



Lt. Elizabeth Carr emphasizes her commander's intent as she issues a fragmentary order to her NCOs in the back of a Mowag Piranha III armored personnel carrier at the Defence Forces Training Centre, Curragh Camp, County Kildare, Ireland, in 2022. (Photo by Airman Sam Gibney, Irish Air Corps)

Toward a Leadership Theory for Mission Command

Commandant Gavin Egerton, Irish Army

Iknocked on the door of my company commander's office with a manila document folder in hand, ready to brief Commandant Dave Cowhig on the

upcoming exercise I had planned. I was a platoon commander training brand new soldiers and their final field training exercise (FTX) was coming up. For a second

lieutenant commissioned less than a year previously, it was a relatively complicated FTX incorporating a naval ship, helicopters, and three different training areas. I briefed Cowhig on each part of the FTX, and when I got to the administrative details, I explained where I intended to billet him. I had run a shorter FTX a few weeks previously, and Cowhig stayed with us for the duration. At this point, he stopped me, “No, Gavin I won’t be staying with you for the exercise. I’ll visit for the critical events to see how the students perform, but I won’t be there overnight at any stage.” I was surprised, figuring he would want to closely supervise me, ensuring the various aspects of the FTX meshed; his presence mitigating the inevitable problems that would arise. Noticing my surprise, he said, “Gavin, I trust you to make decisions in my absence and to do the right thing.” This was a light bulb leadership moment for me.

I was first introduced to mission command as a cadet when our instructors encouraged us to use mission

Commandant Gavin Egerton, Irish Army, is an infantry officer with twenty-two years of service. He has held command, staff, and training appointments at home and deployed overseas on operations on four occasions, once each to Chad and Mali, and twice to Lebanon. He holds an MA in political communication from Dublin City University and is completing a PhD in history from University College Cork, where his thesis title is “The Application of Mission Command in Multinational Forces.” He is a graduate of the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth and serves as an instructor at the Irish Command and Staff School.

orders during platoon attack training—to focus on the *what* and *why*, not the *how*. But now, finally, as my company commander had put it, I was trusted to make decisions in the absence of supervision because (presumably) I had demonstrated competence on the previous FTX, and he now trusted my judgment. This was mission command in action, and I felt empowered.

This episode sparked an interest in the mission command philosophy that has grown over the years, leading me to employ it with my subordinates both at home during training and when deployed overseas on operations. It fascinates me how

some leaders excel with mission command while others struggle to apply it, micromanaging subordinates rather than trusting their judgment. It would appear that some leaders are more suited to the command philosophy than others, indicating that some leadership styles may be more compatible with mission command than others. But could a greater knowledge of leadership theory help commanders adapt and employ mission command more effectively? If so, what theories offer the best chance of success? In this article, I explore some prominent leadership theories to highlight those most compatible with mission command.

Origins of Mission Command

Mission command traces its conceptual origins to nineteenth-century Prussia’s *Auftragstaktik*. Following significant losses at the hands of Napoleon Bonaparte’s Grande Armée at Jena-Auerstadt in 1806, Frederick William III’s Prussia was left subservient to France.¹ Reflecting on the battles, Prussian officers noted that Napoleon had employed a certain amount of decentralized command, delegating authority to his corps commanders and thus giving himself greater overall flexibility.² By comparison, Frederick William III had employed a command structure that was top-down and highly centralized with little scope for independent action or initiative among his subordinate commanders.³ The lessons learned were harnessed to transform the Prussian army. Before the turn of the next century, leaders such as Helmuth von Moltke oversaw a cultural shift toward empowerment and espoused a new command philosophy, *Auftragstaktik*.⁴ This was a philosophy that included elements of command and control, battle tactics, war conceptualization, superior-subordinate relationships, and most importantly, leadership.⁵

Its modern-day successor, mission command, has become the prototypical command template for Western forces in recent years, with many nations’ militaries adopting it as their preferred command philosophy.⁶ The U.S. Army is no different, defining mission command as “the Army’s approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation.”⁷ U.S. doctrine recognizes that “war is inherently chaotic and uncertain” and thus plans must be capable of changing to meet a rapidly developing situation. As

subordinate leaders are typically best situated to understand what is happening, commanders must “capitalize on subordinate ingenuity.”⁸

