



Maj. Adam Cecil of Operations Group Charlie provides observations and insight on the maneuver warfighting function to members of the 256th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Louisiana National Guard, 12 May 2017 during their brigade warfighter exercise at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Brigade warfighter exercises are conditions-based training exercises that use a Decisive Action Training Environment to assess brigade staffs on their ability to execute mission command. (Photo courtesy of the Louisiana Army and Air National Guard)

Is Failure the Right Training Strategy?

Maj. Jerod J. Madden, U.S. Army

I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty six times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.

—Michael Jordan

In the summer of 1997, I attended Basic Combat Training at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. It seemed like everything I did was wrong and attracted the ire of a nearby drill sergeant. We all failed over and over again. However, as the course progressed

and we applied the training received from our drill sergeants, we began to succeed and eventually reached graduation with a sense of pride in having overcome our initial failures. But, what if the training consisted only of failure with no ultimate success after grueling effort? Is failure the right training strategy if it is never coupled with eventual success?

Over the last two years I have attended eighteen warfighter exercises (WFXs) as an observer coach/trainer for Operations Group–Charlie (OG–C) of the Mission Command Training Program (MCTP). These WFXs use computer simulations to train active

duty, Army Reserve, and National Guard brigade and division headquarters in the planning, preparation, and execution of unified land operations in a decisive action training environment. During my tenure, the Blue Force (BLUEFOR) are 0-18 against the Opposing Force (OPFOR). That's right—in eighteen iterations, Army warfighting headquarters lost every single time. If the goal is realistic training, it is obvious we have missed the mark when our forces do not get the chance to turn failure into success during training. Even when the goal is to learn from failure, losing every single time is not the best approach.

The Effects of Assured Failure

According to Dr. Mary C. Lamia, a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst,

Hope structures your life in anticipation of the future and influences how you feel in the present. Similar to optimism, hope creates a positive mood about an expectation, a goal, or a future situation. Such mental time travel influences your state of mind and alters your behavior in the present.¹

She also writes, “The feelings associated with giving up hope ... including helplessness, despair, depression, or yearning ... are the negative counterparts of hope.”² As an observer coach/trainer, I have witnessed these pervasive feelings of helplessness associated with assured failure. During every one of the eighteen exercises I've supported, I have heard someone on the brigade staff mutter something similar to, “What difference does it make? We're going to get destroyed by the OPFOR anyway.”

Many of those attending the WFX understand their assured failure and believe their endeavors are hopeless against the OPFOR. In an attempt to counter this pervasive awareness of imminent failure, each unit develops a list of training objectives and defines success as achieving these objectives, not on the outcome of the fight against the OPFOR. There is no doubt this approach has value; units demonstrate marked improvement in their systems and processes while conducting command post (CP) operations. However, it is human nature to want to win. Fighting against human nature, much like going against the World Class OPFOR, is a losing cause. It is time to consider how we can adjust WFXs to enhance rather than degrade motivation.

In line with Victor Vroom's Expectancy Theory, this assured failure exhausts one's motivation.³ Many participants end up going through the motions knowing that in a couple of weeks it will all be over. They apply our OG-C recommendations from the midexercise after-action review (AAR) and still fail. By the final AAR, many have lost interest. The biggest success they believe to exist is completing the exercise so they can go home. At one WFX, the unit was so sure that they were going to lose to the OPFOR that they completely ignored their instructions from the division order. They believed they were being sent on a “suicide mission,” so instead of attacking the OPFOR at the assigned objective, they planned to bypass them in a maneuver that completely contradicted their orders and would not accomplish their assigned mission. Many units are so focused on their slim chances against the OPFOR that they make similar poor decisions. It is clear that assured failure reduces motivation and detracts from the training value of the exercise.

Train to Win

Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Train to Win in a Complex World*, states,

Training is the most important thing the Army does to prepare for operations. Training is the cornerstone of readiness. Readiness determines our Nation's ability to fight and win in a complex global environment. To achieve a high degree of readiness, the Army trains in the most efficient and effective manner possible... To win in a complex world, leaders work

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to enhance training realism in every training event.⁴

FM 7-0 goes on to state that we must “foster a positive training culture.”⁵

In addition to the Army’s overarching training guidance from FM 7-0, the commander of U.S. Army Forces Command publishes annual training guidance. Fiscal Year 2018 guidance states, “The CTC [Combat Training Center] and WFX programs remain the cornerstone of our integrated training strategy to win against a near-peer hybrid enemy. Units use the Decisive Action Training Environment (DATE) to present realistic operational environment conditions and provide consistency across the Army.”⁶

It is clear that the Army and Forces Command emphasize training to win through a realistic and positive training environment, and that the WFX is a key component of this strategy. However, losing to the OPFOR every single time is neither realistic nor positive; losing every single time fails to achieve the commander’s intent for training exercises.

