

Taking Ownership of Mission Command

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THE ARMY UNDERSTANDS the mutually supporting domains of leader development—institutional, operational, and self-development domains create confident and competent leaders. As we transition from our recent conflicts, the Army seeks to develop leaders to apply mission command by improving the combined effects of training, education, and experience. Ultimately, the experience gained in each training domain reinforces the lessons learned in the others, in a continuous and progressive process. Therefore, it is important that our thinking, actions, activities, and processes enable the practice of the mission command philosophy. By practicing mission command today at every level of the Army, we mitigate the risks in its implementation and synthesize the knowledge we need to meet tomorrow's challenges.

What is Mission Command?

Mission command is the Army's answer to the uncertainty, ambiguity, and fog of war and conflict. It is both the Army's philosophy of command and a warfighting function. Army Doctrine Publication 6-0 currently defines mission command as *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 unified land operations*.¹

As a warfighting function, mission command consists of people, organizations, tasks, processes, and systems. Wholly necessary, these components are no different from any other warfighting function. Apart from the unique fact this warfighting function integrates and synchronizes the others, what, then, is important about mission command?²

Consider the doctrinal definition of mission command provided above. Strip away the numerous adjectives from the definition momentarily, and what this really says is commanders must give their subordinates mission orders; clear, concise orders that convey *mission* and *intent*. Those soldiers in turn use their *initiative* to execute the mission in the manner that best meets

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PHOTO: Infantrymen of 2nd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment, 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, receive their safety brief before firing at Galloway Range, Fort Benning, Ga., 26 January 2009.

Mission Command Philosophy

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 unified land operations.

Guided by the principles of...

- Build cohesive teams through mutual trust
- Create shared understanding
- Provide a clear commander's intent
- Exercise disciplined initiative
- Use mission orders
- Accept prudent risk

The principles of mission command assist commanders and staff in balancing the art of command with the science of control.

Figure 1
The Mission Command Philosophy (ADP 6-0).

their commander's intent. It may sound simple, but its practice in combat under conditions of increasing uncertainty and ever-growing complexity will demand the utmost in initiative, agility, and adaptation from those who must execute.

Complexity demands clear thinking, and to that end, doctrine provides our leaders with guidance, in the form of principles, which support the mission command philosophy (see Figure 1). They can be found both in doctrine and reprinted in various journals and forums over the past year. Notably, each of these principles begins with a clear verb, and thus compels to action our leaders, our people, our organizations, and our systems.

In our profession, each action has a purpose, and the purpose of these principles ultimately is to apply mission command toward the execution of our mission. We can agree then that mission command is a warfighting function whose systems and processes enable and serve the exercise of its philosophy and

its principles, vice a collection of costly systems and organizations that serve only themselves.

We have thus far only discussed a guiding philosophy—a system of values and an underlying theory. Before addressing its implementation and its practice, it is helpful to reflect on the changes the Army has experienced in the last decade, the evolving environment that calls for adaptation, and the process by which our people—our most valuable resource—will adapt in the face of this changing world.

The Changing Environment

The past 12 years of conflict, largely focused on counterinsurgency and large-scale stability operations, have encouraged us to place a high premium on leaders who are adaptable and resilient, tactically proficient, culturally competent, and able to deal with a broad set of military, political, social, and other operational factors that present challenges to mission accomplishment. This is due, in large part,

to the broad set of tasks that leaders at all levels have had to conduct. From clear-hold-build counterinsurgency, to more nuanced undertakings such as leader engagements, tribal shuras, agricultural and infrastructure development, security force assistance, counterdrug efforts and more, our junior leaders are not only expected, but have also grown accustomed to, dealing with complex problems.

