The Trouble with Mission Command

Army Culture and Leader Assumptions

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In 1911, Capt. Harry Cootes of the U.S. 13th Cavalry authored a short leadership article that appeared in the *Journal of the United States Cavalry Association*. In his article, Cootes lamented how micromanagement and a lack of trust had reduced cavalry troop commanders in the early 1900s to "mere figureheads, and in fact, a colonel's first sergeant."[1] Cootes, who had observed several European military maneuvers, contrasted the freedom enjoyed by French, German, and Russian commanders with the conformity and constraints imposed upon American officers. According to Cootes, excessive authoritarianism, distrust, and interference by higher commanders severely degraded the initiative and adaptiveness of U.S. Army officers. These negative behaviors largely resulted in a "sit-fast do-nothing" leadership culture among troop commanders.[2]

Times have changed, but this unfortunate condition persists. In 2020, retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen. David Barno and Dr. Nora Bensahel wrote *Adaptation under Fire: How Militaries Change in Wartime*. Their book devotes significant attention to the philosophy of mission command and particularly the difficulties the modern U.S. Army has encountered in ingraining this concept in its leaders. Barno and Bensahel suggest that mission command represents a crucial element contributing to Army leaders' adaptiveness and mental agility in dynamic operational environments. They also assert that the Army does not effectively practice its mission command philosophy. The authors provide several reasons for this failure, including excessive bureaucracy, extensive micromanagement, widespread risk aversion, and endemic distrust. These negative behaviors arise in response to peacetime bureaucratic requirements and persist in war.[3]

Although Cootes never saw the term "mission command," he might agree with Barno and Bensahel's observations. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces,* defines mission command as "the Army's approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation."[4] This approach provides the overarching philosophy commanders and subordinates use to execute decentralized operations in fluid conditions. However, the Army currently faces significant problems in practicing its mission command philosophy. This difficulty stems from many of the factors outlined by Barno and Bensahel and persists because of deep-rooted cultural issues at play in

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Soldiers conduct a mission briefing after jumping from an Air Force C-130 Hercules aircraft 26 September 2017 during Exercise September Heat at Rivolto Air Base in Udine, Italy. Commanders must integrate a mission command philosophy as often as possible in training events to develop confident, adaptive, trustworthy subordinates. (Photo by Paolo Bovo, U.S. Army)

most Army organizations.[5] To "fix" mission command, the Army must first examine several pervasive leader behaviors and challenge the underlying assumptions that leaders rely upon to solve problems and achieve success.

The Problem

The U.S. Army's mission command approach first appeared in doctrine in 2003, but soldiers from various armies have arguably relied on similar philosophies for centuries. The Germans certainly practiced *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the chaos and uncertainty of war has forced many armies to adopt mission-type tactics out of necessity.[6] Mission command represents only one possible command style, and several authors have argued in favor of different approaches and alternative conceptualizations of the mission command philosophy.[7] Nevertheless, mission command occupies

a prominent place in U.S. Army leadership doctrine. Unless the Army changes that doctrine, it should attempt to practice it—or at least recognize the misalignment between what it prints in field manuals and what its leaders practice every day.

Furthermore, those leaders seemingly embrace the mission command approach and praise its virtues, at least in public. So why do many of these same leaders fail to practice this philosophy? Why does the U.S. Army have a problem instilling the mission command approach?

Three interrelated leadership characteristics stand out as particular causes for this difficulty: a preference for authoritarianism, a love of "bull," and a lack of imagination. Norman Dixon illuminates these fundamental issues in *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, a 1976 study of British military failures and the associated psychological obstacles facing senior leaders. Historians and theorists such as Williamson Murray and Meir Finkel echo many

of the same concerns. Though Dixon studied British military culture and published his book decades ago, several of his findings still apply to the U.S. Army of the early twenty-first century.

Authoritarianism

Military organizations have a long and complicated history with authoritarian leadership styles.[8] This authoritarianism perhaps stems from and perpetuates classic military leadership stereotypes: the draconian drill instructor, the inflexible martinet officer, and the imperious general. Many leaders seem to believe the military profession requires autocracy—that armies need tough, aggressive, and strong-willed leaders to handle the solemn business of warfighting. These qualities can benefit militaries if properly applied, and authoritarian leadership techniques have their place under certain risk conditions and in specific situations.[9] In fact, ADP 6-0 clarifies that leaders should exercise more control in situations where leaders lack training, little cohesion exists, and trust still needs to develop.[10] As with leadership challenges in various organizations, situational and followership variables in military units can influence leader behavior.