Anatomy of a Warfighter Exercise

So, how can we train to win if we never actually win? According to Amy C. Edmondson, Novartis professor of leadership and management at the Harvard Business School,

Most executives I’ve talked to believe that failure is bad (of course!). They also believe that learning from it is pretty straightforward: Ask people to reflect on what they did wrong and exhort them to avoid similar mistakes in the future—or, better yet, assign a team to review and write a report on what happened and then distribute it throughout the organization. These widely held beliefs are misguided as ... learning from organizational failures is anything but straightforward.⁷

This sounds very familiar to the Army approach: Conduct AARs and write final exercise reports identifying mistakes and how to avoid them in the future. MCTP also publishes an annual summary of the most common mistakes made. This document is very similar from year to year, seemingly showing that units continue to make the same mistakes—or do they?

The general construct of a WFX includes an initial attack to an objective, a continued attack to a subsequent

objective, and a defense against an OPFOR counterattack. There are only so many ways to accomplish this mission given the enemy, terrain, and time available, and all possibilities have most likely been exhausted during the conduct of numerous WFXs. Regardless of their chosen tactics and level of skill at mission command, units are attrited to a level of combat ineffectiveness during the first attack. They are unrealistically reconstituted and the process is repeated during the second attack with similar results. Then, their defense is defeated by the OPFOR counterattack and the exercise is over. They go home and tell their peers from other units the ultimate futility of the exercise and pass on some pointers to hopefully make the failure a little easier when it is their turn.

Providing credible feedback when the unit always loses is another uphill battle. It is almost impossible to tell how effectively they executed during the WFX, because we cannot compare their results to past units who also failed in very similar fashion even when applying a completely different solution. It is especially frustrating when a unit actually takes feedback and applies it correctly only to get the same failed results. So we give them feedback based on how well they performed against doctrine, their standard operating procedures (SOPs), and their training objectives. This certainly increases knowledge and leads to improved SOPs, but trying to explain that the exercise was a success due to improvements made on some nebulous training objectives is unconvincing and unsatisfying.

This training procedure does not teach soldiers and units how to win in a complex environment or how to effectively conduct unified land operations “executed through decisive action by means of the Army core competencies ... guided by mission command.”⁸ These training outcomes cannot be achieved when losing is a foregone conclusion; when soldiers feel like the Washington Generals playing against the Harlem Globetrotters, their motivation plummets, and they treat the experience as the futile gesture it is.

Why the OPFOR Always Wins

Most units argue that they lose due to the OPFOR’s overwhelming size advantage. We did a meticulous review of force ratios in OG-C to ensure they were within doctrinal standards prior to the beginning of combat operations. An attacking BLUEFOR is rendered combat ineffective at a three-to-one ratio and

cannot complete the second attack or defense without unrealistic reconstitution.

We could delve deeply into the peculiarities of the Warfighter's Simulation (WARSIM) used at the WFX. One glaring example is the OPFOR employment of unmanned aerial systems and radar to bring extremely effective artillery and counterfire on BLUEFOR with impunity. The brigade and division headquarters participating in the exercise shoulder the blame, but the unrealism of the WARSIM and the lack of participation of assets from echelons above the brigade and division level, to include air and maritime forces, both play a part. No doubt research and discussion on this topic resulting in improvements to WARSIM would be a constructive endeavor, but such effort is beyond my level of expertise and the scope of this writing. From my observations, the two biggest advantages of the OPFOR that ultimately lead to their 100 percent success rate are experienced operators and collocated mission command.

The unit at the WFX supplies personnel to act as virtual warriors, a.k.a. pucksters. They get a couple of days of training and then are expected to accurately simulate combat operations through WARSIM workstations against OPFOR personnel who have been doing this for years. The BLUEFOR must communicate from the WARSIM work cell through the battalion CP tent to the brigade CP tent, while the OPFOR operates out of the same room with instantaneous in-person communications, leading to greater shared understanding and much more effective mission command. I cannot overstate the advantage this provides to the OPFOR.

Leveling the Playing Field

Every year OG-C updates the division operations order used at brigade WFXs and rehearses it by participating in an exercise as a brigade combat team. However, we don't set up tents for our brigade and battalion CPs. We operate directly from the cells with the WARSIM workstations, and we have the experience of participating in numerous exercises. Basically, we negate the OPFOR advantages mentioned previously, and we actually win. We also learn a great deal in the process. While failure produces learning opportunities, the knowledge and confidence gained from eventually overcoming those failures and achieving success is just as important, not to mention the extra motivation that undoubtedly would enhance the WFX. Not everyone

deserves a trophy. We should not set up the exercise to ensure unit success, but neither should we set it up to assure failure as it does now.

