

The Primacy of Purpose and the Three Rings of Organizational Effectiveness

Maj. Gen. David S. Doyle, US Army

Maj. Lam Nguyen, US Army

Most strategic organizations understand the importance of having a clearly defined purpose. It is often the first slide in a command brief or the opening line in a doctrinal publication. Commanders rely on a well-articulated intent to inspire their subordinates and distinguish their organization from similar teams. However, that guiding intent is frequently divorced from the reality of what the organization actually does. The “why” becomes a noble aspiration, disconnected from the daily “what” and “how.” This disconnect is not a mystery; it is the direct result of failing to forge the connective tissue between intent and action.

In the lore of J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth, the Rings of Power were forged to govern the world, but it was the “One Ring” that ruled them all, binding them to a single will.¹ For a modern military organization, the enduring purpose is that one ring—the ultimate source of power and direction wielded by a commander. To harness this power, the staff of a given command must forge three other rings of its own: the *process map*, the *battle rhythm*, and the *terms of reference* (TOR).

While organizational effectiveness rests on the classic triad of “people, process, and systems,” this framework focuses on the often-neglected process architecture.² The Three Rings provide the “how,” which talented people then execute using enabling technology and systems (see figure).

The core problem for most organizations is that when they attempt to create these three rings, they instinctively follow the path of least resistance. The easiest task is to publish a battle rhythm, a schedule often untethered from the organization’s unique purpose. The next easiest is to draft a vague TOR, normally based on habit or tradition. The hardest task by far is to forge a precise process map by prying open the organization to see what is actually happening and what is being done by the team.

This document provides the blueprint for doing the hard work first. It explains how to forge the three rings in the correct order, binding them to the One Ring of Purpose and ensuring that intent becomes reality.

The One Ring: The Enduring Purpose

The purpose of a strategic military organization is its permanent, overarching reason for existence. It is the One Ring that rules them all, the standard against which every mission, every action, and every allocation of resources must be measured.³ The purpose is not created in a vacuum. In larger military organizations, it is derived from national strategic documents (e.g., the *National Security Strategy*, the *National Defense Strategy*), foundational legislation (e.g., Title 10 of the U.S. Code), and the organization’s core, unchanging identity.⁴ In



(Figure by Lam Nguyen)

Figure. Three Rings of Organizational Effectiveness

practice, expressed purpose takes different forms across the joint force:

- For a service (e.g., the US Navy): “To defend freedom, preserve economic prosperity, and keep the seas open and free.”⁵
- For a geographic combatant command (e.g., US European Command): “To deter conflict, maintain peace and security, and provide strategic depth through military operations, exercises, and security cooperation ... across the Euro-Atlantic region.”⁶
- For a functional command (e.g., US Transportation Command): “To conduct globally integrated mobility operations ... enabling capabilities in order to project and sustain the Joint Force in support of national objectives.”⁷

The purpose is the ultimate source of legitimacy and strategic direction. Without it, the other three rings are merely decorative, lacking true power.

From Purpose to Task: The Cascade of Strategy

With the One Ring of Purpose defined, the staff of an organization must translate the purpose into action through the generation of shared understanding, often through the use of the art of command, using concepts that tie to performance. This is the science of strategy.⁸

Campaigns and plans. The enduring purpose informs the development of long-term campaign plans. These plans are the primary mechanism for organizing and directing major operations over time and space.

Lines of effort and objectives. Within a campaign, operations are structured along lines of effort or logical lines of operation. Each line of effort has a series of intermediate military objectives that must be achieved to advance toward the desired end state.

Missions. Finally, these objectives are achieved through the execution of discrete missions. Each mission has a specific task (what to do) and purpose (the “why” that links it back to the objective).⁹

This cascade ensures that a tactical unit executing a single mission understands how its specific task and purpose contribute to a larger objective, which supports a line of effort within a campaign and ultimately serves the organization’s enduring purpose. However, this top-down strategic clarity, even when perfectly captured in formal documents like an execute order (EXORD), an operation plan (OPLAN), or a fragmentary order (FRAGO), is not self-executing. Understanding the purpose and having a plan does not guarantee the implementation of that purpose. A staff must still run the complex machinery of day-to-day operations. To do so effectively, and to ensure the commander’s strategic intent survives contact with daily reality, the organization must master the three rings of effectiveness, forged and utilized in their proper precedence.

