

# The Brigade DCO:

## A Critical Position Within the Command Structure

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As the contemporary operating environment for U.S. forces continues to grow in complexity in an uncertain, future strategic environment, the tactical brigade combat team (BCT) will be challenged in executing a diverse range of missions. Possible mission sets will span the full spectrum of operations and require the brigade to maintain a high level of organizational flexibility to meet requirements that have strategic impacts.

Over the past decade, we have seen BCTs execute complex and demanding operations to include counterinsurgency, humanitarian relief, advise and assist, and medical support, just to name a few. When called upon to accomplish the most difficult mission sets, the BCT has consistently demonstrated that it has the organizational framework and adaptive leadership within its structure to achieve its assigned objectives.

The deputy commanding officer (DCO) is a critical position within the command structure of the BCT. As the demands placed upon the brigade and the commander continue to grow in complexity, the importance of the DCO position is paramount to brigade success. A DCO should not be a special projects officer or assigned to a functional area but utilized in his true capacity as the second-in-command. He is a key enabler within the brigade command group who can provide organizational flexibility in the execution of a diverse range of mission sets. As the BCT completes its restructuring and increases in size incorporating an additional maneuver battalion as well as more combat support and service support echelons, an effective DCO is needed to increase the brigade commander's span of control.

This article will outline the desired attributes for a DCO and argue that the Army must continue to resource this position during combat deployments and at home station even while operating in a resource-constrained environment. When resourced within the organization, a DCO expands brigade influence, assists the brigade to see itself, enhances expeditionary capabilities, and provides mentorship and leader development to subordinates.

### **DCO Attributes**

The DCO is a core member of the brigade command group. Unlike the brigade commander and brigade command sergeant major (CSM), the DCO is not centrally selected by the Department of the Army. Most often, the DCO is chosen by the division commander or resourced externally by the U.S. Army's Human Resource Command. When selecting a DCO, the command should take into consideration the following desired attributes to better provide the brigade increased mission command capabilities.

The first requirement of a DCO must be prior battalion command experience. Successful battalion command experience is crucial because a strong DCO will need to know the expectations for a brigade command team. As a former battalion commander, the DCO has firsthand experience in the demands placed upon subordinate units that will allow the DCO to relate better to battalion commanders. A DCO cannot be "dual-hatted" and serve as both a battalion commander and member of the brigade command group; brigade-level leadership cannot be an additional duty. Also, as a former battalion commander, the DCO will better understand the mission, intent, and expectations at the division level that are vital for brigade success.

The battalion command experience of the DCO can either be tactical or institutional. Many could argue that tactical command experience would make a DCO more effective in a tactical brigade; however, the leadership and organizational demands within the institutional Army can considerably broaden his depth of leadership. Different backgrounds within the command group will make the organization more adaptive and effective in operating in complex environments. The more diverse the senior leadership within the brigade, the more capable it will be in addressing ill-defined problems.

Another requirement of a DCO is a clear understanding of the commander's intent. The contemporary operating environment and our doctrine encourages mission command execution. As a former battalion commander, the DCO knows how to operate within the commander's intent. The brigade commander must clearly outline the DCO's authorities, and those should be understood within the brigade command group, the brigade staff, and subordinate battalion command groups. The commander should grant the DCO the authority to make decisions within his intent in accordance with mission command principals. This will allow the brigade to become more adaptive in the execution of complex mission requirements. It will also groom the DCO for future command or leadership positions within the Army.

The next requirement of a DCO is a detailed understanding of the higher command structure and its operations. When a DCO is selected internally within the division, this is more straightforward; however, when selected externally, the DCO should have prior experience in that division as either a field grade officer or company commander. This previous experience, while at a more junior level, will provide the DCO with the background and understanding of the unique structure and requirements of the division.

Finally, a strong DCO needs to understand people and the importance of building and maintaining relationships. This will enable the DCO to expand the brigade's influence internally as well as outside the organization. Future tactical operations within the contemporary operating environment will require the BCT to work in a joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) environment. Building relationships within an ill-defined command structure is critical to the brigade's success.

### **Expand Brigade Influence**

Once selected in accordance with the above attributes, there are four primary areas a DCO should orient toward which will increase the brigade's organizational flexibility in operating in complex environments. While there are several other areas in which the DCO can be leveraged, these four are the areas in which the DCO can best affect as outlined in our doctrine and organizational structure. Ultimately, it is the commander who will decide where he wants his DCO to focus, and this will normally complement the personality, strengths, weaknesses, and leadership style of the brigade command group.