Leadership Theory

Mission command is a philosophy of both leadership and command. While this article focuses on the leadership aspects, it is important to remember that command, particularly when exercised in a time of war, is a unique form of authority and responsibility not equaled in civilian life. The decisions made by commanders and their orders result in their subordinates risking their lives and carrying out actions not instinctive in a normal setting. Historically, command has been difficult to define and is possibly the least understood military concept.⁹ However, the U.S. military definition is useful, describing command as “the authority that a commander in the armed forces lawfully exercises over subordinates or rank or assignment.”¹⁰ Much of the literature on mission command tends to focus on command theory, but many of the traits and behaviors of commanders who successfully apply mission command reside in the leadership domain. Therefore, studying leadership theory is important to understand what makes mission command succeed.

Generally speaking, leadership theory can be split into two conflicting schools of thought: one perceives leadership as a science, the other as an art. Subscribers to the scientific approach believe leadership is a skill set that can be taught; whereas, those in the art camp view leadership as a collection of natural qualities—something a person is born with. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, the great man theory of British historian Thomas Carlyle posited that some people were born with innate attributes that made them great leaders.¹¹ This poses an interesting implication for the practice of mission command: perhaps some leaders are more suited to the philosophy due to natural ability or personality traits. However, the preponderance of literature and the prevailing consensus is that leadership is a taught skill set that can be improved through study and practice.

The study of leadership theory can be divided into a number of key eras, which can be further subdivided into multiple theories. While it is generally quite interesting to explore each leadership theory, not all are useful to the study of mission command specifically.

Therefore, the selected theories discussed below contain qualities most pertinent to mission command and are thus worthy of closer examination.

Trait theory. Trait theory originated with Francis Galton, who in his 1870 work *Hereditary Genius*, posited that a person’s natural abilities and innate skills could not be learned but were passed down from generation to generation.¹² Scholars of this theory sought to identify the characteristics of great leaders and then compare them to those of potential leaders, looking for the set of unique attributes that set effective leaders apart from those who were less effective.¹³ Leadership and management expert Ralph M. Stogdill, in 1948, concluded that a person in a position of leadership will excel over others in the following traits: sociability; initiative; persistence; knowing how to get things done; self-confidence; alertness to, and insight into, situations; cooperativeness; popularity; adaptability; and verbal facility.¹⁴ Arguably, many of these traits are associated with a sufficiently competent subordinate commander to whom freedom of action and decentralized command could be bestowed. Therefore, the study of trait theory—despite its apparent obsolescence—has a role to play in deciding with whom mission command can be employed. Commanders could use this to develop their own criteria based on theory and experimentation/experience to gauge who under their command they are most comfortable delegating authority to and how much.

However, Stogdill notes that leadership traits differ with the situation, and thus, the qualities and characteristics required in a leader are determined by the demands of the situation.¹⁵ In other words, an effective leader in one situation may not necessarily be a leader in a different situation.¹⁶ This view is supported by psychology scholar Richard D. Mann, who in 1959 pointed out that enough evidence existed to warrant a situational approach to leadership, suggesting the stability of a leadership model is a function of the task and the composition and culture of the group being led.¹⁷ This would suggest that mission command, rather than having universal applicability, is dependent on the mission, the unit assigned the mission, and the prevailing culture within that unit.

Behavioral theory. As the name suggests, this theory examines the behavior of individuals in leadership roles, signifying a shift in focus from leadership traits.¹⁸ Behavioral theory works by describing the



A platoon commander delivers an operation order brief to his NCOs using the mission-orders style for a hasty platoon attack at Kilworth Training Area, County Cork, Ireland, in 2019. (Photo by Comdt. Gavin Egerton, Irish Army)

major components of leader behavior rather than telling leaders how to behave.¹⁹ Scholars who subscribe to this theory believe leaders are made, not born, and therefore, anyone can become an effective leader if they adopt certain leadership behaviors. This is quite a positive viewpoint when one considers leaders who appear incompatible with mission command, or those to whom freedom of action and authority are not delegated, the implication being that they can be developed to become more compatible with mission command.