The First Ring: The Process Map—The Ring of Knowledge

The first ring to be forged is the process map. This is the Ring of Knowledge, providing the “how” by making the complex, often invisible, workflows of the

command visible to all. Think of the old “Schoolhouse Rock” cartoon that showed how a bill becomes a law.¹⁰ It took a complex, multistage process and made it a simple, visual story. A process map does the same for an organization. It shows how meetings are supposed to generate decisions, how reports lead to orders and action, and how those same reports trigger data calls from subordinate units. This is why the process map is the apex predator of the three rings; it dictates the terms for the others.

Close scrutiny of a process map will inevitably find “vestigial” meetings or reports—forums that exist out of habit but no longer serve a function. It will also expose meetings that primarily service the ego of leaders but do not actually drive action or decisions. The map provides the objective evidence needed to eliminate this waste. The analysis should also determine whether the business of the organization actually supports the organization’s purpose.

The primary goal of a process map is to ensure effectiveness—that the organization is working on the right things that directly support its purpose. Many units produce incredible work on things that do not matter. A staff may spend days refining a comprehensive slide deck for a recurring meeting, perfecting formatting, adding detailed metrics, and anticipating every question, only for that briefing to have no bearing on any decision made by the commander. The product is excellent; the purpose is absent.

A personal example from the author (Doyle) further demonstrates this. A combatant command hosted a series of meetings culminating in a board to gain approval from a flag officer for a training exercise. The training exercise was exceptionally well-crafted, resourced, and appropriately scheduled. However, the training itself did not relate to the commander’s priorities and was dismissed. The work that the staff accomplished did not support the organization’s purpose.

The explicit study of a process map would have exposed this misalignment. Only after an organization develops and interrogates its procedures can the staff focus on efficiency—doing those right things with good stewardship of time and resources.¹¹

A process map is not a static artifact to be admired. It is a living document that requires constant senior leader reinforcement to avoid becoming a one-time

product that lives forgotten on a SharePoint site. Leaders must consistently communicate their vision and use the map as a tool in decision-making forums. Periodic, deliberate reviews of the map are essential to ensure the organization’s processes still support its overarching purpose, especially after a change in mission or environment.

Forged correctly, the process map becomes the sensing layer of the organizational system, transforming anecdote into evidence and intuition into measurable reality. Through operations research and systems analysis, the command instruments themselves. Calendars become data, interactions become networks, and time becomes a diagnostic signal. The system can now see how attention, effort, and authority are actually allocated, and how much of that energy truly advances the organization’s stated purpose versus feeding administrative gravity wells. For example, calendar analysis can reveal that 50–60 percent of senior leader time is spent in forums not tied to lines of effort. Without this

Maj. Gen. David Doyle, US Army, recently served as the commanding general of the 4th Infantry Division. His general officer assignments included CJ3 (director of combined, joint operations), Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve; deputy commanding general for support, 82nd Airborne Division; commanding general, Joint Readiness Training Center and Fort Polk; and chief of staff, US Central Command. His experience as a chief of staff at the division and combatant command (COCOM) levels, and his work training and leading staffs from battalion to COCOM levels informed his perspective on effective staff organization and activity.

Maj. Lam “Beau” Nguyen, US Army, is an epidemiology and clinical research PhD student at Stanford University. He previously served as the division operational research and systems analyst for the 4th Infantry Division and as an assistant professor in the Department of Chemical and Biological Science and Engineering at the US Military Academy. His experience analyzing staff processes and decision-making at the division level combined with his academic research background informs his perspective on evidence-based approaches to staff organization and effectiveness.

capability, the system operates in the blind. It mistakes motion for progress, activity for effectiveness, and familiarity for understanding. Worse, it develops confidence in illusions, reinforcing flawed decisions with polished briefings and inherited rituals. Only a system that can observe itself can be governed deliberately, and only then does synchronization become meaningful, which leads to the second ring, the battle rhythm.

The Second Ring: The Battle Rhythm—The Ring of Synchronization

The second ring is the battle rhythm. This is the Ring of Synchronization, providing the “when” and imposing a deliberate tempo on operations. It must be subordinate to and derived from the needs of the process map.¹² An effective battle rhythm ensures the right people are having the right conversations at the right time to make decisions that advance the purpose. An efficient battle rhythm simply means meetings start and end on time. The former is the goal; the latter is a necessary but insufficient component.

