Cpt. Kris Candelaria (*left*) with Team 513, 5th Security Forces Assistance Brigade, and Indonesian army 1st Lt. Wilhelmus Raditya, attached to 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, discuss plans for approaching an objective 27 October 2020 during a live-fire exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Fort Polk, Louisiana. The JRTC exercise is a capstone training event that allows 2nd Brigade to achieve certification for worldwide deployment while building interoperability with key allies in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific. (Photo by Pfc. Rachel Christensen, 28th Public Affairs Detachment)

Understanding Mission Command

Lt. Col. Lee Robinson, U.S. Army

You get the best effort from others not by lighting a fire beneath them, but by building a fire within.

—Bob Nelson

In 2015, the Army published the "Mission Command Assessment Program" to measure progress toward achieving the objectives of the Army Mission Command Strategy.[1] The first strategic objective in the Army Mission Command Strategy is that "all Army leaders understand the mission command

philosophy."[2] As the Mission Command Assessment Program concluded in 2019, a series of articles published in *Military Review* made a persuasive case that the institution fell short of this objective.[3] While there is undoubtedly progress since 2019 on generating greater understanding of the mission command philosophy, instilling an understanding of mission command is a continuous process rather than a milestone fixed in time.

In this article, I share some perspectives on the difficulties of educating and training Army leaders on the mission command philosophy, and I recommend a method to address shortcomings in our current approach. I describe a tool grounded in the relationship between trust and competence as an intuitive approach to coach subordinates and inform our practice of mission command.

Mission Command Confusion

Gen. Stephen Townsend (then the commanding general of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command) and several coauthors discussed the Army's struggles with generating a shared understanding of mission command in three articles published in *Military Review* in 2019. They focused on two culprits. First, the Army's rhetoric and actions were not consistent with mission command, evidenced by centralized training processes that constrained opportunities for subordinates to exercise initiative.[4] Second, instead of clarifying mission command, the 2012 version of Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, *Mission Command*, served as a source of confusion. Removing the term "command and control" and replacing it with mission command resulted in misunderstanding between mission command as a philosophy and mission command as a warfighting function.

As I attended pre-command courses in preparation for battalion command in the summer of 2019, Army senior leaders explained our institutional struggles to understand and practice mission command routinely. They implored our cohort of future battalion and brigade commanders to do better. Updated doctrine published in the summer of 2019 provided us some tools to coach subordinates on mission command.

The revised Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, remedied the shortcomings of the 2012 version of Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0. As stated in the introduction to this manual, "Labeling multiple things mission command unintentionally eroded the importance of mission command, which is critical to the command and control of Army forces across the range of military operations."[5] This update restored command and control as a warfighting function. It also clarified that mission command is the Army's approach to command and control with the goal of empowering subordinate decision making and decentralized execution of operations that is appropriate to the situation.

With a firmer doctrinal foundation for mission command, I prioritized coaching subordinate leaders on the practice of mission command. Company grade leaders expressed skepticism on mission command in practice despite the revisions to ADP 6-0 during my first leader development session on this topic. I found that I needed a better leader development tool to coach subordinates on mission command than what I found in doctrine. This session began a two-year journey to increase the understanding and practice of mission command in the formation. As Townsend noted, "At its heart, the Army's approach to mission command is about applying the appropriate level of control so that, given the circumstances and information available, leaders make the best possible decision at the right level and at the right time."[6]

In our initial discussions on mission command, company grade leaders expressed a perspective that close control of subordinate leaders was antithetical to the spirit of mission command. From these

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conversations, I felt that grasping the nuance of the *appropriate* level of control was the key to unlocking the essence of mission command. A confluence of factors, among them the reduction of mandatory training under Army Secretary Mark Esper's tenure, removal of the term "command and control" from doctrine, and discussions in professional journals about the effects on the institution of myriad reporting requirements, created the conditions under which control was seen as

success with a more intuitive approach to enable the exercise of mission command.[9]

