

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

*Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188*

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 07-04-2021	2. REPORT TYPE Master of Military Studies (MMS) thesis	3. DATES COVERED (From - To) AY 2020-2021
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4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Fostering Independent Leadership: Changing a Culture for Success in Future Wars	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A
	5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A

6. AUTHOR(S) Mullen, John P. (Major)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A
	5e. TASK NUMBER N/A
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A
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9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
Today's military culture stifles initiative-based leadership and could have disastrous consequences in future wars. The noncombat environment offers the best space to develop initiative-based junior leaders but numerous examples prove that the opposite is happening. This micromanagement is abdicating responsibility in junior leaders and is fostering "learned helplessness" at the lowest levels. Fortunately, there are several ways in which the military can adjust course to avoid this fate. This includes delegating authority to the lowest acceptable level, emphasizing intent over task, building trust through quantitative results, and changing the incentives for senior leaders.

15. SUBJECT TERMS
Leadership, micromanagement, generational differences, learned helplessness, mission command.

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			USMC Command and Staff College
Unclass	Unclass	Unclass	UU		19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**FOSTERING INDEPENDENT LEADERSHIP:
CHANGING A CULTURE FOR SUCCESS IN FUTURE WARS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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AY 2020-21

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Executive Summary

Title: Fostering Independent Leadership: Changing A Culture for Success in Future Wars

Author: Major John P. Mullen, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: Today's military culture stifles initiative-based leadership and could have disastrous consequences in future wars. The military should adhere to the principles of mission command within the garrison environment to ensure that junior leaders are prepared for any future conflict.

Discussion: US military joint and service doctrine prescribe mission type tactics, emphasizing independent subordinate leaders who exercise disciplined initiative to accomplish the mission. Unfortunately, the principles of mission command are routinely violated in both combat and noncombat environments. This takes place for a multitude of reasons to include generational differences, technological dominance that allows unfettered communication, and a command structure that favors risk aversion. The noncombat environment offers the best space to develop initiative-based junior leaders but numerous examples prove that the opposite is happening. This micromanagement is abdicating responsibility in junior leaders and is fostering "learned helplessness" at the lowest levels. If the US finds itself in a conflict with a formidable foe, junior leaders will need to make difficult decisions with minimal input from their commanders. The attributes fostered in the noncombat environment could prove catastrophic in this conflict. Fortunately, there are several ways in which the military can adjust course to avoid this fate. This includes delegating authority to the lowest acceptable level, emphasizing intent over task, building trust through quantitative results, and changing the incentives for senior leaders.

Conclusion: Failure to address the breach of mission command principles will have disastrous consequences in a future operational environment where decisions will need to be delegated to the lowest level. Adjusting course in the noncombat environment will mold junior service-members into independent leaders and superior decisionmakers, ready to face an uncertain future combat environment. Noncommissioned and junior officers can be groomed to quickly identify areas where they can assert their control. These junior leaders will thrive in a culture based on trust, empowerment, and guidance by a well-defined commander's intent. The adherence to the principles of mission command within the garrison environment will ensure that these junior leaders will be ready for any future conflict.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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Preface

US military leaders are dedicated to the nation and to the subordinates they command. I have benefited greatly from every leader I have worked with and for. The intent of this paper is not to disparage leaders or the means in which they seek to accomplish a difficult task. Rather, I seek to highlight how common approaches may enable a well-functioning military on a day-to-day basis but may be setting us up for failure in the future. Techniques that have worked in the past may not work in the future. An analysis should be based not only on history but on a projected future.

I greatly appreciate the assistance that I have received from Dr. Richard DiNardo, who has both helped me through the technicalities and guided my ideas into a coherent thought. I also want to express my extreme gratitude to COL Matthew Neumeyer, who dedicated a substantial amount of time from a profoundly busy schedule to challenge and shape my ideas with the leadership wisdom he has gained during a very successful military career.

Introduction

There is ample evidence that the principles of mission command are being violated in both combat and noncombat environments. Rectifying this deficit in the noncombat environment will mold junior service-members into independent leaders and superior decisionmakers, ready to face an uncertain future combat environment. Failure to adjust course will have disastrous consequences in a future operational environment where decisions will need to be delegated to the lowest level.

