



## Hiding Behind Mission Command: How the Fear of Micromanagement Prevents Leader Involvement in Detailed Planning

by CPT Brian J. Harris

After painstaking inspection of the map, checking contour lines, the location of urban areas and analysis of the road network most likely used by military forces, the student takes his red map marker and draws a small, red triangle, denoting the location he anticipates that the enemy will establish an observation post to watch for approaching U.S. forces. Through some level of internal analysis, he has established criteria by which to evaluate the terrain. He assesses the enemy's capabilities and applies his own level of combat experience, determining that this hilltop, more so than any other within the general vicinity, is the best location to observe the valley. He stakes his professional reputation on it.

Hours later, after completing his analysis and developing his tactical plan, and drafting an overall concept of the operation and supporting scheme-of-maneuver graphics, he briefs the instructor on everything he knows, thinks he knows and how he plans to accomplish his mission. He briefs the enemy courses of action, depicting how he sees the enemy fighting in the current scenario, demonstrating understanding of terrain and threat capabilities and their relationship with one another.

Finally, he produces his scheme-of-maneuver graphics. The instructor sits forward, anxious to see how the student plans to tackle the problem he has defined through hours of analysis and consideration. The disappointment is immediate. The graphics are sparse, the timeline useless and no effort,

none whatsoever, has been made to make deliberate contact with the small red triangle.

When the instructor asks the student, "Why don't you have a counter recon plan to engage the enemy observation post you assessed on that hilltop?" the answer is one the instructor has heard so many times before: "I'm not going to tell my platoon leaders how to do their job. I want to give them maximum freedom of maneuver."

### What is mission command?

Army Doctrine Publication 6-0 defines *mission command* 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 adaptable in the conduct of unified land operation."<sup>1</sup> The part about mission orders seems to be the point lost upon many officers and noncommissioned officers leading at the company and lower field-grade level. There are six principles to mission command, with mission orders being one of them. The ADP goes on to define mission orders, which we will break down and discuss.

Mission orders provide "direction and guidance that focus forces' activities on the achievement of the main objective, set priorities, allocate resources and influence the situation."<sup>2</sup>

In short: task and purpose; directly telling subordinates what you want done and why it is important is critical to ensuring mission completion. Without planning missions beyond the cursory task-and-purpose level, a commander cannot effectively allocate resources or set priorities. He cannot *know* what is achievable by his subordinates or what they require if he has not explored the mission orders in detail.

“Mission orders seek to maximize individual initiative while relying on lateral coordination between units and vertical coordination up and down the chain of command.”<sup>33</sup> This means commanders must plan in detail, for only they can ensure achievement of the aforementioned lateral and vertical coordination. A commander cannot simply give a once-over of the mission to his platoon leaders, lock them in a room and expect them to work out the plan together. This is the commander’s responsibility, and his knowledge and experience is crucial.

“The mission orders technique does not mean commanders do not supervise subordinates in execution. However, they do not micromanage.”<sup>34</sup> Commanders must be involved in operating and managing the various assets, as well as providing much-needed guidance to subordinate leaders who may not possess the same level of knowledge, experience and perspective. Many challenge this concept, decrying *any* guidance beyond simple task and purpose, left and right limits, as micromanagement, stating that leaders on the ground should make the decisions.

Let us explore an example: The commander assigns an eight-digit grid coordinate for a subordinate to establish an OP, as well as a named area of interest to observe. I have personally heard leaders state that all they need is the NAI; they can decide where the OP is. While in some situations this is absolutely true, we must remember that the commander has other issues besides one OP location; he must consider the multitude of other OPs, the position of his mortars, the synchronization of supporting manned and unmanned air assets, attached logistical units ... the list goes on. He gives this directed guidance of OP location because it allows him to better emplace and coordinate those forementioned assets.

The leader assigned the OP location still possesses freedom of maneuver. When he arrives at the assigned grid, knowing what his commander’s intent is (observation of the NAI), he can now determine whether the OP location is sufficient or if other nearby positions are better suited. He has the freedom of maneuver to adjust and notify his commander of the shift. *This* is mission command — the balance of detailed guidance from command and subordinate flexibility during execution.

## How is it perceived?

The above-mentioned concern about micromanagement, coupled with the detached, small-unit nature of a decade of counterinsurgency operations, has given rise to a generation of leaders who believe that mission command is simply giving an endstate to subordinates and then allowing them “maximum flexibility” to achieve those ends. While in theory this seems attractive to leaders who desire autonomy in how they lead their formations, it also contains various pitfalls that jeopardize that endstate and risk crushing defeat. After all, how can subordinates be expected to manage the various supporting assets that do not fall under their operational control? A platoon leader cannot possibly resupply his platoon without the company supply trains, or cannot employ much-needed fire support from mortars that aren’t within firing range of his operations.

The knee-jerk solution to the preceding problem simply exacerbates it into a larger issue. Instead of recognizing the critical need for commanders to craft detailed, synchronized plans and get involved in the execution, leaders simply “slice out” elements to their subordinate leaders, thereby providing a quick and easy solution to their problems. Now, however, we have given a second lieutenant, straight out of the Armor Basic Officer Leaders Course — who is challenged enough maneuvering his scout platoon of three Bradleys and five humvees — a fuel truck and a section of mortars to integrate into his platoon operations. When did he learn how to do this? Can a commander truly push so much responsibility down to his subordinates? This fear of micromanagement results in failure to plan, prepare, resource and, ultimately, take responsibility for combat operations.

