

A Picture is Worth 1,000 Words (or 3,110 Words)

by LTC James Armstrong

People process pictures holistically and process words sequentially, piecing them together. This is why pictures can express multiple, complex ideas quickly and inspire countless discussions. While the benefit of a written vision and approach to command forces a commander to provide clarity and logically connect ideas, commanders can use a picture of the same vision as a powerful tool to understand, visualize, describe, counsel and assess.

Using an example visual tool, I will demonstrate the rich benefits in how a commander can better create shared understanding for the organization's mission, leader development, risk, resources and assessment methods with a picture rather than relying solely on a statement. Army writings which describe the usefulness of systems thinking and visual modeling as part of design have value as part of a commander's vision for and assessment of their organization, but are not commonly used as part of command preparation.

Why a visual tool?

A visual tool for commanders to understand, visualize and assess/reassess enables them to more clearly describe and direct their organizations. As they develop their operational approach as part of their role in the operations process, their ability to represent their understanding and visualization in a picture allows them to more effectively create and share their vision across the organization, and it enables deeper conversations than relying on a vision statement by itself.¹ This picture gives commanders the ability to, literally, distribute a vision from which the organization can assess if it is on/off glidepath, describe distractors or changes with impacts, and identify where commander and subordinate actions contribute to the organization.

The visual tool example was developed at a battalion level at which Army doctrine emphasizes the importance of requiring leaders to be "... adept at establishing a vision, communicating it and deciding on goals and mission outcomes."² The ability for the commander and subordinate to point to this picture and discuss the commander's understanding, visualization, operational approach and how the subordinate, higher headquarters and resources impact the desired end state is extremely influential.³

This article uses a visual tool developed during command and recognizes that such tools are unique to each commander or organization. While I created a useful vision statement while at the Pre-Command Course (Figure 1), the visual tool developed while in command captured challenges and the context that led to deeper discussions with all levels of leaders in the unit.

Why we do it.

Vision: Thunder Battalion is a team of **disciplined professionals prepared for combat**. These are the traits our enemies cannot replicate and that our nation relies on. As the history of this unit has shown, **you** are the difference.



"...you may fly over a land forever; you may bomb it, atomize it, pulverize it and wipe it clean of life—but if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it for civilization, **you must do this on the ground**, the way the Roman legions did, **by putting your young...into the mud.**" T.R. Fehrenbach, Proud Legions, Chapter 25.

How we do it.

Discipline in all facets of readiness is the foundation for good **training** which creates **trust** and enables **initiative** guided by professional **leaders**. I expect our deeds to do more to communicate than our words.

Figure 1. Example of the author's vision statement.

Reality not ideal

All commanders spend time creating their vision, establishing goals for the organization to achieve and thinking about the culture the commander wants to create. A commander's ideal accomplishments and culture never meet

reality. Commanders must understand **why** the ideal will not meet reality, the impacts of necessary adjustments and what those impacts mean for their organization and its leaders.

Acknowledging that ideal will not match reality is not enough. The commander must have a plan to continually assess and make necessary adjustments. This discrepancy between ideal and reality with required changes leaves commanders with a delicate balance to manage. Too much pressure from top-down may achieve results but breaks people, families and equipment while sacrificing leader development. Too little pressure puts mission accomplishment at risk and creates an organization that does not perform to its potential.

Figure 2 is the author’s visual tool used to illustrate these various interactions. Figure 3 is the author’s visual tool overlaid on the doctrinal depiction of the commander’s visualization.

