

# Troop-Level Mission Command: a Troop Commander's Approach

by MAJ Amos C. Fox

Military theorist and retired Army officer Robert Leonhard wrote, "The U.S. Army must stress education of its officer corps. ... They (the officer corps) must groom their ranks to produce bold, well-read, dashing battlefield leaders, adept at outthinking their foes."<sup>1</sup>

An effective mission-command system is critical to the achievement of these effects. Furthermore, the responsibility for developing an effective mission-command network at the troop level rests foremost on the troop commander. As such, a troop commander must not depend on higher headquarters, the staff or the institutional Army to set the conditions for an effective mission-command structure to develop and proliferate within the unit formation.

I will describe one approach to develop reciprocal trust through a comprehensive platoon-leader development program. Although the approach described is focused on development of platoon leaders, it can also be applied by junior leaders to develop their subordinates.



**Figure 1. Platoon Leader Integration Program.**

## Understanding mission command

The Army defines mission command as "[t]he exercise of authority and direction by the commander, using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Army states, "Mission command calls for leaders with the

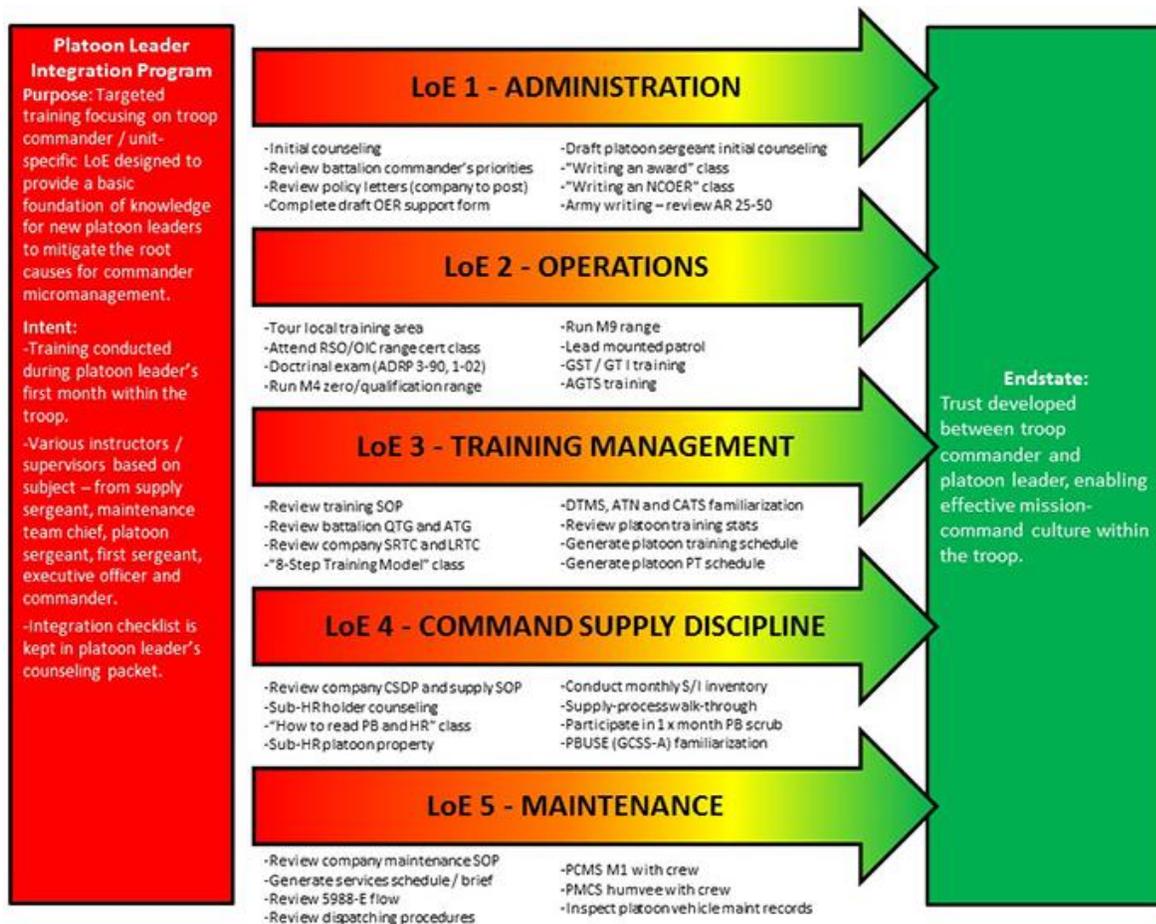
ability to build a collaborative environment, the commitment to develop subordinates, the courage to trust and confidence to delegate, the patience to overcome adversity and the restraint to allow lower echelons to develop the situation.”<sup>3</sup> Reciprocated trust is the most fundamental element that binds mission command because “[o]ne-way trust is not beneficial to the individual or the group.”<sup>4</sup> Troop commanders must develop mutual trust within their formation to create an environment in which disciplined initiative, empowered by the commander’s intent, can thrive.

