



2nd Place, General Douglas MacArthur Military
Leadership Writing Competition, CGSC Class 14-01

(Photo by Gertrud Zach, Visual Information Specialist, U.S. Army Europe)

A soldier with 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, takes cover in high grass at the Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany during company external evaluations, 24 May 2012. The evaluations assessed the company's troop-leading procedures and combined arms abilities.

Army Leadership and the Communication Paradox

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The phrase “Army leadership” typically evokes images of commanders and noncommissioned officers leading heroic charges or generals directing armies—perhaps an aged Gen. Douglas MacArthur planning the Inchon landing, or MacArthur as a young captain leading his company across a no-man’s land, riding crop in hand.¹ In reality, however, most leadership in the Army is far more benign. In little ways, all day long, across the globe, at all levels of the Army, soldiers lead others.

While the style, quality, and stakes vary widely, every leadership interaction has two universal elements. First, and perhaps most obvious, every exercise of leadership involves a leader and a follower. Second, leadership cannot occur without communication between the leader and the follower.

Army and civilian leadership books use countless adjectives to describe what leaders should be and do while giving little or no attention or thought to the communication aspects of leadership. Normally, the focus

is on leader attributes, described with adjectives such as *decisive, agile, adaptive, confident, and disciplined*. However, while a person could become a great leader without being decisive or adaptive, it would be impossible to become a great leader without being a great communicator.

The Army's inattention to communication as a leadership skill is particularly acute in light of the abundance of modern communication tools. The means available for Army leaders to communicate are the best they have ever been—PowerPoint, e-mail, Blue Force Tracker, satellite communications, radio, television, social media, SharePoint, and many more. Paradoxically, these increases in communication capacity diminish communication between leaders and those led. The Army is drowning in communications, and the victim is good leadership. The solution is remarkably simple: acknowledge the importance of effective communication and integrate the teaching of communication skills—writing and speaking—throughout the Army officer education system. In addition, the Army should elevate the role of effective communication in the exercise of mission command.

What is Communication in Leadership?

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, defines leadership as “the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.”² Central to this definition is the idea of *influencing*, which, according to Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22 (also called *Army Leadership*), “entails more than simply passing along orders.”³ Indeed, “all of the Army’s core leader competencies, especially leading others, involve influence.”⁴ The ADRP outlines how good leaders, in turn, communicate by listening actively, creating shared understanding, employing engaging communication techniques, and being sensitive to cultural factors in communication.⁵ ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, describes the importance of communication as far beyond simply exchanging information. Commanders use communication to strengthen bonds within a command. Communication builds trust, cooperation, cohesion, and shared understanding. ... Mission command requires interactive communications characterized by continuous vertical and horizontal feedback. Feedback

provides the means to improve and confirm situational understanding.⁶

While these doctrinal publications provide a solid foundation for the essential role of communication in leadership, the importance of communication seems neglected within the Army officer education system. Undoubtedly, that system values and addresses communication and leadership in the various courses; however, there is insufficient focus on a competency that “is essential to all other leadership competencies.”⁷

The foundational administrative document for Army institutional leader training and education is U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Regulation 350-10, *Institutional Leader Training and Education*. This regulation articulates five goals for Army institutional leader training and education:

- (1) produce leaders who have the ability to execute doctrine and strategy.
- (2) develop leaders capable of planning and executing worldwide peace and wartime missions in a wide range of operational environments.
- (3) provide progressive and sequential training that prepares leaders for future operational assignments.
- (4) incorporate doctrine and strategy changes, as they occur.
- (5) provide vertically and horizontally aligned training products for institutional, unit, and self-development training.⁸

At best, these goals barely imply developing the communication skills of Army leaders. That is not to say communication is not addressed within this framework—a subordinate goal for developing leaders capable of planning and executing worldwide peace and wartime missions includes developing operational plans “readily understood by all.” It is noteworthy, however, that effective communication is not expressly articulated as a goal.⁹ The lack of emphasis on communication skills, as seen in TRADOC Regulation 350-10, seems to have percolated down through all levels of the Army officer education system.

The U.S. Army War College, in describing its capstone program (Military Education Level 1), states, “the School develops strategic leaders by providing a strong foundation of wisdom, grounded in mastery of the profession of arms, and by educating future leaders

in the theory and practice of strategy, operations, national security, resource management, and responsible command.”¹⁰ The Department of Command, Leadership, and Management offers core and elective courses in strategic leadership, defense management, and command.¹¹ This department teaches two of the five core curriculum courses in the resident program.¹² Neither Strategic Thinking nor Strategic Leadership mentions communication in its course description.

Further, looking at the full curriculum published by the U.S. Army War College Department of Distance Education, none of the courses in the required curriculum mentions “communication” in its course description.¹³ A single elective—Strategic Communication: Wielding the Information Element of Power—mentions communication.¹⁴ This elective course, however, concerns strategic communication in the context of foreign relations rather than leadership.