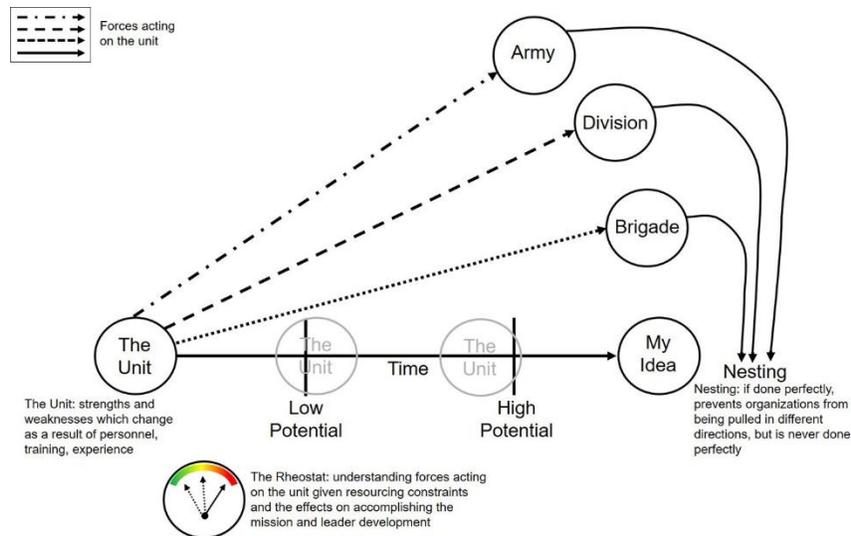


Figure 2. Author’s visual tool illustrating interactions among major factors. (Graphic by the author)

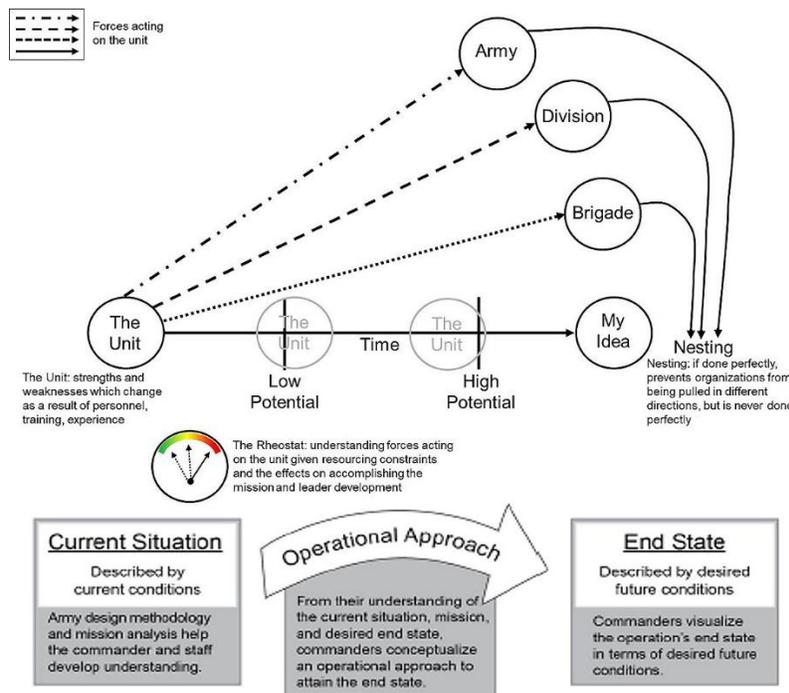


Figure 3. Figure 2 factors overlaid at the bottom with graphic material from Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 5-0. (Graphic by the author)

Subsequent paragraphs will elaborate on the relationship among the ideal, reality and influencing factors as a means for having key discussions regarding: 1) resources; 2) nesting; 3) leader development; 4) multi-echelon training; 5) risk, and 6) assessment. The variety and depth of these key discussions illustrates the richness of using a visual tool.

Resources: people, time, materiel

Each organization comes with its own strengths and weaknesses. Strengths and weaknesses change as often as the people and the training events the organization conducts. This ever-changing organization reinforces the importance of continuing to reassess the organization’s talent and location on the glidepath toward achieving goals.

Every commander also has a time horizon in which he/she is attempting to achieve his/her visualization or goals. Time is often understood as the most important resource. Once spent, it cannot be regained. Commanders’ decisions about what they do with their time personally and how their organization uses time is critical. Commander-to-commander dialogue needs to focus on candid and specific discussions about items left undone which all represent risk.

As a result of the importance of how time is used and the resulting risk, a commander provides intent, priorities and resources (time, people and materiel). The reality commanders often face is that, depending on echelon, they can provide materiel at varying levels of speed but can rarely provide more people and time. The only sure way of allowing the people and time necessary is to go beyond a list of priorities and create resources internally by removing tasks from subordinate headquarters while accounting for the associated risk.

The friction of limited resources and mounting tasks is often exacerbated by friction of external forces pulling on the organization in various magnitudes and directions other than the commander’s ideal. This friction is a result of conflicting direction commanders take action to mitigate risk; in some cases, commanders can simply identify the effects of the friction to ease the organizational frustration.