Mission Command in Military Doctrine

In the early 17th century, the Prussian military introduced the concept of *Auftragstaktik*. This roughly translated to mission type tactics and emphasized accomplishing the mission instead of dictating a specific means of achieving it.¹ Acknowledging the value of this concept, the United States military has adopted principles within its doctrine. Joint Publication 3-0 (JP 3-0), Joint Operations prescribes that joint command should adhere to “command-centric leadership”. Critical to command centric leadership is exercising mission command which “enables military operations through decentralized execution based on mission-type orders”. JP 3-0 describes how mission command is made possible by aggressive and independent subordinate leaders who exercise disciplined initiative to accomplish the mission. Further, the commanders are directed to delegate decisions where possible to allow subordinates to take action based on the commander’s guidance instead of constant communication.² Congruent with joint doctrine, the individual services add additional emphasis to the principles of mission command. The Navy dictates a command relationship based on a “philosophy of mission

command involving centralized guidance, collaborative planning, and decentralized control and execution.”³ The Army has adopted mission command as their approach to command and control believing that it “empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation.”⁴ The Marine Corps directs “our approach should be based on mission command and control.” This mission command and control is based on “low-level initiative, a commonly understood commander’s intent, mutual trust, and implicit understanding and communications.”⁵ It is clear the joint force and individual services are doctrinally committed to the principles of mission command. Unfortunately, these doctrinal directives rarely translate into operational actions.

The U.S. military failure to embrace the concept of mission command and control has been well documented in the combat environment. What is less documented is the violation of mission command in noncombat environments. Since service-members spend the preponderance of their time in noncombat environments and the repercussions of mistakes tend to be far less catastrophic, it would behoove the organization to develop leaders through adherence of mission command doctrinal principles in this environment. This document will first define the problem through exploration of critical factors within the current environment. It will then define the parameters to enable a change. Finally, the document will conclude with proposed methods to enact the change necessary to build proficient junior leaders and decision-makers.

The current environment

The junior leader:

Several references define the attributes of the junior leader. Understanding these attributes allows for a greater appreciation of the psychological foundation upon which future

leaders will be built and, thus, aid in developing approaches that are conducive to the desired outcome. In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt characterize Generation Z (Gen-Z) as a generation that is more anxious, less self-reliant, and less able to negotiate challenges. This hesitance stems from largely well-meaning parents and school administrators who, in an attempt to keep children safe, sought to prevent them from experiencing stress or disappointment. Unfortunately, this prevented a development of coping mechanisms and skills to become an independent adult.⁶ A second characteristic of Generation Z is a reliance on technology. Anthony Turner describes a generation that has never known a world without the internet or online search engines. The ability to instantly obtain answers prevents deep analysis and critical thinking.⁷ Turner extrapolates that instead of linear thinking, Generation Z consumes and communicates information in a fast and disjointed manner. Thus, commanders will need to be poised to mold the Generation-Z junior leader from nascent unreliable decision-making towards an acceptable level of independence.

The senior leader:

Generational differences between the junior and senior leader exacerbate the difficulty in enacting mission command. The senior military leaders with the responsibility of shaping junior leaders are predominantly members of “Generation X”, born between 1965 and 1980. With effective and accessible contraception becoming available during the 1960s, Generation X was less numerous than either the generation before or after. This fact has led Generation X to sometimes be regarded as overlooked or neglected. Generation X was far more likely to be raised in a single-parent home than previous generations. Therefore, as children, they would often be unsupervised for several hours after school, earning Generation X the additional nomenclature of the “Latchkey Generation”.⁸ As the Generation X came of age, the labor force

also saw a greater participation of women, rising from 38 percent in 1965 to 59 percent in 1995.⁹ Generation X was raised in a more connected world where televisions could provide timely updates on seemingly unending political scandals including: Watergate, Iran Contra, and the impeachment of President Clinton. Although Generation X witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, and rapid technological growth, they also witnessed through their lifetime the slipping of US economic and military dominance. The combination of all these factors has led Generation X to be characterized as one of independence, disillusionment, and distrust.¹⁰

The character differences between the Generation X senior leaders and the Generation Z junior leaders creates an unsynchronized leadership relationship. The senior leader likely expects independent junior leaders, assuming they possess the same traits of their generation, raised with several hours of daily unsupervised time. This disconnect is confounded by the lack of trust that is inherent in Generation X. The distrust is quickly affirmed by the seeming inability of the younger generation to accomplish simple unsupervised tasks. The senior leader will likely conclude that the junior leader must be micromanaged until they can show the independence that should have been ingrained during their childhood. Unfortunately, the junior leader is likely to begrudgingly surrender to this micromanagement, equating it to the overbearing parenting of their youth while subconsciously finding comfort in the abdication of responsibility. This cycle will continue with a perplexed senior leader who will find themselves frustrated that the junior leader never assumes responsibility for their actions while continuously confirming their bias that the younger generation cannot be trusted.