Relationship of Competence and Trust

My recommendation for a more intuitive guide for the practice of mission command is rooted in the relationship between trust and competence. ADP 6-0 states, "Mission command requires *competent* forc-

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a dirty word and inconsistent with mission command.[7]

The revised ADP 6-0 provides a path away from the perspective that control is antithetical to mission command, stressing that the appropriate level of control is part of the art of command.[8] However, educating the force on mission command by imparting the knowledge from ADP 6-0 is insufficient. It must be accompanied by training in which the knowledge in ADP 6-0 is put into practice. If you have ever picked up a musical instrument or a paintbrush, you are familiar with the rough state of your early practice as a musician or painting artist. Similarly, early practice of the art of command can be rough. Some artists learn to employ their skills more quickly than others, but familiarization and training on the basic tools of the practice provide a foundation for experimentation and learning.

If determining the appropriate level of control is part of the art of command, perhaps the Army's struggles with practicing mission command stem in part from the tools provided to establish the foundations for the practice of mission command. I sought a tool to help subordinates understand that control measures or risk mitigation practices were not automatically signals of distrust, but rather application of the appropriate level of control in a given situation. ADP 6-0 discusses the use of mission variables and eight other considerations to guide leaders in the exercise of control over subordinate elements, but I found

es and an environment of mutual *trust* and shared understanding among commanders, staffs, and subordinates" (emphasis added).[10] While not downplaying the importance of the other variables a leader should consider in determining the appropriate level of control for a given situation, conceptualizing mission command in terms of the relationship between trust and competence provides a more instinctive method to teach our warfighting philosophy.

What do we mean by trust and competence? ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, states that the foundation of competence is military-technical expertise. Trust is the "shared confidence between commanders, subordinates, and partners that they can be relied on and are competent in performing their assigned tasks."[11] Competent leaders perform duties with discipline and to standards while striving for excellence; display the appropriate knowledge of equipment, procedures, and methods; and recognize and generate innovative solutions.[12] Competence is therefore rooted in a subordinate's ability to perform tasks, while trust centers on the perception between leaders and subordinates of their ability to accomplish a task. Of note, trust depends on a "shared confidence," meaning that if a leader trusts a subordinate but the subordinate does not perceive that the leader trusts him or her, trust is suboptimal.
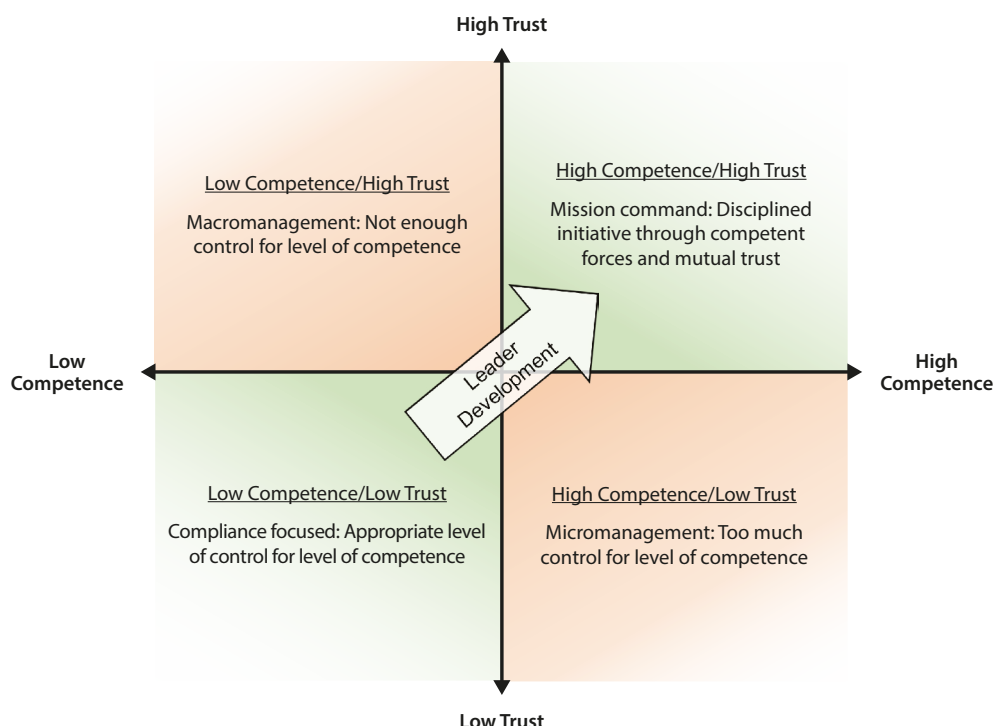
Characterizing mission command as the relationship between trust and competence allows us to put

