

Transformative Staff Training in Ukraine

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The events of March 2014 shocked the world: Russian forces invaded Crimea, and Russia annexed the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine. Subsequently, the Russians employed hybrid tactics that included using conventional forces and Russia-sponsored separatists to destabilize eastern Ukraine (which is on the Russian border). In response, the Ukrainian government authorized antiterrorism operations in Donbass. To support Ukraine, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) formed the NATO-Ukraine Commission (NUC). The NUC includes the NATO-Ukraine Joint Working Group on Defence Reform, which conducts security force assistance. In addition, the United States, Canada, Lithuania, United Kingdom, Estonia, and Ukraine created the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine (JMTG-U) to conduct complementary efforts for robust defense reform.

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The JMTG-U, comprised of a brigade-level headquarters that included U.S., Canadian, and Lithuanian instructors, was tasked with training five Ukrainian battalions, developing a combat training center capability, supporting a doctrine-and-education advisory group, and providing mission command for a task force from the U.S. Army 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment. This article is written from the perspective of officers from that task force, which was the partner-and-advise training team (PATT) battalion headquarters at the International Peacekeeping and Security Center (IPSC) in Yavoriv, Ukraine, from 15 February 2016 until 17 July 2016.

The 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment's task force trained two Ukrainian battalions; this article focuses on the first. The PATT headquarters developed training that transformed a Ukrainian airborne battalion staff from an antiquated and centralized Soviet command style to a contemporary mission-command focus. In contrast to the Soviet command style, using mission command would help optimize warfighting function integration and staff functional capability. The PATT's leaders understood that a traditional training approach would not accomplish the desired transformation. Therefore, the PATT used Army design methodology to develop problem-solving and instructional approaches that would incorporate action learning and andragogy.

Framing the Operational Environment

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in Ukraine possessing the fourth largest army in the world and a nuclear capability. Within twenty years,



political and economic strife mixed with in-depth corruption and forfeiture of its nuclear arsenal (due to a diplomatic agreement) degraded the Ukrainian military to a shadow of its previous strength. Following unrest in western Ukraine in late 2013 and early 2014, pro-Russian separatists seized key government buildings in the east in April 2014. Ukrainian forces, still operating under antiquated Soviet military principles, began antiterrorism operations in the Donbass region in June 2014. However, since increasingly large numbers of Russian regular forces were covertly aiding the separatists, the probability of successful antiterrorism operations was limited. Moreover, a Ukrainian field-grade officer explained to the PATT trainers that the Ukrainians learned during antiterrorism operations in eastern Ukraine that the old system did not work. He said they would need to learn a new way of fighting.¹ Although most Ukrainian forces withdrew from the Donbass region in early 2015, some battalions are still being deployed for antiterrorism operations as of 2016.

The ability to recognize and execute transformational change tests any large organization. The PATT headquarters quickly observed that although Ukrainian unit leaders were patriotic, hardworking, and dedicated

A BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicle provides supporting fire to Ukrainian infantrymen during a live-fire exercise for Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine 23 June 2016 at the International Peacekeeping and Security Center near Yavoriv, Ukraine. (Photo by Capt. Scott Kuhn, U.S. Army)

to mission accomplishment, they adhered to a centralized-control organizational structure, thereby limiting their ability to integrate warfighting functions. During the first week of training, a shocked senior Ukrainian officer asked the PATT instructors if they always allowed company commanders to plan training and train wherever they wanted.²

Initial discussions with Ukrainian leaders revealed that most warfighting enablers, such as mortars and engineers, were regularly employed independently from the maneuver companies. Use of the battalion's mortar battery consisted of direct-lay mortar fires with the battery commander as the observer. The battalion had almost no experience shooting the mortars in indirect-fire mode while using forward observers to adjust rounds. Their complete reliance on old Soviet order-of-battle techniques included static- and linear-defensive arrays with predictable offensive maneuvers. Marching in column, deploying formations on line, and infantrymen fighting

from behind or directly beside their combat vehicles depicted little institutional change since the Soviet era.

