

Mission-Command Culture: A Leader-Subordinate Contract

by LTC Chad R. Foster

*“Culture is established by the people who compose your team and is carried on through those people. ... But you cannot merely expect culture to be a natural occurrence; it has to be taught and made a part of your everyday routine.” -Mike Krzyzewski, **Beyond Basketball** (2006)*

Mission command is much more than a philosophy or a warfighting function. It is a culture that permeates every aspect of organizational activity, from routine staff meetings and field training to actual combat operations. At its heart, this culture is built on a contract of mutual trust and respect between leaders and subordinates. There is no middle ground – this contract either exists in a unit or it does not. Leaders and those under their charge have specific obligations to each other and to the unit. There are also significant costs all parties must accept as the price of building a climate of trust where prudent risk-taking and experimentation is rewarded and decentralized execution is the norm. This makes for an often messy arrangement, but the contract is necessary for a unit to build and maintain a mission-command culture.

Army doctrine simultaneously refers to mission command as a philosophy and as its own separate warfighting function, but neither of these designations is adequate alone. A philosophy connotes a primarily theoretical endeavor, focusing on an individual’s personal motivations and his way of thinking. While having the right mindset is essential in facilitating mission command, a direct link between what is in a leader’s mind and his external actions is necessary. Designating mission command a warfighting function also falls short of the mark because, despite the nuanced language used in its definition, it implies certain tasks lay within the scope of mission command while others do not. What the Army really hopes to achieve is the manifestation of mission-command principles in the beliefs and actions of individuals and in the collective norms of organizational activity. In short, the Army’s true goal is a culture of mission command.

Trust a must

For such a culture to emerge, a bond of mutual trust must exist between leaders and subordinates. This trust only develops over time when words combined with actions clearly and consistently demonstrate a commitment to the principles of mission command in everything a unit does. If these principles seem not to be applied in even one category of organizational activity, the leader’s commitment will be perceived as incomplete and, therefore, will limit the level of trust given by subordinates. In this way, mission command is an all-or-nothing proposition. For example, a leader who micromanages the unit while in garrison cannot realistically expect subordinates to suddenly exercise disciplined initiative in a field environment. Subordinates quickly sense half-measures and adjust their conduct accordingly.

However, zeal cannot override common sense. A commitment to mission command does not mean a refusal to give detailed directives when the situation demands. The most effective practitioner of decentralized operations recognizes when conditions require more specific instructions, and a good leader does not hesitate to issue them. However, a leader committed to mission command recognizes these situations are the exception rather than the rule. Because of this, the leader takes the time to explain to subordinates why they are deviating from mission-command principles for the given situation. Such explanations – and a quick return to normal practice – ensure the bond of trust remains unbroken.

To understand what mission-command culture is and what achieving it entails, think in terms of a two-part contract between leaders and subordinates (Figure 1). William S. Lind, author of the ***Maneuver Warfare Handbook***, first articulated this idea as a way to understand the specifics of mission orders. However, his concept of a contractual agreement between leaders and subordinates has a greater utility when expanded to apply to the entire organizational culture of a unit. Like other contracts, this one is a voluntary arrangement that carries with it very specific obligations and costs. If unwilling or unable to live up to these obligations or to pay the associated costs, leaders and their subordinates will not be able to operate within (or contribute to) a mission-command culture.

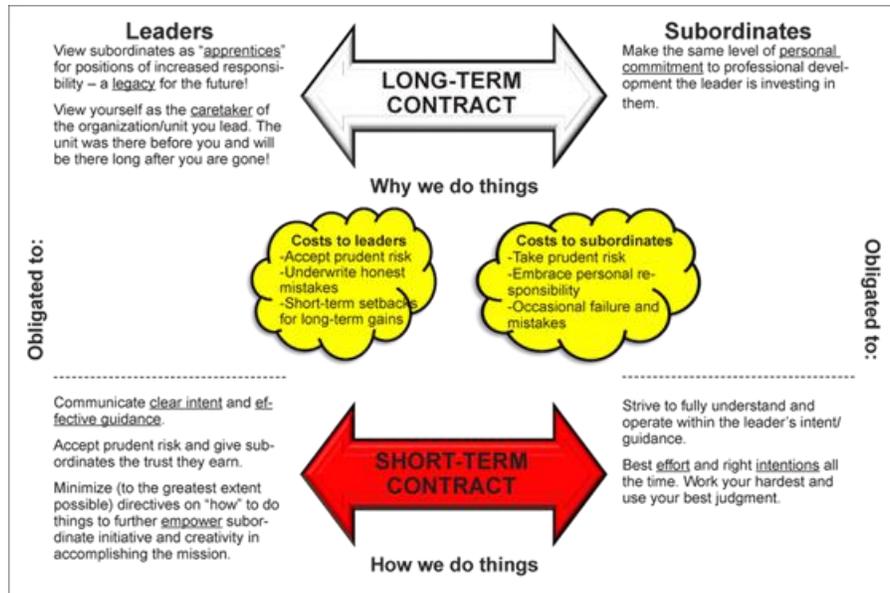


Figure 1. Mission-command culture: a contract based on mutual trust and respect. (Based on the senior-subordinate contract concept articulated by William S. Lind in the *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*)

The first part of this contract provides the long-term context by establishing how the parties involved are obligated to view themselves, other members of the team and their place within the organization. Leaders must consider themselves as merely the current caretakers of a unit that has a long and proud history – one that existed before their arrival and that will continue long after their departure. Doing so encourages personal humility and a desire to make a positive contribution to the unit's history. That contribution comes by treating subordinates as "apprentices" for positions of increasing responsibility. It is not enough just to train them for their current duties. Instead, the leader must help develop each member of his team both professionally and personally as a legacy for the future. In turn, the subordinate's obligation is to make a commitment to his own self-development that matches what the leader is investing in him.