As the last decade and its lessons move further from the present, we simultaneously face the dilemma posed by an uncertain strategic environment. The U.S. exit from Vietnam in the mid-1970s meant primarily a return to training for large-scale “conventional” conflict in Central Europe. The environment today calls for the Army to possess a wider array of competencies.³ This environment is characterized by economic and political instability, a convergence of people and technologies that increases the speed of change around the world, and the proliferation of destructive technologies, available at lower cost to a wider variety of actors.⁴

The most profound challenges to U.S. interests will manifest from rising powers attempting to change the state of international security affairs. Compounding these challenges is further disorder that results from loss of governance or territory, loss of control over populations and resources, and chaotic events such as natural catastrophes and pandemics.⁵ In this changing environment, we find that we must be prepared for more, not fewer, contingencies in order to protect our vital interests. Detering and defeating malign actors represents only one mission among many—asymmetric and hybrid threats, anti-access and area-denial challenges, cyberspace, and weapons of mass destruction will feature heavily in the array of forces with which we must contend. Consequently, we can no longer afford the luxury of a “business as usual” mindset. The trends today point to a future in which ground forces must be prepared to rapidly provide “appropriate, flexible, and responsive capabilities.”⁶

The implication of this strategic environment is that going forward we will ask our soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and junior officers to do not less, but much more. The demand for leaders that can apply mission command to these problem sets becomes abundantly clear. In point of fact, in his 3 April 2012 White Paper on mission command, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General

Martin Dempsey reiterates the guidance given earlier in the capstone concept for joint operations, that, “Mission command must be institutionalized and operationalized into all aspects of the joint force—our doctrine, our education, our training, and our manpower and personnel processes.”⁷ The resulting Army guidance in this regard follows suit. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, the Army Chief of Staff, further reiterates in his address to the Class of 2013 at the U.S. Military Academy, “In our new doctrine, the Army is embracing mission command . . . it is critical that you understand and lead using the philosophy of mission command. We will empower soldiers, squads, and commanders at every level so they may rapidly respond to the demands of the incredibly complex environment in which they are asked to operate.”⁸ The call for mission command is loud and clear.

Risks in Implementation

As the Army now goes about the business of implementing mission command as a philosophy and a warfighting function, it acknowledges in the recently published Army Mission Command Strategy that implementation is not complete. This attributes to a lack of understanding of the doctrine, and consequently a lack of synchronization between the operational and institutional force. By this strategy then, unity of effort across the force is key to implementing the warfighting function, and the first condition we must set is that all leaders across the Army understand and practice the philosophy.⁹

Indeed senior leaders, commanders, doctrine writers, and instructors are right now working toward this result. Anecdotally, a sampling of opinions of recent graduates of the Army’s Command and General Staff Officer’s Course (CGSOC) confirms the institution is earnestly trying to instill the philosophy of mission command in our current crop of mid-grade officers. Undoubtedly, it is with the expectation that over time, the Army’s culture will change as its future battalion and brigade commanders practice the new command philosophy. However, unless deliberate steps are taken to apply the philosophy into every aspect of everyday business, even the strategy states there will be risk in implementation, and leaders who want to see the mission command philosophy become reality should guard against wishful thinking.

Chief among the risks in trying to implement mission command is that Army leaders at various levels simply do not implement it. Those who brush off such risks may not fully appreciate the effect that incomplete or incorrect implementation may have. Simply, that a failure to practice the principles of mission command is a willful decision to revert to those practices, which are anathema to it, namely: micromanagement, risk-aversion, and the zero-defects mentality. If we wish to have agile and adaptive leaders who can execute complex tasks in uncertain environments, these behaviors will guarantee we get just the opposite. Should we be concerned about this risk?