A battle rhythm developed before or without a clear process map inevitably causes organizational friction, as the organization’s control mechanisms are misaligned with the work they are intended to regulate. Internally, this forces the staff to use meetings for purposes other than their stated reason, leading to poor preparation, improper attendance, and bloated reports designed to compensate for uncertainty. Externally, subordinate units recognize that these forums are weakly coupled to actual performance and respond by disengaging, delegating attendance downward, or deprioritizing data calls. The combined effect is a degradation of feedback, increased decision latency, and a growing burden of “out-of-band” work as the staff attempts to reconstruct an accurate picture of operations outside formal channels, creating immense wasted energy and organizational chaos.

One of the most reliable indicators of a battle rhythm event’s true importance is the seniority of its attendees. When a meeting is critical to the command’s purpose, the “heavy hitters”—the principals and key decision-makers—will be there. They cannot afford to miss it. An effective meeting is worth their time, and the leaders recognize the meeting as opportunity to gain traction and provide feedback. When a meeting

is perceived as irrelevant, it will be attended by junior representatives with no authority to make decisions. The attendance roster is an unvarnished, real-time assessment of whether a battle rhythm event is effective or merely a tax on the staff’s time.

The Third Ring: The Terms of Reference—The Ring of Governance

The third ring is the TOR. This is the Ring of Governance, providing the “who” and “what” by defining the rules, authorities, and accountabilities that bind the framework together. It is the commander’s primary tool for delegating authority and forcing integration, taking the shape of a formally approved document that codifies decision rights and responsibilities. Many organizations include a TOR as a policy letter. Others publish it when a new commander takes over. Some units delegate it as a chief of staff function to drive directorates or staff sections.

A TOR’s most critical function is to designate a single proponent or chairperson for a specific forum. By formally granting this position the authority to convene specific members from across different silos (e.g., intelligence, operations, logistics, plans) and make decisions within a defined scope, the commander forces integration. No longer can a directorate claim, “It’s not my job.” The TOR makes it their job to participate, giving the proponent the top cover required to prioritize and synchronize efforts across the command.

An effective TOR is often linked to a decision authority matrix and removes ambiguity by explicitly answering four critical questions for any major decision within its purview:

1. Who makes the final decision?
2. Who must be consulted before the decision is made?
3. Who is responsible for executing the decision?
4. Who is accountable for the outcome?

An effective TOR is not a static artifact rooted solely in tradition. It should be reviewed periodically (e.g., annually or during a change of command) to ensure the forum remains effective. These reviews also allow leaders to adjust the TOR based on the strengths of the current team. A strong, experienced leader may be granted broader decision authority, while a developing team may require a more structured TOR with



clearer guardrails. An effective TOR ensures a forum has the authority and information to make meaningful decisions aligned with the purpose. An efficient TOR is merely a well-written document. The framework demands effectiveness first.

Without this ring, governance is based on personality, not position, leading to indecisiveness and a lack of accountability. A poorly forged ring that is written but ignored—or one that is treated as unchangeable stone—is a symbol of a dysfunctional command culture.

Embedding and Evaluating the Three Rings

Once the three rings are forged, the challenge shifts from design to sustainment. The command must ensure they are used and that they are effective. This requires a deliberate effort to embed these new approaches into the organization's culture and to build feedback loops to evaluate their impact.

Leaders must empower their subordinates to use and challenge the new framework. This means encouraging staff to identify when a process is flawed or when a battle rhythm event is no longer serving its purpose. Feedback must trigger deliberate adjustment

of the process map, which in turn reshapes the battle rhythm and TOR.

4th Infantry Division (ID) personnel attend an event on 25 September 2024 in the division's Joint Operations Center on Fort Carson, Colorado. (Photo by Spc. William Rogers, 4th ID Public Affairs)

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The principles of this framework must be anchored in the organization's culture. This can be achieved by incorporating the "three rings" into in-processing for new personnel, professional development sessions, and the criteria for awards and recognition. This echoes John Kotter's change model, where short-term wins are leveraged to create momentum for lasting cultural change.¹³

A command must be able to observe whether the framework is taking hold. This can be done through both qualitative and quantitative means. Qualitatively, leaders can observe if the language of process and purpose is being used in meetings. Quantitatively, operations research and systems analysis cells can track metrics like the "litmus test for relevance" (attendance seniority), decision velocity, and the reduction of "out-of-band" work. These feedback mechanisms make it easier to see when the organization is internalizing the

rings and when additional leader engagement is needed to reinforce them.