Framing the Problem

The problem was further complicated by an overly bureaucratic tradition reminiscent of Soviet forces, with little support for change at higher echelons and narrowly defined roles across seventeen staff officers. The Ukrainian officers were accustomed to being taught what to think and not how to think. Communication flow originated almost exclusively from the top, with little bottom-up refinement or input. Under the Soviet model, maneuver battalions were units of execution instead of headquarters capable of detailed planning and complex decision making. This arrangement limited battalion commanders to only two or three decisions during a typical combat operation, in which most battalion actions consisted of battle drills. The restrictive command system greatly hindered the Ukrainian army's response to the hybrid-warfare conditions of antiterrorism operations in 2014.

Also exacerbating the situation were cultural norms and behaviors exemplified by leaders afraid to admit shortcomings or mistakes. This fear spiraled down to subordinates, as false reports of readiness were the norm, instead of truth and honest dialogue. Early in the training, one Ukrainian company commander stated outright that he would not tell his battalion commander of existing problems. Instead, he would opt to tell the U.S. PATT company commander, who would inform the U.S. PATT battalion commander, who in turn would advise his Ukrainian counterpart of the problem.

Under such conditions, the creation of a battalion common operation-

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tremely difficult, and an incomplete or inaccurate picture invites decisions based on faulty facts or assumptions. Consequently, Ukrainian staff officers typically asked the trainers for definitive solutions to tactical problems and struggled with the concept that well-analyzed mission variables and accurate staff estimates could influence mission success. To the Ukrainians, following the plan to the letter was more important than achieving mission success. This situation was analogous to how a Western army would view regulations. The Ukrainians regarded straying from a Ukrainian doctrinal template similarly to how U.S. Army soldiers would regard violating a regulation—a mindset that allows little creativity and flexibility in a complex operational environment. This same rigidity extends to the Ukrainian staff structure. Numerous majors and lieutenant colonels exist at the battalion level, but each is confined by a narrow scope of responsibility, thus limiting any staff officer's influence on the commander's decisions.

Developing an Operational Approach for Training

To effect organizational change, the PATT applied Army design methodology to frame the problem and the desired end state.³ The primary difficulty in transforming Ukrainian leaders from a centralized, control-oriented command style resided in proving the benefits of using staff analyses, empowering junior leaders, relying on results-oriented mission orders, and building mutual trust across the organization. The PATT's Army design process led to the adoption of two learning methods to guide developing an operational approach to this problem: action learning and andragogy learning. The goal was to shape the Ukrainian battalion staff using adult-learner fundamentals in a group setting, in a manner that would make each individual willing to adopt new behaviors. Figure 1 illustrates how the PATT framed the problem during its design process.