In 1949, Bernard M. Bass conducted a series of experiments with leaderless group discussion, observing

participants solving problems and evaluating each individual's performance in terms of leadership behavior.²⁰ He then elicited peer nominations from within the groups of those perceived to have the most leadership potential.²¹ This technique moved toward acknowledging the role of situation or context in leadership.²² Bass's technique could be adapted to identify subordinate commanders with the potential for independent action and decision-making by presenting them with decentralized command scenarios during tactical training and observing their behavior. This could then be used to inculcate a culture of mission command at the most junior levels, early in officers and NCOs' careers. It could also build confidence and comfort in superiors in loosening the reins to delegate more freely and often.

Situational theory. Situational theory recognizes that there is no universal style of leadership that suits all circumstances.²³ Therefore, a successful leader will adapt their leadership style depending on the situation. Scholars of this theory seek to understand the influence of contextu-

al factors on leader effectiveness—in particular, where leaders are interacting with subordinates to complete specific tasks.²⁴ In this regard, it emphasizes the value of understanding subordinates and developing their skill sets.

Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard were early pioneers of this theory. In 1969, they suggested four leadership styles: delegating, participating, selling, and telling.²⁵ Each corresponds to the level of maturity of the follower; in other words, their levels of commitment and competence, ranging from "high" for the delegating style to "low" for the telling style. Hersey and Blanchard noted that an optimal style of supervision can be prescribed for given levels of subordinate maturity.²⁶ These supervision styles are derived from combinations of task-focused leaders and relationship-focused leaders. For subordinates low in maturity,

the optimal leader behavior style is task-focused, with leaders telling subordinates what to do. As subordinate maturity increases, the leader's behavior style becomes more relationship-focused and less task-focused. When subordinates reach the highest levels of maturity—fully committed and highly competent—the leadership style is one of delegating, and leaders are eventually seen as redundant or unnecessary.²⁷

Rather than a leader adopting one singular leadership style, their theory suggests leaders should apply a particular style (or styles) appropriate to a particular situation. This approach is quite closely aligned with that of the mission command philosophy, in particular the idea that command exists on a spectrum with detailed command on one end, and mission command on the opposite extreme. A competent and experienced military leader should consider all factors before applying a particular leadership approach, including how much delegation and freedom can be distributed. As former director of the Center for Army Leadership Col. Tom Guthrie observes, “Good leaders tailor their leadership approach according to the mission; the operational environment; and the experience, training, proficiency, and skill of their staff and subordinate leaders and units.”²⁸

The maturity (or, in the military sense, professional competence) and commitment of subordinates will dictate the leadership style applied, and how much delegation and empowerment can reasonably ensue. In other words, in some situations, mission command may be impossible to employ, due to the presence of insufficiently competent subordinates.

Transformational theory. Historian James MacGregor Burns first discussed transformational leadership in his seminal 1978 work, *Leadership*, where he drew distinctions between transformational and transactional leadership styles.²⁹ Burns's work focused on political leadership and power but was expanded upon and widely promulgated as transformational leadership theory by Bass. Transformational leadership is often compared with transactional leadership, so both should be considered together for context.

Transactional leaders are those who lead their followers through a mechanism of social exchange, such as the issue or denial of financial reward in exchange for productivity. Transactional leaders leverage reward for good performance or threat/punishment for poor

performance to ensure the required work output from subordinates.³⁰ In the military context, the unspoken threat of reprimand (or more serious punishment) from the superior rank will result in the subordinate ranks obeying the commands they receive. Conversely, good performance is rewarded in various methods from public praise and positive performance appraisal reports to promotion and the issuing of commendations and medals. Transactional exchanges such as these comprise the bulk of interactions between leaders and followers.³¹