Yet excessive authoritarianism can also create conditions that degrade mission command. Dixon notes that authoritarian leaders tend toward dishonesty, suspicion, obsessive behavior, pessimism, and scapegoating.[11] He also asserts that authoritarian leaders often ignore candid feedback and just as often fail to act upon information that does not support their preconceived notions.[12] Finally, both Dixon and Finkel contend that highly authoritarian leaders struggle to demonstrate adaptiveness or display the disciplined initiative required by the mission command philosophy.[13] All of these behaviors imperil the successful execution of mission command. Leaders may need to employ autocratic styles depending on their situation, but excessive authoritarianism—and military cultures that overprioritize it—threatens decentralization.[14]

Bulls--t

Bulls--t (or "BS") refers to all of the behaviors, procedures, rules, and rituals that armies adopt and maintain to reduce anxiety and mitigate ambiguity.[15] This definition differs from Paul Fussell's concept of "chickens--t," which refers to vindictive and petty behaviors meant to engender misery and increase a military activity's inherent unpleasantness.[16] BS takes many forms—some strange, others obnoxious, many unnecessary. Excessive cleanliness, compulsive orderliness, an obsession with appearances, and an unhealthy devotion to uniformity might all qualify as BS. Many, but not all, of the bureaucratic practices associated with military service may also relate to BS as these processes and systems exist to reduce or eliminate ambiguity. Much of this BS exists primarily in garrison. BS may vanish to some degree in deployed environments, but often as not, it persists.[17]

Like authoritarianism, a moderate degree of BS may occasionally frustrate soldiers but does not pose a significant threat to mission command. Organizations may even require activities typically classified as BS to maintain good order and discipline in certain situations. But leaders who rely on excessive BS to mitigate ambiguous situations can create an organizational climate that stifles decentralization, initiative, and trust. In tranquilizing anxieties and imposing conformity, BS also destroys adaptiveness and innovation.[18] Leaders cannot learn to effectively practice mission command in environments that ruthlessly eliminate all forms of risk, unpredictability, or disorder. Contemporary operating environments feature all of these characteristics, and no leader can ever hope to eradicate them.

Despite its adverse effects, the Army must carefully manage BS. Many disagreeable soldiers and hypercritical leaders tend to characterize everything as BS, even those activities that demonstrably contribute to organizational success. Bureaucracy begets some BS, and Murray notes that bureaucracies like those

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underpinning American military services also exist primarily to alleviate anxieties, impose order, and efficiently safeguard the status quo.[19] Thus, BS may represent an unavoidable part of the military experience that often simultaneously promotes efficiency and hinders creativity. Since BS remains part of the military environment, leaders can either manage it effectively or let the BS manage them and their formations. Commanders must carefully balance the mundane activities that contribute to organizational welfare and discipline with the understanding that the U.S. Army cannot substitute orderliness for initiative.

Unimaginativeness

Authoritarianism and unchecked BS serve to produce the third characteristic that heavily impedes mission command within the Army: unimaginativeness, defined as a reluctance to consider alternate solutions or apply creative thinking. The U.S. Army often recognizes tactical imaginativeness, but it rarely rewards NCOs or officers who get imaginative with career choices or who creatively interpret orders. The Army often directly or indirectly punishes such behavior. As a result, most leaders content themselves with safe solutions and prescribed career paths. Many officers fail to internalize Army doctrinal publications that call for breaking paradigms and innovating; accordingly, innovation remains an unfavorably rated attribute in Army leadership surveys.[20]

Yet Barno, Bensahel, Dixon, and Murray all agree that innovation and adaptation cannot successfully occur without openness to new ideas, and many contemporary military leaders lack such imaginative faculties.[21] Even ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession,* singles out imagination and creative thinking as crucial components of adaptiveness and mental agility.[22] Unimaginative leaders struggle to practice mission command because they cannot freely trust others and they lack an interest in evaluating prudent risks or developing a sense of disciplined initiative. These behaviors contribute to the risk-averse culture that

To view Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, visit https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN20039-ADP_6-22-001-WEB-0.pdf.

Barno and Bensahel identify as a primary impediment to mission command's successful implementation.[23]

Unimaginative officers may not oppose mission command, and a lack of imagination does not imply a lack of competence. In fact, such leaders may still benefit organizations and demonstrate effective direct-level leadership. Nor do mavericks and rule breakers necessarily demonstrate the type of creativity and imagination necessary for mission command's success. But organizational leaders who demonstrate a chronic lack of imagination and creativity may more readily discard the mission philosophy, with its emphasis on risk acceptance and disciplined initiative.