these two concepts on a dichotomy (see figure). On the *x*-axis, competence of subordinates ranges from low on the left side of the dichotomy to high on the right side. The *y*-axis represents the perceived trust between leaders and subordinates, ranging from an environment of low trust on the bottom of the dichotomy to high trust on the top.

This diagram provides a visual representation of the relationship between trust and competence to aid leaders in understanding the appropriate level of control for a given situation. As an illustration, consider the case of a company tasked to conduct convoy protection platform gunnery. A leader faces many decisions on risk management and control measures to ensure a successful outcome and maximize this training opportunity. The appropriate level of control for this training exercise rests on the relationship of trust and competence as illustrated by each quadrant of the diagram.

Macromanagement (upper left quadrant). When the competence of subordinates is low but trust between leaders and subordinates is high, it is likely that leaders will fail to exercise the appropriate amount of control for the task. In our platform gunnery example, the inappropriate amount of control for the level of subordinate competence may manifest in inadequate leader presence at rehearsals or during execution. The risk in this situation is that leaders do not apply the appropriate level of control given the low competence of subordinates, leading to suboptimal outcomes due to an inappropriate level of supervision. A little league baseball coach could schedule practices run by

High Trust

Low Competence/High Trust

Macromanagement: Not enough control for level of competence

High Competence/High Trust

Mission command: Disciplined initiative through competent forces and mutual trust

Low Competence

Leader Development

High Competence

Low Competence/Low Trust

Compliance focused: Appropriate level of control for level of competence

High Competence/Low Trust

Micromanagement: Too much control for level of competence

Low Trust

(Figure by author)

Figure. Understanding Mission Command: The Relationship Between Trust and Competence

his or her players, but of course the team will improve much more with deliberate, supervised practice rather than relinquishing total control to the players. Macromanagement is a quadrant to avoid; a hands-off approach for a low level of subordinate competence will likely lead to suboptimal outcomes as the leader is absent when subordinates need a coach to help them through the fundamentals of a given task.

Micromanagement (lower right quadrant). Suboptimal outcomes of a different sort are likely to result when subordinate competence is high but trust is low. Whereas subordinate competence and insufficient control limit performance in macromanagement, too much control limits performance in micromanagement. Performance limitations in this quadrant stem from the harmful effects on motivation when leaders apply too much control in an environment of high subordinate competence. Drawing on situational leadership theory from the field of organizational behavior, delegation should increase with subordinate maturity.[13] In this quadrant of high subordinate competence, subordinates are likely to view a leader's influence tactics as

Maj. Brendan Baker, operations officer for 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, briefs the brigade commander and brigade staff during a combined arms rehearsal in preparation for movements during a live-fire exercise before Combined Resolve XIII in Grafenwohr, Germany, 13 January 2020. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Noshoba Davis, U.S. Army National Guard)

inappropriate since they are not consistent with their needs. Suboptimal outcomes result from the decrease in subordinate satisfaction and creativity due to the mismatch of leader actions to the situation. Returning to our platform gunnery example, micromanagement will lead to an environment in which competence is not rewarded with increased latitude to apply creativity. The potential for the training event will be therefore limited by the leader's actions rather than the collaborative power of the group.

