

# From One Commander to the Next

MAJ DANA M. GINGRICH

Company command is the last role in which officers directly influence the development of every Soldier in their organization. Command is an opportunity to both lead from the front and empower subordinates to prepare an organization for the rigors of combat. Company command is an opportunity to develop the next generation of Army leaders.

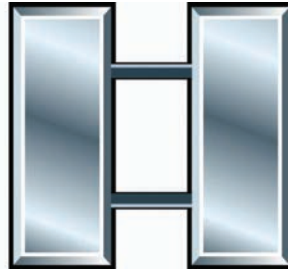
The company commander makes hundreds of decisions that affect the organization's trajectory. This article focuses on three critical functions that only the commander can perform to align the organization on that trajectory. The company commander must create and communicate the vision, build the culture, and model the culture through personal example. The ultimate goal is to achieve **unity of effort** — the complementary effects of multiple platoons, sections, and squads aligned on a common purpose. Organizations, however, do not typically adopt big ideas without leader energy and member support.

To achieve mass adoption, the commander first socializes the ideas to gain individual buy-in. The ideas then gain momentum as influential NCOs and junior leaders support them, forming the guiding coalition. When the support from influential leaders reaches critical mass, the organization fully adopts the ideas. The commander leads the organization through this process by creating the vision, building the culture, and consistently living the culture.

## Create the Vision

The commander creates a vision to align the organization. Beginning at the lowest level, every individual within the organization must understand the broad vision in order to prioritize time and effort effectively. The company's priorities will become evident because those areas are where the command team will apply the company's limited resources such as people, time, training, ammunition, and inspections.

*My experience: The vision we communicated routinely was "Excellence on All Fronts." I believed that to be a great company, we could not just be the "live-fire company" or the "physical training (PT) company," we had to demonstrate excellence on all fronts. This translated to the company putting as much energy behind developing complex squad live fires as creating inclusive, engaging family events. My first sergeant (1SG) and*



*I established four pillars that were similar to the Ranger Regiment Big 4:*

- 1. Leader Development (counseling, eight-step training model, candid feedback)*
- 2. Small Unit Drills (battle drills, integration of fires, doctrinal knowledge, medical proficiency)*
- 3. Physical Toughness (combat-focused PT, squad competitions, 20-mile road march)*
- 4. Administrative Excellence (family readiness group [FRG], evaluations, awards)*

When communicating the vision, a commander's first thoughts turn to the company as the audience. To lead beyond one's organization, however, the commander must communicate to the higher headquarters just as much as to the company. The first person with whom to share the vision is the battalion commander; this will provide an opportunity to ensure alignment with the battalion and brigade vision and to receive the battalion commander's feedback and support. Failure to communicate one's vision externally will result in friction at every major decision point. Once the battalion commander supports the vision, the conditions are set to share the vision internally.

This internal communication requires individual support before the organization will fully adopt the idea. The company commander must meet with the 1SG to fully explain the vision and receive feedback in a collaborative environment. This conversation results in the first step towards unity of effort by creating shared understanding between the two. Together, the company leadership communicates the vision's purpose to the platoon leaders/platoon sergeants, who then reinforce the vision within the organization.

The commander must include both officers and NCOs in developing and communicating the vision. The 1SG and platoon sergeants are normally the most influential leaders to permeate ideas within the company. Once platoon sergeants believe in the vision, they reinforce it by providing purpose and direction to small unit leaders within the company. Creating a common understanding allows the platoon sergeants to exercise disciplined initiative within their platoons. Gaining the 1SG's and platoon sergeants' support completes the next step towards achieving unity of effort.

Once the commander aligns the platoon and company

leadership, it is now time to communicate the vision to the entire company. Communicating across the whole organization characterizes one of the major challenges when progressing from platoon to company leadership. The platoon leader interacts with the platoon at multiple formations each day; this provides opportunities to communicate clearly and often. A company commander relies on multiple levels of leadership to communicate messages down to the individual. The 1SG's and platoon sergeants' alignment with the vision streamlines that communication. Finally, once the commander communicates the vision, focus can be shifted to achieving the vision.