Confronting the Underlying Assumptions

In his influential book *Organizational Culture and Leadership,* Edgar Schein argues that culture consists of three layers: artifacts, stated values, and underlying assumptions.[24] The Army's culture—and the subcultures of the Army's various branches, components, and organizations—features these three layers. Salutes, uniforms, and ceremonies constitute the Army's artifacts, while the Army Values and Ethic comprise its stated values. Meanwhile, underlying assumptions represent ingrained principles, those stemming from behaviors that have repeatedly and successfully solved organizational problems. These assumptions have become a part of the organization's cultural fabric; members of the group rarely recognize them and often act upon them unconsciously. These deep-rooted assumptions drive various organizational behaviors and beliefs.[25]

Army culture has many underlying assumptions. Many of these entrenched beliefs result in the type of exceptional behavior recognized by valor awards, but others act as obstacles to decentralization, accountability, trust, initiative, and effective risk management. In short, these assumptions can stymie mission command. Authoritarianism, a fondness for BS, and a lack of imagination have helped create many of these negative
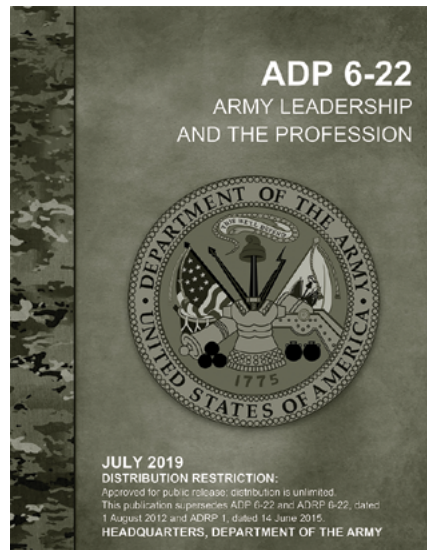
Pfc. Gabriel Gomes, assigned to 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, calls a direction of fire while manning a mortar firing position 28 February 2017 in support of Operation Inherent Resolve near Mosul, Iraq. A mission command approach allows junior leaders to make decisions and take action in accordance with a mission and intent in the absence of direct supervision. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Alex Manne, U.S. Army)

assumptions. To successfully implement its mission command philosophy, the Army must confront and change several of its most damaging leader assumptions, like the three outlined below.

Assumption 1: A leader must trust but verify, even if verification results in micromanagement. Every U.S. Army officer who has misplaced trust in an unsuccessful subordinate has heard of the old Russian proverb "trust but verify." This Reagan-era maxim can solve organizational problems, especially in relatively immature organizations or when dealing with untrained leaders. However, this thinly veiled authoritarian mantra destroys trust when used as a lodestar to guide Army commanders in their interactions with subordinate officers. The "trust but verify" proverb—a sacred cow in many Army organizations—often provides officers with a justification to micromanage. As a result, many leaders trust very little and verify

everything. In the event of failure, senior commanders may view the lack of personal command verification as a sign of incompetence rather than an opportunity for leaders to learn and further refine mutual trust.

As painful as it sounds, the Army must abandon "trust but verify." It must slaughter this sacred cow. Army commanders should instead adopt "certify and trust" as their maxim. Leaders do not automatically owe trust to their subordinates or vice versa. But leaders who intensively train and develop their subordinates can eventually certify their competence. Likewise, subordinates can gain an understanding of their leaders' behaviors and motivations during such training. Both parties can ultimately develop mutual trust—the bedrock of mission command. Through training and leader development, commanders can serve as the wellspring of that trust and ultimately build adaptive organizations. Conversely, commanders who elect solely to "trust but

verify" promote authoritarianism and its kindred spirit, micromanagement—the very leadership quality that Cootes railed against in 1911.

Assumption 2: Mission command occurs naturally without any training or commander involvement. Many commanders assume that their subordinates understand the mission command philosophy and that their organization can easily apply that approach without consistent commander involvement. ADP 6-0 confronts this assumption, stating that "commanders cannot expect subordinates to respond effectively to a mission command approach once operations commence if they have not developed subordinates comfortable in its use beforehand."[26] Yet commanders often expect just that from their subordinates, who often have not experienced the level of institutional or operational development necessary to exercise mission command. Their expectations manifest in the notion that leaders should "figure it out," another much-loved Army mantra. "Figuring it out" may very well help officers develop critical or creative thinking skills in the appropriate type of training environments. However, expecting officers to puzzle through the application of an intricate, trust-based leadership approach during the actual execution of operations without sufficient prior training likely represents, as ADP 6-0 notes, an unrealistic goal.

The assumption that mission command occurs naturally and effortlessly influences many Army leader development factors, including counseling, mentorship, and evaluation reports. Commanders want subordinates who can "figure out" complex problems and expect junior leaders to arrive at effective solutions and exercise disciplined initiative with little or no training. Unimaginative or authoritarian leaders looking to circumvent the hard work of instilling the mission command philosophy often act according to this assumption. However, even earnest leaders seeking to apply mission command may also eventually fall prey to this assumption due to the pressures of leadership turnover, fatigue, unfamiliar situations, and time.