Troop commanders must approach developing trust and creating an effective culture of mission command no differently than the execution of any other mission. Troop commanders must remember that “[i]n carrying out a mission, the promulgation of the order represents not more than 10 percent of your responsibility. The remaining 90 percent consists in assuring by means of personal supervision on the ground, by yourself and your staff, proper and vigorous execution.”<sup>5</sup>

Training is the apex at which reciprocal trust is developed between leaders and subordinates. Commanders who personally train their platoon leaders develop trust in those individuals. At the same time, commanders who take a hands-on approach to the growth of their platoon leaders engender trust in those leaders because they see that their supervisor cares about their development and growth, both personally and professionally.

My experience found a platoon-leader integration program to be a very useful way to develop an effective mission-command culture. The approach operated along five lines of effort (LoE):

- Administrative;
- Command supply discipline;
- Training management;
- Operations; and
- Maintenance.



**Figure 2. How the LoEs link at a glance.**

Each LoE was linked to the next, and they work in conjunction with one another to establish a solid foundation of training and knowledge to develop mutual trust within the unit.

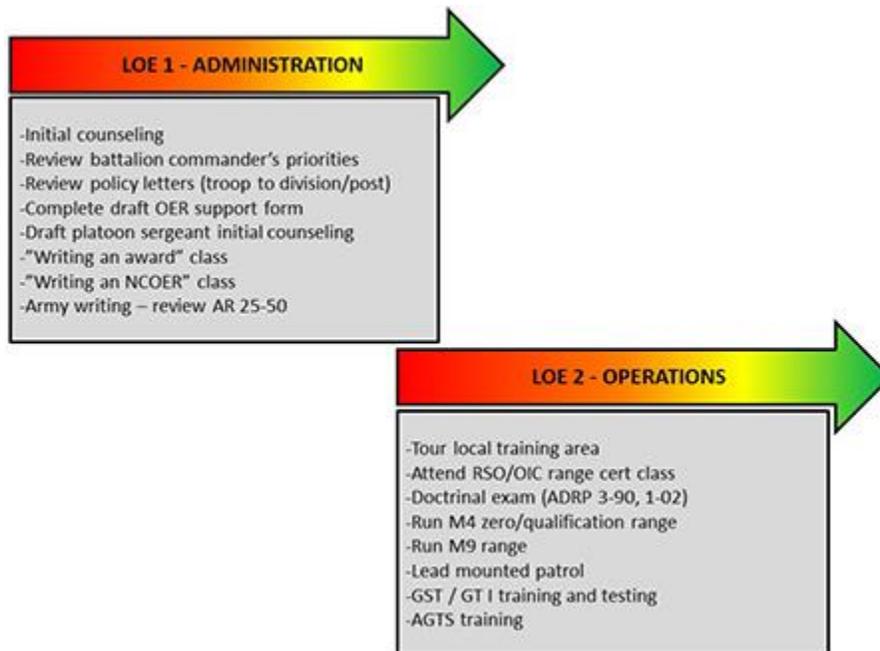
Furthermore, this approach is in line with developing armored units in accordance with the U.S. Army Armor School's "foundations of the armored force." The Armor School's foundation focuses on developing a competent, confident, agile and adaptive armored force that is highly skilled in gunnery, fighting from the hatch and sustainment.<sup>6</sup>

## Administrative

The purpose of the administrative LoE is twofold: provide the platoon leader with overarching guidance and familiarize the platoon leader with the procedural side of unit and Army operations. The administrative LoE should be the first LoE a commander focuses on because it lays the foundation for expectations, priorities and local standard operating procedures (SOPs) within the unit.

Completing initial counseling is the most critical task of the administrative LoE. The troop commander's initial counseling with new platoon leaders is vital to ensure subordinates are oriented in the proper direction from their first day in the organization. Therefore, the troop commander must conduct initial counseling with the newly assigned platoon leaders as soon as possible. In addition to providing platoon leaders with expectations, priorities and responsibilities, quickly providing the new officers with detailed counseling demonstrates the importance of counseling to the commander. In turn, platoon leaders should reciprocate this behavior with their platoon sergeants and within their respective platoons.

There are a few other important tasks that must occur in the administrative LoE. Some of these include reviewing the battalion commander's intent and priorities, reviewing unit SOPs and reviewing policy letters. Troop commanders must modify this LoE as needed to meet the specifics of their unit and its associated mission. Figure 3 provides an example of additional tasks to complete within the administrative LoE.