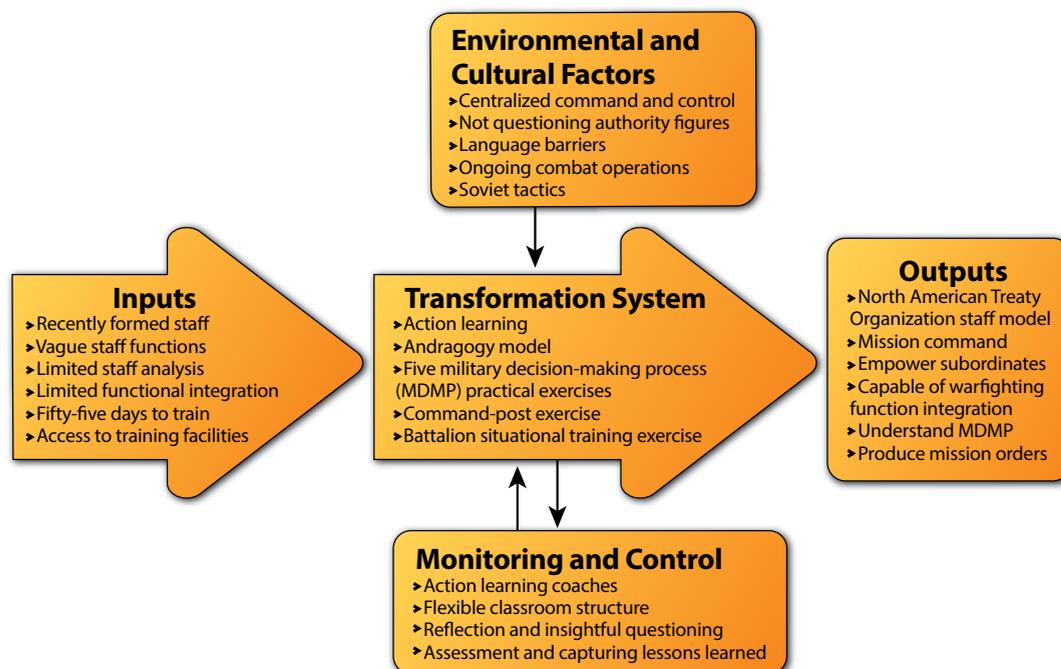
Developed by management expert Reg Revans in the late 1940s, action learning is a dynamic, team-oriented process useful for solving complex, real-world problems while teams simultaneously share experiences and lessons learned.⁴ Public- and private-sector organizations continue to use it as a way to improve operations. For example, human resource development professor Michael Marquardt describes General Electric's success with action learning over about ten years, including

faster decision making, more collaboration across lines of responsibility, and better trust among team members. Marquardt also describes how the Boeing Company capitalized on action learning to develop employees' leadership skills and attributes while focusing on core competencies. This resulted in strong relationships, trust,

reinforced action learning as a viable methodology to achieve change. After several discussions and coaching sessions, the Ukrainian battalion staff began to grasp the issues and renewed their commitment to learn and grow. The task force's executive officer and its headquarters commander became the primary action-learning coaches

because of their individual expertise.

While creating the action-learning plan, the PATT identified the need to address the challenge of training adults who were accustomed to a rigid thought process. The team chose the andragogy model to address this challenge. In the 1970s, Malcolm Knowles popularized andragogy as a means of effectively



(Graphic by authors)

Figure 1. Design Input and Output Model

and increased shared understanding of the company's vision and mission.⁵

Action learning concentrates on developing solutions to real problems using collaboration. The process includes a period of reflection on the results to improve an organization's problem-solving methodology. For Ukraine's urgent and uniquely diverse problems in antiterrorism operations, action learning garnered quick support. The Ukrainian staff, while learning the new approach, embraced the intellectual curiosity that, according to Marquardt, facilitates both personal and team introspection and reflection.⁶

The Ukrainian battalion expected to return to conducting antiterrorism operations immediately following its nine-week training exercise at the IPSC. The swiftness of the return to the front, coupled with the urgency of the Ukrainian army's institutional problems,

teaching adult learners, bringing to light fundamental differences between the way children and adults learn.⁷ Andragogy research, such as papers regularly published in the scholarly journal *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, shows that adults learn best through hands-on application in which they self-direct and actively lead their learning process.⁸ Practical exercises assist in formulating new experiences that translate into learning. Ukrainian officers easily achieved readiness, orientation, and motivation to learn because they knew they were likely to return to combat operations immediately.