Recent critics in the public sphere have voiced their concern that the mission command system (the technological and organizational aspects of the warfighting function) will ultimately undercut the philosophy by empowering commanders with an unprecedented capacity for micromanagement. Given the choice between the art of command and the science of control, the argument goes; the leaders we have traditionally tended to develop will gravitate toward retaining greater control. For example, Gregory Fontenot and Kevin Benson assert in *The Conundrum of Mission Command* that a command philosophy that treats command as an art is unrealistic. “Really—command is an art? If . . . the analogy of command to art is valid, then we need to examine our human resources and education systems, for they produce far more scientists than artists.”¹⁰ Donald Vandergriff similarly points out that the Army’s personnel system may not be best suited to the mission command philosophy.¹¹

Such assertions might raise a few eyebrows, if for no other reason than they suggest the Army is incapable of change. Are there skeptics in uniform, echoing the criticism found in print and circulating throughout the media, who doubt the Army can fully inculcate the mission command philosophy within our culture?¹² Anyone deeply familiar with Army culture may conclude that there are such skeptics; probably many do doubt the days of micromanagement and risk-aversion are behind us. However, the Mission Command Strategy acknowledges this point; this is the Army’s strategy, and therefore it is incumbent upon leaders at every level to clarify the intent of mission command, to ensure understanding, and to see that subordinates have the opportunity to exercise disciplined initiative.

The Army Mission Command Strategy recognizes that a cultural change must occur, and that there are risks involved, and should now give some reassurance to the naysayers and skeptics. The message from the leadership is that we will go further than to simply say, “It’s in the doctrine, talk to your subordinates about it, and everyone will get on board,” because this is simplistic—it does not fully account for human nature and how people learn and develop. Experience is the vital catalyst for learning and development that one cannot replicate or substitute.

Linking Two Strategies

According to doctrine, leader development takes place within three training domains: the operational, the institutional, and the self-development domains.¹³ The recently published Army Leader Development Strategy does not diverge from this model (see Figure 2). Moreover, the strategy adds clarity to the model by describing what the author believes to be the very linchpin that connects these mutually supporting domains. “Leader development is achieved through the career-long *synthesis* of the training, education, and experiences acquired through opportunities in the institutional, operational, and self-development domains, supported by peer and developmental relationships [emphasis added].”¹⁴ Examine closely the usage here of the word *synthesis*. The term has many definitions, but in common English usage it generally means *to combine objects or ideas into a complex whole*.¹⁵

...good leader development is...a learner-centric, goal-oriented process.

However, good leader development is not an *additive*, or merely the combined *sum* of training, education, and experience. Rather, it is a learner-centric, goal-oriented process. Here again, doctrine agrees and reiterates that leader development is both progressive and continuous, and that self-development complements institutional and operational learning.¹⁶