The first area in which a DCO brings value to the brigade is in expanding influence. As the operating environment transforms, the brigade will need to leverage additional mission command capabilities to allow it to dominate its operational space. Within this environment, there are several forces that operate within the brigade's command structure as well as many who are outside of it.

Aside from its higher headquarters and adjacent units, there are other forces who operate outside U.S. Army authorities that the DCO can project brigade influence by building and maintaining relationships. Interagency partners, government contractors, coalition allies, political organizations, non-government organizations, and multinational corporations are just a few of the organizations that the brigade can expect to be working alongside whether in a deployed environment or stateside. As a senior leader within the brigade, the DCO greatly expands the brigade commander's level of influence with these forces who operate outside the brigade's command structure. Understanding the commander's intent and knowing how to work with people makes the DCO the right leader to build and maintain relationships external to the BCT. While the brigade commander sets the framework for external relations, the DCO is a key leader

who can be utilized within the command group to expand upon them. In turn, this will assist the brigade in accomplishing its objectives and goals by leveraging the principle of unity of effort.

Internally within the brigade, the DCO is a key leader who can reinforce the commander's intent. Due to the increase in size of the brigade combat team by the addition of a maneuver battalion and associated support echelons, the brigade commander will need to utilize his DCO in underscoring his vision for the brigade. The DCO is an experienced senior leader that the commander can use to ensure subordinates clearly understand his vision.

### **Assist the Brigade to See Itself**

The second area a DCO brings value to the brigade is by providing the ability to see itself. As Sun Tzu stated, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." As a member of the brigade command group, the DCO has a responsibility in allowing the brigade commander to see himself which in turn will assist in decision making.

To accomplish this, the DCO needs to be mobile and move around the operational space to get a better perspective; true assessments can rarely be made behind a desk. While on circulation, the DCO should visit with subordinate leaders to assess how effective they are in meeting the brigade's intent. This on-the-ground assessment can provide metrics in which the DCO can share with the brigade commander. Firsthand assessments will help frame informed decisions that the commander will make to ensure the brigade remains within his intent and vision.

In the same manner, a DCO can assist subordinate battalion commanders see themselves as well. Having experience as a former battalion commander and established trust among battalion leadership, the DCO can provide feedback to his colleagues allowing them an additional perspective for their respective organizations. When appropriate and not established as a critical information requirement, this feedback should remain at the lieutenant colonel level to allow the brigade commander to focus on higher priorities within the brigade.

The DCO can also help the brigade commander see himself through the eyes of the higher staff as well as through adjacent units. The strong relationships that the DCO has forged with higher and adjacent units will allow him to receive candid feedback on how superiors and peers perceive the brigade's operations. This feedback is extremely valuable and can only be obtained through relationships built on trust that the DCO has fostered externally.

A final consideration in enhancing the brigade's ability to see itself is mutual trust within the command group. Sometimes the assessments the DCO receives from external or internal sources may not be welcomed by the brigade commander. The DCO can only be effective in this area if there is mutual trust within the command group. Trust is paramount within an organization since it is not always easy to tell the king "he has no clothes on." Leadership by "walking around" is a time-proven technique and a true unit cohesion facilitator for the command.

### **Enhance Expeditionary Capabilities and Control**

Deployments that will occur in future operating environments will be different from past expeditionary operations such as in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are many factors that will affect the brigade's deployment array as it task organizes to meet its assigned mission. Political conditions may limit the brigade to deploying only a portion of the force, or a vast operating area could require the brigade to restructure its mission command nodes to better oversee operations.

To meet future deployment requirements, the brigade commander can leverage his DCO in order to expand his operational reach. For partial deployments in which the entire brigade does not go forward,

the brigade commander has two options: deploy his DCO or keep him with the provincial element. There is no one right answer for this, and the brigade commander must balance the leadership he has available versus forward mission requirements. Most brigade commanders would prefer to deploy their DCOs forward (since this will be the brigade decisive operation) and have the division assign an additional lieutenant colonel to serve as the provincial brigade commander; however, this may not always be an available option. The brigade commander will need to balance requirements for forward and home station operations with a command climate that is optimized for de-aggregated operations with effective command across the span of control.

Another consideration for deploying the DCO forward depends on the analysis of the factors of time, space, and force of the brigade's forward operating area. The brigade may be assigned a large area in which it will require its DCO to help the brigade commander command the organization. The brigade may have multiple mission sets that require additional brigade-level leadership which means the DCO will need to deploy forward as well.

