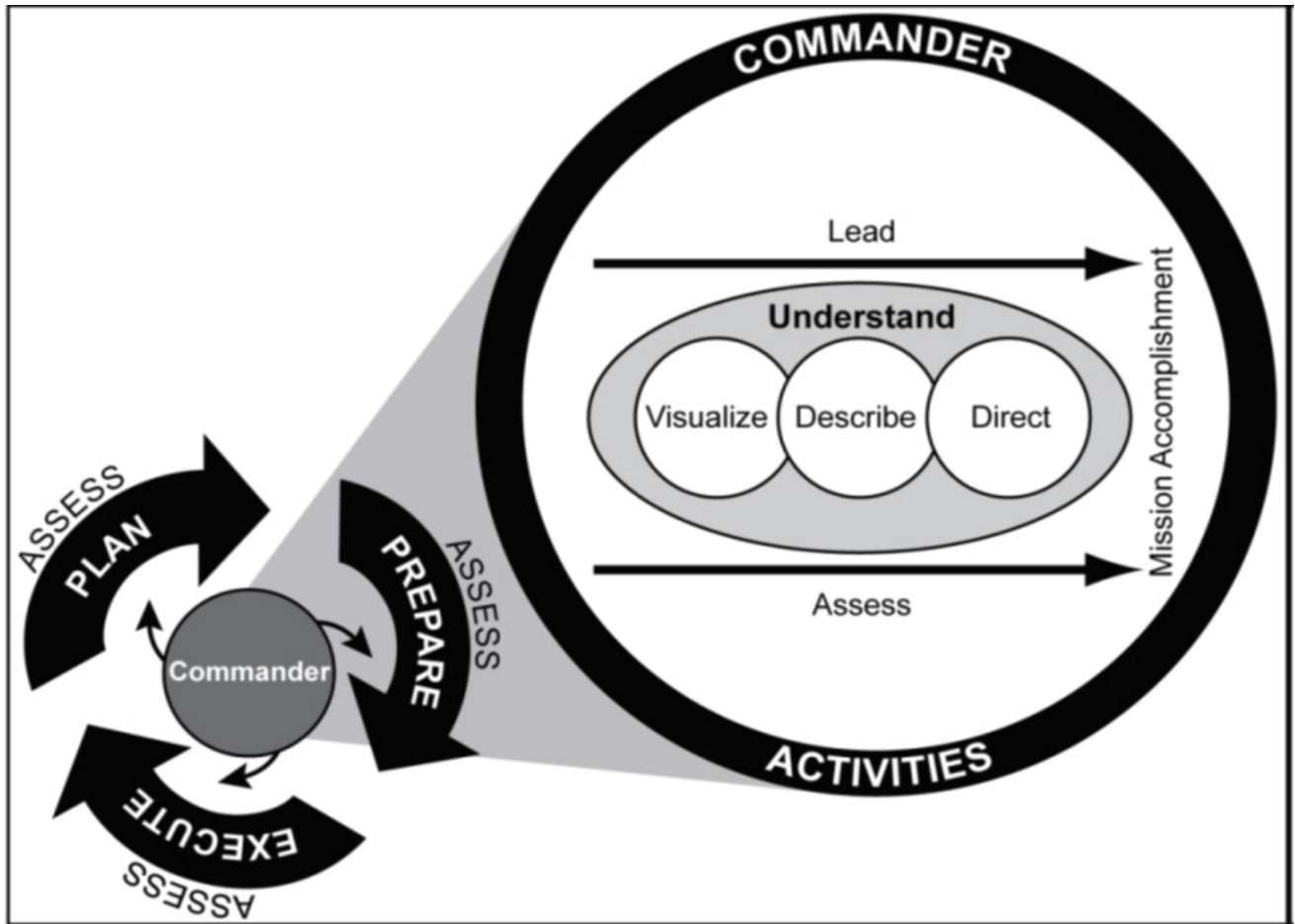
The Problem

The problem we are attempting to solve is how to bridge the gap between three separate levels of experience within a brigade or battalion to ensure we achieve shared understanding and produce the requisite amount of detail within a plan to successfully accomplish the mission. One answer to this problem is to leverage doctrine to serve as the universal language. However, brigades and battalions have varying levels