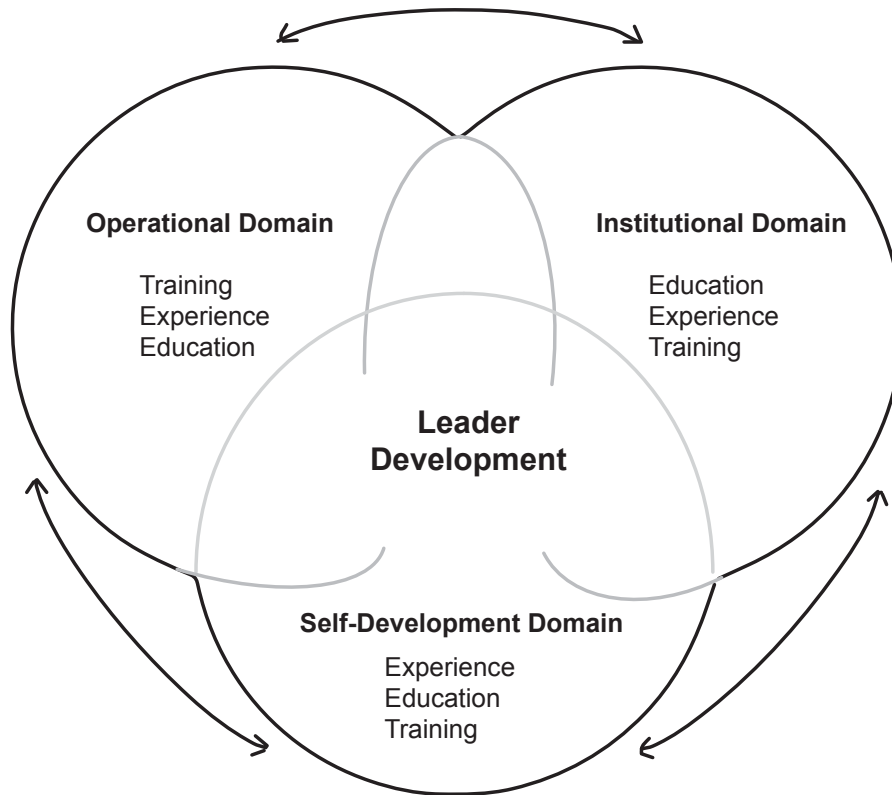


Figure 2
The Army Leader Development Model

Within the institutional domain, CGSOC may provide a good example of this idea in practice, since one of its major educational principles is the use of the Socratic and Adult Learning Methods.¹⁷ These educational methods are largely experiential, in that students are intended to develop or create knowledge based on concrete experience, reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis. (Synthesis, in an educational context, is a learning goal within the cognitive domain.)¹⁸ Varying types of experiential learning models have been described over the years, the Kolb method being quite influential both in and outside of the military. Within the CGSOC, the steps of this continuous process are—concrete experience, publish and process, generalize new information, develop ideas, apply ideas, and provide feedback (see Figure 3).¹⁹ Whatever the steps and how they are depicted, the fundamental characteristic of adult learning is that learning is treated as a holistic, continuous, process of

adaptation to the world, grounded in experience. The CGSOC's methodology corresponds to this theory, by transforming experience into created knowledge.²⁰

Synthesis, then, in a leader development sense, is a goal and product of experiential learning; the student transforms experience into knowledge. Similarly, the leaders we wish to develop must gain concrete experience, and in a goal-oriented fashion, reflect on it, analyze it, and synthesize the knowledge the Army needs to meet tomorrow's challenges. This process should not be limited to a classroom setting. Rather, the continuous cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation must take place within the three development domains. In every case we find one obvious, common thread through each domain—the student, the learner, or the developing leader.

One way to think of this is to envision experiential learning taking place in each domain (see Figure 4).

Beginning with the operational domain, training is conducted in various individual and collective events. Once a training event concludes, leaders at every level have the opportunity to conduct reflective observation (usually an after action review). By reflecting on the concrete experience of training, tactics, techniques, and procedures are refined; ideas are then developed and applied in future training. When soldiers depart their organization to attend training in the institutional domain, the cycle continues. In the classroom setting, these leaders begin with concrete experience and reflection and use their operational experience to conceptualize new ideas, which they will further develop and apply. This process is perpetual in the self-development domain as well. Since the student continually transitions or progresses through each domain, the knowledge synthesized by this process (the combined effects of these domains) naturally resides.

The very minds of developing leaders is the first obvious place where the effects of training, education, and leader development naturally intersect; therefore it is critical that mission command be reinforced in every domain if we wish to fully implement it. Learning, after all, does not begin or end within the schoolhouse. Consequently, teaching adults like adults cannot be limited to certain aspects of the institution. To clarify: by weighing each individual's experiences in the institutional setting, and subsequent application of new knowledge in the operational domain, the idea that the Army trusts subordinates to take initiative and make prudent risk judgments will either be affirmed or refuted in the minds of those subordinates. This is why the Army Mission Command Strategy aligns its lines of effort through the three leader

development domains, and why, perhaps more relevantly, it concludes that, "People, rather than technology, systems or processes, are the center of [mission command]."²¹

What this may mean in practice for now is that the system needs time to work. Leaders are not developed overnight, and certainly not if the Army as a whole is trying a new idea. If we teach mission command in the schoolhouse then we must practice in training, and perhaps more importantly, our leaders' experiences outside of controlled settings must positively reinforce the wisdom and benefit of the philosophy. It is important then for the Army to seize the opportunity now to reinforce mission command in our thinking, actions, activities, and processes.