Avoid pushing the responsibility of resource gathering to the company executive officer (XO) even though this is who secures and coordinates the short-term resources to support training events. Only the company commander can secure the resources required to support a company vision. The long-range training calendar (LRTC) is the instrument to acquire resources. Battalion assistant operations officers (AS3s) must balance supporting the companies with fulfilling the battalion commander's intent — reemphasizing the importance of communicating to the battalion commander. Following the battalion commander's approval, the company commander communicates this alignment with the battalion to the AS3. The AS3 becomes the company's advocate in the LRTC planning meetings. The most effective commanders develop multiple courses of action (COAs), gather battalion AS3/S3 support for the long-term vision, and parallel plan until LRTC publication.

*The LRTC was the most important tool I used to achieve our company vision. The LRTC provided a visual overlay of all the events supporting our four pillars. It confirmed or*

*denied our balance of priorities and our integration with higher headquarters. The LRTC also aligned the platoon and company leadership on a common vision that they used to communicate intent to their subordinate organizations. Lastly, it allowed me to delegate planning and resourcing responsibility to platoon leaders with adequate time and predictability.*

*We did our best to make LRTC development a collaborative process among the company leadership. Although I viewed the LRTC as one of my primary responsibilities, the platoon leaders/platoon sergeants focused on the daily to six-week synchronization and execution. We were aligned on the vision for the company, and they trusted that I would think deep enough to align training with that vision. After I developed multiple COAs, I would brief my 1SG and XO to gather feedback and to adjust my proposal prior to speaking with the AS3/S3. As company leadership, we sought unity of effort by collaborating early in the LRTC development process. Even with multiple COAs, we had a playbook to begin parallel planning while the battalion leadership determined the final LRTC. Once the battalion published the final LRTC, we immediately distributed the information to the lowest level. Our Soldiers wanted the long-term vision even if they did not act on it daily. The most effective platoon leaders would brief the LRTC to their platoons and then post the calendar in the platoon area. These platoon leaders' actions aligned squads on their own nested vision and created shared visualization within mission command.*

**A company commander with the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division coordinates indirect fire support with Soldiers and Airmen between objectives during a combined arms live-fire exercise at Fort Stewart, GA, on 15 December 2016.**

Photo by SPC Wyatt Davis





Providing the S3/AS3 the ideal company version of the LRTC creates an opportunity for the staff to support the companies. The first question from the battalion commander will be: "Have you spoken to the companies about this?" When the AS3 says he/she spoke to the commander about it, the AS3 will become the company's advocate. Once the final LRTC is published, the XO/platoon leaders immediately begin working with Training/S4 to secure land, ammunition, and logistics support. The 1SG and platoon sergeants develop the eight-step training model timeline and milestones. **When used effectively, the LRTC becomes the commander's tool to communicate, collaborate, and empower.**

Communicating his/her vision is a company commander's first step towards achieving unity of effort. After gaining support from the battalion commander and critical leaders at the company and platoon levels, the company commander then communicates internally to the entire organization to create a common purpose. Finally, the commander utilizes the LRTC to plan and resource how the organization will accomplish the vision. For the vision to truly permeate the organization, it must be the drumbeat at every engagement with the company. Whether it is recognizing past successes or reiterating the importance of upcoming events, all communication should return to fulfilling the company's vision.

## Build the Culture

Your organization will have a culture so be deliberate and make it your own. A vision of "Excellence on All Fronts" could generate a multitude of cultures that achieve a similar end state. This vision could easily breed a zero-defect culture where leaders are ruthless and drive the organization into the ground. The zero-defect culture then discourages leaders from influencing beyond their organization because they are too tentative to deviate from the commander's specified guidance, resulting in ineffective leadership at all levels.

We sought to create a goal-focused organization — one that sets high standards and then charts a deliberate path to achieve those standards. Anyone pursuing personal goals knows that not every goal is always achieved; however, failures along the way lay the foundation for future success. This second part is extremely important. Organizational and individual failures, if not immoral or unethical, become growth opportunities and can ultimately lead to goal accomplishment.

Creating a goal-focused organization does not simply mean developing sub-goals for the four pillars and reviewing progress every quarter. A goal-focused organization has to become a way of life. It starts with individual goal sheets (later explained in detail) and works its way up. Every organization has an existing culture; you have to decide: Do I conform, do I change, or do I develop a hybrid culture? But remember, as a commander, you OWN the culture. The elegance of the goal-focused culture is that it cannot be met with much resistance on the surface; everyone can agree that goals are good. The most likely form of initial resistance

*We sought to create a goal-focused organization — one that sets high standards and then charts a deliberate path to achieve those standards. Anyone pursuing personal goals knows that not every goal is always achieved; however, failures along the way lay the foundation for future success.*

will be inaction, which makes implementation key.