The Combat Environment:

Much of the US decision cycle in the current combat environment is reliant on maintaining unfettered communication with subordinate units. If networks are degraded in future conflicts, junior leaders may not have the skills to make sound decisions in this information vacuum. Tactical units are now able to maintain connectivity via Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) on many missions. These technological advances allow for uninterrupted conversational communication with all levels of command. Small-unit actions are observed by multiple manned and unmanned aircraft and broadcast on screens throughout the chain of command. Any observed tactical concerns can quickly be relayed to the junior leader and rectified. In *Network Centric Warfare: Advantages and Disadvantages*, David Peeler and Michael Dahlstrom describe the concept of Network Centric Warfare (NCW), which provides a shared awareness of the battlefield through a web of technologically sophisticated platforms. NCW provides commanders with robust information that can help make sound decisions.¹¹ Conversely, they point out that NCW relies heavily on equipment and communication pathways that are susceptible to enemy interference.¹² One would expect that the uninterrupted and uncontested communications enjoyed by the US against a technologically inferior enemy over the past 20 years would cease against a more formidable adversary, placing the decision-making onus on an unprepared junior leader.

A second disadvantage of NCW pointed out by P.W. Singer in *Tactical Generals: Leaders, Technology, and the Perils of Battlefield Micromanagement*, is the incredible flow of information to the commander that allows strategic generals to immerse themselves in tactical decisions. The micromanagement of tactical decisions is problematic since a senior officer and staff focused on tactical problems are undoubtedly neglecting their strategic responsibilities. Additionally, the officers within the chain of command that have been superseded by the general

are not afforded an opportunity to wrestle with decisions or develop analytic skills. Through several modern examples, Singer supports the claim that the phenomenon of battlefield micromanagement is highly prevalent.¹³ The conclusion that can be drawn from the literature is that junior leaders are not afforded the opportunity to hone their decision-making skills.

The Noncombat Environment

Micromanagement and the violation of the principles of mission command are not solely observed within a combat environment. There is ample evidence that this culture has likewise permeated the noncombat environment. In *Reinvigorating the Army's Approach to Mission Command: It's Okay to Run with Scissors*, Townsend, Crissman, and McCoy argue that counter-insurgency and security force assistance missions have aided in this regression through the narrowing of the home-station training focus. As a result, the army has directed a detailed list of required training that has stifled the subordinate's opportunity to lead, learn, and earn. The authors also theorize that leaders tighten control over subordinates in an effort to align limited resources in a constrained garrison environment. They also describe the personalities of many leaders as trying to accomplish all tasks on their own, or unable to make timely decisions without perfect data.¹⁴ To confirm the prevalence of this culture, one needs only to consider the principles of mission command and contrast them with prevalent US military actions. These principles, outlined in MCDP 6, will be explored in further detail in following paragraphs. They include low-level initiative, a commonly understood commander's intent, mutual trust, and implicit understanding and communications.¹⁵

Initiative is incumbent on the ability of subordinates to make decisions at the lowest level. An example where this delegation is lacking is in garrison Commander's Critical Information Requirements (CCIRs). JP 3-0 defines CCIRs as "elements of friendly and enemy

information the commander identifies as critical to timely decision making.”¹⁶ Hence, published CCIRs offer a glimpse at what items the commander feels should be maintained at their level for decision. A cursory search of Marine Corps garrison CCIRs include “Any incidents of our Marines or Sailors doing great and heroic things—good news stories”, “family member requiring unscheduled hospitalization”, and “A call from a General or Flag Officer.”¹⁷ It is difficult to determine what decisions are derived from this information. Further, it seems unlikely that any decision derived from this information would need to be held at the rank of lieutenant colonel or above. There is a valid argument to be made as to the merits of this information being passed through the chain of command but implying this information needs to be passed as quickly as possible so the commander can make a timely decision abdicates ownership and initiative.

A second problem inherent in inconsequential CCIRs is that they may indicate or foster a culture of distrust. In, *Micromanagement can Cripple a Command*, Dominic Caraccilo describes the prevalence of a command-climate that has cultivated senior commanders with an insatiable appetite for information. This excess information, not tied to a decision, may lead the senior commander to believe that they have better situational awareness and therefore focus on building an uninterrupted information flow instead of trust with the subordinate. This lack of trust stifles creativity and creates a risk averse environment.¹⁸

The mission command principle of intent is meant to foster ownership of the problem and promotes initiative, but is routinely violated in the garrison environment. One example is the training approach for service-members. The prevalence of MarineNet courses to accomplish annual training is a key component of this training approach. Marines are directed to complete the annual requirements online by the end of the fiscal and calendar year. One could surmise that the intent of these classes is to maximize the health and knowledge of the service-members.