Transformational leaders differ in that they stimulate and inspire followers to commit to a shared vision, turning them into innovative problem-solvers while developing the followers' leadership capacity via coaching and mentoring.³² Transformational leaders help followers grow and become leaders themselves through empowerment. This theory builds upon assumptions that people can be trusted, everyone has a contribution to make, and problems are best handled at the lowest level.³³ Successful leaders who build such cultures articulate and convey a clear vision. They then align their subordinates around their vision and empower them with responsibility for achieving that vision.³⁴ The products of a transformational leadership philosophy are relationships of mutual stimulation and followers who are converted into leaders.³⁵

The aspects of transformational leadership such as building a culture of trust, empowerment of followers (turning them into leaders), and pursuit of a vision echo the essence of mission command. Therefore, it is likely that those who successfully employ mission command are also practitioners of transformational leadership. Transactional leadership interactions will occur in a mission-command-friendly environment while operating under an overarching umbrella of transformational leadership. Many of the important ingredients of mission command such as commander's intent, empowerment, and decentralized authority will reside within the transformational leadership domain, but once in place, the interactions between commanders will be typically transactional and require less explanation and discussion.

Conclusion

Examination of the selected theories above indicates that leaders should adjust their leadership style

to suit their ability, the ability of their subordinates, and the nature of the situation and task. Ideally, this is an automatic, instinctive adjustment rather than a conscious decision. Those looking to excel with mission command should study a broad range of leadership theories and styles, equipping themselves to be responsive to such variables. However, investing time in studying the theories explored in this article would be most beneficial as they align closely with the sentiment of mission command.

Trait theory could be used to establish what qualities and characteristics are most prevalent in those subordinates who thrive in a mission command environment. Commanders could employ this to assess who they are most comfortable delegating authority to under their command. Complementing this, behavioral theory could be leveraged to study commanders who successfully practice mission command to identify the key behaviors of such people. Using an adaptation of Bass's group experimentation technique, commanders could then identify those subordinates who exhibit such behavior patterns and are therefore best suited to freedom of action and to whom authority should be delegated. This type of assessment could be built into both NCO and officer leadership training via experiential learning scenarios, introducing leaders to mission command early in their careers. This would make commanders more comfortable delegating to subordinates and thus mitigate some biases and barriers to mission command.

Situational theory is aligned with the idea of command as a spectrum with detailed command on one end, and mission command on the other. Commanders should consider all situational factors before applying any particular approach to command and leadership

such as subordinate maturity, the assigned mission and tasks, and the operational environment. This will help them to decide where on the spectrum of command they should operate in a given situation. It also means understanding when and where mission command is most appropriate.

The study of transformational theory is likely to have the greatest return on investment for those keen to employ mission command more successfully. Many aspects of transformational leadership, such as building trust, empowering followers, and articulating and pursuing a vision, mirror the principles of mission command; the idea of aligning followers toward a shared vision, for example, echoes the successful communication of a commander's intent. Transformational leaders coach and mentor their followers to develop their own leadership ability and work toward the shared vision, building mutual trust in the process. Furthermore, commanders develop their subordinates to work to achieve higher levels of professional competence (maturity) and thus become more likely to be empowered with delegated decision-making authority—the core of mission command.

Since my light bulb leadership moment with Cowhig all those years ago, I have read widely and deeply on leadership and command in the hope of developing my leadership ability and that of my subordinates, thus becoming a more successful practitioner of mission command. The leadership theories discussed above have characteristics that individually and collectively contribute to an aggregated leadership theory congruent with the essence of mission command. For any commander hoping to develop their leadership philosophy and employ mission command more effectively, studying these theories offers the best chance of success. ■

Notes

1. Neil M. Heyman, "France Against Prussia: The Jena Campaign of 1806," *Military Affairs* 30, no. 4 (1966): 186–98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1985399>.

2. Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British, and Israeli Armies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 32.

3. Donald E. Vandergriff, *Adopting Mission Command: Developing Leaders for a Superior Command Culture* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 27.

4. Werner Widder, "Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung: Trademarks of German Leadership," *Military Review* 82, no. 5 (September–October 2002): 4, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Hot-Spots/docs/MC/MR-Sep-Oct-2002-Widder.pdf>.