### a. Individually: Start with individual goals and work your way up.

*I am probably the greatest advocate for the use of goal sheets. My 1SG described the goal sheet's power as, "Now that I wrote it down, I have to do it." I have lofty goals in my head, but writing the goals down forces me to develop a plan and to hold myself accountable.*

*As a platoon leader, I had a simplistic approach. I made everyone in the platoon fill out goal sheets and post them on their lockers, a decent idea but not well executed by me as a second lieutenant. As a commander, my main responsibility was to get Soldiers to perform at their best. This meant helping them achieve their personal and professional goals. I shared my goal sheet with my officers and 1SG and had them bring their goal sheets to our initial counseling. I wanted them to know that I was invested in their goals as the foundation of our leader relationship.*

*Positive unintended consequences resulted. My leaders set goals for everything from planning a successful squad live fire to learning French. This helped me get to know them as people, far beyond any standard initial counseling. I was striving to set the example and tell them: "As a leader, I care about you and your success." My platoon leaders took this same approach with their platoon sergeants and squad leaders. We became goal-focused individuals, and our leaders invested in the development of those around them.*

### b. Operationally:

*Leaders began setting goals for everything. They set target increases in PT scores by event, target participation rates when planning family functions, and even target shortage reductions for monthly inventories. The goal-setting culture can best be described in the following anecdote.*

*Historically, Expert Infantryman Badge (EIB) testing has a 15-20 percent pass rate. When Soldiers wear the EIB, it means they have mastered the tasks and drills required in the infantry. For an infantry unit striving for excellence, 20-percent success did not sound great. As a group of leaders (platoon sergeants and up), we came together to determine our goal for the company. After some back and forth, we agreed on*

50 percent. Our company sought to achieve a 50-percent pass rate at the EIB testing and had two months to prepare. We believed it followed the SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time measured) goal template. The platoon leadership owned the goal and communicated it down to the lowest level. Every Soldier had to commit to earning the EIB, and all leaders had to invest in their Soldiers' success to achieve 50 percent. After two months of grueling train up and testing, 41 paratroopers pinned on their EIBs, a 41 percent pass rate and double the Army average.

The command's role in our company's EIB success came well before the train up and testing. The commander prioritized the resources such as training time, equipment, and distribution of work, and the team leaders, squad leaders, and platoon sergeants trained and developed the individual experts. Leaders were setting goals and investing in the success of their Soldiers.

### c. Organizationally:

Developing and achieving organizational goals is more abstract and long term than achieving individual or collective goals. As a commander, organizational goal setting ties back into the vision. It occurs among leaders between vision setting and LRTC development. After the platoon sergeants and platoon leaders provide feedback, they should then brainstorm the necessary requirements to achieve the vision. The ideas from the brainstorm inform LRTC courses of action. The LRTC essentially becomes the organization's goal sheet, and then each event has its own operational goals. For our vision, it meant increasingly complex live fires, inclusive family events, and an increase in graduation rates from Ranger and Jumpmaster courses, as examples. It is difficult for individual Soldiers to connect with broader organizational goals. Therefore, the commander's communication must reinforce how past individual and operational successes and future company events are fulfilling the company's vision.

### Live the Culture

Most Soldiers have been or will be part of an organization that advertises one culture and lives another. Whatever matters most to you and your organization must be the culture you live.

### a. Set the Norms:

I am a perpetual optimist. I have a personal saying, "A leader



Photo by Gertrud Zach

*A paratrooper assigned to Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, runs during a 12-mile ruck march as part of the brigade's Expert Infantryman Badge testing phase at the Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany on 5 February 2016.*

does not have the right to have a bad day." As an organizational leader, you have fewer interactions with individuals in your company. If the one time a private interacts with you and you are upset and abrasive, what is his/her lasting impression? Take that one step further; if your subordinate leaders know you are having a bad day, how likely are they to bring you information that could upset you further? How effective are you as a leader if your team selectively shares information with you? You do not have to be happy all the time, but you must be even-keeled and approachable.