Unfortunately, the intent is often interpreted as achieving a maximum completion percentage. To highlight this in the extreme case, consider the possibility of an avid tobacco-using commander directing a subordinate who has never used tobacco to complete the annual online tobacco cessation class. The logical interpretation from the subordinate is that the commander is far more concerned with the completion of the MarineNet course than with the actual termination of tobacco use. There may or may not be a secondary benefit of reducing tobacco use, but it is unlikely. If individual service-members are not vested in the intent, online training offers a temptation and a means to simply “click through” the courses as quickly as possible.¹⁹ More importantly, these courses can infer that the health, welfare, and education of service-member is not the responsibility of the individual or their direct supervisor but rather belongs to the nebulous “big Marine Corps”. It would be far better for the commander to pass a clear intent with a definitive vision that puts the onus on the individual service-members and junior leaders to devise appropriate training to accomplish the original intent of the specific training requirement.

Trust is paramount in a chaotic environment. Building trust requires a commander to assume a significant amount of risk that could not only be disastrous to their career but could also significantly impact the wellbeing of their subordinates. Along these lines, it is advantageous to build trust in a noncombat environment where outcomes can be closely monitored. The noncombat environment also allows the commander to recognize an untrustworthy subordinate before entering a combat environment that could have repercussions on national security, mission accomplishment, or the lives of service-members. Unfortunately, there are many examples in which the appearance of trust is missing within the non-combat environment. One such example is the prevalence of Holiday Accident Reduction Program

(HARP) forms. These forms are required to be filled out by all enlisted Marines who have not reached the rank of Staff Sergeant before embarking on an extended holiday period. The non-commissioned officer (NCO) is considered the “backbone of the armed forces” and has “the sacred trust of the American People”.²⁰ Yet, the mandatory vehicle inspections demonstrate that this group is not trusted to have a vehicle in good working order prior to a holiday period. Similarly, if an NCO proves that they are incapable of achieving this rudimentary standard, the command can ensure that this NCO has limited influence on more complex and consequential decisions.

Implicit understanding and communication are built upon repeated practice. The more a subordinate is given the opportunity to make a decision, the more a superior will be able to understand and mentor the decisions that are made. Additionally, the mentorship provided by the superior helps the junior leader hone their decisions to coincide with the objective. Unfortunately, decisions are kept at the higher levels and junior leaders miss opportunities to build these skills. Subordinates are also driven to provide the totality of raw information up through the chain of command that will undoubtedly result in additional requests for superfluous information. Excess reporting prevents subordinates from honing their skills so as to provide succinct information in a degraded communication environment. It can also foster a culture that favors the desired answer over the honest answer. In the article, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*, Leonard Wong and Stephan Gerras provided evidence that commands saturate subordinates with more tasks than can reasonably be accomplished. In the study conducted by the U.S. Army War College in 2002, the hours necessary for a company commander to conduct the directed training added up to 297 training days. Unfortunately, the report found that company commanders only had 256 training days available per year.²¹ Even

more concerning was the fact that there was no widespread reporting within the Army that indicated that any unit was not fulfilling the mandatory training requirements. The authors argue that this reality nudges leaders down the slippery slope of dishonesty, breeding a culture that is counter to the intended values of the military.²² This example proves the importance of clearly articulated communication, but more importantly, it highlights the necessity for junior leaders to be able to provide their commander with honest reports without suffering unwarranted negative consequences.

The appropriate rank of a decision-maker

Accepting that mission command dictates that a greater level of autonomy should be delegated to subordinate leaders, it is necessary to determine the appropriate rank of a decision maker, the scope of autonomy to be delegated, and the means required to foster the desired characteristics of a junior leader. The modern technologically advanced information environment allows a near limitless means for senior leaders to make decisions at all levels. There are some undeniable advantages to this. One could reasonably argue that proficiency of decision making would be proportional to the rank one had achieved. There is an expectation that a general officer would be better at making decisions for myriad reasons including: age, experience, and overall comprehension of the military mechanisms. Thus, an argument could be made that if warfare continued along its current trajectory in perpetuity, the US military should continue to leverage technological advances to push decisions to those that have the highest probability of making the best decisions.