Meeting the short-term obligations of the mission-command contract is the immediate and tangible expression of the long-term agreements previously described. Success hinges on the leader's ability to provide clear and effective guidance that is useful to subordinates when developing their own plans for mission accomplishment and in making on-the-spot decisions as the situation changes. Leaders must issue only the minimum amount of directives on exactly how to complete assigned tasks, demanding that subordinates exercise disciplined initiative and creativity within the boundaries of the leader's intent. Underwriting honest mistakes along the way is vital as long as individuals learn and grow because of them. Such top-cover does not extend to legal, moral and ethical lapses. Errors made with the right intentions, in honest pursuit of the assigned objective, are the natural cost of building and maintaining a mission-command culture.

Risk is inherent in this contractual agreement. Leaders must accept the risk of subordinates making mistakes that result in short-term setbacks. These setbacks might cost the leader (and possibly the unit) a bit of temporary recognition, but the long-term payoffs are well worth it. These payoffs come in the form of empowered subordinates who trust their superiors and thrive in the types of conditions that demand disciplined initiative and decentralized operations. Leaders who are unwilling to accept this cost because of a zero-defect mentality or a desire for personal advancement are unfit for their position because they have not defined success as growing the next generation of adaptive Soldiers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and officers. Leaders must resist the temptation to violate the contract, even if they see a peer gaining more short-term success by centralizing decisions and punishing those who experiment in the spirit of exploiting an opportunity.

Results achieved through micromanagement or toxic-leadership practices are invariably short-lived and detrimental to the morale and long-term health of the unit. They erode trust and fail to create a climate that will foster the initiative needed to beat a thinking enemy at the point of contact. Likewise, a subordinate who lacks the

courage to exercise initiative cannot earn the full trust of his superiors. Team members must accept that temporary failures will, in the long run, pave the way to greater success because of the learning and professional growth that take place because of them.

Determining exactly how to put this contract into practice is difficult. There is no single “right” answer when establishing a mission-command culture because each situation is unique. However, assessing progress is possible by focusing on observable indicators (Figure 2). Almost none of these indicators are “inputs,” meaning that few are actions or directives imposed by higher headquarters. Instead, they are descriptive outcomes that are observable at all levels by anyone with the inclination to look and listen. There are many tools at a leader’s disposal to help with assessments, but for most of these indicators, all that is required are a leader’s eyes and ears. Asking pointed questions at the right time to the correct individual or group will reveal far more than the most detailed PowerPoint briefing. The only way to find out what is really happening inside subordinate formations is to seek unfiltered contact with the Soldiers, NCOs and junior officers within those units. Unscripted encounters and focused observation are the keys to determining where a unit really stands when establishing a mission-command culture.

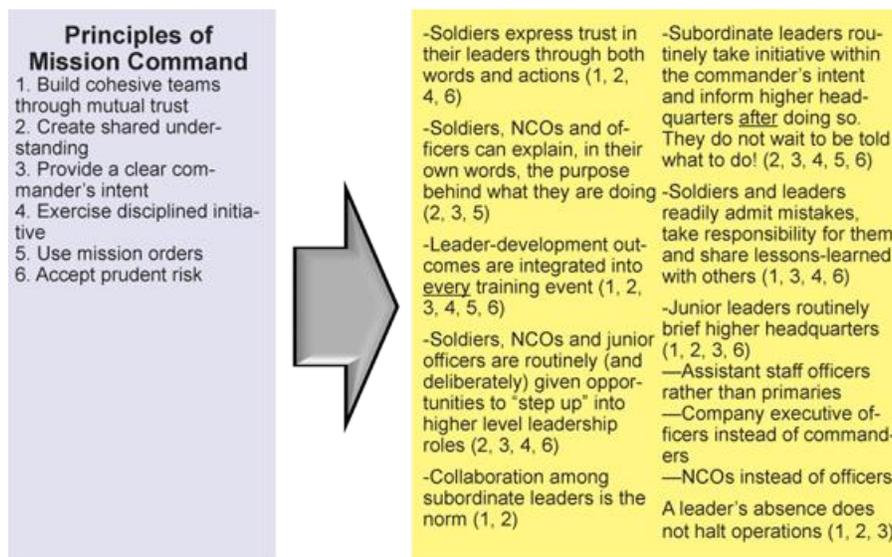


Figure 2. Establishing a mission-command culture: indicators of success.

Summary

Mission command is just the latest label for a concept of empowered leadership that has existed throughout the history of military operations. It is not something that can be selectively applied. Mission command is a culture that binds the members of the organization together through a contract of mutual trust and respect. This contract provides purpose and a guide to action for all involved. More to the point, it creates the conditions for adaptive leadership to blossom by empowering leaders to make decisions at the lowest appropriate level. None of these ideas are new or ground-breaking. In fact, most of the points articulated in this article are quite simple and well-known.

But as many have discovered, even the simplest of things is often difficult. To help ensure a unit is “getting it right,” leaders must observe their formations closely and ask the tough questions of the right people within the organization, including themselves. Also, subordinates must have the courage to accept prudent risk and exercise disciplined initiative within the guidance of the leader’s intent. Only when this level of commitment from both leaders and subordinates is present does the unit have a chance of achieving a mission-command culture.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

NCO – noncommissioned officer

USMA – U.S. Military Academy