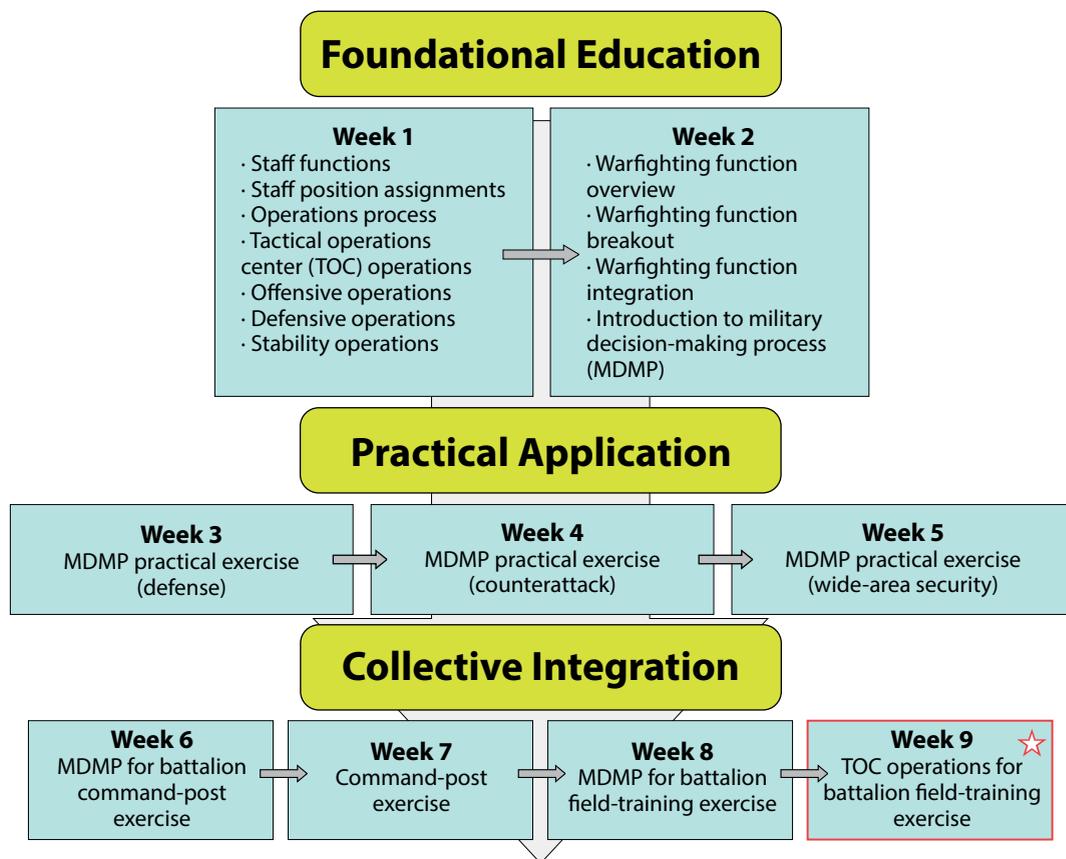
Developing a Plan for Training

The PATT initially thought a progressive, linear approach was best suited to reach the desired end state. Upon further analysis, the team adapted a spiral

development approach, similar to a model sometimes used by software designers.⁹ Spiral development sequences functional goals so that each goal represents an iteration, or a loop, in the spiral. The iterations used included developing an initial concept, determining and refining goals, identifying problems, certifying instructors, assessing progress, conducting retraining, and making appropriate adjustments to the training plan. The final iteration would integrate the functions already established in the other iterations.

Figure 2 depicts the three modules developed to complement this approach: foundational education, practical application, and collective integration. The focus during the first module included basic knowledge of U.S. and NATO doctrine. Classroom instruction covered the U.S. Army's operations process, establishing a tactical operations center, tactics in a decisive-action environment, warfighting functions, and the military decision-making process (MDMP). Multiple delivery methods such as lectures, practical exercises, terrain walks, and use of multimedia reinforced key learning objectives.

The second module, practical application, included three scenarios to facilitate three complete iterations of the MDMP. The three scenarios included a defense task, a counterattack, and a cordon-and-search operation that incorporated stability tasks. The Ukrainian



(Graphic by authors)

Figure 2. Learning Modules

battalion staff conducted the seven steps of the MDMP during each iteration of the tactical scenario. They eventually produced a final operation order, constructed a terrain model for a combined-arms rehearsal, and established mission-pertinent battle-tracking tools in the battalion tactical operations center for each prescribed scenario.