**Figure 3. Administrative and operations LoEs.**

## Command supply discipline

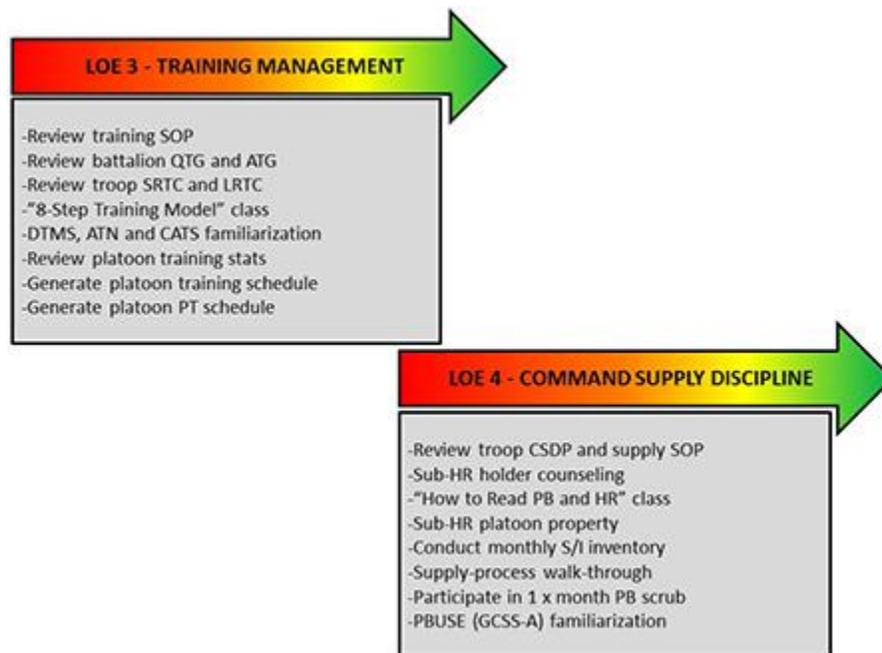
I have heard several senior leaders say, "Tactics won't get you fired, but not adequately accounting for property will." With that in mind, the command-supply-discipline LoE is vitally important to development of mutual trust

between troop commanders and platoon leaders. The primary focus of this LoE is ensuring platoon leaders understand the troop's command-supply-discipline program (CSDP), the sub-hand-receipt (HR) process and that they must successfully sign for their platoon equipment.

Additional tasks that should be conducted along this LoE include completing multiple inventories (i.e. sensitive-items (S/I) inventory and/or shadowing the commander during a cyclic inventory) and observing the commander sign the property book (PB) at the brigade PB office.

This LoE is a great opportunity to integrate multiple Soldiers from across the troop, as well as outside the troop, to assist with development of new platoon leaders. The troop commander should leverage the supply sergeant, the troop executive officer, the battalion S-4 officer and PB officer to augment personal efforts. The troop first sergeant is also a valuable resource to use during completion of this LoE.

As with each of the LoEs, troop commanders must modify the CSDP LoE to meet the needs of their troop and their mission. Figure 4 provides an example of additional tasks to complete along the command-supply-discipline LoE.



**Figure 4. Command supply discipline and training-management LoEs.**

## Operations

The focus of the operations LoE is to ensure platoon leaders have completed the benchmarks and leader-certification tasks that will enable them to effectively train and lead their platoons. This LoE, above all others, is dependent on the type of unit and the commander's input. I commanded a tank company, a headquarters troop and an Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course troop. I adjusted the tasks along the operations LoE in each of these troops to address the differences in each of those commands.

As an example, I chose to focus on tank-specific areas in the tank company I commanded. Some of the major tasks I included in this LoE included touring the local training areas, attending the range safety officer (RSO) /range officer-in-charge (OIC) certification, conducting a mounted tactical exercise without troops and completing the Gunnery-Skills Test (GST), Gunnery Table (GT) I and Advanced Gunnery-Skills Trainer (AGST). Planning and executing an M9 and M4 range were tasks I added to the operations LoE. Furthermore, I administered a doctrinal assessment to the platoon leaders to assess their level of understanding of tactics and doctrine, which drove where I focused my efforts when developing my officer professional-development program.

Like the command-supply-discipline LoE, the operations LoE provides a great opportunity to integrate multiple Soldiers from across the troop to assist with development of new platoon leaders. If done properly, the new platoon leaders will interact with other platoon leaders and noncommissioned officers within the troop. They will coordinate with the staff for land and ammunition, and they will interact with personnel from the distribution platoon to ensure range operations are adequately supported. Moreover, the crew-level training in this LoE enables new platoon leaders to quickly integrate with their tank crews, allowing them to rapidly become valued members of their crews and platoons.