McChrystal and the “Team of Teams” in Iraq

The following case illustrates how an elite military organization, under combat conditions, instinctively forged the equivalent of the three rings to overcome systemic misalignment.¹⁴

When Gen. Stanley McChrystal took command of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in Iraq, he faced a formidable challenge. Despite possessing superior technology, training, and resources, his hierarchical command was being outmaneuvered by a decentralized, agile, and networked adversary: al-Qaida. McChrystal recognized that JSOC was a highly efficient, twentieth-century bureaucracy built for a different era, and to defeat a network, it needed to become one itself. This led to a radical overhaul of JSOC’s culture and operational processes, with a new, intense battle rhythm at its core and the application of clarity in the unit’s terms of reference.

The centerpiece of McChrystal’s new battle rhythm was the daily *operations and intelligence video-teleconference*.¹⁵ This was not a typical military briefing but a revolutionary tool for creating a shared consciousness across a global organization.¹⁶ This unique, new event broke down the traditional silos that separated operations and intelligence, as well as the barriers between different units and partner agencies.

Purpose. The primary goal was to share information so widely and transparently that everyone in the organization could develop the holistic understanding of the battlefield that was traditionally reserved for the commanding general. This created an “aligning narrative” and a common purpose, moving beyond the simple goal of “beat al-Qaida” to a deeper understanding of how they needed to operate to win.¹⁷

Process. McChrystal transformed the meeting from a top-down report into a forum for open exchange. He established an environment of “psychological safety” where junior members felt empowered to contribute information or ask questions without fear of reprisal.¹⁸ This allowed tactical operators on the front lines to communicate directly with strategic leaders, bypassing layers of management that would typically slow the flow of information.¹⁹

Battle rhythm. This disciplined ninety-minute session took place at the same time, five days each week, every single week, regardless of holidays or McChrystal’s own personal travel schedule. It connected thousands of participants from time zones all over the world, at every level of the command and across multiple agencies, from operators on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan to intelligence analysts in Washington, DC, and to senior, often deputy director- or director-level leaders of multiple agencies.²⁰

Terms of reference. McChrystal transitioned his own role from that of a chess master, directing every piece on the board, to a gardener who cultivates an environment in which the organization can thrive and adapt on its own.²¹

This relentless linkage of purpose to action allowed JSOC to dramatically increase its operational success. By preparing subordinate leaders to understand the purpose, process, battle rhythm, and terms of reference, McChrystal accelerated the unit’s ability to use situational awareness. By giving leaders information *and* the authority to act, McChrystal created a culture of “empowered execution.”²² This transformed JSOC into a “team of teams”—a hybrid model combining the centralized resources of a hierarchy with the agile adaptability of a network—which proved devastatingly effective in synchronizing the campaign against al-Qaida.²³

JSOC did not describe this transformation in terms of process maps, battle rhythms, or TOR. However, their success was driven by the deliberate integration of these elements into a single, reinforcing system, precisely the framework described in this article.

Conclusion: One Ring to Bind Them

The gap between an organization’s stated purpose and its actual performance often stems from choosing ease in staff functionality over effectiveness. The most difficult task—and the one that enables true alignment—is integrating the One Ring of Purpose into the process map. This integration drives a well-published and disciplined battle rhythm, overseen by a realistic TOR that governs the system on behalf of the commander.

A review of existing literature reveals a critical gap that this framework is designed to fill. Military doctrine masterfully details the “science” of planning through processes like the Joint Strategic Planning



System, yet it is less prescriptive on the “art” of running the headquarters that must execute those plans.²⁴ Similarly, business frameworks excel at strategic measurement but fall short of providing an operational architecture, while conceptual models like the observe, orient, decide, act (OODA) loop offer cognitive tools for decision-making but not an organizational structure to enable them at scale.²⁵ The primary shortcoming is that these powerful concepts—planning, measurement, and cognition—are rarely forged into a single, actionable framework for organizational design.

When an organization acts with discipline, a powerful effect occurs: the framework itself begins to compel alignment. The internal staff and subordinate units are almost forced to orient their efforts toward the parent organization’s purpose because the very structure of their work, their meetings, and their decision-making forums are now bound to it.