The third module focused on collective integration. Following the MDMP practical exercises, the Ukrainian battalion staff planned and executed a more complex command-post exercise against a hybrid threat. The command-post exercise required the battalion to execute defensive operations including combined-arms maneuver and stability tasks in a simulated Donbass environment. Following the exercise, the staff planned and executed a new orders process and provided mission command for a full-battalion situational training exercise at the Yavoriv Training Area. The situational training exercise used a multiple integrated laser engagement

system, or MILES, in an environment similar to a U.S. Army combat training center. This event served as the culminating exercise for the battalion's fifty-five days of training.

Conducting Training

On the first day of training, one senior member of the Ukrainian battalion staff stated that he usually was given forty minutes to plan and issue an operation order and that the concept of deliberate planning was foreign to him.¹⁰ The Ukrainian staff had received little formal training in the staff functionality that the U.S. Army considers standard. Therefore, the PATT's initial

to describe the current state in Donbass, illustrated in figure 3 (page 50, translated to English). They identified historically formed cultural differences between eastern and western Ukrainians as the root cause of conflict.

The practical exercise demonstrated that the learning group could successfully apply doctrine to the operational environment. The exercise was the first validation of action learning and andragogy as viable models. The Ukrainian staff applied previous experiences to identify and solve a problem, demonstrated the readiness to learn, and displayed motivation during the exercise.



task was to build a foundation that would enable them to progress to practical application. The Ukrainian staff were initially skeptical of new doctrine that differed from their usual linear tactics and time-based triggers. The introduction of new techniques for integrating fires and maneuver with event-based decision points caused one senior staff member to state that this was not how things would really work.¹¹ The staff members did not initially grasp the purpose of building a nonprescriptive doctrinal foundation that would provide a commander with multiple options, and they expected the classes to be prescriptive.

During a class on stability operations, the Ukrainians began to accept and learn from the new approach. The task for the learning group was to identify the root cause of instability in Donbass. The learning group collaborated to develop a cluster map

A battalion staff from the Ukrainian Ground Forces' 25th Airborne Brigade pauses for a photo during an operation order briefing 29 April 2016 as part of staff training at the International Peacekeeping and Security Center, Yavoriv, Ukraine. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Adriana Diaz, U.S. Army)