This logic is flawed in many ways. First among them is the dangerous assumption that the US will always enjoy its near total dominance of the battlefield in future wars. Without dominance of the battlefield, deferring decisions to high-ranking officers becomes difficult for

two reasons. First, passing the quantity of data necessary to facilitate decision-making exposes the network to jamming, signature location, and interception. Second, reducing the reliance on long-range communication by aggregating units increases visual detection and targeting by enemy forces. Maintaining aggregated forces has the additional detraction of reducing the totality of offensive operations. Thus, projecting the size and autonomy of units in future wars will inform what level decisions should be delegated. It is within these constraints that a modified Salvo Combat Model can offer some insight. The Salvo Model is a method that was developed in 1995, that expresses indirect-fire combat in a mathematical equation.²³ Consider A is the total number of geographically separated US units, B is the number of adversary ordnance that could affect US forces, a_3 is the amount of ordnance the US can intercept, a_1 is the number of hits that put one US unit out of action, and σ_B is the capability for an adversary to find a US unit. The degradation to the total number of US forces could be expressed as:

$$\Delta A = \frac{(\sigma_B B - a_3 A)}{a_1}$$

One could then calculate the amount of ordnance needed to fully degrade every deployed US unit:

$$B = \frac{A(a_1 + a_3)}{\sigma_B}$$

Thus, the number of units is directly proportional to the amount of ordnance the adversary would need to expend. Moreover, one can assume that smaller units would also be more difficult to locate, lowering the value of σ_B . Applying this model to the US Marine Corps, one could test the validity of an infantry battalion as the smallest autonomous unit. The United States military has a

limited number of infantry battalions and thus the command-and-control nodes of each deployed battalion would provide a robust signature and an enticing target to the enemy.

Currently, the Marine Corps has 32 active and reserve infantry battalions. If one makes the audacious assumption that every battalion would deploy and the adversary would be willing to expend up to 500 pieces of ordnance, these battalions would need to be able to absorb or intercept up to 16 pieces of ordnance. Conversely if the lowest autonomous unit was a company, platoon, or squad, the number could be reduced to under five, two, and one respectively. Within this model, survival and mission accomplishment are maximized by enabling the autonomy of the squad. Since an infantry squad is typically led by a junior noncommissioned officer and a platoon by a second lieutenant, the military should maximize autonomy and decision-making proficiency at this level. Empowering the most junior officers, both commissioned and non-commissioned, maximizes the probability of success in future conflicts against a near-peer adversary.

Scope of autonomy

Having identified that the appropriate level of decision-making autonomy resides within the noncommission and junior officer corps, the focus shifts to determining what scope of autonomy should be granted at each level of command. Multiple factors determine how capable a subordinate is to assume responsibility. Thus, an agreement should be reached between the superior and the subordinate that favors delegation of authority while balancing the risk of catastrophic failure. In, *My Way or the Highway the Micromanagement Survival Guide*, Harry Chambers offers a means to help formalize the process through the acronym CUP.²⁴ The ability of the subordinate to make decisions are categorized in terms of having complete Control, Uncontrollable, and Partial control.²⁵ The subordinate and superior should draft a list of

decisions and apply the appropriate label to each, striving to maximize the number of “complete control” and reduce the number of “uncontrollable”. The subordinate and commander should also analyze the items which fall within the “uncontrollable” or “partially controllable” category and determine if there are actions that can be taken to shift these items towards the “complete control” category.

A second, related, indicator of the level of autonomy granted a subordinate is evident within the types of CCIRs that a commander deems necessary for reporting. Since CCIRs are a direct reflection on what decisions the commander deems the subordinate unqualified to render, the list should be heavily scrutinized. Commanders should carefully analyze the reason why each decision needs to reside at their level and determine if mitigating steps could be taken to build confidence in junior leadership authority.

Desired characteristics of a junior leader

Having determined the level and scope of autonomy that the military should strive for, the next factor to consider is the desired characteristics of an enabled junior leader. It is in this realm that MCDP-1 offers some insight, seeking “harmonious initiative and lateral coordination” within subordinate leaders.²⁶ If initiative is a preeminent trait, utility arises from determining mechanisms that may hinder or foster such a trait. One such mechanism is learned helplessness, a behavior that emerges when subjects are exposed to adverse stimuli beyond their control. Emerging in 1967, this theory asserts that subjects exposed to adverse stimuli would eventually succumb to the belief that they had no control of the situation even when options to escape the adverse environment were clearly presented. In a series of experiments, dogs were divided into three groups. Group one was placed in a harness for a period of time. Group two was placed in a harness and administered an electric shock at random intervals in which they had no means to

escape. Group three was placed in a harness and administered an electric shock but were able to escape by pressing a button. After several trials, the dogs were individually placed in a box that was divided by a short partition. The floor on one side of this box could administer an electric shock but the dogs could escape by jumping over the partition. The dogs from group one and group three quickly jumped over the partition while the dogs from group two simply laid on the floor and began whimpering.²⁷