Development and implementation of a process-based system do not remove the ability or obligation for leaders to adapt to change. When leaders identify opportunities or are confronted with emergencies, they must

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force, speaks with Capt. Joey Nickel 3 June 2010 during a foot patrol through Muqur District, Badghis Province, Afghanistan. (Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Mark O’Donald, International Security Assistance Force HQ Public Affairs)

be flexible enough to adjust a battle rhythm or change the terms of reference. However, large organizations or headquarters that operate primarily by orienting on the “priority of the day” will inevitably fail to harness the full capability of a talented and trained staff. A staff can do the work to adjust to emergencies but should operate under regular order based on a thoughtfully crafted process linked to purpose.²⁶

By undertaking the hard work of examining a staff’s process, a command creates a powerful synergy where the One Ring of Purpose provides the strategic direction for all campaigns and missions. These missions, in turn, guide the forging of the three rings of organizational effectiveness. This holistic approach ensures that every action, from strategic planning to tactical execution, contributes directly to fulfilling the organization’s enduring purpose and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. ■

Notes

1. The "One Ring" and "Three Rings" metaphor is adapted from J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Houghton Mifflin, 1954).
2. Harold J. Leavitt, "Applied Organization Change in Industry: Structural, Technical and Human Approaches," in *New Perspectives in Organization Research*, ed. William W. Cooper et al. (Wiley Publishing, 1964), 55–71.
3. "Ring-verse" Fandom, accessed 20 March 2026, <https://lotr.fandom.com/wiki/Ring-verse>. The Ring Verse describes the Rings of Power and the One Ring that governs them.
4. The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (The White House, November 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>; Office of the Secretary of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy* (Department of War, January 2026). The legal basis for the roles and missions of the services is established in Title 10 of the US Code.
5. "Mission," US Navy, accessed 20 March 2026, <https://www.navy.mil/About/Mission/>.
6. "Mission," US European Command, accessed 20 January 2026, <https://www.eucom.mil/about-the-command>.
7. "About USTRANSCOM," US Transportation Command, accessed 20 March 2026, <https://www.ustranscom.mil/cmd/about-tustc.cfm>.
8. The distinction between the "art" and "science" of strategy is a classic theme. The "science" is often associated with the process-driven methodologies found in joint doctrine, while the "art" refers to the commander's creative application of judgment and experience, a concept central to the writings of theorists like Carl von Clausewitz in *On War*.
9. For a comprehensive overview of campaign planning, lines of effort, logical lines of operation, and the hierarchy of plans and orders (OPLAN, EXORD, FRAGO), see Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning* (US Government Publishing Office [GPO], 1 December 2025).
10. "I'm Just a Bill - Schoolhouse Rock," posted 18 August 2024 by Schoolhouse Rock, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZ8psP4S6BQ>.
11. Peter F. Drucker famously differentiated effectiveness—doing the right things—and efficiency—doing things right. He established this concept and explained it in Peter F. Drucker, *The Effective Executive* (Harper & Row, 1967), chap. 1.
12. The concept of the battle rhythm as a tool to synchronize staff activities and the operations process is detailed in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (US GPO, July 2019), 1-17–1-18.
13. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Harvard Business School Press, 2012), 121–36. Kotter's eight-stage model for leading change emphasizes the importance of creating short-term wins and anchoring new approaches in the corporate culture.
14. Stanley McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (Portfolio, 2015), 19–27.
15. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 164.
16. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 154–63.
17. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 153.
18. Amy Edmondson, quoted in McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 94.
19. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 168.
20. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 164–68.
21. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 222–25.
22. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 202–19.
23. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams*, 132.
24. JP 5-0, *Joint Planning*, II-1—II-3.
25. John Boyd, *A Discourse on Winning and Losing* (Air University Press, 2018), 384. The OODA loop is a conceptual decision-making model.
26. This paragraph addresses the inherent tension between disciplined operations and the need for adaptation. The concept echoes Dwight D. Eisenhower's observation, "Plans are worthless, but planning is indispensable" (Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Remarks at the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference, 14 November 1957," American Presidency Project, accessed 8 April 2024, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-national-defense-executive-reserve-conference>), emphasizing that the value lies in the shared understanding a process creates. It also aligns with the doctrinal principle of "disciplined initiative," where subordinates can deviate from a plan to seize opportunities, precisely because they have a stable, purpose-driven "regular order" to guide routine operations and return to after a crisis. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces* (US GPO, July 2019), 1-11–1-12.