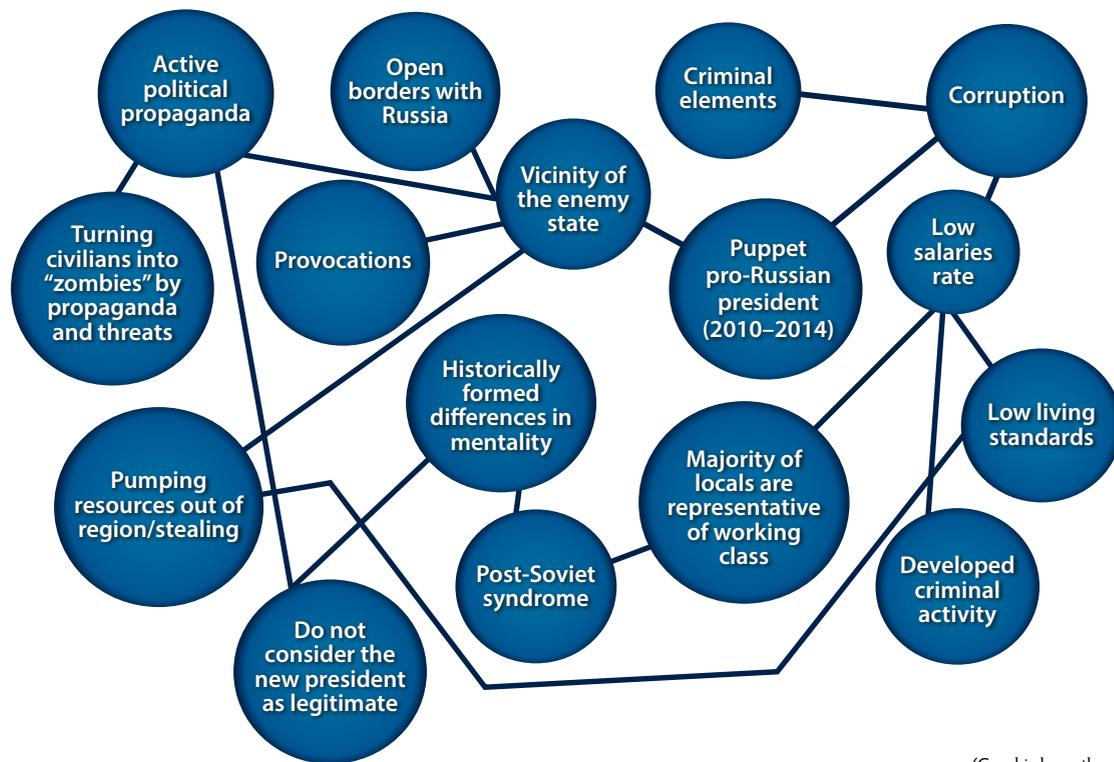
The action-learning coaches observed growth within the Ukrainian staff during the practical-application phase of each MDMP iteration. The learning group initially struggled with conducting the MDMP, primarily with the application of mission-command principles. The staff conducted a thorough mission-analysis brief, but it developed courses of action that were too complex, detailed, and prescriptive. They left little flexibility for subordinate units to exercise initiative or provide refinement.

Through coaching and interactive discussions, the staff began to develop concepts and mission orders

allowing subordinates to exercise disciplined initiative. The PATI's battalion commander complemented the staff's efforts by coaching his counterpart on the role of the commander in the operations process. Coaching stressed the commander's role, including "understand, visualize, describe, and direct," and the principles of mission command.¹²

A critical component was helping the Ukrainian commander and staff understand the conceptual difference between tasks and purposes. This was accomplished through interactive discussions and tactical decision games using examples relevant to the antiterrorism operations. The commander and staff gradually began to understand that junior leaders must be empowered to make decisions in order to accomplish the assigned purpose and meet the commander's intent. They began to understand the importance of disciplined initiative in an environment where conditions change rapidly. By the second iteration of the MDMP, the Ukrainian battalion commander verbalized clear planning guidance and intent while the staff began to see how the MDMP process develops effective mission orders.

The learning coaches also focused on the integration of warfighting functions during the practical application module. The Ukrainian staff addressed all the warfighting functions from the start, but they failed to



(Graphic by authors)

Figure 3. Ukrainian Learning Group Cluster Map Identifying Causes of Conflict

integrate them sufficiently. This was apparent during the counterattack practical exercise. The staff developed a plan that employed obscuration fires to conceal the battalion's movement to the objective, and then they established attack-by-fire positions encircling the enemy defense. However, the plan lacked fire-control measures and risked fratricide. The plan also failed to mass combat power at the decisive place and time, and it lacked control measures for integrating indirect fires, engineer assets, and maneuver forces on the objective. By using action-learning techniques such as inquiry and reflection, the Ukrainian staff identified the problems in their course of action and revised the plan prior to the decision brief. Action learning was the vehicle for the coaches to stimulate the change in planning.

By the time the Ukrainian staff reached the collective integration module, they displayed a full understanding of how to integrate warfighting functions during the operations process. The staff integrated fires with maneuver in both classroom practical exercises and live-fire exercises. They began to employ forward observers to synchronize fires using technical and

tactical triggers. During a platoon live-fire exercise, the battalion integrated each warfighting function to conduct a combined-arms breach on terrain that replicated the Donbass region.