## **Training management**

The goal of the training-management LoE is to teach the planning processes that enable the operations LoE. The key tasks in this LoE include reviewing the troop's training SOP, reviewing the battalion's quarterly (QTG) and annual training guidance (ATG), reviewing the troop's training calendars (short-range (SRTC) and long-range (LRTC)), reviewing training statistics (platoon and troop) and providing platoon leaders with instruction about the Eight-Step Training Model.

As with the others, this LoE is open to interpretation by the troop commander. However, there are a few more tasks I found critical to development of my platoon leaders' understanding of training management. I found training my platoon leaders on the Digital Training-Management System (DTMS), Army Training Network (ATN) and Combined-Arms Training Strategies (CATS) extremely valuable. Their ability to manipulate these programs enhanced the troop's overall training-management capability, which made my life as the commander quite a bit easier.

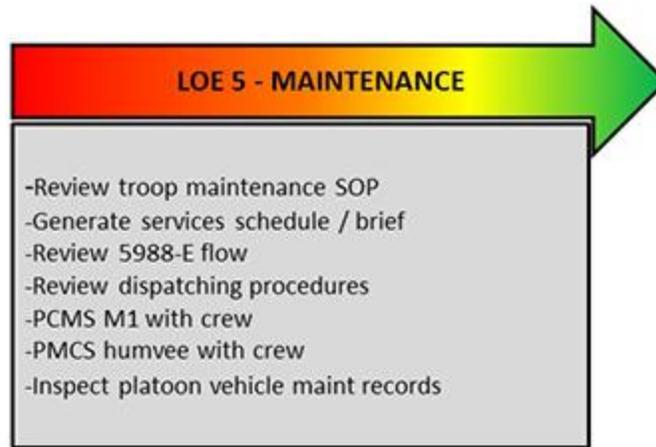
Similarly, training the platoon leaders on the Eight-Step Training Model and then having them develop a platoon training schedule that was nested with the troop training schedule was important to their development. Also, having platoon leaders attend a battalion training meeting in an observer role benefits them because it allows them to frame how training management nests beyond the platoon and troop echelon. Moreover, it helps platoon leaders understand the purpose and method associated with troop training meetings.

## **Maintenance**

The goal of the maintenance LoE is to train platoon leaders on the maintenance processes and programs executed at the troop and battalion levels. This allows platoon leaders to be more capable of leading and supervising their platoons.

The maintenance LoE is also quite dependent on the type of unit in which leaders find themselves. For armored brigade combat teams, a troop commander would be well-served to focus on reviewing the troop and battalion maintenance SOPs, reviewing the maintenance and preventative maintenance checks and services (PMCS) process – including the process for completing the 5988-E (equipment and inspection worksheet) – and reviewing dispatching procedures. Furthermore, having the platoon leader participate in the PMCS of each vehicle type in the troop is beneficial because it exposes the officers to multiple vehicles within the troop's fleet.

Similar to the command-supply-discipline LoE, the maintenance LoE will allow new platoon leaders to meet Soldiers who are critical to sustaining their platoons and the troop's fleet of vehicles and combat systems. Platoon leaders should also interact with the troop maintenance noncommissioned officer in charge, the troop executive officer, the battalion maintenance officer, the battalion maintenance chief and the battalion executive officer. These interactions enhance the growth and development of the officers by providing insights and thoughts from multiple positions and multiple echelons.



*Figure 5. Maintenance LoE.*

## Conclusion

The responsibility for developing an effective mission-command network at the troop level rests on the troop commander. The troop commander must not depend on higher headquarters, the staff or the institutional Army to set the conditions for an effective mission-command structure to develop and proliferate within their formation.

Mutual, reciprocated trust is paramount to developing an effective troop-level mission-command system. Training is the key to unlocking mutual trust. As military theorist and retired Army officer Douglas MacGregor wrote, “American Soldiers, noncommissioned officers and junior officers can exercise independent judgment and make good decisions under the pressure of combat, but they will only make the right decisions if they are trained and encouraged to do so before a war begins.”<sup>7</sup>

With that in mind, an effective approach to training new platoon leaders is to use a program aligned along five lines of operation: administrative, operations, training management, command supply discipline and maintenance. By doing so, troop commanders will develop trust within their organization and build formations in line with the Armor School’s foundations of the armored force.



*Figure 6. Foundations of the Armored Force.*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle*, New York: Presidio Press, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 1-2, *Terms and Military Symbols*, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership*, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, New York: Portfolio /Penguin.

<sup>5</sup> LTG George S. Patton Jr., *War As I Knew It*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Press, 1947.

<sup>6</sup> BG Scott McKean, "Armor Update," <http://www.benning.army.mil/mcoe/maneuverconference/>.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas MacGregor, *Transformation Under Fire: Revolutionizing How America Fights*, Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003.