Regardless of the scenario, there is no one right answer on where the commander should place his DCO during a deployment in which only a portion of the brigade goes forward. The only certainty is that future deployments and their inherent mission requirements will challenge all brigade commanders. The brigade commander and his staff must conduct detailed analysis of both forward and provincial requirements in order to determine the best method to employ the DCO.

### **Mentorship and Professional Development**

The final area in which the DCO can add value to the brigade is by providing mentorship to subordinates. Leader development is critical within our Army as we continue to grow and develop the next generation of leaders. With established trust and prior experience, the DCO can complement professional development and mentorship initiatives established by the brigade commander and sergeant major. All too often, leader development initiatives within the brigade are sacrificed to an extremely high operational tempo that takes time away from senior leaders. Mentorship and professional development are areas in which the DCO can be employed to strengthen the leadership of subordinate officers. There are two general categories of leadership that the DCO should focus mentorship efforts toward: battalion commanders and the brigade staff.

The DCO can be effective in providing mentorship to subordinate battalion commanders by using his prior command experience and understanding of the commander's intent. To accomplish this, the DCO must have first established trust and respect among his fellow lieutenant colonels. Even though this sounds simple, many DCOs struggle with this when they arrive at the brigade. The DCO is the same rank as the battalion commanders and may only be a year group or two ahead of them in experience. Additionally, many battalion commanders are very competitive by nature and could see a strong DCO as a threat within the brigade. This is why it is imperative that a DCO establishes mutual trust and respect initially and reinforces it continuously. If not, any efforts in providing mentorship or advice to battalion commanders will be in vain.

The best way to establish trust with battalion commanders is for the DCO to become the battalion commanders' advocate within the brigade command group. The DCO has the ability within the brigade to shape initiatives or goals at the battalion level. Once trust is established, a wise battalion commander will use the DCO to help influence the brigade commander to see the benefits of his desired endstate on initiatives for his battalion. In this capacity, the DCO can be used as a "sounding board" and provide feedback to a battalion commander on how his boss will receive his recommended proposal. This will assist the subordinate commander in remaining in line with the commander's intent and also prevent him from irritating his boss in many instances. As a DCO does this, he must not break the trust of the

commander for candid feedback. He can only advocate when he is in agreement with the battalion commander. Advocacy of bad ideas will cause the commander to lose trust in his DCO.

One last area where the DCO can provide mentorship to battalion commanders is by expanding upon vision and intent two levels up. The DCO is privy to background conversations at the brigade and division levels and can provide additional clarity on higher guidance issued. Often, orders and directives are issued to battalion staffs but little background is given to battalion commanders on what generated the decisions made. If the DCO takes time to provide additional perspective and background, battalion commanders will better understand the expanded intent of their superiors and execute mission command orders more effectively.

The second category of leadership that the DCO should focus mentorship efforts toward is the brigade staff, specifically the field grade officers. Majors run tactical-level organizations within our Army, but we do not invest the appropriate time in their development. Again, a high operational tempo is to blame. The brigade executive officer and S3 often rate subordinate staff majors but lack battalion command experience. This is in no way meant to circumvent the rating scheme but meant to grow leaders. The DCO should address this with the brigade executive officer and S3 to ensure they understand that this is not a measure to reduce the power structure within the staff. It is very easy for a DCO to be seen as a very senior staff officer but he is not. His job is to provide mission command within the brigade, and the professional development of field grade officers is an important aspect of this.

The DCO should dedicate time to talk with all the majors on the brigade staff on an individual basis to outline professional development goals and objectives. His focus should be on those field grade officers who do not get much interaction with the brigade commander. Most of the brigade's field grade officers will go on to command at the next higher level, and this investment is key to developing the next generation of leaders.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the DCO position within the brigade combat team is critical in expanding the mission command capabilities of the command group. As a former battalion commander, this leader needs to be an adaptive officer who understands intent two levels up. An effective DCO expands the brigade's influence, assists the brigade to see itself, expands the brigade's expeditionary capabilities, and provides mentorship and leader development to subordinates.

Increased force structure and constrained future budgets will put additional demands on operations in which a DCO can significantly assist the command. The complex operating environments in which tactical formations will operate will continue to stress mission command capabilities of the BCT. It is imperative that the Army continue to resource this position during combat deployments and home station operations even while operating in a resource constrained environment.

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