# Harnessing Initiative and Innovation

## A Process for Mission Command

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*"Mission Command. The increasing complexity and uncertainty anticipated in the future environment demand that Joint Force 2020 employ mission command to unleash its full potential in a way that harnesses the initiative and innovation of all members of the team. Commanders exercise mission command by understanding the military problem, visualizing the end state and operation, and describing their vision. They direct actions throughout planning and execution and arm their subordinates with intent.*

*Today, much of the Joint Force is employed in environments involving ill-structured problems and against adaptable, thinking adversaries who exploit opportunities at every turn. These challenges call for leaders at the tactical level to exercise greater personal initiative vice relying on the decision making of echelons well above the point of action. Leaders must empower individual initiative by providing clear, concise, and complete mission orders in a climate of mutual trust and understanding. The future joint force will be one where junior leaders are empowered to exercise disciplined initiative based on clear guidance and intent. Institutionalizing mission command is imperative to prepare our next generation of leaders."*

— Excerpt from *America's Military—A Profession of Arms*

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PHOTO:1-5 Cav Soldiers conduct an air assault during Operation New Dawn, COP Speicher, Iraq, July 2011. (CPT Matt Liebal).

APPRECIATING THE NEED to institutionalize mission command in today's Army is easy given the future described by General Martin E. Dempsey above. As leaders, we spend a great deal of time discussing the significance of mission command. Current doctrine, as described in FM 6-0, *Mission Command*, is sufficient for a military organization to accomplish its mission. However, does it inform us as to how to institutionalize mission command and develop leaders who exercise disciplined initiative, as called for by General Dempsey?

Army doctrine mentions the need to develop leaders who are empowered to exercise initiative. It does not currently describe a way to do that. We believe that we have found a method for establishing a shared vision across a unit that is useful in all operational environments, integrates all necessary functions of the organization, and addresses the question of how we harness the skills of today's young tactical leaders— officers and NCOs— who came of age during this time of war. The shared vision offers a way to develop them as leaders for the future. We argue that commanders should not act alone to understand and visualize the mission. By allowing subordinates to be involved in this process, we achieved shared understanding and initiative far sooner, and more efficiently, than our doctrine describes.

We have tested this method during garrison training, major field exercises, and our recent deployment in Operation New Dawn in Iraq, which served as a final "proof of concept." We found that our approach to mission command—
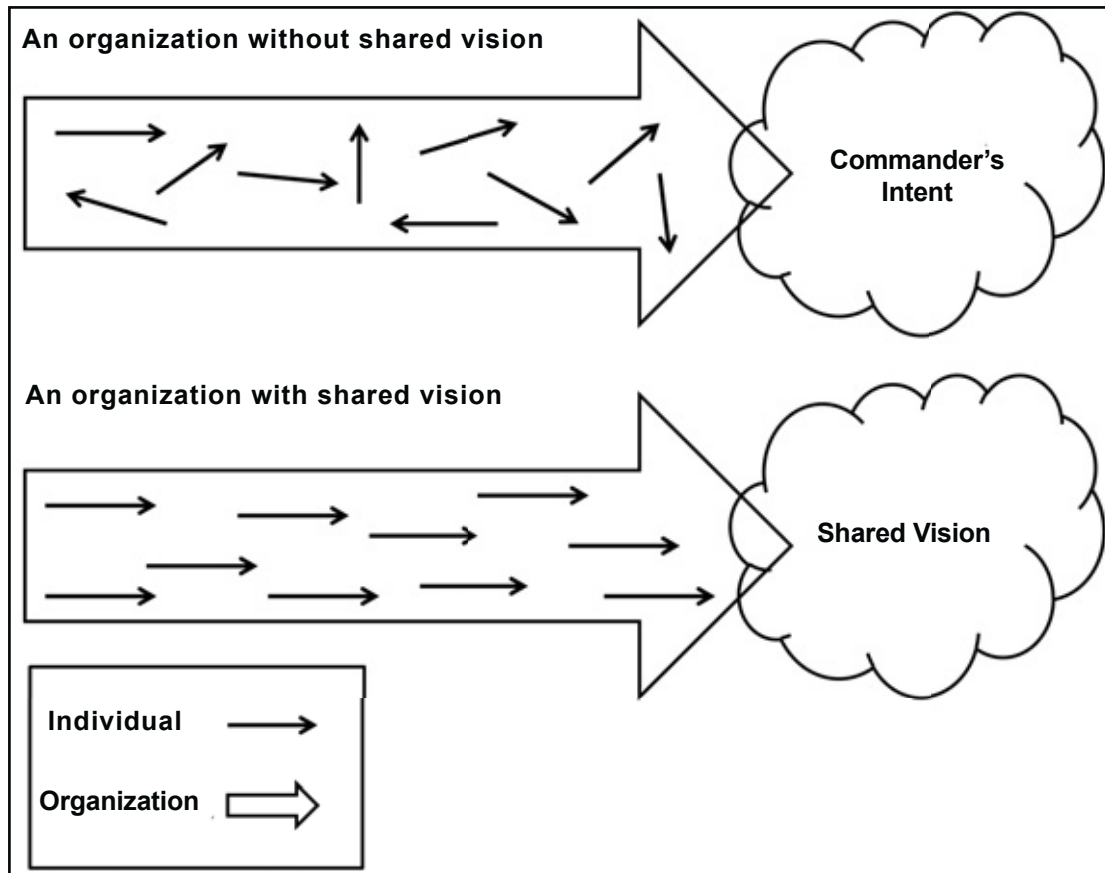
- Developed critical thinkers.
- Established "ownership" at all levels.
- Developed a proactive staff.
- Established a predictable environment.
- Clearly established priorities.
- Produced flexible and adaptive subordinate units.