Fixing these OPFOR advantages may seem straightforward, but of course it is never as easy as it seems. To negate the OPFOR experience advantage, we could develop a World Class BLUEFOR of permanent contractors, or we could eliminate the World Class OPFOR and require soldiers to perform duties as temporary pucksters for the OPFOR just as they do now for the BLUEFOR. However, the former costs money and the latter takes soldiers away from their unit, although there is some training value to participating in the exercise as a puckster.

As advances in artificial intelligence (AI) allow, we could create a completely simulated BLUEFOR and OPFOR with no human operators. The AI could generate reports via chat message and possibly even conduct voice communications. Unfortunately, the technology may not yet be available for this solution, not to mention the cost and time consuming acquisition process. To negate the OPFOR mission command advantage, we could force them to operate in distributed mission command nodes similar to the BLUEFOR. Constraints in available space at some training sites could make this difficult. However, we could supply MCTP with the tentage and equipment necessary to house the different OPFOR CPs.

These and most other solutions obviously take time and cost money that may not be available. However, can we afford to continue spending millions on WFXs, the cornerstone of our training strategy, without ensuring a maximum return on investment? I believe we could make the change to temporary pucksters and distributed mission command nodes for the OPFOR with relative ease and minimal cost. This could be experimented with during several exercises to determine its effectiveness before making a final decision. The AI option may be the most promising long-term solution as the large initial investment would ultimately lead to savings over time.

In the meantime, a more immediate fix may be reducing the OPFOR combat power to account for their advantages. Further discussion, research, and guidance is needed to determine if and how this is the best, most quickly implementable option. What are the OPFOR advantages worth and will reducing their combat

systems or units negate these advantages? What second- and third-order effects will come from such a reduction? Will specific training opportunities such as counter unmanned aerial systems and counterfire be missed?

A New Strategy

According to Dr. Jennifer Kunst, a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst,

We are greatly helped in life when we have a relative balance of success and failure, for then they work in tandem in a potentially helpful way. Success can strengthen our feelings of competence which, ironically, can make us feel that we actually can deal better with failure when it comes. So, too, failure offsets success, keeping us humble and reminding us that we are just human. We are so much better off when we can take the good with the bad.⁹

Again, there is definitely training value attained at these WEXs in their current construct, but it is not maximized when assured failure diminishes the unit's motivation and discredits our feedback. Imagine if units knew they had a chance to win. Imagine if they took the feedback on their and other units' failures and applied it to achieve success. It would certainly increase motivation and reinforce the legitimacy of

our feedback, and even if the unit achieves overall success against the OPFOR, there would still be plenty of failures beneath the surface to learn from and dissect to produce AARs and final exercise reports. And, this feedback would be trusted and internalized, because it has been demonstrated to help units achieve concrete success against an OPFOR, not just against doctrine, SOPs, and training objectives. Units would then be much more motivated to correct their deficiencies and build upon their successes. The annual MCTP document outlining habitual failures would not look so similar every year, because the outcome of the exercises would not be preordained OPFOR victories. When a unit actually achieves success in a realistic training environment, the tactics, techniques, and procedures they used could be further analyzed and validated for inclusion in doctrine and dissemination across the force.

Units want a fair competition where they get precise feedback on how they did against the OPFOR and how their performance measures up against other units. They want to win or lose fairly, understanding exactly why and what they need to improve upon to have a better chance of winning in the future. If we want our units to learn from failure and achieve greatness, they have to hit a few game-winning shots. ■

Notes

Epigraph. "Michael Jordan—"Failure," YouTube video, from a 1997 Nike commercial, posted by "212GroupInc," 16 February 2012, accessed 27 July 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuXZFQKKF7A>.

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3. Pranav Parijat and Shilpi Bagga, "Victor Vroom's Expectancy Theory of Motivation—An Evaluation," *International Research Journal of Business and Management* 7, no. 9 (September 2014): 1–8; Emma Elizabeth Snyder, "Fall 2016: Expectancy Theory," Penn State University WikiSpaces, last modified 18 September 2016, accessed 28 July 2017, <https://wikispaces.psu.edu/display/PSYCH484/Fall+2016%3A+Expectancy+Theory>.

4. Field Manual 7-0, *Train to Win in a Complex World* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 5 October 2016), 1-1.

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