The U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) catalog provides a mission, a philosophy, principles, a vision, and strategic priorities.¹⁵ Unfortunately, none of these expressly mentions communication. The college’s Advanced Operations Course

(AOC) curriculum includes one leadership course in both the core and advanced operations portions. Together, the core AOC courses include twenty-four blocks totaling forty-eight hours of instruction. Of these twenty-four classes, only two mention communication in their course descriptions: once in L100, Leadership—Developing Organizations and Leaders; and once in L200, Leadership. As with the Army War College, there is no core course requirement for a communication-specific course, or a writing or public speaking course.

The U.S. Army Cadet Command manages the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program, the largest source of commissions in the Army. The Cadet Command “selects, educates, trains, and commissions college students to be officers and leaders of character in the Total Army” and “instills ... values and a sense of accomplishment”¹⁶ The ROTC program accomplishes this mission through a four-year program of instruction in “basic military skills, [and] the fundamentals of leadership.”¹⁷ Of these four years of instruction, only one course during the sophomore year expressly includes communications.



(Photo by Sgt. Gene A. Arnold 1st infantry Division PAO)

Sgt. Jared Wallfrom, 5th Engineer Battalion, 4th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, provides a presentation on the specific capabilities of military working dogs 5 October 2010.

The mission statement of the U.S. Military Academy is similar to that of the U.S. Army Cadet Command: “To educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army.”¹⁸ Similarly, the academic goal at the academy is to produce “graduates [who] integrate knowledge and skills from a variety of disciplines to anticipate and respond appropriately to opportunities and challenges in a changing world.”¹⁹ To this end, the academy lists seven subordinate goals, the first of which is communication. Given the relative prominence of communication in the academy’s core curriculum, it is perhaps not surprising that several blocks of core classes concern oral and verbal communication.

How Do Modern Communication Tools Pose Risks to Effective Communication?

In a remarkably farsighted monograph from 1992, which predates the most fundamental tactical modern communications system (the Single-Channel Ground and Airborne Radio System), then Army Maj. John K. Stoner examined the “tension between the science of increased technological control and the art of the demands of command and leadership on the modern battlefield.”²⁰

Stoner was especially concerned about commanders being able to exert too much control through technology. Twenty years later, his thesis looks remarkably sound. In 2009, defense analyst Peter W. Singer coined the term “tactical generals” to describe the situation that arises when technology allows high-ranking commanders “not only to peer into, but even take control of, the lowest-level operations.”²¹

Former Army Lt. Col. Pete Blaber, who served as a Delta Force squadron commander, recounts an operation in Iraq in early 2002. His unit’s mission was to conduct a show of force and to avoid becoming decisively engaged with a much larger, stronger, enemy force.²² When Blaber gave instructions to a subordinate commander to withdraw, his commanding general came on the network and countermanded his order. The general was sitting in a tactical operations center more than three hundred miles away in another country.

A counterpoint can be seen during World War II, in then Army Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower’s restrained communication to his superior, then Army Gen. George Marshall, after the start of D-Day. Eisenhower’s memorandum starts by noting that further communication would come only after the “leading ground troops ... [were] actually ashore.”²³ It summarizes the status of the entire operation in less than a page; Marshall evidently did not require more. The order for Operation Overlord itself is an example of succinct communication—the entire base order is five pages.²⁴ The idea that a major operation could be executed without live, continuous, detailed updates is almost a foreign concept in the twenty-first century. Equally foreign is the idea of summarizing the most complex military operation in history in a single page.

A further difficulty of modern communication is the innumerable nontactical methods of communication. On a typical day, a commander may use any or all of the following technologies to communicate with seniors or subordinates: telephone, text message, e-mail, video teleconference, Facebook, SharePoint, Excel, PowerPoint, and others. While these technologies have the ability to enable communications—and thus leadership—they have downsides.

Some critics point to Army leaders’ use of PowerPoint as deserving special condemnation. *New York Times* writer Elisabeth Bumiller quotes retired Marine Corps Gen. James N. Mattis, former commander of U.S. Central Command, saying that “PowerPoint makes us stupid.”²⁵ Bumiller also reports that Army Lt. Gen. Herbert R. McMaster has been known to ban PowerPoint presentations, saying that relying on PowerPoint is “dangerous because it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control.”²⁶

Retired Army Col. Thomas X. Hammes, writing in the *Armed Forces Journal*, describes PowerPoint as “actively hostile to thoughtful decision-making.”²⁷ Hammes details myriad issues with PowerPoint, including the lack of intellectual rigor in putting together a large pack of slides vice summarizing a complex issue into a short memorandum; the amount of staff time wasted on formatting (font, color, alignment, pictures, and graphs), overwhelming amounts of information on a slide, the negative effect on the decision-making tempo of senior leaders, and the dangers associated

with expressing complex ideas in bullet points.²⁸ This last point is particularly significant.