By applying mission command in the operational domain, and by observing or reflecting on the experiences and lessons learned, Army leaders begin the process of thinking critically about concepts and how to apply them when confronted with change. As the Army continues to implement the Mission Command Strategy, leaders at every level should also continue to embrace a culture of

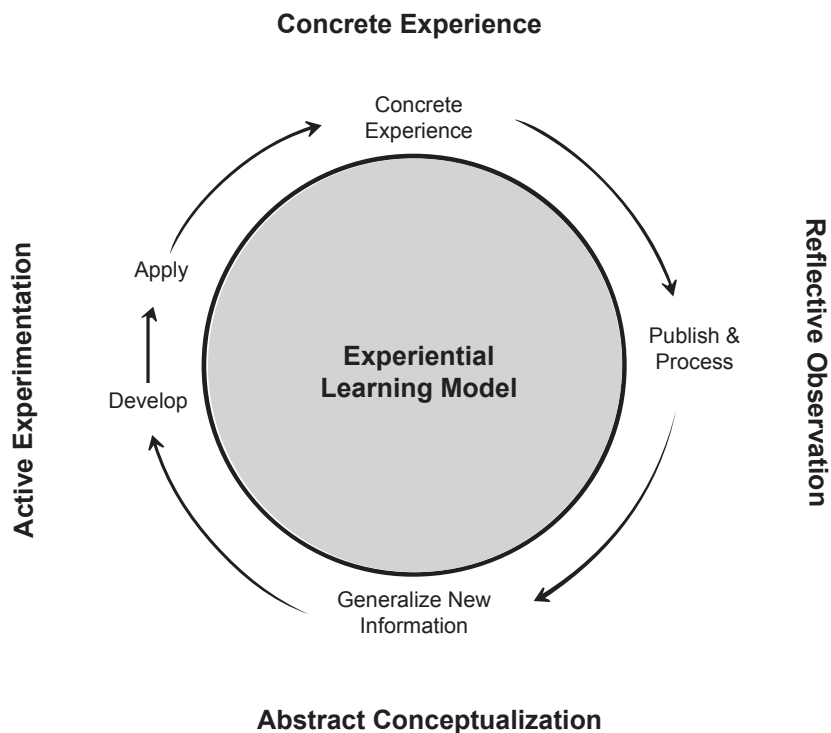


Figure 3. The CGSC Experiential Learning Model

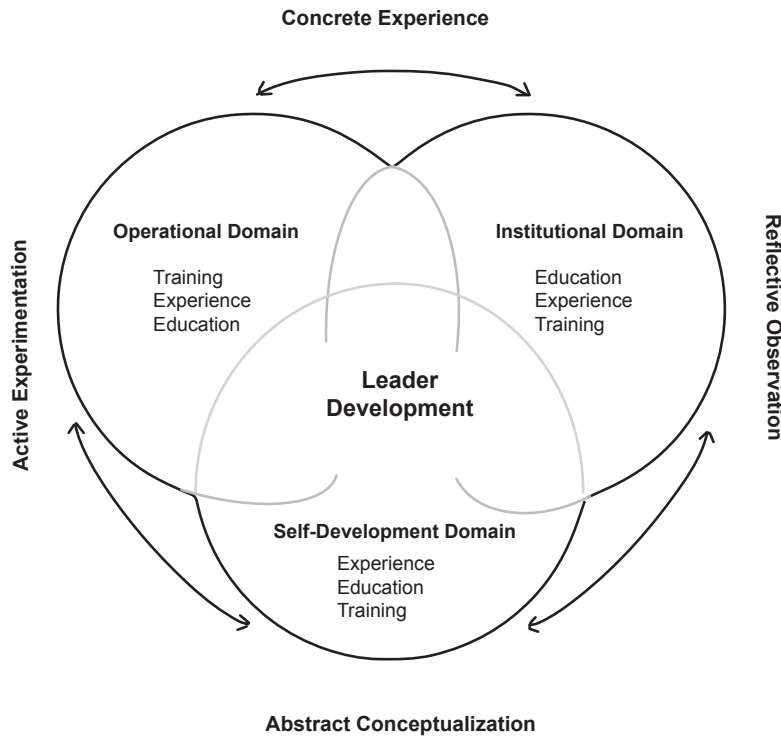


Figure 4
Hypothetical model of experiential learning across all leader development domains.

continuous learning, and in turn provide feedback in the institutional domain at every opportunity. This best informs how to approach changes to doctrine, training, education, and leader development.