We witnessed these improvements most clearly at the conclusion of the war in Iraq, when the battalion supported the largest withdrawal of U.S. forces and materiel from a country since the end of the World War II. We supported the tactical retrograde of three brigade combat teams with all their associated equipment (much of which had been stockpiling over the last eight years), while simultaneously transitioning our own facilities to Iraqi or U.S. State Department control, supporting the end-of-mission of a U.S. division headquarters, and beginning our own retrograde to Kuwait. The battalion did all this while still in contact with enemy cells in Salah ah Din, Iraq.

Company grade officers and NCOs largely accomplished this monumental task. They "owned" the problem, analyzed it critically, took the initiative, and developed solutions that provided order amid chaos. They were ready for this complexity because they followed an approach to mission command that had prepared them for the challenges they would face.

Figure 1 shows the difference between an organization in which the commander acts alone to develop understanding and visualization and an organization where the commander does this with key leaders and staff. In Figure 1a, the commander develops his understanding and visualization and, through his intent, describes the operation to the unit, which is depicted by the cloud shape. The
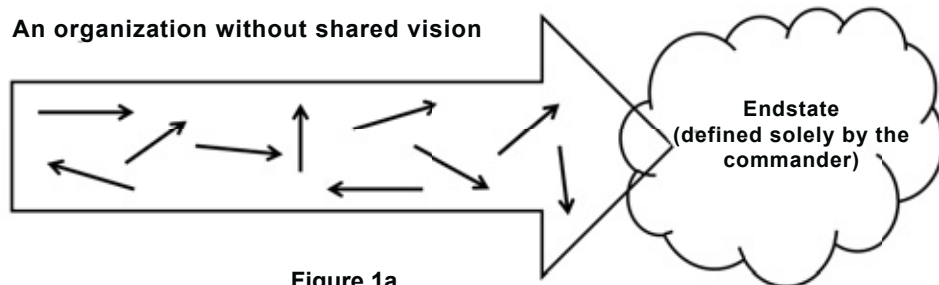


**Figure 1**

**An organization without shared vision**

**Endstate (defined solely by the commander)**

**Figure 1a**

**An organization with shared vision**

Endstate

Individual

Organization

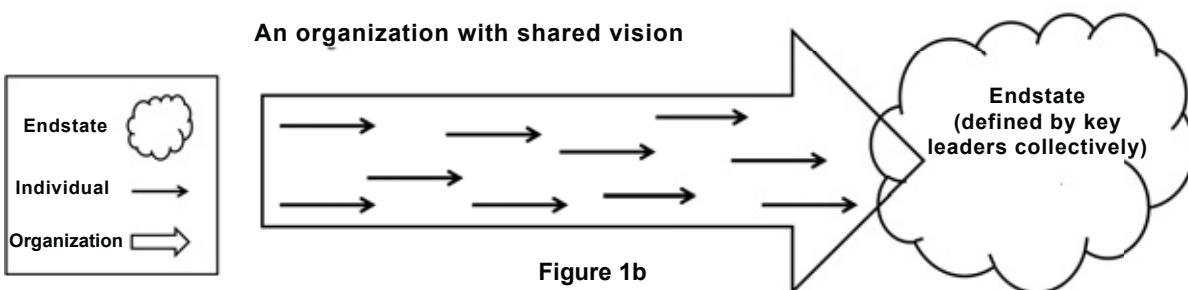**Endstate (defined by key leaders collectively)**

