

The Philosophy of Mission Command and the NCO Corps

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The commander's intent, one of the six guiding principles of mission command, should be concise and to the point. The "conciseness" depends upon your target audience. For example, "go sweep the hangar floor" is enough for a sergeant who has swept many a hangar floor. However, if you are telling the specialist who has never done it before, more details may be needed. (Graphic by NCO Journal)

Yes, another article on mission command. Before you click the "back button," let me explain why embracing the philosophy of mission command is critical to the development of the noncommissioned officer Corps.

"Mission command" has been the buzz phrase of choice since its adoption as official Army doctrine in 2012. It was born from the need to evolve out of command and control doctrine to meet the demands of a complex and demanding battlefield. However, mission command is not

a new concept, and examples of its application can be found as far back as when humans first took up arms against one another.

Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6.0

(https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/adrp6_0.pdf), *Mission Command*, defines this philosophy as: "The exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations."¹

We know what mission command is, and knowing is half the battle, but do we practice mission command at the NCO level? Is mission command, especially the philosophy, even in the realm of the NCO? Lastly, how do we create agile and adaptive leaders?

Holistically, the answer to the first two questions is "No." Even with mission command crammed down our throats, we still have NCOs, even senior NCOs, paralyzed with fear when asked to take initiative within the commander's intent. The answer to the second question should be a resounding "Yes" if we want to develop an NCO Corps that is prepared to meet all challenges. Therefore, how do we teach mission command and develop agile and adaptive leaders who feel empowered to take disciplined initiative? What is the secret? There is no secret. It takes time, patience, and understanding. With all the requirements Soldiers are tasked to accomplish each day, we can be lacking in all three of these elements.

When teaching mission command, we use examples like Joshua Chamberlain's stand on Little Round Top on the second day of Gettysburg. Do we have to wait for opportunities like this to teach the essence of mission command? Of course not! We do it through everyday tasks like cleaning your work areas or sweeping a hangar's floor.

The six guiding principles of mission command are:

1. Build a cohesive team through mutual trust.
2. Create a shared understanding.
3. Provide a clear commander's intent.
4. Exercise disciplined initiative.
5. Use mission orders.
6. Accept prudent risk.²

By employing these principles, everyday tasks can be used to teach and develop the philosophy of mission command and build leaders willing and able to take disciplined initiative within their commander's intent.

Build a Cohesive Team through Mutual Trust

Commanders must have the confidence that all required tasks for a properly functioning organization are being carried out. The act of completing even routine tasks also builds mutual trust. ADRP 6.0 puts it best: "Trust is gained or lost through everyday actions more than grand

or occasional gestures."³ This is also true in building a cohesive team. The best teams are formed by doing routine, mundane, daily tasks together.

Create a Shared Understanding

A shared understanding starts with everyone knowing the part they play in accomplishing a goal. What is the operational environment? The hangar where we perform aircraft maintenance. What is the purpose of the operation? A clean and safe working environment. All the specified and implied tasks to accomplish the goal need to be conveyed and understood by everyone.

Provide a Clear Commander's Intent

By doctrine, the commander's intent should be concise and to the point. The "conciseness" depends upon your target audience. For example, "go sweep the hangar floor" is enough for a sergeant who has swept many a hangar floor. However, if you are telling the specialist who has never done it before, more details may be needed.

Exercise Disciplined Initiative

If we lay the proper foundation, this is where the magic happens. If you have built a team through mutual trust, created a shared understanding, and conveyed a clear intent, subordinates will have the confidence to exercise disciplined initiative.

Vice Adm. Horatio Nelson, a famous commander of the British Royal Navy known for his victories against the French during the Napoleonic Wars, once said, "No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy." In other words, if the desired end state has been met, it is the right way! Is there a better way to sweep a hangar's floor? Tell a group of Soldiers if they complete this task they can go home, and watch the innovation flow!

Can there be mistakes? Sure, but the most valuable lessons often begin with a mistake. Leaders must possess the courage to allow their subordinates to make mistakes. No one put it better than retired Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, 38th chief of staff of the Army, when he said, "Encourage initiative and underwrite failure."⁴ Giving a subordinate the opportunity to "own" a task by allowing disciplined initiative, though checked by failure, is the philosophy of mission command.

Use Mission Orders

In the warfighting function, mission orders come in the form of Warning Orders, Operation Orders, and Fragmentary Orders. In our scenario, this can be as simple as "go sweep the hangar floor." Again, the level of detail required depends upon the experience level of the subordinate in charge.

Accept Prudent Risk

Are there risks in sweeping a hangar or the hundreds of other menial tasks you could use to develop agile and adaptive leaders? It is safe to say that as subordinates use creative ways to accomplish a task, they will also find innovative ways to hurt themselves or break something. The key to preventing injuries or damage is to analyze what could go wrong. It can be as simple as asking, "How have I screwed up doing this same task in the past?"

Conclusion

There you have it. There is no secret formula. It all starts with engaged leadership.

To put it another way, how do you get good at running two miles? By being good at running one mile. Two miles leads into three, four, and eventually a marathon. The same holds true with the NCO you are tasking with sweeping a hangar, supervising a motor pool, or running a small arms range. This same NCO, who now possesses the confidence to exercise disciplined initiative to seize, retain, exploit, or maintain a position of relative advantage, is the agile and adaptive leader you helped develop.

Again, this is a process that takes time, patience, and understanding. With everything we have to juggle as leaders, it is easier for leaders to give detailed instructions on how to accomplish a task, especially if they know the best way. Trusting subordinates to "figure it out" could mean a late night or two, but the pros far outweigh the cons. The result will be an NCO corps with the confidence won from opportunities given to find a better way. This is the philosophy of mission command we must embrace in the development of our future leaders.

Notes

1. U.S. Army, *Mission Command*, ADRP 6.0 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, May 17, 2012), para 1-5.
2. U.S. Army, ADRP 6-0, para 2-3.
3. U.S. Army, ADRP 6-0, para 2-5.
4. Jonathan Koester, "NCOs Have Important Roles in Mission Command," *NCO Journal* legacy website, September 17, 2013, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://ncojournal.dodlive.mil/2013/09/17/1932/> (<http://ncojournal.dodlive.mil/2013/09/17/1932/>).