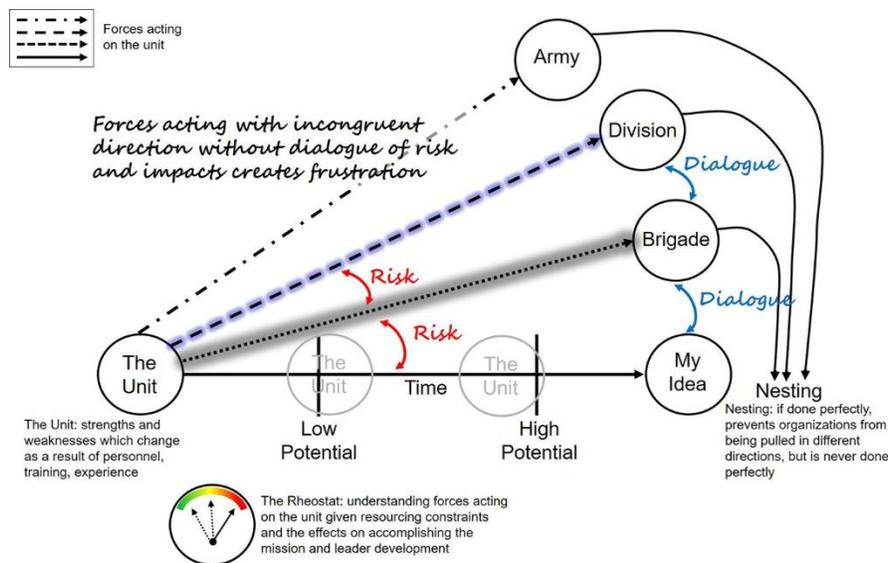


Figure 4. External forces and their impact, necessitating commander’s adjustments. (Graphic by the author)

Nesting

The concept of nesting is widely accepted, which results in each headquarters pulling an organization in the same direction. Each commander who publishes and explains intent and priorities should accomplish nesting.⁵ However, in application, higher headquarters often adjusts its focus, causing a change in priorities. This change could be the result of the leader identifying problems from his/her periodic assessments or the rise of completely new problems.

Practical examples of problems and corresponding solutions that may disrupt nested priorities include an increase of discipline incidents with resulting mitigation measures; a substandard maintenance inspection which causes renewed emphasis on maintenance processes and parts inventory; force-protection changes as a result of a change in threats; or a degradation in funding.

While a disruption in nesting among headquarters has its own root causes and solutions, a visual tool can help commanders recognize and address the impacts of the disruption and allows the organization to make necessary adjustments. The visual tool illustrates this nesting mismatch in multiple arrow types to show forces external to the organization pulling in various directions (see Figure 4).

Pulling in various directions frustrates Soldiers and leaders alike. The impacts include task saturation and competition for resources. As a result, commanders must understand these external forces and adjust their own pull on the organization. Failure to adjust creates frustration as Soldiers and leaders feel pulled in different directions. Failure to adjust also dilutes focus and does not recognize the practical delay in reaching previously defined goals.

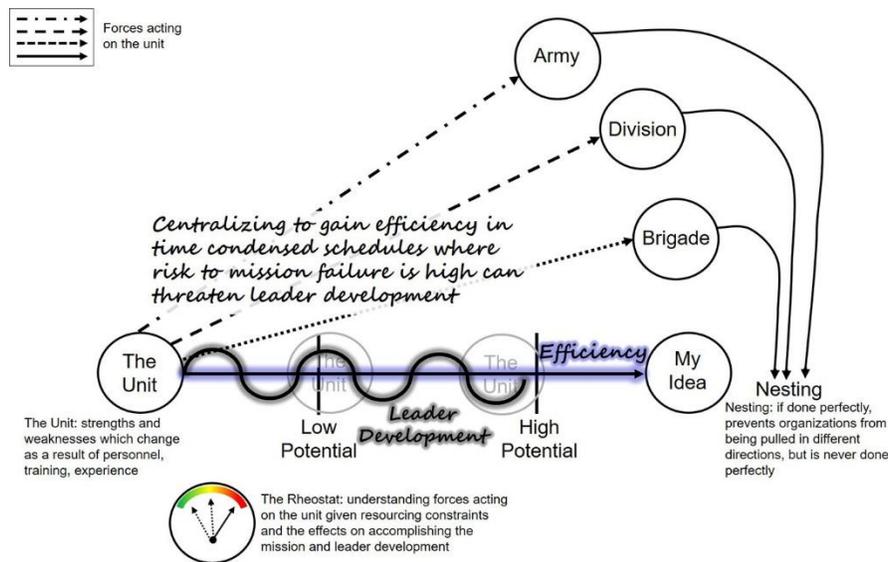


Figure 5. External forces pull in different directions. (Graphic by the author)