**Figure 1b**

large, block arrow depicts the larger organization, which the commander can direct to the end state in the cloud by aligning and using resources and systems. However, in this scenario, getting individuals in the unit to take ownership of the mission requires a great deal of time and energy. The small arrows depict those individuals, some of whom need regular guidance and direction to stay on course while others even openly resist the effort and consume a great deal of time and resources. This scenario does not foster initiative or empower leaders.

Figure 1b depicts a unit whose subordinates are empowered and exercise initiative. Here, the individuals have taken ownership of the mission and require little regular guidance and direction. They know what they must do because they helped define the problem in the first place.

So how does the Army develop this kind of organization? Before we can adequately address that question, we will review our current mission command doctrine.

## Doctrinal Review

Field Manual (FM) *6-0, Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, dated 2003, defines mission command in several ways. As a

philosophy, mission command is "the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of full spectrum operations. It is commander-led and blends the art of command and the science of control to integrate the warfighting functions to accomplish the mission." FM 3-0, *Operations,* says that as a warfighting function, it develops and integrates those activities, enabling a commander to balance the art of command and the science of control.

But what does all this mean? Simply put, it is the Army's way of ensuring that cohesive teams (staffs, units, and command teams) can create an environment of shared understanding that allows the commander to understand, visualize, describe, direct, lead, and assess operations. He does this by driving the operations process, providing clear intent, and creating an environment where subordinates feel that they are part of the process.

The problem is that our doctrine offers few, if any, examples of how to do this. We often see commanders attempt to understand an operational environment in isolation, based solely on their experience. However, this does not foster a sense of ownership from the members of the unit. After

imparting his understanding by visualizing the mission, the commander must dedicate a great deal of time and effort to describing his intent and directing its execution. Many problems that face units today in the operational environment are new, complex, and beyond the commander's experience. In this situation, doctrine suggests that the staff use operational design methodology to gain a better understanding. However, should this come before or after the commander begins the mission command process on his own?

As mentioned earlier, we approached this situation differently by grounding ourselves in the aforementioned doctrine, but reordering it to allow the commander, key subordinates, and the staff to maximize a shared understanding. Consequently, we achieved buy-in very early in the process. How did we do this? Figure 2 depicts the process.

## A Process for Battalion-level Mission Command

Figure 2 illustrates how we linked operational design methodology, the military decision making process (MDMP), and finally the day-to-day operations and systems of the battalion.

The design process informs the commander's understanding, visualization, and description and, in our case, resulted in the creation of a campaign plan with associated lines of effort (LOEs). Developed together with other key leaders, it results in a shared vision for the unit. Operational design begins with *understanding* the environment in which the problem lies (the environmental frame). Frequently, the commander uses some framework or model to understand the environment and problem. He then *visualizes* how the unit can successfully solve the problem. Finally, he *describes* this to the organization through commander's intent.

The commander then *directs* action using the MDMP for specific events or objectives along the various LOEs. The commander injects his commander's guidance, often based on his personal experience. The result is initial planning guidance. The commander has now led and directed a deliberate methodology or process (campaign planning utilizing design) that has provided him enhanced visualization and understanding. In the end, the unit has used design to inform mission

command, which, in turn, drives the planning process, resulting in a product that is "ours" versus one dictated by the commander.