The staff continued to successfully plan and issue mission orders during the command-post exercise and company situational training exercises, applying the knowledge gained during the foundational portions of the training. By the end of the rotation, the Ukrainian staff was capable of following the Army operations process in a manner that would give them some degree of NATO interoperability. They demonstrated remarkable progress in using the MDMP to produce mission orders, conduct effective combined-arms rehearsals, and apply mission command during a tactical exercise in field conditions.

An important factor to this successful training was using a variety of teaching techniques to keep the training audience engaged. The learning coaches attempted to limit lectures by supplementing classroom instruction with practical exercises, real-world vignettes, live-fire exercises, situational training exercises, terrain walks, and a command-post exercise. Andragogy was integrated into the action-learning model to create a learning environment optimized for the adult training audience.

Mission Success

Although the action-learning coaches were unable to change the Ukrainian Army's centralized post-Soviet mentality at the operational or strategic level, action learning as a catalyst for change was successful at the tactical level. Action learning could be applied by national-level military advisers at the brigade level and above. This approach could accelerate change by delivering the training opportunity on a wider scale while garnering senior-level support.

Coupling the bottom-up training of Ukrainian rotational battalions at JMTG-U with embedded action-learning coaches at the operational level would maximize the effectiveness of the methodology. Action learning could support building warfighting function integration and staff capabilities while promoting mission-command principles.

In Ukraine, the scope of training should be expanded to higher echelons to persuade senior leaders to achieve enduring, transformative change. This case study suggests that action learning and the andragogy model can assist in changing cultural norms in the Ukrainian army, and possibly with other forces in Eastern Europe, while rapidly producing modernized and NATO-interoperable formations. ■

Notes

1. Name withheld, Ukrainian airborne battalion deputy commander in discussion with the authors, through an interpreter, in Yavoriv, Ukraine, March 2016. Discussions with Ukrainian officers were conducted in confidentiality, and all names are withheld.

2. Name withheld, Ukrainian airborne battalion commander in discussion with the authors, Yavoriv, Ukraine, March 2016.

3. Army Techniques Publication 5-0.1, *Army Design Methodology* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 2015).

4. Reg Revans, *ABC of Action Learning* (Surrey, England: Gower Publishing Limited, 2011); Michael J. Marquardt, *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning: Real-Time Strategies for Developing Leaders, Building Teams, and Transforming Organizations* (Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2011).

5. Michael J. Marquardt, "Harnessing the Power of Action Learning," National Science Foundation, *T&D [Training and Development]* 8, no. 6 (June 2004): 26–32, accessed 15 August 2016, <https://www.nsf.gov/attachments/134059/public/PowerofAction-Learning.pdf>; Mary Stacey, "Action Learning: Addressing Today's Business Challenges While Developing Leaders for Tomorrow," *Fresh Perspectives on Leadership Development* (Toronto: Context Management Consulting, Inc., 2007).

6. Michael J. Marquardt, *Optimizing the Power of Action Learning*.

7. Malcolm Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy* (New York: Association Press, 1970).

8. See *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Wiley Periodicals, Inc., accessed 7 September 2016, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1002/%28ISSN%291536-0717>.

9. Barry Boehm, *Spiral Development: Experience, Principles, and Refinements*, ed. Wilfred J. Hansen, Spiral Development Workshop Special Report, CMU/SEI-2000-SR-008, (Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie-Mellon Software Engineering Institute, July 2000).

10. Name withheld, Ukrainian airborne battalion chief of staff, in discussion with the authors, Yavoriv, Ukraine, March 2016.

11. Name withheld, Ukrainian airborne battalion deputy commander in discussion with the authors, Yavoriv, Ukraine, March 2016.

12. For the commander's role in the operations process, see Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2012). For the principles of mission command, see ADRP 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2012).