### b. Generate Short-Term Wins:

I wanted my leaders to challenge the status quo. Empowered leaders think critically about routine operating procedures to improve the organization. I absolutely despise the 15 minutes early to the 15 minutes early, hurry-up-and-wait status quo. As a 2LT, I arrived almost two hours early for a division run. As a commander, generate short-term wins within your span of control.

*When I first took command, I would get to work at 0545 for a 0600 team meeting before PT. I would walk in and greet groups of privates who lived next door in the barracks. Inquiring about*



*this phenomenon, I discovered that the privates arrived at 0545 so that our company could report accountability to the battalion by 0640. We were living the 15-minute early status quo! The platoon sergeants went into a meeting from 0600-0620 and then put out information to the squad leaders from 0620-0630. The squad leaders put out the information to their squads AFTER PT. Therefore, we enacted a new policy. I did not want to see any private in the company before 0615 — short-term win.*

The company leaders spoke about this small change in policy for the next month. In doing so, we were communicating different messages to different audiences. To the privates: we care about you and we use common sense. To the leaders: I trust you to challenge the status quo. We are going to be a company that does things that make sense. Short-term wins add up to a change in culture.

### **c. Make the Tough Decisions:**

Tough decisions come when the behaviors of individuals within the organization directly challenge or diverge from the organization's culture. These were tough decisions for me early in my career because I had to decide: Do I truly believe in the vision and culture I am trying to set and is it right? These were the loneliest times and the most defining times. In every organization I have served, I have had to address significant issues: officer/NCO misconduct, hazing, sexual assault/equal opportunity, fraud/waste/abuse. The decision in these scenarios is usually straightforward — one just needs the fortitude to make it. The anecdote I highlight below is a subtler event that I consider having reinforced our company culture.

*In analyzing the EIB attrition rate, we identified the land navigation test as a key driver for lower-enlisted attrition. We planned three days of land navigation training before the test*



Photo by SPC Antonio Bedin

**CPT Dana Gingrich, right, passes the guidon to LTC Michael Kloeppe, during a change of command ceremony for Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, on 26 May 2016 in Vicenza, Italy.**

*to mitigate this risk. The land navigation course was in the Northern Italian foothills. I had a scheduling conflict for part of the training so I assigned a platoon leader to plan the training and my XO and 1SG to supervise the execution. The morning of departure, my master driver (a staff sergeant [SSG]) raised an issue that the driver of the support vehicle had to be winter-driver certified to drive in the training area. We were an airborne company so the driver's training and requirement presented an issue.*

*The SSG brought the issue with the driver (a private) to the platoon leader who then went to the XO to raise the issue. As discussed before, building a culture of excellence on all fronts can have many derivatives, especially with highly motivated lieutenants. My lieutenants had a bias for action. They were going to overcome barriers to accomplish the mission. The PL/XO approached the discussion from the perspective of "how do we resolve this issue quickly to still meet the movement timeline?" The discussion rapidly transitioned from problem definition to solution: Can the driver do without a winter license or how quickly could the master driver sign a winter driver's license? Fortunately, this all unfolded outside of my door in the company office.*

*Hearing this conversation, I started to get that tense feeling in my stomach when you know something does not sound right. I walked out of my office and immediately dismissed the driver so that I could talk to the leaders. I just told them to stop. Any solution that violated regulation or put this private at unnecessary risk was unacceptable. Furthermore, I was becoming uncomfortable since I was trusting them to lead the company in my absence. After establishing my expectations, I stepped away to allow the leaders to develop a creative solution and back brief me on the way forward. This event allowed me to reinforce multiple principles that defined our culture. 1. We will not sacrifice our integrity in pursuit of excellence. 2. Our Soldiers must know that their leadership cares about them. 3. We still trust and empower leaders after tough corrections and feedback.*

### **Conclusion**

My decisive point as a company commander was to achieve unity of effort. You will encounter many other aspects of leading a company that a commander addresses to create culture such as empowering others, investing in people, and aligning incentives. Everyone in the organization will help in these efforts, but only the commander can create the vision, communicate the vision, and build a culture to support that vision. Doing this aligns the organization and sets the condition for the unity of company effort to achieve far more than the sum of the parts.

---

**MAJ Dana M. Gingrich** commanded Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade, from 2015-2016 and was awarded the GEN Douglas MacArthur Leadership Award for 2015. He recently graduated with his Master in Business Administration from the Stanford Graduate School of Business and is currently attending the Command and General Staff Officers Course at Fort Leavenworth, KS.

---