The final step in mission command is to *assess* how the unit is progressing along the campaign plan. We used conventional tools to conduct this important step. For example, while in garrison, we used our command and staff meetings to show the command team the status of our unit and personnel readiness. We used training meetings and resource synchronization meetings to ensure that we were properly preparing for, and conducting, the training events that would eventually result in achieving our desired end state for training. Command maintenance periods let us focus on the readiness LOE, and leader professional development classes focused on building skills in our leaders. Quarterly training briefs afforded us opportunities to assess how we were progressing along our campaign plan or to adjust the next quarter's plan. While deployed, we used battle update briefs, the targeting meeting, and other tools to track and assess our progress in a similar fashion.
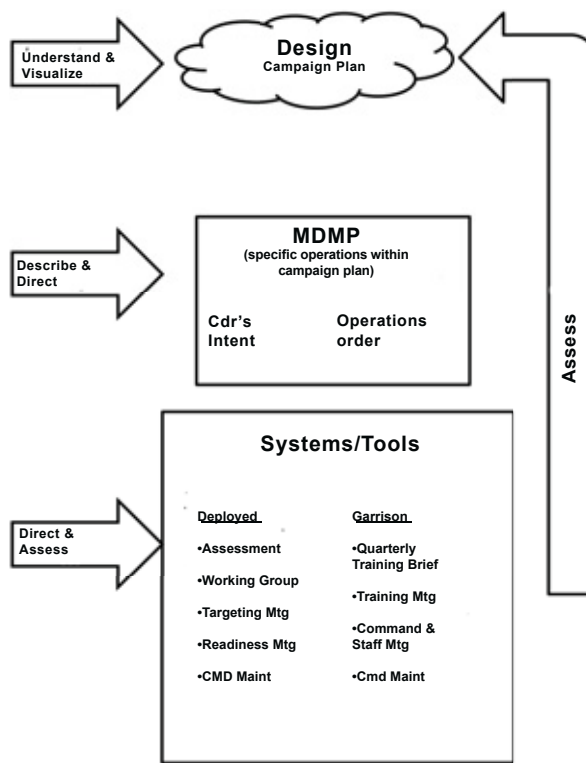


**Figure 2**

We have followed this process five times over the last two years—twice in a garrison environment to create extended training strategies during various stages of the Army Force Generation cycle; once in a time-constrained combat training center environment where the change in mission required a new, condensed, scenario-driven campaign plan; in preparation for an operational deployment in support of Operation New Dawn with the creation of an initial campaign plan; and during combat, when it became apparent that a change in operational and environmental factors warranted a change in the unit's purpose and direction, and thus, the campaign plan. Each time we employed the process, the variables dictating the need to execute the process were different, thus showing this method's versatility and utility.

We first employed the process in garrison to create an extended training strategy to determine predeployment training guidance (PDTG). We captured this in the form of a training campaign plan. Our first step was to host a mission essential task list conference for platoon sergeants and above at a facility on Fort Hood away from the battalion headquarters. This change in location facilitated open dialogue, a primary necessity for success. The commander served as the primary facilitator, asking such leading questions as, "What will we be expected to do in the next year?" and "At what tasks do we need to excel?" The group's answers



Key leaders of 1-5 Cavalry collaborate to determine the unit's lines of effort, Fort Hood, TX, April 2012. (1LT Tony Forstner)

to these questions led to the bottom-up creation of platoon battle task lists. We agreed on those battle task lists and the staff later published those in a FRAGO (fragmentary order).

The task lists formed the initial thoughts behind the LOEs we developed at our subsequent campaign plan development session, which included first sergeants and above, with the commander again asking leading questions, as opposed to simply describing his vision for the next year. Of course, any good commander already has an initial vision; he just keeps it to himself at this early stage.

We then developed four LOEs—training, leader development, readiness, and resiliency. (Figure 3 depicts an example of a generic campaign plan.) Those efforts were critical if we were to be ready for our deployed mission of advising, training, and assisting Iraqi Security Forces.

Next, we collectively defined the end states for those LOEs. We defined end states for how we wanted the unit to be just prior to deployment. While this may seem time-consuming and unnecessary, it established goal alignment and ownership up front, greatly reducing the need for the commanders to persuade subordinates down the road. We formed into smaller groups, with a designated chief for each LOE, and the smaller groups defined the end state for the LOE. Each group then out briefed the larger group, and together we refined the end states until we were satisfied. The commander served as the facilitator for this portion.

Once we had established the end states for each LOE, the operations officer led us through a process of defining effective sub-units such as teams, crews, squads, platoons, and companies. Again, we divided into smaller groups, led by a facilitator. The groups discussed what made an effective sub-unit in terms of training, leader development, readiness, and resiliency. Once finished, each work group out-briefed the larger group, and we collectively decided on common definitions.