5. David M. Keithly and Stephen P. Ferris, "Auftragstaktik, or Directive Control, in Joint and Combined Operations," *Parameters* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 119, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol29/iss3/7>.

6. Russell W. Glenn, "Mission Command in the Australian Army: A Contrast in Detail," *Parameters* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 21, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol47/iss1/4/>; Anthony C. King, "Mission Command 2.0: From an Individualist to a Collectivist Model," *Parameters* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 7, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol47/iss1/3/>.

7. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], July 2019), 1-3.
8. Ibid., 1-3-1-4.
9. Roger H. Nye, *The Challenge of Command* (New York: Penguin Group, 1986), 29.
10. Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington DC: U.S. GPO, 2017), GL-5.
11. Bert Alan Spector, "Carlyle, Freud, and the Great Man Theory More Fully Considered," *Leadership* 12, no. 2 (April 2016): 252, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015571392>.
12. Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* (New York: D. Appleton, 1870), 1.
13. Spector, "Carlyle," 251.
14. Ralph M. Stogdill, "Personal Factors Associated with Leadership: A Survey of the Literature," *Journal of Psychology* 26, no. 1 (January 1948): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.1948.9917362>.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 65.
17. Richard D. Mann, "A Review of the Relationships Between Personality and Performance in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin* 56, no. 4 (July 1959): 246-47, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0044587>.
18. Robert G. Lord et al., "Leadership in Applied Psychology: Three Waves of Theory and Research," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 102, no. 3 (March 2017): 437, <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000089>.
19. Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2016), 78-79.
20. Bernard M. Bass, "An Analysis of Leaderless Group Discussion," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 33, no. 6 (December 1949): 527, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0058164>.
21. Lord et al, "Leadership in Applied Psychology," 437.
22. Victor H. Vroom and Arthur G. Jago, "The Role of the Situation in Leadership," *American Psychologist* 62, no. 1 (January 2007): 19, https://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Leadership/Vroom_Jago_2007_The_role_of_the_situation_in_leadership.pdf.
23. Geir Thompson and Robert P. Vecchio, "Situational Leadership Theory: A Test of Three Versions," *Leadership Quarterly* 20, no. 5 (October 2009): 838, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.06.014>.
24. Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe, "A Critical Review of Leadership Theory," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of the Psychology of Leadership, Change, and Organizational Development*, ed. H. Skipston Leonard et al. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 19.
25. Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behaviour: Utilizing Human Resources*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 152.
26. Thompson and Vecchio, "Situational Leadership Theory," 838.
27. Robert P. Vecchio, R. Craig Bullis, and Donna M. Brazil, "The Utility of Situational Leadership Theory: A Replication in a Military Setting," *Small Group Research* 37, no. 5 (October 2006): 408, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496406291560>.
28. Tom Guthrie, "Mission Command: Do We Have the Stomach for What Is Really Required?," *Army* 62, no. 6 (June 2012): 26, https://www.ansa.org/sites/default/files/FC_Guthrie_0612.pdf.
29. Bruce A. Tucker and Robert F. Russell, "The Influence of the Transformational Leader," *Journal of Leadership and Organisational Studies* 10, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107179190401000408>.
30. Bernard M. Bass, "From Transactional to Transformational Leadership: Learning to Share the Vision," *Organizational Dynamics* 18, no. 3 (Winter 1990): 20, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616\(90\)90061-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616(90)90061-5).
31. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper Perennial Political Classics, 2010), 4.
32. Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, 2nd ed. (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 4.
33. Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio, "Transformational Leadership and Organizational Culture," *Public Administration Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 113, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40862298>.
34. Ibid.
35. Burns, *Leadership*, 4.

Interested in getting a personal subscription to *Military Review*?

Requests for personal subscriptions should be sent to the U.S. Government Publishing Office. For information on cost and instructions for subscribing online, visit <https://bookstore.gpo.gov/products/sku/708-099-00000-7?ctid=1387>.