Adjustments without commander's dialogue about the impacts of adjustments can cause the same frustrations. It is critical for commanders to recognize these external forces, be able to assess their magnitude and direction, and adjust to the associated risks all within a relevant amount of time.

Leader development

Given time as our most important resource, it follows that its impacts on the organization are the most significant and wide-ranging. Commanders must understand the full impact of time constraints. For example, getting the most tasks done in the least amount of time may be the most efficient but not the most effective approach. Therefore commanders should make constant assessments to balance leader-development opportunities, achieving results and the effects of the pace on Soldier health (physical, mental and spiritual).

Too much focus on achieving results in a short amount of time often looks like a commander dragging the organization to his/her ideal and forsaking leader development, job satisfaction and families along the way. Leaders focused on short-term change often start with this approach but fail to adjust to a sustainable strategy.

The other end of the spectrum results in an organization that never reaches its full potential, individually or organizationally, and it jeopardizes mission accomplishment. The ultimate leadership laboratory provides purpose, direction and motivation along the path to achieve nested goals, which enables the organization to progress with appropriate resources with retraining opportunities.⁷

However, resources are always limited. As an organization experiences resource constraints, leaders start to work on gaining efficiencies. A small-arms qualification density is a simple example of a common task where we centralize to gain efficiency. If there is not time or resources (range availability) for each company to conduct its own training event, the unit tasks one company to run the range as others rotate through qualification. As a result of this gain in efficiency, the training, experience and leader-development opportunity for each company to plan and execute a training event is narrowed to one company. Furthermore, if time is severely constrained and the unit has but one opportunity to get the range done correctly, leaders assess the risk of failure too great to allow and attempt to prevent failure through detailed oversight.

If leaders are not confident in the discipline or training of their subordinates, they quickly lose trust, and detailed oversight becomes micromanagement. This is how leader development becomes the first element to suffer in a condensed schedule. To gain efficiencies, we centralize events. We lose the ability for commanders at each level to develop their own plans on how to prepare their units for their higher-headquarters' collective event using the Eight-Step Training Model. Leaders who understand that leader development was sacrificed as a result of efficiency and who can create repetitions to replace those lost opportunities are more likely to strengthen the foundational discipline and training elements necessary to trust and empower subordinates.

Units can also help themselves by guarding against gaining efficiencies through poorly-thought-out multi-echelon training. Executing multiple events simultaneously is not the same as multi-echelon training.⁸ Commanders should be wary of making the training audience at one echelon the trainers and certification authority of simultaneous events.

For example, if a battalion operations center is providing mission command for a platoon live-fire, and the operations officer is required to execute duties as the range officer in charge (think in the tower), the executive officer may be required to help run checkpoints to shut down areas of the training area to support conduct of the range (think admin of training-area support). The battalion commander may be on the lane certifying platoons. Then it is not realistic to expect the primary trainers to give the battalion staff the appropriate level of coaching and training necessary to improve.

If we are to gain efficiencies or seize opportunities to train multiple echelons, we can consider augmentation from outside the training audiences or scale back expectations of training objectives. Leaders should provide a purposeful nesting of training objectives, identify primary training audiences and preserve time for subordinates to train on supporting tasks prior to moving to collective events.⁹

Risk

Each adjustment as a result of changing goals, resource constraints and the simple business of choosing what to execute well all creates risk. Commanders have far too few real risk discussions for three reasons:

- We are not honest with ourselves about who makes risk decisions;
- We too often worry about the risk of taking action instead of inaction; or
- We expect too much from subordinate headquarters to provide feedback on failure.