We then used these definitions to derive the measures of effectiveness to assess if we were on track to achieving our end state. Finally, we divided into work groups once again and determined the key tasks or objectives required to achieve each LOE's end states. In our case, we created task lists for each quarter of the year that we had before
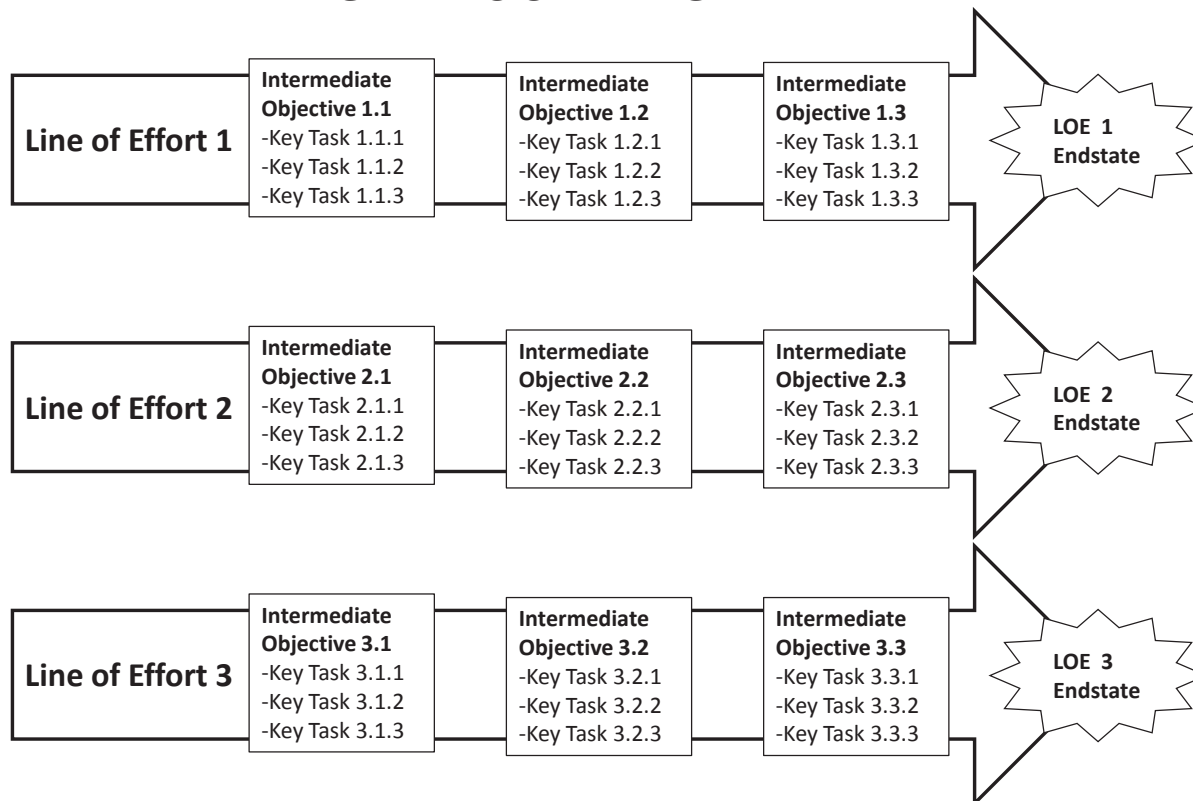
# GENERIC CAMPAIGN PLAN

| | Intermediate Objective 1.1<br>-Key Task 1.1.1<br>-Key Task 1.1.2<br>-Key Task 1.1.3 | Intermediate Objective 1.2<br>-Key Task 1.2.1<br>-Key Task 1.2.2<br>-Key Task 1.2.3 | Intermediate Objective 1.3<br>-Key Task 1.3.1<br>-Key Task 1.3.2<br>-Key Task 1.3.3 | LOE 1 Endstate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Line of Effort 1** | | | | |

| | Intermediate Objective 2.1<br>-Key Task 2.1.1<br>-Key Task 2.1.2<br>-Key Task 2.1.3 | Intermediate Objective 2.2<br>-Key Task 2.2.1<br>-Key Task 2.2.2<br>-Key Task 2.2.3 | Intermediate Objective 2.3<br>-Key Task 2.3.1<br>-Key Task 2.3.2<br>-Key Task 2.3.3 | LOE 2 Endstate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Line of Effort 2** | | | | |

| | Intermediate Objective 3.1<br>-Key Task 3.1.1<br>-Key Task 3.1.2<br>-Key Task 3.1.3 | Intermediate Objective 3.2<br>-Key Task 3.2.1<br>-Key Task 3.2.2<br>-Key Task 3.2.3 | Intermediate Objective 3.3<br>-Key Task 3.3.1<br>-Key Task 3.3.2<br>-Key Task 3.3.3 | LOE 3 Endstate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Line of Effort 3** | | | | |