A *Washington Post* online editorial by Ruth Marcus explains that after the 2003 Space Shuttle *Columbia* disaster, investigative task forces called out the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) use of the presentation software "for special criticism."²⁹ Marcus quotes the final report of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board and Yale researcher Edward Tufte, whose work the board considered. The report identifies a particular slide from an important presentation and states, "it is easy to understand how a senior manager might read this PowerPoint slide and not realize that it addresses a life-threatening situation."³⁰ The Board further identifies "the endemic use of PowerPoint briefing slides instead of technical papers as an illustration of the problematic methods of technical communication at NASA."³¹

Author Thomas E. Ricks, in his book *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003 to 2005*, describes how under then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, combatant commanders were relying on PowerPoint slides as a planning and communication tool.³² Ricks reports that in 2002, then Army Lt. Gen. David D. McKiernan received planning guidance in the form of PowerPoint slides prepared for Rumsfeld by then Army Gen. Tommy Ray Franks when he was commander of U.S. Central Command. Franks did not provide clear instructions based on normal planning processes:

McKiernan ... couldn't get Franks to issue clear orders that stated explicitly what he wanted done, how he wanted to do it, and why. Rather, Franks passed along PowerPoint briefing slides that he had shown to Rumsfeld. ... [McKiernan said,] "That is frustrating, because nobody wants to plan against PowerPoint slides."³³

Unfortunately, the PowerPoint trend that was developing under Rumsfeld shows little sign of burning out.

How Can the Army Ensure its Leaders Use Communication Tools Effectively?

All levels of the Army officer education system should expressly acknowledge the importance of communication skills in leadership. Bundling

communication among other aspects of leadership diminishes the central importance of the concept. Army schools should discuss the concept of developing better communicators in their mission statements, vision statements, and course goals. By way of example, the British Army lists six goals of its officer commissioning course, including "to teach officer cadets how to think and communicate as commanders and to foster a deep interest and care for the individual."³⁴

Further, Army schools should consider offering stand-alone courses of instruction on communication (both speaking and writing) within the leadership curriculum. The U.S. Military Academy's holistic approach to leader education is perhaps a model to which other institutions can look for guidance—it is not just undergraduates who need to study writing and speaking. This approach may have the added benefit of addressing the communication frictions caused by email, PowerPoint, and other modern media. It is astonishing to think that e-mail is the most common communication tool in the Army, but few have received instruction on how to use it effectively. Similarly, some consideration should be given to the institutional use of PowerPoint. Perhaps commanders should restrict its use, or the Army should better train soldiers in its practical application.

Some write off mission command as a hollow concept, a glossy repackaging of an old idea rather than a substantive doctrine. This is not entirely inaccurate. As ADRP 6-0, *Mission Command*, readily acknowledges, "mission command has been the Army's preferred style for exercising command since the 1980s."³⁵ Others, such as Clinton J. Ancker, III, have noted examples of the concept dating back to the civil war.³⁶ The Army's wholesale change from "command and control" to "mission command" represented a concerted effort on the part of Army leadership to reinforce the "centrality of the commander" and de-emphasize the importance of technology.³⁷ The other important aspect of mission command is its dependence on communication. During the operations process activities, mission command requires constant communication between commanders and subordinates. Three of the six principles of mission command concern communicative elements almost exclusively: "build cohesive teams through mutual trust, create shared understanding, [and] provide clear commander's intent."³⁸



(Photo by Sgt. Travis Zielinski, 1st Cavalry Division PAO)

Soldiers from 1st Cavalry Division rush forward on a simulated battlefield during a joint air assault demonstration 29 March 2010 on Camp Taji, Iraq. After spending several months training, soldiers from the 1st Air Cavalry Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, conducted the demonstration to show Iraqi army leaders the effectiveness of air assault assets.

A small change to the Army's definition of *mission command* could express the central importance of communication. The current definition reads as follows:

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 unified land operations.³⁹

An improved definition would read as follows (bolding added to emphasize the proposed modification):

Mission command is the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using **clear communication and** mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations.

In addition, the Army's definition of mission orders could be amended to reflect the importance of communication. According to ADP 6-0, *mission orders* are defined as "directives that emphasize to subordinates the results to be attained, not how they are to achieve them."⁴⁰ This definition could be strengthened by the

addition of a few words: **clear and concise** directives that emphasize to subordinates the results to be attained, not how they are to achieve them.

Conclusion

Communication forms the core of every leadership interaction in the Army. Robust modern communication tools can support leaders at all levels, but only when used by skillful speakers and writers. When used improperly or overused, these tools can cause important information to be misunderstood, taken out of context, or neglected. Even worse, they can lead to poor leadership practices that are contrary to the philosophy of mission command. Leaders who rely too heavily on communication tools, rather than personal skills honed by study, reflection, and practice, run the risk of failing to apply analytical skills or of relying on technology to the detriment of effective communication.

The key is for the Army to recognize the paradox of modern communication and modify doctrine and the Army officer education system to better equip leaders to harness, rather than be harnessed by, communication technologies. ■

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Notes

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4. *Ibid.*, 6-1.
5. *Ibid.*, 6-14.
6. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 17 May 2012), 9.
7. ADRP 6-22, 6-14.
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