Who makes risk decisions? Without concerted leader effort and the courage to have dialogue about achievable objectives, the gathering risk as missions get communicated from higher headquarters to subordinate headquarters is assumed by our least equipped personnel to make risk decisions. If brigade tells battalion to do 10 missions with only the resources (time, people, materiel) to conduct five, and battalion turns and gives those same missions and resources to companies – and so on – we eventually end at a young sergeant, specialist or private who now has 10 missions and resources to only do five. Often this young Soldier has the least experience, education and training to make risk decisions. This young Soldier has nowhere to pass the missions, so he or she makes the best decision possible about which five missions are not going to get accomplished.

After leaders discover the failure of half the originally assigned missions, we then start asking each echelon why we chose to execute these five vs. the other five. Commanders and leaders at echelon confront risk decisions where the experience, education and training match the results of the decision, or they accept the default to that young Soldier making the decision which, in some circumstances may be required but should not be left at that Soldier

when unnecessary. The difference between accepting prudent risk and accepting risk without reasonable understanding of the possible outcomes is the definition of gambling.¹⁰

Risk of action and inaction. Army doctrine is sound in balancing the risk of action and inaction. ADP 6-0, **Mission Command**, begins discussion of disciplined initiative with a quote from Field Services Regulation dated 1941: “Every individual from the highest commander to the lowest private must always remember that inaction and neglect of opportunities will warrant more severe censure than an error of judgment in the action taken.”¹¹

However, in practice, our view of risk is skewed as a result of codifying the risk of taking action rather than describing the risk of not acting. The conversation is often “If we take X action, then Y risk may result.” We too frequently turn the conversation on its head and ask “If we do not take X action, then what Z risk may result.” Often, Z risk is greater to the formation than Y risk.

Let us examine two examples where flipping the conversation reveals a greater risk. As a tactical example, if we put the scout platoon on a screen line, they may get decisively engaged and take casualties. Conversely, if we do not put the scout platoon on a screen line, the enemy destroys the main body; scout casualties, while not desired, are less risk than failing the mission as a result of the main body being destroyed.

An operations-security (OPSEC) example would be if we use an unclassified application to communicate information, an adversary could piece together relevant OPSEC details. Conversely, if we do not communicate information in a relevant timeframe, the organization does not move forward and the adversary “steals the march.”¹²

Reversing this common trend requires a deliberate effort to have the “converse” discussion and to get back to the intent of our doctrine.

Higher headquarters should set conditions for success, not failure. Headquarters exist to enable success of subordinate units and to combine their efforts in a way that allows the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts. We have become too reliant on bottom-up feedback and have created intellectual laziness on the part of higher headquarters. Rather than do analysis on troops-to-task, our headquarters are knowingly giving an unfeasible volume of missions to subordinate units and then asking for their feedback on what they cannot accomplish.

While bottom-up refinement is critical, and many commanders would appreciate their higher headquarters giving them a chance to shape mission sets as a result of their feedback, we cannot use this as a crutch for poor work. Especially at battalion- to company-level echelons, where we have the most significant gap in training, experience and education between the echelons. We can do more work to provide feasible mission sets rather than provide a road to failure and expect junior leaders to tell us where they are going to fail.¹³

This idea does not replace the bottom-up assessment we need from our Soldiers who accomplish the mission, but we are out of balance on this equation and scratch our heads wondering why subordinates are hesitant to tell us about failure and the associated risk we knowingly handed them.