As with trust but verify, the Army must change this assumption through training. ADP 6-0 prompts commanders to train mission command by incorporating this approach as often as possible into training events. However, Army training management doctrine emphasizes standardization, uniformity, and efficiency. It does not necessarily reward leaders who build ambiguity or complexity into their training plans. Tellingly, ADP 7-0, *Training,* calls for realistic, combat-focused training but contains no mention of mission command.[27] Not every training event merits such opportunities; after all, basic rifle marksmanship ranges do not require much complexity. Yet, many unit collective training events would benefit from more ambiguity and opportunities to demonstrate disciplined initiative instead of rote uniformity. Commanders must incorporate mission command fundamentals—decentralization, initiative, trust, and risk acceptance—into training plans wherever possible. Failure to train mission command before expecting subordinates to execute the approach during operations only contributes to misguided assumptions.

Assumption 3: Army leaders should avoid risk because risk threatens promotion and career advancement. This well-ingrained belief represents the most insidious and damaging threat to mission command's successful practice. Many officers do not trust, delegate, or take the initiative due to the fear of personal or organizational failure. They avoid taking risks because these risks—if they result in failure or accidents—endanger careers. Army formations rarely offer the psychological safety that Schein and other authors consider necessary to develop learning organizations.[28] Despite claims to the contrary, officers know that failures, even in the pursuit of innovation or adaptation, often negatively impact evaluation reports. Many leaders, therefore, elect to hew to the safe and unimaginative path. Alternatively, they and their organizations turn to BS in the form of bureaucratic layers and laborious risk management processes that seek to mitigate ambiguity but instead destroy trust and frustrate initiative.

All of these behaviors severely hinder the execution of mission command. The Army must dispose of the assumption that drives these behaviors by rewarding leaders who internalize the mission command philosophy by effectively trusting others, prudently accepting risk, and underwriting honest mistakes. ADP 6-0 specifies that commanders cannot tolerate all types of failure, such as ethical violations and dangerous repeated errors.[29] Even tolerated failures must benefit the affected leaders by producing learning opportunities influenced and guided by commanders. This learning process further contributes to the certification of competent and trusted subordinate leaders.

Some Army leaders currently recognize and emphasize qualities such as trust, risk acceptance, and psychological safety. Still, many commanders prize authoritarian officers who prioritize getting results above leader development and organizational growth. The mission command philosophy seeks to avoid catastrophic failure in war by creating adaptive leaders who have learned from repeated failure in peace. This approach cannot hope to succeed if it remains governed by a status quo that prefers uninventive, risk averse, and professionally conservative leadership solutions.

Conclusion

The Army codified mission command nearly twenty years ago and teaches this philosophy to all of its leaders in some form or fashion. Yet few Army organizations effectively practice this approach today. Instead, Army formations often fail to trust, fail to train, fail to achieve shared understanding, and fail to reward those who display real initiative. Army leaders contribute to these failures through authoritarian behaviors, overprioritizing

BS, and a distinct lack of imagination. These behaviors have produced underlying leader assumptions regarding the need for constant micromanagement, the expectation of mission command without training, and the primacy of risk aversion over prudent risk acceptance.

The Army and its leaders must confront these assumptions and challenge the paradigms that foster them to successfully apply the mission command philosophy. Army leaders must first identify and change their behaviors—excessive authoritarianism, the over-reliance on banality and order, and the lack of imagination—before they can realistically address underlying cultural assumptions. By changing behaviors and confronting old beliefs, the Army can best ensure its leaders cultivate the type of adaptiveness and flexibility demanded by future battlefields. Those leaders who see no value in such adaptive leadership would do well to heed the wisdom of Capt. Harry Cootes, who more than a century ago, desired greater trust and latitude from his commander to engender "the enthusiasm, initiative and go" required of successful armies.[30] ∎

Notes

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4. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2019), 1-3.

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11. Norman F. Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 416–32.

12. Ibid., 417–20.

13. Finkel, *On Flexibility*, 99–100.

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16. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 80–81.

17. Dixon, *Military Incompetence*, 283–95.

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19. Williamson Murray, *America and the Future of War: The Past as Prologue* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2017), 219–29.

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21. Barno and Bensahel, *Adaptation under Fire*, 262–65; Dixon, *Military Incompetence*, 588–90; Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 758–59.

22. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2019), 4-1.

23. Barno and Bensahel, *Adaptation under Fire*, 279–80.

24. Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017), 17–25.

25. Ibid., 21–25.

26. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 2-21.

27. ADP 7-0, *Training* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2019).

28. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 328–29; John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 108–12.

29. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 2-17.

30. Cootes, "More Responsibility," 21.