This experiment was effectively repeated with rodents but the scientists also observed a wide range of behavioral changes within group that could not escape the shock, including; reduced aggression, reduced social dominance, slowed fear extinction, and neophobia. A version of this experiment was then conducted with human subjects, utilizing a loud noise instead of an electric shock.²⁸ The results were again congruent with the other animals with several additional behavioral changes noticed, to include indecisiveness and poor concentration.²⁹ The biological neuroscience of learned helplessness continued to be explored, resulting in the discovery that the original hypothesis was backwards.³⁰ In reality, passivity in response to adverse stimuli is the default, unlearned response.³¹ This passivity can be overcome by learning that one has control of adverse situations.³² Thus, with every decision that is withheld from a junior leader, they are denied the opportunity to explore their control over adverse situations, reinforcing their passivity in future events. Coupled with the aforementioned behavioral changes, these are far from the traits that the Marine Corps seeks in its initiative-based junior leaders. To build the type of warriors that will be successful on the future battlefield, junior leaders must learn that they have control and responsibility of their actions. This can be accomplished through multiple repetitions, where junior leader is mentored through decision-making. Additionally, every effort should be taken to explain the reasoning behind tasks that the junior leader won't be granted control over.

Methods for developing leaders

With a firm understanding of desired characteristics of future leaders, it is useful to now explore particular methods to achieve these traits. The military has long preached the tenets conducive to initiative-based leadership. These tenets are most succinctly addressed through the process of mission command. Prussian-German tacticians developed a concept of *Auftragstaktik* during the 19th century to empower junior leaders to exercise initiative.³³ It is this concept, translated as mission-type tactics, that would later be adopted by the US military as mission command that held that leaders were “duty bound to do whatever the situation required, as he personally saw it.”³⁴ This concept has continued to permeate throughout the military and not only are the principles of mission command critical in the “information age” but they will be the relevant standard in any “modern, democratic, army”.³⁵ Additional emphasis was added in the mission command white paper written by GEN (ret.) Martin Dempsey, USA, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in which he stated “smaller and lighter forces operate in geographically dispersed joint operations areas, the ability to conduct effective decentralized and distributed operations will be essential.”³⁶ In *Applying Mission Command to Overcome Challenges*, McBride and Snell use the experience of a retrograding material from Afghanistan to highlight key mission command principles from doctrine.³⁷ These principles were: build cohesive teams through mutual trust, create shared understanding, provide a clear commander’s intent, exercise disciplined initiative, use mission orders, and accept prudent risk.³⁸ It is these principles that serve as the scaffolding for building future leaders and drive the following recommended methods: bestow ownership of decisions at the lowest acceptable level, emphasize intent over tasks, and build trust through quantitative results.

Bestow ownership of decisions at the lowest acceptable level

Having already discussed the advantages and the means for local commanders to delegate more authority to their subordinates through the “CUP” methodology, a similar approach, on a grand scale, should be taken within the entirety of the Department of Defense. Services should scrutinize which authorities and decisions need to remain at the highest levels and which ones could be delegated. They should also reward commanders who further delegate authorities with prudent risk. Main areas in which the services should focus their efforts include: training, personal welfare, and discipline. If the service believes the junior leader is capable of employing their subordinates in a combat environment, the junior leader should have the confidence of the service to properly train them to standard for the deployment. Ensuring the welfare of subordinates should be sacrosanct to junior leaders and every opportunity should be bestowed upon them to exercise this responsibility.

Finally, enforcing the discipline within a unit is aided by the total acceptance of responsibility for the outcomes of the action. Delegation of this authority will inevitably involve the immediate risk of a subordinates making poor decisions. These failures could be perceived as a systemic failure, versus an acceptance of prudent risk. The services should not succumb to this risk aversion for two reasons. First, the avoidance of assuming this risk now denies the junior leader the opportunity to be mentored through “small mistakes”, increasing the likelihood that they will make catastrophic mistakes as they ascend through the ranks. In a similar manner, shielding subordinates from the responsibility of making decisions prevents the discovery of junior leaders who do not share the ethos or the character that the nation demands of military leaders. Second, withholding authority from the junior leader, subconsciously absolves that leader of responsibility for the consequences of the action. This lack of ownership has the potential to manifest the same traits that were observed in the learned helplessness trials.³⁹ Not

only does delegating authority to the lowest level foster a sense of ownership within the entirety of the organization, it also eliminates the time-consuming extra steps withing the approval process.⁴⁰ Thus, delegating authority to the lowest level of command that is capable of handling the responsibility is likely to have the greatest impact on the readiness and adaptability of the service.