Opportunities for the Next Turn

We have established mission command as a philosophy of command codified in doctrine. Leaders in every situation and every setting must practice it. If we only partially employ it in certain contexts, then surely it will never permeate our leadership culture, and accordingly it will die a quick death as another bygone catchphrase. It is a philosophy that values those who take risks, but who do so deliberately and prudently. While leadership doctrine as currently written recognizes it is only prudent to make checks and corrections, good organizations are founded on trust in experienced and empowered subordinates.²² Presently as always, leaders will judge theories by how well

they work in practice. If a subordinate is trusted to make prudent risk judgments, do we not stand by our original decision to trust that person if those judgments prove wrong? Will subordinates in turn trust their leaders enough that they will assume risk and take initiative when the opportunity arises? On the other hand, will experience teach them that it is better to play it safe, take a center-of-mass evaluation, and move on?

The Army sees itself as a learning institution, and as such, we should never stop asking questions. As we search for those answers, each of us would do well to ponder how mission command would affect the manner in which we think, act, and lead. We can look within our organizations and decide how best to promote and reward adaptive, bold, and imaginative leaders.²³ Maybe this is the appropriate juncture in which the Army could examine our human resources system,

and find ways to look at careers holistically. Gen. Robert Cone, commander of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, recently stated, “Such leaders cannot be mass produced. Our personnel systems are going to have to resist the temptation to treat people as a commodity and evolve to look at each as an individual.”²⁴

Of course, we will have further questions to ask if we wish to contemplate such a change. Have we really considered the question of who is number one among our subordinates? Did the leader make mistakes and not assume risk? Alternatively, did the leader take risks and make mistakes, but learn from them, correct them, and ultimately succeed? Should we expect to find a great number of subordinates who assume much risk and somehow never make mistakes?

Perhaps there are opportunities to inculcate further mission command that we have not considered. An important first step may be to address the concern that the philosophy is taking a back

seat to mission command systems, technologies, and processes. Addressing this concern now will go further to instill the philosophy and the practice within leaders at all levels, while minimizing the risks in implementation. Given the present abundance of complex mission command systems, and the future growth of mission command enablers such as cyber, we could alleviate unnecessary complexity by minimizing the degree of control to that which is essential. This is especially true when we continue to field systems that require us to stop everything while small armies of contract field service representatives fix our systems. If commanders establish the minimum necessary control, it forces them to rely upon or trust the teams they trained in order to accomplish their mission. This is a good thing. After all, mission command as a philosophy recognizes that war and conflict are chaotic; the more complexity one adds to a mission, the more likely it is to fail.

As we consider how best to answer these questions and wrestle with making mission command a reality, let us close by reflecting on these words from Gen. Cone. “When faced with unforeseen situations, we count on smart and adaptable leaders to ensure the ‘Army we have’ can be rapidly transformed into the ‘Army we need.’”²⁵ The mission command philosophy encourages us to empower leaders to be adaptive and agile to the fullest extent possible in the conduct of Unified Land Operations. It is the Army’s philosophy of command, and the onus is on each of us to practice it. Ensuring this happens is the responsibility of everyone, operating in and through every leader development domain. While falling short of this goal will teach future leaders only that there is a difference between what is taught and what is practiced, each leader today making mission command a personal responsibility will affirm and reinforce our philosophy by and through everything we do every day. **MR**

NOTES

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