(sometimes lieutenants) to post-senior service college colonels (brigade commanders). A brigade or battalion cannot successfully operate at the doctrinal experience level of a pre-career course captain, nor can we expect it to operate at the doctrinal level of experience of a battalion or brigade commander. Therefore, as another way to mitigate this problem, field grade officers (executive officers and operations officers) must bridge the doctrinal divide. Graduate Intermediate Level Education field grade officers should understand the commander's role in the operations process and see the problem through that lens to help bridge the gap between the first and third generation's knowledge of doctrine (see figure 2).⁴ Brigades and battalions should be relying on the doctrinal experience of their field grade officers to be most effective. So why are we not? It is all about balance.

A Possible Solution

Brigade combat team and battalion commanders. Brigade and battalion commanders must set an example in using and communicating through doctrine. They must put aside their fears or concerns of



(Figure by Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process*)

Figure 2. The Operations Process

“sounding like a manual” and communicate to their subordinates through doctrine. Communicating through doctrine may come across as robotic or dry. However, it is extremely effective and sets an example both now and for future generations of Army leaders. Instead of abandoning the MDMP, commanders must enforce its use and ensure the process is trained to standard and at regular intervals. Commanders must acknowledge their role in the operations process and adopt the use of the commander activities depicted in figure 2 as a methodology for communicating with the staff and subordinates. Professional military education focuses on the MDMP for captains, majors, and Battle Staff Course graduates, and the process serves as a point of departure for all three generations.

The commander also has a responsibility to stay current in doctrine and set conditions to train the entire organization on its use. This is done through

the routine use of doctrinal tasks and language and by enforcing the use of the MDMP and ensuring the staff completes all steps to standard. The staff, particularly the field grade officers, must feel confident enough to respectfully correct the commander if terms are outdated, perhaps misapplied, or misunderstood. Frequent leader professional development sessions that reference doctrinal changes or exercises that require the use of doctrinal processes serve as examples of how a unit can achieve and maintain the requisite level of proficiency. Commanders must set the standard of disciplined use of doctrine early and communicate through it to lead to shared understanding and reduced risk.

Field grade officers. The Army’s field grade officers receive intensive study in the operations process as they go through their Intermediate Level Education at Fort Leavenworth’s Command and General Staff College or at a comparable institution. Field grade officers serve

a critical role within the operations process, and they must acknowledge that role. Commanders drive the operations process and own the commander's activities, but field grade officers must assist commanders with understanding, visualizing, and describing within those activities to achieve mission accomplishment.⁵ Many times, field grade officers serve as the bridge between the commander and the staff, communicating the commander's understanding, visualization, and description of the operational environment and endstate to lesser experienced officers and noncommissioned officers to help drive the operations process (see figure 3, page 6). They must also provide the commander an assessment of the staffs' doctrinal understanding and ability.

Additionally, they commonly interact with the staff more frequently than the commander and because of

they attended company grade professional military education, so this cohort of officers must maximize the use of self-study, leverage leader professional development, and receive mentorship from officers with more experience. They must remain current in their branch's doctrine and use it to communicate with subordinates, peers, and superiors. Lastly, company grade officers should have a thorough understanding of how to doctrinally communicate through the five-paragraph operations order and how to effectively leverage troop leading procedures to prepare and execute operations.