Compliance focused (lower left quadrant). This quadrant demonstrates how a high level of leader engagement can lead to best case outcomes when subordinate competence and trust are low. The exercise of compliance-focused leadership is appropriate when subordinate competence is low and the perception of trust between leaders and subordinates is also low. In sharp contrast to the expectations under micromanagement, the coaching and influence tactics of a leader in this quadrant are likely to be well received by subordinates because they are consistent with the subordinates' needs, especially if the leader explains that the control measures are in place to build trust

and competence. In our platform gunnery example, detailed planning and the use of backbriefs and rehearsals will lead to positive outcomes rather than relying on intent-based mission orders.

Mission command (upper right quadrant). This quadrant represents mission command in its ideal state with high trust and high competence. In this environment, mission orders focused on a clear commander's intent with latitude for subordinate creativity will maximize the potential outcome. Returning to our platform gunnery example, this quadrant is the most likely scenario for subordinates to draw upon their experience and creativity and maximize the outcome of the training event within the commander's intent.

As the shading in the figure indicates, leaders should strive to operate within the quadrant of the ideal state of mission command but should understand that compliance-based leadership is appropriate in some situations. In these quadrants, the leader applies the appropriate control for the given level of trust and competence among subordinates. The figure provides an intuitive approach for leaders to decide on the appropriate level of control for a given situation

management and risk management practices are two methods to move from a compliance-focused form of mission command to the ideal state.

Training management is the process by which leaders prioritize, plan, resource, and execute training events. Mission command depends on competence, so leaders must ensure that subordinates have sufficient repetitions to build competence on mission essential tasks. As subordinates demonstrate mastery of tasks,

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and communicates that compliance focused leadership is desirable in some cases.

Moving from Compliance-Focused to the Ideal State of Mission Command

An appropriate analogy to think about the movement between these quadrants is the relationship between a rider and a horse. When trust between the rider and horse is low and the situation is unfamiliar, the rider holds the reins tightly. As trust increases and competence grows through repetition, the rider holds the reins more loosely. A well-trained horse may complete a familiar ride without prompts from the rider. The rider seldom leaves the reins in place; however, circumstances may change that cause the rider to tighten or loosen the reins.

Leadership is a constant process of adjustment of the reins with the goal of applying the right level of control for the circumstances at hand. Variables such as new leaders or unfamiliar circumstances may impact the perception of trust and competence. In such cases, akin to a rider feeling nervous when the horse may not be, a leader may tighten the reins out of caution, bumping the level of control into an undesirable quadrant.

As the figure indicates, the method to move to the ideal state of mission command is leader development. Incorporating leader development in our training

leaders introduce ambiguity and complexity to allow subordinates to make decisions and learn from them. Incorporating command-and-control systems is a critical aspect of training management to train subordinates and leaders to operate from shared understanding. As competence and trust increase, training management is the process that commanders use to provide leader development opportunities to move from detail-based to intent-based mission orders.

ADP 6-0 provides a perspective on how risk management practices aid an organization to move from compliance-focused leadership to the ideal state of mission command. It explains that two ways of managing risk are "managing the number of tasks assigned to subordinates and by providing the appropriate resources to accomplish those tasks."[14] As subordinate competence increases, commanders have more opportunities to add complexity to an operation to further leader development while appropriately managing risk. This complexity may involve varying resources such as information, forces, materiel, and time as described in ADP 6-0.

The Mission Command Journey

The road to understanding mission command has been a bumpy one through the way mission command was taught and practiced. Our ability to practice mission command will increase with our efforts to

communicate this philosophy in a way that our subordinates easily grasp. Understanding the relationship of trust and competence provides a useful pathway to a firmer grasp of mission command among Army leaders. I found the tool described in this article helpful to coach subordinate leaders on mission command. It generated a constructive dialogue in our training management and risk management practices. It also helped subordinates feel less guilty about using compliance-focused leadership when it was appropriate. ■

Notes

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