Another aspect of bestowing decision-making authority to junior leaders involves training and mentoring subordinates. Command and control “require both the *art* of command and the *science* of control”. Cultivating a culture that fosters mission command takes time, training, and effort. Every opportunity, in both garrison or in the field, should be taken to apply the principles of mission command.⁴¹ Commanders should take the opportunity to break the perception of an uncontrollable environment by highlighting items that can be controlled by the subordinate.⁴² Within these opportunities, commanders should introduce enough ambiguity to allow junior leaders to make and ultimately learn from their choices. Commanders should also bring many of these options to the edge of failure in order to develop subordinates comfortable with risk assessment.⁴³ When mentoring subordinates, commanders should seek to discover the reasoning behind the decision. Language should be adjusted so that instead of asking binary yes or no questions, leaders ask questions that begin with “how” or “what”.⁴⁴ This will allow the commander to glimpse into the underlining motives and, when necessary, adjust the manner in which decisions are made rather than defaulting to a “right” or “wrong” answer. These recommendations, taken together, will do much to increase the readiness of the junior leader for future conflicts.

Emphasize intent over tasks

A second method to developing junior leaders towards autonomous decision-making in future conflicts is emphasizing the desired outcome over constrictive tasks. Providing detailed tasks to subordinates allows the commander a high level of control but does little to develop a junior leader and much to stifle initiative. Conversely, providing a clearly articulated goal allows the subordinate to creatively develop a solution while simultaneously taking ownership of the outcome. In *Reinvigorating the Army's Approach to Mission Command: It's Okay to Run with Scissors*, Townsend, Crissman, and McCoy direct that orders should be clear and simple enough to be executed without continuous communication.⁴⁵ In “*Mission Command in the Modern Army Garrison*”, Kristofer Fosmoe seeks to incorporate these principles in a garrison environment; focusing predominantly on creating a culture of trust while creating shared understanding of the problem instead of prescribing check-list solutions and encouraging disciplined initiative to meet the commander’s intent. He suggests that orders and directives should provide commanders authority to change behavior, rather than directing what they must do in every situation.⁴⁶

In the nascent stage of the command relationship, the commander should routinely inquire how the subordinate plans on achieving the goal and mentor the junior leader on the validity of their plan. To add clarity, the following is one example of how this might look. Instead of tasking a subordinate to complete a vehicle inspection sheet prior to a holiday period, the commander could emphasize their goal that every service-member returns safely and inquire as to how the subordinate intends to make this happen. The subordinate may choose to utilize the vehicle inspection list, but they may also derive a completely novel way of approaching the problem that still achieves the desired goal. This concept was highlighted in *Turn the Ship Around* where Marquet describes the manner in which orders were executed while he was in command. Instead of a commander orchestrating every movement, the subordinate declared what

action they intended so that the commander could reject or approve said actions based on how they coincided with his intent.⁴⁷ This technique provides a feed-back loop to test how well the commander is communicating and how well the subordinates are receiving the intent. Intent-based guidance allows the commander an incredible opportunity to observe how junior leaders approach problems. It also increases the likelihood that novel, effective, and efficient solutions will arise from the plurality of subordinate solutions.

Build mutual trust through quantitative results:

The level of mission command within units is hypothetically based on individual assessments of subordinate units. Under the pretence of command and control, command tends to be favored for units with a high level of proficiency and trust, while control tends to be favored in units without these attributes.⁴⁸ In *The Speed of Trust*, Covey and Merrill define the key components of trust (integrity, intent, capability, and result) and offer some behaviors to help build trust within an organization. They explain that as trust increases within an organization, so does speed, while cost proportionally decreases. This optimization within an organization can be accomplished through thirteen behaviors: talk straight, demonstrate respect, create transparency, right wrongs, show loyalty, deliver results, get better, confront reality, clarify expectations, practice accountability, listen first, keep commitments, and extend trust.⁴⁹ This insight provides direction and guideposts for commanders to enable a military culture that fosters trust. One could argue that the crux of a commander's hesitancy to delegate authority stems from a lack of trust that subordinates have the skills to make proper decisions. This prophecy is a self-fulfilling because a subordinate who is never granted the opportunity to make decisions will be unable to prove that they have the capability to make sound decisions. Thus, to build trust within an organization, commanders must first assume the risk of granting trust to an untested subordinate.

It would be unwise to grant the totality of authority without systematically building and confirming the trustworthiness through informed milestones that confirm the decision-making proficiency of the subordinate.