When All Else Fails: The Back Brief

One of the most formidable tools in the doctrinal tool bag for bringing about or ensuring shared understanding is the back brief. Simply having members of

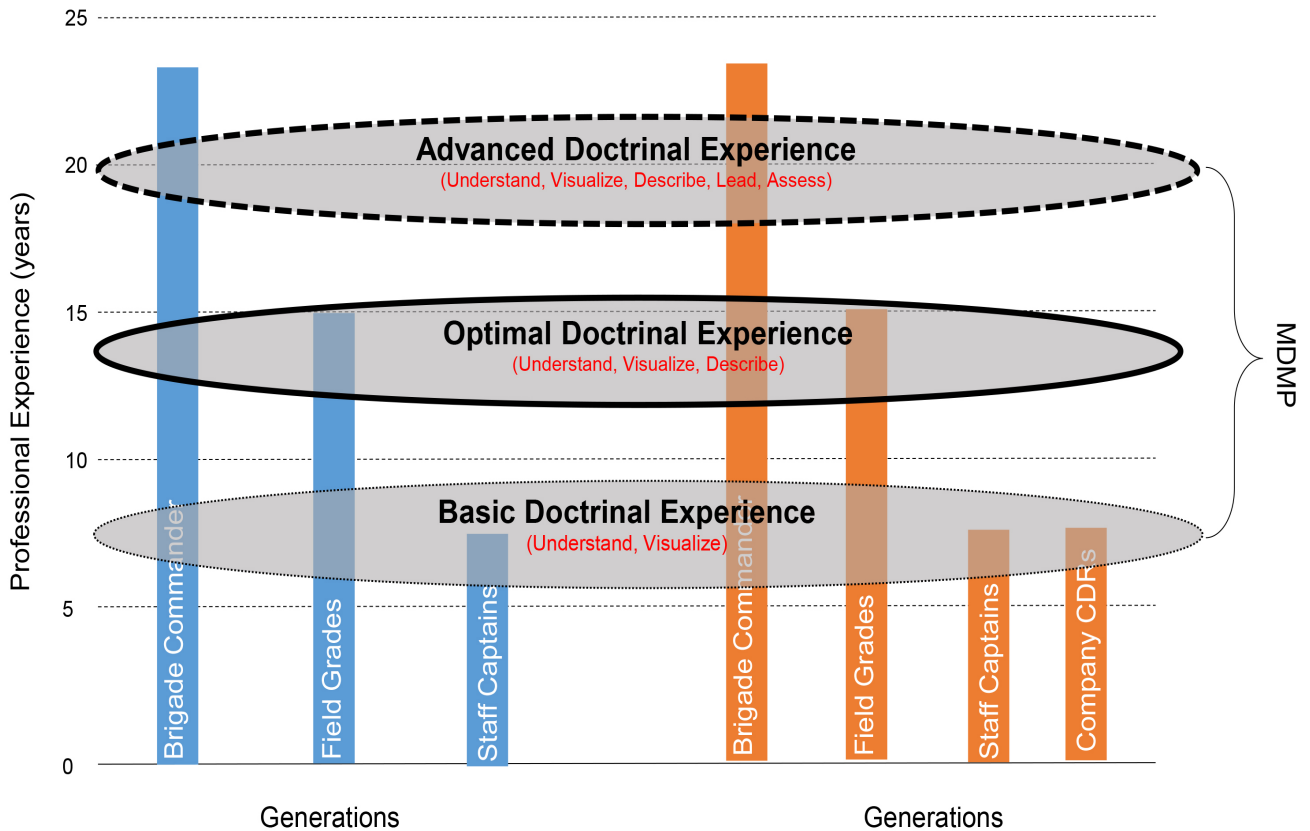
“Commanders drive the operations process and own the commander's activities, but field grade officers must assist commanders with understanding, visualizing, and describing within those activities to achieve mission accomplishment.”

this have an inherent requirement to know doctrine and remain current with its changes. The majors must discipline themselves to constantly relearn doctrine and communicate through it, and more so than commanders, they are required to enforce its use. This is not to say that all responsibility for mission accomplishment rests with the executive officer or the operations officer; in fact, all three generations (including the brigade combat team commander) have a responsibility to use a common and correct doctrinal language routinely. Daily and routine operations must be rooted in and use doctrine, enforced by the more experienced leaders. This integrates new staff officers and other members of staff quickly and reinforces the commander's intent to use doctrine as the units' common lexicon.