**Figure 3**

our deployment, and these became measures of performance to track progress. A unit facing a different training timeline should determine what amount of time makes the most sense for it to use.

Finally, the staff took all of the outputs and built a PDTG campaign plan that drove our efforts for the entire next year. We later published a written FRAGO detailing this campaign plan in lieu of annual training guidance. Subsequent quarterly training guidance was simply a narrative of the key tasks and objectives illustrated on the PDTG campaign plan. However, we assessed the campaign plan quarterly to determine if it was still valid or if we had to adjust course. We assessed the measures of performance from the last quarterly training guidance and measured them against the measures of effectiveness. Based on this assessment, we would add or adjust measures of performance to the next quarterly training guidance. We identified major overall azimuth shifts. Finally, the operations officer would draft quarterly training guidance within the lines of the PDTG campaign plan and add tasks that needed re-doing or had not been accomplished to "standard" for each quarter. If key tasks now proved to be invalid, we deleted them.

The battalion's PDTG campaign plan was the guiding document for all battalion events leading up to the final weeks prior to getting on the aircraft that would take the soldiers to their Operation New Dawn mission.

In January 2012, we found ourselves back at Fort Hood, six months earlier than anticipated, because the war in Iraq ended. We needed another campaign plan for the remainder of the fiscal year. Again, we assembled the leaders and staff and asked them to define LOEs, end states, and key tasks, with the end state no longer a deployment, but a training event—a battalion gunnery at the end of the fiscal year.

We decided to plan only through the end of the fiscal year for two primary reasons. First, we expected the eventual announcement of a future deployment mission that would require yet another design planning process, and we felt confident that

any announcement would not significantly affect the current fiscal year. Second, the unit would soon be going through a period of transition in leadership, including changing the entire battalion command group, so it made sense to plan through the end of the fiscal year and let the new commander and his team build the next PDTG and campaign plan.

The processes described above took a few weeks. However, when necessary, a unit can complete them more quickly. We faced such a situation during our Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotation in January 2011. The battalion was initially assigned an area of operations, with its unique set of environmental factors, within the JRTC scenario construct several weeks prior to its arrival to Fort Polk. We followed our process and developed our initial campaign plan while at the leader training program in November 2010. As we were getting ready to move into the "box" to begin seven days of force-on-force training scenarios, a sister battalion pulled out of the exercise early, so we abandoned our current planned area of operation and assumed the uncovered area. Because the environmental conditions had changed, we had to refine—or recreate—our campaign plan only 72 hours prior to execution. Having gone through the mission command process twice (creating the PDTG and leader training program) and several sessions of MDMP, the staff began to define the new area of operation, using a construct of design, and assigned company missions while it continued training for the force-on-force exercise.

Through several planning sessions and work groups over three days, the battalion staff was able to create an entirely new campaign plan based on the new area of operation, briefing the new mission requirements to the company commanders mere hours before we moved to our assigned area of operations for the force-on-force component of the exercise. This proved that the staff was able to think critically without the constant presence of the commander, executive officer, or operations officer.

We utilized our process twice more—just prior to and during our Operation New Dawn deployment. In preparation for our deployment, we set aside several working days to create a comprehensive campaign plan, using information brought back from predeployment site surveys, from discussions with the unit we would be replacing in Iraq, and

from planning products produced by our higher headquarters.

To develop the plan, we conducted another off-site with our key leaders, including newly arrived stability transition team members. Early in the process we discovered that any comprehensive plan had to include the rear detachment command team and family readiness group leaders. We formed into working groups to brainstorm specific rear detachment, family, and home station objectives and end states for soldiers and families remaining behind after the battalion deployed.