To be truly useful, these milestones would need to reflect the efficacy of the decision instead of the accomplishment of a given task. This idea coincides directly with subordinates focusing efforts on achieving the commander's intent. The US military has provided a means in which to categorize milestones that will prove useful in applying the right measures to confirm proficiency. Measures of Performance (MOP) are "indicators used to assess friendly (i.e., multinational) actions tied to measuring task accomplishment." Measures of Effectiveness (MOE), on the other hand, are "indicators used to help measure a current system state, with change indicated by comparing multiple observations over time to gauge the achievement of objectives and attainment of end states."⁵⁰ Therefore, the performance of a subordinate should be gauged on the ability to accomplish MOEs and not on MOPs.

Unfortunately, this is not necessarily the standard within the military. To highlight this point, consider the previous example of completing a vehicle inspection sheet. The junior leader is evaluated on the percentage of accurately completed inspection sheets, not on the percentage of subordinates that safely returned from a holiday leave period. This is not an argument on the efficacy of vehicle inspection sheets, but rather a statement on how the quality of the junior leader could be evaluated. Within this scenario, a junior leader tasked with maximizing safe returns of subordinates may still choose to utilize vehicle inspection sheets to meet the commander's intent. Conversely, the junior leader could opt for an alternative option that still achieves the goal of maximizing the safe return of subordinates. The true metric would be the safe and timely return of subordinates after the holiday period. The most important aspect is that

the junior leader has been afforded the opportunity to maximize repetitions of owning a decision with quantifiable metrics to evaluate how well those decisions unfolded within a given scenario. An additional factor to consider when employing MOEs is to ensure that they are developed to accurately reflect the desired outcome. Using an MOE that does not coincide with the desired outcome is futile at best and damaging at worst. Therefore, commanders should seek guidance and work directly with subordinates to help develop individual MOEs. An organization that maximizes MOEs while minimizing a reliance on MOPs has the greatest chance of achieving success while simultaneously developing independent leaders.

Forcing the change through senior leaders

In a 1997 Marine Corps Gazette essay, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Charles Krulak, outlined the damaging effect of a “zero defect mentality”. In the essay, he described how a culture that embraces this mentality drives subordinates to refrain from taking action since omission is less risky than taking an action that may result in failure.⁵¹ Unfortunately, the warnings do not seem to have been heeded. Instead, this mentality appears to have only grown. Military doctrine may prescribe the tenets of mission command but promotion and command boards run counter to this narrative by punishing those who take risks that lead to failure. This system does not mean that only risk-averse commanders will be promoted, but adopting a risk-averse command philosophy will likely increase the probability of promotion. Therefore, there is a valid argument that adopting many of the recommendations within this document run counter to career self-preservation, highlighting the need for the US military to make bold adjustments to reward initiative within senior-leaders. First, the services should level the playing field by favoring commanders that take calculated risks and penalizing those that do not. Routine reporting provided by the commander on areas in which they are

taking calculated risk would offer a glimpse at their mindset and allow mentorship to foster increased initiative. Similarly, command climate surveys should be phrased and scrutinized for indications of micromanagement of junior leaders. Second, the services should eliminate the perception of the zero-defect mentality in all areas except morality, ethics, and character. It should be expected that commanders will make mistakes but these mistakes made under a strong mentor should serve as a learning experience and not a career ending event. If senior leaders are encouraged to take well-calculated risks, they will likely encourage the same of their subordinates. This will immediately improve the success of the unit and will create stronger leaders poised for future conflicts.

Conclusion

As adversaries continue to increase their capabilities, the US may find itself involved in a form of warfare that is vastly different from the conflicts of the past twenty years. Advanced enemy weapons such as precision-guided ballistic missiles, surveillance platforms, and electronic warfare platforms will compel the US to adapt to an unfamiliar battlefield, one in which the tactics and technology that have enabled unprecedented success no longer reign supreme. Although the character of war may change, the nature will not. For the US military to survive and thrive in this chaotic environment, junior leaders must be capable of seizing the initiative through well-disciplined independent decisions. In this way, mission command must be recognized as a part of the US nature of war, not a fleeting characteristic. Unfortunately, the current environment where junior leaders spend most of their time, the non-combat environment, does little to promote these traits. Fortunately, this can be rectified with a dedicated effort. Noncommissioned and junior officers can be groomed to quickly identify areas where they can assert their control. These junior leaders will thrive in a culture based on trust, empowerment,

and guidance by a well-defined commander's intent. The adherence to the principles of mission command within the garrison environment will ensure that these junior leaders will be ready for any future conflict.

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