Company grade officers. Company grade officers, whether on staff or in command positions, must have an understanding of their basic branch doctrine at least two levels up from their rank/position and have knowledge of the doctrine of the warfighting functions that may support them in accomplishing the mission.⁶ In some cases this may be difficult, depending on if

staff or subordinate commanders reiterate what was told to them is a powerful method to instantly ensure effective communication. This proven method is not just for subordinates whose experience the commander does not trust. Routinely practicing the back brief bridges the gap between experience and knowledge. It can also clarify a poorly developed and/or communicated plan. It can alert a commander that guidance was unclear or that a subordinate misunderstood it. In essence, immediately requiring personnel to confirm the message transmitted was the message received can save massive amounts of organizational energy and almost instantly provide shared understanding. However, the level of shared understanding is limited in both scope and duration. Formal commander confirmation or back briefs are limited in scope based on who the commander has present and participating in the brief. A smaller audience invites added risk as the messages communicated only reach a small percentage of the force, thus limiting the breadth and depth of the shared understanding.

Regardless of how much of the formation is privy to the confirmation or back brief, the shared



(Original figure from Col. Matthew T. Archambault. Updated figure by Lt. Col. Jonathan Graebener using graphics from Army Doctrine Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*)

Figure 3. Field Grade Officers Help Drive the Operations Process

understanding is also bound by time. As soon as subordinate commanders return to their formations or the staff moves on to execute, the magnitude of shared understanding begins to lessen. Commanders must leverage the battle rhythm, battlefield circulation, and trusted agents among the command to help continue to communicate information that enables shared understanding. Commanders and subordinates equally share the burden of spreading understanding to those not privy to a formal or informal back brief. A unit disciplined in using doctrine and communicating in doctrinal terms will have a better chance of maintaining the purity of the message and enjoying longer-duration shared understanding.

Conclusion

Doctrine binds individuals and organizations together, spanning time and geography, and ensures the professionalism of the entire Army. Disciplined use of doctrine and communicating in doctrinal terms are the most important

tools for professional soldiers to combat the generational gap. The current lack of use of doctrine and the failure to communicate in doctrinal terms exacerbate the divide amongst the generations.

Coming out of its fights in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Army adopted a culture of mission command, attempting to allow subordinates and staffs the freedom to plan and operate with greater independence and autonomy. However, in doing so, it sacrificed shared understanding, professionalism, and efficacy as warfighters. If the Army is to regain those capabilities while at the same time leveraging its culture as American warriors through the use of the philosophy of mission command, then commanders must do two things. First, they must force the use of doctrine within their formations, and second, they must leverage the doctrinal approach in executing the operations process and accept their role as the drivers of the process.

Pivotal to this effort are the field grade officers who run battalions and brigades so that senior leaders can

command them. Field grade officers can help their commanders drive understanding of the operations process and the commanders activities within the process. They can do this by effectively communicating, coordinating, and collaborating through a common language and process and

by leveraging the skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgement necessary for developing shared understanding in problem-solving to achieve a desired purpose and end state. ■

Notes

1. Matthew Archambault, "The Three-Generation Dilemma," *Military Review* (Online Exclusive, June 2018), accessed 11 December 2020, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Jun/Three-Generation-Dilemma/>.

2. Commander, Operations Group, *Strategic Outreach to the Force: The Most Recent Trends and Observation Report from the JRTC* (Fort Polk, LA: Joint Readiness Training Center, 13 April 2020).

3. Operations Group, *Trends and Observations Joint Readiness Training Center* (Fort Polk, LA: Joint Readiness Training Center, 12 March 2020).

4. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, July 2019), 1-4. "Commanders use the operations process to drive the conceptual and detailed planning necessary to understand their OE [operational environment]; visualize and describe the operation's end state and operational approach; make and articulate decisions; and direct, lead, and assess operations."

5. Ibid. According to ADP 5-0, commander activities within the operations process are visualize, describe, direct, lead, and assess.

6. For example, an infantry rifle company commander should have an understanding of Field Manual 3-96, *Brigade Combat Team*, and knowledge of how the remaining warfighting functions enable the company's operations.