After we completed the initial lines-of-effort decision phase, the working groups went "classified" and defined key objectives for our area of operations in Iraq. Again, these breakout groups provided the measures of performance and measures of effectiveness that we used later during the targeting process to help validate whether our operations were still moving toward our desired end state. Because discussions were underway at higher levels of command about a pending U.S. departure in late 2011, there was ambiguity at our echelon regarding our mission, so we decided to develop the campaign plan only out to October 2011—a decision that proved fortuitous. We took this final campaign plan product forward to Iraq,



1-5 Cavalry soldiers train for stability operations prior to deployment, Fort Hood, TX, March 2011. (Photo by SGT Harvey Hodnett)

guiding our operational focus for the first five months we were there.

Our plan proved useful as we progressed for the first several months. We utilized our battle rhythm events to continually check to ensure we were on glide path within each of our LOEs using the predetermined measures of effectiveness and measures of performance, including a weekly conference call with our rear detachment team. As summer waned and early fall 2011 approached, our operational focus changed from a locally focused stability mission to a planned, total retrograde of U.S. forces from Iraq. We used our established targeting meetings to begin our mission command process to develop the "continuation" portion of our campaign plan and assess it. This allowed us to establish new LOEs and end states for our changed environment and mission. As the unit moved toward its transition out of Iraq, we developed new LOE objectives and end states for our retrograde to Kuwait to establish ourselves as a strategic reserve. Collectively over two separate events, the battalion leaders and staff defined and reaffirmed the unit's combat operational plan. It proved its worth as the battalion executed combat operations in an area of operations greater in size than the state of Maryland and participated in, without error, the largest retrograde of U.S. forces since World War II.

## Requirements

There are several requirements for this approach to mission command to be successful. First, the commander must create an environment where collaboration and initiative can flourish. He can best do this by teaching, as opposed to simply directing. When possible, the commander should ask questions instead of making statements. This fosters critical thinking within the staff and other subordinates. Sometimes the commander may even want to ask questions to which he already knows the answer—just for the sake of creating dialogue and communicating that he values input.

Of course, for this to happen, the commander must be confident in his ability to be in charge without having to be the "smartest person in the room." He must be comfortable not having to appear that he knows everything about everything.

In addition, an informed and integrated staff, no matter the rank or specialty, is necessary because field grade officers must also act as teachers and coaches for staff and junior leaders. Regular staff training should be part of the battle rhythm. Field-grade officers, joined by the commander from time to time, can teach the staff campaign design and the military decision making process. This obviously requires a significant amount of time and is a challenge if the unit's deployment timeline is tight. Often unit leaders decide that staff training requires too much time and comes at the expense of immediate needs, so they ignore it. Of course, as soon as the battalion meets one immediate need, another arises, and the staff never receives adequate training. Consequently, the staff is always reactive, not proactive. If properly trained, however, staff members become critical thinkers and innovators, and the unit is able to operate in a proactive fashion.

## Risks

As mentioned above, this method takes time. It does not work best when the unit is in a crisis, nor should units use it for short-term operations or planning; it is not mission-specific. It is intended to serve as a general framework for long-term mission command in order to develop a particular culture.

There are two risks in following this method of mission command. The first risk is the need to accept short-term suboptimal performance from new staff officers in order to drive long-term learning. (The adage that we learn from our mistakes applies here.) Every staff officer and leader is important in making this process work. Personal initiative and quality control are critical. Sending a subpar product back to be redone in order to drive learning is preferable in the long-term to simply handing it off to a more capable officer. The goal is to improve everyone's capabilities.