## Mission command in practice: beyond talking points

While mission command may seem abstract, merely a state of mind or a concept, it has very real, tangible outcomes that, when applied to planning, result in greater synchronization of combat power and supporting assets as well as clearer goals for subordinates to achieve.

**Timelines.** Understanding time is critical when planning above the platoon level. This is due to the introduction of so many other enablers that simply do not reside at the platoon level. Without proper understanding of time, commanders cannot hope to synchronize air assets to support operations, relying simply on hope that air will be available. While this is many times true in the current COIN environment, the dangers of over-reliance on what worked in COIN cannot be overexaggerated. In times of limited asset availability, those who have detailed understanding of their operational timeline will stand a better chance of gaining access to critical supporting assets by anticipating that need and requesting it early.

As an example, a commander who plans his operation in detail and understands that he will reach a set phase line, where he expects to make enemy contact, by 8 a.m. can request air support at this critical moment prior to crossing the line of departure. The commander who simply plans to cross LD when ordered and only knows when his higher expects the mission to be completed by cannot hope to request air support to be in position when he anticipates needing it. The net result is a commander who will spend much of his time reacting to the enemy, requesting emergency support and hoping for the best while his men buy time with their lives.

**Task and purpose.** As stated previously, understanding *what* and *why* the commander wants a task done is crucial, if for no other reason than a Soldier is much more willing to accept personal risk when he understands exactly what his leader wants and why it is so important. Simply ordering a platoon to conduct a zone reconnaissance lacks focus and results in a platoon spending hours moving around the battlefield collecting useless information.

Assigning NAI, times and what you are looking for in those locations allows two things: subordinate leaders know when they have achieved their mission, and they have a better understanding of how to develop their own timeline and set their own priorities (another important aspect of mission command mentioned earlier).

Task and purpose, when coupled with a timeline, allows subordinates to better understand the commander’s intent,

visualize how he expects the battle to unfold and assures him that the proper resources have been allocated to help achieve mission accomplishment.

## Initiative

We return now to our student, blissfully allowing his subordinates maximum freedom of maneuver in the face of an enemy — ultimately handing that enemy the initiative. By not planning how to make contact with the enemy, the commander has ensured one thing: the subordinate unit will make contact on the enemy's terms. The enemy commander will decide how the engagement commences, leaving the subordinate with the only option of reacting and hoping to achieve overmatch by calling for unplanned support.

This problem all starts with mission analysis. While the student did assess the enemy on that hilltop, he is not confident in that assessment. What if he is wrong? I cannot say how many times I have heard that excuse, a valid concern but dangerously destructive to combat leaders. After having trained more than 180 students in the Cavalry Leaders Course at the U.S. Army Armor School, I cannot recall how many times that same hilltop has had that same red triangle drawn on it. Why is that? How could so many students, separated by time and geography, come to the same conclusion repeatedly? The answer is analysis, conducted through the lens of tactical knowledge and experience.

Experienced combat leaders *do* have the ability to make calculated, educated assessments of where the enemy will fight. Leaders must accept this and then act upon it, planning around that assessment and thereby allowing them to make contact on their own terms. By assessing that enemy OP on a hilltop, and then assessing his own maneuver timeline and tasks, the commander can leverage his assets effectively on the enemy at a time of his choosing, enabling his subordinates maximum effectiveness and ultimately, flexibility on the objective.

This desire to fight through battle drills is dangerous and saps our confidence in planning and our belief in its effectiveness. Battle drills are not plans. They are, however, the answer to the above question about being wrong in analysis. Should the student plan to attack the enemy OP on the hill, only to find the enemy is on the next hill over, then he uses battle drills to regain the initiative and complete his mission. Battle drills are a tool of survivability, a method by which units react efficiently to unexpected enemy actions and turn the tide of battle quickly; they are not a substitute for operational planning.

## Conclusion

There are many reasons why planning skills at the company/troop level decline. Key among them is fatigue. Conducting the same patrols in the same area of operation every day in a COIN environment eventually results in atrophy and the aforementioned over-reliance in battle drills. While this is understandable, and I personally can attest to my own failure in this regard, emphasis must be placed in correcting this

degraded leadership skill. Leaders must strive to do better than give vague guidance to subordinates and rely on reactive measures to support them while in contact.

Acknowledging that detailed planning both allows for better execution and admitting that it isn't micromanagement is critical as our Army returns to its roots and relearns how to fight against a peer/near-peer adversary. There are absolutely times when giving a subordinate leader a task and purpose, with little additional guidance, is acceptable. Leaders must realize, however, that giving directive guidance, especially at critical moments and friction points in an operation, is more than just micromanagement. Providing specific guidance not only assures subordinates that their leaders have thought through the mission requirements, but also serves as professional development to junior leaders. A company commander is, in essence, training his platoon leaders when he demonstrates how to solve a tactical problem. Lack of mentorship takes its toll on the professional development of young leaders rising through the ranks, who then continue the cycle with the following generation.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Army Doctrine Publication 6.0, *Mission Command*, May 17, 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6.0, *Mission Command*, May 17, 2012.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

**ADP** — Army doctrine publication  
**CLC** — Cavalry Leaders Course  
**COIN** — counterinsurgency  
**LD** — line of departure  
**NAI** — named area of interest  
**OP** — observation post