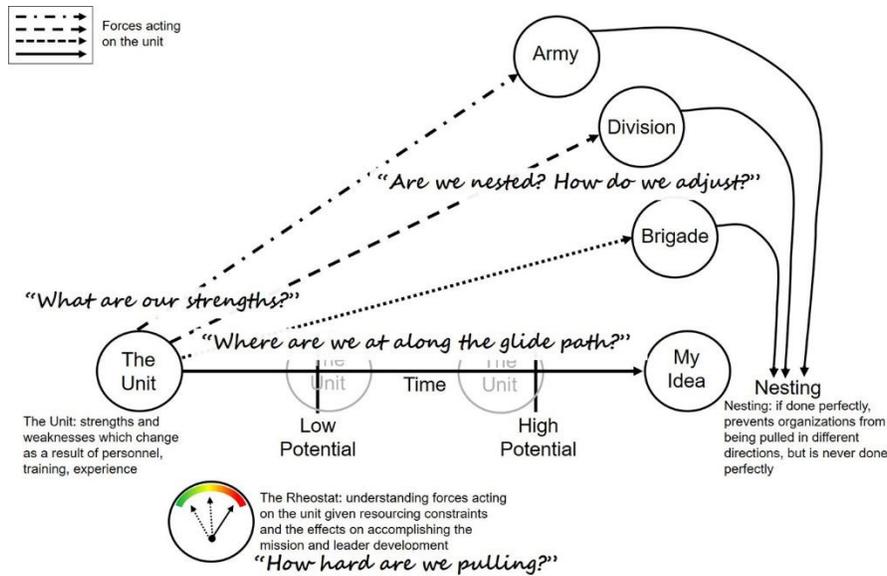


Figure 6. A visual tool for a unit's self-assessment. (Graphic by the author)

Assessment

Not one concept presented in this article is helpful beyond initial counseling or as a start point for leading an organization without the ability to assess and reassess. Leaders use many tools for assessing their organizations, including inspections, battle-rhythm data points, spending time with Soldiers at the point of execution, formal assessments such as command-climate surveys and planned engagements with different cohorts of Soldiers.

The point is that leaders should think critically about their assessment tools and how those tools allow them to see their blind spots. Everyone has blind spots, and the self-awareness to be open to assessments that help illuminate those blind spots is what separates leaders who can make meaningful adjustments from those who are satisfied with receiving reports that all is well. These assessment tools are what allow leaders to truly understand the magnitude and direction of forces acting on the unit.

The leader can then adjust his/her “rheostat” on expectations, engage in real risk discussions, create resources or adjust priorities and intent. The two most likely points of failure in assessment occur because leaders do not create a broad enough tool set for assessment and are too willing to accept good news.¹⁴ As Colin Powell wrote in *My American Journey*, “The day Soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them.”¹⁵

Leaders naturally want their organizations to perform to their highest potential but should account for (identify and adjust to) the external forces while mitigating the resulting risk. This leaves the leader with a likely problem statement: The leader must accomplish the mission given resource constraints, while leaving room for leader development and without breaking families or the Soldier's desire to serve along the way.¹⁶

Showing this problem in a picture to share the commander's visualization is extremely valuable and allows the commander to have discussions with peers and subordinates about how they impact the organization, what changes have occurred and make accurate assessments. Whatever picture the commander deems most helpful allows leaders to share in the understanding and visualization; informs how subordinates and other organizations fit into assessment loops; and provides a start point for discussion about where along the path the organization lies.

While the picture does not replace the clarity and logical trail of the written word, it supports quickly communicating a shared understanding across all ranks. If this visual tool and its discussion points created dialogue between the reader and a fellow professional, whether that dialogue was in agreement or in disagreement with the usefulness or accuracy of the tool, then the reader has experienced the benefit a visual tool provides for a commander and the organization.

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Notes

¹ ADP 6-0, **Mission Command**, July 2018.

² Field Manual (FM) 6-22, **Leader Development**, June 2015.

³ Army Technical Publication (ATP) 5-01, **Army Design Methodology**.

⁴ ADP 5-0, **The Operations Process**, July 2019.

⁵ A "nested" concept illustrates how the actions of subordinate units fit together to support a mission of the higher headquarters.

⁷ While the author understands the military's penchant to allow subordinates to learn from failure much like industry's "fail, fast, forward," we must maintain that our profession requires winning. We should be careful about learning and retraining vice propagating the idea of accepting failure.

⁸ FM 7-0, **Train to Win in a Complex World**, Oct. 5, 2016.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ADP 6-0.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² ATP 5-19, **Risk Management**, April 14, 2014.

¹³ Battalion commanders with 17-20 years of experience, in comparison to company commanders, most likely at five to eight years of experience.

¹⁴ Jim Mattis and Bing West, **Call Sign Chaos**, Penguin Random House, Sept. 3, 2019.

¹⁶ Colin Powell and Joseph Persico, **My American Journey**, New York: The Random House Ballantine Publishing Group, 1995.

¹⁶ A problem statement should not start out with "how," which is the beginning of a question. The statement is declarative and describes the dilemma and tradeoffs as a result of the problem.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

ADP – Army doctrinal publication

ATP – Army technical publication

CGSC – Command and General Staff College

FM – field manual

OPSEC – operations security