Another primary risk to this process is that the outcome may be somewhat different than the commander envisioned. We collaborated to determine the desired end states or goals and jointly developed the key tasks or objectives that had to be accomplished to reach the end states. However, different people develop different paths to achieve the same goal. They often prioritize key tasks differently and put them in different chronological order. It is tempting for the commander to jump in and put them in the order that he dictates, but this is not wise. Usually, a plan the group develops, even
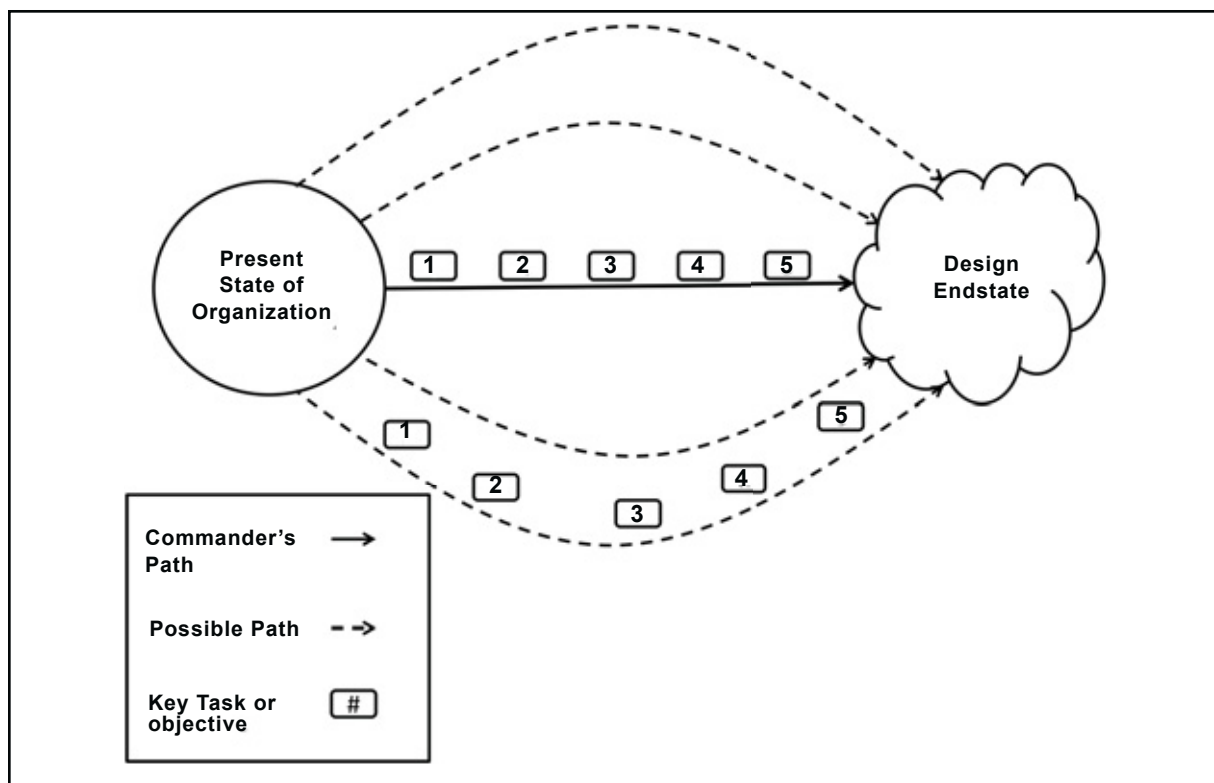
**Figure 4**

if it matches only 80 percent of the commander's plan, is superior to a plan developed solely by the commander. This is because when the group develops the plan, the members of the group have already bought in to the mission. They do not need convincing. If the commander develops the plan alone, he must work to sell it to the group. This often requires a great deal of time and energy. It also inhibits initiative and synergy. Our mission command method involves the input of many and results in synergy where 1+1=3. The commander must be willing to accept that it is not his plan.

Figure 4 depicts this concept. The figure shows the desired end state, but shows many possible "paths" to arrive at that end state. The commander will most likely visualize his own path, including the key tasks or objectives needed to accomplish the end state. Of course, several other possible paths exist, as the dashed lines in the figure indicate. When subordinates develop alternate paths, they usually develop similar or even the same key tasks or objectives. However, they frequently place them in different chronological order or assign different priorities to them than the

commander does. The commander can facilitate their understanding or accept the path developed by the group instead of his own.

## Conclusion

Mission command need not always be commander-centric. Our method of establishing a shared vision by incorporating subordinates early in the process during the *understand* and *visualize* phases can serve as a "unifying theory" for leadership that results in a more effective organization. It clearly communicates how to integrate all lines of effort in the organization to achieve a commonly defined end state. It establishes ownership, aligns goals early, empowers subordinates, and improves long-term efficiency. After all, a group-developed goal that is "good enough" is better than a "perfect" answer the commander develops by himself.

While the process we have described requires time and patience in the short-term, it results in a climate that does indeed foster initiative. It empowers junior leaders to think critically and address challenges that are likely to arise in the future. *MR*