



A U.S. Army Soldier with the 54th Brigade Engineering Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade, retrieves mission details while calling for fire operation during Exercise Allied Spirit VI at 7th Army Training Command's Hohenfels Training Area, Germany, Mar. 16, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rachel Wilridge)

# Fostering Disciplined Initiative

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**A**dvances in technology are transforming the character of war. Hypersonic cruise missiles, artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, and quantum technology are challenges requiring a shift in how the U.S. Army conducts business (Asymmetric Warfare Group, 2020; Magni, 2020). This starts with training officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) utilizing mission command. In tomorrow's wars, *disciplined initiative* will prove the most important quality in junior leaders. This article describes the importance of disciplined initiative in a decentralized command and offers a way to implement it during leadership development training.

## Future of Warfare

For decades, the U.S. Army has mostly fought on battlefields where it enjoyed uncontested dominance over multiple domains such as the electromagnetic (EM) spectrum. In modern operations, EM dominance is even more crucial for warfighting because many units and weapon systems rely on it for communications. However, the rigors of near-peer, high-intensity conflict will inevitably include cyber and electronic warfare, which threaten the Army's operations on the EM spectrum. Even recently, Joint Special Operations Command identified electronic warfare as one of the biggest threats in Syria, where Russia has successfully contested the EM spectrum (Seligman, 2018).

This means that in future conflict, the average infantry squad leader can no longer depend on the ability to call for close air support or a nine-line medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) request, or even request guidance from higher command when issues arise. With the possibility of austere battlefield conditions, NCOs will need to rely on experience and initiative to independently make decisions regarding tactical objectives and use what chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Gen. Mark A. Milley, calls “disciplined disobedience” (Lopez, 2017). This is the act of using discretion and initiative to achieve battlefield objectives and follow the spirit of an order rather than following it verbatim.



U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, learn hand signal techniques before conducting dismounted movement drills during Basic Leader Course at the International Peacekeeping and Security Center, Yavoriv, Ukraine, Nov. 1, 2016. (U.S. Army photo by Army Staff Sgt. Elizabeth Tarr)

## Opportunity

In February 2021, I attended the Army’s Basic Leader Course (BLC). BLC is the foundational curriculum for Army NCOs, and apart from the Sergeants Major Academy, is the only career course where enlisted leaders are not separated by occupational specialty. The course can provide an opportunity to instill disciplined initiative as a foundational pillar to every young NCO. Subsequent leadership courses (i.e. Advanced Leadership Course onward) could then implement follow-on study of disciplined initiative within the framework of each branch’s operational needs and individual curricula.

According to *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6.0*:

*“Simply put, disciplined initiative is when subordinates have the discipline to follow their orders and adhere to the plan until they realize their orders and the plan are no longer suitable for the situation in which they find themselves. This may occur because the enemy does something unforeseen, there is a new or more serious threat, or a golden opportunity emerges that offers a greater chance of success than the original course of action. The subordinate leader then takes action on their own initiative to adjust to the new situation and achieve their commander’s intent, reporting to the commander about the new situation when able to do so.”* (Department of the Army, 2019a, p. 1-12)

*Initiative* is a blend of skills, such as confidence, the ability to bridge the gap between tactical realities and strategic objectives, and foresight. In many ways, BLC touches on these skills. For instance, each student in my class was required to give a brief about operational environment issues as well as write an essay on why we

thought sexual assault was increasing in the Army. Leadership abilities and confidence were also built up through public speaking, leading physical training events, and turns acting as class leader. However, the cornerstone of initiative is being able to act without explicit direction in order to accomplish tasks supporting the mission’s objective. In my opinion, the current curriculum does not adequately foster this skill.

## Solution

BLC is already packed with lectures, essays, and practical exercises and there are plenty of ways to incorporate disciplined initiative into the existing curriculum. For instance, scenario exercises are frequently used to illustrate and develop key leader qualities and vary, from a drunk man harassing his girlfriend at a bar to managing interpersonal disputes in your team. In the short-term, instructors could give a brief explanation of what disciplined initiative is and then ask students how it might be exercised in the scenarios BLC already uses.

In the long-term, a module on initiative and “disciplined disobedience” could be incorporated into the future BLC curriculum. This way it can be a concrete focal point, formally developed so Soldiers have the proper tools and confidence they need when they head back to their units and assume responsibilities as leaders.

*ADP 6-22* references initiative more than 40 times, which should provide plenty of context and weight to effectively weave it into the BLC curriculum (Department of the Army, 2019b). Exercises explicitly focusing on the initiative aspect of leadership in a wartime environment should be the emphasis of this model to include hypothetical scenarios such as how students would handle injured Soldiers if no MEDEVAC is available or how to respond to changing tactical conditions if radio communications unavailable. Historical examples could

also be used. For example, *ADP 6-22* uses 1st Lt. John H. Parker's decision to use machine guns offensively in the Spanish American War during the Battle of San Juan Hill to demonstrate initiative and creating a new technique (using machine guns offensively instead of only defensively) (Department of the Army, 2019b).

Another way to increase initiative throughout the force is to hold both formal and informal discussions between junior and senior NCOs at the unit level and every level of NCO professional development. Fostering a climate where Soldiers feel comfortable exercising *reasonable* initiative without fear of reprisal from their chain of command is a significant first step towards developing a more adaptable Army. *ADP 6-22* states, "Climate largely shapes the degree to which unit members feel comfortable exhibiting initiative and providing input. Leaders create the conditions for ini-

tiative by guiding others in thinking through problems for themselves" (Department of the Army, 2019b, p. 6-7). Ultimately, initiative is about risk-taking. Failure will inevitably happen. In training and garrison, addressing failure should not extinguish a Soldier's willingness to exercise initiative.

## Conclusion

Implementing changes to NCO professional development curricula and training will allow the U.S. Army to foster a more adaptable force, one requiring less micro-management to operate effectively. By encouraging and training disciplined initiative in young NCOs, allowing them an opportunity to exercise discretion and initiative to independently make decisions regarding tactical objectives, the U.S. Army will be prepared to win tomorrow's war regardless of environment or domain. ■

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